

Reflections on Educational Community: Without Identity, With Compassion

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How can an educational community resist “the impulse to erase or consume otherness in the name of commonality or shared identity?” Ann Chinnery proposes we do so by envisioning a “community without identity” where moral education is marked by compassion and cultivates a capacity to live with the unknown. Students expose themselves “to surprises, contestation, and inculcation” and experience attendant forms of discomfort and suffering. This sometimes “profound suffering” experienced by students calls forth compassion from teachers who “need to suffer with them.”

Chinnery admits that what she proposes can be a “demanding path” for teachers and students. Some would add that it also appears rather bleak and dispiriting. If we follow Chinnery’s direction, we may wonder how teachers and students could sustain themselves on such a “demanding path.” My own reflections lead me to introduce another perspective that might help to ease the path somewhat.

In her penultimate paragraph Chinnery refers to “the possibility of an opening into compassion....” It is this “possibility of an “opening into compassion” that I want to explore from a different angle. To do so, I shall turn to the traditional Buddhist conception of compassion, sometimes referred to by its Sanskrit (and Pali) name of *karuna*. Before delving into the details of compassion as *karuna*, I want to call attention to certain contrasts and parallels between a Buddhist framework and the lines of thinking Chinnery draws upon as grounds for her community without identity. For instance, on questions about what we can and cannot know about ourselves and others, I think it is fair to say that Buddhists hold a view that is (a) more radical and (b) less skeptical, than that proposed by Chinnery.

A Buddhist view is more radical because, from this perspective, we can never totally know ourselves or any other because there is no such thing as a separate unchanging self to be known. The purported unknowable other is not a true object of knowledge in the first place, but merely a series of figments constructed by human thoughts. In technical Buddhist terminology, we are talking about “nonself” (*anatman*). In a discourse describing the concept of “nonself,” Thich Nhat Hanh says,

Nothing has a separate existence or a separate self. Everything has to inter-be with everything else... Nonself means that you are made of elements which are not you. During the past hour, different elements have entered you and other elements have flown out of you. Your happiness, in fact your existence, comes from things that are not you.¹

From the Buddhist perspective of nonself, a “community without identity” could be a community whose members no longer “identify with” or confuse who they truly are with any particular set of labels, stories, or narratives. Such a community still

makes room for people to describe individual experiences, even tell their stories, but they have stopped identifying themselves with any descriptors.

Let us turn now to the question of compassion. In comparing the Buddhist concept of compassion, or *karuna*, with Chinnery's account derived from Emmanuel Levinas, I believe they have operational agreement about their starting points. In both conceptions, compassion first requires that we show up, being as completely and fully present as we possibly can, in touch with the other person in their pain. A literal translation of *karuna* would be "experiencing a trembling or quivering of the heart in response to a being's pain." Thich Nhat Hanh writes that compassion "contains deep concern. You know the other person is suffering, so you sit close to her. You look and listen deeply to her to be able to touch her pain."² Along similar lines, Chinnery describes compassion "as a particular kind of suffering-with-the-other, as a moral attitude, or way of being." And Oona Ajzenstat writes that Levinas, from whom Chinnery draws her account, offers "an ethics of each-to-each-other commenced in the face-to-face."³

Up to this point we have at least an operational match between Chinnery's construal of compassion and the Buddhist concept of *karuna*. Beyond these agreements, however, we find significant divergences that may carry implications for practice. For example, the very concept of *karuna* makes explicit room for further moves and associated concepts that go beyond, and diverge from, simply "suffering-with-the-other."

Even in the basic initial encounter with compassion as *karuna*, one does not only "look deeply," s/he also "listens deeply" as well. An emphasis on deep listening reminds us not only to avoid idealizing community efforts at dialogue across differences but also to avoid demonizing all such efforts as well. We do need to beware of asking marginalized students "to make their lives intelligible to the dominant" in order to "gain entry as legitimate members of the classroom community"; we also need to learn how to take appropriate initiatives in "listening" and "hearing," such as those described and advocated by Lisa Delpit and Sharon Todd, among others.⁴

As I mentioned earlier, the Buddhist view on what we can know about each other seems to me less skeptical than what one might infer from claims such as: "We are all inescapably and irreducibly other to the other." From the perspective of *karuna*, even though our knowledge of each other is inevitably incomplete, nevertheless, within the context of an encounter characterized by "deep looking and deep listening" morally relevant knowing can emerge. In fact, clarity about what is needed can arise with such precision and force that one moves into the exact action called for by the truth of the situation. Actions may range from saying a single word of encouragement to saving someone's life at great cost to oneself. As I read him, Alphonso Lingis gives us just such an example in his moving account of how he was rescued during a debilitating illness in the south of India by an unknown stranger from Nepal.⁵ Presumably the man from Nepal who rescued Lingis did some "deep looking" in order to understand Lingis's suffering and be moved to take the needed

action, then, however, the man's energy had to be focused on rescuing Lingis rather than on continuing to suffer-with him.⁶

In closing I want to suggest another benefit we might derive from understanding compassion under the aegis of *karuna*. Within the Buddhist tradition, compassion has four interconnected aspects ("Four Brahmaviharas"). The other three aspects are lovingkindness, joy, and equanimity. According to this tradition each of the four aspects "contains" the other three. Thus, for compassion to be true compassion/*karuna* it has to contain lovingkindness, joy, and equanimity.⁷

One might ask: but what bearing does this foursome have on our current discussion? As we have seen, the focus on compassion arises because we want to acknowledge suffering when it is present, to prevent erasure of this suffering other who faces us. But what about those times when joy arises? Do not we also want to allow ourselves to acknowledge and experience joy when it is present? And the same with lovingkindness and with equanimity? As I have argued elsewhere, if we want educational communities where differences can be sustained, rather than erased or subsumed, then a wide range of practices will be required.⁸

1. Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching* (New York: Broadway Books, 1998), 133–135.

2. *Ibid.*, 172.

3. Oona Ajzenstat, *Driven Back to the Text: The Premodern Sources of Levinas's Postmodernism* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001), 9.

4. Lisa Delpit, *Other People's Children* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 46–47; Sharon Todd, *Learning from the Other* (Albany: State University of New York Press), chap. 5.

5. Alphonso Lingis, *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1994), 158.

6. I do not mean to imply that Chinnery (or Levinas) would not advocate similarly responsible actions on behalf of others. I only want to emphasize how we *can* know each other in crucial ways. Another critical divergence from Levinas for a Buddhist perspective is that ultimately "each person is us...we are not separate from others." Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*, 135.

7. See Ann Diller, "The Search for Wise Love in Education," in *Teaching, Learning, and Loving*, eds. Daniel Liston and James Garrison (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2004), chap. 10.

8. From my perspective, these practices include not only deep looking, deep listening, open peaceful co-existence and voluntary cooperation, but also two other practices that I call co-exploring and co-enjoyment. See, for instance, Ann Diller, "An Ethics of Care Takes on Pluralism," in *The Gender Question in Education*, eds. Ann Diller, Barbara Houston, Kathryn Pauly Morgan, and Maryann Ayim (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), chap. 12.

Thanks to the members of PHAEDRA for their critical assistance during my cogitations on this essay and to Meredith Gunning for her elucidations of Levinas's philosophy.