

Caring for Self and Others in the Time of COVID-19

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Good morning, everyone. I'm alone here at a.m., but I am together with the whole world. And perhaps that's one of the perspectives about what to see. What's happening now in the world? Is it many of us are alone in a certain way? Maybe we are alone in our homes with the people who live there, or some people have no one they're living with.

There is a kind of quality of aloneness that many people have now in our sheltering at home, locked down, that we have a huge majority of the people on the globe. But we're alone with others. We're alone with. We're sharing this amazing phenomena of amazing global event that, in some ways, seems unprecedented as something that we share together. Maybe the flu of nineteen eighteen was a shared event all over the world. But the degree to which we know each other and experience and have news about everyone, in the way that we can have this tube connection to so many people, it's as we are sharing in something on a huge scale.

And you know, life has taken a dramatic turn. It reminds me of the saying that a difference between school and life. In life, you get the test first. And so here we are in a certain certainly can be seen as a test, or be seen as a new opportunity for care, for practice, for really looking and meeting at some of the deepest existential issues of human life, and that we are doing this together on a large scale. It's certainly a time for a lot of compassion and care.

And as I was thinking about now, much more than before, about the symbolism of in Mahāyāna Buddhism, there's a great personification of compassion called Avalokiteśvara or Guānyīn or Kannon, that the body of compassion who sees the cries of the world, sees the suffering of the world. And the fact that she is kind of, in the traditional language, said to be the one who sees the suffering of the world, may be a little bit behind the choice by the Japanese camera maker to call their cameras Kannon, Canon. It is named after the great personification of compassion. And think about one of their imagery, symbol, symbolic

imagery of Kannon, Avalokiteśvara, this being is that she has a thousand arms, a thousand hands, and each hand is an eye, and so she has a thousand eyes, a thousand hands. And in some statues, each hand has a different tool implement.

And the idea is that you need a thousand eyes at least to see all the different forms of ways human beings are challenged, all the different kinds of situations people are in, and you need a thousand hands to be able to care for that, and you need a thousand implements and tools to offer the right kind of care for all the different ways in which people's human life is like. And the challenges people are under these days are so multi varied. Some people. And that's, you know, getting a sense, and kind of slowly kind of realizing that, you know, pretty much, I think, every one that I know, in some way or other, is challenged in these days. And in the challenges, kind of, you know, the knowledge of how many, how many ways people are challenged these days, just growing. It's certainly obvious that in the United States and, I think, around the globe, a medical profession is challenged.

Hospitals are at a breaking point. Some places and the medical staff are working overtime and to exhaustion, and some of them are clearly going into situations where their own health and maybe even their life is at risk, in very dramatic ways, and such a huge challenge. There are people who have, you know, losing their work and their finances, and can't afford maybe rent. There's now people who didn't have housing when this whole thing began, and are scrambling to look for housing. And not easy. And we have people who are home alone. Maybe with kids. It's a big challenge to take.

I just can't, you know. I raised children, and when they were quite young, there was that chapery. You know, had a lot of challenges, the amount of time it needed, the challenges of the kids and their energy and at home. And they ought to have this vision of twenty-four seven. Now I can imagine that it's huge challenges for some people at home with children and being alone. And there are people who have illnesses of all kinds. Different kinds of illnesses make them particularly susceptible to the coronavirus, and, you know, it's more dangerous for them. And they have those challenges going on, and it just goes on, the list goes on, and on.

So what's called on for us is to be like Avalokiteśvara, to have a thousand arms, a thousand eyes, and a thousand implements, ways of care, to care in the ways that we can. A neighbor yesterday came over with a handmade face mask that she made, and that was very touching. And to feel her care and that she brought it over to our house and for our family, and very nice. And other people also now are making face masks and offering them. And I'm very touched by the people offered to me, and to me, and to our retreat center, the staff that are there, and

you know, it's a kind of at a time of compassion, of care.

That is very unusual, because in terms of the virus itself, in terms of what everyone has to now deal with and worry with and prepare for and contend with it on this globe, it's not really a person, a people, or a country that is the enemy. We have a very strong tendency, human beings, to make another and to push away and to close in and separate ourselves from others and blame others. Certainly some of that is happening, for sure. But it's very hard to see other people as the enemy in causing this illness, as being what we're contending with. We can't, like, point to. We certainly can point to people maybe in government who maybe are not been fast enough to take care of things or make choices maybe we don't agree with. So certainly we can come see that there are, you know, human issues that need to be dealt with.

