Beyond COVID-19: From Crisis to Compassion

According to ancient eastern wisdom traditions we can learn to understand, manage and transcend the suffering of the COVID-19 pandemic through the looking glass of the three marks of existence, or *trilakshana*: *anicca* (impermanence), *dukkha* (primary suffering) and *anatman* (no-self). But in order to do so, we must refrain from the idea of fighting for security and defend at all costs our survival. If one assumes that there is an 'I' that can be threatened and a 'we' to prevent from dissolution then it is understandable to be in panic, due to such an invisible threat. However, if one knows that the illusion of a 'self' is part of a play that changes constantly just as waves in the ocean, then we can begin to take care of this dream to wake up together through our common humanity.

Security is no longer considered only about justified violence and controlling others in military terms against enemies, but also about having the right practices to transform our relationships, from living in fear to move forward towards cooperation and freedom. This is not to say that State security is outdated or unnecessary, it is just that human security is also needed to be taken care of from a distinctive approach where fundamental freedoms should be addressed. The General Assembly of the United Nations in its resolution A/RES/66/290 states about human security as follows: 'All individuals, in particular vulnerable people, are entitled to freedom from fear and freedom from want, with an equal opportunity to enjoy all their rights and fully develop their human potential.'

This pandemic has threatened those basic freedoms to safeguard the lives of many. Is it justifiable to violate fundamental freedoms in order to secure population from getting infected? Is it ethical to continue to use fear as a tool and method of social constraint? Is it possible to defend from the pandemic while protecting fundamental rights? I argue that it is possible if public policies, along with individual actions, are guided by *karuna* (compassion). By integrating that compassionate mind-set, attitude, and emotion, we can use this opportunity to transform greed into generosity, ill will into loving-kindness and delusion into wisdom.

It can be done through compassion both from individuals to States and in the overall global governance, in order to reach what Richard Falk (2001) refers to as Humane Global Governance. It encompasses the main proposals of global governance and ethical aspirations in a functionalist and pragmatic way to deal with reality. Therefore, compassion becomes the core element—or antidote—to end the global pandemic of fear, greed and ignorance. By doing so, it will strengthen the capacity to align common interest in public policies, security, health and economic development.

Many questions are still unanswered, and they are just a symptom of a natural and mandatory transformation. Is this a sign of an exhausted planet? Is this the revenge of nature? Can this be a large-scale plan of resetting global governance? Or maybe a plan to improve the status of a superpower within an anarchic system? The answer from an eastern political philosophy approach is that we are witnessing—once again—an era of deprivation of the status quo on a global scale. A much-needed turn which will set new causes of conditions that will enable us—all of us—to enhance our capacity not only to survive but improve health conditions.

In the Hindu classical mythology, it is the time for Shiva ('the destroyer') to appear as the main character in the drama of life and death within *Samsara* (cycle of conditioned existence) which is projected through *Lilamaya* (the illusory game). This will set the conditions for the force of *Brahma* (the creator God or human power to create new conditions) to manifest a new reality which can be then maintained by Vishnu (the enthusiasm to continue living) in a

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new opportunity to reach a true liberation from the egotistic approach that had led many of humanity's worst moments.

In other words, we are witnessing a natural cyclic manifestation of destruction in order to build a new world order, one with compassion and loving-kindness as an opportunity to enhance global development based on justice and solidarity within the recognition of, as the XIV Dalai Lama puts it, our common humanity. By doing so, we can move from power politics to compassionate politics, transcending the practice of pursuing egotistic community goals in spite of other societies' well-being. This is what David Loy defined as 'wego' (Loy, 2006, p.46). This deluded sense of collective self can be defined as an artificial collective identity based on discriminating others in terms of racial, economic, religious or social superiority in order to institutionalize greed and social injustice. Or, in this case, those who are healthy (but at risk) and those with the virus are separated immediately in an intersubjective consensus of fear, especially after when, on March the 11th, the World Health Organization made the assessment that COVID-19 can be characterized as pandemic. This established what Philip Strong (1990, p.293) defines as the 'epidemic of fear': because we are afraid of the emerging infection, we also become suspicious of those around us as they may be the person who spreads the infection.

I argue that these conditions can determine a new social order based on ethics and mutual understanding. A sense of common threat can become a catalyst for a shared intention of compassion and loving-kindness, but only if we know how to deal with this crisis by recognizing the three marks of existence mentioned above:*dukkha*, *anicca* and *anatman*. The first mark, dukkha, refers to the natural tendency to encounter difficulties, conflicts, problems or disease. The pain related to those moments are what is called primary suffering, one that we all must experience as human beings and is present through birth, ageing, illness and death. The more common attitude towards these elements is to fight them, to get rid of anything that moves us towards pain, only to create new afflictive conditions to develop suffering. The urge to get rid of the quarantine measures around the world have made it so that many people break the rules and the governments have to harden policies, causing the escalation of fear and anger. Meanwhile, the sense of being secure is still absent.

