

# Dharma Echoes

Living through crisis times

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## Dharma Echoes: Living Through Crisis Times: Ed Hill

It's only been about a month since the quarantine started, but already a lot of people are talking about the "before times." Looking back I guess my last memory from then would be March 14th--I went to my usual class at my aikido dojo. People at gyms and athletic centers then were still talking about just washing our hands more and maybe doing outdoor practice for a few weeks to reduce physical contact. When I left I didn't know it would be the last time I would leave my apartment (for anywhere other than work) for the next month. A couple days later the state was virtually shut down, along with most other places in the country.

Since then the only part of my everyday schedule that has stayed the same is work. As a 911 dispatcher, I and my colleagues are considered "essential" employees, a group society has learned recently includes quite a few job descriptions. The person who takes out your garbage and restocks your groceries is no less important than your doctor or local firefighter.

Technically nothing about the world really changed--there has always been garbage to take out and food to be restocked, and a need for someone to do it. There has always been old age, sickness, and death. But our perception of some of these things has changed.

It's not really a deep insight, in the sense that I think we all knew this deep down before the pandemic. There have been lots of social media posts and articles talking about things like this: how important "unskilled labor" actually is, how much cleaner the air is in cities now that people are commuting less, how even a simple thing like washing your hands can be an act of compassion toward your elders and immunocompromised neighbors--in short how connected everyone and everything really is. In other words, the Universal Truth Sensei mentions a lot in his dharma talks. I was tempted at times to smugly declare aloud that Buddhism taught this a long time ago, "before it was cool." But then I remember that we all forget this truth, and have to remind ourselves of it constantly. A pandemic is a harsh reminder. The nembutsu is a gentle one.

Overall I'm grateful to still have work and to be able to support my family. But I know a lot of people have not been so fortunate. A lot of people talk about what they want to do or hope to see "after this is all over." I too hope we collectively learn some lessons from this ordeal that will lead to a better life for all. There's the big picture stuff: better healthcare access for everyone, more appreciation for service-oriented workers, equitable and just treatment for the unemployed, etc. I don't know how much of that will happen, or when. In the meantime I'm focusing on the many social distance friendly activities I was already doing, like reading, running, and meditation, and trying some new ones, like wood carving. I already enjoyed a pretty full "solo" routine before the pandemic, so I'm grateful too that it hasn't been a tough transition. Still, I miss socializing with my temple friends and look forward to when we can gather under the same roof again.

Until then, gassho!



## Dharma Echoes: Living Through Crisis Times: Meg Chapman

As a senior in high school I was stunned when I found out I would not be graduating with a formal ceremony. Initially it felt like everything I had worked for over the last 12 years was for nothing. It seemed to me whenever I expressed my discouragement one of my many mentors was quick to remind me “it will all be worth it senior year when you walk across the stage”.

Accepting, at least for now, this is my reality and I am quarantined instead of making memories at my senior prom is easier some days than others.

Although it feels like COVID-19 is taking so much from me, I find myself appreciating the smaller previously insignificant moments so much more than ever before.

In addition to impermanence and acceptance, Buddhism has also taught me life is suffering and suffering is universal. Before the outbreak of COVID-19 I worked hard to distract myself from my thoughts and always kept so busy. Now, I can't outrun my mind, so I have to acknowledge the thoughts, my feelings and see them for what they truly are: fleeting.

Sitting with those thoughts was painful at first. My anxiety felt paralyzing at some moments as I mourned the loss of my senior year which consisted largely of attending classes, completing homework, going to the gym and hanging out with friends.

Initially I viewed quarantine as a jail sentence. Now that some time has passed, I am beginning to feel so much more free and more in control. This time of suffering will come to an end and I hope to never again take my daily life for granted as I once did. Until then, it's best to just take it one day at a time. No overthinking. Just living. Moment to moment. That's my plan.

## Dharma Echoes: Living Through Crisis Times: Vicky Churchman

My first thought is that I can't believe that we are all going through such a global scare. This invisible enemy is hitting all humans regardless of race, religion or socioeconomic level. This is the stuff of science fiction and not reality. But here we are and now we have to face it together.

Why should my lifetime be exempt from a crisis in history? Just as my grandparents faced the Spanish flu and WWI and WWII and my parents endured the time of the Cold War. This is my crisis story now. I look back on how they got through it and take strength that I will too.

