**Suffering, Memory, and Compassion - A Buddhist Variation on the Ethics of Memory**

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**Introduction**

I would like to thank Professors Timothy Knepper and Leah Kalminson for the opportunity to participate in this wonderful series, the Comparative Project, and to share my ideas about Buddhism and ethics of memory with students, faculty, and staff at Drake University. I would also like to thank the A.A.R. for awarding me the collaborative research grant that afforded me the opportunity to visit Nanjing and to conduct some of the research for this project.

When Professor Knepper asked me to give a presentation on Buddhist approaches to suffering, I immediately agreed since this topic brings together two fundamental interests of mine. First, my general research investigates ways in which Zen Buddhist philosophies can contribute to contemporary issues. In the past, I have focused my inquiries particularly on issues of diversity and ethics. Second, it has become important to me that, whenever I visit a new country, I visit the sites commemorating tragedies that have become central to a people’s self-understanding and identity. As a German living in the U.S.A., it has been important to me to visit the concentration camp in Dachau as well as the Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C. As a resident of the Midwest, I felt it imperative to visit the Wounded Knee museum. As a resident of the U.S.A. who regularly brings American students to Japan, a visit to the Atomic Bomb Museum and the Peace Park in Hiroshima was of the essence. And when I taught Japanese Buddhism in Hong Kong and Shanghai, the Nanjing Massacre Museum was pivotal to understand the Sino-Japanese relationship. Why is that so? I believe that the key to intercultural understanding is the communal tragedies and traumas of cultures and nations.

In the history of every community, be it particular cultures, religions, or humanity as a whole, there are cataclysmic events that I call “unique inescapable ruptures.” With this term I refer to tragedies like massacres and catastrophes that shape the identity and self-understanding of a community. One of these “unique inescapable ruptures” is the dropping of the atomic bomb over Hiroshima on August 6, 1945. This event did not only bring unspeakable suffering to hundreds of thousands of people in a single moment but also constitutes a point of no return for humanity as a whole. The very moment that the bomb was dropped changed the history and self-understanding of humanity irrevocably. It not only marked the beginning of nuclear proliferation but it also elevated the arms race to a new level from which humanity has not yet recovered. Not only are WMDs a constant source of threats but also the possession of nuclear weapons has become a bargaining chip in the political gamble and function as a symbol of political sovereignty. As the events of March and April of 2013 have illustrated, the possibility of new emergent nuclear powers is seen as the single biggest threat to humanity. In similar ways, “unique and inescapable ruptures” shape the self-understanding of individuals and communities and are central to their identity formation. The question is: How do we respond to them? Do we commemorate them or deny their existence?

Four examples of such memorials of these unique and inescapable ruptures are the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C, the Wounded Knee Museum in Wall, South Dakota, the Atomic Bomb Museum in Hiroshima, and the House of Sharing in Seoul. I have chosen these sites because, as a German scholar of Japanese Buddhism who lives in the Midwest, I am in one way or another related to each of them. These four memorials illustrate, on the one hand, how the memorialization of those “unique inescapable ruptures” or, on the other hand, the refusal to recognize them, shape ethnic and national identities. The Holocaust Museum and the Atomic Bomb Dome are monumental witnesses to some of the worst acts of destruction produced in the twentieth century. The Wounded Knee Museum and the House of Sharing, on the other hand, illustrate how a small group of survivors and their descendants struggle for the recognition of the horrors inflicted on their community. It was only in the last two decades that both museums were built to commemorate the Wounded Knee massacre of 1890 and the plight of the comfort women during the Pacific War and still both places are barely recognized by their respective local governments and the respective tourism boards. What all four sites have in common, however, is the belief that the memory of the victim is necessary for the establishment of peace and justice for future generations.

