

## COVID-19 Era as the Era of Care

**Gil Fronsdal**

**May 03, 2020**

**Keywords:** Dharma, anukampā, care, compassion, attachment, clinging, mutuality, Buddhist practice, suffering, liberation

---

The greetings from Redwood City, and I appreciate very much the chance to share with all of you the Dharma, or at least my best understanding of the Dharma, the practice, and how it expresses itself in the world, and in particular how it expresses itself in the world: caring for the world, caring for the welfare and happiness of others. This Dharma practice, Buddhism, is integrally, integrately connected, or part and parcel of our capacity and our motivation to care for all beings, including ourselves. For some time now, I have been referring in my conversations with people that we are living in the Covid Nineteen Era. Maybe other people are saying this as well. It just came out. Maybe I learned it from someone else.

This idea of the Covid Nineteen Era, I hope that in the future, when people think back to this time, that this time will not be known as the Covid Nineteen Era, not named after a disease, but rather, it'll be known as the era of care, the era in which people cared for each other. It's a time. It will be known as a time when there was a clear call in all humanity to care for each other, to care for everyone on this planet, and in particular to the poor, the sick, the oppressed, the people who are most challenged. Already before, this Covid Nineteen spread around the globe, but now it is even more challenged, to the breaking point around the world. And we know that many more people have been mobilized, been engaged in caring for others who have the disease of Covid Nineteen than are people who have had the disease or people who have died from the disease. I suspect for every person who has died of the disease, there has been a team of caregivers hopefully around them.

Maybe not everyone. Some people have died alone, but we have, you know, in the news every day, stories of hospitals, medical teams who are actively involved, working day and night to care for people, to save people's lives. We have family and friends and neighbors who are caring for people who are sick, and the circles of care that go outwards is in fact greater than

the people who have the illness. Not to diminish our care for the people who are sick, but rather to remember the goodness, to remember how much compassion, kindness, support, and that there are people motivated. And this is the bright light of the world, I think, is these people who are supporting and helping so much. And I suspect and I hope that a majority of the people on this earth have done some act of expressing care for others, care, compassion, support for people who are impacted or could be impacted by the pandemic.

What I mean by this is that even people who are not sick or sheltering in place are washing their hands or doing the kinds of things that will somehow reduce the spread of the disease, caring for those who might get it if we spread it. I think it's highly symbolic that with this virus, the same behaviour that involves caring for oneself, protecting oneself from the disease, is the behaviour that protects others from the disease. So what I mean by that is, if we shelter ourselves in place, stay home, certainly we can do that, protecting ourselves so we don't get sick. But simultaneously, that act is protecting others from how we might be the vector spreading the disease. And we know that many people have the disease without even knowing it, or they have it for several weeks, many days without knowing it, and are therefore vectors to carry it along out into the world. And once one person places it on a doorknob or in some place, then it can spread from there, and you know, it multiplies.

The context that goes outwards, so the fact that we shelter in place, it protects ourselves, and it protects others. And I find this deeply symbolic, that caring for ourselves is a way of caring for others, and caring for others is a way of caring for ourselves. Maybe this applies to many more things in life than the virus. I think that there's something very, very significant that we're all in it together in this world. If we care for each other in all kinds of different ways, the sum total benefit for everyone is much greater than if we have many individuals only taking care of themselves, only thinking about themselves. And those people who really think they want, really mostly concerned with themselves, if they only knew, if they could open up their hearts and their activities and their concern to a much wider field, it would come back to them in phenomenal, wonderful ways.

So too, and so this idea, at this time, and also another symbolic thing about this time, and the coronavirus time, is a phenomenal way we're seeing, experiencing, how much we're interrelated. We're interrelated in ways that we can spread the virus, but we're interrelated in the way that we can care for each other and benefit each other all over the globe, all over what we do. And that's also symbolic, that we're so deeply interrelated at a global level. It was a time when, you know, not so long ago, that people didn't know people beyond their valley, beyond their little community, beyond their neighborhood. And I grew up in, you know, from

Norway, and there they had many different dialects of Norwegian. I was surprised when I met someone who spoke Norwegian. I couldn't understand them because they came from far up in the north, and there used to be that people didn't travel there. If there were no roads in the country, and there all these different fjords that were semi-isolated, and people developed the whole different languages of different kinds of Norwegian because they only knew the people there, and now we know people all over the world or know about them.

