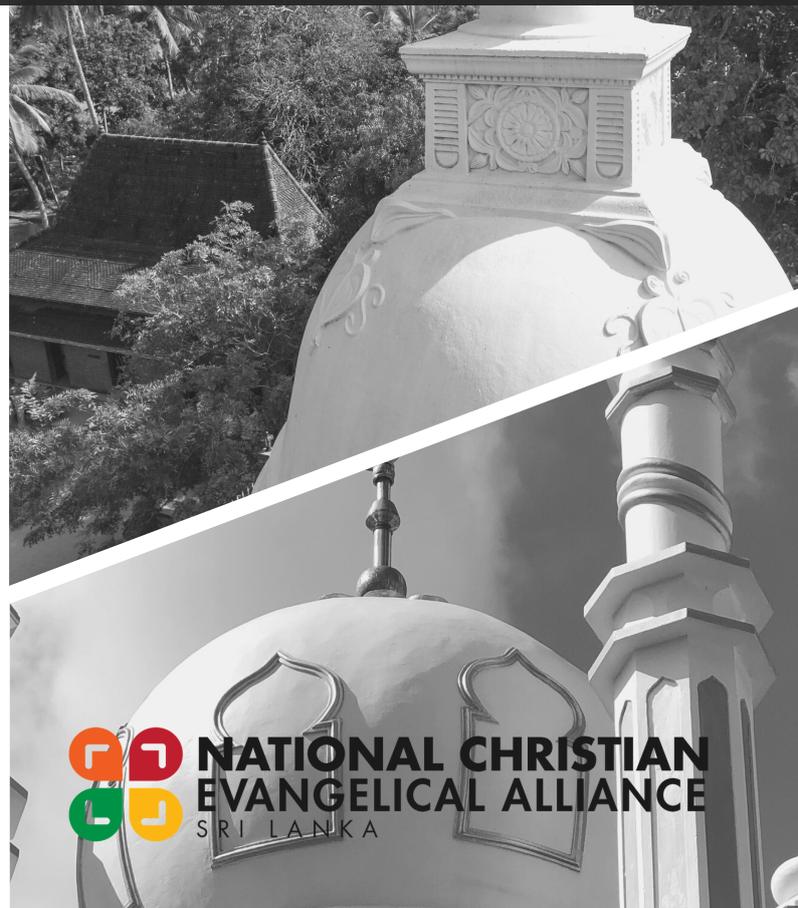




COVID-19 AND RELIGION:

What is our response?



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Preface

The booklet comprises faith-based reflections on how each religion speaks positively into the current crisis. The purpose of this is to encourage responsible behaviour on part of faith leaders and their respective communities. The booklet seeks to facilitate different faith groups to collectively reflect on the role that religion can play in tackling the current Covid-19 crisis and be empowered to positively impact the thinking and behaviour of each faith community, to ensure healthy and responsible communities who are resilient in the face of threats to public health.

COVID-19 AND CHRISTIANITY

AUDACIOUS FAITH

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused suffering around the world. In our own community too, there has been loss and bereavement. This pain has been intensified by the difficulties involved in participating at funerals and comforting, and being comforted by, one's family at this time. As a community of hope in the Resurrection, we remember the deceased and their grieving relatives and friends in our prayers. For many we know, however, the suffering of this time has not been the passing of family or friends; but rather loneliness, anxiety, and separation from family and loved ones.

As a community, we have been trying to "come to the assistance of the ailing" at this time. The coronavirus isn't going to disappear in the foreseeable future. Even when it does, the aftereffects will be felt for a long time to come. COVID -19 has taught us many lessons. The most striking of them all has been a stark and grim reminder of the fact that after all is said and done, we are only mortal. Many of us thought and some possibly still do that we were/are invincible. The Coronavirus dented this way of thinking, albeit temporarily as history shows us, that we humans do not learn lessons we ought to do.

'GROUNDED FAITH' IN THE SCRIPTURES

In the context of COVID -19 and in attempt to respond to this time of uncertainty, the letter to the Hebrews can shed light on faith that can become courageous. In Chapter 11 of that letter to the Hebrews, faith is defined as "the assurance (reality) of things hoped for, the conviction (proof) of things not seen" (Heb 11:1). The letter further goes on to explain faith from three different perspectives. These are: God's promise to Abram¹ of (1) land (Gen 12:1-3;

¹ Abram is Abram which is translated as "exalted ancestor" till God tells him that he will no longer be called Abram but "Abraham" which means "ancestor of a multitude". "No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations." (Gen 17:5)

13:14-15,17; 15:18;), (2) progeny (Gen 13:16; 15:5; 17:4-8, 15-16,19; 18:10; 21:3; 22:17) and (3) the sacrifice of his son Isaac (22:1-10).

In case of Abram, he indeed had land and became prosperous according to the promise of the Lord. However, he did not let his prosperity overshadow him. This is seen in his generosity (Gen 13:8-12). This generosity on the part of Abram resulted in God being even more generous with him (Gen 13:14-18). Since, Abram did what God commanded him to do and did it with faith, he was blessed beyond his own expectations with both land and progeny (Gen 17:5; Gen 21:1-7; 24:34-36). However, even as he received blessings in abundance from God, he was asked to give up or sacrifice his son (Gen 22:1-2), who would be the one who would continue his blood line. When Abraham heard this command of God, he shows no surprise whatever nor does he raise any objection. He obeys because he has faith that whatever God does will be for his good and God's glory. The result of his willingness to obey the voice of God and do God's will in faith results in God responding to him with generosity that only God is capable of (Gen 22:15-18).

