



THE PANDEMIC AND THE SELF

By Swami Bodhananda

I belong to a tradition that believes that the self is immortal, pure, and non-dual. And hence the self cannot be destroyed, diseased, or infected. This belief gives me great relief from anxiety and dread during the Coronavirus pandemic, keeps me calm, positive, and enhances my immunity.

Being a spiritual guide to many people belonging to different faiths, classes, and nationalities, I try to impart this message across borders and bring some clarity and sanity to an unprecedented state of maddening paranoia, confusion, and uncertainty, where even experts are clueless and at their wit's end.

I was in Kerala when the first case of Covid-19 was reported in Thrissoor, on the southwestern tip of India. The patient was a student who returned from Wuhan. The subsequent two cases in Kerala were also student returnees from Wuhan.

I was touring Kerala and one of my functions, on February 1st, where a large number of people participated, was in Thrissoor. Then no one bothered or talked about Covid-19. I left Kerala on February 13 for Bangalore where no incident was reported. From Bangalore, I left for Ahmadabad, then on to Delhi, Kurukshetra, Varanasi, Prayagraj, Chitrakoot, and on 3rd March, I was back in Delhi, which reported the first corona patient on 2nd March.

I stayed in Delhi till 23rd March when the COVID-19 incidents reached the mark of 100 patients. By then the alarm bells started ringing and the Indian Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi addressed the nation requesting people to observe a voluntary curfew. The call was a total success. Indian roads, airports, seaports, factories, farmsteads, schools, and offices came to a grinding halt. Some essential services were open.

Sitting, imprisoned in my apartment, I felt an eerie silence seeping into my soul, as though the earth has abruptly stopped on its track, like the roaring Niagara freezing in

winter.

The voluntary curfew was a trial run and on 24th March the Indian government ordered 21 days national lockdown, which was extended for another two weeks and now we are going through lockdown 3.0.

I escaped from Delhi on the nick of time before shut down of airports and flight cancellations. The Delhi airport wore a deserted look, passengers wearing masks and keeping distance. I reached Bangalore to the safety of my ashram on the 23rd evening. There was no thermal scanning or temperature testing in the airports.

To a total of 50 days confined in my ashram!

The lockdown caused unprecedented suffering to people, especially the poor and daily laborers. Almost 40 million lost their jobs and livelihood. Millions of jobless migrants, their women, children, and old parents trudging behind, start walking longingly to their villages creating a humanitarian crisis. Some of them fell asleep on rail tracks. In one incident 16 laborers who were fast asleep on the track were ran over by a speeding cargo train.

Hundreds of thousands of shelter camps were set up to house the fleeing crowds to prevent the pandemic spreading to villages.

Slums like Dharavi, a miasmic mess of flesh, filth, and feces, where the population density was 350,000 per square km, with just 4000 public and a few private toilets, and no running water, where physical isolation and hand sanitation were impossible, became a nightmare for authorities.

Trapped migrants in foreign countries cried desperately for help. Even those who could come back to their native places were forced to spend 14 days in quarantine. So near yet very far, quite nerve-racking and frustrating.

Health care workers moving around like phantoms in heavy personal protection gears in sweltering heat and overcrowded hospitals with patients in ventilators and others waiting for the verdict were heart-rending scenes.

The whole nation was benumbed. People felt lost, helpless, disoriented and abandoned.

Psychological problems mushroomed, rate of domestic violence, and suicide cases increased.

Poor alcoholics moved around like zombies deprived of their lifeline, while those who have the means took to alcohol to beat boredom.

Gods in temples, mosques, and churches got a well-deserved reprieve from the din and roar of milling crowds.

Shopping addicts and cinema buffs wrung their hands in utter despair as malls and multiplexes closed down. Herds of stray cows roamed on empty national highways.

Consumerism gave way to conservation. And animals and birds reclaimed their colonized habitats.

Though I was trained to spend time in solitude and to enjoy my being in blissful self abandon, the forced lockdown and physical isolation were too much on my psyche. The long period I spent in public service I got used to close physical contact with the sick, the poor, the old, the destitute, and children. I am also used to constant travel across time zones, conducting workshops and seminars. I believed in transferring energy than just communicating ideas. All these required physical proximities and mutual trust and vulnerability.

But the Corona scare brought in its wake mutual suspicion and physical distance. Daily life lost its naturalness. A strange variant of narcissism crept in, leading to the opposites of self-hate and self-obsession and a paranoid fear of the other and the unknown.

As days rolled by I got my bearing back. I started listening to the songs of birds, the rustle of leaves, the whisper of the morning breeze, the drumbeat of May showers, and the glances of the full moon behind a veil of shifting clouds.

My contemplation became more colorful and my inner journey more rewarding. My wide-ranging experience and readings started coalescing into meaningful patterns revealing new insights about the world, self, and the direction of life.

I am sure by the time the COVID-19 ordeal will have been over, I quite don't know when I would have emerged as a better person than I was before - more environment friendly, empathetic, open, balanced and inclusive.

A sort of second enlightenment.

