Bhagavan, whose compassion is equal for all of us,
Just hearing your name removes the suffering of the lower realms,
And cures the diseases of the three poisons:
To you, who shines with lapis lazuli light, I bow with reverence.
Grant your blessings so that the sickness of I and all sentient beings be pacified!

In the light of an ongoing coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) that has caused people in many countries of the world to loose their lives, or to be infected with the virus, and live with constant fear and insecurities, we, the Benchen Community, are all in this together.

As a gesture of goodwill and solidarity, we requested His Eminence Sangyes Nyenpa Rinpoche to speak on the crisis. However, since Rinpoche has been in retreat for nearly a month, he chose not to reiterate what has been said already by many imminent teachers, including our sole refuge, His Holiness the 17th Karmapa Ogyen Trinley Dorje.

Therefore, as I was asked by Rinpoche and his personal tutor-teacher, Lama Tenam, to speak on behalf of our Community, I would like to share my thoughts on what is
worthy and what is not in such challenging times. My perspective is solely based on Buddhist ethics.

From a Buddhist point of view, blaming a particular race, community or country for a disease outbreak is serious mistake. There’s not a single sentient being who has not been our mothers from past lives. And like our present mother, they have been as equally kind to us. Therefore, a good Buddhist will recognize all sentient beings as part of one family. Since we share one planet and live in a global village, there’s no point in acting selfishly as citizens of independent nation-states, instead of cultivating a universal responsibility for one another, as members of one global family.

What is worthy then? One fundamental doctrine of Buddhism is the law of karma. This law teaches us that the external world and living beings inhabiting it are but direct effect of their own actions. Some consequences of those actions are experienced individually while some are experienced collectively.

During the time of Buddha Sakyamuni, the king of Kosala attacked Kapilavastu and many Sakya people were killed. At the same time, Buddha experienced headaches. When his disciples asked him to rescue the innocent Sakya people, Buddha said that it’s a karma that can’t be changed. Upon persistent request, he used his miraculous
power to save five hundred Sakya people by giving them refuge in his own bowl. Later, when the bowl was brought down, however, they were turned into a pool of blood.

When Buddha was asked about this, he related a Jatakas story about the fishermen who killed and ate all the fishes. The last fish caught was a bigger in size and when it was killed, a boy laughed at the suffering of the fish. Buddha said that the king of Kosala had been the big fish and his soldiers the rest of the fishes. Sakya people were the fishermen and Buddha himself was the boy whose laugh caused him to suffer from headache in this life. Since one can’t escape from the effects of one’s karma, the five hundred Sakya people shared the same fate despite being rescued.

Buddha then proclaimed, “Deeds done are not lost. One doesn’t encounter deeds one did not do.” Therefore, from the Buddhist point of view, the pandemic that we are witnessing at the moment is also the consequence of a collective karma that we have committed in our previous lives. However, the inevitable consequence of karma shouldn’t be misunderstood to mean that one overlook the necessary precautions of wearing masks or gloves, washing hands, or distancing from the infected.

Buddhist version of karmic consequence is based on the nature of impermanence. We can transform the
consequence of any constructive or destructive karma done millions of lifetimes in the past by applying the right antidote. Therefore, diseases are the result of our karma, and with the deeper understanding of karma, we can save ourselves from being further infected by diseases.

It’s also important to note that in trying to cure the actual disease, leaving our lives in the hands of doctors alone is not the right approach. In Buddhism, being one’s own ultimate savior is strongly emphasized. According to Buddhist psychology and medicine, diseases are caused by imbalances of wind, bile and phlegm, which in turn are triggered by the three poisons of attachment, ignorance and hatred, which are rooted in ego-clinging.

Buddhist meditation based on visualization of deities is a means to become a Buddha ourselves by transforming the ego-clinging, because it’s only through attaining buddhahood that one will be completely freed from diseases. Buddhism identifies the result of karma through its cause and conditioning factors. If the cause of certain experiences in life is our karma from the previous or this life, circumstances varies.

For example, doctors confirm that a certain disease is caused by a certain animal. However, the real cause of the disease is our karma from the past and the virus infection from an animal is just a circumstance. Therefore, we must
endeavor to uproot the real cause of the disease and the way to healing is to cultivate more virtues and avoid negative deeds. Unless we observe a lifestyle that never willfully inflict pain on any sentient beings, we will be far away from enjoying genuine health and happiness.

Not long after the coronavirus outbreak in China, His Holiness the Karmapa, out of intolerable concern and caring for the people who are affected by the disease, along with his message of hope and optimism, translated “The Prayer that Saved Sakya from Disease” into Chinese and were made available to the masses. This immediate response to the crisis from His Holiness shows how much he cares for the world without any bias towards race or community. This also teaches us to abandon our ingrained tendency of remaining indifferent and apathetic especially during disasters and epidemics.

