

“RESPONDING TO COVID-19 WITH AWARENESS + WISDOM”

Interview with Sayadaw U Tejaniya

April 5, 2020

Q: Greetings, Sayadaw, and thanks for speaking with us today. How are you doing and how is the Shwe Oo Min Meditation Center doing?

A: The center is closed, and I am well both psychologically and physically. I am continuing my practice as usual. I'm not doing anything out of the ordinary. It's practice as always.

Q: How is your recovery from your cancer scare last year?

A: I feel very good. I just need to get myself tested every four to six months.

Q: How is your family in Yangon doing, and also the people of Myanmar during this crisis?

A: Life is pretty much as usual so far, although my family is staying at home and not going out. The Burmese people are taking stronger and stronger protective steps against rising infections as time goes on. The number of infections in Burma is still low, and everyone is trying their utmost to keep it that way. Even the Burmese New Year in mid-April has been canceled this year, and we are going to start a full-on lockdown in a week or so.

Q: The most common question I've received from yogis to ask you, is how can a person practice to maintain awareness and equanimity with all the fear, anxiety and uncertainty that Covid-19 has unleashed?

A: As far as the practice is concerned, I can only say, practice as usual. I only give instructions for practice, and the practice instructions are always the same. There's almost a mantra in the way I teach, which is, we're not practicing to make things happen in the mind, such as equanimity, or to make things go away, such as fear or uncertainty. Rather, we practice in order to observe things as they are happening, and to understand.

The most important thing is not to think about how to practice in order that something will go away, like your fears, so that you can then enjoy equanimity. That's not the way to approach the practice. The way to approach practice is to remember, first and foremost, that the mind suffers whenever it either resists or craves having an experience. The right attitude is instead accepting, observing, and learning from your experience just as it is.

It helps if someone already has some understanding of the three characteristics of anicca (impermanence), dukkha (unsatisfactoriness or suffering), and anatta (not-self). If you have this understanding you can then remind yourself about what is happening outside in the world: "This is nature, this is the nature of anicca, dukkha and anatta."

But what is happening inside of us is also nature. If the mind understands and accepts that what is happening both outside and inside is nature, then you'll be able to know how to think and act in the most appropriate ways possible.

Q: What would be the most appropriate ways during the pandemic?

A: First you must follow the public health instructions, of course: Wash your hands frequently, don't touch your face, maintain social distance, and don't go to crowded places. Don't become a vector yourself. Protect other people from yourself if you get sick. You must do all the responsible things.

From the practice perspective there are also things to do. Especially, you should prepare by keeping the right frame of mind. Whatever simple practices you have learned to keep you grounded in the present moment, do them, to keep your mind aware and ready for whatever you have to face.

Q: How do you personally handle anxiety or fear?

A: It's not that I don't have anxiety or fear, but I do have the understanding that this is just what happens in the mind. I cannot prevent the mind from having fear or anxiety. They will arise. But my view is, "This is natural for the mind in this situation." The worst thing that you could possibly do is to think: "How can I get rid of this?" Because the desire to not have anything bad happen at all is exactly what causes the worst fears to arise. The mind that doesn't want any sorrow or suffering creates the most anxiety.

For me, the key is that someone, anyone, can accept in their mind that this is natural, that this can happen, and it's happening now. If the mind accepts that this is just nature at work, this acceptance settles the mind so much.

Q: Does the present extreme circumstance present any positive opportunities for our practice?

A: At a time like this, everybody becomes more conscious of themselves. It doesn't matter if it's someone who meditates and understands awareness and being aware of the self or not. You don't have to have studied anicca, dukkha, anatta, and all of that. Everybody naturally becomes much more conscious of their feelings and all their fears and thoughts at this time.

When someone who becomes more conscious also thinks in the right way, this heightened awareness will naturally turn practice into a real learning journey. It becomes a practice of Dhamma. There will be a marked change in attitude away from fear and towards acceptance, interest, and a desire to learn and understand. Instead of resisting feelings in the mind and body, these feelings will now be seen as nature. A great release and relief comes from seeing and understanding one's experience in this way.

If a sense of self is strong and becomes entwined in noticing the mind and body, however, and one starts to identify with one's thoughts, feelings and sensations, then the ego will rise and grow bigger, and fear and all the other defilements and unwholesome minds will become stronger.

