

The Fulfillment of Remembrance  
By La Sarmiento

I, and I imagine many of us, experience the practice as one of constantly forgetting and remembering. On a retreat several years ago, I once asked my teacher Michele McDonald what she thought the Buddha meant on his deathbed when he said to his monastics, “Strive on with diligence.” She replied that she had asked three sayadaws [1] in Burma the same question, and they all said, “It’s the fulfillment of remembrance” – to come back to the present and to what is true.

In the midst of this devastating global pandemic that has over 3 million reported cases and close to a quarter of a million deaths as I write, I reflect on all the ways I have forgotten and remembered in these last 6 weeks.

What is happening right now is traumatizing, and even more so for those of us who have a history of trauma, oppression, or marginalization. Many of our loved ones have gotten sick, recovered, or died from COVID-19. Many healthcare and essential workers are separated from their families. Many of our communities have been mandated to shelter-in-place, to keep our distance, to wear facemasks in public spaces. Schools, colleges, and universities are closed. Millions are currently unemployed or have lost their businesses. Many families worry about whether they will have a roof over their head or food on the table if this continues indefinitely. Not to mention the abhorrent greed, hatred, and delusion that flood all our sense doors each day.

All this immense stress manifests in our bodies, hearts, and minds. In the beginning, there were many days when I felt incredibly anxious, fearful, doubtful, angry, frustrated, disconnected, hopeless, and powerless. I started to develop more muscle tension and joint pain. I remember questioning my practice and role as a teacher as I felt myself riding a roller coaster of anxiety and depression, day in and day out. I noticed a huge resistance to teaching online – “Who is going to want to be comforted by a teacher who’s falling apart?” was the narrative playing in my head.

And recently, there have been more days when I have felt calmer, easeful, spacious, grateful, and even happy. Yet circumstances in the world, as the pandemic progresses, continues to get worse on so many levels. The narrative then shifted to “How dare I feel better!”

I had forgotten. I fell off the wagon. I had multiple arrows piercing my heart. And when I remembered to pause long enough to put my hand on my heart with long deep breaths, I told myself, “This, too, buddy, is ok.” multiple times a day when needed. I was able to free myself from the prison of my own making: I remembered to be compassionate towards myself....