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Do the Compassionate Flourish?: Overcoming Anguish and the Impulse towards Violence

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Abstract

In this paper I argue that in order for compassion to be considered a virtue, Western philosophical accounts of compassion must be supplemented by Buddhist understandings. After examining two potential problems with compassion (that it may burden the compassionate agent with anguish such that s/he cannot flourish and that feeling compassion may give rise to violence on behalf of the suffering), I consider a way out of both of these problems. My central claim is that the proper emotion which demonstrates the virtue of compassion is that of equanimity.

In the spring of 2004, the American press began to publish stories about the Abu Ghraib prison scandal in Iraq.¹ The news stories and accompanying photographs that depicted the abuse, humiliation, and degradation of Iraqi detainees captured my, and many other peoples', attention. What I read,

and the pictures I saw, filled me with a number of strong emotions. First, compassion for the prisoners, then anger at the soldiers who had perpetrated this abuse, then rage at the U.S. military-industrial-prison complex. By virtue of being a U.S. citizen, I felt implicated in what our soldiers had done, complicit with a political system that had sanctioned the invasion of Iraq and this nonsensical response to the September 11th attacks against the U.S., angry that I was powerless to make any of it stop.

As my rage increased, I found my mind filled with numerous fantasies of sabotaging and vandalizing the many military facilities that lay at easy reach within my city. This consuming rage and desire to inflict violence was somewhat surprising to me as I am a professed pacifist. I believe that while perpetrators of violence must be held accountable, the proper response to them is compassion, not reproach or blame, and certainly not violence. And yet as I read the accounts of what had been done to the prisoners and saw the tangible results of U.S. military training, I could not immediately generate compassion for the perpetrators of these crimes. As a philosopher and as a Buddhist I have been trained to observe and analyze patterns of human thought and how these patterns influence human behavior and life. I realized that my own failure of compassion provided an opportunity for further reflection and analysis. And so, I have continued to think about compassion, how it arises, how it becomes habituated, how it relates to human flourishing, and how it might assist me in shaping an ethical and appropriate response to the events reported in the news.

In order to be in a position to assess my response to the Abu Ghraib prison scandal, I must first articulate my understanding of compassion. I believe that compassion is best understood as a virtue. However, in order to be considered a virtue, I believe that western philosophical understandings

of compassion must be supplemented by a Buddhist understanding of compassion. Both the pro-compassion and anti-compassion traditions in western philosophy contain problematic assessments of compassion.² For example, contemporary pro-compassion advocates suggest that compassion is connected to sorrow (Tudor); that it requires the blamelessness of the sufferer for her/his suffering (Nussbaum); and that compassion is simply a complex emotional attitude toward another (Blum).³ Some philosophers, who are generally sympathetic to the good of compassion, worry that it may unduly burden the compassionate agent (Tessman).⁴ Furthermore, the anti-compassion tradition asserts that compassion is counterproductive to the flourishing of both the possessor and the recipient (Nietzsche) and that the compassionate are led to either misery or violence as a result of encountering suffering (Arendt).⁵ In this paper, I will focus on two claims: first that "attention and sensitivity to other's suffering" may burden the compassionate agent with anguish; and second, that feeling compassion may lead to violence in an effort to change the circumstances of the suffering. In contrast to these positions, I will argue that compassion, properly understood as habituating the emotion of equanimity, counters the tendency toward either anguish or violence.

Compassion as a Virtue

Compassion, I believe, is best understood along the lines of an Aristotelian virtue.

In order for compassion to be considered a virtue, its emotional component (one's emotional response to another's suffering) has to be trained and habituated in order to constitute "proper emotion."⁶ In part, the properly trained emotion of compassion involves coming to identify with the painful situation of another, empathizing with his or her suffering,

and desiring the alleviation of that suffering. In addition to proper emotion, the virtue of compassion requires deliberation. I contend that the untrained emotion of compassion alone cannot be relied upon as properly action guiding. Combining the trained emotion of compassion with deliberation is necessary because the untrained emotion of compassion alone might lead to impulsive attempts to alleviate suffering. In short, I believe compassion can be regarded as a state, and thus as a virtue. In my understanding, then, compassion would have the following definition: "The virtue of compassion is the habit of choosing the action that demonstrates the proper response to the suffering of others. The proper response requires an equanimitous disposition." Its equanimitous nature, then, allows the habituated virtue of compassion to avoid many of the problems found within Western philosophical descriptions of compassion, while successfully entailing active attention to suffering others and engagement with their plight.

One of the major problems with understandings of compassion found in western philosophical sources is that such descriptions routinely connect compassion with the experience of sorrow and pain. This assumption yields an understanding of the virtue of compassion as oddly burdened, and hence, questionably connected to its possessor's flourishing.⁷ I do not believe that the connection between compassion and sorrow or pain provides the best description of what genuine compassion actually is.