Q. Greed, hatred and delusion aren't easy to notice when everything is going well, because feelings of pleasantness seem to cover them up. At stressful times like this, however, that pleasantness fades and so the defilements seem to become exposed and starkly visible, and thus easier to observe.

A: For those who meditate, this can be a time for greater clarity. It's like an alarm that's awakening us to the quality of dukkha that is inherent to this life. Dukkha is always present but now the alarm of the pandemic is waking us up very clearly to the fact that life has this nature.

Q: What would you advise people like nurses, doctors and grocery store workers who are on the front lines of the war against this virus?

A: I always tell yogis that it's not only in times of crisis, but at any time in life, that first we always want to know the intention before any action, before any speech. We want to know why we are doing something, and we want to know how we are going to do it. This is a basic tenet of wise awareness.

In this way, plan ahead and set your mood for the day. Establish positive intentions so that you carry out your actions and speech in the best possible way. Approach each day with the most wholesome mind possible. Then, with your mind being wholesome, you will feel more at ease and peaceful, and you will carry out your actions in the most peaceful and wise way.

If there is high anxiety or panic, it's harder for you to deal with the world and with your mind, and you're more likely to make mistakes. And you're also then more likely to spread the virus through unconscious and compulsive actions.

That's a basic understanding and approach to practice that is always important, but right now is more crucially important than ever.

Q: Yet even skilled practitioners can feel overwhelmed at times like this. How should a person practice when they feel overwhelmed?

A: At these times we need to take strength from tiny moments. Take a moment to go within yourself. Meditate, don't think. Don't think of anything. Take that moment to just drop into the present moment and gather your mind. Definitely this is where concentration practice is very helpful.

You're not opening your mind at this time. You are keeping awareness focused on a single object, and in this way calming the mind. If you can do it for one minute, do it for one minute. If you can do two minutes, do two minutes. Take as many opportunities as you can like this throughout the day. If it's 10 seconds, it's 10 seconds. As many chances as you get, take them. Use them to ground the mind, to calm and stabilize the mind.

Q: What objects of concentration do you recommend?

A: Pick whatever object serves you the best. Only you will know, so experiment and find what works for you. It could be the breath, or the sensation of the whole body, or the sensation of one finger touching another. It could be a memory that brings peace or joy. It could be a different object each time. Use whatever makes you feel grounded and brings you to the present moment as fast as possible, right now. The most important thing is that in these moments when you are calming the mind, not to allow anything in that frazzles the mind. Do not let anything in that unsettles the mind.

Q: I get enraged listening to Donald Trump for even a few moments. His incompetence, lies, and complete lack of ethics is causing many people needlessly to die. How can I deal with the rage I feel towards him?

A: We know Donald Trump is not going to change. We can't change him, but we can change the quality of our mind. We already know that he lacks ethics, competence and responsibility. So, don't listen to him! When he comes on the TV or the Internet or wherever, just start watching your mind. Attend to your own mind, not to Trump. That's the practice. Get interested in how the mind is reacting, not in what Trump is saying or in the person of Trump. When peace comes to the mind even while Trump is talking, that's a pretty good yogi. By the way, Americans have had Trump for the past four years, but in some countries people have been living with this kind of thing for decades!

I have one thing to say to yogis about this: Do we want to destroy our peace of mind because of a person like this? Ask yourself: “Do I want to sacrifice my mind to someone like this?” The reason our peace of mind is shattered and destroyed is because we are thinking about this person.

We need to be very clear that it is not Trump but our own thoughts that are shattering our peace of mind. We have so many judgments and thoughts of rage, and it is all those judgments that are jangling and frazzling our mind. Rather than spend our precious moments of life and peace of mind on judging Trump, change the object of your awareness. Change it from thinking about Mr. Trump, to observing what’s happening in your mind, or watch your feelings so you don’t get pulled into the thoughts. For those yogis who have the skill, when you see Trump talking on TV or wherever, go straight to the understanding that “This is just seeing” and “this is just hearing.” Instead of identifying with concepts like “This is Trump,” “Trump is so horrible,” and all of that, instead go straight to the reality which is, “This is seeing,” “this is hearing.” For those who have that skill, do that.

Q: Could we send metta—loving-kindness—to Trump?

