Before he became a Buddhist monk, Sayadaw U Tejaniya lived the life of a householder, running a textile business until he ordained at the age of thirty-four in 1996. He now teaches meditation at the [Shwe Oo Min Meditation Center](https://ashintejaniya.org/centre%22%20%5Co%20%22%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) in Yangon, Myanmar (Burma) and at retreats worldwide.  U Tejaniya is also the author of [Relax and Be Aware: Mindfulness Meditations for Clarity, Confidence, and Wisdom](https://tricycle.org/trikedaily/meditating-while-thinking/)(Shambhala, 2019). His teaching emphasizes meditation as a continuous daily practice, “from the moment you wake up until the moment you fall asleep.”

When COVID-19 hit, U Tejaniya’s Yangon meditation center was forced to close. In a recent interview over a WhatsApp phone call, U Tejaniya’s interpreter, Ma Thet, in Singapore, and meditation teacher and writer Doug McGill, in the US, spoke to Sayadaw about how we can skillfully continue our practice through the pandemic—and how we can deal with the negative emotions that arise as our political leaders scramble to deal with the crisis. Questions were gathered from readers of [The Daily Tejaniya](http://mcgillreport.org/dailytejaniya.htm), a daily email practice message sent each morning to U Tejaniya’s yogis [students] worldwide.

\*\*\*

**How can a person practice meditation to maintain awareness and equanimity with all the fear, anxiety, and uncertainty that COVID-19 has unleashed?**As far as the practice is concerned, I can only say practice as usual. We’re not practicing to make things happen in the mind, such as equanimity, or to make things go away, such as fear or uncertainty. Rather, we practice in order to observe things as they are happening. It helps if someone already has some understanding of the three characteristics of [anicca](https://tricycle.org/beginners/buddhism/what-is-impermanence/%22%20%5Co%20%22%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)(impermanence), [dukkha](https://tricycle.org/trikedaily/denial-of-dukkha/)(unsatisfactoriness or suffering), and [anatta](https://tricycle.org/magazine/there-no-self/) (not-self). If you have this understanding you can then use it to remind yourself: “This is nature; this is the nature of anicca, dukkha, and anatta.” Even if we lack this understanding, we can remember that the mind suffers when it resists or craves an experience. The right attitude is accepting, observing, and learning from your experience just as it is.

**A yogi asks, “I get enraged listening to [President] Donald Trump for even a few moments. His incompetence, lies, and complete lack of ethics is causing many people needlessly to die. How can I deal with the rage I feel towards him?”**We know Donald Trump is not going to change. We can’t change him, but we can change the quality of our mind. When he comes on the TV or the Internet or wherever, just start watching your mind. Attend to your own mind, not to Trump. Get interested in how the mind is reacting, not in what Trump is saying or in the person of Trump.

We need to be very clear that it is not Trump but our own judgments and thoughts of rage that are shattering our peace of mind. Rather than spend our precious moments of life on Trump, change the object of your awareness. Change it from thinking about Mr. Trump, to observing what’s happening in your mind, or watch your feelings so you don’t get pulled into the thoughts. When you see Trump talking on TV or wherever, go straight to the understanding that “This is just seeing” and “This is just hearing.” Instead of identifying with concepts like “This is Trump” or “Trump is so horrible,” instead, go straight to the reality which is, “This is seeing,” “This is hearing.” If peace comes to your mind even while Trump is talking, you’re a pretty good yogi. (By the way, Americans have had Trump for the past four years, but in some countries people have been living with this kind of thing for decades!)

**Could we send metta (lovingkindness) to Trump?**If anyone actually feels metta towards Trump, yes, you can radiate that feeling towards him. But if you are not able to generate any metta feeling, you’ll need to use other objects first to develop feelings of metta within yourself. You could start by sending feelings of well-wishing to yourself. Then you can send metta to your benefactors, to someone who is kind whom you know and love, to your friends, or to a beloved pet. In other words, start by sending metta to [people for whom you already feel metta](https://tricycle.org/magazine/cultivating-compassion/). After doing this for a while, when the mind no longer feels anger or rage but instead feels peaceful and can radiate metta, at that point you can decide to include Trump in that field of metta. When it comes to metta, once you have it, only then can you send it. So if you don’t have it, generate some first.