**Ethics of memory:**

The Swiss playwright Max Frisch addresses the necessity of memory in his famous play *Nun singen sie wieder*. In this play, Max Frisch depicts the futility of war. In a poignant scene, townspeople whose city has been attacked by air-raids meet in a bunker. Seeing a child, a woman says, “The child will not know anything of the war when he is grown up. Think about that!… Wherever no one can remember the war, their life begins again.” To this a voice from the back responds, “Or the next war.” Asked why, the voice responds, “Because there is no one there to remember it.”

In Japan during the 13th and 14th century, there emerged the tradition of the “biwa-hōshi.” These were blind itinerant monks who recited the *Tale of Heike* to the sounds of the biwa, a Japanese string instrument. They recited the songs in remembrance of the Genpei War that ravaged Japan in the second half of the twelfth century. On the surface, these are songs about a war but the *Tale of Heike* has a Buddhist spin to it. The term “hōshi” in the phrase “biwa-hōshi” actually means “dharma-teacher.” The goal of the recitation was to remind the listener of the impermanence of life and of the fact that greed inevitably leads to destruction, and encouraged the audience to embrace a life of compassion. The raison d’etre of the biwa-hōshi was to keep alive the memory of the war that laid waste to Japan’s golden age.

In the early 2000s, Avishai Margalit and Pamela Sue Anderson coined the phrase “ethics of memory.” The goal of this phrase was to emphasize the ethical dimension of memory and commemoration. In his book, *Ethics of Memory*, Margalit suggests: “The different between dwelling on humiliation and not on recognition is not the same sort of difference as that between seeing the cup half empty and seeing it half full. The difference, I believe, cuts deeper. Is it not injustice rather than justice that ‘hurts us into politics’?” (Margalit, 2004,104). Margalit believes that it is the memory of the injustice done to us that motivates us to become moral and political. One can take his reasoning a step further and argue that it is the memory of injustice that prescribes our action and defines our identity.

But what do we remember? As a society, we remember the founding days of our community. We remember significant events and people and most of all we remember events that define our community in so far as they express our independence, sovereignty, and thus identity. If we do remember injustice, it is mostly the injustice done to us, the injustice perpetrated on our community. But what events do we forget? As a German, it struck me that the former G.D.R. chose November 9, 1989, to break open the Wall and to start a new chapter in its history. While this was definitely a positive event in history, it seems as though that date was purposefully chosen to undo one of the most painful memories in recent German history, the Reichskristallnacht of November 9, 1938. This night has been the symbol for the senseless mob violence unleashed against the Jewish community in the Third Reich and now its commemoration was forced to share its place on the calendar of memory with an event that has become symbolic for the victory of democracy. The politics of commemoration and forgetting is interesting and expressive of a struggle to construct an identity that reflects moral comportment, if not superiority.

Within a dualistic framework, it seems that there are two kinds of commemorations. First, there is the commemoration of injustice done to one’s own community. Then there is the commemoration of injustice done by one’s own community. The former, which is reflective of what I call “extrovert criticism,” brands the other as immoral and affirms one’s own identity as that of a victim of atrocities. The latter applies “introvert criticism” and recognizes one’s own moral fallibility to the point of self-negation and affirms the humanity if not superiority of the other. Both attitudes essentialize one event in history and, by doing so, bifurcate humanity into victims and victimizers, good guys and bad guys. I believe what is needed is a theory that eschews this dualism and essentialism and allows communities and individuals to recognize their own fallibility in order to open one’s identity to a common humanity.

**Ethics of expression:**

This is where Buddhist philosophy comes in. Buddhist philosophy not only provides an alternative to dualism and essentialism but also recognizes memory as the method to transform suffering into compassion. According to the legends, the historical Buddha was shaken out of the complacency of his royal life by the awareness of suffering when he first encountered sickness, old age, and death. This confrontation with suffering that threatened his own life and the life of his loved ones became the reason for his religious life. However, before he realized the solution to the problem of suffering, so the legends tell us, he was able to see his own past lives as well as the past lives of everyone else. It was this memory that led him to wisdom, that is, the understanding of reality as it is and ultimately compassion towards his fellow humans. There are two lessons to learn from this legend for our current topic. The first lesson is that knowledge of one’s own failures leads to wisdom and compassion and thus to a transformation of suffering. The second lesson is that self and other are not separated, that knowledge of the self leads to knowledge of the other and ultimately the recognition of our common humanity. In the movie *The Dharma Brothers*, the confrontation with his own crimes during a 10-day meditation retreat provide a convicted murderer with the insight to understand the motivations of his daughter’s murderer and, ultimately, with the courage to forgive him. According to mainstream Buddhist beliefs, awareness of one’s own failures and the resulting self-awareness is the necessary condition for compassion and the acceptance of the other.