The catalogue of faith continues with the faith of the parents of Moses (Heb 11:23) and then of Moses himself (Heb 11:24-28). It begins with God's providential care of Moses right from his birth (Ex 2:1-10) till the time he could be God's instrument (Ex 3:7-12) in redeeming the people from slavery and oppression to freedom and blessing (Ex 14:30-31). The eulogy continues by mentioning six individuals in the later history of Israel (Heb 11:32) who may have been considered heroes in Israel's history.² In this summary, we are presented with what was accomplished through their faith. In each of those mentioned, they did obtain the promises that were made to them.³

However, even as the treatise on faith continues, we are told of those who had to undergo great ordeal and suffer much with no indication of an end in sight. The author would have had prophets like Elijah, Elisha, Zechariah, Jeremiah and Isaiah in mind. The trials that all of these had to face was because of their fidelity and their firm conviction that they were doing what God had called them to do. This is why we are called despite evidence to the contrary to believe even when we cannot see and even when we do not see. We are called to do what we have to do in every present moment and persevere in our faith in imitation of Jesus himself who is the pioneer and *perfecter* of faith (Heb 12:1-3).

² See Attridge, Harold, W., *Hebrews: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Hermeneia, 1989

³ For the fulfillment of promises to Barak see Judg 5:1-7; Gideon (Judg 6:11-16); Jephthah (Judg 11:29-35); Samson (Judg 13:25); and David (2 Sam 5:19)

RESPONDING FAITH

In connection with the treatise in Hebrews, how do we respond with faith in the situation in which we find ourselves?

The pandemic has us no matter how advanced our Science and Technology is, we find that at this moment we are helpless. Even now, it is not clear how the virus originated, how it spreads (all that we have now are a variety of theories), how it can be controlled (isolation from others is considered safer than contact, but whether the infection can be caused from surfaces is another matter) and how we must respond to the situation and life. Hence, our response cannot be on merely the individual level. We now have to think globally and act both globally and locally.

1. 'Thinking Faith' on INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

1.1 Positive Thinking: In times like this our response could be to give up and give in. If so, it is to allow negative thinking, emotions and feelings to rise to the surface of one's consciousness and so to despair. It can also be to see the present situation as the wrath of God⁴ and therefore blame God or accuse God of not caring.⁵

Another response is to think positively, creatively and constructively. These positive thoughts will express themselves in positive feelings and actions. The way to do this is to start each day with a positive affirmation of oneself, others and the world. Self-talk is a great help in this regard. We keep telling ourselves that things will get better and that God is still in control. We continue to focus on the little things no matter how small. We thank God that we have the facilities we have like water, food, a mobile phone which allows us to stay in touch with others and the world, internet facilities and so many things we usually have taken for granted. We can

⁴ Jesus' response in Lk 13:1-9 is instructive in this regard. When Jesus is told about the Galileans who were slaughtered by Pilate (possibly because they had revolted against the Romans) in the temple so that their blood was mingled with the blood of the animals who had also been slaughtered for sacrifice in the Temple, Jesus responds by stating that tragedy or catastrophe (like we are now experiencing) is not the measure of the sinfulness of the world or even of one's need to repent. He goes on to give the example of a natural tragedy (the collapse of the Tower of Siloam) to make the same point but also to state emphatically that everyone needs to repent or look at life anew.

⁵ In Mk 4:35-40, the miracle of the storm on the lake, the disciples accuse Jesus of just such an attitude when they ask "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" (Mk 4:38). Jesus, however, will point to their fear and lack of faith and is surprised by it (Mk 4:40).

simply be content with spending time with the members of our family. We thank God for giving us an opportunity to thank him.

1.2 Live in the present: One of the most challenging things for us to do is to live in the present moment. We often have regrets about the past or are obsessed with the future. Consequently, we do not live in the present moment and it passes us by. This is time like no other to simply be in the NOW. In reality, there is no next moment or tomorrow. The present moment is all we have and will ever have. Today is indeed the tomorrow we worried about yesterday. Now is the later and later is now. Hence, to focus on the present – ‘exercise’. In order for our minds to be fresh our bodies must also be fresh. Second, reconnect, this is also a time to renew old friendships and strengthen relationships. While it is not possible to have physical contact because of social distancing it does not mean that our hearts have to be far from each other. Thirdly, reach out to someone in need. Often, we get so caught up in our own small selfish worlds that we have no time to even think about the challenges that others go through. If there is an elderly or differently abled person, can I reach out to him/her in some small way?

2. ‘Acting Faith’ on GLOBAL LEVEL

2.1 Share: Though each national government will be concerned about its own people first, the world leaders must also realize that this is a universal not national challenge. We use the advances in science and technology to reach out to each other with information, resources and even funds if needed. It is the need of the hour to get rid of our selfish and narrow-minded way of proceeding and put the needs of the whole of humanity before everything else. Now is the time for magnanimity and large-heartedness. Now is the time for generosity and thinking and acting globally and universally.

2.2 Inspire confidence: The larger majority of the people are not aware of the intricacies of the problem that we are facing. As a matter of fact even experts in the medical profession are still groping in the dark. In a situation like this it is important for world leaders to inspire confidence in their citizens. This they can do by regularly giving out information. When information is given by someone in authority, it is more easily believed than otherwise. In order to do this the services of medical experts could be used so that correct information and not myths are disseminated as much as is possible.

2.3 Love over fear: In order to ensure that instructions about lockdown and other measures are followed, governments use a variety of measures. Some of these are violent and involve the use of physical force. It is a

proven fact that while force does work temporarily to ensure discipline the effects are temporary and in most instances, obedience is out of fear and not conviction.⁶ If governments take steps to educate the people as best they can and appeal to deeper values like care for oneself and the other, generosity, altruism and above all love, it will have a more lasting effect.

