Choices and COVID-19
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As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to dominate the world news and how we live our life now, it has given us an opportunity to reflect on the many things that we have taken for granted in our everyday life.

Recently I came across an article in Rolling Stones entitled, “The Reason You’re Exhausted Is ‘Moral Fatigue’, written by Elizabeth Yuko. It’s a very interesting article about simple decisions we made, pre-coronavirus, that are now consequential even life threatening. Something as simple as going to the market or for a walk has become a moral dilemma.

In this life we have to make many choices. Every waking moment, we are making choices. Today, you will choose what to eat. You will choose whether or not you get some exercise. You will choose what you will put in your mind. You will choose whether you will stay safe at home or buy groceries. You will choose whether to be happy or grumpy.

This morning you already made some choices … did you check your email, your text before saying good morning to your spouse? Did you have a hard time deciding to change from your pajamas? You will make hundreds of other decisions today. During your life time you will make many choices.

Some will be very important. Some will not. The choices we make, however, determine to a large extent of our happiness or unhappiness, because we have to live with the consequences of our choices. Just as the Golden Chain says, “I will try to think pure and beautiful thoughts, to say pure and beautiful words, and to do pure and beautiful deeds, knowing that on what I do now depends on my happiness and misery.”

Some of the choices we make will have immediate impact. Other choices will have an impact days, or even weeks later. Some may take years or decades or even generations. But, make no mistake about it … the multitude of choices you make today will have an enormous impact on the quality of your life.

In Buddhism, our understanding of decision making is based on cause and effect of our thoughts, words and deeds.

Why do some people disregard or don’t take seriously social distancing or “safer at home”? Why is there hoarding of toilet paper and hand sanitizers? Why are healthcare workers, public safety personal, grocery stock and clerks compromising their health to help those who might have the virus? Who knows?
For Shinran all our choices, whether good or bad, are the outcome of past karma. Shinran understood that we all have needs and desires or drives that control our behavior. Shinran recognized the innumerable causes and conditions that could drive people to do things almost against their will, even into situations they had no control over.

In the Tannisho Chapter 13, Yuien writes, “Good thoughts arise in our minds due to the effect of past good and we are made to think and do evil due to the working of karmic evil” and in the words of Shinran, “Under the influence of our karmic past we human beings will do anything”.

Jodo Shinshu does not place a good or bad label upon our choice. Depending upon the circumstances, we must all make the best decision at that moment. It is easy to judge. However, in retrospect, regardless of right wrong, good or bad, how do we feel about what has happened.

The awakening of the individual goes beyond the dualistic nature of extremes. Our life, our karma is unique therefore our own shall also be unique. And, it is also independent of what we are told is good, bad, right or wrong.

The bottom line for Shinran’s faith goes beyond good and evil, therefore we have no good deeds that will assures us salvation … but too, there are no evil deeds that can obstruct Amida’s Vow. Because Shinran realized our shortcomings he assures us that salvation is completely the result of the Vow.

I think this moral fatigue is real. The author concludes, “As exhausting as moral fatigue can be, we’re experiencing it because we’re taking the time to reflect more on how our decisions and actions my affect other people” … What’s new?