True and Authentic Compassion through Shunryu Suzuki and Martin Luther King

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March 13, 2014
In Martin Luther King’s *Strength to Love*, and in Shunryu Suzuki’s *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, both thinkers convey their underlying theme of authentic compassion: a feeling that arises from a person’s inner attitude and inner love for one another, which is only possible to achieve once we move away from our own self-centered and egoistic thoughts. Suzuki’s message of redemptive hope focuses on self-acceptance of the inevitability of transiency, while King’s approach seeks to end suffering through the understanding of one’s enemy.

This paper seeks to link the models of compassion and hope of Shunryu Suzuki, and Martin Luther King. I have used my own personal experiences, and the on-going situation in the Southern Philippines between the Government, and separatist rebel groups. I hope to use these insights in order to apply the ideologies of Suzuki and King into the current day context.

**Distance yourself from self-centered thoughts to get to authentic compassion.**

King and Suzuki both emphasize the importance of compassion without self-centered thoughts. Suzuki states, “In the beginner’s mind there is no thought ‘I have attained something.’ All self-centered thoughts limit our vast mind. When we have no thought of achievement, no thought of self, we are true beginners” (Suzuki 22). It is important that we rid our minds of dualistic thought. If you think in this manner, our minds will be self-sufficient, and not longing for some objective. This is when our minds are boundless, and it is only then when we can be true to ourselves, and have sympathy for other beings. However, Suzuki conveys that for us to have true and authentic compassion, it has to come from within. He states, “If it is in our inmost desire to get rid of our self-centered ideas, we have to do it. When we make this effort, our
inmost desire is appeased…” (Suzuki 46). Suzuki suggests that the act of compassion by itself does not have any significance, if it is not followed by a true desire to help others.

King also stresses that in order for compassion to be authentic; we need to first get rid of our egoistic thoughts. He uses the Good Samaritan as an example to display true altruism, “…the Good Samaritan reversed the question: ‘If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him’…” (King 26). This is the same type of “boundless” mind and mentality that Suzuki refers to, one that will give rise to an authentic altruism. However, there are major hindrances that prevent us from feeling true compassion for others. I, myself, have a tendency to classify people based on their differences. But in order for compassion to truly be boundless, “the good neighbor looks beyond the external accidents and discerns those inner qualities that make all men human, and therefor, brothers” (King 25). In order for compassion to work, it is extremely important to view people not as a race, tribe, or nationality, but to view them plainly as humans. Suzuki affirms this approach by stating, “When everything exists within your big mind, all dualistic relationships drop away. There is no distinction between heaven and earth, man and woman, teacher and disciple…” (Suzuki 44). We have to be able to look and accept people for who they are, for this type of understanding will lead to compassion.

Critique of pity

On November 2013, Typhoon Yolanda, one of the most powerful storms ever to have been recorded, devastated a part of my home country of the Philippines. With nearly 6,000 dead, I felt helpless being 7,000 miles away from home. I immediately rushed to the Benson Cafeteria when I heard that a couple of my friends set up a booth to accept donations for the typhoon victims. I donated some money I had in my wallet, and carried on with my daily activities. When I returned to my apartment, I asked myself: If my charity earlier that day was really the best I
could do to help my fellow countrymen. The answer to my self-inquiry was no, I could have done more. This realization was further enhanced when I read King’s *Strength to Love.* “True altruism is more than the capacity to pity…Pity may represent little more than the impersonal concern that prompts the mailing of a check” (King 27). I became aware that my effort to help out those in need was lacking. While my act of pity did provide money that would have gone towards the efforts of rehabilitating affected areas, my actions cannot simply arise from the standpoint of comfort and convenience. As a neighbor, I needed to do more on my part to truly partake in the act of compassion.

This is the same type of pity that Friedrich Nietzsche suggests is detrimental to our society. “Those who are from the outset victims, downtrodden, broken, they are the ones, the weakest are the ones who most undermine life among men, who most dangerously poison and question our trust in life, in man” (Nietzsche 87). He states that altruism is not selfless, but rather a self-centered thought that arises from guilt. Furthermore, he states that by being compassionate towards the needy, we are only keeping alive the weak, which poison the healthy. However, I, as a person, cannot choose to leave those who are in need alone. There is an inner attitude that is inside all of us that seeks to go beyond race, gender, nationality, and wealth. Instead, it seeks to focus on the inner qualities that bind us all together. I believe that to help those that are in need is my obligation as a fellow neighbor, and that true and authentic compassion will give purpose to life, and, without a doubt, help those who are suffering. “Such obligations are ones commitment to an inner law, written on the heart” (King 28).

**Society obeying the unenforceable**

There has been an increasingly violent relationship between the Government of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), a pro-separatist rebel group in
Southern Philippines. Clashes between the two groups have caused the lives of over 6,500 people since the 1960s. Many administrations have tried to implement strict rules that seek to prevent further violence, but none have succeeded in actually creating a peaceful environment. We, as a society, use rules and laws to govern and maintain order. However, for a society to change its sentiment for one another, we must have the willingness to obey the unenforceable, “an inner attitude, written on the heart”. This sense of genuine compassion and goodwill for others does not arise from the creation or the enforcement of rules. I truly believe that in order for there to be peace amongst these two groups, there needs to be a change in sentiment for one another.

According to King, man-made laws assure justice, but a higher law produces love” (King 28).