We must be aware of the fact that it’s neither the first time that we are witnessing such an epidemic outbreak nor it’s confined to a specific region or country any longer. Many worst epidemics and pandemics have ravaged humanity throughout its existence.

For example, Great Plague of Marceille that broke out in 1718 killing more than 200,000 people. Asian Cholera of 1817 that started in Culcatta and spreading throughout
Southeast Asia to Middle East, Africa and Mediterranean coast had killed more than one million people.

Three deadliest pandemic outbreaks of influenza occurred in the 20th century: Spanish Flu in 1918, Asian Flu in 1957, and Hong Kong Flu in 1968. All three have been reported to have killed millions of people each.

Within two decades of the 21st century, there have been three known coronaviruses that can cause fatal disease: SARS coronavirus that emerged in 2002 in China taking over 700 lives. MERS coronavirus that started in 2012 in Middle East and took over 800 lives. The third novel coronavirus to emerge is called COVID-19 that emerged from China in December 2019.

Therefore, it’s worth noting that illness and human civilization have shared a long history together. Jamgon Lodro Thaye wrote a prayer that reads, “Disease and pestilence, unknown in ages past, threaten human beings and animals alike.” However, disease is caused by our destructive action, which is triggered off by destructive emotions. Hence, doctors and drugs alone cannot uproot the underlying cause of the disease.

Taking all these into account, since the beginning of February, as suggested by His Eminence Sangyes Nyenpa Rinpoche, Benchen Community has been conducting
regular prayers and pujas, including an elaborate puja of protector Shingkyong. Also according to His Holiness the Karmapa’s suggestion, we have been reciting “The Prayer that Saved Sakya from Disease” on daily basis.

While we seriously follow the necessary infection control precautions, we have been using our self-quarantine time to perform the most-needed regular practices and pujas by maintaining a safe distance between ourselves. We have done an elaborate White Tara and Tseringma practices for the wellbeing of those with disease, those who care for them, and those who are suffering from anxiety during this stressful time.

Another reason for doing these practices is to continue our annual prayer function which we dedicate for the wellbeing of His Holiness the 17th Karmapa, His Eminence Sangyes Nyenpa Rinpoche and all the teachers who dedicate their lives in the service of others.

We also gathered for a few days of a special prayer service—chanting of King of Aspiration—for the sake of those who have succumbed to the illness caused by the virus.

Our Lamas at Benchen Institute have recently concluded 10-day Medicine Buddha practices, while those in our school continue to recite Medicine Buddha and Amitayus
dharani-mantras. Our Lamas in the retreat are also doing their part by dedicating merits from their regular practices for everyone who has been affected by this epidemic. I also like to mention that though His Eminence Sangyes Nyenpa is in a strict retreat, his profound prayers and thoughts are always there for everyone.

Therefore, these are some of the things that we as ardent followers of Vajrayana Buddhism can afford to do in such a difficult time. By saying all these, I am not trying to brag about things we have done. Our foremost intention is to let those who genuinely care for others know about this and encourage them to play their part.

It has been said, “You may have attained an extraordinary realization, but your conduct must conform with the ordinary world.” Similarly, we should practice what is ethical and unethical from the spiritual and secular point of view.

From the spiritual side, there’s no better way to be ethical than by following the code of ten virtuous deeds and avoiding the ten non-virtuous deeds. In other words, we must give up any act of inflicting harm on others and treat every one with love and respect instead.

From secular side, instead of being too hard on oneself in trying to control the situation, it’s worth following the
necessary safety precautions recommended by public health experts.

Therefore, I appeal everyone to be well-equipped with both spiritual and secular measures to endure the challenging time.

Lastly, by now, regardless of gender, religion or ethnicity, we are all confined to hospitals or our homes due to the nationwide lockdown affecting nearly all forms of public life. The lesson that this pandemic has to teach us is simple: among other things, it means we are in the same boat, that we all belong to the same race. From a Buddhist perspective, though the manner in which we experience and interpret this pandemic differs from person to person, it’s but a direct consequence of a strong collective karma.

Only when we understand this complex yet shared situation will we start to understand fellow sentient beings. Only then will we engage in loving care for others, comfort them when they suffer from loss or sickness, when a great failure causes them depression, etc. Therefore, my only appeal to everyone is to start or continue to adopt a lifestyle that is rooted in love and peace.

Those who didn’t have much time for your family, now is the chance to spend more quality time with your spouse,
kids and elders. And those who are dharma practitioners, now is the time to shine with your courage, commitment and joyous effort. If you are a Buddhist, now is the time to restrengthen your confidence in law of karma, to spread the message of love and peace, and to live with optimism and renewed hope.

Thank you!