

Keeping the Sitagu Buddha Vihara community safe from COVID-19, general precautions

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We are in the midst of the first wave a global pandemic that has hit America particularly hard. Alongside a significant, but not high, mortality rate, it is highly infectious and very severe and perhaps long-term or chronic health consequences for a very large portion of those who contract the disease are continuously being discovered. Certain groups of people are considered particularly at-risk: those with underlying medical conditions, those with weakened immune systems and the elderly (over 65). The disease can be transmitted by infected people even if they do not yet show symptoms, or may never show symptoms. Young, healthy people, including children, are less likely to suffer the worse effects, but also become easily infected, and can readily infect others.

Our concern here is to provide some guidelines to the broad community on how to keep yourselves, your families and your neighbors and colleagues safe, and specifically to clarify policies we have implemented at the Sitagu Buddha Vihara in Austin, Texas, with these guidelines in mind. I caution that I am merely summarizing my understanding of COVID-19 for the convenience of our community, but as someone with no specialized medical knowledge.

Best practices for keeping safe

Our primary goal is to reduce infectious transmissions, If you are currently uninfected, it is to remain so. If you are currently infected (apparently about 40% of such people don't know it), it is not infect those around you.

Transmission. At this time it appears that COVID-19 is predominantly airborne, transmitted by breathing in respiratory droplets emitted by an infected person by coughing, sneezing or, unfortunately, merely by talking or breathing. COVID-19 can also be transmitted by touching something on which droplets have landed – for instance, a hand rail, doorknob or product in a store – and then later touching one's own face. Recent research indicates that the smaller droplets emitted by talking or breathing are strongly implicated because these droplets remain in the air for a longer time and travel further. These droplets eventually evaporate, sometimes leaving the virus itself suspended in the air. Fortunately they also disperse very quickly outdoors, such that outdoor transmissions are relatively uncommon.

Protection. The primary means of reducing chances of transmission are:

- Social distancing,
- Wearing a face mask,
- Washing one's hands and sterilizing,
- Contact tracing.

The first three rely on diligent compliance of individuals like you and me. Contact tracing requires a program of aggressive and systematic government action, and seems to be necessary, and has proven quite effective in many lands, for reducing the number of infections to almost zero, but unfortunately there is still no national plan for contact tracing in America. These are best practices, but may be difficult to observe for many people, particularly in unsafe workplaces. Also, it is important to recognize that each of them provides only a reduction in the probability of infection, not complete protection. Many people seem to think, for instance, that if they remain six feet apart they do not need to wear masks, or if they wear masks they don't need to socially distance. Only by putting as many layers of protection between you and others does the probability of infection reach an acceptably low level. This is why all of these or as many as possible should be diligently observed.

Social distancing physically separates people between whom transmission might otherwise occur. Failing to socially distance for short periods of time is safer than for long periods. Recommended guidelines, to the extent possible, are:

- To stay at home except for essential errands like buying food.
- To minimize the number of errands, make them quick and avoid talking with people as much as possible. To avoid compromised environments, that is, those that do not enforce strict social distancing guidelines or that are crowded,
- To work at home.
- Not to accept visitors into your home, and not to visit other homes.
- To avoid use of public transportation, or riding in a car with people outside of the immediate household.
- To avoid social gatherings, including family gatherings, restaurants (except pick-up), etc. Austin/Travis County prohibits gatherings of more than ten people from more than one household altogether, and recommends at-risk populations avoid gatherings in which more than two people are from outside their household. Small outside gatherings with proper precautions might be safer.

- To stay at least six feet apart from other people and to keep encounters short.

Again, these are best practices, not all of which are always practicable for all people, but each of which will reduce the probability of transmission to the extent it is practiced, and which together serve to reduce the probability of transmission to a very low percentage. We might consider any environment “unsafe” in which there is anyone who is not a member of our household who is not socially distancing and/or is not wearing a mask. We should not make an environment unsafe for others and remove ourselves as quickly as possible from an environment that is unsafe for us. I should caution that the six-foot rule seems to be regarded as less effective than it once was: it was based on the since revised understanding that the virus was largely carried by sneezes and coughs rather than by smaller droplets propelled simply by talking or breathing, which tend to remain airborne for longer periods.

