

Hello, everybody. I am really happy to be able to connect with you all. I want very much to hear how you are and where you're at, and that's why I want to emphasize mostly Q&A, so that I have a sense of what your questions really are, rather than me teaching something to a sort of blank space and not really being sure of what everybody's going through.

I do know for sure that there is a lot of fear in various forms, such as panic, underlying anxiety, and nervousness, things like that. And then there are the offshoots from that, like anger, irritation, and so forth. So I wanted to start with a short meditation. With either your eyes open or closed, we can begin with just checking in and feeling. In particular, check in with how you're feeling in your body. If you are feeling anxiety, for instance, then you will feel it in your body someplace. So I want to begin with a short meditation of just feeling what you're feeling right now, in this moment.

Your eyes can be open or closed. How are you feeling, physically? Right now? See if you can feel it in your body and locate in your body whatever it is you're feeling, remembering that whatever you're feeling is fine. Not a problem. It's just a process of connecting and finding out where you are, without judging it as bad or good. Whatever it is that you're feeling right now, it's actually your link—your connection—with what other people all over the planet are feeling. If you're feeling any variation on anxiety or fear, it's a link with what other people are feeling. If you're feeling any variation on anger or aggression, irritation, frustration, or even boredom, it's a link with what other people are feeling.

So, for just a few minutes, we could do a variation on the Tonglen practice of standing in someone else's shoes. To the degree that you can touch in and feel what you're feeling, when you breathe in, breathe *that* in. Breathe it into your heart area, breathe it into your whole body, and breathe it into a feeling of a big space. Then breathe it out, and send it out. The out-breath can be like a sigh of relief, sending out that relaxation or sigh of relief to everyone all over the planet. You could start with the people that you know personally, and just do it person by person. Or you could get as vast as looking at the earth from the moon, and do it for the entire planet. So as you breathe in, breathe in that feeling, whatever it might be. Breathe it in, and as you breathe in, open and relax, taking it in, feeling it, and then relaxing out, and sending that relaxation out to everyone.

Breathe in for everyone, connecting with everybody as you breathe in. We're all in the same boat here. Relaxing out, send out that relaxation or spaciousness to everyone.

Let the in-breath be opening—a very relaxing sense of opening, opening, opening. And then relax out. You're doing it for yourself and for everybody else who's in the same boat. Do this for your friends and family, do it for your country, and for the whole earth, all of us on this earth.

With the in-breath, you're connecting with suffering, widespread suffering, and with the out-breath, you're sending love and relief.

That was short, and we were not able to go very deeply, probably, but I'd like to start hearing from you and to hear your questions. I'd appreciate that a lot.

Anonymous: “You’ve mentioned previously in talks that, when doing Tonglen, you breathe the suffering and pain into the great blue sky and not one’s own body or person. Can you say more about how that process is done—if we’re supposed to take in the suffering personally or have it go more into an expanse?”

Well, the way I was just teaching it now is not completely traditional. I wanted to give the feeling that it is your own body. I often will teach it as the heart—that the heart just gets wider and wider and wider as you breathe in. Rather than more and more contracted, your heart gets very big, so that breathing in, even if that's dealing with suffering or pain, there's a sense of letting it be there just as it is and not hardening against it or softening against it. So when I say the big blue sky, I don't really mean to jump over here, but I want to give a feeling of a lot of space, a lot of space for it to come into a big space and then be sent out into a big space. So the practice has a feeling of relaxing, or it has something soothing about it, even though it's dealing directly with suffering and pain. When there's suffering and pain, we tend to get very contracted and fearful, and this is a way of using our ability to love each other and our compassion for one another as a vehicle for opening to whatever it is we're going through that's painful and difficult, and then letting that be our connection with other people. So we do it for ourselves and, simultaneously, for everybody else who's feeling that way.

Claudia Lane: “My question is about fear. I am a nurse, and with the current conditions, I am so afraid to go into the hospital to take care of people. I struggle with running away from the fear and then wanting to go forward and face the fear. If you could just speak a little bit about leaning into the fear, and then what it is that we can all do, when we're faced with such an enormous problem.”

Well, first of all, I want to say that fear is absolutely a natural response to what's going on. So one doesn't have to feel that the fear itself is problematic in any way. It's just a natural response. I think that, in giving that variation on Tonglen that I gave there, that was really coming from a place of—when we can put ourselves in other people's shoes, such as the fear felt by all the people in the hospital, and all the other doctors, nurses, and the people who are there because they're so terribly ill, I think somehow, getting in touch with your heart—getting vulnerable and tender in *you*—is the most healing thing that one can do.

