

Discovering Wisdom in the Midst of Chaos
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By Melissa Moore

Dear Karuna Training Community,

This year Karuna Training is offering a series of free online talks and emails - with engaging insight into a variety of Karuna related topics. Here is a little in depth discussion from Karuna Founder and Senior Teacher Melissa Moore about our next topic, which will be explored in our next online interactive session: Karuna Live...

[Discovering Wisdom in the Midst of Social Distancing and other Pandemic Chaos](#)

When we originally planned our monthly topics for newsletters months ago, this month's topic was, "Discovering Wisdom in the Midst of Chaos' - which is actually some kind of Karuna Training tagline; however now it feels very important to bring this idea into discovering the wisdom of our current chaos, which we share; the current Coronavirus Pandemic. I am sure we are experiencing it differently and with various degrees of panic, grief and curiosity.

I've really had to chew on where I/you/we find ourselves in this moment! I/you/we must consider deeply the wisdom of our mutual reality in the current global Coronavirus lockdown.

To consider deeply from a Contemplative Psychology perspective means we feel into it and open to it as it is; for us, for our close friends, colleagues and family; and for those in the world at large.

It is a big meal to taste all at once; it is important we break it down and distinguish our experience of each category of relevance. These are all relevant categories; ourselves, those closest to us and the world at large; however they tend to mix up in a moment like this where this crisis is affecting all of us, but in distinctly different ways.

One opportunity is to grow our awareness in a discerning way so that we can see what we meet in all relational categories. This is a moment of great chaos in the world, we are in uncharted territory as a species; for some this is fascinating. For a lot of others, this moment is causing a lot of anxiety, genuine true suffering and enormous pain; especially those afflicted with Coronavirus in a serious way and dying. Not to mention those beings who are extremely unprotected; the homeless, the elderly living alone or in

institutions, jails, mental hospitals, orphanages, ghettos, etc. We are involved in and bearing witness to a true tragedy.

So we need not be ignorant of the pain or trite in asking, 'what is the wisdom in our current pandemic chaos?' 'what is the wisdom of our social isolation?' 'What is the wisdom of all this chaos and world economic decline?' I do not want to come from any space of privileged perspective in asking these questions, but that seems impossible and naive from where I sit in my socio-economic bubble of inconvenience due to the pandemic, one so comfortable that I can even consider such a question to begin with.

The wisdom each of us discovers in this time may not look the same, as we struggle with different challenges and experiences, but each of us has the innate possibility of opening to the reality of the chaos and discovering the wisdom it holds for us, in our own lives.

Wisdom and Chaos in the Contemplative Psychology Tradition

In Contemplative Psychology, as taught by the Tibetan Buddhist teacher Chogyam Trungpa; we learn that 'chaos is good news' because it always points to the truth of impermanence, which is easy to forget. We are forever trying to fix, maintain, alter, address, control, manage, supervise, or change our worlds. There is no controlling true chaos, so it is considered 'good news' in that we are always stuck with reality as it is, and when it is chaotic we cannot avoid that truth.

I have thought about Chogyam Trungpa a great deal in this pandemic; because he was a mere 19 year old Lama of a remote Tibetan Monastery when he heard that life would no longer be as it was before due to the Chinese invasion of 1959.

He sent a request to his spiritual teachers for advice on what to do, but they sent back nebulous undefinable dharmic answers - all basically meaning "it's up to you".

So Trungpa Rinpoche decided to go into retreat, he quarantined himself in a meditation retreat for up to a month. Afterwards he led a contingent of 300 Tibetan men, women and children on a nine-month escape over the Himalayas to India. Only 20 or so of his original travellers arrived in India. It was a devastating and near-mythic journey all available to read about in two books; *Born in Tibet* (1966) and *From Lion's Jaws*

(2016). Chogyam Trungpa definitely was experiencing great chaos and not-knowing in a time of great change, like we are today.

In our current milieu, meaning the shared global pandemic-seized world of now, it is easy to see many of us are collectively slowing down through the practice of *mandated social isolation*.

There are many places in the world of course, where this idea is a ridiculous privileged mandate, as there is nowhere to socially isolate. For example, the slums of Bombay or in Brazil, the homeless in our cities, and the elderly or disabled in shared facilities. There are also those who are actually speeding up right now- essential workers like those in healthcare, delivery drivers and grocery store clerks, who may be working even harder to keep up their duties amongst increased and a threatening demand. And there are those who were already at home, working remotely, those who are disabled by chronic illness, or isolated geographically from loved ones who may suddenly have more 'virtual' events to attend and may also be experiencing a kind of speeding up.

Still, it is hard to deny that much of the world's activities are slowing down. Businesses are on pause, events are canceled, and skies are clearing. And for those of us now going into social isolation, we may find that social distancing is a method that instantly invites space.

I find the lock down of restaurants, cleaners, stores, malls, nail and hair salons, bars, movie theaters, etc. has had a radical impact on how I spend my time and move through the rhythm of my week. I have to ask myself, "how much was I distracting myself with all of these things?" I really don't miss it all that much and I appreciate the space a lot. As a result I have a lot less distraction. Again, I realize that will not be true for those with less disposable income; who do not frequent such places to begin with. I'm astutely aware suddenly of how easy for me to say, 'so what' to my inconvenience; and I see it is not really a loss for me. Simultaneously, however, my privilege and how it's showing up right now, I find revolting.

I can also see there's wisdom in the current demand for mindfulness.

Mindfulness is what it takes to continually 'WASH YOUR HANDS and DON'T TOUCH YOUR FACE'. When we realize that the 'face is suddenly the most dangerous place on earth' - as the New Yorker touted last week,

we can see these are hard to accomplish mandates, and require a lot of mindfulness for such simple tasks.

