

Is Buddhism a 'Doctrine of Invulnerability'?

The western world seems to be in an ethical and spiritual decline. Extreme self-interest is rising as surely as commitment to conventional religion is waning. Many of us do not thrive in this hothouse of greed and moral paucity, so it is not surprising that some people are seeking spiritual and existential guidance in other places. Perhaps they are turning for inspiration to variants of eastern traditions like Buddhism or to some modern derivation like MBSR (Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction)?

In the hurry to get relief from this struggling, much of the depth and wisdom of the traditional sources can get omitted to leave a fragmented series of practices and understandings. Many variants are probably helpful as tools and satisfying to some degree, but may not offer the depth of inner change that some people are looking for.

As practices from other cultures are co-opted there can be many interpretations and misunderstandings along the way. On the radio National program 'The Philosophers Zone' I heard US philosophy professor Todd May¹ speaking about what he calls "doctrines of invulnerability"². Professor May seemed convinced that Buddhism along with Stoicism and Taoism were based on encouraging a detaching of oneself from the travails of life and the development of emotional control to allow the practitioner to rise above pain; thereby being shielded from the inevitable troubles that are encountered on life's journey. Todd May sees Buddhism, Stoicism and Taoism essentially as doctrines of non-caring – is he right; is developing a protective self armour the goal of Buddhist spiritual enquiry and practice? Do practitioners become less vulnerable and more able to let 'bad things' wash over them, but at the cost of emotional separation from others; including those who are cared about most?

There is suffering in the world, there always has been and the modern world brings its own bitter-sweet pains; even for the most privileged of us.

The heart of Buddhism promises a way out of suffering at a very deep level. However it is not trying to bring that about by practices of emotional hardening by distancing ourselves, or helping us avoid or become inured to our, or another's woes. The Buddha points to the fact that as clinging is reduced suffering is ameliorated – this is a benefit of a deeper understanding of the very nature of ourselves, of things, and the relationships we create between the two. Instead of a Stoic style of hardening, one can open to the suffering of others, be compassionate and engaged, even vulnerable, yet not be debilitated by that suffering. Indeed we may find that we can engage life more fully, offer more compassion and bring more inner resources to support another

precisely because one's emotions are not overwhelmed or limited by inner conflicts or reactions to a situation.

The wisdom that the Buddha encouraged us to discover offers emotional steadiness and courage, not by emotionally shutting down but by opening up both the heart and mind to what is right before us. If I am not triggered to fight or flight but remain open to the suffering without being swept away by personal fears and concerns, I can remain present and functional as I engage and feel the suffering within the other or myself. With a steady heart and mind one 'suffers' as, and with, the other. One shares the burden, yet the burden is not personally oppressing if one does not cling to views and expectations. Wisdom informs us that suffering is simply suffering; one need not anguish either due to our own suffering or that of another; not because the suffering is not felt, but because we know its origin and dependent nature. Suffering now has a non-personal context and its ability to overwhelm is reduced. Through staying open to feelings but with a clear mind, neither denying nor dramatising any experience, one can draw on the inner wells of wisdom and compassion. Riding the storm may well be unpleasant but it is not dangerous unless one's rudder is lost.

Professor May holds that our lives would be less meaningful if the possibility of suffering was removed, that there would necessarily be a loss of connection. He proffers that we should assess what really matters to us, the big things that we care about over time, and be open to suffering around those things – the death of a close friend for instance. He thinks suffering about these things makes sense and to do otherwise would feel "weird" or superficial. Conversely he thinks that we should attempt to let go of suffering that may arise from the less significant things in life, the things for which suffering would not make sense or serve a purpose. I wonder how, in practise, Professor May mentally draws things apart to make this distinction between what is worthy of suffering and what is not?

I think the fundamental misconception Professor May holds is seeing Buddhism as a doctrine promoting invulnerability through the mastery of self control. If the Buddha had indeed held that beings have a core 'self', as I believe the Stoics did, then strict control and practised invulnerability would be the only way to avoid suffering. However the Buddha offered the much more radical solution that saw all things as dependently arisen and the perceived 'self' as having no inherent existence. Looking in this way the whole world of 'things' and the relational duality of self and other must be fundamentally reconsidered. And in the process a very different path to the ending of suffering is discovered.

All this reminds me is how easy it is to make assumptions and develop misconceptions about complex and nuanced traditions and teachings, to the point of drawing from them simple

conclusions that do little more than conveniently reinforce our current world view. We are all susceptible to these confirmation biases and can be subtly or significantly led astray.

We can be mindful that, just as in other areas of life, there is a tendency to cling to the known in spiritual practice. From time to time I think it is worthwhile to reflect on our spiritual practices and beliefs; those things that we no longer question because at some level we think they are comfortably 'done and dusted'. As time passes we may develop and take for granted routines and views that are little more than the habitual architecture or trappings of a spiritual life. We can breathe some fresh energy into this important area by looking again at our beliefs, our intentions and our commitments. In particular we can dig a little deeper into any spiritual goals and assumptions that we carry, perhaps now hidden from view, that have outlived their usefulness and confine or limit what spiritual practice and insight could offer us. There is always a standing invitation to reconnect with and deepen our spiritual quest. Part of the enduring beauty of this quest is that there is no true danger of it being mundane or boring, if we feel like that it is because of limits we have set. There are no limits to wisdom to love or compassion. Is it not we who set and feel those inner boundaries, we who fear the edges and are therefore reluctant to approach? Yet it is change and growth taking place at those very edges that give lives meaning and purpose. In the longer run it is not invulnerability or repeated confirmation of any fixed world view, traditional or otherwise, that will bring contentment and fulfilment. It is our ability to remain open to and touched by the ongoing exploration of what it means to be a wise and loving human being.

Rowan Holden.

"If there is a single definition of healing it is to enter with mercy and awareness those pains, mental and physical, from which we have withdrawn in judgment and dismay."

Stephen Levine, *A Year to Live: How to Live This Year as If It Were Your Last*

1: Professor Todd May is Class of 1941 Memorial Professor of Philosophy at [Clemson University](#)

2: <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/philosopherszone/when-being--vulnerable-makes-for-a-better-life/8767842>