

Notes for Punahou Podcast

As mentioned the topic at hand for this episode will be focused on faith during this challenging time.

- How can we stay connected during times like these when we are physically distant?

In our times, today, more than ever, it is easier to stay connected. I am a boomer and so I remember the days when we still had to write letters and pay each time we used the telephone. We should use our iphones and social media to our advantage and keep connected with those from whom we are physically separated. At home, we should consider doing things we never seemed to have the time for in the past such as cooking meals together and so forth. For some, staying at home causes them to be isolated and separated from others. Here, perhaps, a different perspective may help to alleviate this feeling of loneliness and isolation. Granted, we as human beings or people are social animals and we do want social interaction with other people. However, at the same time, if we are able to see the interconnectedness and interrelatedness of all life, all existence, we come to understand that I am never all alone. I am being supported by so many others. For example, the air that breathe is made possible by the trees of the forests, the food that I eat each day is made possible by the plants and animals that are the food I eat, the sun and earth support my life

and being able to live each day. Truly, my life and living is a gift of life being supported by hundreds even thousands of other lives on a daily basis. I do not and cannot live all by myself or alone. I have observed that for many Buddhists that this perspective or viewpoint keeps them intimately connected with the world around them. There is a profound sense of humility and gratitude and somehow wanting to contribute back that is prevalent.

- What do the religious texts say about times of plague and upheaval?

Let me preface by saying “Let us have hope. Let us not despair. Let us be resilient.” This COVID-19 Pandemic is not the first nor the last that we will experience. COVID-19 is a pandemic and unprecedented in ways and that is why we must be even more stringent (at) this time, but throughout humankind’s history, we have faced tremendous challenges in both recent times and also in centuries past. (The “Spanish Flu” of 1918 comes to mind.)

In our Hongwanji Tradition, there is a comment by our Founder Shinran who lived in the 12th-13th Century in one of his Letters dated 1260 in which he comments about the devastating calamities such as natural disasters, famines and epidemics that struck in the years preceding the year 1260 in Japan. He says “It is saddening that so many people, both young and old, men and women, have died this year and last. But the Buddha taught the truth of life’s impermanence for us fully...”. In the Buddhist Tradition, it has always been emphasized that as living beings we should all be aware that we all experience what is known as the 4 Kinds of Suffering, namely, birth, old age, sickness and death. This is universal and common to all life forms. Shinran’s comment is based on this awareness or understanding. (continued)

Please do not misinterpret his comment. His comment is, by no means, expressing apathy or indifference or saying that life is not important. Buddhism emphasizes that every life, human and otherwise, is precious. A direct descendant of Shinran, His Eminence Koshin Ohtani's shares "In this world, there is no life that was ever lived in vain. There is no life that is meaningless. All life is linked together. All of us share in the light that Amida Buddha shines upon us-this is what Buddhism teaches."

- How can we take care of our spirits when we learn disturbing news?

For many faith traditions, there is a source of Wisdom and Compassion that people can rely upon for guidance and assurance. Let us avail ourselves to it. In one of the Buddhist sutras, it says “Faith removes greed, fear and pride; it teaches courtesy and to respect others; it frees one from the bondage of circumstances; it gives one courage to meet challenges; it gives one power to overcome negativity; it enables one to keep one’s deeds bright and pure; and it enriches the mind with wisdom.” The sutras also speak of a great All-Embracing Compassion which does not exclude anyone or anything. We are all equally surrounded by this Great Compassion. Let us respond in gratitude to this Great Compassion. It might help all of us, if we each ask ourselves “What can I do to help or change the situation?” Let us keep in mind not all contributions need to be large endeavors and reach hundreds or thousands of people. Even if it reaches one person, you made a difference! This is the wisdom of interdependence. We are all interrelated and interconnected and what we each do or do not does matter!

- How can parents empower their children and maintain a healthy balance of information?

The entire pandemic is disturbing, but when you hear news of especially the hot spots and about deaths occurring in local areas it is most concerning. As we continue to battle COVID-19, we should try to keep a balanced perspective. We want to keep informed, but it might not be a good idea to continually watch, all day and all night, news about the virus and pandemic. The different channels are doing their best to keep the Public informed, but if we watch all of it, it is overwhelming. The pandemic is very serious and we should know what is happening, but we should also direct our eyes inward and keep an eye on the fear and anxiety level within us and how it is affecting us or our behaviors including our interactions with one another whether we are working as essential workers or at home with our families and working from home. The general Buddhist emphasis on meditation and the Shin Buddhist emphasis on self-reflection can help all of us. Keep that eye focused both outward and inward. For many of us, although we may be faced with economic hardships and pressure, time wise, we probably have more time with our children and/or families and it might behoove us to spend some quality time with them. Quality time could include doing activities which can help others like writing notes or

drawing pictures to send to health care professionals and other essential workers who are working so hard on our behalf. At Hongwanji, we have a recitation called “The Golden of Love” which in part says “I am a link in Amida Buddha’s Golden Chain of Love that stretches around the world...I will try to think pure and beautiful thoughts, to say pure and beautiful words and to do pure and beautiful deeds knowing that what I do now depends not only my happiness or unhappiness, but also that of others.” Also, we need to be patient with each other. Our lifestyle, right now, is very different from normal and though it might be challenging, patience is a key factor. While we need to all pitch in, we also need to give each other room and be understanding of each other.

- Why do bad things happen to good people?

In this situation with COVID-19, I would not link it to morality or morals. It is a phenomenon which came about from the natural environment. COVID-19, as a virus, does not discriminate between so called “good” people and “bad” people. This pandemic, to me, has nothing to do with being “good” or “bad.” It is a health and/or medical issue or concern. There are causes and conditions which gave rise to it, but it, again, has nothing to do with being good or bad. What should be stressed is the utmost importance of adhering to the good hygiene practices, physical distancing and social solidarity, quarantine policies and abiding by the Stay at Home, Work from Home Proclamation including the consequences of NOT following the directives and/or guidelines and recommendations. Let science and medicine guide us here.