

## **Our Reasoning and Decision-Making About Public Health and Safety on Retreat and Endemic Covid-19**

from the Friends of Cloud Mountain Board of Directors

The ways in which Cloud Mountain shapes and forms the retreat environment from the public health perspective are institutional expressions of alignment with the foundational Buddhist principles of *sīla* (ethics/morality) and *dāna* (giving). The Cloud Mountain Board views preserving the health and safety of everyone at Cloud Mountain as an ethical imperative and as a vital form of civic *dāna* practice. We view caring for and protecting one another from harm as expressions of the precept of non-harming. Following practices specifically intended to preserve public health and safety are very real ways in which we gift one another with a safe and trustworthy holding environment. The potency of giving and generosity are deepened through the renunciation of personal preference and convenience. In our institutional Dharma practice, we emphasize the needs of the community as a whole over the preferences or convenience of any single individual.

Cloud Mountain, along with the entire world, is in a period of transition from covid-19 as a pandemic challenge to an endemic challenge. There seems to be a widespread belief that we will return to some kind of post-covid “normalcy.” Sadly, this is wishful thinking. It is not possible to return to a world where covid-19 doesn’t continue to have an impact. There is only the change from a crisis-level pandemic to an endemic disease. This particular disease needs to be viewed clear-sightedly as the dangerous illness it continues to be. And it is likely to be with us forever.

The decisions of our Board are not backward-looking; our health and safety protocols are not holdovers from a past problem that will some day go away. Our decisions are grounded in the new reality that presents itself and look toward a future containing an endemic illness and how we most appropriately meet that challenge. So, many of our protocols remain in place. Our own direct experience has shown us how well they work in keeping people healthy!

However, as you read our revised health and safety protocols, you will see one big change: we have waived our covid-19 vaccination/booster requirement. We wish to make clear that we still strongly believe in the efficacy of vaccination and encourage everyone who comes on retreat to be vaccinated and boosted. We believe vaccination is extremely important in protecting the health of individuals and as part of the wider public health effort.

We are waiving the vaccination requirement for the following reasons:

- 1) Clear, reliable information about this (and about other aspects of the current covid-19 variants) has become so hard to come by. We are quite unhappy with how poorly served we’ve been by the public health community and the media. In the face of this dearth of good information, we don’t wish to hold arbitrary requirements. Sadly, it’s been virtually impossible to gain clarity on topics including but not limited to how frequently boosters are needed, how long natural immunity lasts after a bout of covid-19 or which medical conditions contraindicate receiving boosters. Different health providers and health plans are making quite different recommendations for getting

vaccinated and boosted. Canada's health system has its own policies about who is able to receive a booster and when. This inconsistency leaves us at a loss to maintain a clear policy.

- 2) With US federal and state policies changing around covid-19's emergency status, we know that both access and cost will become impediments for people without health coverage to receive vaccinations and boosters. We don't wish to create barriers for people without health privilege to attend retreats on this basis.
- 3) On a very practical level, our small office staff can no longer field the many questions about our vaccination requirements and requests for waivers. We've done our best with the sparse and inconsistent information we've had to work with. But without clear research and data to draw on, it feels most sensible for us to let go of the requirement rather than make best guesses about what constitutes good policy.

As a retreat center, there is a final consideration for us: our mission to ensure stability and continuity of retreats. Alongside the public health and safety considerations, we also feel a responsibility to support retreatants' and teachers' perceptions that their practice environment is safe both physically and psychologically. A recent experience taught us a lot.

On one of our retreats this winter, we had 2 retreatants test positive on the testing round on day 3. Each of these individuals had been in very close contact with others: one through their yogi job as dishwasher and another through their multi-person carpool to the retreat. Thankfully, no one else was infected by them in the end. (Following those positive tests, everyone on site kept masks on and people who had been in close contact with them did daily testing to ensure they remained covid-free.) But we had to ask ourselves what would have happened to the integrity of the retreat if our protocols hadn't been in place?

If it weren't for masking and testing, we can imagine justifiable concerns in people's minds. Without these protocols in place to alleviate anxiety about exposure, we can envision people leaving the retreat early. This could fracture the integrity of the retreat container to the degree we might have to cancel the retreat for the remaining retreatants. The risk to retreats as a whole is too great to not have these precautions in place; they give us resiliency in the face of the unexpected. For the sake of our ability to ensure retreats carry on in the face of endemic covid-19 and its dangers, you can count on seeing a roster of appropriate protocols including masking and testing maintained over the long-term.

We recognize that not everyone will agree with our reasoning and decision-making. We are at peace with that. After all, unanimity is a rare beast. But we've observed how our own struggles to develop appropriate protocols to keep our doors open for practice in the early days of covid and all along the way benefited other organizations in developing theirs. And we are proud to have been one of the first retreat centers to re-open. In sharing how we're thinking about this, we participate in the ongoing conversation about meeting the challenges of our times in caring and skillful ways, as we all face difficult decisions specific to our particular circumstances.