

## Non-Anxious Presence

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So with this online recording offering from IMC, we are initiating the first of our online offerings. During this single nineteen era, we didn't cancel the daylong. We had a schedule today, and at this time I would normally be giving a Dharma talk at the end of the daylong. So we had a short sitting, and now we're having a Dharma talk. Maybe some of the people who came to the daylong this morning are trying to participate. Maybe you've logged on, and if we are sharing these few moments together, and for others who might have learned about this, then probably this is going to be something we'll continue to do.

It's most likely that we'll cancel ongoing programs of IMC because the three local county health departments in our area have requested that non-essential meetings be canceled. So in our attempt to try to support the lessening of the transmission of this virus, we're also not having public programs here. But this gives us a wonderful opportunity to see what we can do to create and learn how to offer meaningful online programming. Whether it's live sittings and talks that we can continue, maybe tomorrow morning, at Sunday morning. We'll try to do this as well, and I'll be here, and the recorder, and maybe one or two other people. But I will happily sit and offer a talk to the few people here, and for the many people who might be listening or watching online.

And over time, hopefully, we can think of different ways of doing new events here and things that are useful. I hope that it's supportive in this coronavirus era that those of you who might not go in public much and stay at home would find this supportive to have this ongoing contact and kind of live contact with IMC and the teachers here and the teachings that we do here. Hopefully it's a wonderful way of infusing your daily life, your home life even, with Dharma and with practice. I'm also thinking, maybe at some point I'll start a regular early morning sitting, and maybe you'll sit with me. And for those of you who haven't really started a regular

sitting yet, maybe that's your opportunity to sit together with a wider community of online folks. Now we can kind of live the Dharma a little bit more that way.

And, you know, I think that one of the principles of Dharma practice is Dharma practice is good wherever we do it. So if we do it alone, it's good. If we do it with others, it's good. If we do it with others through the online medium, it's good. Whatever practice we do is good. Maybe there are better alternatives that we could do, meeting in person, perhaps. But there are a lot of worse options that people can do.

And chances are that many people don't do the most enhancing things for themselves, the most drastically rich things for themselves, when they spend a lot of time alone. I've already heard of people who now stayed home from their usual activities because of the virus, and now they've watched back-to-back Netflix movies through the day. Now, that could be wonderful. But I certainly believe that the opportunity to practice and to learn the teachings and to deepen one's understanding and reflection on these topics is a profound way of living. It's a way of infusing any life with profundity, with nobility, with value. If we could do this during this era when many people may be doing the practice that's called social distancing, maybe we can find a way that social distancing is also the period in which we can enhance a deeper connection to others in a different way.

We can open our hearts more. We can become the kind of people who can contribute to the society around us because of who we are and what we become. I'm very aware, at least now, in these initial weeks of the coronavirus, that there's a lot of fear, and oddly enough, I don't quite understand why. Oddly enough, it seems like the thing that stores are running out of the most is toilet paper. Either people are planning to blow their noses a lot, or I don't know what this toilet paper craze is for—meat, food, and other things, perhaps. But there's certainly a lot of fear and it's being expressed in many different ways.

What Dharma practice is about is learning how to be fearless. Fearless not because we put ourselves in situations that are safe, but fearless because we know how to live in a fearless and wise, maybe cautious way. With the dangers that exist in our world, there are always going to be dangers in human life, and dangers in this world, and the idea of kind of finding a safe place, and always having safety, and being safe, and requiring safety in order to be free—it's not a very dangerous life. So here we have this golden opportunity to take a deep look at fear in a new way. Your fear certainly is probably more contagious than the virus these days; it's the contagion of fear that spreads around—how people talk and what the news is saying and in the way people are behaving. The alternative to fear is to be fearless.

The alternative to fear is to be wise. The alternative to passing on the contagion of fear is

to pass on the contagion of tranquility and calm and assurance and stability. I recently was told of a chaplain who does in-the-field chaplaincy for first responders, to firefighters, to police officers, and people who go to situations that are often quite tragic. Where people are often dealing with the tragedy of death and natural disasters and fires and things that come out of the blue for many people and are shocking and upsetting, chaplains go and offer spiritual care. In that setting, the chaplain was asked, "What's the essential ingredient of being a chaplain in those kinds of settings?" Part of the question was, "What's spiritual about your chaplainship?" She replied that what's spiritual was offering a non-anxious presence.