But there's something about the shared nature of this kind of crisis where everyone is kind of facing the virus in a way where it's all shared. And how do we open up all our hands, all our eyes? How do we open up our humanity so that our care, our compassion, goes out in all directions to everyone? And one of the ways, I think, is to do self care. I think of the, you know, one of the ways to do self care and care for others, care for the whole world, is to use the basic practice of mindfulness as a way to take care of the different layers or different dimensions of our life in a kind little bit. Can be even a systematic way where we, you know, use the practice to really check in with ourselves in a deep way and see, Where does the care need to be what needs our attention. Now, and often in our practice, at least a mindfulness practice, I think it's we put a lot of emphasis on self care as the foundation.

They care for others that we have more to offer others. If we have resolved some of our own tension and stress, if we are not as agitated. If we're less agitated, if we have some calm, if we be able to work through and come to the side of some of our suffering, then we have so much more to offer the world. We have to think we have, we have an embodiment and modelling and understanding of how to live without agitation, how to live without stress, how to live without suffering. And that understanding is so important, because then we're less likely to perpetuate stress and suffering and agitation in the world. If we are caught in the grip of fear, then that's the model. Will we show other people then? Contagious fear is contagious.

Certainly it's, you know, easy to be afraid now, but to have enough presence and practice with fear, so that we can stay calm enough even with our fear, that we don't kind of spread fear into the society in the world. To have been able to resolve and work through and understood the dynamics of anger or frustration or hatred in ourselves, so that doesn't spill over into the world. To be able to know how to calm ourselves when we're agitated. So when we go out

into the world or, you know, have contact with people, that what we offer is a calm presence and non-anxious presence, so that to use the mindfulness of the checklist can be done like this. That's the way that we often teach the mindfulness practice here at Aamse is we do it systematically, first with breathing posture and breathing, then with mindfulness of the body, then mindfulness of emotions, and then mindfulness of thinking.

There's more to be aware of for sure. But as a check point for checking in with yourself, this is a very can be very effective that what is your posture in? When are you tense? Are you slumped over or you collapsed? Are you overly rigid? Are you somehow turning away physically from the world?

Can you find a posture that represents some way that you care, appropriate for yourself, that you're not collapsing, that you're not falling into lethargy? You're not overly tense. You are not grasping your hands or, you know, twisting your fingers and you know, sometimes just checking in with your overall, What are you doing with your body? It's kind like the first kind of place to check, where it's relatively easy you get the evidence kind of directly and like. So take a posture that maybe is like a meditation posture, a posture of balance, a posture that represents some confidence of being present here. Even if you don't feel that way, it's not insincere to adjust your posture, to take a posture that's balanced and alert and upright, and not collapsed or not overly tense.

And then within that posture, how's your breathing? Are your breath? Is your breathing tight? Is your breathing shallow? Is your breathing fast? How is your breathing with the situation, and sometimes feeling the holding patterns in the breath. If we're holding your belly in, or holding the chest, or breathing only in the upper chest, for example, it's to start noticing that. And then I see if it's possible to relax in the breathing, to let the breathing settle in. And sometimes even small adjustments in breathing, or maybe consciously taking a few long, deep breaths, or relaxing in the body as you breathe, can be a big mood changer, really kind of settle us and balance to some degree relatively quickly. And to check in with your breathing.

And if you check in with your breathing, sometimes it can be hard to do that, because some of the difficult emotions and beliefs and ideas and concerns we have can take precedent, can seem so important that we don't take no one to take the time to check in what's going on here. Some of us who are sheltered at home actually have a lot of time, and it's not time to sacrifice the self care because we have all this swirling of ideas and agitation and worry. And sometimes it's checking in with your breathing, simply taking some breath, and then mindfulness of the body. What is happening with your body internally? Where are the tensions and holdings? What's activated? What's tight? What's hot? What's numb? What is moving in

your body?

Is there a lot of restlessness, like physical agitation in the body. To really understand what's happening with a body is to understand this kind in all these kinds of ways is to understand how the body is expressing our relationship to what's happening in the world. And to sit in meditation, for example, and tune into all the different energies and sensations of the body as a check in. Oh, that's what's happening. I can't tell you how many times in my life that I've been busy doing something, and then it occurred to me to check into my body. And only then did I realize my shoulders were tense. Only then did I realize I was holding my belly. And sometimes it's been very easy. As soon as I recognize that it something releases, something relaxes. It doesn't have to be dramatic, but it's definitely an improvement.