A second lesson we can learn from Buddhism is its non-dual philosophy. Most Buddhist philosophy rejects the notion that we constitute permanent and independent selves. Rather, Buddhist philosophers suggest, human beings are impermanent and existentially interconnected. Huayan Buddhism uses the allegory of Indra’s net to illustrate our interconnectedness. In addition to its emphasis on the provisional nature and inherent interconnectedness of human existence, Huayan Buddhist philosophy suggests that a person evolves, in the words of Nishida Kitarō, in the dialectic of individuality and universality. For example, every human being is at the same time individual in his/her personality and shares in a common humanity. In some sense, every human being expresses this common humanity fully. At the same time, humanity is not limited to one individual expression. This means, to express the common humanity completely, every single human being, past, present, and future, is required. In his/her activities, every human being shapes what it means to be human while at the same time, is shaped by our common humanity.

One of Nishida’s students, Mutai Risaku, develops Nishida’s dialectic one step further. He suggests that the individuality of human self-consciousness and the totality of the whole world are mere limit functions. True individuality can only be assigned to momentary acts of self-awareness while true totality requires an infinity of expressions and thus can never be attained. In other words, true individuality escapes our grasp in the same sense in which the totality of the world is ever elusive. Therefore, human beings express themselves in what Mutai calls specifics. By “specifics” he means particular identities such as religious, ethnic, national identities etc. These identities are, at the same time, expressive of the individuality of human beings and the totality of our existence. However, as Mutai points out repeatedly, particular identities are constructed, provisional, and always relative to other identities. Most of all, particular identities are one of many and are neither permanent nor absolute. It is the absolutization of these particular identities that lead to destructive ideologies such as racism, sexism, nationalism, and religious exclusivism. Identities are not only provisional and relative, they are also shape-shifting, since they are constructed vis-à-vis a perceived other. To explain this predicament, I frequently ask my students to engage in the following thought experiment: Imagine a room of 10 people, 7 Christians, 2 Hindus, and 1 Buddhist. The discourse will posit Christians versus thus perceive to be not Christians. Once the Buddhist and Hindus get tired of their marginalization and leave the room, the identity politics within the room change drastically. Now the four Protestants band together against the three Catholics. Once the Catholics leave the room, it is the three Lutherans against the one Baptist, and so forth. Once one recognizes, as Mutai suggests, that shape-shifting particular identities are expressive of both individuality and the totality of our existence, three consequences follow: Every particular identity is necessary to express humanity completely. Second, all human beings constitute a solidarity of equals. Since all our identities are expressive of a shared humanity, we learn from each other about our common humanity, and self-awareness is the key to this understanding.

In short, an ethics of expression differs from the essentialism that underlies most of our identity discourses in four significant ways. Essentialism proposes that the identity of individuals and cultures is separated from those of others. This belief implies a dichotomy of the world into good and bad, us and them. While the goal of essentialist philosophies is to uncover truth and justice, it often results in what I call “ethics of judgment” that seeks to identify and condemn those deemed immoral. An ethics of expression, on the other hand, suggests that identities are provisional and constructed in relation to other identities. It envisions the human community as a solidarity of equals in which we realize that there is good and evil in all of us. Such a philosophy strives to embrace the ambiguity of existence and to develop an “ethics of understanding” whose goal is compassion.

