

Currents

Peace in the chaos

WHAT'S HAPPENING IN THE ARTS,
LEISURE AND OUTDOORS

By ANNEMARIE SCHUETZ

NARROWSBURG, NY — COVID-19 is dominating the news cycle, disrupting our sleep and leaving us shaken. But its cousin is just as harrowing.

It is "a silent distress that's highly contagious," said Seiso Paul Cooper, Zen priest and psychotherapist, who leads Two Rivers Zen in Narrowsburg, as well as a practice in Manhattan. "What's driving it is fear."

Anxiety lives behind our endless news-checking and death-counting, our constant cleaning. It's behind the laden shopping carts and the speed with which we go from quiet to raging. Being consumed by it means there's little space for other people and activities that matter to us, like our families, working in the garden, or just breathing in spring air—it means there's little space for sustaining ourselves.

Of course, the anxiety has a rational base. "The reality is that there is a highly contagious, deadly disease," Seiso said. And reliable facts can be hard to find. "Even valid information changes from day to day. There is no solid ground to stand on, and that can be frightening."

Fear makes us feel helpless, like events are going on without us, people are dying and we have no way to control our lives or protect our families. But there's nothing new here. People have been wrestling with the problem since consciousness was a thing.

From both his perspective as a Zen priest in the Eihei Dogen tradition and as a therapist, Seiso offers a way out.

First, exercise mindfulness. Do you need to change a habit? Seiso has a story about his frequent bus trips from Monticello to New York City. Before everything shut

down, he took the usual ride, first picking up his usual bag of chips. "I decided to use my alcohol wipes on the bag," he said.

But habits are strong. He opened the bag, ate chips... and belatedly realized he never wiped the bag down. "I completely forgot," he says. "I tell this to my students [to exercise mindfulness over habits] and there I am!"

To be mindful is to see the habit, clearly and without judgement, to see how it fits in your day and your mind. It's the first step toward changing behaviors that no longer serve a purpose.

Second, let go of being judgmental, he said. That includes ending the constant, debilitating self-criticism that only short-circuits what we want to do. "There is useful judgement," for instance, deciding to change a behavior, but "internal self-criticism, self-judgement—that's not beneficial."

Third, step back from feelings. They are only feelings. Couple the stepping-back with common sense and examine the feeling. Do you need to act on it? What should you do? Will that help?

Fourth, see the experience differently. "Think [about] how we view the situation. We call staying at home a quarantine, but in Zen we call it a retreat."

Fifth, "We are all separate and connected at the same time," Seiso said. "It's a fundamental Zen teaching." We are social distancing, but we are entangled with each other and embedded in the One.

He brought up the Zen poem "The Identity of the Relative and the Absolute." It describes the physical, the phenomenal stuff of which we are made and the totality of all things—letting go of anxiety and everything it spawns so



Tom Krush on Unsplash

So much has been overwhelmed by coronavirus. Once we've found a calm space in ourselves, we'll be able to deal with other problems. we can get on with our human lives, so we can do what needs to be done.

Seiso has put a *mushotoku* meditation, an 11-minute pause in our lives, on Soundcloud, available to all. "*Mushotoku* or 'no gaining mind' is a key practice of Zen meditation," Seiso said. "It is simple, non-doctrinal and can be easily practiced with minimal instructions."

"Once we make it our own, we are free of reliance on external practices," he continued. "More importantly, we have open access to our inner resources, which can be very empowering."

Because we are stronger than we know.

Participate in the meditation by visiting www.bit.ly/mushotoku2river and check out www.tworiverszen.org for more information.