TURN TO 'GOD'

God is known by different names and worshipped differently in different religions and cultures. In some cultures, God is not acknowledged, and worship of God is not allowed or approved. The noun "God" is not a name for God. It may be translated as 'Supreme Being', or 'Divine Being' or any other name that one prefers. We have to understand with our minds and hearts that God is God and we must let God be God. We also have to know that though we sometimes like to think that we are god and like to play god, we are humans. And if there was any doubt before this pandemic that we as humans are supreme, it is quite certain that all doubt is removed now. We are vulnerable, we are weak, we are fragile, and we are dust. If we understand and accept this and if we acknowledge that we do not know, it will be the beginning of wisdom. This is why we turn to God. God is beyond all names and forms. God is beyond anything that we can say or think about God. What we need to do is turn in all humility and nothingness and ask God for help. Acknowledging our dependence on God is the first step toward humility. It also indicates who God is and who we are. We are (whether we acknowledge it or not) at God's mercy.

⁶ See Desiree Rumbagh, <https://www.desireerumbaugh.com/love-is-stronger-than-fear-2/>; see also Michael Braunstein, Love vs. Fear <https://thereader.com/heartland-healing/the-two-emotions-love-vs-fear>, Ben Irwin, Proving Love is stronger than Fear: Summer's Campaign, https://preemptivelove.org/blog/summer_downs_proving_love_is_stronger_than_fear/, Shona Keachie, Base your actions on love not fear, <https://byrslf.co/base-your-actions-on-love-not-fear-97287b756c55>

CONCLUSION

In the context of the definition and catalogue of faith given by Hebrews 11 and also that things did not always happen the way they were expected to, we are called to a faith that believes without seeing and even to a faith that believes even when it does not see. If one was able to see before believing, it would not require faith of any kind. However, in the present situation, to have faith is indeed a challenge. Overall the above, we must put on faith⁷. Hebrews so eloquently describes it, faith is a necessary element for every one of us as we struggle with this incomprehensible pandemic. The example of the exemplars of faith must spur us on. This faith is not merely intellectual assent, but an active faith which shows itself in deeds.⁸

The call to each one of us as we struggle to come to terms with the aftermath of the havoc caused by the novel Coronavirus is to remember that we are one human family. The virus makes no distinction whatever between rich and poor, male and female, black, brown, yellow or white. It treats all equally and infects all in a very similar manner. In a similar manner we too are called to journey with each other as companions and comrades on this journey of life. While we might not be able to walk hand-in-hand at this moment we can definitely walk together heart-in-heart.

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⁷ In Col 3:14, the Colossian community is told to put on love over compassion, kindness, humility and other qualities in the following words “Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony”. While this is good advice, at the present moment and in the present situation faith that all will be for God’s glory and the good of humanity is as all-encompassing as love.

⁸ James 2:14-26 describes in detail what a passive and an active faith is. He concludes by stating that a faith which does not show itself in works is dead. Faith cannot be shown apart from works. They go hand in hand.

COVID-19 AND BUDDHISM

*"Sabba papassa akaranam, Kusalassa upasampada,
Sachitta pariyodapanam, Etam Buddhadasanam."*

*Avoid all that are unwholesome, Cultivate the good and the wholesome,
Purify your mind, This is the Teaching of the Buddhas*

The aim of Buddhist practice is to help us be happy. Buddhist teachings do not tie this happiness to a deliverance of a promised land; rather it is a teaching about maintaining happiness here and now in a reality where we experience many ups and downs. By avoiding things which brings us harm and by cultivating whatever helps us be good, Buddhist teachings invite us to take on a middle path to be happy and be resilient towards suffering.

The Covid-19 Pandemic brought to us not only the direct impacts of a health crisis, but due to its nature and the lockdown conditions that ensued many other dynamics of human conditions also surfaced. Let's consider some of these dynamics and how Buddhist teachings can help us in our understandings and responses to these dynamics.

One of the very basics of the impact a pandemic has is the illness and death it brings. So far over 10 million infected persons and over 500,000 deaths worldwide have been attributed to the pandemic. While part of our basic reality, as humans we are conditioned to be overwhelmed by death even when it's not proximate or in such large numbers but the reality of impact of the covid-19 pandemic has shaken most of us up. Illness and death can bring a lot of fear, anxiety and sadness to people. When people are operating out of such fear it can easily get out of hand and become hysteric during times of crisis. We do not have an immediate solution or a vaccine at hand and this only adds to the uncertainty and confusion of the crisis.

The introductions of the Ratana Sutta (Sanyukta Nikaya, PTS: Sn 222-238), that we often heard recited at Buddhist temples island wide during the lockdown, talks of a similar crisis that brought fear and panic among the people of the great city of *Visaala*. Ratana Sutta helps us understand the importance of creating confidence in the people of the buddha, dhamma & sangha and thus avoiding the chaos of panic and hysteria. This can help us understand that people of different faiths and beliefs may benefit from their confidence in their own beliefs, faith, practices and sense of community that can be important factors for them to be resilient in the middle of a crisis. In more secular terms this can also mean that a Buddhist approach is also to help people gain confidence in health and governance systems in the country's overall responses to the epidemic through right leadership.

UNDERSTANDING THE TRUE NATURE OF SUFFERING AND HAPPINESS

Suffering

The Covid-19 pandemic brought attention towards human suffering in its many layers. A Buddhist approach to respond to this suffering can be guided by core-teaching of the Four Noble Truths. They are:

- Suffering (*dukkha sacca*) – An acknowledgement of reality and suffering
- Causes of Sufferings (*samudhaya sacca*) – A deep critical understanding of causes of suffering
- End of Suffering (*nirodha sacca*) – A conviction in the possibility to end the suffering and be happy
- The path to end suffering (*magga sacca*) – The practice of the 8-fold noble path of righteous and holistic living that includes cultivating – right views, right intentions, right words, right actions, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration.