A: If anyone actually feels metta towards Trump, yes, they can radiate that feeling towards him. But if they are not able to generate any metta feeling, they’ll need to use other objects first to develop feelings of metta within themselves. You could start by sending feelings of well-wishing to yourself. Then you can send metta to your benefactors, to someone who is kind whom you know and love, to your friends, or to a beloved pet. In other words, start by sending metta to people for whom you already feel metta.

After doing this for a while, when the mind no longer feels anger or rage but instead feels peaceful and can radiate metta, at that point you can decide to include Trump in that field of metta. When it comes to metta, once you have it, only then can you send it. So if you don’t have it, generate some first.

Q: Could I send metta to the coronavirus?

A: If you truly feel metta whether it's towards Trump, the virus, or the universe and all beings, then you can send it and you should send it. Metta is basically radiating a feeling of well-wishing to all beings and to everything. If it's already radiating out in all directions towards all beings, then you can be aware you are radiating metta, without stopping it.

Q: The First Precept says to do your best not to kill. Taking the attitude that you want to kill something seems a sure way to energize that thing to fight back in its own effort to live. If you stay fully focused on the intention to kill the virus, perhaps it just escalates the hostilities. Whereas taking a metta attitude means that perhaps a happy truce with the virus could be found.

A: That's a helpful view.

Q: Are there other ways we could use metta in the current crisis?

A: Those on the front lines like nurses, doctors and grocery store workers can try to do their work while continually wishing well for themselves, for everyone around them, and for all beings. If they can maintain a mind that is consciously and continuously wishing everyone well as they go about their difficult work throughout the day, that would be an extremely healthy practice.

Q: How are you taking refuge in sangha at this time of social distancing?

A: There are two views of sangha, the conventional (samutti) sangha and the ultimate (paramattha) sangha. The conventional sangha is the people who practice, who maintain the Dhamma by writing books, or who safeguard the books and the knowledge.

The ultimate sangha is the pure mind, the wholesome mind. When I'm practicing, I bring my mind to a wholesome state. At that time I am relying on the mind that is sangha to me. The wholesome mind is a sangha that I can depend on. The meditating wholesome mind is the sangha that you can rely on. That's the ultimate sangha. It's not people, it's a quality.

Q: How are you practicing during this time?

A: I am finding this period is a tremendous opportunity to fine-tune my practice, not only when I am sitting but throughout the day. There are no more interviews with yogis, and there are very few interactions or daily responsibilities. So I can really focus much more within myself, practicing detailed awareness. That's how I can help.

Q: Have any special insights arisen?

A: No deep or astounding insights, but just the other day, while just simply noticing my breath, the mind suddenly appreciated so deeply that I was still breathing. It recognized that there are so many people who are having great difficulty breathing today in the world, and I was very grateful that I could still breathe and that I was aware.

I did notice something else while doing an experiment with my mind, which is that when I changed my thoughts, this changed how I felt. For example, if I thought, "This is a truly frightening situation right now, etc." then the mind became full of fear. Terrified! But if I then changed my thoughts to something like "After all the virus isn't here yet, and we are taking strong precautions, etc." then the mind settled and felt at ease. It was really interesting to see that the mind could take either position. Depending on the thoughts, my feelings changed, not because reality had changed but because my thinking had. In this way I saw that how I think becomes how I feel.

In exploring these two extremes, I have realized that you have to learn the right limit. You have to be balanced, not so carefree that you are reckless, but also not so afraid that you are paralyzed. To maintain that balance, be cautious as necessary, and don't worry about what you cannot control.

Q: Even in ordinary times you suggest that people should consider their home as a retreat center. Now would seem like an ideal opportunity to do that.

A: There's really no better time than now to seize the moment and practice as hard as possible, to be as conscious as possible. When people come to retreats at a meditation center, they always say it's so difficult to continue practicing when they go home. But right now, it's being enforced that we have to stay at home. So yes, it's an ideal time to turn your home into a retreat center.

If we succeed, then long after Covid-19 is over, we will continue to use our homes as a place to continue practicing Dhamma. Because we will have made it a habit to practice Dhamma by being continuously aware at home.

Q: How should a person practice on a home retreat?

A: In exactly the same way as they do on retreat at a center: by maintaining continuous awareness of each activity throughout the day. The moment that you wake up in the morning, know that you are awake and aware. As you get out of bed, know that you are getting out of bed. As you walk to the bathroom, know that you are walking to the bathroom. As you wash your face, know that you are washing your face. As you brush your teeth, know it; when you are making breakfast, know it; when you are eating, know it.