A Zen approach to conflict is to move from crisis to possibility. Diane Musho Hamilton affirms that to learn to transform conflict, we must let go of the notion that something or someone is wrong or bad. This notion of impartiality helps us to get rid of preconceptions and misjudgement so we can see that 'the conflict is not the problem; our response to it is' (Hamilton, 2013, p.3) This means that we can see beyond the primary suffering and, by not resisting to it (but opening compassionately to it), we can see an invitation to reset our perception of the world. This can help us to interact with the second mark of existence, 'anicca' which means impermanence. This means that nothing stays the same and we need to be able to embrace it through what the Taoist refer to *wu-wei*, i.e. the art of flowing with life. This is not to undermine our will but to apply it in those aspects which are really needed. If we can direct our creativity, physical strength and intelligence fuelled by compassion then we can make the most out of any situation.

Mervyn Frost argues that having compassion is understood as 'being open to feeling the suffering and pain being experienced by other participants in a given practice and understanding that this openness is required for one's own well-being as a fully-fledged ethical actor.' (Frost, 2014, p. 102) Thus, 'international relations is not well understood when it is viewed as a struggle for power by sovereign states, but is better understood as an ethical argument broadly construed.' (Frost, p.97) And this ethical framework applies to the society of sovereign states and the global civil society as we have witnessed throughout the pandemic situation. Both levels are intertwined in a global interaction that encompasses an emotional response. This emotional response is where we have a major opportunity to redirect the guidelines of our political, economic and social systems. The complexity of this task is to learn which emotions are necessary for a specific situation to de-escalate it, as in the case of this global pandemic.

In this scenario, compassion (both as an emotion and as a cognitive value) is especially useful as it integrates the individual and collective efforts to get rid of afflictive (egotistic) practices that derived in inequality, injustice and separation. For example, the World Health Organization put forward an agenda of common good in the 'Closing the Gap in a Generation Report' in 2008, where it stresses the importance of making the right efforts to undermine the health inequity that can be clearly witnessed in how different countries have faced the COVID-19. In order to get through this mark of existence of 'anicca' without falling into the trap of anxiety, fear and anger, one should apply a

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compassionate approach. From a normative standpoint, the more compassionate and altruistic norms and rules are made and implemented, the more stable democratic institutions will be. This is because they can support emotional narratives such as equality, freedom and justice for all participants whether they be sovereign states, institutions or the global civil society.

Finally, the third mark of existence 'anatman', refers to a lack of an independent cause of everything. This pandemic is not just about the lack of ecological awareness, abuse of economic power or a social experiment by any given country. It has so many variables that, for cognitive and analytical purposes, we refer to the whole of the phenomena as Coronavirus. The more we can agree that this is a multi-layered incident, we can then work together to remove those layers of ego, fear, and dominance or, as the realist might say, interests in terms of power. In addition, we can realize how the opportunity for change can be personal and collective for mutual benefit if guided by compassion.

Otherwise, it could be reduced to a cold rational choice formula, where for one to win the other one has to lose, thus reaffirming separateness and competition that may lead to an escalation of violence and social disruption. As Gudrun von Tevenar (cited in Ure and Frost, 2014, pp. 7) argues, 'compassion is a politically important cognitive and normative resource that enables us to identify hidden or unacknowledged forms of social and material suffering: it makes us aware of the suffering and compels us to remedy it'. This goes along with the basic Buddhist claims that the compassionate mind has two possible manifestations: help others and do not harm. This is to say that although is important to set a course of action to help others in need (taking care of the sick, giving away food, sheltering and providing psychological guidance for example in PTSD), it is also important to refrain from hurting others.

In this pandemic of Covid-19 we have witnessed both manifestations. For example, the adjustment of public policies and health policies to help the ones in need, state provisions for the unemployed, public and private spaces offered as shelters and the basic hygienic measures to avoid infecting others (by using facial masks, social distance, etc.) One could argue if those measures are really guided by compassion or are just means to control public opinion, but as with any other emotion, compassion poses risks when it becomes the basis of political and social action. Maureen Whitebrook (2014, p.22) affirms that 'compassion has to operate beyond personal relationships, in public (as a precondition of politics), translate feeling into action, and avoid charges of sentimentality or irrationality as inappropriate for politics by way of the exercise of judgement in the course of the move from feeling to action.' Therefore, compassion is not a call to become victims, but one to stand up and move forward in creating new conditions to strive as an interdependent humanity.

In conclusion, we are facing a great opportunity to wake up as a global civil society, one of sovereign states working together by aligning individual needs with collective ones, national with transnational well-being. It is not a matter of wishful thinking or romantic ideals, but the application of public policies derived from more mature and conscious individuals guided by compassion, who can influence institutions to safeguard common good. Thus, human security can be developed along with State security creating a new set of norms and values based in common interests. As the XIV Dalai Lama puts it: 'the individual's motivation is thus the governing factor. And whereas a vision properly motivated [by compassion] can lead to wonders, when divorced from basic human feeling the potential for destruction cannot be overestimated' (Dalai Lama, 1999, p. 72).

The greatest enemy in this pandemic is not the virus itself, but the egotistic drive that have led to inequality, injustice and separateness. We are witnessing the dark night of consciousness—the era of destruction—so we can soon be awake to a new vision of empathy, cooperation and kindness. The question is not when will the pandemic end, as it will surely do as an impairment phenomenon; but rather, what are we going to do with it? A cause for more suffering or a cause of liberation through the recognition of our common humanity and universal responsibility. Thus, as the XIV Dalai Lama affirms: 'Peace is not the absence of war. Peace is the manifestation of human compassion.'

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