I don't want to say that there's like a magic thing, but if you go to work, and you acknowledge that you're feeling a lot of fear, and you go to work with that fear, and then you see it

everywhere, there's a sense that you could start breathing it in and say, "May we all be free of it," and send out love and care to the other nurses and to the doctors. Send out the kind of care you would like to have if you were in one of those beds. There's something healing about our interconnectedness. It can heal us rather than separate us. So, starting to do Tonglen for yourself and feeling how that links you with everybody else—I think that's the best thing you can possibly do. Know that the fear is just natural, the fear you could catch the illness and die yourself is totally natural. And don't get too caught up in storylines, because they will take you down every time. Let it be about heart connection.

Phil: "I try to be and consider myself a pretty compassionate person, and also a pretty logic-based, scientific person. I see a lot of people—locally and nationally—who are ignoring what I feel like I could call true ways that we can lessen the impact of what's happening right now. They're ignoring them or dismissing them, and that causes anger or confusion, or even a feeling of me being better than them. I feel like they're almost two separate things, because I feel like nothing emotional is going to change the facts of this, and I'm trying to figure out the useful bridge between the two, if there is one. Maybe that's the wrong question."

No, it's not the wrong question, it's an excellent question.

Do you think that people are ignoring things because they're afraid, and they just don't want to face what might really be going on?

Phil: "In my better moments, I do, yes."

And in your worst moments?

Phil: "In my worst moments, it's about understanding that people have a hard time connecting future suffering with right now, and thinking that we have a hard time changing, which I guess is a form of denying it as well or being afraid of it."

That's right. Well, that could bring some compassion to the people who don't have that capacity, the people who are ignoring. I was just talking to my son, and he was saying the exact thing you're saying and feeling that he couldn't grasp it. But I think with not being able to see and not being able to look ahead in terms of how the virus spreads, one could have some compassion for those unable to do that, particularly if it's going to end up impacting them or people they love dearly. So in a case like that, it can definitely make one very angry, everything from irritated to completely furious, but of course that's not going to help. I think a lot now about what we are adding to the planet. What are we adding to the planet when one of us starts getting

really irritable and angry at other people? We definitely don't need to add that to the planet. And if one is panicking, we certainly don't need to add that to the planet either.

If each of us takes personal responsibility for our own minds and also our own hearts, I think that's really it. To just keep coming back to these practices of knowing that, “Just like me, this person is living and possibly spreading the virus. Just like me, this person really doesn't want to suffer. Just like me, this person wants to be happy. Nevertheless, just like most human beings, they don't get the cause and effect of where the true happiness comes from and where the true suffering comes from.” So, one could have a sense of empathy, even while one is angry. When you feel that, you can say, “This is what I'm feeling. I'm feeling angry, and I don't have to spin out on it, and I don't have to be ashamed of myself. I'm just not going to act or speak out. And if I have it in me right now, I have it in me right now, but not later. I'm going to try to have some sense of empathetic compassion for these people, or at least understanding—understanding of the vulnerability of humanity.”

Celia: “What guidance can you offer for staying present while planning and preparing? I appreciate what you said about not getting caught up in storylines, but some seem like rational stories to follow, like buying enough food to prepare for potential shortages.”

Well, see what's driving you. The toilet paper issue was in the news a lot a couple of weeks ago about people hoarding, for instance. Notice if it's coming from a place of panic, and then ask, how much do you really need of each item? There has to be some kind of weighing of how much is actually practical and necessary. You may shop every two weeks, and you need to get enough to get you through two weeks, and maybe some things you get more of, but how much of it is being sensible and making good choices, and how much of it is panic-driven and selfish? Selfish in the sense that, if you take everything, then there's not enough for somebody else.

In terms of being present, you can be present with the Shenpa, if you know that term which means wanting things to go a certain way and attachment to wanting other people to do it right. I think if you can be present with what you're feeling and maybe even pause for quite a while before you go to the grocery store, and make a grocery list a couple of days ahead of time and really go over it and make sure: do you really need *that* many rolls of toilet paper or whatever it might be? It's interesting, up here in Nova Scotia, when you go to the grocery store, even in normal times, you don't expect to get everything you want to get. So you just think that you're going to have to just put in a little time. So maybe if there are three weeks in a row where you can't get potatoes, then when you finally can get potatoes, you might get a really large bag. Something like that just sort of makes sense.

