

Dear Branching Streams teachers and leaders,

I have received notices and emails from many Zen Centers and sanghas in recent days about ways in which you are trying to slow the spread of the COVID19 pandemic in the U.S. and around the world. I've also received questions about best practices...when to close a center, what advice to give sangha members, how to address anxiety and fear about the uncertainty of the changing situation.

These decisions can be very difficult for us to make. I found Alan Senauke's comments, posted on the Soto Zen Buddhist Association forum, helpful: Loving the warm hand to warm hand nature of our practice, there is an understandable loss felt as we move towards "social distancing." But it is necessary, and we can share with each other creative approaches to maintaining connection and cooperation. Humans are amazingly adaptable. And we are all in this together."

I have been in Texas since March 3rd and am now visiting Austin Zen Center. I have watched the care with which AZC's leaders are making decisions about how best to keep residents and the wider sangha safe, checking the CDC reports as well as local health recommendations, and noticing what other Zen groups are doing. I have also been following the decision-making process of San Francisco Zen Center's leadership in the last two weeks.

Many Zen Centers are closed at least until the end of March. Black Mountain Zen Centre in Belfast posted a [link](https://www.sfzc.org/online-programs/online-ze) <https://www.sfzc.org/online-programs/online-ze> to the on-line zendo at SFZC which offers daily zazen every weekday. Seattle Soto Zen is offering a Virtual Sunday. The guiding teacher will be offering a talk and discussion from her home using Zoom technology. Other centers are offering practice discussions by phone or Zoom, as well as dharma talks and classes online. Some centers are open and are finding ways for sangha members to practice together safely. All centers are suggesting the basic precautions the CDC has publicized.

I'd like to share some words of SFZC's Abbot, David Zimmerman, which I find helpful:

"Everything is changing quickly: almost hourly we receive new information and updates regarding the expanding spread of the virus and what we need to do to protect ourselves from it and/or to mitigate its impact. The practice effort required of us now is one of 'compassionate accountability'...to do our best to take loving and conscientious care of ourselves and each other. In my mind, this means that each of us needs to make a whole-hearted effort to be well-informed, to diligently do what we can to reduce the risk of infection for ourselves and others, and to treat everyone with kindness and tenderness as we navigate this time of uncertainty and great concern.

While it's normal to be experiencing fear, anxiety, confusion, overwhelm and other forms of distress right now, the dharma practices of the six paramitas (generosity, ethical conduct, patience, diligent effort, meditation, and wisdom) offer us powerful medicine to help restore us to equanimity. We might think of ourselves as entering into a new practice period or intensive of indeterminate length, one with the theme of "The Zen Practice of Meeting a Pandemic". Regardless of the plethora of unknowns we're being presented with, let's explore how we can collectively sustain and nourish our personal and communal practice."

Please send me your newsletters and announcements about how you are meeting this emerging situation so that I can share suggestions with other groups. I am also available to speak with any of you by phone or Zoom if you would find it supportive.

I will end with Seattle Soto Zen's guiding teacher Allison Tait's words: "Please take care of yourselves and one another."

With gratitude for all you do, Tova

p.s. I thought the following excerpt from "Six Ways to Transform Fear" by Marc Lesser, might also be helpful.

Change the pace: [Slow down](#). Structure a day, or part of a day, where the focus is on paying attention to yourself and your surroundings when you have nothing to accomplish. Leave your cell phone behind.

New perspective: If possible, go on a retreat away from your office space and home space. Be in a place that is less familiar and where you are less apt to feel the pull of everyday tasks and usual routines. Quiet and spaciousness are a beautiful thing.

Get to know your monkey mind: Don't be surprised or discouraged if you notice how busy and noisy your mind is when you remove distractions. Use your meditation and mindfulness practices; come back to your breath and body.

Find your center: Notice that you are more than your stories. In the busyness of life, you can easily become fooled into believing that the stories you tell about yourself are you, and that they absolutely define you. As your mind becomes more quiet, you gain access to your still, undefinable center. You glimpse the ways you create these stories about yourself, about others, and about the world.

Refresh and renew: Allow yourself to step (or more accurately, drop) into a place of not knowing, of uncertainty, of joy and refreshment. See if you can just appreciate everything you are, even your doubts and discomfort; just appreciate being alive.

Blend the mundane and the sacred: See and appreciate the immensity and sacredness of all existence and at the same time see the mundane need to eat, wash the dishes, sweep the floors, and clean the counters.