

What is Love Asking from Us? Reflections on Gaza and the Bodhisattva Path

Tara Brach, May 11, 2024

“The moment we choose to love, we begin to move towards freedom, to act in ways that liberate ourselves and others.” ~ bell hooks

The humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza has escalated dramatically [since my last blog post in December 2023](#), and it’s spiraling into increasing devastation, torment and chaos with each passing day. The Israeli military has killed 34,000 Palestinians, mostly women and children. Almost the entire population of Gaza is displaced, more than half is struggling with starvation and disease, and there is now a famine spreading through the North. Meanwhile, since the brutal attack and hostage taking by Hamas of October 7th, many in Israel have been living with acute trauma, loss and an ongoing sense of deep endangerment.

Over these months, my deepest inquiries continue to be: What is love asking from me? How can we take action in ways that liberate ourselves and others? These questions have led me to seek a deeper understanding of the historical conditions that contributed to this current situation, to lead meditation events for those directly impacted, to contact my representatives and call for a ceasefire, to donate to humanitarian organizations and to write articles encouraging others to engage in compassionate activism. Dialogues with Palestinians, Israelis, friends, students and many others holding diverse perspectives and experiences have broadened and refined my views as well as helped illuminate my own biases. And through this time, I’ve witnessed a courage, wisdom and love in some of those closest to the suffering that has inspired my heart.

What continues to resonate as most clear and urgent is to stop the killing and do everything we can to get humanitarian aid to Gaza to address the widespread and horrendous suffering. At the same time, we must look to the future, asking ourselves what kind of action will bring justice and peace, a world where all beings are treated with respect, care and dignity. External strategies alone—like political and social activism—will never be the answer. Our human violence arises out of the delusion of separation—the perception of “us against them” that leads us to fearing and then hating and demonizing others. There will be no genuine justice and healing in our world unless we dedicate ourselves to evolving our human heart and spirit: We need to realize our intrinsic belonging to one another.

The felt sense of enlarged belonging was poignant during a meditation gathering I led for Israelis in December. After hearing many expressions of trauma and loss in the wake of Hamas’s attack and Israel’s retaliation, a woman spoke at the closing of our candle ceremony: “May we pray for all the children.” I witnessed this same sense of caring and communion in March when I led an online event for a Palestinian meditation group with members in many Arab speaking countries. One woman had seen an image of a mother in Gaza and her six emaciated, clearly starving children, all sitting by an empty cooking pot. Her vow was to recollect this image daily to keep her heart broken open. Another woman at the end of the gathering prayed through her tears: “May I keep choosing love, even when the forces of hatred are so great.” In the silence that followed, there was a palpable sense of shared presence and tenderness.

Choosing love has the power to free us from suffering. This is the essence of the Bodhisattva Path, a path dedicated to awakening our hearts and bringing healing and freedom to all beings. The practices on this path are aimed at cultivating mindfulness and compassion, which are the grounds of transformational engagement with our world.

The compassion of a Bodhisattva is inclusive of all beings. And yet when we or others are threatened or harmed, especially when we’ve been traumatized, we lose our capacity for empathy. The threatening other is experienced as bad, and not human like ourselves. This isn’t our fault. The habit of demeaning and dehumanizing others is a universal and biologically rooted response from our survival brain. It’s much simpler and faster to create an enemy—a default to black and white thinking—than to open our hearts to the complex reality that humans who cause suffering are themselves wounded and suffering.

Throughout human history, the demonizing of others has been the psychological fuel that drives warfare. We can look at any violent conflict across the globe—the civil war in Sudan, the persecution of the Rohingya in Myanmar, the war in Ukraine, the conflict in Syria—and we’ll see this “othering” and devaluing of human life. In this process, the other is stripped of their humanity and becomes unreal—a mere symbol of evil or threat. And when we make others less than human, we armor our hearts and are severed from our own conscience and humanity. This is what enables humans to commit and rationalize killing, torture, genocide and other acts of cruelty.

