

Finding Connectedness Amidst Isolation

The Coronavirus has forced us to stay at home and to keep our distance from others. My wife and I go for a walk every afternoon for exercise, and if someone is coming towards us on the same side of the street, they cross the street immediately, as we should be doing. Sometimes we do the same. At first, it kind of offended me, like someone would avoid us by blatantly crossing the street, but we are all used to that now as we practice “social distancing.”

However, as we practice social distancing in order to do our part to prevent the spread of the virus, we cannot help but feel more isolated. Some of us might be living alone. Elderly cannot even receive visits from their grandkids. I understand that if someone does come down with the Coronavirus and is hospitalized, your family can't even go see you at the hospital. How sad to think that you might be hospitalized all alone, and even sadder, that you might die alone.

There is a passage in the Larger Sutra that states exactly that. It says that in life, *we are born alone and we die alone*. The first time I learned this, I thought that it was too harsh of a statement, but it is brutally true, isn't it? We are born into this world alone, and someday we leave this world alone. We cannot take anything or anyone with us. We can't take our money with us. We can't take our social status with us. We can't take our loved ones with us. We depart alone.

But although Buddhism gives us such a harsh but true teaching, at the same time, it gives us the teaching of never being alone.

Shakyamuni Buddha, when he sat under the bodhi tree, was all alone. He had left the ascetics that he had been practicing with. They called him a quitter. He was all alone, sitting in meditation. But what was his insight, his enlightenment? It was the world of oneness. While being all alone, in total isolation, he discovered the world in which he was connected to all beings and to all of life. His heart became one with all of humanity, with all sentient beings. In his isolation, he found his connectedness with all.

Shinran Shonin also discovered this heart that is always one with all beings. In one of his famous poems he says, *“If you are all alone, think that there are two of you. If there are two of you, think that there are three of you, and that third person will be I, Shinran.”* Shinran Shonin’s heart is one with any follower of the Nembutsu, past, present or in the future.

During this time of isolation, we might feel terribly alone. But we are not alone. We are never alone. If you feel alone or isolated, simply say *Namuamidabutsu* to yourself. In that Nembutsu, is the heart of the Buddha, the world of oneness, the world of immeasurable life and immeasurable light, and you will never be alone.

Namuamidabutsu,

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