COMPASSION FOR THE OTHER IN LEVINAS AND BUDDHISM: THE CASE OF THE BODHISATTVA

Kajornpat Tangyin[1]

ABSTRACT

The philosophy of Levinas, gives a primacy to ethics over ontology, and a primacy of the other over the self. This is something which is also found in the tradition of Mahayana Buddhism, especially with regard to compassion, and the idea of the role of the Bodhisattva. This paper compares Levinas's philosophy of ethics with the teaching of Mahayana Buddhism and and demonstrates how they are connected by their emphasis on the virtue of compassion. Both advocate a departure from the ego-self to the compassion for the other. Levinas like Buddhism redefines subjectivity through its responsibility to the other. So reading Levinas through Buddhism allows us to understand the shift from the Western idea of the self to the responsibility towards the other, and it allows us to understand the responsibility the self has towards addressing the suffering of the other. Also reading Levinas through Buddhism allows us to understand a respect for non-human nature which remains within the framework of Levinas' philosophy.

Keywords: Levinas; Buddhism; Compassion; Thich Nhat Hanh

Prajñā Vihāra Vol. 23 no. 2 July to December 2022, 53-65

Levinas uses the term the "Other" (*autre*) to refer to alterity or otherness in general, and the "other" (*autrui*) to refer to the personal other, or the other person. He places ethics as first philosophy prior to ontology, and his ethics begins with the encounter with the other in society. The primacy of ethics gives the priority to the other, and also reflects the primacy of the other over the "I."

For Levinas, the relationship between the self and the other is asymmetrical, similar to the irreversibility of time.[2] The traditional priority given to the 'I' or the self, for Levinas, is problematic in Western philosophy. He says, "The I is the very crisis of the being of a being (*l'être de l'étant*) in the human… I already ask myself whether my being is justified, whether the *Da* of my *Dasein* is not already the usurpation of someone's place."[3] So the other is recognized while the self is put into question, such is the beginning of Levinas's philosophy of ethics. The other is beyond any comprehension, or any thematization, or in the other sense the other is beyond any ontological determination. The other is neither initially nor ultimately what we grasp or what we thematize.[4] The other to whom we can grasp, thematize, generalize, is not the true other. For Levinas, if we could possess, grasp, and know the other, it would not be other. Possessing, knowing, and grasping are synonyms of power.[5] The other, for Levinas, is not something to be dominated by knowledge and power. He writes that "the relationship with the other will never be the feat of grasping a possibility."[6] Levinas, in his book *Time and the Other*, continues this discussion when he observes that the other is beyond the graspable, or thematizable, in a manner similar to time. He sees time as beyond any conceptualizing, and prior to any understanding. We experience time but do not possess time, and we have no power over time. Likewise, we experience the other but we could not possess the other and have no power over the other.

Levinas regards 'time' and 'the other' as a mystery. These are the two things which cannot be understood in the manner of the other things we experience. He says, "The relationship with the other is not an idyllic and harmonious relationship of communion, or a sympathy

through which we put ourselves in the other's place; we recognize the other as resembling us, but exterior to us; the relationship with the other is a relationship with a Mystery."[7] This positing of time and the other as mystery leads him consider that our of relationship with the other is similar to our relationship with the future. The future is unknowable, and beyond our grasp. The future is always exceeds our expectations. The future that we speak of of is not the real future. Levinas says, "The future is what is in no way grasped…. The other is the future. The very relationship with the other is the relationship with the future"[8] When Levinas connects the other with time, he accepts the limits of human knowledge to formulate concepts. So he is referring to something prior to our conceptualization. He prefers to use the term 'alterity' of the other.

The alterity of the other is incompatible with the difference among things, or even of the different attributes, different properties, and different positions in space. According to Levinas, "But before any attributes, you are other than I, other otherwise, absolutely other! And it is this alterity, different from the one which is compared to attributes, that is your alterity. This alterity is not justifiable logically; it is logically indiscernible."[9] Alterity of the other must be respected at the moment of the encounter between human beings. Otherwise we are tempted to categorize the other as the same, where it becomes only an object of our appropriation. The other cannot be absolutely other if the alterity of the other is not recognized. Concerning the significance of the alterity of the other, Levinas says:

> It is not difference which makes alterity: alterity makes difference. The recognition of the other happens beyond being, beyond essence, without these formulations taking on a sophistic signification. The possibility of respect and of goodness are extraordinary possibilities with regard to nature, with regard to the perseverance in being: the possibility of holiness which, beyond the perseverance of a being in its being, would recognize the priority of an irreducible alterity. I think that the true humanity of man

