

Applying Buddhist Compassion Practices on social, ecological and other urgent matters and a Tonglen-Compassion-Meditation

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In our time, a time of crises, every religion should question itself what it could contribute to society as a whole. To my feeling this would be an appropriate attitude that all religions and spiritual traditions should be encouraged to adopt. Rather than only maintaining and guarding their respective traditions, cults, and rituals, even insights or philosophies, or trying to spread them - which may and should happen at the same time - religious and spiritual traditions, including Buddhism, could consider what values, methods and tools can be offered to benefit people in societies, including animals and all life.

In certain teachings of Tibetan Buddhism such as the Lodjong Mind Training, a distinction is made between an absolute reality approach and a relative reality perspective, also called absolute and relative Bodhichitta. My proposal is that the Buddhist contribution could more lie in the field of relative reality (or Bodhichitta) than its ultimate wisdom aspect and I would like to explain this here in brief.

We may remember that the Dalai Lama repeatedly has claimed that humanity should try to agree on basic secular ethics that would be accepted by most people. In fact he says that ethics do not originate from religions but have their roots in the human experience itself. Nobody wants to suffer or experience any suffering. The Dalai Lama is also known for emphasizing that compassion trainings should be offered as a part of educational programs in schools and universities.

One main contribution that Buddhism could offer is its specific approach that healthy and wholesome mental attitudes can be developed and trained. Qualities like mindfulness, mental calm and inner peace, a peaceful mind, loving kindness and compassion, gratefulness, fearlessness and many other important qualities (brahmaviharas) can be trained by methods of mind training: with meditations, recitations and prayers, communication skills and other skilful means.

Such qualities should not just be mere moral values that one “should have” or expect from other people, or simply concepts that our conscience, our moral ego, our “Über-Ich” stores. As Buddhist meditators we could emphasize that everyone can develop such inner qualities when pondering and meditating on them and keeping on with such practices until one is certain of them and one can see oneself, others, and the world with their eyes: with more mindfulness, mental calm and inner peace, loving kindness and compassion, gratefulness, fearlessness and other qualities.

I also like Alan Wallace's idea that Buddhist meditation techniques can help the modern being to return to and maintain his "first person experience" as an antidote to being influenced by constant outer stimulations and technical orientations.

Compassion is an attitude that is the key to wholesome, friendly and ethically helpful actions. Compassion by Buddhist definition is more than just an empathetic response. It is the motivation and inner strength that arises in us, when we deeply perceive suffering with awareness and a sense of kindness, overcoming self-centredness, transcending the emotional quality of feeling touched, moved, or even irritated and wounded. While empathy, the ability to feel what others may feel and experience, compassion has an aspect of clarity and insight, of wisdom, setting free the motivation to act in an wholesome way with our body, speech, and mind. (This is precisely what is called the development of relative Bodhichitta in the Bodhisattva approach. Of course there is a wisdom aspect included.)

Compassion can be trained by several methods. Certainly it can at best be learned in situations when we are in direct contact with the suffering of others – provided we have an open heart and a fairly stable mind. Once we were to know how to react or act with skilful compassion it would be enough, we would not need any other method. But usually there is never sufficient compassion.

People who have professions - or performing work that require compassion - may suffer from "empathy-fatigue", which is often falsely called the "compassion-fatigue-syndrome". But it is probably not the compassion that is so exhausting but a sense of empathy that can no longer deal with the suffering encountered. The practice of compassion may even be the remedy for the fatigue and it would be interesting if a regular compassion-training could prove that. There is compassion-research going on in some places and here researchers have already shown that methods of training compassion – often stemming from Buddhist sources – have this quality.

The Bodhisattva's attitude to compassion is very direct and pragmatic:

If we were to see someone thirsty to offer drink is an appropriate act of compassion. And so it would be to give food to the poor, medicine for the sick, friendship for the lonely ones, care for the sick and dying, shelter for the homeless, education for children and wherever it is needed etc.

Here is a famous quotation from the third chapter of Shantideva's Bodhicharyavatara, the "Entry to the Path of the Bodhisattva":

- May I be a guard for those without one,
A guide for all who journey on the road,
May I become a boat, a raft or bridge,
For all who wish to cross the water.

- May I be an isle for those desiring landfall,
And a lamp for those who wish for light,
May I be a bed for those who need to rest,
And a servant for all who live in need.

- May I become a wishing jewel, a magic vase,
A powerful mantra and a medicine of wonder.
May I be a tree of miracles granting every wish,
And a cow of plenty sustaining all the world.

- Like the earth and other great elements,
And like space itself, may I remain forever,
To support the lives of boundless beings,
By providing all that they might need.