This Dharma practice in meditation is a means to developing a non-anxious presence. I find it meaningful that she chose the word anxiety, because in my understanding anxiety always involves the imagination. It's always anxious about something which is not present but we imagine will be present in the future. Certainly some of these imagined future possibilities of danger are real enough. But there's a high percentage of imaginary fears, which may never come to pass. A high percentage of people's anxiety has a lot to do with the power and creativity of the imagination.

The tendency may be the habit, maybe a fear-driven habit, that leads us to imagine frightening scenarios of what might happen. Again, an alternative to that is not to spin anxious imaginations about the future, but rather to reflect wisely, carefully about what's possible, what are probable scenarios, what's realistic, and to be prepared. But to realize that we can never be prepared totally, that life has dangers that are inherently in it. Then the question, really the Dharma question, is, how are we prepared to meet the inevitable dangers of sickness, old age, and death, and all the different other things that come our way unexpectedly? Now, it's the virus that's spreading around the globe, and chances are it'll soon enough come to our neighborhoods. Here in California now it looks like we can have another drought, and with that we'll probably expect a whole other epidemic, maybe of fires that will affect our state, and maybe some of these will be close to where we live and affect us directly.

So are we ready for this? Does our Dharma practice involve finding some kind of comfort and safe and comfortable place inside that we feel kind of reassured in some way? Or does the Dharma practice provide us a place of wisdom and fearlessness inside, of ease and peace inside, which is portable, with which we can meet the dangers of the world, so that we can be a non-anxious presence for others, so that we can be the chaplain? We can be the one who offers spiritual care, not because it's explicit spiritual care—maybe no one thinks of it that way—but we are the ones who can support others by the lack of our anxiety. It's possible, I think, to live a life with no anxiety whatsoever. It might not be possible to live a life with no

fear.

Some fear is realistic, but certainly we can live without anxiety, and certainly with a dramatic lessening of fear. To be motivated, even if we are afraid, to be motivated and have the ability to not collapse into it, or let the fear be what motivates our decisions for how we can live our life, the decisions for the stories we tell, or the ways in which we relate to other people. What if we know how to be afraid? We know how to be present for it, know how to recognize it clearly and understand it's there, and not deny it, but are able to breathe through it, or have a wider field of attention that holds it and gives us the freedom to come and behave based on other intentions, other motivations, other purposes for ourselves. Maybe our intention is to not be motivated by anxiety, but that place inside of us is able to be fearless or to have a non-anxious presence. Maybe what we can tap into is our compassion for others or our care for others.

Perhaps we can tap into our place of mindful reflection. We give time over to thinking wisely about things. Maybe it's using wisdom to realize that there are different ways of learning about the news, that the daily news, whatever channel or way we get it, is often not the best way to get news. If we want to live a wise and an anxiety-free life, there are websites. There are places where the news is given in much more careful ways, or methodical ways, or encyclopedic ways, like the encyclopedia, for example. Like Encyclopedia Britannica, they have wonderful entries there on what's happening in the news right now.

Is Wikipedia less accurate than what's in the newspapers? I kind of suspect that it's more carefully curated than the newspapers, and less likely to have a particular political twist or something. Certainly, when I read the Wikipedia news, I feel like I'm getting the basic information in a very important and thorough way, and in an easier way than the news. It doesn't give my stomach a kind of curling or anxiety, or I get a whole different emotional feeling as I read it. I think it's a wise way of learning what's going on in the world without the emotional impact that some of the daily news has, especially if we're used to seeing it live on TV.

So we are in this new era now, and one of the opportunities we have, one of the possibilities is, if we reflect on our Dharma purpose, the purpose that's related to how we're practicing, the question then would become: Given my interest in the Dharma, given my interest in developing a life that's based on mindfulness and wisdom, how do I relate to this new era? How do I infuse the new situation with mindfulness, with wisdom, with compassion, with kindness, with a way to live in an anxiety-free way or be an anxiety-free presence? When we go to the supermarket and people are behaving differently there because of this virus, and you can tell that people appear anxious, and everyone's wearing latex gloves to pull the food off

the shelves. People are socially distancing themselves now—they say, "Keep six feet away from people so we don't breathe the same air that has been in their lungs." There's a sense of distance. If this happens, people are not out in public so much. We may not see so many people.