> begins in this recognition, before any cognition of being, before onto-logy. That is why I said to you that the question of the other seemed to me to be anterior to the problem of ontology.[10]

For Levinas, the irreducibility of the alterity of the other is the moment where the ethical relationship between human beings begins. It is not ontology that remains at the level understanding, or for the sake of knowledge, but it is an ethics, where the alterity of the other is fully respected. Any program of reduction of the other to the same, or the return to the self, has to be put into question. In an interview, he claims: "I am trying to show that man's ethical relation to the other is ultimately prior to his ontological relation to himself (egology) or to the totality of things which we call the world (cosmology)"[11]

For Levinas, this philosophy of ethics should embrace the whole of humanity. He says,

> The ethical is not an invention of the white race, of a humanity which has read the Greek authors in school and gone through a specific evolution. The only absolute value is the human possibility of giving the other priority over oneself. I don't think that there is a humanity that can take exception to that ideal, even if it is declared an ideal of holiness. I am not saying that the human being is a saint; I'm saying that he or she is the one who has understood that holiness is incontestable.[12]

Levinas's philosophy of ethics also has a religious dimension. In the above quotation, we can see that he claims that the highest aim of a philosophy of ethics is holiness, and this holiness is the ultimate aim of humanity. This extends even to the examples he uses for the other; he speaks of the stranger, the widow, and the orphan.[13] These are real examples of living people that moves Levinas beyond abstracts considerations of the other. He is very fond of quoting a Jewish proverb:

'the other's material needs are my spiritual needs.' He approaches this responsibility not through rational principles or the universality of law as in Kantian ethics, but through our living relation to the other.[14] Ethics, for Levinas is all about goodness, mercy, and charity. And this ethics, or the relation with the other, is accomplished through service and as hospitality.[15] He adds, "I am for the other in a relationship of deaconship: I am in service to the other."[16]

Re-reading Levinas with this in mind connects us to themes in Buddhism. For instance, the story in Mahayana Buddhism of the Bodhisattva who delays his attainment of nirvana, because of his compassion for all sentient beings, desires to help every last one of them reach the shore of Nirvana before himself. His compassion and responsibility for the other, the privilege he gives to the other, is relevant to the main message of Levinas. Wing-Cheuk Chan says, "From the Mahayana Buddhist slogans to the effect that all sentient beings can become Buddha and that a *Bodhisattva* lives for the sake of others, one can discover that Mahayana Buddhism is indeed committed to the paradigm of ethics as first philosophy. Indeed, this can be well sustained by the Mahayana Buddhist doctrine of compassion."[17] Levinas's idea of the other allows us to reflect more deeply on the nature of true compassion in Mahayana Buddhism. Gadjin M. Nagao, in *The Bodhisattva's Compassion*, describes this well:

> Compassion means "to share other's sufferings," and naturally it is itself characterized by pain and suffering. Observing the sufferings of all sentient beings, when a bodhisattva becomes compassionate toward them he shares the same suffering and himself comes to suffer greatly…. His happiness never occurs so long as other people are unhappy; his happiness is only constituted of other's happiness, apart from which there is no happiness independent and special to him.[18]

Nagao takes account of Bodhisattva's compassion to all sentient beings without any discrimination between the happy and the suffering,

and never expect anything in return.[19] This is the basic characteristic of all bodhisattvas.

As in Buddhism, Levinas's philosophy of ethics departs from the ego-self and moves towards a responsibility for the other. Levinas redefines subjectivity with responsibility, and this responsibility is not limited by itself or within itself. But on the contrary, responsibility extends from beyond self. Levinas says, "No one can remain in himself: the humanity of man, subjectivity, is a responsibility for the others, an extreme vulnerability. The return to the self becomes an interminable detour."[20] This is similar to the idea of the Bodhisattva who carries all men's sufferings and takes responsibility for all men sins, and through his compassion he lives his life for the salvation of the other. This seems to be a difficult path, but essentially everyone can practice the virtue of compassion, and everyone can become the Bodhisattva. Thich Nhat Hanh, the famous Vietnamese Buddhist monk, says:

> The essence of love and compassion is understanding, the ability to recognize the physical, material, and psychological suffering of others, to put ourselves "inside the skin" of the other. We "go inside" their body, feelings, and mental formations, and witness of ourselves their suffering. Shallow observation as an outsider is not enough to see their suffering. We must become one with the object of our observation. When we are in contact with another's suffering, a feeling of compassion is born in us. Compassion means, literally, "to suffer with."[21]

The Buddhist virtue of compassion, according to Thich Nhat Hanh, is also similar to Levinas's reflections concerning 'hostage' and 'substitution.' Levinas writes, "Substitution is not the psychological event of compassion of intropathy in general, but makes possible the paradoxical psychological possibilities of putting oneself in the place of another."[22] The Buddhist virtue of compassion and Levinas's substitution in a similar way aim to help the other out of suffering.

