

The Way of Compassion

It is my pleasure to be the final keynote speaker in the “Walking the Way of Peace: Peacebuilding in a Violent World” lecture series. My talk is entitled “The Way of Compassion,” and I will attempt to address the pertinent issue of inner or spiritual transformation and its connection with social engagement and nonviolent action for justice. Compassion is truly indispensable in this day and age, which many commentators have described as a time of terror. Compassion is not simply about high-mindedness; it is also about the responsibility for the consequences of our actions. Good intentions—even if not feigned—do not necessarily make an action right. We are witnessing a meaningless or even nihilistic cycle of terrorism and counter-terrorism, of suicide bombings and unilateral aggression by the world’s military hyper-power. Both sides are sputtering the same rhetoric of Good, Evil, and God to justify their arrogance and virulent hostility and their quest for money and power—all these done against the backdrop of callous disregard for the lives of innocent people. Compassion is also truly indispensable in this age of pluralism—of values, cultures, lifestyles, evaluative horizons, multicultural societies, and so on. Compassion through nonviolence and continuous dialogues is badly needed, lest we want a world smoldering in hate, hostility, splitting, and aggression as prophesied by the “clash of civilizations” thesis. Without over-exaggerating, compassion is a key to our survival—to human survival. So indeed we are in a time of major crisis. But let us be reminded that the word crisis comes from “krisis,” which in Greek means choice. Do we want to travel down the much acquainted road of violence or nihilism or do we want to tread along the way of compassion? To quote a famous verse >from the Dhammapada:

Hatred does not eradicate hatred.
Only by loving-kindness is hatred dissolved.
This law is ancient and eternal.

From the perspective of an engaged Buddhist, the way of compassion requires both internal and external transformations. Both transformations are co-original, and they cannot be reduced to one another. In other words, on one hand, compassion posits inner or spiritual changes that will lead to cultural, symbolic, and discursive changes; and on the other hand, external structural transformations in the name of justice such as the redistribution of resources, incomes, and rights. We must come up with notions of the good as well as of what to do. Both spiritual and structural transformations are necessary, but depending on specific contexts, they may not be necessary in the same degree or combination.

Compassion or loving-kindness and nonviolence are one. The *Mettakaraniyasutta* makes this abundantly clear:

He or she who wants to attain peace should [first] practice being upright, humble, and capable of good speech. He or she should know how to live simply and happily, with the senses calmed, without being covetous and carried away by the

emotions of the majority. Let him or her decline from doing anything that will be disapproved of by the wise ones.

[This is what he or she must contemplate:] May all people be happy and safe, and may their hearts be filled with joy. May all living beings live in Security and in Peace—whether weak or strong, tall or short, big or small, visible or invisible, near or far away, already born or yet to be born. May all of them dwell in perfect tranquility. Let no one do harm to anyone. Let no one put the life of anyone in danger. Let no one, out of anger or malice, wish anyone any harm.

Just as a mother loves and protects her child at the risk of her own life. We should cultivate Boundless Love and offer it to all living beings in the entire cosmos. We should let our boundless love pervade the whole universe, above, below and across. Our love will know no obstacles; our hearts will be absolutely free from hatred and enmity. Whether standing or walking, sitting or lying down, as long as we are awake, we should maintain this mindfulness of love in our own hearts. This is the noblest way of living.

In order to act nonviolently, one must overcome the three poisons of the mind and sources of violence, namely greed, hatred, and delusion through mindfulness and loving-kindness. Put another way, compassion helps us overcome narcissism (and the prejudices it entails), which some say is rooted in the modern social conception of the self. Ken Jones captures this well in *The New Social Face of Buddhism* when he writes, "...there is in the culture of high modernity another influential perspective of the self, which focuses on narcissism [which] means a total self absorption and self-preoccupation. The whole experience of the world is interpreted in terms of self-need, to the extent that valid boundaries between the self and the external world become indistinguishable. Self-need becomes no longer objectionable." It is this narcissism that breeds hostility, division, aggression, and war.