Even if we are not directly engaged in violent conflict, our habits of “bad othering” are deeply conditioned and contribute to the dividedness and violence in the

collective field. The Bodhisattva Path invites each of us to wake up from this habit by bringing it into conscious awareness, and intentionally cultivating our capacity for compassion.

You might pause for a moment to look at your own psyche. Bringing to mind the situation in Gaza, or any domain of charged conflict that has been impacting you, you might sense if you have been perceiving a particular group of people as less human, less moral and less valuable than yourself or those you identify with. If so, what does this “bad othering” feel like in your heart? Can you sense the tightness of armoring? Now explore looking behind the behaviors or views of those you condemn. Is it possible to sense them as a traumatized and hurting part of our human family? As parents, children, siblings or friends who, like you, want to feel safe, valued, loved and free? Notice what happens when you let your heart be touched by this larger reality.

Breaking free of dehumanization and awakening compassion requires a courageous, honest, and sustained mindfulness. It is natural that Palestinians, Israelis, and others who are most traumatized in this conflict may not be capable of a mindful presence right now. However, for those of us who care and have the willingness, this crisis calls on us to deepen our dedication to the Bodhisattva’s inner work. As Thich Nhat Hanh taught, “Man is not our enemy.” We need to open wide our hearts so our actions serve the healing and freedom of all beings.

Some fear that an inclusive compassion—one that encompasses those we feel have caused the most harm—is too soft, that it bypasses accountability for violating others and undermines a forceful resistance to continued violence. However, compassion is not silent, indiscriminate, or neutral; rather, it calls us to relieve suffering through affirmative and determined action. Compassion-in-action has been modeled by well-known spiritual leaders like Gandhi and Martin Luther King and expressed in the non-violence movements of the last many decades. With compassion we can oppose dominance hierarchies like racism and colonialism that harm both victims and perpetrators. With compassion we can recognize the decades of oppression and displacement of Palestinian people, as well as the hugely disproportionate killing, devastation and trauma experienced by all those living in Gaza today. At the same time, we can hold in our hearts the great historical and present trauma of the Jewish people—the centuries of persecution, the extermination of Jews in the last century, the spiking of antisemitism and the continued sense of endangerment, especially for Israelis. Only by caring for all, while acting to address the asymmetry of this conflict and the immediacy of this humanitarian catastrophe, can we ultimately bring healing to all.

While the focus of this piece is on the crisis in Gaza, there are countless domains of great pain and trauma on this planet that need our compassionate attention. These span the suffering of those in war-torn places and those facing climate emergencies, to our most close-in circle of dear ones, as well as our inner life. And the realms of suffering include all who are being violated, including non-human beings, and our living earth. On the Bodhisattva path we seek to let our hearts be touched by the pain in our world, and to respond with love and compassion, as best we can.

In this spirit, let us pause once more, and take a moment to inquire into what love is asking from us right now—either in response to the anguish of those in Gaza, or in response to any place of suffering in the world.

For me, this inquiry invokes an inner tenderness and energizes action. As I mentioned earlier, it guides me to speak and write about compassion in action. And it leads me to continue to join with others in the call for an immediate and permanent ceasefire, a return of all hostages by both Israel and Hamas, removing blocks to humanitarian aid to Gaza, and an end to the United States funding of weapons for Israel. We need to stop the killing and tend to those in need. And together, to manifest a more just, compassionate future that honors the dignity and intrinsic sacredness of all beings.

May we each take refuge in presence and love, over and over.

May we listen to what love is asking from us, and act in ways that liberate ourselves and others.

May we engage together on behalf of our precious, hurting world.

With love and prayers,

Tara

For those who seek engagement in ways that might directly relieve the suffering in Gaza, please consider the below.

<https://afsc.org/news/6-ways-you-can-support-palestinians-gaza>

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