Re-reading Levinas in this way can also be linked to the Bodhisattva's compassion to all sentient beings, and creatures such as animals and the environment. For Buddhism, there is no doubt that the Five Precepts (*Pañca-sila*) – (1) not to destroy life, (2) not to steal, (3) not to commit adultery, (4) not to tell lies, (5) not to take intoxicating drinks – are the basic moral obligations. And the first precept is not to kill, which means that we have to extend our compassion for all living creatures. Thich Nhat Hanh sees the Five Precepts as the basic practice in the Five Mindfulness Training:

> The First Mindfulness is about protecting the lives of human beings, animals, vegetables, and minerals. To protect other beings is to protect ourselves. The second is to prevent the exploitation by humans of other living beings and of nature. It is also the practice of generosity. The third is to protect children and adults from sexual abuse, to preserve the happiness of individuals and families…. The Fourth Mindfulness Training is to practice deep listening and loving speech. The Fifth Mindfulness Training is about mindful consumption.[23]

The basic teaching of Buddhist's ethics begins with 'not to kill' that includes all living creatures. For Levinas, when he echoes the commandment from the mount of Sinai "Thou shalt not kill" and this commandment means to only human or to all living creatures. John Llewelyn poses this question to Levinas's ethics when he writes:

> Who is my neighbor? The discussion of this question throughout the ages has ranged from asking whether my neighbor is the Jew, through whether he is any and every other human being including my enemy, to whether he is God. It may enable us to clarify what Levinas's answer to this question would be if we ask not only whether his concept of the neighbor includes God, a question that, in the light of one interpretation of the belief in the death of

> God, might be deemed by some to purely academic, but also whether Levinas's concept of the neighbor includes the nonhuman animal.[24]

Yet in Levinas's philosophy of ethics, there are no ethical priority given to other creatures. When Philippe Nemo mentioned the biological paradigm that 'every species lives at the expense of another and one cannot live without killing,' Levinas replyed: "In society such as it functions one cannot live without killing, or at least without taking the preliminary steps for the death of someone."[25] He elaborates "what is most natural becomes the most problematic."[26] So he seems to acknowledge the biological paradigm but he does not extend his concern to non-human creatures.

We get no help if we try to apply Levinas's philosophy of ethics to non-human creatures by using his terms like *speech* and *the face*. Llewelyn remarks: "When asked about our responsibilities toward nonhuman sentient creatures, he is inclined to reply that our thinking about them may have to be only analogical or that the answer turns on whether in the eyes of the animal we can discern a recognition, however obscure, of his own mortality – on whether, in Levinas's sense of the word, the animal has a face."[27] Llewelyn, points out that Levinas made this very clear, "The face that calls me into question is not the face of the animal."[28] The face that calls me into question is the face of my neighbor, for whom I must be responsible. But there are those like Anne Primavesi, in the article *Biodiversity and Responsibility*, who attempts to apply Levinas's ethical responsibility to responsibility for other species in the ecosystem.[29] This is one of many attempts of Levinas's readers who try to make Levinas to be more expansive in his consideration of the other. Colin Davis' calls this the "Levinas effect" which means "the ability of the Levinassian text to appear differently to each of its readers."[30]

But it must be remembered that Levinas lived during the time of war, and he experienced the brutal non-human treatment of human being. The urgency of such a situation is to address the human treatment of the human, or as he writes in the Preface of *Totality and Infinity*: "Everyone

will readily agree that it is of the highest importance to know whether we are not duped by morality."[31]

The use of Buddhism for rereading Levinas therefore becomes an interesting task because it has the potential to connect Levinas to the idea of a compassion that embraces the whole of nature, human as well as non-human. This task is just beginning and requires deep comparative analysis of the concepts of compassion (karuna) suffering (dukkha) and our relationships with the order of nature or 'dependent origination' (pratitya-samutpada).

ENDNOTES

[1] Kajornpat Tangyin is a lecturer in Philosophy and Religious Studies at Assumption University of Thailand and is the Director of the Center for Professional Ethics.

[2] Emmanuel Levinas, *Is It Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas.* Jill Robbins. (Ed.). Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001, 118.