**Could I send metta to the coronavirus?**If you truly feel metta whether it’s toward Trump, the virus, or the universe and all beings, then you can and should send it. Metta is basically radiating a feeling of well-wishing to all beings and to everything.

**Are there other ways we could use metta in the current crisis?**Those on the front lines like nurses, doctors, and grocery store workers can try to do their work while continually wishing well for themselves, for everyone around them, and for all beings. If they can maintain a mind that is consciously and continuously wishing everyone well as they go about their difficult work throughout the day, that would be an extremely healthy practice.

**What other advice do you have regarding right thought and action during the pandemic?**You should first and foremost act responsibly. Follow the public health instructions: wash your hands frequently, don’t touch your face, maintain social distance, and don’t go to crowded places. From the practice perspective, you should keep the right frame of mind. Whatever simple practices you have learned to keep you grounded in the present moment, do them, to keep your mind ready for whatever you have to face.

**How do you personally handle anxiety or fear?**It’s not that I don’t experience those emotions—but I do have the understanding that this is just what happens in the mind. I cannot prevent the mind from having fear or anxiety. They will arise. But my view is, “This is natural for the mind in this situation.” The worst thing that you could possibly do is to think, “How can I get rid of this?” The desire to not have anything bad happen at all is exactly what causes anxiety and fear to arise. If the mind accepts that these emotions are natural, this can help to settle the mind.

**Does the present extreme circumstance present any positive opportunities for our practice?**For those of us who meditate, this can be a time for [greater clarity](https://tricycle.org/trikedaily/coronavirus-meditations/). It’s like an alarm that’s awakening us to the quality of dukkha that is inherent to this life. Dukkha is always present, but now the alarm of the pandemic is waking us up very clearly to the fact that life contains suffering.

**When practicing meditation, how does one clear tension and worry from the mind?**By watching it continuously and not thinking. It’s Vipassana 101!

**Yet even skilled practitioners can feel overwhelmed at times like this.**I recommend establishing positive intentions at the start of each day, so that you have a framework for carrying out your actions and speech in the most wholesome way possible. That’s a basic understanding and approach to practice that is always important, but now it’s more crucial than ever. If you’re feeling anxiety or panic, you’re more likely to spread the virus through unconscious and compulsive actions. I always tell yogis that it’s not only in times of crisis that we want to determine our intention before any action. At any time, we want to know why we are doing something, and we want to know how we are going to do it. This can help us when we feel overwhelmed, and is a basic tenet of wise awareness.

We also need to take strength from tiny moments, by taking the time to drop into the present moment. This is where concentration practice is very helpful. In this practice, you focus on a single object, which tends to calm the mind.  If you can do it for one minute, do it for one minute. If you can do two minutes, do two minutes. If it’s 10 seconds, it’s 10 seconds. Take as many opportunities as you can to do this throughout the day. Use them to ground the mind, to calm and stabilize the mind.

**What objects of concentration do you recommend?**Pick whatever object serves you the best. It could be [the breath](https://tricycle.org/beginners/buddhism/meditating-with-the-breath/), or the sensation of the whole body, or the sensation of one finger touching another. It could be a memory that brings peace or joy. It could be a different object each time. Use whatever makes you feel grounded and brings you to the present moment.

**How are you taking refuge in**[**sangha**](https://tricycle.org/magazine/sangha-meaning/)**in this time of social distancing?**There are two views of sangha, the conventional (samutti) sangha and the ultimate (paramattha) sangha. The conventional sangha is the people who practice or who maintain the dhamma by writing or preserving the texts. The ultimate sangha is the pure, wholesome mind. When I’m practicing, I bring my mind to a wholesome state. At that time I am relying on the mind that is sangha to me. The wholesome mind is a sangha that you can always rely on, no matter the circumstances. It’s not people, it’s a quality.