Continuously know everything you are doing. This is how we should always practice, even when there's not a crisis.

Q: Why should we try to maintain continuous awareness of such mundane activities as getting out of bed, brushing our teeth, noticing which foot goes through a doorway first, which arm goes through a T-shirt first, and so on?

A: Noticing details is the territory of wisdom. That's why we should train in noticing details. Only when the mind is trained to see things in detail, can it see the right causes and effects, and the right sequences of things, such as what thoughts and actions give rise to wholesome mind states. Only a mind trained in this way can clearly see the habitual patterns of the mind and body, and in this way train itself not to follow those patterns unconsciously, but rather to choose wisely.

For example, the mind always plans ahead. You can notice this when the mind is alert. No matter what you are doing, even in simple activities, the mind is always planning and forming intentions. Just putting on a T-shirt, intentions form to put this hand through first, then the next hand, and so on.

When I started to notice that the mind always plans ahead, I began to notice that when something was on my left, I had the choice to reach out with my left hand to pick it up, instead of using my right hand in the habitual way. In this way, I saw very clearly that the mind is always planning in a way that is purely habitual, and not necessarily always in a way that is most skillful or beneficial at that time.

However, when I can see the mind's intentions in this way, then I can consciously choose whether to act or not to act in a given situation. I can choose to do what is skillful and leads to ease. In that way, I avoid acting out of pure habit that always does the same thing, even when it causes suffering.

Choice is also a territory of wisdom. When we are not conscious, all of our intentions, thoughts, speech and actions are governed by the defilements of greed, hatred and delusion. It's mostly delusion because everything is on automatic. Delusion is boss. When we train our mind to notice what we are doing first, and what we are doing next, we are training our minds to see that detail. We are giving the mind consciousness, and consciousness has a choice. When there's a choice, the mind is no longer on automatic.

Q: How is consciously having a choice practical at a time like this?

A: For myself, I've become much more conscious of how often I reach up to touch my face for no reason. You have to be really mindful to not touch your face—it's very difficult! Yet when you notice this, you start to become aware of the intention that is formed before you touch your face. Once you start to become aware at this level—that is the level of intentions before an action takes place—then you can choose to stop that action if you want. If you can notice the intention to touch the face, that gives you the power to choose not to do so, which at a time like this can be literally life-saving.

Q: Fear seems to increase the voltage of mindfulness. For example, fearing that touching my face could give me coronavirus seems to heighten my ability to be aware of the intention to touch my face before I do so.

A: We must be careful about letting fear become the motivator of any thought or action. The unwholesome mind should never lead. If fear arises, you can watch the fear. But don't let it lead, because defilements always bring in other defilements. For example, if you let fear be the lead, it will quickly bring in other defilements such as anger, worry, impatience, sadness, or depression.

Instead, you can choose to raise the voltage of your awareness out of a clear, calm and objective understanding of the necessity to not touch your face.

Q: Here is a question sent in by a yogi doing a home retreat: "I share a space with my partner, and we are around each other much more often than before. We both practice Dhamma, but being around each other so much is tense, like we are breathing down each other's necks. What advice can you offer someone living in close proximity with a loved one during this lockdown?"

A: The reason you feel like this is because you are thinking about the other person, and watching the other person. Your attention is all outside of yourself. At a time like this we will be in close quarters with other people. If we are not wise, we are going to notice more things about them and we are going to think about them. If we are not wise, this will create problems.

This is the time when it is most important to keep your mind inside yourself. Don't be a busybody. Don't just quarantine your body, quarantine your mind. Keep it inside itself, don't let it wander out and start judging and thinking about other people.

If both you and your partner meditate, mind your own business and stay within yourself. Do your own practice and you will have no problems. Everything will fall into place and everything will be so much better if you both practice by paying attention to your own selves. After a while, when awareness and samadhi get stronger, naturally the mind will be more stable and feelings of metta will spontaneously arise because the mind is steady and calm.

Also, you and your partner are feeling tension because you aren't dealing with tension at the moment you first notice it. At the very moment you notice tension you should stop looking outside of yourself. You should look at the tension within your mind and immediately clear it before you do anything else—before you speak, before you think, before you act.