Nevertheless, I am sympathetic to the concern that compassion is burdened with sorrow and pain because compassion is appropriately directed toward *suffering* others. I worked as a "woman's advocate" at a domestic violence shelter in the early 1990s. There I experienced first hand the difficulty of sustaining compassion in the face of the immanent, unrelenting need of strangers. In that context, I found that continuous

contact with victims of violence produced a detrimental effect upon my own well being. Over a period of time, the compassion I felt for the women and their children changed from engaged concern into an anguished state from which it was difficult to act at all. Thus, when considering compassion, it is important to attend to the issue of pain and sorrow.

Aristotle and painful virtues

From an Aristotelian perspective there is something strange about calling a disposition that is intrinsically painful a virtue. In the usual case, Aristotle expects that the virtuous agent will take pleasure in, or at least not be pained by, the exercise of the virtue (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1104b3-13).⁸ Part of virtue, for Aristotle, is to become habituated to feel pleasure and pain at the proper things, for, as he says, "to feel delight and pain rightly or wrongly has no small effect on our actions" (*NE* 1105a7-8). If we feel pain at the thought of doing what is noble, this pained response both tells against our having the relevant virtuous disposition and will also be a significant impediment to our actually doing what is noble. Similarly, we can be led astray by feeling pleasure in what we ought not (e.g., overindulging in food and drink).

However, even for Aristotle, the seemingly tight correspondence between feeling pleasure when performing virtuous action, and feeling pain at the thought of acting contrary to virtue, breaks down. As Sarah Broadie states, "virtue is sometimes expressed in our being pained at things at which we should be pained (e.g., someone else's vile action)."⁹ Further, she argues that,

the pleasure with which the virtuous person acts must be distinguished from his enjoying or finding enjoyable what he does. Doing it with pleasure must be doing it freely, unreluctantly, ungrudgingly, hence in this sense gladly. It may also be taking satisfaction in doing it. All this is consistent with its being an unpleasant or painful thing to do.¹⁰

The obvious example in this case is Aristotle's discussion of courage. Aristotle argues that, "death and wounds will be painful to the brave man and against his will, but he will face them because it is noble to do so or because it is base not to do so....It is not the case, then, with all the virtues that the exercise of them is pleasant..." (NE 1117b7-16). Thus, although virtue in general requires training to feel pleasure and pain at the proper objects, sometimes in carrying out virtuous actions one risks encountering pain; in these cases, the virtuous agent takes pleasure in (freely, unreluctantly, ungrudgingly) doing what is noble despite the physical or psychological pain that this entails.

I want to suggest, then, that compassion could be considered a parallel case to that of courage. Thus, although someone could argue that the exercise of compassion is inherently painful (because it repeatedly involves one in the suffering of others) I suggest that this fact alone would not disqualify compassion from being regarded as an Aristotelian virtue. As with the case of courage, one could take pleasure in doing what is noble (acting to alleviate suffering) even though doing so could result in physical or psychological harm to the compassionate agent. However, there are several ways this assessment can be complicated; Lisa Tessman's chapter "Between Indifference and Anguish" provides an excellent example of how the argument I offered above cannot be easily accepted.¹¹ My response to

Tessman is part of why I argue that for non-Buddhists, compassion can only be regarded as a virtue if it is understood to incorporate something along the lines of Buddhist equanimity.

Sensitivity and Attention to Other's Suffering

Tessman argues that sensitivity and attention to another's suffering is inherently painful. This is as it should be, she thinks, because "it is morally wrong not to be pained, at least moderately" by the suffering of others.¹² In particular, Tessman is concerned with the suffering of others that comes about as a result of oppression. In these cases, then, "virtue is... expressed in our being pained at things at which we should be pained."¹³ However, this case differs from the one of courage where despite the (potential) pain the agent could take pleasure in the desire to perform the noble action. Here, one cannot, in any straightforward way, take "pleasure in the thought of performing the noble action" because "feeling pleasure at the thought of attending well to someone's suffering...would make the noble action dependent upon others' suffering."¹⁴ This would seem problematic indeed.

In addition, given the enormity of suffering that exists as a result of oppression, it also appears to be difficult to find a morally praiseworthy point that could be regarded as the virtue in this sphere. Indeed, Tessman asks whether, given the current background condition of systemic injustice that causes the suffering (oppression, domination and exploitation) of many, *any* virtue exists between the extreme of too much attention (anguish) and the deficiency of too little attention (indifference) to others' suffering.¹⁵ Focusing one's attention upon ameliorating the suffering of a specific few, she thinks, necessitates ignoring the suffering of masses of others. Thus, she contends that no comfortable intermediary position can be found because in taking the suffering of others seriously one "is at once

too indifferent and too anguished."¹⁶ This, then, is a second way in which sensitivity and attention to the suffering of others is painful; given the enormity of suffering one is pained by one's own inability to respond adequately. Ultimately Tessman concludes that a virtue exists between indifference and anguish; however, it forms an atypical, though not unknown, Aristotelian virtue because it is burdened with pain and guilt. In light of this fact, Tessman argues that,

tragic dilemmas do not present themselves only in rare and isolated incidents...If my characterization above of the fact of suffering in the world is accurate enough, then we all face tragic dilemmas as a regular condition of our lives; unless we are completely indifferent (in which case we clearly lack virtue), we must always be asking ourselves whose suffering to tend to and whose to turn away from, which injustices to try to remedy and which to ignore, daily making the horrifying decision to let hundreds of thousands or millions suffer as a result of our inaction.¹⁷