The more we know about the world now, the more we understand that we are medically connected through things like the virus. We know that for some time that the viruses spread around the world, plus, that we're economically connected, we're politically connected, we're connected in so many different ways. That was unimaginable a long time ago. Again, this is also a call to care, that all the networks of interrelatedness are also potential networks, or how the spread of our care can go in all directions. Certainly, to really kind of come out the best possible way from this Covid Nineteen illness, the virus, the more we can care for each other, be careful and in the right way supportive, the more we can manage to get along. And at the same time, how we care for the people's work and economy and economics, and care for the people who are not becoming sick, but the people who are and are going to be in tremendous economic distress because of what's happening, as there are predictions that more people might die from the recession and economic collapse than from the illness itself.

I don't know if that's a true statement that's going to play out, but certainly there's going to be all kinds of problems that are in the wake of this illness, and some of the weakest links in the world, the weak links of our human chain of connectivity, are going to suffer the most. The millions of people, you know, it's a phenomenal number of people in refugee camps. In those refugee camps, you know, they are just eking out, barely eking out an existence. And in all these different places where they are, for example, in Bangladesh and refugees from Syria, and it just goes on and on, the refugees around the world, and they're barely surviving in dense camps. Even if the virus doesn't come actively into them, the food chains are disrupted. The ability to support the non-profits who support them are challenged financially and getting their work done. So who cares for them? Who cares? How do we care for the rest of the world? Do we care for them?

I hope that we in the United States will have as much dedication to caring for each other at this time, to find our way through in a healthy, beneficial way for all beings. Support everyone as this country did dedicate itself to in World War Two. It's touching to me that that generation of World War Two was called the greatest generation. What are they going to call this generation,

or the generations of us that are here now, the people who step forward and really try to make come out of this in a way that it'll be in the history books, that this was a generation that cared? Could it be the caring generation? Could it be the greatest caring generation? You know, what will be known this time? And what a lesson, what an inspiration, what a kind of ambrosia for the heart, for the soul, for the psyche to experience and know care in all kinds of ways, and that it's ambrosia, and that it's nourishment for us.

I think it's because it's deeply embedded in our human system and human nature to care and to be cared for. It touches something profound within us. I think that to call forth, as an example of this, how central care is, and how central caring for each other is for our very well-being, is to consider the amount of care that goes into child care, into child raising. A baby is born and can't care at all for itself. The amazing amount of care that it takes to bring a baby into toddlerhood and into childhood, into adolescence, into adulthood is, as you know, phenomenal. What it takes, and the child, the baby, needs to feel that care, needs to feel that safety, needs to come and take it in that this is the world they live in. Otherwise, if they don't, they don't grow up into the fullest human being they can, where they feel that they can trust this world and are present in a safe way, and can offer the world something in return.

We care for our elders, you know, and our parents, you know, that does. When they get older and need help, there's care for them that's provided. It's kind of natural to do this, to offer care, and it feeds something inside of us. To expand those circles of care, or to think of those circles of care not only for the people who are friends, families, or our particular community, but to have that sense of care to go outwards into all directions for the whole world, I think, is part and parcel or intimately connected to Buddhist practice. This freeing up of the heart, freeing up of our capacity to care, to have compassion, to have love, freeing up, freeing ourselves from whatever barriers we have of being present in a full, embodied, and complete way to meet this world, to be in this world like it is.

