

A non-dual response to the COVID-19 pandemic

This paper is devoted to Rupert's advice about dealing with some of the difficult situations we encounter as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. First, here is part of a short meditation from one of his recent webinars:

This is a very challenging time for everyone and it brings into sharp focus the unpredictability and insecurity of everything at an objective level. The uncertainty of everything objective. But at the same time as bringing into sharp focus the uncertainty and insecurity of everything at an objective level, the situation also brings into focus the one thing in our lives that is absolutely certain and secure, namely our own being.

So, strangely, at a time like this, not only the uncertainty and insecurity of things is emphasised but also, if we are open to the possibility, the security of our own being is also magnified, so to speak. Of course, it is not really magnified. Our own being is always available, always secure, but at a time such as this, either a time of great upheaval outwardly or at a time of intense feeling inwardly, the security of our own being, the safety of our own being is somehow magnified.

Our own being is the one place where it is possible to take refuge. Of course, each of us has to deal with this situation in whatever way it impacts us on a practical level in our lives. And that is different for everyone. But what is the same for everyone is the presence of our own being in the background of experience, and above all, its innate peace.

Whatever we may have to encounter outwardly in our circumstances and relationships and whatever feelings may be stirred inwardly, behind all of these lies our inherently peaceful and quietly joyful being.

No circumstance on the outside, and no feeling on the inside, can eclipse this innate peace of our being unless we give it permission to do so, in which case it will seem to do so.

So each one of us is free to allow our attention to come back, again and again, whatever circumstances we may be encountering, or whatever emotions we may be feeling, to the peace of our being and to take refuge there from time to time.

Nothing can impose suffering on us. Our suffering is our own activity and it is the simple activity of resisting what is. Our own being, the presence of awareness, never resists what is, and therefore there is no suffering in our self. Hence peace is its nature. The suffering is never in the circumstance. It is always in our resistance to it. [12/3/2020 Webinar]

Rupert has had to convert some of his retreats into online events. Here is part of discussion from the recent 'retreat at home' about how to make best use of our time while at home in lock down:

Q: I have a lot of anxiety. I don't know what to do during my day because I'm at home. Can I practise self-enquiry during the whole day and see what happens?

RS: So you're locked down at home and you can't go out, chances are, for the foreseeable future. Nearly all of us now are in this condition. It's a good question: what do we do all day long if we can't work from home. So no, I don't recommend that we practise self-enquiry all day long. Set aside some time or periods of time each day to explore these matters. Either on the inward-facing path to explore and establish yourself in the understanding 'I am awareness', explore the *nature* of awareness. Bring yourself again and again to the experiential recognition that awareness is inherently peaceful and fulfilled. And then, as we did earlier today, welcome

whatever feelings arise and see that there is no resistance in you, awareness, to the feelings. So explore all these – many of us now have a lot of time on our hands.

But I don't recommend just doing that. It's also important to attend to other areas of your life. Keep fit, keep active. Set yourself an exercise regime. There are so many apps, yoga classes, exercise routines online. Set yourself an exercise routine that includes some cardio exercise and I would suggest some yoga¹. We may be at home now for three or four months, so take the opportunity to develop something new in your life. For instance, say to yourself every week I'm going to learn a poem. Take a poem that you love and learn it. It doesn't have to be a whole poem, it could be a phrase. For instance, Utpala Deva's prayer that I quoted earlier². Learn it. It's only two or three lines. These words, if they come from understanding, they have the power to take us to the understanding from which they come. So these words are potent. So learn a phrase or just a couple of lines and speak it to yourself. Allow the words to deliver their meaning. Likewise with poetry, I recommend you set yourself just a simple task of learning one poem a week. Poems are like fine vintage wines. Just as a fine old wine delivers its taste layer after layer after layer, so a good poem reveals its meaning gradually. The more you contemplate it, the more its meaning unfolds inside you. So that is something you could do.

Set yourself a couple of projects that you would never normally have time to do. And projects that aren't necessarily practical – they have no practical end, they are creative, something you love to do such as writing, or pick up a musical instrument. There are so many possibilities now. Don't just sit contemplating your anxiety. Contemplate your true nature, welcome your anxiety and then put it on one side and give your attention to something that you enjoy, something that is creative. And keep in contact with friends online. Make sure that you keep in contact with friends. Share your interest in these matters. You could get together *[online]* with a group of people once a week and explore these matters and share your insights. Take advantage of this situation, difficult as it is for so many people. Turn it into something positive and creative in your life.