[3] Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence.* Michael B. Smith. (Trans.). New York: Columbia University Press, 1999, 28.

[4] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority.* Alphonso Lingis. (Trans.). Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969. 172.

[5] Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other.* Richard A. Cohen. (Trans.). Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987, 90.

[6] Ibid, 76.

[7] Ibid, 75.

[8] Ibid, 76-77.

[9] Emmanuel Levinas, *Is It Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas,* 49.

[10] Ibid, 106.

[11] Richard Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984, 57.

[12] Emmanuel Levinas, *Is It Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas,* 170.

[13] Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence.* Michael B. Smith. (Trans.). New York: Columbia University Press, 1999, 97.

14 Emmanuel Levinas, *Is It Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas,* 114.

[15] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority,* 300.

[16] Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death, and Time.* Bettina Bergo. (Trans.). Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000, 161.

[17] Wing-Cheuk Chan, "The Primacy of the Other: Mahayana Buddhism and Levinas." *Phenomenological Inquiry.* Vol.22, October, 1998, 74.

[18] M. Gadjin Nagao, "The Bodhisattva's Compassion Described in the Mahāyāna-sūtrālamkāra." In Jonathan A. Silk. (Ed.). *Wisdom, Compassion, and the Search for Understanding: The Buddhist Studies Legacy of Gadjin M. Nagao*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000, 5.

[19] Ibid, 6.

[20] Emmanuel Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers.* Alphonso Lingis. (Trans.). Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1993, 149.

[21] *The Thich Nhat Hanh Collection.* Arnold Kotler. (Ed.). New York: One Spirit, 2004, 81-82.

[22] Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence.* Alphonso Lingis. (Trans.). Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991, 146.

[23] Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching.* New York: Broadway Books, 1998, 196-197.

[24] John Llewelyn, "Am I Obsessed by Bobby? (Humanism of the Other Animal)." In Robert Bernasconi & Simon Critchley. (Eds.). *Re-Reading Levinas.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991, 234.

[25] Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity.* Richard A. Cohen. (Trans.). Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1985, 120.

[26] Ibid, 121.

[27] John Llewelyn, "Am I Obsessed by Bobby? (Humanism of the Other Animal)," 240.

[28] Ibid, 242.

[29] Anne Primavesi, "Biodiversity and Responsibility: A Basis for a Non-Violent Environmental Ethic." In Ursula King. (Ed.). *Faith and Praxis in a Postmodern Age*. New York: Cassell, 1998, 52.

[30] Colin Davis, Colin. *Levinas: An Introduction.* Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996, 140.

[31] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority,* 21.

REFERENCES

Chan, Wing-Cheuk. "The Primacy of the Other: Mahayana Buddhism and Levinas." *Phenomenological Inquiry*. Vol.22, October, 1998, pp.71-83.

Davis, Colin. *Levinas: An Introduction*. Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996.

Hanh, Thich Nhat. *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*. New York: Broadway Books, 1998.

_____ *The Thich Nhat Hanh Collection*. Arnold Kotler. (Ed.). New York: One Spirit, 2004.

Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Alphonso Lingis. (Trans.). Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969.

_____ *Ethics and Infinity*. Richard A. Cohen. (Trans.). Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1985.

_____ *Time and the Other*. Richard A. Cohen. (Trans.). Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987.

_____ *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*. Alphonso Lingis. (Trans.). Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991.

_____ *Collected Philosophical Papers*. Alphonso Lingis. (Trans.). Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1993.

_____ *Alterity and Transcendence*. Michael B. Smith. (Trans.). New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.

_____ *God, Death, and Time*. Bettina Bergo. (Trans.). Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000.

_____ *Is It Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*. Jill Robbins. (Ed.). Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001.

Kearney, Richard. *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The*

Phenomenological Heritage. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984.

Llewelyn, John. Am I Obsessed by Bobby? (Humanism of the Other Animal).

In Robert Bernasconi & Simon Critchley. (Eds.). *Re-Reading Levinas*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991.

Nagao, M. Gadjin. The Bodhisattva's Compassion Described in the Mahāyāna-

sūtrālamkāra. In Jonathan A. Silk. (Ed.). *Wisdom, Compassion, and the Search for Understanding: The Buddhist Studies Legacy of Gadjin M. Nagao*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000.

Primavesi, Anne. Biodiversity and Responsibility: A Basis for a Non-Violent

Environmental Ethic. In Ursula King. (Ed.). *Faith and Praxis in a Postmodern Age*. New York: Cassell, 1998, pp. 47-59.