What I'm trying to address is the fact that people panic and overbuy, it feeds into your sense of holding onto yourself so tightly, when what is actually going to soothe you and all of us is opening up the scope and including other people, looking out our eyes at other people and seeing what they're going through—they're going through just what we are, in some variation—and letting our hearts open to the situation and be opened by the situation rather than closed in fear. I might not be quite getting to what you were asking, but what I'm addressing, I think, is people's tendency to panic and get very tight and unreasonable instead of sensible. That doesn't really acknowledge how interconnected we are in this whole thing, and how we have to care for each other and watch out for each other. I hope that addresses it somewhat.

Pamela: “I have two small daughters, and we have not been in a bad situation at all, but they constantly ask when we're going to go back home, and they ask about the coronavirus and these terms that they don't understand. I am not scared, but how do I explain to them in simple ways so that they don't get scared either? Because when they talk to my mother, or when they talk to other people that are outside the circle that we live in right now, it's all about panicking.”

It's interesting, when you ask this, I think about Mr. Rogers—there were all those movies about him last year—and how he would always address the children through his puppet, remember? Are you familiar with Mr. Rogers? It was this television show for little kids, but one of the things he would do would be to address issues of the day. So for instance, if Mr. Rogers was on television now, he would be addressing really little kids about the coronavirus. So he would have his hand puppet say, “Mr. Rogers, what's the coronavirus?” And then Mr. Rogers would say in his very gentle way, “Oh, it's like a bad flu that, because we're like one big family on this earth, people all over are catching this flu. But you do not have to be afraid. We're in this very safe place, and we can have a happy life like we always do. But it's good to know that there are people who have this bad flu, and we could be saying prayers for them, or when we eat our food, we could say, ‘may the people who are feeling sick from the virus be better.’” You know, things that little kids understand. I mean, you as a mom, you could say it much better than me, but what I think the point was—the Mr. Rogers kind of lesson—was that he didn't scoot around it, because the kids are picking it up, you know. You can even say to them, you know, “Grandma, because she's old, she gets more scared than some people do, so you just have to be very sweet with grandma, and just know that grandma is like that sometimes. But I'm not scared, so you don't have to be scared. We're in such a good place, you know?” Like that. You'll find your way, but I think the idea is just address it really honestly, but tenderly and sweetly, and bring out their good children's hearts. I don't know, what would you say as a mom?

Pamela: “Well, I have told them that—that it's like a really bad flu and that people are scared, but we don't have to be scared because we're very blessed to have good food, to be

in a place with good air, to be in a place where we have the sun. I guess my biggest concern was my mother, because even though she's not in a bad position, my daughters are very attached to her, and when they talk to her, she is very capable of passing on her fears, and that's what I don't want."

Can you talk to your mom? You know, find some time when the kids are off playing and just say, "Let's work together to not frighten the children. You and I can talk, but with the kids, because they don't understand very well, let's make a real joint effort to not frighten them. So with them, just talk about things that you would normally talk about if nothing were happening." Something like that. And in case your mom forgets or finds that very hard, then with the children, you can just say: "Grandma loves you, and that's why she's worried, but I think grandma worries too much, and we don't have to worry." Say things that are loving and respectful, and then say, "Let's make a picture for grandma to cheer her up. Let's make some cookies and cheer her up." Things like that, so they begin to feel like they're trying to help her feel better.

Kevin: "Can you speak of death and impermanence? Not physical death, necessarily, but the death of our old paradigms and ways of being. What practice can you suggest for us to face the gift of death so we can be more open to the new wanting to be born?"

Oh my goodness Kevin, what a question. It's a wonderful question. But I feel like I can give a ten-day seminar on the topic. I like what you're saying about the death of old paradigms—that's the opportunity of this time, really. There are some old paradigms that would be good to have die, and if this pandemic helps some of those die, that would be a wonderful thing.

In terms of what practices to do, I think the main practice is to be fully present with what's happening with you now, and notice any resistance. You say impermanence and death. Notice any fear of uncertainty, which is a form of impermanence and death, and insecurity, which is a form of impermanence and death. Notice any tendency on your part to be holding on and contracting. Then the best practice would be to acknowledge that contraction and not make it bad—there's nothing wrong with that—but to feel it as fully as you possibly can. The practice that people sometimes do if they're really feeling caught in the contraction of fear and insecurity and death, fear of impermanence and insecurity—they breathe in very deeply and relax out very deeply. You've probably done that practice. It's not about trying to sweeten it up, but about relaxing and growing your capacity to hold feelings like uncertainty, growing your capacity to be able to hold impermanence, growing your capacity to be able to be open to not controlling things which you can't control anyway and be open to asking, "Where is this going, what's going to happen to me personally, how is this going to impact my life and the life of my friends, and how is this going to shift the planet?" Just being open instead of being afraid.

