Ignorance and Suffering: Insights from Tibetan Medical Philosophy on American Thought in the 2020 Pandemic

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Abstract

During the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, we Americans have entrusted our safety and wellbeing to our most reckless and responsible citizens alike. The puzzling reality of American health care is that although U.S. medical technologies are foremost in the world, public deficits in scientific knowledge and a confusion about the value of “individual freedom” versus “public health” hinder efforts to contain the spread of COVID-19. Today, expert advice surrounding the dangers of the coronavirus and the importance of face masks should be taken with the utmost seriousness. By July 22, 14 million people are known to have been infected and as the number grows, it is increasingly important that we, as a national public, educate ourselves and others about scientific developments concerning COVID-19 to slow this crisis. The theory of confronting ignorance to avoid prolonged suffering is hardly a new concept, having existed for thousands of years in ancient Tibetan-Buddhist texts. In this essay, I apply some Tibetan-Buddhist fundamentals to our present context and argue that an understanding of how ignorance leads to suffering—and a sense of individual responsibility to overcome personal ignorance—is direly needed in our present context. I am by no means claiming to offer a fix-all for everything wrong in America, but I hope that popularizing concepts from an ancient yet evolving philosophy will help us deal with public and personal health in manageable and practicable ways.

Keywords
Ignorance, Tibetan Buddhism, Pandemic, Suffering.

What separates Buddhism from other world religions is that it is a belief system based not on faith but on logical inquiry. Similar to Western approaches to the scientific method, Buddhism’s core tenent is to accept any concept and principle only after thorough investigation and the application of logic and reasoning—as opposed to ritualistic practice or faith (Katzman 2019). Tibetan Medicine branched out of Buddhism’s scientific and inquisitive foundation and seeks to understand suffering in order to properly identify illnesses (physical and mental) and prescribe treatments (Katzman 2019). Through such discernment and healing practices, followers develop a healthy mind/body connection in order to practice and attain Enlightenment—the extinguishment of suffering.

Western audiences often view Eastern Medicine as mystical, ritualistic offshoots of ancient religion. In actuality, as Dr. Menpa Namgyal Qusar (2019) (teacher, researcher, and established clinical practitioner of Tibetan Medicine) affirms, Eastern and Western medical approaches are more similar than different (Qusar et al. 2019). As in western medicine, Tibetan Medicine recognizes that people have different physiologies and body constitutions and acknowledges that different patients affected by the same disorder or disease (like COVID-19) can experience dissimilar symptoms. In Tibetan Medicine, a healthy body is in a “delicate state of dynamic equilibrium; unwholesome diet, improper lifestyle, seasonal variation, [and] evil spirit influences can easily upset homeostasis”
One practice unique to Western Medicine is the tendency to divide "mental" and "physical" health into separate departments. In contrast, Tibetan Medicine sees an intimate connection between one's physical and mental components and understands that both components (the material body and non-material mind) profoundly influence one another and one's overall health. Geshe Dadul Namgyal La (an experienced Tibetan-Buddhist monk and English translator for His Holiness, the Dalai Lama between 2007-2009) says, "many sufferings begin with internal suffering, which leads to external suffering, mostly health problems . . . The Buddhists attribute the source of this internal suffering to the mental component of the [non-material] mind" (La 2019). It is through such a connection that ignorance can manifest itself in bodily suffering and/or a distorted perception of reality that leads to later suffering. One such example of community ignorance is the continued use of wet markets in Asian communities despite proven public health dangers.

SUFFERING IN TIBETAN BUDDHISM

In Tibetan culture it is believed that suffering is an inescapable reality of life. Suffering is what helps guide those along the path towards Enlightenment via the Four Noble Truths, the essence of all Buddhist teachings:

The Four Noble Truths are: 1) the truth of suffering, 2) the origin of suffering, 3) the truth of cessation, 4) the truth of the path towards cessation. They are called noble truths because they are truths realized only by noble or superior persons. After identifying the four truths, the Buddha [teaches] how to realize suffering, how to abandon the cause of suffering, how to achieve the cessation of suffering, and how to practice the path to cessation (Dalai Lama 2001).