At this point, a quick caveat is necessary. I am well aware that this understanding of our existential predicament is complicated by the existence of a power differential. There is a reason why Hegel referred to this relationship as the master-slave dialectic. Victims and victimizers are equal as human beings but not in political reality. An ethics of understanding aims at revealing and correcting this power differential. For the purpose of our current topic, I will limit myself to the terminology of individual person, specific identities, and the totality of the world in my analysis of responses to “unique inescapable ruptures.”

**The case of Nanjing:**

In the second half of this paper, I would like to apply this “ethics of expression” to the commemoration of the Nanjing massacre. The Nanjing massacre commenced on December 13, 1937, when the Japanese forces attacked Nanjing, the capital of China, and lasted for about six weeks. Even though the Japanese occupation brought upon Nanjing brought about unspeakable terror. It took years for even the Chinese government to recognize the plight of the victims. Even though Ah Long’s book *Nanjing* depicted the cruelties of the Japanese occupation as early as 1939, and the Communist Party remembered the heroism of the Chinese during the founding of the PRC in 1949, it was not until the 1980s that the massacre of Nanjing was officially commemorated. The memorial hall in Nanjing was first conceived in 1983, completed in 1985, and expanded in 1997 and 2007. Iris Chang’s famous *The Rape of Nanking*, published in 1997, first made the English-speaking world aware of the Nanjing massacre.

What is disheartening is the rather extreme disagreement of Japanese and Chinese historians and politicians on the subject of the massacre. For the most part, Chinese sources refer to the massacre as the rape of Nanjing, estimate the number of fatalities at above 300,000, treat the surviving pictures and testimonies as proof of the atrocities and the factuality of the massacres, and claim that the Tokyo tribunals were insufficient. A lot of Japanese literature, on the contrary, refer to the massacre as the Nanjing event, downplay the number of fatalities to about 50,000, suggest that the pictures and testimonies were part of Chinese propaganda, and claim that the Tokyo tribunals were based on anti-Japanese prejudice. The attempt to deny the horrors of the Nanjing massacre is evident in the pre-occupation of Japanese literature to quibble about numbers and to uncover Communist ideology. The violent disagreement on the memory of the Nanjing massacre burst on the scene in the early 2000s when the Chinese and Korean governments criticized the new history textbooks developed by a commission of the Japanese government.

If we look behind the ideological frames, one can detect four types of narrative in movies remembering the Nanjing massacre. First there is *Black Sun: The Nanjing Massacre*, which tells a story of undifferentiated Japanese atrocities against Chinese victims and thus reads the Nanjing massacre in the light of a nationalist discourse. The movie *Nanking* tells the fate of the international community in Nanjing that upheld the humanistic values against Japanese barbarianism. This movie reflects modernist ideology that propagates universal human rights to fight injustice and moral depravity. Then there is the movie *John Rabe* that depicts the massacre through the eyes of the German manager of the Siemens plant in Nanjing. Being a member of the NSDAP (Nationalist Socialist Democratic Workers Party) and in all likelihood a supporter of its policies in Germany, he became an unlikely hero during the Japanese occupation of Nanjing. He, first, set out to save the lives of his workers, then other Chinese who came to his plant for help. Finally he became the head of the International Safety Zone established to protect Chinese from Japanese atrocities in Nanjing and used his German citizenship to negotiate minimal safety regulations. His is a human interest story and reflective of an individualist ideology. Finally, the movie *Nanjing, Nanjing--City of Life and Death* takes an alternative perspective. This movie by the Chinese filmmaker Zhuan Lu narrates the story of the Nanjing massacres through the eyes of a Japanese soldier. It manages to tell the story of human rights violations and atrocities without demonizing the Japanese as a people. In comparison to the movie *Black Sun,* which depicts the Japanese as faceless shadows or blood-thirsty demons, the camera in Zhuan Lu’s film often rests on the face of the Japanese protagonist, who fails to comprehend the horrors of war and, ultimately, is destroyed by it.