Buddhist teachings highlight three roots that can grow and feed suffering: *Lobha* (craving, greed, sensual attachment), *Dweshā* (aversion, hate, anger) and *Moha* (Ignorance).

The suffering we experience during the pandemic are the usual sufferings of life that at times may feel more intensely brought together.

Dweshā (aversion) – Fear of illness and death, loss of loved ones, anxiety, helplessness and frustrations are emotions that can be part of the Covid-19 pandemic experience. At a primary level we can fear for our health, fear for our lives and fear death. Then when gripped by this fear we tend to look out at the world with a worldview that is tainted by these fears. We may be more survival focused, we may suspect other people more, we may guard ourselves, we may operate more out of self-interest and we may lash out at others in anger or aversion. We heard of strained relationships at homes during lockdown, the frustrations and tensions among family members living together 24/7 could easily grow to become aversions, animosity and fights. There was an increased reporting of child abuse and domestic violence during this period in Sri Lanka and in many other parts of the world. This aversion might also make us want to find scapegoats for our frustration with the pandemic experience and blame it entirely on certain groups of people. There can also be aversions among people towards those who are privileged and therefore less affected by the impacts of the pandemic.

Lobha (greed) – craving, attachments, lust for sensual pleasures, greed - we can be suffering thinking of all that we don't have due to the lockdown or all that we want to have. We can easily start to hoard things justifying to ourselves these are essential. At the start of the lockdowns not only in Sri Lanka but elsewhere there was reported panic buying, even at times fighting for products at supermarkets. There was no concern for the needs of others.

Moha (Ignorance) – At its essence moha refers to our wrong understandings and expectations that things will not change or things are permanent; the belief in a self that is permanent; and that happiness can be maintained by fulfilling our sensory wants. This ignorance can be overcome with increased understandings on dukka (suffering), anicca (impermanence) and anatta (non-self). It is the same ignorance we see manifesting during the pandemic as increased beliefs in superstitions, subscribing to fake news and hate speech, racism and beliefs that one group of people being superior than the others, etc.

A Buddhist approach to all these sufferings is to first acknowledge and then deeply understand the causes. The Kalama Sutta (Anguttara Nikaya, PTS: A i 188) gives guidance that a practitioner can pursue critical thinking and look at issues without just being limited to social norms, cultural beliefs, popular media narratives or political propaganda. It invites us to take a critically investigative approach to understanding information.

In Buddhist practice, this critical investigative approach is not limited to outer world phenomena but also very much as a critical investigation within ourselves. The Girimananda Sutta (Anguttara Nikaya, PTS: AN v108) describes the guidance provided by the Buddha towards Ven. Girimananda who is gravely ill and helps us understand a Buddhist approach to comprehend and respond to the challenges of illness and fears of death in ourselves and in others. The focus is towards reflection and growing awareness of the ultimate reality, the impermanence, the non-self, the nature of suffering and the practice of mindfulness. This also means that such critical practice is not just for good times but also to be done in the worst when we feel unsettled.

PRACTICE OF MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness, which has also become popular in the non-religious world, is a practice of maintaining awareness. Starting by bringing the mind to stillness one is then continuing to watch the mind and its interactions keenly but gently. Mindfulness practice also helps us become more aware of our emotions and their drivers, it helps then to better relate to these emotions without fully letting them take over our mind. This can be a very useful resource when our anxieties kick in. A mindfulness practitioner may use simple techniques including a focus on breath or scanning the body and be mindful of the constant in and out flow from the mind. When one recognizes anxieties and fears, and sees them for what they are, often they fall away, and the mind can continue less burdened. The mindful mind is often described with an analogy of a clear and still pool of water that allows for us to see through it. The mindfulness practice allows us to gain insight into our mind and thus understand how to help it be free of suffering and be happy.

THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

Instead of operating out of the greed (lobha), aversion (dwesha) and ignorance (moha) the Buddhist proposition is to purify the mind with awareness and then invite the mind in the four divine adobes (brahma viahara) of metta (loving-kindness), karuna (compassion), muditha (empathic-joy) and upekka (equanimity). These four mind qualities can help us be more wholesome and happier. They are interrelated and can strengthen the cultivation of each other. The happiness that we gain in the process is one of the middle path, less shaken, rooted in an awareness of both the immediate but also the ultimate reality around us.

PRACTICE OF METTA OR LOVING-KINDNESS

The *Karaniya Metta Sutta* (Sanyuktha Nikaya, PTS SN 143-152) elaborates the Buddha's Words on Loving-Kindness practice from self to all living beings. It truly is for all living beings from big to small and from the seen to the unseen. *The Kakacupama Sutta* (Majjima Nikaya, PTS: M i 122) through its Simile of the Saw then elaborates that this practice of loving-kindness is not only for all living beings but also in all types of situations, even when one is physically attacked and or as the sutta highlights even as your limbs are being sawed off. Thus, the teaching is clear that we are to practice loving-kindness towards all living beings even during the crisis of a pandemic and there are no exceptions.