Each global crisis also has its lessons to be learned. As a global society, each person's health is interconnected. There is a civic responsibility we all must take going forward. Also, if the Buddhist mantra of interconnection isn't already understood by the world then we're all being taught this lesson right now! Not only in that we spread viruses to each other but also how important the grocery store worker is, the trash man, and certainly our first responders, doctors and nurses.

The other Buddhist mantra that is getting me through this is impermanence. When I grieve what my life was like pre-COVID, I know that this won't last forever.

I must remain patient, take this time to enjoy and appreciate my family and do all the things I used to "wish I had time for".

Our brilliant science researchers will rise to the occasion and develop treatments and vaccines in time.

I sense that my awareness has shifted from an economic perspective (go to work, buy this, travel there, etc.) to one of humanity. I don't think that's a bad shift in perspective. I hope when this is over and things go back to the way they used to be that I won't lose that broader human perspective.





## Dharma Echoes: Living Through Crisis Times: Molly Kuramoto

During the first weeks of the pandemic, I caught myself repeatedly referring to the virus as CORVID-19. I knew this was incorrect, but every time I tried to say "COVID" that extra "r" would sneak in and I wouldn't catch it until it had slipped out of my mouth. As a result, I cannot talk or think about our current situation without images of large, black birds crowding my mind. Part of me suspects that my brain is hung up on the memory of bird flu fears in the 1990s.

The point I am trying to make is that when I first heard about COVID-19, my biggest concern was that people would think I was uninformed enough to believe that it came from crows.

Now I worry about my unemployed friends and I wonder when they will be able to go back to work. I have nightmares in which I contract the virus and I watch helplessly as it spreads to the people around me. I'm afraid that if social distancing ends too soon, we will have another surge in COVID-19 cases and deaths; but if social distancing continues for too long, some of us will start to lose the battle to stay sane.

But sanity was a war I was already losing.

For me, COVID-19 is just another factor in my daily struggle to maintain some level of normalcy and happiness despite a predisposition towards mental disorder. If you don't spend a lot of time around me, you might not notice my sometimes-odd behaviors. Thanks to a hefty dose of medication each day and the efforts of an amazing group of healthcare professionals, it isn't obvious that I struggle with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) and depression.

Both conditions are currently well controlled, but the arrival of COVID-19 and the disappearance of toilet paper from the store shelves created some new concerns. Would I be able to keep my regularly scheduled appointments with my primary care provider, my specialist, and my therapist? What would happen if I wasn't able to get refills of my medications? Fortunately, so far the pandemic has not interfered with my ongoing treatment.

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## Dharma Echoes: Living Through Crisis Times: Molly Kuramoto

My biggest challenge has been a sudden change in my work schedule. To ensure that the animal clinic I work for continues to stay open the staff were split into two teams. This way even if an employee contracts COVID-19, only one team would be required to go into quarantine. Each team is in the clinic for seven consecutive 10-hour days followed by seven days off. The 10-hour days have been rough, but it was the seven days off that proved to be a real problem. With nothing to do and nowhere to go, it was only a matter of time before depression crept into all the empty hours.

Halfway through my first week off, I was sleeping 16 hours each day. When I was awake, I was irritable and lethargic. On the morning of day five, as I was wallowing in feelings of worthlessness and dwelling on what a flawed human being I am, I looked over at my nightstand and saw my onenju sitting there next to my phone. I started thinking about the teaching and realized: of course I'm a flawed human being! The phrase itself is redundant since human beings, by their very nature, are flawed. Furthermore, life was never intended to be easy; everyone struggles with something. At that exact moment, everyone else was struggling with COVID-19 just like I was. I thought about how lucky I was to already have the tools to work through the my COVID-related anxiety thanks to years of struggling with OCD and depression.

I closed my eyes and focused on reciting the nembutsu. The depression did not magically disappear, but I was able to realize and accept that I was experiencing it in that moment. I wouldn't feel that way forever. Now, anytime I get overwhelmed by feelings of hopelessness or anxiety, I focus on reciting the nembutsu until the feeling passes.

I hope that you and your loved ones are healthy and safe; and that you have plenty of toilet paper. I also hope that if all the recent fear, change, and social distancing is having a negative effect on your mental health, you'll remember two things:

1. It's okay to not be okay sometimes. This pandemic is kinda' a big deal. It's normal to struggle as we all try to process everything that's happening.
2. If you start to feel like you need help, get help. It's worth it. It will get better; it always does.

Namo Amida Butsu