We could hope that there will be some very good things that will come out of this, but we don't know. So we have to wait with an open heart and an open mind and not close down when we're facing impermanence and death at an everyday level. Hopefully that's some help.

Lindsey: “My question isn't quite as specific to the current situation, but I'm sure it applies in some ways. I always have trouble with decision-making—that's something I've noticed I struggle with in my adult life. It brings up a lot of anxiety for me. I go back and forth and overanalyze. So I wanted to ask you what specific advice you would give around that and what you practice yourself when you're faced with tough decisions.”

Well! I always say the same thing and answer everything the same way—at least that's how it seems to me. Of course you have to act, and you have to say something and do something and make the decision. But in the process, if you can become very familiar with what that feels like, the feeling of getting caught in making the decision—that's where it has a lot of applicability to what's happening now, with the virus and being able to hold really uncomfortable feelings without contracting, without going inward too much, getting caught up in oneself too much. The reason getting too self-centered is a problem is because it increases suffering. If you want to find a way to relax and open and keep moving, so to speak, instead of getting caught, it has to be more that you use what you're feeling as a link with other people, in other words, some way to be able to look out your eyes and be there for other people. So something like the indecision you feel, which is so painful for you—I'm sure if you're like most human beings, it causes you to get more self-centered because you worry about yourself, and it's very easy to go keep going in.

There are lots of storylines, right? So to the best of your ability, through meditation as a way to become more adept at this, you let those storylines go and be with the feeling underneath. Interestingly enough, this seems like it doesn't make sense rationally, because rationally, you would keep the storyline going until you can figure out what to decision to make. However, if you have this approach of sitting with the agitation, or however you want to describe it, you'd be very surprised at how much clearer a way to go will come. It's like creative energy that allows you to make a decision comes out of that stillness or out of touching immediately into that experience. And what's important is, don't make that experience bad. Just say, “It's just a sensation, it's just what I'm feeling—it doesn't say there's anything wrong with me. I'm an ordinary human being, but I'm sort of dumb about what's going to help me,” if you know what I mean. [Laughs] I don't mean to insult you there—I'm talking about the human race. So the decision will come out of that stillness, rather than out of that mind spinning.

Michael: “I'm working to feel what I'm feeling, but I'm feeling very uncomfortable, and my mind goes into a pattern of wanting to do something to distract myself. Often I can stop

that process, but sometimes it feels almost like a powerful train that's going there anyway. When I get into the habitual pattern, I have a little bit of awareness that I'm in a pattern of wanting to distract myself, but I don't feel like I have a lot of choice. Is there anything that might help in that situation?"

I think that everyone listening is familiar with what you're describing. There are different stages at which you can catch emotions, if I'm right to be describing it as an emotion. You're describing it at the hardest stage, and that's when it's already full-blown and moving rapidly, which is the most difficult time to work with it, so you can give yourself a break about that. But in the meantime, you can start to train with catching it at the ember stage. You might say that's very hard to do, but actually, having worked with this a lot and talked to many people who work with it, it's very possible to catch it at the ember stage. You work with less highly charged but similar kinds of emotional responses—more lightweight responses. So for instance, someone is talking to you, and you might all of a sudden pause and say, "Wait a second, I'm starting to get angry here." You feel it starting, and you actually let them know too. Say, "Wait a minute, I need to kind of slow down." That's what I mean by ember stage. You're not always talking to somebody, but you say to yourself, I'm beginning to feel angry here. I'm beginning to feel anxious here. So you train yourself in catching it at the ember stage. Working with it that way, you are simultaneously working with it when it's out of control, because the more you can train in that lightweight situation and get familiar with the feeling before it's ignited, before kerosene has been poured on the flame, then, curiously enough, even when you're in the middle of it, and it's already out of control, there's a part of you—the wisdom part, you could say—that's watching the whole thing happening. And that's very different from being completely out of control and having no recognition at all of what is happening to you. So I advise this ember-stage practice as a way of working on any stage at all. The other thing is, should you happen to get carried away, and the whole thing is too much for you, and you speak and act out of it, then you can go back over it afterwards. Go back over it afterwards. Go quietly somewhere and just relive the whole thing—get in touch with the whole power of the emotion, later on. That also is training you for the future, for the next time that comes up.