I find myself many times a day swishing my hair mindlessly from my face, scratching my nose and am shocked to find how many things I use my mouth to open. Slowing down, being mindful and catching our mindless habits with some growing awareness has been a great benefit and hint of wisdom in the current chaos.

Exercise for Discovering Wisdom in Chaos

I've been thinking about contemplative methods that get to the inner feelings of the potency of this rare moment we are sharing. Thus, I would like to offer you a brief 3 minute contemplative exercise. Just read along and pause when I say (PAUSE). Set down the page, or look up from the computer and take the instructions as an opportunity to see if you can feel what I am suggesting.

I invite you to make this personal in this present moment.

1. First, feel into your own sensations in your body - around the pandemic - what do you carry into this present moment? (PAUSE)
2. Then, feel into your current environment, where you find yourself right now; most likely in your home; ask yourself, what does the pandemic feel like in your home space and with the people that you share the household with at this moment? 'Or the lack of people there?' What does this feel like for those who you are in physical contact with, pets, your computer on social media, your close friends and family?' (PAUSE)
3. Finally, open your mind wide to the greater whole of the world, what you have read and what you may not have considered yet; feel into the space of what we are all globally sharing - and even beyond the news; the truth of our interconnectedness, all people throughout the world susceptible to this virus in the same way, with the different fears, different insecurities, and very different circumstances with which to meet the current moment. Can you feel into that greater whole this moment? (PAUSE)

Consider what you notice doing this exercise, if you like you can jot them down. Can you discern the different levels of relational relevance?

I notice that I feel tense in all three domains; but differently tense. In my personal energy and body contemplation; my throat is constricted and I'm genuinely sad. In my immediate environment contemplation; I felt the tension more as a background anxiety, and I felt obligated to keep up a strong front for others. And then, leaning into a global awareness' I'm totally overwhelmed with sadness and grief, which may be why I suddenly find myself crying for seemingly no reason.

Through these episodes of sudden grief, I've realized the need to discern for whom and for what I am feeling - there is so much to feel in this life-altering moment!

Working with Exchange and Oscillation

I've been taking the time to do this 3 minute exercise to discern my feelings several times a day. I find it helpful to delineate these categories; otherwise I freeze. Usually this is because of the grief I'm tuning into globally through the practice of 'exchange'.

Exchange is something we train in contemplative psychology - a pre-verbal awareness of our inseparability with our world and the environment, our feeling capacity that is often background and unconscious. To exchange is to develop a feeling sensitivity and awareness in which we can train in - and be better equipped to feel the feelings of others, and not confuse them with our own feelings.

Through practicing exchange, I'm able to feel an overwhelming sense of the whole - and of course I'm probably projecting some onto my feelings from all that I've read, so it's not so clean cut in the feeling world. At the same time, I take the time to come home to myself and pause to see what is really going on with me at this moment.

In Karuna Training we call this the practice of oscillation; starting with ourselves, and then opening up and touching into the whole, or what is in front of us, and then oscillating consciously back home to ourselves.

Once we learn to discern our own feelings we will then have the wherewithal and stamina to open our heart to feel the feelings of others. This is where the wisdom of the chaos is always found, right in the hot spot of whatever chaos is presenting itself.

Working this way; we learn we can then stay with the feelings until the wisdom of the situation emerges.

Staying is our only task, not wavering, but staying within a non-judgemental openness and simply feeling. This is easier said than done. It is actually great news because it means that we don't have to fix anything; from this viewpoint the wisdom is self-existing; so there is nothing to fix.

I've found through this exercise of oscillation - and many other exercises that we do in contemplative psychology; there is the capacity of expanding your feeling capacity - or your heart capacity (if you will) beyond yourself. This is what is meant by offering our heart to others. This is learning to grow the seed of compassion within us.

Staying With Feeling to Discover Wisdom

In these Coronavirus socially isolated days, I notice I'm moving slow, it is like I'm moving in molasses. Sometimes I feel very dull and that is always when I allow myself to feel the vulnerable truth of great helplessness. For many there is a wish to just lay down and sleep or really to let go. It's all so exhausting and overwhelming. This feeling of freezing, slowing down or losing oneself in space is an aspect of trauma; that sometimes we freeze when we hit the unfamiliar (or for some it may be the all too familiar) groundlessness. We experience a freeze effect; which makes me feel like a deer in headlights.

I find when I am in one of these freeze states, that the practice of oscillation between myself and the greater whole to see what I am feeling really helps. I'm tuning into my own body sensations, oscillating home to myself first -- and then touching into the greater whole; this allows me to recalibrate my ability to feel again, it wakes me up from the overwhelm and freeze.

Right now feelings to be found in the world via exchange or via newspaper reports or podcasts can be substantially overwhelming. The only way to discover the wisdom within this chaos -- is through feeling, but feeling with discernment of what we are feeling into.

To feel the overwhelm of the world is to open our heart to what is! Social distancing could be considered a form of imposed oscillation, the world demanding we come home

to ourselves. The opportunity is learning how to touch and go with our compassion. First we touch into ourselves and then to others, oscillating back and forth and making what may feel at first a false boundary. Then we can feel what we feel is ours and feel the greater whole in short spurts, and not be overwhelmed as much.

The magic of slowing down, oscillating back to ourselves and then to the greater whole and feeling everything as it is -- is where the wisdom of this chaos abides. There is no rule book or manual to follow, it is a method of trusting the world as it is presenting itself right now.

We are cast upon ourselves daily to meet the current pandemic chaos with an open and awakened heart, and we need to help each other to remember that there is a path to do so.

That's all from us for now! We wish you well in these challenging times.

Warmly,
Melissa Moore and The Karuna Training Team