

Renounce the world: stay home

Lesson of the Covid-19 Pandemic

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A few days ago, when I was reading about the urban lockdown in Malaysia (just over a kilometre or so north of Singapore), I broke into a smile. People are ordered not to go about, especially in crowds, and not to socialize. That is what the Buddha has been teaching us for the last 2500 years! **Renounce the world!**

The idea of the lockdown order is to “starve” the Covid-19 virus whose incubation period is a fortnight. Hence, people are ordered to stay home at least for that period. Suddenly, the streets are as empty: it is as if humans are giving the world a badly needed break.

Renounce the world! Stay home!

Some mass media are reporting that as a result of the pandemic lockdown, with people staying home away from their usual busyness, it may actually bring a **baby boom** after the pandemic! Hence, it would be wise to be busy with something really helpful. In this connection, let me suggest:

Renounce the world. Stay home. Study the suttas.

It’s interesting how widespread adversity can throw new light upon what we have often take for granted: that when we renounce the world, we leave home. Anyway, considering that sad reality that many, if not most, people renounce home nowadays for a better life as monastics when they don’t have to work, nor pay tax, and people will feed, support and spoil them for free.

Renunciation, as taught by the Buddha, has been turned on its head. If we follow **the (Saddha) Jāṇussoṇi Sutta** (A 10.177), then, such people who seem to do good but do not keep the precepts, will be reborn as well-cared **pets**, that is, as animals in the homes of their supporters (if they are lucky)!¹

The mind as home

For our Dhamma reflection, we can understand “home” as a “dwelling” (vihara): a place for **true renunciation**.

A home is where there is **love**. When love is fully and properly expressed even to those who do not deserve it, it is called **compassion**. When we show loving appreciation of the goodness and happiness of others, it is appreciative **joy**. Despite all the love we can and do show, the world still stands and turns in suffering. There can never be enough of love to be shown to the world because people and situations change. Hence, our love keeps us at **peace** and equanimity despite the world

¹ See **(Saddha) Jāṇussoṇi Sutta** (A 10.177,10-35), SD 12.6a.

Thus, to “renounce the world” means to give up **greed, hate, delusion and fear**, all that is negative in our heart. This is **good** for us in the sense that love, compassion, joy and peace, prepare and allow us to truly and really learn from what is going on around us, from the world.

We cannot cling to the world, we cannot stop it: it just keeps spinning with greed, hate, delusion, fear. It’s the nature of the world. When we let it go, we are letting go of greed, hate, delusion and fear.

In fact, the world is really our **breath**: when we stop breathing, there is no more world for us. Now, when we breathe in, we must also breathe out. We can try to hold our breath, but it’s just a matter of minutes that we need to breathe again. To breathe means in and out, to let come, let go.

To live, then, is to love: to be home anywhere, to treat others so that they are at home with us. We must thus show them **love**. The best way of loving others is to reach out to them with **compassion**, that is, to learn what we can from them and act on this.

We are grateful for this living lesson: we shown them **joy**. With this learning, we are able to simply accept the world by letting it go.

In short: to live is to love; to love is to learn; to learn is to let go. Then, we keep growing in wisdom and freedom. This is the meaning of renouncing the world: so that we are really at home with ourself, with everyone we meet and know, with everything around us.

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