With compassion one will be able to enter in continuous and active dialogues with others and overcome dualisms that pit "us" against "them", human against subhuman, rich against poor, man against woman, and so on. Indeed misrecognition can lead not only to aggression, but also to asphyxiating self-hatred. What others, especially one's significant others, think thus affects one's identity, potential for self-realization, and social position because it also impacts the fair and equal distribution of resources and opportunities. For instance, human beings are also cultural beings, and an attack on a culture is simultaneously an attack on the bearer of that culture. This is because identity is dialogical as opposed to monological. On this view, the sources of injustice must also be addressed at the cultural or spiritual level, requiring cultural, discursive, and symbolic remedies.

With compassion one is open to the maybes and the perhaps, to the singularity of the others. They will become our partners in conversation and transformation, contributing to what some call a "fusion of horizons" or "transvaluation" that is vital for the coming community. This will only occur in the context of ongoing conversation that affirms rather than denies diversity and incommensurability, and that sees any agreement reached as contingent rather than fixed. "Keep going!" should be an important rallying cry. The end of a conversation is the harbinger of disaster or terror.

This approach is particularly useful for cross-cultural encounters between and within groups, and especially for decentering hegemonic relations or values—such as the presumed superiority of the Western lifestyle. We must envision difference as a resource rather than an obstacle to dialogue. Modern societies are too pluralistic to begin with the presumption of unity; that is, a unity of shared values and understandings. A plurality of voices will help break the monologue of each group or individual and strengthen objectivity and democratic participation. This process will help the members of each group to transcend their particularity, perhaps even facilitating cosmopolitanism and augmenting the social knowledge of participating group members.

Compassion is not incompatible with competition. His Holiness the Dalai Lama makes the distinction between two kinds of competition when he says that one kind of competition is only for individual glory and the other kind of competition includes an awareness that other people must also be nurtured or empowered to succeed. Competition can be beneficial if it inspires us to be the best we can in order to serve others. Rituals and games are often built on competition but can serve also to strengthen the spirit. This discussion of competition and achievement parallels the discussion among Buddhist scholars about the purpose of *nibbana*. For some, spiritual enlightenment is a personal quest. For others, such as those in the Engaged Buddhist community, true enlightenment is built upon wisdom and compassion and is intrinsically connected with the well being of all others. The Mahayana tradition is particularly emphatic that all beings must be liberated before the bodhisattva attains enlightenment. These discussions about the nature of competition and *nibbana* highlight how a seemingly minor difference in focus can shift the focus >from an ego-centered attitude to a community-centered philosophy.

And with compassion comes forgivingness and reconciliation. With compassion, one has no fear to forgive (even the seemingly unforgivable). Forgiveness is thus the absence of fear. One does not simply tolerate or place conditions on one's hospitality, one truly forgives. Or as some put it, tolerance is akin to invitation, while forgiveness connotes visitation. Forgiveness has to be unconditional in order to be worthy of its name. His Holiness the Dalai Lama is exemplary in this case. Some social ills are so damaging and horrendous such as the Chinese invasion of Tibet and all the dreadful events in that country. Yet to have a simple monk like His Holiness and his followers insisting that we all learn to love and empathize the Chinese people and to forgive the Chinese government which has committed acts of aggression out of ignorance or delusion, not to mention out of greed and hatred, is profoundly illuminating.

This is why the practice of meditation is very important. Practicing meditation allows us to understand what makes us tick, to really know our own mind. We can see the love, hate, fear and delusion in our minds. By understanding and acknowledging these emotions we can overcome our prejudices. This provides a basis for problem solving, a basis of wisdom and compassion, which helps pave the way to non-violent response.

Meditation practice ultimately leads to *upekkha* or the “mind of equanimity.” Buddhism talks of the four *brahmaviharas*. *Upekkha* is the fourth *brahmavihara*. Venerable P.A. Payutto, a leading Thai scholar-monk, explains *upekkha* as “Seeing things as they are with a mind that is even, steady, firm and fair like a pair of scales; understanding that all beings experience good and evil in accordance with the causes they have created; [and the readiness] to judge, position oneself, and act in accordance with principle, reason and equity.” The one who has *upekkha* is fully aware of what is going on but without being blinded by attachment. This does not mean hermetic isolation, apathy or insensitivity though. It is a mindful detachment that allows the development of wisdom. Wisdom is what really allows us to help others with compassion and understanding.