The loving-kindness starts with self (or non-self if a technical approach is adopted). Accepting and acknowledging the imperfections, being vulnerable, being kind towards oneself is essential for one to be happy and resilient. During crisis when fear and anxieties take root, giving one space and opportunity for self-care is very important. This can start with being kind to ourselves, acknowledging that we are worthy to be happy, that we are part of the complex causality and by being gentle with ourselves. Loving-kindness towards oneself can help also manage challenges of isolation, depression and negative self-image and find happiness. Being kind to oneself also may include looking after one's own health and in the pandemic context that may be include practicing physical distancing, hygiene practices, reconnecting socially. Etc.

Then the metta sutta guides us to be moved with loving-kindness towards others. Others in terms of all living beings, in all types of situations, and holding various relationships with us. The practice of loving-kindness will grow when we focus our practice on the more difficult relationships, those who we are apathetic toward or hold aversions towards.

In the context of Covid-19 we can think of various groups of people to include in our loving-kindness practice. We can start with those who are infected with the virus; loved ones and families of victims; front line workers in various sectors who continue to work despite risks involved; groups in vulnerable situations including elderly, those with existing health conditions; the economically vulnerable including daily-wage workers; the stigmatized and discriminated; those in governance roles; those who have hurt us; those who have been hurt by us; groups that are aggressive and may be violent; and to all the animals and nature.

Buddhist teachings invite us to practice loving-kindness towards all living being including some groups specifically mentioned above. What does this loving-kindness practice imply? Is it only to think of them? Is it to expand our circle of concern? Is it to then from metta (loving-kindness) to be moved towards karuna (compassion) – a helpfulness and taking of responsibility; muditha (empathic joy) – a shared joy in their happiness; and upekka (equanimity) – a big picture systematic approach in where we are balanced, less shaken and less caught up. These practices can take many forms including meditation; giving to those in need; showing concern and care especially to the vulnerable; being mindful of one’s consumption; expressing kindness and gratitude in our communications.

A Buddhist worldview is one that recognizes interconnectedness of life. The Vietnamese Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh uses the term ‘Interbeing’ to emphasise how this embracing of interconnectedness shapes our way of being or how we live and that our liberation is not just for ourselves but also for others.

A Buddhist approach does not place all focus of suffering and therefore the work for happiness on to the individual. While highlighting the importance of the individual and their inner spiritual work, Buddhist teachings are about a critical consciousness of the suffering both at its worldly and spiritual levels. Through the core-teaching of *paticca samuppada* (dependent co-arising) it highlights the complex and non-linear understanding of causality (cause and effect) that is scientific in nature. It highlights the importance of both the inner work but also the outer work that is needed to address human suffering by tackling root causes. A Buddhist approach invites us to take a systemic approach to ending suffering of people by addressing structural issues in our societies such as inequality, poverty, racism, discrimination, consumerism and corruption that are exacerbated and clearly visible during the pandemic. With wisdom, courage, kindness and compassion a Buddhist response invites us to engage with an extra special focus on the inner spiritual cleansing work that was highlighted before.

A Buddhist response to Covid-19 therefore is an enlightened response, a response full of wisdom and critical understanding, a response full of loving kindness and compassion, a response that is both inner and outer work or both spiritual and worldly, it is an engaged approach that is not centred around one’s own needs but of others.

Buddha's teachings do not advocate for just his followers, nor are they merely advocating for the protection of Buddhism. Buddhist teachings are about the ending of suffering of all people, whatever ethnic, caste or religious backgrounds they have. They envision a world where humans are able to understand human condition and live together in happiness through both individual and collective liberation.

In this light it is important that Buddhist leaders, both the ordained and lay, practice the true message of Buddhism and as assigned by the Buddha work for *bahujana hithaya* or the well being of all. There are many who will continue to have longer-term impacts of the covid-19 pandemic and have been made more vulnerable. We must care for them and support them putting aside labels such as caste, ethnicity, gender, religious background and political affiliations. We must be better prepared for potential next phases of the pandemic. We must be in solidarity and work together hand in hand with leaders from other community as a gentle sibling and not an imposing majoritarian group.

Importantly with the election period we know our identities are manipulated for extra political mileage and there are possibilities for inciting violence. It is with such contexts in mind that the Buddhist practitioners should give leadership with all people at the heart of their concern. We should stand for non-violence, rule of law, equality and for ensuring political leaders work towards the well -being of all our people. The life of the Buddha has many examples and teachings for us to learn from and be inspired by in this regard.

For all its negative impacts, the Covid-19 pandemic has also given an opportunity for people to raise our consciousness on things that were taken for granted. To look at what is important in life, what is real and what is essential. The choice of which path we wish to take here on was always ours. Ours to decide if we go back to a normal full of both individual and collective sufferings or if we wish to take a path to improve and build a future for others and ourselves that is happier.

May I be well, may I be free from suffering and may I be happy!

May others be well, may they be free from suffering and may they be happy!!

May all beings be well, may all beings be free from suffering and may all beings be happy!!!

Suchith Abeyewickreme

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COVID-19 AND HINDUISM

HOW HINDUISM PERCEIVES CRISIS SITUATIONS LIKE COVID-19

For the protection of the good, and the destruction of the wicked, I manifest in every age to establish righteousness (*"sambhavaami yuge yuge"*) (Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 4, Verse 8) Lord Vishnu emphasizes that, bad human behaviour and lack of trust in God mandates unprecedented, cataclysmic disasters ranging from droughts, volcanic eruptions, heavy rainfall, cyclones and massive floods to worst pandemics and God Almighty will manifest self to cleanse society of its ills and place Dharma (righteousness) back on its footing.

The Taittirīya Upanishad states, *"Satyam vada! Dharmam chara! Matrudevo bhava! Pitrudevo bhava! Acharya devo bhava"* emphasizing to speak the truth, practice Dharma (righteousness) and to regard the mother, the father and the guru as God.

