

Exiting Lockdown

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As coronavirus restrictions start easing again, many of you will be engaging with family, social and worklife more fully. Similarly for us here at Satipanya, as the winter retreat closes, we start looking outwards, forwards, planning outings, visits, work. Transitions are tricky. We so easily lose the run of ourselves, expect too much of whatever is on the horizon. You might be dreaming of booking a meal in your favorite restaurant; on retreat we're dreaming of the first breakfast when we can chat. We project too much happiness into these events and get disappointed, bewildered, angry when the initial happiness fades, leaving us as grumpy as ever! Or it can be the other way round, we suddenly realise how attached we've grown to the enforced withdrawal of lockdown, of retreat, and dread all the coming busyness. Most of us suffer from both afflictions – expecting wonders one moment, dreading change the next! The good news is that transitions are also rich opportunity for spiritual practice. It's when we see our attachments and delusion most clearly, and thereby find a precious opportunity to work with these, find wiser ways of responding. As always, mindfulness is key. Can we tune into whatever emotions are driving our thoughts, actions, speech? Say we're being fired up by expectation. Stop a moment to acknowledge and explore the experience. Expectation usually has a pleasant, happy flavour. Stopping to savor that is a form of *mudita* – appreciative joy. It is good to be able to look forward to things, to have faith that we can enjoy life. Anyone who has suffered from depression knows what a great gift this is. Stopping to enjoy our anticipation of happiness cultivates gratitude for mental well-being as well as whatever we are looking forward to. Stopping also grounds us, makes our expectations more realistic, lessens disappointment if things don't go exactly as we would have wished. Say we're being driven in the opposite direction – dreading the thought of going back into society. Can we feel the reluctance, dislike, aversion - whatever way unhappiness is manifesting? There is truth here too – going back into society requires effort and will not bring us lasting happiness. Though this insight is painful, we have the good fortune of knowing that the Buddha saw value in this pain and formulated it as the first noble truth; he told us we must fully understand *dukkha* (the unsatisfying nature of life) to become liberated. We won't learn by shying away from life. But if we can embrace the pain as a spiritual insight, this lifts our spirits. We'll reengage with society more willingly, knowing this is part of our spiritual path. The burden of dread diminishes, and we might even start looking forward to a meal in our favourite restaurant – after all the path can have enjoyable aspects as well as pain! As we see-saw between overexpectation and dread, we learn to savor here and now the happiness we were projecting into the future, and to embrace the unhappiness that teaches us the first noble truth. None of this is easy however, and we need to be patient with our many mistakes as we fly up into the sky with false expectations and get rudely dumped on the ground with disappointment. Transitions are precious. Transitions are tough. The habit of stopping to acknowledge our

emotional state helps us emerge from our various lockdowns with minimal misery, maximal learning and deeper gratitude for all that society offers.

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