Using this word care repeatedly here is my translation of a Buddhist term that the Buddha used called *anukampā*. It goes back to the time of the Buddha, where there is a very clear usage of this word that lends itself to not only understand that it means compassion, but it also means something broader: compassion with care and caring for others in more ways than just caring for their suffering and not wanting them to suffer. *Anukampā* also means to care for people's welfare and for their happiness. Even people who are well off, you know, comfortable and safe, maybe have enough food, not suffering in some deep, obvious way, we can also, with our generosity, want to care for them, care for their well-being, care for their happiness. As much as compassion is one of the most profound things a human person

can feel, it's not really suited in all situations. If we only have compassion for our friends, our friends might start feeling uncomfortable around us. But if we care for them, maybe there's infinite room to care for the well-being and happiness of our friends.

It's a broader sensibility, but also it seems like it's a natural sensibility. It's a natural sensitivity that we all have, at least that's the impression I get from reading the teachings of the Buddha. Because the Buddha never talks about cultivating or developing *anukampā*, this capacity, this capacity for care, he just assumes it's there, assumes that it's there more and more. The more we let go of hatred, the more we let go of ill will, the more we let go of the things that block the existence of it. The people who become more spiritually mature are people who are more liberated and free, awakened. Maybe what they awaken, one of things they awaken to, is they awaken to their capacity to care.

I like the word care a lot because it's, to my mind, my mind, it's a humble word. It's a word that hasn't been used very much in the translation of the Buddhist texts into English. There have been these grand terms like compassion and loving kindness that have been used. But care is, I think, it's part and parcel of what the Buddha was teaching, but that it's kind of a humble word because it's a natural part of human life, and we probably use it all the time in our language. But it doesn't really get elevated that high, like compassion does in the world of religion or Buddhism so much. I'd like to elevate it a little, but I'd like to point out that it's here as a natural part. I'm touched, you know, how if you start thinking about where the word care is used in our society. It's used in health care, you know, the intensive care unit, palliative care, and it goes on and on places. Spiritual care is a department of chaplaincy. Sometimes it's called a spiritual department of spiritual care.

It's used for child care, the childcare providers, people who work in nursery schools and in kindergartens are sometimes called child or baby sitters, childcare providers, caregiving. Many people are caregivers. Many people who don't get paid for it. There are caregivers who are paid. Then there's family members who are known as caregivers. If we're caring for someone who's sick, someone who may be dying, we talk about the family's caregivers and their needs, and how to support them as well. So this word care is used kind of over and over again in English, and it has this wonderful word, because it has kind of two meanings. To care is to care for something, can mean to value it, to be interested in it, to attend to it in some way or other, and not necessarily because it's suffering, because it's something we want to care for and make it function well, to care for our car. I don't think our car suffers usually, but we can care for a car by getting oil changed and different things within it to kind of function well.

To give care, to be a caregiver, is to, there's a care that has to do with actually supporting

people, helping people, supporting people to have a better life and to bring benefit to people. These two things, to be interested, to value people together with the idea of supporting them and doing things that are, you know, to help them out, or things that are compassionate sometimes. These two meanings of care come together, because we could say that, oh, we take care of what we care for. We take care of what we care about. To care about other people, we take care of other people. How do we enter into this kind of mutuality, or this place where it comes from, to value other people? We take care of other people. How can we not value other people if we are deeply rooted and at home and centered in ourselves? Because as the practice deepens and we open up and become freer and freer of the forces of contraction, attachment, clinging, it's natural to see others, to feel others, to be sensitive to others in a deep way.

From that place deep inside, care is a natural functioning of who we are. There's no need to evoke care or to create care or build care or remind ourselves care or care, think about what a good idea care is. If we're centred on ourselves, so that inner sensitivity, the empathy, can be there. The word *anukampā* that I'm translating as care, *kampā* means to shake or to tremble. *Anu* means towards, in relationship to something. For the heart to tremble, to shake, to resonate towards what's happening in the world, to other people. For our inner life to have the sensitivity to be mindful enough, awake enough to feel the natural sensitivity that we don't feel if we wear armor. We're closed off if we're caught up in anger or greed or ambition or conceit. This beautiful and profound spiritual task of settling, letting go of conceit, greed, ambition, letting go of that, very touching and in profound ways which we are afraid, scared, to let go of all the difficult ways we have hatred or ill will.