How is this spiritual revolution linked to structural changes? It is clear that any structure that will be able to accommodate compassion has to be inclusive. What some call a “deliberative democracy” is compatible with compassion, and it is a useful working model. The deliberative democracy model posits a society of peers (or one which new members are incorporated as peers) engaging in free, open, and continuous dialogues on matters of common concern. In other words, the notion of equality under the law will not reflect hegemonic values and interests if members in that society are able to envision themselves as authors of the laws that bind all in society. If certain groups are marginalized from the decision-making processes, then it can be said that the decision reached is not only partial but also illegitimate. General norms or principles may have universal applicability, but one must be mindful of their derivation as well as recognized the possibility of their re-articulation. On this view, free speech, for instance, is subject to interpretation and criticism because different societies “entertain different notions of decorum, privacy, human dignity and public decency, and have different ideas on what is matter of legitimate public interest or discussion and what may or may not be said in public and how.” To sum up, it is a call for inclusivity in the decision-making process and for exposing the impartiality of the general norms.

Inclusion implies a respect for diversity. As mentioned earlier, compassion entails openness to the other, to difference. However, what is the role of difference in a compassionate structure? Should difference or particularism be our new Master Word? What are the roles of universalism and particularism in justice? Both universalism and particularism are ambivalent. Neither is in itself a privileged category. They are ambivalent because they are useful but may also be destructive. For instance, universalism may reflect hegemonic values and be used for domination. The invasion and occupation of Iraq is good for the world, we are told. On the other hand, particularism, while being useful for self-realization, may lead to relativism or nihilism. That’s the way we do things here. It may be used to legitimize in-group abuses or torture. This is a politics of difference that we should strenuously oppose. With compassion and wisdom, we will be able to negotiate between these two strands of thought that are increasingly forceful in the globalizing world.

Turning to the issue of recognition and misrecognition may be helpful. Universalism may be useful in particular contexts, and particularism in others. There is

no one-size-fit-all solution. As the philosopher Nancy Fraser points out,

Thus, the form(s) of recognition justice requires in any given case depend(s) on the form(s) of misrecognition to be redressed. In cases where misrecognition involves denying the common humanity of some participants, the remedy is universalist recognition; thus, the first and most fundamental redress for South African apartheid was universal “non-racial” citizenship. Where, in contrast, misrecognition involves denying some participants’ distinctiveness, the remedy could be recognition of specificity; thus, many feminists claim that overcoming women’s subordination requires recognizing their unique and distinctive capacity to give birth. In every case, the remedy should be tailored to the harm.

Aside from the issue of inclusion and diversity, structural changes must also be made in the area of redistribution. Put another way, we have to think about killings or deaths that result from omission or unequal opportunities. The average lifetime in the US and Western Europe is 77 years. The average lifetime is considerably less in many parts of the world, most noticeably in Africa. If the average lifetime in the US and Western Europe is used as the base, many people in Africa are living what moral philosopher Ted Honderich calls, “half-lives” and “quarter-lives.” And they are half-lives and quarter-lives full of deprivations and hardships. We generally do not see omitters badly, but this is grossly incorrect. At the very least, the badly off must be rescued by means that do not affect the well being better off. Another major step is real redistribution, or as Ted Honderich puts it, “transferring means from the better-off that do significantly affect their well-being without making them badly-off.” But taking from the better off may reduce their incentives to contribute to the social whole. But if competition is envisioned differently then this may not be an insurmountable problem. Moreover, “incentives inequalities must be reduced only to the necessary ones.”

Compassion is thus intertwined in the issues of recognition and redistribution, inclusion and diversity, forgivingness and reconciliation, and universalism and particularism. It is a central component if we want to avert far worse disasters in this time of terror and age of pluralism.

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