The fact of facing constant tragic dilemmas creates a number of problems, including the possibility that the virtuous agent risks having her/his life marred by constantly encountering situations for which no right answer exists. Her concern is that, "in some terrible cases not just one's life but also one's character will have been transformed; one will be pained, regretful, and overwhelmingly sorrowful."¹⁸ Further, Tessman worries that "to take on the pain of others and the pain or guilt of knowing how many more one has necessarily turned away from is to live a life so filled with regret and sorrow that virtue, and flourishing, are ruled out."¹⁹ Thus, the possibility of having one's life marred and/or one's character transformed (deformed)

raises the possibility that sensitivity and attention to others' suffering is a barrier to flourishing for the agent.

In the Aristotelian model, it is usually the case that possession of the virtues contributes to the flourishing of the agent, because possession of the virtues is necessary, though not sufficient, for *eudaimonia*. However, the possibility that possession of *this* virtue could lead either to the marring of the agent's life or to the deformation of her/his character suggests that the expected link between virtue and flourishing may be severed in this case. Tessman argues that although this is unusual, it does not mean that sensitivity and attention to another's suffering is not a virtue. For, "[a] trait may at once contribute to flourishing (because it is a virtue and conduces to a "noble" end) and detract from flourishing (because it undermines the "external" conditions for flourishing, including freedom from great pain)."²⁰ The virtue of sensitivity and attention to others' suffering is both necessary (given the background condition of great injustice) and yet burdened; thus, such a virtue may not contribute to its possessor's flourishing.²¹

In summary, Tessman lists two different ways that the burdened virtue of sensitivity and attention to others' suffering is painful: directly attending to the suffering of others produces pain in the one doing the attending; and recognizing both the necessity and horror of making choices about whose suffering to attend to is painful. Facing the very real possibility of having one's life marred and/or of having one's character deformed by "pain, regret, and overwhelming sorrow" is an implication of this painfulness. The position articulated by Tessman seems either consistent with or a further elaboration of points made by those in both the pro- and anti-compassion traditions I mentioned previously.

Finally, Tessman argues that, "[s]ensitivity and attention to others' suffering entails taking on others' pain, being pained by their pain; one's actual felt pain is part of the response to the other that constitutes the morally recommended responsive action."²² However, I wonder what "taking on others' pain" really means? The one who suffers feels what s/he feels (in response to the loss of a child, the pain of being the target of hate speech, and so on), while the observer feels whatever s/he feels in relation to seeing that suffering. However one cannot, therefore, conclude that the two feel *the same thing*. They both feel something, and they may both feel something painful, but what they feel is two different things due to the difference of perspective and relative distance to the event that being two separate people entails.²³

To suggest that one can feel another's pain is to claim that somehow responsiveness to another's pain involves a type of emotional infection. Even if this sort of psychological contagion is possible, I do not believe it is to be recommended. Becoming mired in the suffering of others such that one's emotional experience is that of overwhelming anguish, fear, or pain leads one away from the ability to effectively engage with the suffering other and into one's own psychological experience. "Taking on another's pain" creates a situation in which the responder is no longer focused externally upon the plight of the suffering other, but instead becomes self-referentially and internally focused. Further, as Nancy Snow suggests, coming to identify with another's situation by imaginatively dwelling on their plight becomes problematic in that "these imaginings [could be] no more than flights of fancy, with little or no basis in actual fact."²⁴ More important than feeling another's pain, then, is coming to understand what they suffer so as to be able to respond, where possible, to alleviate that suffering.

I think Tessman's insistence on the necessity of taking on the other's pain stems from her belief that if the responder does not demonstrate a pained acknowledgment of the other's suffering, then the suffering other may not actually feel responded to. In other words, without obvious emotional upset on the part of the responder, the one being attended to may well think that the responder has failed to grasp the severity of their situation.

Tessman's articulation of sensitivity and attention to others' suffering represents the best attempt to articulate what I call compassion understood as an Aristotelian virtue that I have found. However, as I have indicated, there are many aspects of the state she has described to which I take exception. For the moment I will set aside the problem that the compassionate agent may become so burdened with pain or anguish that her own flourishing may be negatively impacted in order to consider a different sort of problem. Hannah Arendt articulates her concern that compassion may lead to violence in her assessment of the French Revolution.

From Muteness to Violence

As a rule, it is not compassion which sets out to change worldly conditions in order to ease human suffering, but if it does, it will shun the drawn-out wearisome processes of persuasion, negotiation, and compromise, which are the processes of law and politics, and lend its voice to the suffering itself, which must claim for swift and direct action, that is, for action with the means of violence.

Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*²⁵

Arendt discusses the concept of compassion in *On Revolution*, where she juxtaposes the American and French revolutions in order to explore what accounts for the success of the former and the unqualified disaster of the later. She believes that the differences in outcome can be linked in large measure to the place each revolution granted to compassion. Arendt argues that in the case of the American Revolution, the revolutionaries remained focused upon the task of founding freedom and the establishment of a new form of government. The revolutionaries were not distracted by the passion of compassion, co-suffering at the sight of the suffering of their fellow man; consequently, the American Revolution did not become derailed from its intention of founding the *res publica*. This was due in large measure, according to Arendt, to the relative abundance found in America such that even the poor did not suffer from want of food and the misery of poverty.²⁶

However, most other countries during the eighteenth century suffered from scarcity, not abundance.²⁷ As Arendt notes, "[p]overty is more than deprivation, it is a state of constant want and acute misery whose ignominy consists in its dehumanizing force; poverty is abject because it puts men under the absolute dictate of their bodies, that is, under the absolute dictate of necessity...."²⁸ In contrast to the American revolutionaries, the actors in the French Revolution were confronted with the abject misery of the masses who rose up to demand an alteration in their social condition. Because the revolutionaries were moved by the suffering masses, the men of the French revolution "raise[d] compassion to the rank of the supreme political passion and of the highest political virtue."²⁹ As a result, they turned away from the task of founding freedom and turned toward the realm of necessity (satisfying the demands of biological urgency). This led to disaster, according to Arendt, because the demands of necessity cannot

be resolved politically; rather, they must remain matters of the private, household realm, or matters to be solved administratively by experts.³⁰

Arendt asserts that the problems with compassion as a political virtue are many. She argues that Rousseau and Robespierre thought that compassion (a passion) opposes reason; she seems to agree with this assessment.³¹ Further, she states that compassion "cannot be touched off by the sufferings of a whole class or a people....It cannot reach out farther than what is suffered by one person and still remain what it is supposed to be, co-suffering."³² Thus compassion, in her view, only recognizes the particular and has "no capacity to generalize."³³ As a result of this inability, compassion maintains a "curious muteness." Given these factors, Arendt says that compassion "abolishes the distance, the in-between which always exists in human intercourse...the worldly space between men where political matters, the whole realm of human affairs, are located...."³⁴ Without this in-between space, no room remains for "predicative or argumentative speech, in which someone talks to somebody about something that is of interest to both because...it is between them."³⁵ Because compassion, on this reading, stands opposed to reason, mired in the suffering of particular others, unreflective, and mute, it is unable to generate dialogue or discussion, to argue for a remedy, to persuade others of its position. The only option left is to be swallowed by misery or to change suffering into rage, muteness into violence.

What is interesting to note about the dangers of compassion as articulated by Arendt are the ways they accurately describe the quagmire in which I found myself upon hearing the news of the abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib; to some extent, my own experiences bore out her objections. My experience of the emotion of compassion for the prisoners did tend in

the direction of misery and rage; the initial emotion of compassion quickly changed into a desire for vengeance, a desire to destroy the military establishment that made the abuse of prisoners possible in the first place. Experiencing the emotion of compassion for the prisoners did, as Arendt suggested, "abolish the distance, the in-between space...where political matters are located" by making a distant few immediate in my concern, and left me both mute with rage and inclined toward violent responses.

Thus, Arendt is correct to issue cautions regarding the potentially detrimental effects of excessive emotional states on political life. However, I believe she was incorrect when she labeled the excessive emotional state she had identified as *compassion*. Once I began to entertain thoughts of violence, I was no longer experiencing the emotion of compassion, and my disposition was not that of the compassionate agent. Rather, I slid out of compassion and into the mind state of hatred. A desire to exact revenge is not surprising, as a mind filled with hatred often inclines toward violence. What my experience regarding the compassion I felt for the Abu Ghraib prisoners demonstrates, is that when compassion changes to anger and rage, it morphs from what it ought to be into its far enemy: cruelty (even though in my case cruelty remained only hypothetical and imagined). This assessment of the movement from compassion to violence provides a more adequate interpretation of the problems Arendt observes regarding the French Revolutionaries' centering of the social question, poverty, where concern for the poor subverted the goal of establishing freedom and instead led to the Reign of Terror. In that case, too, the problem was not in recognizing suffering and desiring its alleviation; rather, the problem came when the untrained emotion of compassion turned into rage, which then led to mob violence.

I believe Arendt is, therefore, incorrect in asserting that compassion stands opposed to reason, mired in the suffering of particular others, unreflective, and mute. Many other emotions—anger, hatred, and sorrow among them—do exhibit these qualities. Agents who are consumed with these emotions tend in the direction of either being swallowed by misery or of changing suffering into rage and muteness into violence. Acknowledging that people often experience the transformation of compassion into misery or rage indicates that they have insufficiently habituated equanimitous compassion, not that compassion itself is synonymous with or inclines one toward these objectionable emotions. I want to suggest that the virtue of compassion acts as a corrective to these excessive emotional responses and integrates deliberation.