In American society, these noble or superior persons should be our medical professionals - not politicians. Our medical professionals are the most educated about suffering and methods of treatment. According to Geshe Dadul La, "the root of suffering and illness is tied to ignorance." He then refers to a passage from Terry Clifford (2001):

There is but one cause for illness, and this is ignorance due to not understanding the meaning of identity-lessness [lack of permanent ego]. For example, even when a bird soars in the sky, it does not part from its shadow. Likewise, even when all creatures live and act with joy, because they have ignorance it is impossible for them to be free of illness.

From this perspective, the ignorant belief that one's permanent ego exists independently from the universe obscures one's understanding of the Buddhist concept of impermanence. One example is - until recently - President Trump's intentional choice to not wear a mask (in an attempt to not show weakness as a leader), which has had a toxic effect on impressionable Americans that look to him for guidance. The message of not wearing a mask subliminally advertises that COVID-19 is not an immediate public threat. Tibetan Buddhism teaches that people must be aware of their own mortality and ignore their own sense of self in order to appropriately nurture and maintain a healthy life. It is counterproductive to appear strong and invincible when millions of Americans are faced with a deadly disease. Understanding impermanence means accepting that the U.S. can never become 'virus-free.' For as long as we live in the natural world, there will always be viruses circulating our communities. It is for this reason that American entities should fund disease prevention protocols during times of health. Many Tibetan-Buddhist physicians and philosophers hold that "everything in the universe is in a constant state of flux, that all phenomena are characterized by impermanence . . . it is this very impermanence of creation that causes each and every being to suffer." The temporary lifespan of every being necessitates that each being experiences the inevitable traumas of birth and death, including countless other causes of suffering in between these events. The concept of reincarnation comes from the idea that “[s]uffering is not only accidental or random, but stems from a specific cause, whether from this life or from previous lives.” COVID-19 was caused by the bad karmic practice of cruel animal treatment within wet markets. The liberation of oneself from the vicious cycle of existence can only be
from the vicious cycle of existence can only be extinguished through reaching Enlightenment. Enlightenment is accomplished through “proper learning and practice of Dharma” (or simply, Natural Law) and is regarded as a lifelong practice of mindful meditation (Khang 2001). Through compassionate meditation and mindfulness, many will begin to recognize the inherent problems with wet markets for both ecological and human health. The extinction of suffering through Enlightenment is the ultimate goal of Tibetan Buddhism as well as Tibetan Medicine. To initiate the journey towards Enlightenment, it is paramount that one confronts their ignorance to prevent a downward spiral into suffering via the three mental poisons (hatred, attachment, and delusion) which arise from ignorance. These mental poisons, brought about by public ignorance, hinder our societal recovery from the ravages of COVID-19.

**DIFFERENT FORMS OF IGNORANCE**

Geshe Dadul La describes two distinct forms of ignorance that develop into suffering: 1) confusedness about the relationship between one’s actions and their results (law of causality); and 2) confusedness about the ultimate (reality of phenomena). He explains that Form One involves not knowing the appropriate law of causality which encompasses the causes of suffering and paths towards its cessation. One’s ignorance of specific causes of—and treatments for—suffering leads to the subconscious manifestation of harmful mindsets and produces negative health effects. China exemplifies this by Asian communities’ ignorance of the human mistreatment of animals and livestock within Asian wet markets and their potential for creating a highly infectious disease. A local example is the ignorant acceptance of findings that describe COVID-19 as potentially lethal exclusively for elderly and immunocompromised people, or those with certain blood types, when the statistical studies are actually inconclusive. Those individuals that hastily generalize and misinterpret scientific literature can unknowingly exaggerate the viral spread. Geshe Dadul La adds that “ignorance with regard to the mechanism of causation can be stretched to encompass almost everything, including karmic cycles that spans across lives, but within this life, it is just as relevant” (La 2019). This first form of ignorance is more frequently used in the context of Tibetan Medicine, as this form deals with physical, tangible consequences of ignorance from improper health practices that led to the appearance of COVID-19.

An interesting difference between the physician-patient interactions in Tibetan and Western Medicine is that western physicians typically go through a checklist while communicating to the patient the state of their health, while in Tibetan Medicine the patient is tasked with informing the physician of their ailments. The personal responsibility of being a ‘good’ patient in Western Medicine could help popularize medical literacy and inspire widespread general-health practices for the community. The path towards cessation is dependent on the patient’s willingness to heed the physician’s professional advice. After all, a physician cannot force his or her patient to be healthy. This patient’s responsibility to cease their own suffering is part of the Buddhist journey towards Enlightenment and is part of what makes it an individual and subjective practice.

