

Quarantine and Karmic Baggage

March 22, 2020

I came to the experience of quarantine a little earlier than some, and its process has been confusing and changeable. I got what I believe was the flu the last week of February, right after Daijukai sesshin. It was typical - 3 days of fever, coughing, staying in bed, and feeling miserable. Then the fever broke, I was able to get up and shower, dress, do laundry, and return to my life and duties. Or so I thought. Yes, the cough was still there, which is sometimes typical of flu and colds. My past experience tells me that this sort of cough can hang on for a few to several weeks, sometimes months. There's no way to know exactly how long I will be coughing.

I didn't think much about it. After all, it's common for people to be in various stages of colds, flu, and allergies in late winter / early spring. The sound of coughing in the zendo is a time-honored tradition. But in those days of the first awareness of the threat of coronavirus, the sound became one of fear and distress for many. I began to experience pressure to absent myself from at least large gatherings. Somewhat mystified, I did so. I was told that the restriction would last 14 days. I stopped cooking, though I still did housekeeping and cleaning, I embraced the new sanitizing procedures and practiced them.

At 14 days after the fever stopped, I figured I was now okay to resume my regular routine. I was still coughing, but again didn't worry about that. I felt fine, was working out, and had lots of energy. I even went into prisons and the county jail, as I have been doing for years.

Soon, the Oregon Department of Corrections closed the prisons to visitors and volunteers coming in, and the county jail followed. The stigma and fear around coughing in public intensified. I began to realize that people were actively avoiding me, even as I was careful to maintain a distance of 6 feet or more. I continued to avoid large gatherings, *i.e.*, no Sunday morning or Wednesday evening events.

Then Dharma Rain, along with many other organizations, closed all public events. We have been scrambling to move much of our practice online, to find ways to continue our work of supporting the Three Treasures in this difficult time. I finally realized that even though I felt fine in spite of the continuing cough, I needed to self-quarantine for the sake of others, not to add distress and fear in this time.

However, we didn't really set up the residential container here to make isolating easy. Quite the contrary - it is designed so that we can all participate with each other and use our spaces efficiently. So meals are communal in the Sodo, prepared in our wonderful kitchen. We put extra showers in one residential unit for those staying here during sesshin. Laundry facilities are in the Sodo and also a second unit. A small resident's kitchen is in a third unit, with a refrigerator, microwave, and hot plate. A sewing room is in the unit with laundry. The office and library are in another building - which we call Uji. All of these spaces, along with the barn (workshop and storage), and the outdoors - gardens, walking trails, and connections with the surrounding

neighborhood - have been open to all, and we've all moved freely among all of them, appreciating and feeling blessed by them.

I've been privileged to be Tenzo (head cook) for several months, cooking for sesshin, shopping, organizing, stocking, cleaning, and supporting. But once I started coughing, pressure mounted to get me out of the kitchen no matter how much I washed my hands and sanitized surfaces. Over the last several weeks, though, for me personally it feels as though a net has been tightening around me, with increasing restrictions. I am not acting as tenzo, as I now can't even enter the Sodo or go out shopping. I sit zazen in my room. There have been proposals and discussions about the best way to work with the residential container so that we can continue to support and take care of each other while still following safety guidelines. The uncertainty of what it looks like has made for some difficult ups and downs. Lots of fear and anger.

The Mind

What I notice through all of this is not surprising: the greatest suffering has come from my own mind. Feeling personally attacked and restricted. Being treated like I'm sick when I feel well. People's palpable fear and distrust of me. Even though I know intellectually that people may not be thinking what I'm projecting on to them, and that it's not personal, it still *feels* personal because it's about my body, about something I can't control. It feels discriminatory, unjust, unfair. Sometimes I have been filled with rage and thought about how to escape the situation. This is one of many examples of old karmic baggage that arose, this one about trying to escape/avoid hard situations.

As my previous life has continued to shut down in bits and pieces, I struggled with wondering who I am now, how to be of the most use in this situation. At one point the insight: how can I be most helpful to others? By doing nothing. Weird. The question then arises, what does it mean to be an ordained priest and an authorized teacher when I'm in quarantine, with little interaction with the outside world?

Of course, as mentioned, many of us are still exploring and finding ways to use online connections. I've been following the news and Facebook much more closely than usual, posting on Facebook more than I ever have before, reading other people's experiences in dealing with all of these changes. There's a lot of good interaction possible if you can wade through the chaff.

Structure

I find that it's helpful to have a structure, to follow a schedule. So I have chosen to keep the Ango schedule, to get up early each morning and put on my robes, sit in my room, and then chant morning service by myself in the living room. I change into samue, fix my own breakfast in the residents' kitchen next door, eating at about the same time as other residents.

Morning and afternoon work practice, as always, looks like various things. I have a wonderful personal trainer, who has sent me workouts by email, and with more time available, I have gone

to working out 4 times a week instead of 2. The workout ends with a walk (or bike ride) in the neighborhood, so I get the benefits of fresh air, exercise, and an expansive sense of getting out.

As I gradually turn my attention from the kitchen to the sewing room (which is in my unit, and therefore accessible to me) I discover projects that can be of use. A suggestion to make more white kimonos for those who have died. Face masks have become a thing, with patterns to be found online. The usual temple sewing of waggessas, zafus and zabutons continues. And always personal mending and sewing clothes for myself.

And then there's the garden. It's one of those tasks that over the past few years has been sandwiched in whenever I can find space. Now there may be more time for this.