Then, in that letting go, to feel the sensitivity of our inner life, the way we can pick up and feel empathy for other people, to drop the barriers, to drop the armor. This, you know, this kind of mutuality of how we care for others, we care for ourselves. It has a kind of reverse principle, and that is that if we're self-absorbed, only taking care of ourselves, me, myself, and mine, if we paradoxically are also harming ourselves. If we have unfettered, it might feel like we're freer. If we have unfettered expression of our hatred, just I'm free expressing it, or if we have unrestrained ability to follow our desires, whatever we want, I should be able to be free to do. It becomes an alienation, a disconnection from something that's deeper than desires, or deeper than greed, or deeper than hatred, or deeper than delusion, deeper than conceit. In fact, we harm ourselves when we act from greed, hate, and delusion. So this paradox: the more we act only for ourselves, the more we harm ourselves, the more we, not out of obligation, the more that we free ourselves from greed, hate and delusion, the

more we become someone who benefits ourselves, frees ourselves, touches into what's most beautiful within ourselves. Turns out that if we do that work, one of the beautiful things we find inside is our natural capacity for *anukampā*, our natural capacity for care.

So in this contemporary nineteen era, in what I hope will become the era of care, what do you care about? At what point does the welfare and well-being of others become not only something you care about, but something your care is motivated by your actions and how you are in the world? How can you not wait for someone else to do the caring, but how can your care be expressed? I think our hearts need to know that we're doing something, anything that makes a difference. Some people are living in good circumstances, and some, imagine some people who are living in good circumstances, who are sheltered at home, are actually spending less money than they normally would be. Please use some of that money. Don't just sit and make your savings get bigger. Make donations to the places people really need it. There are people who are hungry in the United States, around the world. Let's make sure that people have enough food. Invest that money in some place that makes a difference for our society, that brings benefit. Don't just sit on the money.

For those of us, those of you who don't have money to share, who are struggling financially, allow yourself to be helped. Allow yourself to go out and try to help. Let people know that you are in need, because unless we know, people won't be able to help. If you are being helped by others, there's still others that you can help as well. See what you can do. Even if it's just a smile or a phone call or a friendly conversation with someone you meet, there are an infinite number of ways that our capacity for *anukampā*, our capacity for care, can be expressed. To begin expressing it more and more is also the path of freeing ourselves from all the forces of attachment and clinging. Care enough. Act on your care, and you begin stretching into the limits and to the edges and to the places of attachment and clinging. Then you bring your practice there and begin to dissolve it or stretch it thin, and eventually let it go away.

We have a practice to let go of attachments and clinging so that we can care better, and we can care so that we can meet those attachments and clings, so we can let them go. The mutuality of practice and care and practice in Buddhism. May we contribute to a wonderful potential that's inherent in this globe right now, the potential that this becomes the era of care, and that we are part of the caring generation that is remembered and celebrated for generations to come. It's that important, what's happening now. So thank you for the opportunity to talk with you and to share what's on my heart, and I hope it has some benefit for you and inspires you at this difficult time for our society, our world.

I think I have one announcement. I see many of you who are here and appreciate seeing

some of you who come peacefully at a.m. In about thirty minutes or so, eleven o'clock here in California, we're going to have a community meeting for the IMC community. It's going to be on Zoom. Those of you who were logged on today, you're part of the community. If you would like to join the meeting, you're welcome to do so. It's just a chance to talk a little bit about IMC. We'll do a few breakout groups, so people get to meet each other a little bit who are connected to IMC. Then we'll take some questions, concerns from the community. If you want to be part of that in a few minutes, certainly before, you know, in the next fifteen minutes or so, I'm going to put the Zoom link to that meeting on the IMC calendar and log on a little bit before. So you'll probably be in the waiting room because of this weekend bombing and stuff like that, hacking in. I think at eleven o'clock or so I'll take the link off. So hopefully we can be a little more protected as a community that way. So I thank you very much, and I wish you all well.