Compassion Grounded in Equanimity

Having considered the problems of anguish and violence, in this section, I will sketch an understanding of compassion as developed within the Theravada tradition. Specifically, I will examine the link between compassion and equanimity illuminated in a discussion of the four *Brahmavihāras* by Buddhaghosa in his fifth century text, the *Visuddhimagga*. References to the *Brahmavihāras* (Divine Abidings) can be found throughout the *suttas* of the Pāli canon. These texts emphasize that the practitioner must have a baseline of ethical conduct in order to develop the concentration necessary to deep meditation which is, in turn, necessary to the cultivation of the four *Brahmavihāras* (Divine Abidings). It is said that the cultivation of these four brings internal peace.³⁶ The *suttas* make clear that the untrained mind, one filled with *tanhā* (craving) or filled with greed, hatred, and delusion, is like a fever that causes both physical and mental distress.³⁷ Although ethical conduct marks the beginning of the perfection

of virtue within Buddhist ethics, virtue cannot be completely perfected until the states of mind (moods, habitual thought patterns, and emotions) are sufficiently trained.

The four *Brahmavihāras* (Divine Abidings) are *mettā*, *karuṇā*, *muditā*, and *upekkhā*. Although no word in English provides an exact correspondence to *mettā*, it is usually translated as loving-kindness. Alternate non-literal translations include "unconditional love" or "gentle friendship"; due to the difficulties in adequately translating this word, when I refer to *mettā* I will leave it untranslated. In the *Visuddhimagga* it is said that *mettā* is characterized as "promoting the aspect of welfare...manifested as the removal of annoyance. Its proximate cause is seeing loveliness in beings. It succeeds when it makes ill will subside, and it fails when it produces (selfish) affection."³⁸ *Mettā* works to permanently eradicate one of the five hindrances (ill will), and to lessening the mind obscuration of hatred. As with all of the *Brahmavihāras* (Divine Abidings), when cultivating *mettā* during meditation, four classes of beings are taken as the meditation object (*mettā* directed at one self, at loved ones, at neutral people, and at enemies).³⁹

Compassion "is characterized as promoting the aspect of allaying suffering....It is manifested as non-cruelty. Its proximate cause is to see helplessness in those overwhelmed by suffering. It succeeds when it makes cruelty subside and it fails when it produces sorrow."⁴⁰ Like *mettā*, compassion assists in overcoming the obscuration of hatred. It is important to note that unlike Western understandings of compassion that I examined above, a Buddhist understanding of compassion is not linked to sorrowing. I will explore the reasons for this shortly. *Muditā* (usually translated as "sympathetic or appreciative joy" or "gladness") is characterized as

gladdening/being joyful on account of others' success. Sympathetic joy functions as the antidote to both envy and discontent; it rejoices in other's successes yet differs from giddiness. Finally, equanimity

is characterized as promoting the aspect of neutrality towards beings. Its function is to see equality in beings. It is manifested as the quieting of resentment and approval. Its proximate cause is seeing ownership of deeds (*kamma*)...It succeeds when it makes resentment and approval subside, and it fails when it produces the equanimity of unknowing, which is that [worldly-minded indifference or ignorance] based on the house life.⁴¹

Equanimity balances the other three, leads to a deeper understanding of the doctrine of *kamma* (volitional activity), and ensures *mettā*, compassion and sympathetic joy are developed equally towards all beings. Equanimity is the key concept that informs my understanding of compassion.

In the *Visuddhimagga* it is said that each of the *Brahmavihāras* (Divine Abidings) has a near and a far enemy. The near enemy is the quality that seems similar to the given trait but which is actually quite different from it. The far enemy is the opposite tendency. For compassion, the near enemy is pity (feeling sorry for someone who is suffering) or grief (feeling anguish at the sight of someone's suffering) and the far enemy cruelty. For equanimity, the near enemy is indifference and the far enemy is greed and resentment.⁴²

All of the *Brahmavihāra* practices aim at breaking down the conventional, but artificially constructed, barriers that are erected between other sentient beings and oneself (i.e., anything that leads to us/them thinking). The four *Brahmavihāras* do this in slightly different ways by working to undercut prevalent human tendencies. *Mettā* seeks the welfare of all by countering ill

will, compassion seeks the end of suffering for all by countering cruelty, and sympathetic joy seeks the success of all by countering aversion. Equanimity supports all three by countering the human tendency to make destructive distinctions between sentient beings. Thus, the cultivation of equanimity leads to a radical understanding of equality in which no distinction is made between self and others or between friend and foe.⁴³ Having provided a brief overview of all four *Brahmavihāras*, I will now take up equanimity, compassion, and the relationship between the two in more depth.

I stated above that equanimity causes approval and resentment to subside; however, it is important to distinguish this from its near enemy of indifference. By cultivating equanimity, the practitioner moves toward impartial neutrality toward others rather than demonstrating partiality on the basis of her/his attachments (greed), hatred and delusions. In the *Visuddhimagga*, a story is given that demonstrates the working of equanimity.

Suppose this person is sitting in a place with a dear, a neutral, and a hostile person, himself being the fourth; then bandits come to him and say 'Venerable sir, give us a bhikkhu' [Buddhist monk], and on being asked why, they answer 'So that we may kill him and use the blood of his throat as an offering', then if that bhikkhu thinks 'Let them take this one, or this one', he has not broken down the barriers. And also if he thinks 'Let them take me but not these three', he has not broken down the barriers either. Why? Because he seeks the harm of him whom he wishes to be taken and seeks the welfare of the other only. But it is when he does not see a single one among the four people to be given to the bandits and he directs his mind impartially

towards himself and towards those three people that he has broken down the barriers.⁴⁴

When the practitioner has developed insight into the nature of beings (each individual is a collection of the five aggregates; each one desires happiness and does not want suffering), then s/he will not desire the welfare of any one (self included) over the others (self included). Thus, Buddhism does not regard egoism or self-sacrifice as virtues. Equanimity is not an attitude of apathy ("whatever happens, happens") or indifference ("I don't care what happens"), but rather, a deep conviction that the welfare of each one matters as much as the welfare of the next.