Geshe Dadul La explains that Form Two takes the shape of obscured information, which can easily distort one’s perception of reality, completely disrupting one’s journey towards cessation. Our senses contribute to our ignorance. To our faculties of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and feeling, objects seem to exist [independently] right on their own. Presented with distorted information, the mind assents to this exaggerated [falsely objective] status of things... When the mind adheres to an object in this way – thinking that it appears as it exists – lust for the object and hatred for what interferes with getting it can set it (Dalai Lama 2007).

The politicization of coronavirus is a major cause of obscured information in America. Politicians on both sides are transforming the virus into something that it is not in order to sell their agenda: a debate about policy, government action, and who is to blame. For one side, safety measures are an
This [second] type of ignorance prevents people from understanding the true nature of the universe as described in the famous parable of the ‘three blind men and an elephant.’ It is impossible for a blind man to soundly contemplate an elephant’s appearance by touching its trunk, torso, or tusk...

Each blind (ignorant) person holds his or her falsely objective perception of the elephant (the universe) to exist independently of how a sighted (Enlightened) person would view the elephant. This mindset to refuse to explore different perspectives for a more holistic view of the ultimate reality evokes ignorance and wakens the mental poisons from their dormant form to “evoke grosser destructive [afflictive] emotions, such as arrogance and belligerence [creating suffering] for yourself, your community, and even your nation” (Dalai Lama). In Tibetan medicine, health is highly influenced by how one thinks and how one allows their mind to function. It is important to prevent harmful closed-mindedness by comprehending the Buddhist principle of interdependence: everything in our universe exists in dependence with one another — our universe is a collective of subjective experiences. This distorted view of reality makes correcting oneself much more difficult. In order to liberate oneself, a person must unlearn their harmful thought-habits before opening their minds to the possibilities of alternate perspectives that accumulate to form our subjectively composited universe (Katzman).

A relevant example of this ignorance is some people’s prioritization of individual rights over government social distancing policies. These individuals falsely view the quarantine efforts as pointless because they do not perceive any benefit from such policies and only focus on how these measures limit their life choices. They fail to recognize that the tremendous political and religious freedoms celebrated in America were implemented with the noble intention of protecting our communities and maintaining social order. These individuals cannot see the virus as a poison that can kill infected peoples; rather, their freedoms and leisure are being suspended. The politicization of coronavirus has only divided American attitudes towards adapting to our new epidemiological climate. Although the political motivations of researchers and scientists must be scrutinized by academia, our political beliefs and public leaders should neither ignore nor contradict the advice of qualified medical professionals.

CONCLUSION

In the case of the coronavirus pandemic, we must acknowledge that this disease is not only how we, as individuals, perceive it. The coronavirus is many things to many people. For
small business owners, it is a natural disaster. For the youth, it is a secluded childhood. For the elderly, it is bleak isolation. For the wealthy, it is a massive inconvenience. For the average American, it is financial and economic uncertainty. For the immunocompromised, it is a potential death warrant. All of these are legitimate concerns. Although Tibetan Medicine recognizes the complexity of the COVID-19 pandemic, Buddhist philosophy teaches us to recognize this virus beyond how it immediately affects ourselves. One must study the virus and how it affects one's neighbors, coworkers, communities, and others' communities, to promote a more compassionate and robust effort to social distance and create a brighter and more optimistic future during this time of crisis. This virus goes beyond who you want in public office, what you like doing on your weekends, what places you like to visit, or which restaurants you like. This virus is an opportunity to protect those in our communities that are more susceptible to COVID-19. Mahatma Gandhi said, "the greatness of a nation can be judged by how it treats its weakest members." It is for this reason that American individuals have a tremendous personal responsibility for the safety of our communities. Doing so requires one to imagine oneself within the groups that are most vulnerable to the virus. This thought experiment or 'exercise of compassion' will most likely influence one's behavior to be more mindful of how one conducts oneself. A dominant philosophy in America has always been 'every life is precious.' If we are true to that philosophy, then we as a people must not let our political and religious freedom distract us from our responsibility to protect our communities.

WORKS CITED
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