Now in our times there are very urgent social issues on so many levels:

- The refugee crises with no end in sight for the wars that urge the refugees to flee their countries ...
- The great gap in society between the rich and the poor. We are a culture that is based on making and spending money and who has mostly lost the original idea of a social market economy ...
- The risky financial and trade market that has lost any sense for true values so that the economy of countries - and therefore the prosperity of individuals - can collapse at any time ...
- Weapons are sold and distributed all over the planet in an incalculable number, also and foremost by the countries that we inhabit ...
- There is so much hunger, lack of education, of medical support etc. in so and so many countries ...
- ... and many other urgent matters ...

On top of that there is an endless variety of ecological issues that are a definite problem or will more and more become a greater problem to human beings, animals, and plants and all living creatures.

- 120 species die every day – “forever” or at least an unknown future
- = 43.800 /year = 2.190.000 in 50 years. That is species not individuals! The German weekly magazine “Der Spiegel” wrote that in the year 2014 “58.000” species died out.
- There is a constant threat coming from the nuclear power plants and the unsolved issue of where to store the nuclear garbage. Without abandoning nuclear energy and basing the entire energy supply on renewable resources it is only a matter of time until more and more land, countries and their inhabitants including the oceans will be affected by nuclear contamination, in the same way we know it from Chernobyl and Fukushima.

- The oceans are emptied from fishes and poisoned by waste such as plastic, oil, and nuclear garbage as well ...
- The ground and fields in many areas are poisoned by fertilizers and other chemicals and liquid manure ...
- There is the whole tragedy of the climate change with the sea level rising, threatening all those cities, people, and animals who live by the sea ... , causing islands and peninsulas and low countries to vanish in a foreseeable future.
- ... and so many other issues ...

To practice kindness and compassion with such big problems, and also with many of the seemingly smaller ones, needs a very strong and sincere motivation, a good heart that is really caring and not ignoring, a mind that wants to see the trouble and its causes, rather than forgetting about it all and remaining in a self-centred or narrow-minded, narrow-hearted, mode. Perhaps Buddhist methods of mind-training may be of help here to enhance active compassion when applied sincerely and deeply. And this is the point where I am afraid that a wisdom-approach alone, however pure and deep, may not be of much help. It may be misused to bagatellize the problems by considering them as typical expressions of Samsara, impermanence, emptiness, or even just as the expressions of ignorance, greed and hatred.

I am interested about how to apply the compassion practice of Tonglen stemming from the Tibetan Buddhist Lodjong Mind Training as a method to strengthen compassion, also with respect to such greater issues. In fact in Tibetan history these teachings also have been introduced when Mahayana teachers such as Atisha felt that wisdom attitudes and yogic practices failed to support the development of kindness and compassion amongst people.

Tonglen means “sending out and taking in” and it can be applied at times as a self-compassion meditation, working with one’s own suffering of body, emotions and mind. It can also be applied in relation to other people whom one may think of in meditation or even while being in direct contact with.

It can also be applied to perform a kind of compassionate bearing-witness-practice, either by thinking of certain situations in society or the world, or going to certain places and practice there while being directly confronted with a situation entailing suffering. It can be applied while doing a sitting-practice, or doing walking meditation etc. in a place where you know that great suffering has occurred or is occurring at the moment, or may become manifest in the future.

Over the years I have developed a way to describe the Tonglen-meditation so that it could be such a contribution for the development of compassion, not matter if one is a Buddhist or not.

Here is a very brief summary of a guided meditation of Tonglen-session in 5 steps:

1. In the beginning we develop a motivation to cultivate more compassion towards ourselves and/or others.
2. Then it is important to sit – or stand - in a way that makes you feel very wake and alert. (An introverted mental calm is not required...)
3. Now we come into contact with a source of kindness and compassion that we may visualize above our heads in space and then at the level of your heart etc. Alternately we may perform a kind of Metta-meditation or recite a Mantra of compassion.
4. In the main phase of this meditation we think of a situation for which we would like to foster our attitude of compassion... And then we practice the sending out and taking in (also described in the invert order as “taking in the suffering and sending out compassion” by riding on the breath, combining it with gentle and generous movements of silent breathing ...
5. At the end we dissolve everything ... and dedicating the merit ...

Of course to practice Tonglen properly it has to be explained in much more detail and then it needs to be applied to a given situation appropriately.

I practiced Tonglen with Buddhist and Christians alike, and also with non-religious therapists, nurses, doctors, voluntary hospice caregivers, near nuclear garbage store grounds and in other places where the sufferings of our time of crises are evident, and I do believe that it is a very valuable practice.

My motivation behind this contribution to the Vienna BTE conference in 2016 was to remind us, that it may not be the time to be too rigid with our Buddhist views and practices and that we should not get stuck in maintaining the old traditions. Let's not be too romantic of Buddhism. Rather we could try to recognize the ecological, global and cultural crises we are in, and offer helpful skilful means from the Dharma-practice for the benefit of as many as possible.

This is a somewhat updated version of the script I was reading from when giving the 33 minute talk and meditation instruction at the BTE conference.

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