

Buddhism and the Coronavirus

By Rev. John Paraskevopoulos

The Buddhist tradition envisages the world in which we find ourselves as a concatenation of mutable causes and conditions. This realm of flux and instability is what gives rise to the host of perils, sorrows and torments that shadow our all-too-brief time on this earth. Under such precarious circumstances, as the Buddha observed, we must become reconciled to the inevitability of sickness, old age and death.

This is not a 'pessimistic' outlook but simply an honest and clear-eyed view of things as they are, without the sugar-coating that we tend to put on life to make these uncomfortable truths more palatable. We often seek to sweep this realization under the carpet so as to avoid its intensely confronting implications, but it repeatedly comes back to haunt us as a *memento mori*.

Notwithstanding the above, it is certainly not correct—as some falsely imagine—that Buddhism subscribes to nothing more than a fragile and fleeting universe that is constantly afflicted by unrest. In its Mahāyāna form, this tradition also upholds the belief in a spiritual Absolute, known as the Dharma-Body (*Dharmakāya*).

This inconceivable ultimate reality is the eternal underlying essence of mind and matter—the blissful, self-sufficient and unchanging well-spring of existence. It is the non-dimensional unity behind all things whose living presence within us comprises our real self that endures beyond our short-lived bodies and brittle identities.

The extraordinary richness of terrestrial life, with its countless teeming phenomena, is a reflection of the abundantly overflowing spiritual energy of the Dharma-Body. As a consequence of its infinite potential, it pours forth as the boundlessly varied appearances that we find in nature and among living beings. However, by unfolding itself in this

way, the Dharma-Body necessarily assumes forms that are evanescent and fragmentary, this being the price to be paid for the manifestation of finite things which must involve some privation of a higher perfection.

The Coronavirus that is currently spreading death and mayhem across the globe is a life-form, among many billions, which has an interest in its own survival like any other. It is inevitable, therefore, that its propensity to reproduce and prevail will come into conflict with similar motivations in other beings, where their respective interests in flourishing are not congruent.

It is true that, as a result of this pandemic, many have had cause to reflect on life and its ephemeral nature. Some have questioned if their lives, thus far, have been spent meaningfully or whether valuable opportunities for personal or spiritual development have been thoughtlessly squandered on unfulfilling vanities.

A short digression is necessary here to consider the role of *karma*. The word simply means ‘action’ and refers to the impersonal law of cause and effect that governs the consequences of our moral intentions. It is the principle that influences the nature of our existence—not only our habits and way of perceiving but also aspects of the material world.

However, it does not govern every event in our lives and thus has nothing to do with fate or destiny. There are other causes in the universe that are unrelated to human *karma* and so life is not entirely determined. Given that we always retain our free will, despite the many constraints under which we labor, it continually remains open to us to make choices that improve our lives and strengthen our spiritual orientation.

Buddhists are loath to suggest that *karma* has inflicted this virus on humanity in order to ‘teach us a lesson’ about our wayward lives. Rather, they would be inclined to say that the present crisis affords an occasion to re-evaluate our priorities and engage with the true font of our well-being by seeking permanent liberation from suffering. Like many other religious traditions, Buddhism unequivocally asserts that our authentic welfare must be grounded on *spiritual* reality and not on the perishable chattels of this world, which is likened to a ‘burning house’.

In light of the interdependence of all beings (*pratītyasamutpāda*) in this transient cosmos of incessant birth-and-death (*saṃsāra*), we are all connected by forces that can either lead us to the highest good (*nirvāṇa*)—if we remain open to its beneficent *karmic* influences—or

we may undermine our quest for enlightenment by hurtling down a hopeless spiral of ignorance (*avidyā*) that binds us to the dissatisfaction (*duḥkha*) inherent in further transmigration.

If nothing else, the onset of this virus bestows us with an exceptionally precious opportunity to restore and fulfill our vocation as spiritual wayfarers on a journey back to our source.