**Have any special insights arisen in your practice during this time?**Just the other day, while just simply noticing my breath the mind suddenly appreciated so deeply that I was still breathing. It recognized that there are so many people who are having great difficulty breathing today in the world, and I was very grateful that I could still breathe.

**In the past you’ve suggested that people should think of their home as a retreat center. Now would seem like an ideal opportunity to do that.**After people go on retreat at a meditation center, they often say it’s so difficult to continue practicing when they go home. Right now, we have to stay at home—so yes, it’s an ideal time to approach your practice as you would at a retreat. A person should practice on a home retreat in the same way as they do at a center: by maintaining continuous awareness of each activity throughout the day. The moment that you wake up in the morning, know that you are awake and aware. As you get out of bed, know that you are getting out of bed. As you walk to the bathroom, know that you are walking to the bathroom. As you wash your face, know that you are washing your face. As you brush your teeth, know it; when you are making breakfast, know it; when you are eating, know it. Continuously know everything you are doing. This is how we should always practice, even when there’s not a crisis. If we succeed, then long after COVID-19 is over we will continue to use our homes as a place to practice dhamma.

**Why should we try to maintain continuous awareness of mundane activities?**Noticing details is the territory of wisdom. Only when the mind is trained to see things in detail can it see the right causes and effects, and the right sequences of things, such as what thoughts and actions give rise to wholesome mind states. Only a mind trained in this way can see the habitual patterns of the mind and body, and in this way train itself not to follow those patterns unconsciously, but rather to choose wisely.

The mind always plans ahead. Just putting on a T-shirt—the mind forms the intention to put this hand through first, then the next hand, and so on. When you can see the mind’s intentions in this way, then you can begin to avoid acting out of pure habit. Choice itself is a territory of wisdom. When we train our mind to notice what we are doing, we are training our minds to see detail. We are giving the mind consciousness, and consciousness has a choice. And when there’s a choice, the mind no longer runs on automatic.

**How is having a choice practical at a time like this?**Recently, I’ve become more conscious of how often I reach up to touch my face for no reason. You have to be really mindful to not touch your face—it’s very difficult! Yet when you notice this, you start to become aware of the intention that is formed before you touch your face. Once you start to become aware at this level, then you can choose to stop that action if you want. If you can notice the intention to touch the face, that gives you the power to choose not to do so, which at a time like this can be life-saving.

**Fear seems to increase the voltage of mindfulness. For example, fearing that touching my face could give me coronavirus seems to heighten my ability to be aware of the intention to touch my face before I do so.**We must be careful about letting fear become the motivator of any thought or action. The unwholesome mind should never lead. If fear arises, you can watch the fear. But don’t let it lead, because [defilements](https://tricycle.org/magazine/three-defilements/) always bring in other defilements. If you let fear be the lead, it will quickly bring in other defilements such as anger, worry, impatience, sadness, or depression. Instead, you can choose to raise the voltage of your awareness out of a clear, calm and objective understanding of the necessity to not touch your face.

Worrying is useless. It never solves a problem. Worry is always a state of mind that robs your creativity, resilience, and ability to see things differently and more openly. Worry blocks off alternative ways. It says, “Oh, this is not possible, that is not possible.” Worry only thinks about what is not possible, and it only gives you one possibility, which you do not want. It doesn’t want to accept anything else. It’s a self-defeating state of mind, so try not to encourage it, and don’t believe the thoughts that come from the worried state of mind.

Finally, it’s never a question of how to practice “if this happens or that happens.” It’s always, “How do I practice now?” That’s how you always practice. When I was diagnosed with cancer in 2018, I didn’t practice any differently than before. Whatever comes, I’m practicing. Things are fine, I’m practicing. Things are not fine, I’m practicing, always in the same way. The practice never changes.