Or sometimes I feel, by through the body, I noticed that sometimes it's the early warning sign of certain emotions coming along or stress is there. Or sometimes I only know what I'm feeling emotionally if once I've discovered what's happening in my body, and the sensations that are swirling there, the butterflies in the stomach, maybe tensions in the inner jaw that might be there. And so self care by checking in with your body. There might be signals in the body that tell you what you should be doing. Maybe you should be moving. Maybe there's all this energy in the body that needs movement. And needs to be dissipated and needs to be expressed. A movement exercises, a tithe yoga, qìgōng, dance for people who are cooped up at home for a lot. Maybe this is a time to dance with music, without music, just to get the body moving and shaking. When the body doesn't move enough, when we holding herself still too long, a lot of inner things kind of get bottled up and repressed, or the pressure builds inside.

And it's a lot easier to handle some difficult emotions if we give movement to the emotions. So if we're afraid, move the fear. Express in your body what that fear wants to do. And if you're angry, express it physically a little bit, not to hurt anyone, or not to, you know, throw plates across the room, but kind of just kind of like, almost like you're dancing it, like you're choreographing what you're feeling. It gives a freedom and looseness, and a little bit of healthy distance from some of these difficult emotions we have. So feel what's going on in the body, and give it expression sometimes can be very helpful.

And then the third area see. So then the third area is emotions. Kind of already began talking about it, but this is a time to really tune in to what's going on emotionally, even if it's subtle. The subtle emotions that are chronic and continuous have a huge impact on our, on ourselves, and our being. Notice how we relate to our emotions. If we feel angry, if we're afraid, if or sad, if we're happy, if we feel peaceful, when do we feel peaceful?

Our emotional life does not have to be completely out of our control. We don't have to be just the recipient or the victims of whatever emotions we have. We can practise with it through mindfulness, and to bring careful attention to emotions changes the nature of the emotions. I mean, when you bring awareness to emotion, really step back and get the bigger view, and really kind of fully aware of it, then we're less entangled with it. We're less feeling it and feeding it. And that begins to change it.

Emotions they get fed, you know, get perpetuated, Tera, usually in a not so useful way. Even happy emotions, if we're too involved with them, in feeding them in a certain way, or pushing them a little bit, they go a little bit kilter, a little bit quite not quite right. So how to get open to them, and feel them, and allow them to be there. And in doing that, it be healing and harmonizing, brings us to homeostasis, calms things down. So we can have calm fear, calm distress, calm stress, calm happiness, you know, whatever. It's possible to be calm in the middle of these things.

So to check in with ourselves emotionally. What need? What emotionally do we need to do? What needs our attention, what needs our care. And as I said earlier, we could offer a lot more care to the world if we've cared for ourselves first. And one of the ways is through our emotions. And so we can be very conscious of what the emotions are, so that we're not acting out of them in unskillful ways.

If the emotion kind of is pushing us to act, then maybe we don't act so consciously or knowingly or intentionally now from the best places inside of us. And then to be careful to check in with ourselves. What's going on in our minds? What kind of beliefs do we operating under? What kind of thoughts do we have? What are the flavour of our thoughts? What are the What's the background mood of how we think? Because the mood of our thinking is like a filter by which we think and how we think and the things we think.

Were the mood of our thoughts is fear. The mood of our thoughts is aversion. If the mood of our thoughts is harshness and anger, that tends to reinforce discomfort. We enforce an unhealthy way of thinking to look at the kind of beliefs we keep thinking and believing. If you're when you're following the news, listening to news, reading the news, take a little time after learning the news to notice what now you believe, because it's generally people will take in news and have an opinion about what they read. Absorbed in opinion of what they read in the news, go along with the mood or the conclusion that the perverse thing you've read is. But if you take time to time, mindful time is what just happened to me cognitively, what just happened to me as I read. Do I now have a new belief? Do I not have a new way of thinking. Am I interpreting this to a certain lens?

Is it I jumped on at the latest solution and holding on for a hope? And this is it because of the way that person spoke so confidently? Who was the person who wrote or spoke about this? There's a whole way of a wise way of critical thinking, of careful thought about what we're doing in the mind, what our thinking is about, and how we think, and our relationship to our thoughts. Do we believe our thoughts? Do we think we are? Our thoughts are so immeshed in our thoughts that whatever we think, of course it's true because we are one and the same as our thoughts. To practise mindfulness is to realize that our thoughts are not the sum total of who we are. They're not the centre of who we are, not the definition of who we are.

It's quite phenomenal to be mindful of thinking and just see thoughts, just thoughts almost as if sometimes as if they are not yours at all. They just arise and they pass. We don't have to latch on to them. So there's a whole way of checking in with ourselves, with our thoughts, you know, in being aware of it. And if we find ourselves too entangled and too gripped by our thoughts, it's probably a good time to learn to relax deeply. And one way to relax deeply is to go through these four different areas of mindfulness, or five: awareness of posture, awareness of breathing, awareness of the body and of emotions. Can any of these be softened and relaxed? Can any of these be somehow settled so that when they're more settled, then there tends to be not so much of a grip or compulsion to think so insistently?