It is also possible also to think strategically as you encounter others throughout your day. Imagine each person you encounter is infected (in about 1% of the cases you may be right), and ask what will protect yourself from that person. Then imagine you have the virus (which you might without knowing it), and ask what do you have to do to protect that person from yourself. You might imagine that people around you are smoking and ask how far do you have to stand from that person so that you do not smell the smoke. Smoke disperses much like small respiratory droplets. Notice that if you are in a room with several smokers it would be hard to avoid the smell, whereas outdoors you are unlikely to smell the smoke at all. On the other hand transmission over distances greater than six feet is possible in enclosed spaces where small respiratory droplets may linger in the air.

Face masks. Wearing a face mask has two functions: (1) it inhibits the dispersal of respiratory droplets from you, assuming you are infected, and (2) it filters small particles like the coronavirus, so that they do not pass through your mask from you to others nor from others to you. Simple cloth masks are better at (1) than (2). Medical masks and masks that incorporate effective filters additionally serve both (1) and (2) well. In any case their use is essential in controlling the pandemic. There is a widespread resistance to wearing masks in America, sometimes justified nonsensically as protecting human rights (the right to endanger the health and life of others?).

In function (1) a facemask works well when combined with social distancing. The mask catches respiratory droplets and those that pass through generally do not travel as far. In notice that, unfortunately, people have a tendency in the proximity of other people to lift their masks when they want to talk, then to put them back in place when they stop talking. This is exactly backward: the mask is more critical when speaking than when simply breathing.

A good face mask that serves both (1) and (2) generally fits tightly around the face and has multiple layers, including a non-cloth layer such as paper or polypropylene which is able to filter smaller particles. Again, it should be cautioned that most face masks are far from reliable by themselves, they only reduce the probability of transmission. It is important to social distance in addition to wearing a mask.

Washing hands, sterilizing. Frequent washing of hands or use of a sanitizer reduces the chance of surface to face transmission or face to surface transmission. Learn how to wash your hands; twenty seconds. It is helpful if you need to go shopping to carry disinfectant wipes to use before or after touching anything. Spray areas frequently with disinfectant where others are likely to touch things.

Recommendations for households. Households present a special condition, in that the intimacy of household life generally makes the 24/7 use of masks and social distancing difficult or ineffective. Most people who contract COVID-19 contract it at home: one family member is infected at work or in a public space and quickly infects the rest of the household. However, if all members of the household are uniformly very diligent in the best practices for keeping safe, the household is likely to remain safe as a whole with no internal precautions. All things being equal, larger households are less safe than small households because there are more opportunities for infection from outsiders, and some members of the household may be at greater risk for having to work outside. If someone does exhibit symptoms, it is important to isolate that person immediately from other members of the household, who hopefully have not yet become infected, and check with a doctor for advice. Out-of-the-ordinary symptoms to look for are:

- Fever or chills. Apparently elevated temperature is a very reliable indicator.
- Cough.
- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing.
- Fatigue.
- Muscle or body aches.
- Headache.
- New loss of taste or smell.
- Sore throat.
- Congestion or runny nose.
- Nausea or vomiting.
- Diarrhea.

Visiting SBV

We have adopted some rather strict policies to keep the residents of SBV and the wider community safe.

- All public events are suspended until further notice, but check out our on-line events.
- Masks and social distancing are required in all buildings. People are welcome to wander the grounds without a mask, insofar as they do not approach anyone. Do not remove your mask in order to speak.
- The library is open for browsing and check-out, but not for lounging; short visits only. Of course, mask up and spread out. Avoid touching things unnecessarily. The pagoda is available for longer periods of meditation or service, with masks and social distancing. Notice that in general chanting is very effective in spreading the virus. However the pagoda is very airy. Please avoid use of the Dhamma hall.
- People should not visit monks or other residents in their cabins, but monks will meet with visitors outdoors with masks and observing social distancing. You may knock on a monk's door then step back if you drop by.
- An individual or a small family may come to participate in a food offering for the monks. However, dishes on the monks' table are no longer offered individually, and visitors should not attend to the monks after the initial offering. Wear your mask and socially distance. Of course the monks do not wear masks while they eat. If a resident lay kappiya is present (probably U Moe), please maintain your distance from him.