I'm aware that I usually carry around a background list of projects that I want to do but don't have time for. One question that arises is whether these tasks are things I really want to do and don't have time for or just insurance that I always have something to do, a way to feel useful and okay. Part of the difficulty of this time of change has been the feeling of being useless, a parasite, not good enough. Old Karmic Baggage again. Having a bunch of projects to do, like having a stack of books to read, feels like stored wealth to me. In those terms I'm rich. Or maybe I'm just greedy. After all, what does it mean to be idle? Does it really diminish my value?

Space Between

During the uncertainty of what will this new reality look like, what is possible in this new life, I found that I couldn't simply stop thinking about the kitchen, where I've given a large part of my life for several months, or the zendo, or the prisons, where the investment of my life is a matter of years, immediately find what's next to do, and drop what was before. There is inevitably a space between what was in the past and what will come next. How do we navigate that space between one life and the next? How do we get comfortable with a void and wait peacefully to see what fills it?

I wish I could say that I have sailed through this time with perfect equanimity and a uniformly calm demeanor. On the contrary, my emotional reactions have been surprisingly intense. I recognize many of these states - as I mentioned, old karmic baggage that I have been working with for years. One thing I've learned is how to recognize and honor those feelings without being consumed by them. Much of the time I can shrug ruefully and let them go after a little time. The Buddha speaks of offering Mara (the evil one) a cup of tea and then sending him on his way.

The anger is more difficult, as it is newer for me. I didn't allow myself to feel it for much of my life. The struggle is similar, though it still takes longer for me to process it and let it go. I need to explore it a bit so I don't just stuff it. For that, I again allow it to be recognized and honored, and when it seems to be approaching the indulgent stage, threatening to take over, I rely on zazen and chanting practice to interrupt it, to give it a break, to ventilate it. Eventually it passes, as everything does. It's been interesting to watch the sometimes wild swings of feeling despondent

one day and strong and positive the next followed by a day of anger, and so forth. I've been sighing a lot. It's just been a difficult time.

I hear others speak about the disorientation and distractions associated with a time of intense processing in the background. I realize that this is like other major life transitions, like divorce, a new job, etc. There's a period of time when you need more sleep, and it's harder to carry out usually easy routine tasks, partly because the routine has changed. It's important to take care of ourselves during these times, to be gentle with ourselves and allow the process to move forward. One way to do this is by sitting zazen.

Zazen

Kyogen told of an experience at Shasta Abbey one morning when they got up early to file into the zendo for zazen. The sun was just coming up, and the view on the mountain was stunning. The air was fresh, and it was wonderful to be alive. As they entered the zendo, in a dark, musty, temporary building, he felt a pang of loss. But as he settled down into zazen and found the spaciousness of that experience, he realized that our practice allows us to experience that anywhere, under any conditions. So you don't have to be on a mountain at sunrise to touch spaciousness and wonder.

Sitting still and watching the mind consistently over time helps me loosen my attachment to thoughts and feelings. It's so easy to concretize - this is how it is, how it has always been (old karmic baggage), how it will always be. When I just sit still and watch that, and the next day notice that my perceptions and thoughts have shifted, moved to a different view of reality, I gradually learn not to believe everything I think or feel. I can hold the thoughts and feelings more lightly, with compassion and curiosity, continuing to ask what is true in this moment.

This process leads to equanimity, which is not the same as being calm no matter what. Equanimity accepts everything, including difficult emotions, and is the opposite of concretizing them. Equanimity allows me to be in a sea of changes without drowning.

Another benefit of zazen is finding compassion for myself. Over time I can notice others around me struggling as well. Many are going through the same things, and though the struggles are similar, the ways we each go through them are unique because we all carry our own unique karma, ways of perceiving reality, and particular personalities. It is a curious fact that paying attention to my own karmic baggage helps me see others more clearly. It is a curious thing that in this time of isolation and quarantine I feel more connected than ever to others.

In *American Sutra*, Duncan Williams writes about the difficult time when thousands of Japanese people were herded into concentration camps in the United States. They especially targeted Buddhist priests, often giving people very little time to pack up and go. Most of them lost everything. Here's one thing he says:

In Buddhism, the practice of delving into the depths of this world so as to transcend it is sometimes symbolized by the image of a beautiful lotus flower emerging out of muddy waters. The lotus flower represents enlightenment and in sculptural traditions is the seat upon which the Buddha is centered. Muddy water represents delusion and greed, or anything that hinders enlightenment and causes suffering. While some traditions center on the need to transcend the muddy water to attain a state of enlightenment, most Japanese Buddhist traditions emphasize that for the lotus flower to exist, the nutrients from the muddy waters are essential. It is a metaphor that emphasizes how the karmic obstacles of this world are interconnected with liberation and enlightenment.

For the interned Buddhist priests, incarceration often served as muddy water. Their American sutra was written not in a realm of purity and formality but in the swamps of Louisiana and deserts of New Mexico. The internment camps became new arenas for deepening religious practice for those whose mission it was to offer valuable Buddhist teachings to America. (pp85-86)

He goes on to describe some of the ways that Buddhists improvised creating religious objects to do ceremonies and continue to practice their religion, for example, carving images from carrots. Many stories of resilience and overcoming horrible obstacles. Stories like this help me to put my own suffering in this time into perspective. After all, I am still in my home. I have everything I need. The question of how a priest functions in a situation where all the usual routines and accoutrements have been taken away is also pertinent.

There has always been suffering - we speak of war, epidemic, and starvation, but are removed from them; they seem remote, unreal. We're shocked when they slam us out of nowhere. It's all happened many times before. We just forget.

What will come next? More uncertainty and impermanence. We have been working on adopting a set of policies of how we will practice with quarantine here in this residential container. Right now my life is like this. I can say that this is okay for now. It is likely to change several times in the days and weeks ahead. This is after all what our practice is for: to see what is true with clarity, to have compassion for ourselves and others, and find a wise response in each moment.