



# Steer Against the Wind with Great Strength

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In early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic spread around the world, rapidly changing the lives of people everywhere. Facing this rather dangerous and highly contagious virus, the first and foremost action to take is prevention. The ancients said: “Only with great strength will you be able to steer against the wind and settle in peace.” As Buddhist practitioners, the greater the adversity, the more we need to bring in our pure awareness. Besides following all the necessary preventive measures to protect ourselves, more importantly, we need to protect and care for each other with right mindfulness and compassion. Through the power of tolerance and kindness, we will turn this precarious time into an opportunity to practice the bodhisattva way, benefiting oneself and others.

*The Sutra of 42 Chapters* says: “Observe heaven and earth and contemplate impermanence. Observe the world and contemplate



impermanence.” Impermanence is a truth of life. When we understand and accept this truth, we will be able to act from wisdom. History tells us that pandemics are not rare accidents. With the expansion of global economy, the increasing population in cities, and the convenience of transportation, outbreaks of pandemics have occurred repeatedly in history: the Black Death, smallpox, measles, cholera, the Spanish flu, and even today’s seasonal flu. They tell us that safety can give way to peril and vice versa any moment. If we go through life complacent and unaware, we will be caught unprepared when disasters strike. However, pandemics are also impermanent. If we know how to respond to crises with right mindfulness and work on the correct cause, then certainly we will turn peril into peace.

## Meditate to Still the Mind Turn Peril into Peace

We cannot turn back the clock to the time before the pandemic outbreak, so how do we accept and live in the reality of this moment? The best way is through Zen practice. Zen practice is essentially that of “concentration and contemplation,” which can be broken down into four steps: turn inward, reflect, transform, and take action. When our six senses come into contact with the six sense objects, know to turn inward—“like a turtle guarding its six”; guard your mind as if it is a fortress; cease your wandering thoughts and be unmoved. Always reflect inward and check if there are greed, anger, ignorance, pride, and doubt in your mind. As soon as you notice any unwholesome thoughts, transform them: turn greed into thoughts of giving and sharing, turn anger into compassion and tolerance. Moreover, take action to put these wholesome thoughts into practice.



During this period of “shelter-in-place,” many lay disciples have noticed how their regular Zen practice has helped them to face the pandemic with calmness and patience. Besides the regular reciting sutras and sitting meditation, they also practice gratitude and dedicate merits to all beings. They make use of every opportunity to practice amid the many inconveniences created by the crisis. For example, when lining up to get into a store, they would use the time to recite sutras or mantras. During the long hours at home,

instead of watching T.V. or surfing the internet, they read the Grand Master's Dharma talks, review meditation class notes, and then share the Dharma with their family. Compared to before "shelter-in-place," they are actually spending more time practicing, cautiously guarding their action, speech, and thought.

## Be Calm and Content Come Rain or Shine

One disciple who works in a major hospital said that at the outset of the pandemic, the hospital not only lacked masks and other protective gear, but also a definite plan for admitting Covid-19 patients. Amid an atmosphere of tension and uncertainty, she decided to silently recite the *Diamond Sutra* during her lunch break everyday. Although her co-workers are not Buddhists, out of respect for her practice, they also lower their voice and lighten their steps. As a result, the whole staff room calms down.

To deal with this rapidly changing pandemic and the feeling of uncertainty, the first thing to do is to take care of our own thoughts. As the *Diamond Sutra* says: "One should thus abide, thus subdue the mind." Live in the present, bring your mind to where you are now, stay on the path of truth, subdue any attachments to the past, worries about the present, or delusions about the future, abide in your true mind, turn every situation into an opportunity to advance your practice, and make positive connection with others—these are the Buddha's prescriptions for caring for our minds.

The Grand Master said: "The external world is ever-changing, but myriad changes are not separate from this mind. If this mind is in command of itself, then it has the power to transform external situations, to dispel disasters and manifest blessings in adversity."

No matter how the world changes, this very awareness, not subject to birth and death, is where we can truly attain safety and peace. As this pandemic sweeps through our lives, may we learn to diligently and compassionately steer against the wind as well as to sail with the wind, taking every opportunity to practice the bodhisattva's loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity.