So these are some ways to do self care. Someone who has learned to do this can do this very quickly, and it's almost like second nature. After a while, we go round and we're checking in and feeling and knowing what's going on. And then the same thing can happen when we are caring for other people. We care where other people, through our posture, through our breathing, is affected by the care of others. Our body is affected, our emotions are affected, our thoughts are affected.

And to maintain some contact with ourselves and self awareness, I think a nice kind of guideline for how to care for the world, how to do things for others, even no matter how intense it has to be. Maybe even the more intense it is, the more useful this guideline is, and that is to keep fifty per cent of the attention on the people, the person we're taking care of, and fifty per cent of the attention on hearing one's self when one's body, one's breathing, one's emotions, one's thoughts. And there's a way of doing that where it doesn't feel like we're separating from others, but actually to do it really be centered in this practice of mindfulness. There's a wonderful way in which we are caring and paying attention to what's happening here, and the boundary between self and other kind of disappears. It isn't so much that we're well not. It isn't so much that we're merging with others. That's not so useful. But we're clearly aware of what's happening here, but there's no sense of a contracted self around what we're pay-

ing attention to. We're noticing here, and so it's more like we're transparent and open, and we're also very attentive to the other, so we can take care of them as well. And this kind of being with others, with the mindfulness centered here in an open way, but centered in the situation where we still are aware of what's happening here not selfishly, but almost because selfishness has disappeared.

And so naturally the awareness is all encompassing, goes around, and includes both self and others in the whole situation. I think of mindfulness as, when it's mature, as not being self centred, but being a situation centered, that we're really centered on the situation we're in, and in being centered in that situation. That mindfulness is three hundred sixty degrees where we pay attention to ourselves and pay attention to what's outside of us, and just at all equally valid and equally important for our attention. And I found in situations of great challenges that I actually work wiser and better when I can manage this idea of about fifty for the attention inside and out. So I was very touched by a passage that's been going around now probably maybe many of you seen it, maybe many times.

The first time I read it or saw it was just said that it came from an unknown neighbour. The second time I saw it, someone said, Thank you for someone who sent me a beautiful video from the made by the Belfast Northern Ireland Fire Department. Where are beautiful scenes of the town of people? What's going on right now in Belfast around sheltering at home? And then someone else sent another saying it was originally composed by a man named Paul Williams. So maybe that's the case. But it's beautiful. I think it was meant for the world.

When you go out and see the empty streets, the empty stadiums, the empty train platforms, don't say to yourself, It looks like the end of the world. What you are seeing is love in action. What you're seeing in that negative space is how much we care for each other, for our grandparents, for our immune compromised brothers and sisters, for people we will never meet. People will lose their jobs over this. Some will lose their businesses, and some will lose their lives. All the more reason to take a moment when you're out on your walk or on your way to the store or just watching the news to look into the emptiness and marvel at all that love. Let it fill you and sustain you. It isn't the end of the world. It's the most remarkable act of global solidarity we may ever witness. We are in this together. The world, our societies, will get through it or ing together. Not everyone will get to the other side. But let's do this together. Let's support each other. Let's love each other. Let's care about each other as much as we care about ourselves.

Not let's not be overly focused on our own situation. Remember that as you take care of yourself in this environment, it's the same behavior off much of it, like sheltering at home

and caring for the world around you. Now that we're all been asked to wear face masks in public. The face masks are not to protect you from yourself. That your face mask not protecting you. Your face mask is you protecting others. And when they wear their face mask, they're protecting you. And what a fantastic, what thing this represents, that each of us is caring for the other by wearing these masks. This is love, this is care. May it be that we appreciate the solidarity, the care, the attention.

May we appreciate the medical profession that's working so hard to help. May we appreciate the people in the grocers. Workers in the grocery store are keeping the food available and stocked, and in some ways also risking their own lives by helping and supporting. May we appreciate all that's happening. And in seeing this appreciation of what is good right now and support of that, we sit laying down the seeds, the foundation for the beginning of a new world. This is not the end of the world. I like to see this is the beginning. And may we create the foundation for caring and loving and anesana world in which we really care for ourselves and see ourselves as a global family.

May we all care for ourselves. May we all care for others. May we all care for the whole world. And may it begin by the self care that mindfulness brings us. Thank you all very much for being here, and I appreciate it so much to have the chance to share and talk and to share my love and my a wonderful opportunity I have to be in touch with so many of you. And I don't take it for granted. I value it very much. And may the goodness of our practice together spread from each of us out into the world around us. May this period of time we've had together now be something that spreads goodness out across the globe. Thank you all very much.