[22/3/2020 Rupert Spira, *Retreat at home*]

Later in the same meeting, there was a discussion about how to return to our own being, when faced with serious practical difficulties:

Q: Somehow in the last week, it has been very hard to sit there [as awareness]. I'm getting involved in the drama, I've got to sell my condo, I'm catastrophising ...

*RS: That may be the case. I'm not minimising the distress and the seriousness and the difficulty of the situation that you and innumerable people find themselves in now. I don't mean to minimise that. Of course, you've lost your job, you don't know how long it is before you're going to be flying again. It's a lot to deal with. I'm not minimising that. But whatever you have to deal with, whatever you are experiencing, it is always *you* who is experiencing it. I am exhausted, I am upset, I am tired, I am concerned, I am worried, I don't know what to do, I may have to sell my condo – I, I, I, I, I runs through all of these thoughts and feelings and activities and relationships. You are there. You, your being is there at the very heart of all your experience. In fact all your experience is a colouring of your being. Your being is like the screen behind the image. The image is always changing, and at the moment for many people, the image is pretty dramatic and pretty distressing. But the screen is always the same. 'I am' is always the same. You cannot *find**

¹ A fellow student of Rupert's teaching, who is also a doctor, recommends including muscle toning exercises for all the major muscle groups.

² See the contemplation at the end of this paper.

that because you *are* that. You can only be that knowingly. And to be that knowingly means to know that what you essentially are doesn't share any of the limits or qualities of your thoughts or your feelings or your activities. It is free. It is transparent. It is silent. It is at peace.

Q: How do I get to that point where I can have this horrible show on the TV screen and I wipe my finger across the TV screen and the TV screen hasn't changed. But somehow I'm so engrossed in that show.

RS: If you are engrossed in the show, then you are lost in the show. From time to time you pause, and you do the equivalent of wiping your finger across the screen which means that you go to your being and you realise that all of these distressing thoughts and feelings, they're all appearing in me, they're all made by me, I'm always the same, I'm the peaceful presence in the background of all this turbulence. At the moment, for you and for many other people, it is extremely turbulent and challenging. So it is inevitable now that from time to time the peace, the silence of your being is going to be obscured by the content of your experience. Don't worry. Just let that happen. But whenever you notice that you are lost in the content of your experience, do it almost physically, it's like taking a step back. You take a step back into the presence of awareness. You think 'Oh, I am that which is *aware* of my thoughts and feelings, I am *not* my thoughts and feelings. I am the peaceful presence of awareness in the background of all experience that is always looking on, whatever it is that I am experiencing.'

Q: I got to experience that pretty strongly for the first three months.

RS: I know you have, you've been there, you've tasted yourself, you know yourself. And due to the intensity of current circumstances your self is being obscured by the content of experience. So just put some time by each day to close your eyes, so to speak – you can close your eyes physically but stop giving your attention exclusively to your thoughts and feelings and circumstances, and just take a step back and rest in your being. And when you rest in your being it's like you recharge yourself, and then you go out again and deal with your circumstances with courage and confidence and clarity.

Q: Maybe when I was living in that space I wasn't visiting it enough. It's a bit stronger now.

RS: It's more like a tortoise that takes its home with it wherever it goes. So it's not either visiting that space or going out into the world. You could go out into the world, which in your case means dealing with your current circumstances, difficult as they are. But remember that you take your being with you wherever you go. Your being shines in the midst of experience.

Remember the French writer Albert Camus, that I quoted yesterday. He said that 'in the depths of winter, I finally realised that there is in me an invincible summer'. You are in the depths of winter at the moment – darkness, decay, the ending. Everything is falling away, being removed from you. It is like a winter. The future is looking a little bleak. He didn't say 'after winter ended and the spring came I realised there was this invincible summer. He said it was in the very depths of winter, in the depths of my despair, and my frustration and my anxiety and my fear. 'In the depths of winter, I finally recognised that there is in me an invincible summer', that is an invincible presence of awareness that is bright, that is luminous, that is at peace, that is loving.