In some sense, these four narratives reflect four different ideologies. *Black Sun* negotiates national identities and assigns moral values to each. The Chinese are represented as innocent victims, the Japanese as the faceless cold-blooded murderers. In order to create a nationalist feeling of belonging, it bifurcates the world into good and evil. *Nanking* is representative of the modernist paradigm. It portrays universally applicable values that are based in rationality and a clear sense of good and evil. These universal values are embodied by the American and European expats that choose to stay behind in Nanjing even after the invasion in order to save the victims of atrocities. *John Rabe* takes on what one could call a postmodern paradigm that focuses on personal experience and the empowerment of victims. It refrains from generalizations and tells the story of one individual who has the courage, as Paul Tillich would say, “to be oneself.” *Nanjing, Nanjing* takes on the perspective of Mutai’s humanism that combines the previous three paradigms. It strives to understand what drives people to commit acts of terror, faces the complexity of this event, and serves to remind the audience that war cannot but dehumanize everyone involved.

Before I continue, I would like to add another caveat. It is not my intention to suggest that the fourth paradigm resolves the tension between the other three and provides the exclusively right way of commemoration. On the contrary, this approach reflects our existential ambiguity in the light of which peace and moral purity constitute an admirable but every elusive goal. In some sense, the ethics of expression conceptualizes and systematizes the moral ambiguity expressed in the final lines of the famous Japanese anime *Records of the Lodoss War*: “There was once a boy who dreamed of being a hero. Who believed sincerely in the battle to banish darkness from a world of light. But Light and Darkness are equal. And where one exists, so too must the other. And when the boy realized this, he had taken the first step towards becoming a true hero.”

**Commemoration:**

So how are we to remember unique inescapable ruptures? At the end of this paper, I would like to suggest four forms of remebering. First, there is the commemoration through monuments, museums, and holidays. This is the way ethnic, national, and religious communities remember the atrocities that are formative of their identity. It acknowledges the fact that all of us affiliate with particular identities. They give us a feeling of belonging. Commemoration, then, constitutes a ritual that enforces this identity. A second form of memory is education. Education appeals to our shared humanity. It is based on moral reasoning and its goal is peace. In some sense, education provides the knowledge necessary to be a responsible citizen of the human community in a globalized world. However, we do not experience history in abstract universals. We are individuals with personal histories. Therefore, we need to remember unique inescapable ruptures through witness accounts. They give voice to those silenced by history. They empower victims and create empathy. Most of all, they remind us that even though there is one world, there are infinite experiences thereof. Finally, there is the form of memory as mimesis. Its goal is to reenact and embody suffering in order to understand the conditions that lead to the events that shape our history and our identities. It aims at the transformation of individual persons and particular communities that experience themselves as different and separated from the other. One example of such a practice of mimesis is the Japanese dance form of Butō. Butō was developed Tatsumi Hijikata and Kasuo Ono in the aftermath of the dropping of the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima. The dance is designed to confront oneself with the horrors at the basis of one’s own existence. Its goal is the understanding of the other in a solidarity of equals. Hijikata famously said: “The dancer through the Butō spirit confronts the origin of his fears. A dance, which crawls toward the bowels of the earth.”

An ethics of memory that is based on an ethics of expression thus suggests a fundamental paradigm shift. It suggests that understanding our place in the world and our response to “unique inescapable ruptures” should be based on a non-dual paradigm that recognizes the provisional nature of our identities that are constructed in relationship to each other. Given such a philosophical framework, the goal of the memory of injustice must always be to engender transformation. By including multiple narratives, one aims at understanding the conditions of the tragedies that form our communal and personal identities. As Thich Nhat Hanh suggests in his *Being Peace*, the conditions for reconciliations are remembrance, openness, and self-awareness. It is in this understanding of one’s own failures and shortcomings that one is able to understand the standpoint of the other. Only when one accepts that our moral and existential ambiguity cannot be resolved in a simple dichotomy of good versus evil, is one able to avoid the demonization of others and embrace the solidarity of equals.

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