Shane: "My question is about loneliness. That's an emotion that hasn't been mentioned yet today. A lot of us are living completely alone in this time. I've been practicing Tonglen every day, and I do feel connected to so many people in this aloneness, but I was wondering if you could speak to loneliness that's an emotion that's coming up for so many people right now, when we're not able to be with people except through a screen."

I think loneliness is such a tender emotion, as opposed to some of the harder-edged emotions. Loneliness—if it even is an emotion—it's certainly a very heartfelt feeling. And again, I feel like with all of these, it's a natural response to being isolated, to being quarantined, to being unable to

go out and see your friends. It's just a natural response to that. Given that that's so, then the question is how to make friends with yourself—how to be friendly with your loneliness, as corny as that might sound. But actually that gentle approach, that warm-hearted approach, is so healing. My guru Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche used to make a distinction between loneliness and aloneness. He said loneliness has a kind of restless quality to it—you want it to go away. You can feel exactly the same thing—exactly, no changes at all—but relax with it, and be ok with it. Know it. Be friendly with it. Be gentle and honest with it. Like lovingkindness toward the loneliness. And then it can shift. He would say that we can hold those very same feelings of loneliness, which is restless, and call it aloneness, which is a quality of enlightened people. This quality of enlightened people is that they know that they were born alone, and they will die alone, in terms of nobody goes with you. And they see the beauty of that feeling, the almost romantic quality of that feeling, and it lets them connect with the heart of everybody else who is also just feeling alone but feels that it's bad and they want to get away from it. It somehow soothes that restlessness to be able to be ok with just feeling that as a normal, natural response to a situation that you and millions of other people are in. Thank goodness for the internet, because we can at least see other people—I get to see your green hair, and that's sort of great! So, if you do meditate, it's a good time. You can think of it as a retreat and say, “This isn't going to last forever, and I'll have to go back to my busy life, and it'll have the up side of being able to see my friends, but I won't have the kind of time I have now.” So see the preciousness of this time as well. Especially you, because you're in a privileged situation—you're suffering from loneliness and you're using it in your practice, and you know that there are people who are packed into small spaces and getting on each other's nerves, and there are also people in desperate situations.

Anonymous: “What if I feel too much despair, anger, and hopelessness and feel like I don't have any peace or love to exhale or send to others?”

Well that's a very, very common feeling. I would say in situations like that, start to collect your out-breath material [from tonglen practice]. In other words, anything pleasant that happens to you in your life. Either actually jot it down in a journal or keep it in mind. “This is the kind of thing I can wish for other people to have.” Take your experience of any sweetness, any kindness, any feeling of pleasure, and think of that as something you want to share with other people. Begin with sharing it with people that you love or people who are ill, and you would like to do something to be able to help them. I'm suggesting that you put the emphasis on what I am calling out-breath material and just send whatever is good in your life—be willing to share it, or breathe it out to other people, or wish for other people to have this.

And then in terms of the in-breath, that's harder to work with. Again, you don't start with the overwhelming feelings, you start with very small feelings, like the kind of feeling that you might feel if a mosquito were buzzing around and irritating you, just mild irritation. You get in the

habit of connecting with that feeling of irritation with curiosity and with complete acceptance—letting it be ok. There's nothing wrong with you as a human being that you have these overwhelming feelings, these strong, strong emotions. It's very natural. The practice would be to use this time to move from not being able to connect at all with any sense of touching into difficult feelings to connecting to difficult feelings that are what I would call lightweight. And if connecting with what's painful and difficult still seems impossible, then just emphasize out-breath material and collect examples of out-breath material. And connect with other people that way. I can't overemphasize the healing quality of empathy, the healing quality of realizing we're so interconnected. That's one of the most profound Buddhist teachings, and now it's so evident to everybody, it's no longer in the realm of philosophy or esoteric Buddhist teachings, it's just obvious. In that way, we can say, since we're all interconnected, what do we want for ourselves, what do we want for everybody else? What would we like to spread out over the planet so that *that's* what becomes contagious? So that we ourselves catch this particular virus of lovingkindness, for instance? It takes a lot of courage to do this in-breath sort of thing. It takes a lot of courage to connect with difficult feelings, so give yourself a break about that, and try it with very lightweight things, like disappointment at them having run out of toilet paper at the grocery store or something like that. And then collect out-breath material.