To say that equanimity requires a radical understanding of equality does not entail that equanimity applauds all actions as equally good. Equanimity does not mean the suspension of judgment regarding what, in Buddhist terms, would be regarded as the distinction between the wholesome and the unwholesome. Rather, the person who cultivates equanimity recognizes that all people want happiness and want to avoid suffering; however, it also accepts that the way in which some people attempt to find happiness comes through unwholesome means. When these means endanger others, preventing the person from carrying out those means may be the appropriate course of action. However, the attitude that must accompany any such intervention ought to be one of compassion instead of the desire for retribution or the inevitable excesses of anger and hatred.

Finally, equanimity requires insight into the nature of *kamma* (volitional activity).⁴⁵ *Kamma* means any volitional activity. From any volitional activity there will be an effect; thus beings experience the *kamma* resultants (whether good or bad) of the volitional actions they undertake (including the results of their thinking). Thus, although one may be affected by the

choices made by others, how one responds (acts, thinks, and emotes) about those events remains one's own responsibility. Again, this does not lead to an indifferent or apathetic response to what befalls others or oneself. Equanimity is not expressed by the sentiment that whatever bad thing has befallen someone is simply her/his own fault. Rather, with equanimity one sees the way unskillful actions lead to unskillful results and skillful actions lead to skillful results. Realization that the human condition means that each individual is subject to suffering, coupled with the fact that often our own unskillful actions (actions, thoughts and emotions) intensify the degree of our suffering, gives rise to compassion.

Compassion involves the desire that all beings be freed from suffering. As I noted above, in Buddhist understanding compassion is the antidote to cruelty and, along with *mettā*, counters the mind obscuration of hatred. Cruelty involves both the extreme acts of torture, violence, and brutalization, as well as the less extreme tendency to harm others in small ways (i.e., to verbally attack someone when angry; the desire to belittle another's accomplishments out of jealousy that s/he has succeeded). Further, hatred, in a Buddhist view, involves a cluster of related terms: ill will, anger, aversion, and fear. Thus, irritation at the driver who cut in front of us on the highway, anger when our partner is late coming home from work, fear of "those terrorist" who seek the death of all Americans, and so on, are all forms of hatred. In each case, the individual who feels irritated, angry, or fearful creates a distinction between her/himself and the one at whom her/his irritation, anger or fear is directed. This tendency to make us/them distinctions undermines the recognition that "just as I want happiness and do not want suffering, so does the inattentive driver/tardy partner/"terrorist" want happiness and does not want suffering."

The cultivation of the Buddhist virtue of compassion comes about not only by evaluating the types of actions one habitually performs (an important investigation in its own right), but also through an on-going inquiry regarding the types of thoughts and emotions one habitually has. Buddhist psychology insists that individuals must examine the habitual content of their minds. From a Buddhist perspective, it is crucial to determine whether one's thoughts are habitually filled with anger, ill will, aversion, or fear, all of which inhibit the development of compassion. If one finds, as most people will find, that one's mind repeatedly returns to these forms of hatred, then the *Brahmavihāra* practices can be undertaken in order to retrain one's habitual emotional patterns.⁴⁶ This, in turn, will alter one's behavior such that one will be inclined to perform actions that help to alleviate the suffering of others. Thus, compassion grounded in equanimity will not degenerate into these mind states of hatred; this is because successfully habituating equanimity yields the cessation of resentment and approval. Once this has occurred, compassion will not yield to either cruelty or despair.

I do not deny that a variety of emotions may arise when someone is confronted with the suffering of another person. One can easily imagine experiencing sadness or pity at the sight of suffering, or anger in response to social injustices that cause suffering. However, Buddhist ethics recognizes dangers inherent to sadness, pity and anger; thus, a distinction must be made between these emotional states and true compassion. Buddhism does not advocate a Stoic eradication of the emotions. Rather, it suggests that those who feel sadness, for example, in the face of suffering are unable to move from their emotional response to effective action. When sorrow stands as one's primary (and overwhelming) response to the depth and prevalence of human suffering, one easily slips from sorrow into

anguish and incapacitation. These excessive emotional states do not promote the exercise of agency. The ability to effectively exercise agency arises when one has developed a high degree of equanimity. This entails, in part, cultivating a non-reactive mind, such that one ceases to have a volatile, exaggerated response to what is. Further, Buddhism suggests that a realistic assessment of the human condition requires the realistic recognition of the immensity and intractability of human suffering. A Buddhist view holds that the acceptance of the pervasive nature of *dukkha* (suffering) better enables the agent to seek its end than does the continued perpetuation of untrained emotional states.