While rules may attempt to control people, their feelings and or hatred towards one another may still stay the same. Suzuki takes a similar stance, and disagrees on using force as a means of controlling people. “Even though you try to put people under some control, it is impossible… The best way to control people is to encourage them to be mischievous…the second worst is trying to control them.” (Suzuki 32). I believe that Suzuki is suggesting that the more you establish rules and restrictions while asserting control on a people, the more there will be a response of retaliation from them. With the insurgency situation that is going on in the Southern Philippines, I agree that attempts to control and combat the MILF has just resulted in more violence.

On March 2000, President Joseph Estrada declared an all-out-war against the MILF rebels. Several clashes between the militant group and the Philippine military erupted, which led the loss of many lives. As a result, the rebels retaliated and were held responsible for the bombings in several key locations in the nation’s capital on December 2000, which resulted in 22 deaths. Another separatist group, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), attacked
Zamboanga City, Southern Philippines which led to the displacement of more than 100,000 people (Fox News 2013). The Muslim MNLF group has been fighting the mainly Catholic Philippines for an independent autonomous homeland in the south. Karl Marx suggests that “the most stubborn opposition between Jew and Christian is the religious opposition… and how is religious opposition made impossible? By abolishing religion.” (Marx, *On the Jewish Question*). This statement explains the similar situation on-going with Muslim groups such as the MNLF, MILF and the rest of the predominantly Catholic Philippines.

While I agree that the opposition and situation resulted from religious tension between the groups, simply abolishing religion is easier said than done. Another solutions is needed to ease these historical and religious tensions between both groups. Islam was first established in the Philippines in 1380, while the first Catholic mass was held in 1521 (seasite.edu). These religions have already been imbedded in the social and cultural makeup of the Filipinos. While the conflict between the separatists and the Philippine government can be attributed to economic and political factors, there is an inherent religious division between both groups that has created tension. “The religious is any activity pursued on behalf of an ideal end against obstacles and in spite of threats of personal loss because of its general and enduring value” (John Dewey). It is my understanding that instead of religion being a dividing factor between both groups, religion should be as a means in which there could be unity in Southern Philippines. There needs to be an understanding and awareness between both groups for any peaceful transformation to occur. It is important to emphasize King’s pro-peace, non-violence approach, one that stresses goodwill and understanding for one another, “Love is not to be confused with sentimental outpouring…agape, understanding and creative, redemptive goodwill for all men” (King 46). I believe that Agape, the type of love that promotes respect and unity amongst people, is the solution to the on-going
tensions in the South. This is not a political solution, nor is it an enforceable one. This type of love needs to come from within each individual person. The use of force has proved that time and time again, it will only lead to more violence and hatred. “Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness…darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that” (King 47).

**Redemptive Hope.**

King’s redemptive hope for the racial tensions in 1960s America can be applied to the situation in the Southern Philippines. I believe the solution for those instances can only arise from understanding and awareness. “...men are possessed by the invisible, inner law that etches on their hearts the conviction that all men are brothers and that love is mankind’s most potent weapon for personal and social transformation” (King 30). He stresses that the salvation of mankind is attainable when we, in strength and humility, meet hate with love. King’s approach to end suffering and hardships of mankind emphasizes the relations between person-to-person.

Sigmund Freud states “we are threatened with suffering…from our own body, which is doomed to decay and dissolution; and from our relations to other men” (Freud 24). Freud’s view of suffering links the redemptive of hope of King, which focuses on neighborly compassion with others, with the redemptive hope of Suzuki: the self-acceptance of the finiteness of everything. Suzuki emphasizes the inevitability of transiency as one of the reasons humans suffer. “When we realize the everlasting truth of everything changes and find our composure in it, we find ourselves in Nirvana…because we cannot accept the truth of transiency, we suffer” (Suzuki 103). Much like Freud’s explanation of suffering, Suzuki suggests that humans have a tendency to take on a non-acceptance of the truth of transiency. We will only find purpose in life when we start to embrace the fact that everything will change, no matter what. Our bodies are finite, and
will eventually return to dust. I personally find it very difficult to accept the inevitability of transiency. However, I believe that by accepting the truth, I can achieve some sort of peace of mind.

**Self-Analysis and Conclusion**

Martin Luther King and Shunryu Suzuki’s view of authentic, universal compassion highlights the need for an individual to cleanse the mind of egoistic thoughts. After that first step, we can then truly have sympathy for others. Another important theme that King emphasizes in regards to person-to-person relations is Agape: an understanding for each other, which is needed for any social transformation to occur. Throughout this course, thinkers such as Nietzsche, Freud, Suzuki, Eliade, and Marx, have resonated in my religious and social aspects of my life. Coming into this course, I considered myself a Catholic. I struggled with my reasons as to why I was Catholic and I started to ask myself: “am I a Catholic just because my parents are?”

This course has provided an opportunity to help me explore and evaluate the role of religion in my life. “Religion is an answer to the ultimate questions…the primary task of religious thinking is to rediscover the questions to which religion is an answer, to develop a degree of sensitivity to the ultimate questions…” (Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom*). I completely agree that Religion is able to answer ultimate questions. However, Religion is not the only answer available to find meaning in life. Religion does attempt to provide meaning in life, but we must first develop a sense of sensitivity and responsiveness to the questions “What are we all here for?” and “What is our purpose?” These are the questions that we need to ask ourselves before we embark on the journey that is religion. However after
reading *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, I found an idea that was extremely simple, yet overreaching to all aspects of my life, “We do not exist for the sake of something else. We exist for the sake of ourselves” (Suzuki 27). In the future, this is a teaching that I will try my best to integrate into my own life. By truly being myself, I believe this will help me find purpose in life.