The illustrious Saivite Saint Thirunavukkarasar in Panniru Thirumurai (the collection of twelve holy scriptures) states that, persons who do not wish to surrender themselves to the God, neither frequent the temple nor pray before meals and who refrain from applying Thiruneer (Holy Ash) during illness, would meet a horrible end in this birth and the next.

The revered Vedic sage Agastya states, *"Sarpamundu sarva noyumudu, karpamariyak kanniyum, vaayu bhagavan pagaikundu piththam siththam sikai kolvaan"* meaning, when persons consume snakes, a plague will fall upon them, and even young healthy adults will suffer from lung and liver related complications, eventually falling victim to it. This is now believed to be the COVID-19 pandemic, which originated in China's wholesale food markets.

Pulippani Sidhdhar, another Vedic sage in his poem *"Sarvari Varusha"* has mentioned, *"Saathi pathinettum theeramaru noyarthirivar, maariyindri bhoomi vilayamal puththirarum mattravarum emanindri saavar iyambu"*

The daily Hindu prayer song *"Kon murai arasu seiga kuraivilaathu uyirgal vaazgha, naan marai arangal onga, natravam velvi malga"* emphasizes, may the King govern with justice, may all lives be free of trials, may the society thrive by implementing the 4 vedas and let there be more prayers, for good health and longevity.

Bhagavat gita classifies the society into four Varnas; Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. Brahmins are priests, scholars and teachers, while Kshatriyas are considered as rulers, warriors and administrators. Vaishyas are agriculturalists and merchants, while Shudras are deemed as labourers and service providers. Sadly, all these principles have now gone astray.

Since mankind has strayed away from moral principles and virtues, stating “science is greater than divine power”, It is believed that, God has brought about this COVID-19 pandemic through subatomic scale microbes.

HOW HINDU TEACHINGS RELATE TO COVID-19

Corona virus disease (COVID-19), is an infectious disease that has held even the most powerful nations hostage, producing a resemblance to the post-apocalyptic world depicted in scriptures. Even the top scientists and researchers don’t have an answer for the COVID-19 pandemic.

It can be said that, mankind’s lack of faith in God and immoral principles have resulted in this situation. It is advisable to “seek divine intervention and to uphold the Dharma principles and virtues” during these testing times.

In ancient times, during plagues and natural disasters (such as drought massive floods), Kings convened their counsels and promptly conducted meritorious deeds and worship services. They also ensured the wellbeing of women, elderly and even domestic animals such as cows and promoted peace and prosperity. Sadly, people have neglected such meritorious deeds nowadays and are reaping the negative consequences.

As per Hinduism, the following are our duties/responsibilities during crisis situations:

1. Following moral principles and virtues and helping others to follow suit
2. Seeking divine intervention through worship activities
3. Following the Hindu health codes, which elaborate bathing and handwashing methods and other practices, such as wearing clean clothes and using clean utensils for serving food
4. Following a strict dietary regimen, which include produce and herbs with medicinal properties and Ayurveda and Siddha methods such as burning incense
5. Cooperating with the Government and authorities in their fight against COVID-19 and praying for their efforts
6. Showing empathy and lending a helping hand to the affected
7. Helping people to replace their bad habits with good habits (e.g. diet, religious and cultural practices)
8. Introducing a healthy way of living to counter the COVID-19 spread
9. Prioritising safety precautions
10. Practicing self-sustainability (e.g. home gardens, buying local produce)

As per Hinduism, we should refrain from the following during COVID-19:

1. Neglecting social distancing in religious and cultural events (e.g. weddings, award ceremonies)
2. Sharing utensils without
3. Neglecting health practices when preparing meals and consuming unhealthy foods
4. Conducting religious and cultural events without basic sanitary facilities
5. Neglecting social distancing during pilgrimages
6. Contaminating holy ash, sandal and kumkum

The following practices are recommended during crisis situations:

1. Properly washing hand, feet and body, wearing clean clothes and observing religious practices
2. Extending the opening hours of worship places to avoid congestion
3. Observing religious prayers from home or enclosed building. Handing out holy ash, sandal and kumkum in small individual packs
4. Using banana leaf and other disposable utensils
5. Broadcasting religious events through PA system, television, CD/DVD and online
6. Seeking blessings from saints and clergy
7. Organising Navakraja shanthi, poojas and spiritual and mental wellbeing seminars

Social conduct as per Hinduism:

1. Maintaining social distancing during prayers and gatherings
2. Following strict safety precautions when in contact with strangers and outside environment
3. Caring for the affected, while maintaining safety precautions
4. Practicing traditional methods of greetings (Namaskaram, Abhaya Mudra) which do not necessitate personal contact

How the government and authorities should act during crisis situations:

1. Accommodating religious observances with safety precautions
2. Maintaining Dharma and welfare establishments and seeking blessings from elderly and clergy
3. Structuring the government administrative arm, to accommodate the recommendations from healthcare professionals

1. Accommodating safety precautions in government rules and regulations and maintaining a more practical stance
2. Providing relief aid to the affected

Responsibilities of political leaders:

1. Supporting the “Corona control measures” without any personal agendas
2. Supporting the bills and regulations in favour of safety precautions and infection control measures
3. Refraining from misusing “Corona disease control efforts” for personal and political gains

How religious leaders should respond during crisis situations:

1. Cooperating with the Government and authorities in their fight against COVID-19 and praying for their efforts
2. Accommodating safety precautions at religious observances and poojas and refraining practices that involve personal contact
3. Diverting donations towards relief aid
4. Empowering Government and general public to take a stand against immoral practices (e.g. five capital vices, animal slaughter)
5. Conducting meritorious deeds
6. Conduct faith based lectures and sermons for spiritual and mental wellbeing
7. Engaging in meditation and using the divine powers for common good