As I pointed out earlier, the cultivation of equanimity requires the contemplation of *kamma*. Buddhaghosa says, the "proximate cause [of equanimity] is seeing ownership of deeds (*kamma*) thus: 'Beings are owners of their deeds. Whose [if not theirs] is the choice by which they will become happy, or will get free from suffering, or will not fall away from the success they have reached?'"⁴⁷ By developing an understanding of volitional actions and their effects, conjoined with an understanding of the immensity of suffering, one will recognize that the particular suffering one is witnessing is but a fraction of the total. This realization supplies the agent with both the motivation to act to end the particular suffering being witnessed along with the capacity to avoid despair.

Anger, although a common emotional response to situations (especially unjust situations) that give rise to suffering, is diametrically opposed to the cultivation of compassion. An objection could be raised that without anger, people are not motivated to alter situations of systemic injustice. I would argue that a Buddhist reading suggests that anger—as a manifestation of hatred—is always incompatible with virtue. This point is indicated in the

Dhammapada "Whoever controls his anger is like a charioteer, In command of the rolling chariot and not just holding the reins."⁴⁸ Although anger may signal that something is wrong in a given situation, much like physical pain signals that something is wrong with a given body part, due to its impulsive nature anger tends to work counter to deliberation. Furthermore, anger encourages dichotomous thinking. Such thinking, with its concomitant tendency to demonize those "who are to blame," does not lead to compassion and the desire to alleviate *all* suffering. Instead it encourages a retributive disposition that seeks, at best, the alleviation of suffering for those near and dear.⁴⁹ As I indicated above, compassion grounded in equanimity accepts that everyone wants happiness and does not want suffering. On the basis of this recognition, compassion makes untenable the distinctions and differential valuations that are conventionally, and erroneously, made between self and other, friend and foe.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I want to return briefly to my reaction to the Abu Ghraib prison scandal in order to explore what my failure of compassion indicates about my completed model of equanimitous compassion. One might argue, for instance, that my failure of compassion reveals that this virtue really is, after all, prohibitively difficult to habituate. As I acknowledged earlier, the untrained emotion of compassion can quickly give rise to other destructive emotions, such as anguish, fear and anger. Further, my initial reactions in these directions indicate that I have insufficiently habituated the proper emotional response to the suffering of others. However, once I recognized these counterproductive mind states in myself, I was able to redirect my energies toward practices that assist in the development of equanimity. For example, I consciously began to affirm that "just as I desire happiness and

do not desire suffering, so do the soldiers who perpetrated this abuse desire happiness and not desire suffering." I continued to conscientiously make and extend this recognition in order to include all the persons in the military chain of command up to and including the President of the United States. This practice effected an abatement of anger.

When my anger subsided, I was able to more rationally deliberate about appropriate responses to these events. Once I stopped being consumed with my own internal reaction of anger, I was able to recognize that by participating in the Abu Ghraib abuses, the soldiers harmed not only others, but their own characters as well. Instead of continuing to blame the soldiers, I began to genuinely desire that the soldiers would find a way to change the fear, anger, and hatred that had led them to perpetrate these abuses into compassion for themselves and others. At the same time, I concluded that those who participated, those who instituted these practices, and those responsible for military policy, training and oversight should be held to account. I determined that the best action I could undertake given the circumstances was communication through petitions, letters to elected representatives, and by using my role as an educator to raise awareness about these actions in relationship to principles of ethics and international law. I believe, therefore, that my initial failure of compassion provided an opportunity for me to further develop the virtue of compassion: to undertake practices designed to habituate proper emotion and to integrate proper emotion with proper deliberation.

Notes

1. During the U.S. occupation of Iraq, after the U.S. military ousted Saddam Hussein, U.S. military forces controlled the Abu Ghraib prison. Hundreds of Iraqis were held at

the prison as prisoners of war. Various U.S. military personnel, in conjunction with private contractors (often ex-special forces military personnel) were charged with the task of interrogating prisoners in order to extract information regarding possible insurgent groups and/or terrorist cells remaining in Iraq. The interrogation methods utilized—including sexual humiliation and abuse, stress postures, sensory deprivation, the presence of attack dogs during interrogations, and other forms of torture—were in gross violation of military standard operating procedures and the Geneva Convention.

2. Nussbaum (1996) discusses the pro- and anti-compassion traditions.

3. See Tudor (2001); Nussbaum (2001); and Blum. (1980).

4. Tessman (2005).

5. See Nietzsche, (1982); (1969); and (1966). See also, Arendt, (1963).

6. In this paper, I rely upon an Aristotelian understanding of virtue. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argues that virtue requires that one both act and feel in the correct way (NE 1106b15ff).

7. The idea of "burdened virtues" is developed by Tessman (2005). I will discuss this idea at greater length in what follows.

8. Aristotle (1941).

9. Broadie (1991:91).

10. Broadie (Ibid:91).

11. Tessman (2005).

12. Tessman (Ibid:152).

13. Broadie, (1991:91).

14. Tessman clarified this point in a private email correspondence.

15. Although Tessman occasionally refers to the intermediary between anguish and indifference as "compassion," usually she avoids this term, because it appears to name a virtue, in order to leave open the possibility that no such virtue exists. Instead she opts for calling the sphere she is discussing, "sensitivity and attention to others' suffering."