But can we kind of turn this around and not see it as social distancing, but see it as a new, creative situation for how to be the producers of human connection, that we are the doers of it? We are the ones who would offer this. We aren't waiting for people to connect to us. When our practice becomes an active force, yes, there's distancing, but how can I relate in a wise way with the people around me today? There was someone who suggested that she or others go back to writing letters, thinking that if we get a letter in the mail, it kind of makes a special personal connection that's very different than getting an email. Maybe we have more time now to write letters and to mail them.

Someone else said that we could call people more now and make phone calls and connect that way. Perhaps there are ways of smiling more at strangers or staying alone in a nicer way. Maybe people feel safer to say hello to strangers when we keep six-foot distance. What kind of conversations can we have with people that, in the times when we have together, we don't take them for granted anymore? We can say, "Oh, this is a time to connect in a deeper way," and see the person in a deeper way, or show that we're interested in them, or we appreciate them, that our relation has become more valuable. So maybe the quantity of relations to others may go down for some people, or some people who are working have been sent home.

I know some of the people now are working from home, and so they don't have the daily in-person contact with colleagues. But what if with the lesser contact we have, we really make sure we're available for that, present for it, and not distracted from the very contact that presents itself with someone else? To meet people with kindness, meet people with appreciation, or meet them with greater mindfulness and attention. Or what does it mean to be free? What is freedom, personal freedom, inner freedom? What is it like in relation to another person when we're with someone else?

Of course, we could always ask these questions, but to the extent to which we're troubled to do good, which feel challenged, or even to the degree to which we feel anxious about the new reality of these times with what's happening with the virus, to the degree to which that's difficult for us, I would propose, to that same degree, or maybe more, is to find some way inside to muster actively, intentionally, purposefully the opposite. To not just allow ourselves to be the victim of circumstances and somehow give up or collapse, or just take it for granted,

"This is how it has to be now. And what a drag!" Then we're only consumers of our life. We're only then, only as good as what we consume, what comes our way. But what if we're producers?

What if we're the ones who step forward and not wait for something to come? But we step into the world and with our practice, with our attention, with our goodness, with our meeting, and find ways to live meaningfully in this new era. So to be not the victims of this era, but to be the saviors of this era, be the ones who step forward to make a difference and support everyone. Now, in my neighborhood here, and around where I am—and I think in most places at this point—I don't know anybody personally who has the virus or is sick. If it becomes more dramatic, and hopefully not much more dramatic in our society, then who are the helpers? Who are the people who are going to support the others?

Who are the people who are going to bring food to those who are sick and can't get out? There are many people who live alone. Who's going to support them and help them? Are we waiting for public agencies to help them? Or do we expect others to do it because we're afraid to go out? What does it mean to be a helper?

What does it mean for our hearts? What happens to our hearts when we hunker down at home and let everyone else just manage on their own the best they can? What kind of heart does that make? What kind of inner life does that develop in us? What happens to our inner life and our inner hearts? How does it develop if we actually think about other people and become those who are, become a force for the goodness, for the good in our society in this new era?

So I see that every situation is an opportunity for something good. Every situation is a time for some way of enhancing the Dharma in our own hearts and minds and bodies. Even more so now. So I hope, it's my sincere hope, that as we offer these online offerings and Dharma talks and sittings and all that, maybe we can explore this topic, or maybe these Dharma offerings here from IMC will support you. Certainly it's in your life, but it also may support you to find how to make this particular time something vital and meaningful. You look back at this time and really appreciate that it was a turning point in your life, in making your life somehow go in a really good direction of freedom, direction of compassion and care, the direction of a non-anxious presence that you can offer the whole world.

So thank you. And for those of you who've been watching and listening to this, I appreciate, I very much appreciate your interest and the motivation behind your interest, that you find this valuable and interesting. Now, if you stay to IMC's website, there's a "what's new" section. We'll keep things updated there best we can about how we're going to develop this means

of online programs and teachings, and look forward to having more contact. As we develop this way, and as we develop this online offering, we'll figure out some way so that it can be mutual and reciprocal, so we can take questions. Or maybe there's ways of having discussion groups, maybe over Zoom or something, so there can be some feeling of actively engaging in this process as well, not just simply listening and watching.

So I hope that you are well. I hope that your Dharma practice goes well. And I hope that we can share the Dharma together for a long time. Thank you.