Hindu way of controlling fear and anxiety

1. Refraining from sins and immoral principles, that are considered to be the root cause of all sorts of calamities
2. Explaining the truth about the consequences of sins accumulated from the previous birth and guiding people towards Dharma (righteousness)
3. Organising prayers, meditation programs and poojas that help to overcome fear and anxiety
4. Emphasizing on the “All to the good” “Will of God” “Never Fear, God is with You” concepts
5. Narrating ancient tales and mantras to overcome fear and anxiety

Hindu beliefs to face the current situation

1. Properly washing hand, feet and body, wearing clean clothes, consuming food from banana leaf, drinking water without sipping from the rim, clean and healthy food preparation/serving/consuming, disinfecting using turmeric water, disinfecting utensils and residential areas, decorating with neem and mango leaves and using incense for disinfection
2. Practicing traditional methods of greetings (Namaskaram, Abhaya Mudra) which do not necessitate personal contact
3. Consuming produce with medicinal properties and herbal drinks, using incense, medicinal bath, applying oil and practicing yoga would boost immunity
4. Explaining the consequences of capital sins and punishments, previous life, reincarnation, heaven (Swarga) and hell (Naraga) to improve spiritual and mental wellbeing
5. Following the traditional Hindu code would greatly improve good merits and thereby bring an end to injustice and suffering
6. Organic farming, nature conservation, consuming fresh produce such as cow's milk
7. Using divine powers of saints for common good

In ancient times, during plagues and natural disasters (such as drought massive floods), Kings convened their counsels and promptly conducted meritorious deeds and worship services. They also ensured the wellbeing of women, elderly and even domestic animals such as cows and promoted peace and prosperity.

Likewise, with God's grace, we can also succeed the fight against COVID-19. Let us cooperate with the Government's disease control measures and pray for their success.

Lokah samastah sukhino bhavantu

Let all beings lead happy and peaceful lives

Ko samrakshanam! Loka samrakshanam!

Save cows. Save the World

Shivashree P. Sivalokanathathesikar (Gurukkal)

Divine Lift Society, Jaffna

COVID-19 AND ISLAM

Covid-19, the global pandemic was destined to happen by the will of Allah.

Out of his will and wisdom everything is created in this universe. It is all for the benefit of human beings. Right now, it may seem as if the world is filled with misery but it could lead to human prosperity. So, let us look at it more as a test.

The creator of the universe says in the Quran in Surah Hud, verse number 61, He created human beings in order to govern the universe. To govern the universe is to maintain its balance. Imbalance of the universe is caused due to various reasons that include environmental pollution, racial tension, war and violence and looting of resources. This has led to the complete disruption of universal balance, and it is in such a situation that Covid -19 has taken root. This pandemic has created an enormous impact in the world.

It also teaches us that human beings with their actions can destroy the balance on Earth. Verse number 41 of Surah Ar-Room further clarifies this,

“Corruption has appeared throughout the land and sea by [reason of] what the hands of people have earned so He may let them taste part of [the consequence of] what they have done that perhaps they will return [to righteousness].”

Another Quranic verse says,

“And we will surely test you with something of fear and hunger and a loss of wealth and lives and fruits, but give good tidings to the patient, Who, when disaster strikes them, say, "Indeed we belong to Allah, and indeed to Him we will return.”

Prophet Muhammed (Sal) said as follows,

“When sins committed out of shamelessness become more common, deadly novel epidemic diseases will take form”

In the Islamic perspective, a test is such: Allah would send disease and plagues to those who have gone astray and committed shameful deeds, so that they may learn and return to the path of righteousness. Thus, Allah and our Prophet wanted us to be patient when calamity strikes.

We need to understand that this is a test from Allah. Islam also wants us to understand the reasons behind the challenge and take measures to overcome it.

The religion also guides us on how we should eradicate pandemics. Prophet Muhammed (Sal) has said that people should avoid travelling to and from places where such diseases are present. This is an important measure taken to avoid the spread of disease.

This practice was followed when the plague spread during the time of Khalif Umar (Rali). People were restricted from traveling to or from Sham (Syria). This is why quarantine is strictly emphasized to control pandemics for which there is no medicine or treatment at hand.

Islam wants the government and the rulers of the Nations where the pandemic is spreading from to educate their people; so they would know how to handle the situation and control the spread within their territories. This also includes the introduction of necessary health precautions and laws on travel restrictions. If it is a pandemic that spreads within a country, its rulers should take responsibility for controlling it. The following are some examples from Islamic law.

Inn Abbas (Rali) halted the Friday congregational prayer due to rain. This is recorded in the book of Imam Bukhari. At the time, the masjid and buildings were made out of mud, therefore people found it difficult to move around in the mud whilst also keeping their clothes clean. Likewise if there was heavy rain during when it was time for the five daily prayers, when calling for prayer (adhan) he would ask people to stay at home to pray and not come to mosque. This shows the concern shown by the Prophet to avoid inconveniencing people. This is why he ordered the most important congregational prayer to be held at home.

As opposed to that, the impact of Covid-19 is thousand times more severe than that of rain. It is evident that Islam gives complete freedom and guidance to rulers, political figures and religious leaders to act in the best interest of the people when faced with dangerous situations.

The role of religious leaders is crucial in times of danger and hardship. They are responsible for educating people about these incidents through a religious framework. The Quranic verse given below says,

“Mischief has appeared in the land and the sea because of what the hands of the mankind have earned, that He may make them taste a part of that which they have done, so that they may return (turn to Allah)”

The Quran clearly states that it is a disturbance to the balance of nature that leads to catastrophic events in the world to occur. It highlights the importance of religious leaders giving proper guidance to people. It is important that they have good knowledge of these critical situations and know how to take precautions when facing them.