Q: How does one clear tension from the mind?

A: By watching it continuously and not thinking. It's Vipassana 101!

Q: Here's another question from a yogi doing a home retreat: "How can I practice with feelings of loneliness that comes from living alone during the lockdown?"

A: The problem again is thinking. You are thinking "I'm so lonely," "I'm all alone," "I feel like this," and "I feel like that." It's all this thinking that's the problem. If you were being mindful of your actions continuously throughout the day, you would be getting samadhi and be on a high. You would be feeling happy and you would not be thinking. Thinking is what provides the word "loneliness." If you are aware, if you are with reality, there is no loneliness because there is always two—there is awareness and there is object. You are never alone.

Q: Another yogi question: "I have been unemployed and my job prospects now seem hopeless. I have a family to support and children to educate. I have been practicing awareness but I frequently can't sleep at night due to panic and fear. How can I approach all of this with wisdom and equanimity?"

A: The problem, once again, stems from thinking. It comes from rehashing the problem over and over again in the mind. That's what causes the anxiety. Think of the worst possible thing—that you have no money, you have no food. What can you possibly do? Instead of worrying about it, know that at any given time the only thing you can do is whatever is possible. You might ask somebody else for food. It's not like the world is without kind people.

Instead of dwelling on fear and worrying thoughts, the most important thing to ask yourself is: "What can I do right now?" There is no point in thinking about certain things. If the children can't go to school, there's no point in thinking about that right now. What can you do now? One thing is you can practice right now is to keep your mind in a happy state. Deal with what's happening on a case-by-case basis. Keep your mind in the best possible state.

I myself have never been in a situation like this. But I had a friend's father who was very depressed and he tried very hard, twice, to overcome his depression and continue to support his family. But the last time he fell into depression he just couldn't raise himself any more, and he gave up on life.

He just stayed at home and did nothing. As the family's resources dwindled, everyone in the family who before had just sat around because they were dependent on him, they all woke up and started doing what they could in order to survive. He stayed depressed, but they survived.

Q: Skillfully handling the mind state of worry seems really critical now.

A: Worrying is useless. It never solves a problem. Worry is always a state of mind that robs your creativity, your resilience, and your ability to see things differently and more openly. So, just stop your worried thoughts. Stop those thoughts in their tracks and put your mind on something else.

There is no such thing as "no way." There are always many ways.

What worry does is to block off all the ways. It says, "Oh, this is not possible, that is not possible." Worry only thinks about what is not possible, and it only gives you one possibility, which you do not want. It doesn't want to accept anything else. It's a self-defeating state of mind, so don't encourage it, and don't believe the thoughts that come from the worried state of mind.

Q: Some experts say that about 70% of us will eventually get Covid-19. How should we practice if we get sick, or if we're dying?

A: It's never a question of how to practice "if this happens or that happens." It's always, "How do I practice now?" That's how you always practice. When I was diagnosed with cancer in 2018, I didn't practice any differently than before. Whatever comes, I'm practicing. Things are fine, I'm practicing. Things are not fine, I'm practicing, always in the same way. The practice never changes.

Q: One last yogi question: "My son died recently after two and a half years with cancer. He was full of courage and the capacity to know what to do in times of crisis. I feel my son is now supporting the transformation of our world. Are beings like my son helping humanity from an unseen world?"

A: Don't think about other beings from another world. Stay within yourself. You don't need to believe that unseen beings are influencing you.

When your son was alive, he showed you a very good example of a wholesome mind that had right view, right attitude, strength and courage.

Because you saw this was so powerful for him and people around him, you imbibed some of that from his good example. All of that is still very much present within you, right now. Notice that. It's here to be seen now.

There was a story recently of an old lady in Italy, she was 86, and she said, "Don't put me on a ventilator. I've lived a beautiful life. I'm satisfied with it and I want other people to have a chance to have a beautiful life." This goes back to the beginning, when I said that if you know how to have the right attitude, and you aren't expecting a result, then you are present in the right way.

What's important to see is the mind of a person like your son, which is helpful to others. Not just to the person himself or herself but to the people around them. This is where the lesson is. It's not that invisible beings are guiding the world. It's the example that we can see. It's the qualities of the minds that are visibly helping us right now—positive and wholesome minds.

Interviewed by Doug McGill, translated by Ma Thet.

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