[22/3/2020 Rupert Spira, *Retreat at home*]

One attendee at the same retreat felt that spending time sinking into our true nature of pure awareness seemed like a selfish activity when so many people in the world are suffering. Here is Rupert's response:

Q: There's a massive shift going on right now. The world is going through such an amazing moment. I feel selfish just sitting with my own awareness.

RS: Why do you feel this is selfish? I agree that the anxiety, the fear the distress that people are feeling are palpable on the streets if you go out now. And if you read the news, it's palpable. What is the one thing that everybody wants at this time?

Q: Peace, health ...

RS: Relief from anxiety, fear, uncertainty. To discover this peace, where it lies, and to go to it, is not selfish. It is the least selfish of all activities. It's not a personal activity. It is the discovering of that which everybody longs for. Not only discovering it, but discovering the pathway by which or through which it may be accessed, which will enable you then to share it with others with whom you come in contact, in whatever form you share it. ...

Earlier on you said you were sure I would just say 'turn away from all this and go to your self'. Well I wouldn't say that. I would say that the most important thing in life – either in this crisis situation or indeed in any situation is to find access to peace and happiness. Why? Because it is the one thing that we want above all else. But I would not suggest that we do this to the exclusion of paying attention to looking after our own bodies, and looking after those with whom we come in contact – whether they are family members, friends, neighbours, community. Particularly in this time of crisis, I would recommend that each of us does whatever we feel we can do to attend to the situation and to help people – not just in the ultimate way, not just to find peace and happiness but in relative ways as well.

Q: But just walking outside in Manhattan to the bank to line up to go into the bank five people at a time, you can feel this energy that is very different from the usual streets of Manhattan. It just feels like all these lone people, just walking along the street, just lining up. Everyone's in it on their own in a weird way. When you see them, you can chat to someone, say 'hello', but it just feels like this shift is so internal for everyone.

RS: *Rupert described his visit to a deli in Oxford where he had to queue to go in the shop, and talked with people in the queue. He said:* There was such a feeling of community and friendliness. We were no longer strangers to each other. We were joined together in our common humanity. Not only was the fear palpable on the streets but also our common humanity was palpable on the streets. And I experienced people's openness and friendliness. I tend to be rather quiet. In a situation like that I might be more inclined to just go in the shop and get my groceries and leave. I found myself chatting with people in the queue. There was so much love and warmth and community, irrespective of who the people were, where we came from. All we were feeling was our shared humanity. It was very loving.

I'm sure there are many people in this meeting this evening who have experience this. So it doesn't take much. You find yourself standing in a queue, albeit six feet away from the next person, just to start up a conversation with them and irrespective of the content of the conversation, just to communicate this warmth and love and affection and peace to them. And they will come away from the conversation feeling they have been blessed by you. When I say 'blessed by you', I don't mean anything extraordinary or religious. I just mean that they've been blessed by your peace. They've felt that you were not afraid. You were just one with the moment. No problem. They will have felt that, and their being which they may not have previously had access to because of their fear and their anxiety, will have been magnified by your presence, and they will feel the peace of their own being and they will feel that you have

blessed them. They won't formulate it like that, probably, but you have blessed them. You've blessed them with your peace. That's beautiful.

Q: I'll try

RS: You don't even need to try. If you are in touch with your peace, peace is contagious. If you are in touch with it, it just communicates itself effortlessly through words, through gestures, through a smile, through silence. You don't even need to try. Just be in touch with your innate peace and it will share itself naturally in your own unique way with whoever you come in contact with. That is the greatest thing you could offer your fellow New Yorkers at this time. Smiling at a stranger as you walk down the street is a communication of this peace. There could never have been a time, at least in our generation when this was more needed than now.

[21/3/2020 Retreat at home: [Communicating Peace During COVID-19](#)]

Contemplation

Here is the prayer that Rupert quoted several times throughout the retreat:

Being immersed in You, may I be free of desires for anything other than what is; may I be utterly filled with delight, considering everything and every being I encounter to be only You.

[Utpala Deva's Garland of Hymns to Shiva]

And this is Rupert's rendition:

Abiding in and as myself alone, I, awareness, have no desire for anything other than what is and, as a result, knowing everything that arises as my own activity, I am utterly full of peace and quiet joy.