The most important thing here is to analyse the fundamental issues based on religious teachings. Then the religious leader is equipped to guide people based on what they have learnt. As the third step, efforts need to be taken to do this within every religious framework. Finally, all can come together to do it as one Nation.

As religious leaders we can take these four steps into consideration in order to fight Covid-19. As part of the measures taken to avoid the spread of the pandemic, all religious activities were put on hold and religious places were closed for the past three and half months. As per the instruction of the health officers they have resumed services with certain limitations.

Based on what I feel, due to the three and half months long lockdown, there may be a massive set back in the spiritual, cultural, economic, and educational spheres of society. We are also mentally strained. Hence as a multicultural Nation, where people of different races live together, all the religious leaders need to study the situation and come up with activities and programs to guide our people.

It is not healthy to point fingers at a certain group of people and blame them for spreading the pandemic around. Also, religious leaders should not succumb to this rhetoric and respond in a similar way. We need to act in a responsible way. People could panic and be disturbed due to certain measures taken in the name of fighting the pandemic. This could lead to inappropriate alienation and suppression of a certain group of people.

It is the duty of religious leaders to guide people in this regard based on what the religion preaches.

“Man is not weary of supplication for good [things], but if evil touches him, he is hopeless and despairing.”

(Surah Fusslilat 41:49)

“And when We bestow favour upon the disbeliever, he turns away and distances himself; and when evil touches him, he is ever despairing.” (Surah Al-Isra 17:83)

“And of the people is he who worships Allah on an edge. If he is touched by good, he is reassured by it; but if he is struck by trial, he turns on his face [to the other direction]. He has lost [this] world and the Hereafter. That is what is the manifest loss. “(Surah Al-Haj 22:11)

The above Quranic verses show how a believer would act in the face of difficulty. Do not be frightened, lose faith or be frustrated. Instead, indulge in self-introspection and analyse the situation as a group and then take measures to overcome the shortcomings.

Islam encourages people to rethink their actions and conduct both individually as well as collectively- so one can improve not only oneself but also the society that one lives in.

The current situation is challenging us to make this change.

One of the most common problems at present is that people from various social backgrounds and statuses experience spiritual emptiness. They could be rulers or citizens, rich or poor, young or old, men and women.

The world today is in such misery as a result of the spiritual strain in human beings. Indecency, psychological issues, fights over class, creed or religion and sexual abuse are all a reflection of this.

The major reason for spiritual emptiness is lack of 'God consciousness'. Spirituality is strengthened by a strong belief in God.

Sound spiritual health is crucial to face any disastrous situation. Without this, we would be left only with tears, racial hatred, bloodshed, sorrow, corruption and sexual abuse.

In order to overcome this challenging situation, we could take the following into consideration;

Become a people who practice their religion in their personal, social and national lives.

We should practice the religious teachings in our personal lives and make efforts to contribute to the betterment of the Nation.

Likewise, we should also make efforts universally to establish peace and harmony in the world.

I strongly believe that we need to take these matters into consideration in order to overcome challenges and create a happy and peaceful world.

Sheikh M.P.M Firthous (Naleemi)

(BA, Dip in LIS, Chairman Bismi Institute)

GENERAL HEALTH GUIDELINES

GENERAL

Advise your congregants on the importance of staying safe and stopping the spread. We are only as strong as our weakest link. Make sure you slow the spread of the virus among everyone.

- Maintain at least 1 Meter distance between yourself and others, if in public or while you are talking.
- Wear face masks when in public, or when interacting with others outside your family
- Wash your hands often with soap and water. If you don't have access to soap and water, then use a hand sanitiser.
- Avoid touching your face, eyes, mouth and nose.
- Don't be afraid to reach out to medical professionals if you are sick.

PLACES OF WORSHIP

Keep the following in mind when gathering at places of worship:

- As the government eases lockdown and religious activities are allowed to resume, abide by health guidelines released by the government regarding the maximum number of people who can gather at one time at a place of worship
 - Discourage the elderly and young children from attending religious activities as they are more vulnerable to infectious diseases
 - Ensure all who visit the places of worship are wearing masks at all times
 - Provide for hand washing facilities at the entrance of the places of worship
 - Ensure all who visit the places of worship leave their footwear at the entrance
 - Make sure that all who attend the place of worship at all times maintain at least 1m distance from each other
 - Consider the possibility of your faith community meeting online for religious observances
 - Not everyone will have access to the internet and to digital devices, therefore, using low- technology means is also vital in maintaining contact.
1. Establish a cleaning routine in worship spaces, sites and buildings.
 - It is important to disinfect worship spaces, where people may gather, to remove any virus from the surfaces.
 - Frequently clean often – touched object such as door- knobs, light switches, and stair railings with disinfectant.
 - Avoid serving food for large groups at your place of worship

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Look out for the needs in your community and alert those who can help. Prioritise the poor, elderly, people with disabilities, orphaned and women headed households.

- Children need ongoing supervision for their protection. Ensure that they are given opportunities to play, to feel loved and secure during this time.
- People who have the virus have not done anything wrong. Encourage those around to show support and kindness to them and to their families.
- Being responsible and encouraging responsible behaviour is crucial to slow the spread of the virus.
- Make sure to discourage sharing fake news.
- Verified and reliable sources on information regarding the COVID situation are:
 - World Health Organisation
 - Sri Lanka Ministry of Health
 - Health Promotion Bureau of Sri Lanka

DEFEND
DIGNITY 

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY &
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