Although the examples she employs seem to coincide with what I would call compassion, there may be reason to think we are describing two different states.

16. Tessman, (2005:137).

17. Tessman (Ibid:143).

18. Tessman (Ibid).

19. Tessman (Ibid:144).

20. Tessman (Ibid:153).

21. Tessman (Ibid).

22. Tessman (Ibid:149).

23. Nietzsche makes a similar point. Nietzsche (1982:sections 133 and 134).

24. Snow (1991:198). I take it that Tessman has in mind some type of "imaginative dwelling" when she speaks of "taking on other's pain." She opens the chapter with just this sort of description.

25. Arendt (1963:86-87).

26. Arendt qualifies this statement by noting that "the absence of the social question from the American scene was, after all, quite deceptive, and that abject and degrading misery was present everywhere in the form of slavery and Negro labour." [Arendt (1963:70)] The significant difference for Arendt appears to be that in the American case the poor (e.g., poor whites) were not miserable; they did not lack bodily necessities as the poor in other countries did for the early American scene was characterized more by abundance than scarcity. Nevertheless, the American revolutionaries had to ignore the glaring example of "abject and degrading misery" omnipresent in the condition of slave's lives in order to remain focused upon the *res publica*. Arendt further notes that, "if Jefferson, and others to a lesser degree, were aware of the primordial crime upon which the fabric of American society rested, if they 'trembled when [they] thought that God is just' (Jefferson), they did so because they were convinced of the incompatibility of the institution of slavery with the foundation of freedom, not because they were moved by pity or by a feeling of solidarity with their fellow men." Arendt (1963:71). Thus, the American Revolutionaries could have paid more direct attention to the ob-

vious example of abject misery before them and still not have become distracted by compassion.

27. Arendt (1963:68).

28. Arendt (Ibid:60).

29. Arendt (Ibid:75).

30. Arendt (Ibid:91).

31. Arendt (Ibid:76).

32. Arendt (Ibid:85).

33. Arendt (Ibid).

34. Arendt (Ibid:86).

35. Arendt (Ibid).

36. MN, 40, 13. The Buddha says that a practitioner who "develops loving-kindness, compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity, and thereby gains internal peace...practices the way proper to the recluse."

37. Ibid.

38. Buddhaghosa (1976:344). The *Visuddhimagga* (hereafter, *Vism.*) is a 5th century text which provides an exposition of all the major themes and doctrines found within the *Tipiṭaka*.

39. Neutral persons are all those persons for whom one feels neither attraction nor repulsion. Examples may include casual acquaintances or others with whom one regularly interacts but does not know (i.e., grocery store clerks). Enemies include anyone with whom one has conflicts (i.e., family members, combative colleagues) or toward whom one has anger (i.e., political leaders with whom one disagrees). The *Visuddhimagga* provides detail instructions for how the meditation is to be carried out and how obstacles that may arise are to be overcome. For example, one common practice for developing *mettā*, is the repetition of phrases such as "May I be happy and free from suffering" or "May I keep myself free from enmity, affliction and anxiety and live happily" (*Vism.* IX, 8). The text notes that resentment or anger may arise in the course of *mettā* meditation; for example, resentment or anger may arise toward an enemy when specific wrongs

they committed are remembered. One way of countering this is to meditate upon the five aggregates to try to locate the essence toward which one is angry; this will lead to a deeper understanding of the insubstantiality of all things—including persons—which will diffuse the anger, at which point the *mettā* meditation can be taken up again (*Vism.* IX, 14ff).

40. *Vism.* IX, 94.

41. *Vism.* IX, 96.

42. *Vism.* IX, 98-101.

43. *Vism.*, IX, 47.

44. *Vism.*, IX, 41. The specific context for the story is that of developing *mettā* for all beings. In the sections immediately preceding this story, instructions are given for various practices to be undertaken if one experiences resentment when trying to extend *mettā* to the hostile person. Refusal to identify any person (including oneself) for the bandits to sacrifice is the sign that one has thoroughly developed *mettā* grounded in equanimity.

45. *Vism.*, IX, 96. In meditation, the equanimity verses are along the following lines, "So and so is heir to her *kamma*. Her happiness depends on her thoughts, words, and actions, not upon my good wishes." This emphasizes that ultimately the responsibility of freeing oneself from suffering lies with each individual.

46. It might be usefully noted that cognitive behavioral psychology plays a similar role within Western culture. Cognitive therapists recognize that altering someone's habitual thinking patterns can have a dramatic effect upon their emotions and behaviors as well.

47. *Vism.*, IX, 96.

48. *The Dhammapada*. Translated by Ananda Maitreya, 17.2.

49. The United States' current "war on terrorism" can be taken as a prime manifestation of such thinking. The Bush administration's desire to root out terrorists has quickly altered American foreign policy from one based in diplomacy and collaborations with international coalitions into a go-it-alone state of perpetual war. As Thich Nhat Hahn is fond of saying, "There is no path to peace; peace is the path."

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