Chapter X

Sacred Groundlessness: Deepening the Ethics of Mindfulness in the Midst of Global Crisis

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Abstract (to be included only in the e-Book version)

This chapter situates the question of ethics and mindfulness in the context of a global crisis—a crisis that is at once ecological, social, and personal—and suggests that these dimensions of the global crisis contain a common and underlying crisis of being, a nihilistic despair that is symptomatic of an inability to come to terms with groundlessness and relativity. Informed by the methods of insight (vipashyanā) within the awareness traditions of Tibetan Buddhist Mahāmudrā and Dzogchen, the emerging trend of "compassion" within secular mindfulness discourse is critiqued and applied to the question of nihilism and the global crisis. Through normalizing and cultivating a familiarity with groundlessness and relativity, mindfulness practice can anchor itself to deeper intentions that can not only critique the way that mindfulness is currently being taught and practiced, but can also liberate the personal and collective resources necessary for global sustainability. By honoring the integration of groundlessness and compassion presented in the traditional "Mind Training" teachings, secular compassion trainings can facilitate a novel and emergent culture of groundlessness within secular society. In this way secular compassion training can become an authentic and powerful agent for personal and social change, forming the basis of globally sustainable ethical action, i.e., a groundless ethics of wisdom and compassion.

Key Words:

Mahamudra, Vipashyana, Nihilism, Compassion, Groundlessness, Mindfulness, Ethics, Global Crisis, Eco-Dharma, Sacred Secular

INTRODUCTION

All around us, the world is dying. From moment to moment, our own lives are also slipping away. We are in a sort of free-fall, and it is not clear whether this is occurring inside of us, in the world outside, or both. And in the midst of this uncertainty, knowing what to do is even less clear. At the same time, the imperative for taking action only continues to grow more desperate. But perhaps if we take a step back from both acting and refraining from action, to both reflect on and fully feel the situation that surrounds and pervades us, we might be able to see the situation differently, and to then act in ways that are presently beyond what we have imagined.

Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche (2004) once remarked, "The bad news is, you're falling through the air, nothing to hang on to, no parachute. The good news is, there's no ground." If we can learn to rest with this good news of groundlessness, then perhaps the free-fall we feel might be the very ground of ethical action. In this chapter, I am proposing that methods of secular mindfulness can not only facilitate this acknowledgment, but can also be a powerful force in cultivating a sustainable and sacred world that rests upon it.

It is important to engage in incisive critiques and thoughtful corrections of the way mindfulness is being implemented in secular society—in schools, hospitals, the military, and so on. It is also important to consider and resist the ways mindfulness is being used to serve the interests of unsustainable social ideologies and to perpetuate economic inequality. And, it is crucial that we always learn how to think inconceivably as we participate in the transmission of foreign contemplative traditions into our various local and global cultures, secular and religious.

But these ethical considerations are all, in various ways, related to a more fundamental dis-ease and crisis facing the whole world. This is a single and yet polyvalent ethical crisis—a danger and an opportunity—that might be called the global crisis. It is a crisis of one earth, of our connection to common ground, and to groundlessness. It is a social crisis of global injustice and a global crisis of ecology. It is an individual crisis of the anxiety, despair, and alienation that are the personal risks of being alive on this earth at the end of linear history. What role might mindfulness play in addressing the underlying causes of this global crisis? Given that the ramifications of this crisis pose an immediate threat to the existence of human life itself, mindfulness needs a response; otherwise, mindfulness is not what the world needs right now.

In this chapter, I offer critical observations on the ethics of the global crisis and make suggestions for how mindfulness may productively intervene. In particular, I will focus on: (1) the emerging trend of compassion within mindfulness theory and practice, and (2) how to acknowledge and harness groundlessness as the basis of globally sustainable ethical action, i.e., a groundless ethics of wisdom and compassion. In offering these observations, I may tangentially comment on debates within the critical literature surrounding the mindfulness movement, and there may be various points of connection with traditional Buddhist formulations. My intention is to articulate lessons learned in my roles as a teacher, practitioner, community leader and member in both the traditional Tibetan Buddhist and secular mindfulness traditions, a role which provides a unique perspective into the critical tensions that mindfulness is attempting to navigate. For example, there are tensions between tradition and adaptation; between the secular and the sacred; and between fact and value (which paralyze most attempts at fluid and authentic ethical responses). In addition, there is a larger question

of how to take ethical action in a world of relativized ethical norms, and the resultant hesitancy to invoke the notion of universal ethics.

If these tensions were to be successfully navigated, mindfulness could productively address the global crisis. It could provide a unifying yet heterogeneous framework for resisting and responding to the institutionalized forces of selfishness and injustice that are propelling the world towards self-destruction. For it is only through the emergence and action of a true beloved community, based on a common ethic of care—individually, communally, and environmentally—that the current trends can be sustainably redirected.

In many ways, the claim that a culture of mindfulness can save the world is a grossly exaggerated optimism. But, it is also true that the unsustainable trajectory of the Anthropocene era is human-created, and behind these actions are humans, acting on individual and collective intentions. Intention is the application of mind, leading to action. If the practices of mindfulness have any relationship to intention, then they may have an important role to play in the formulation and cultivation of an ethics of global sustainability and care for our common home, much like what Pope Francis (2015) is proposing in his recent encyclical. This is not simply an application of good intentions. Rather, anchoring mindfulness to include deeper intentions related to death, fundamental contingency, and the illusory nature of phenomena has the power to transform one's very *being* and relationship to the world. In this way, a transformation of intention has the potential to completely redirect social critiques and social systems.

Deepening Mindfulness

But there are several significant obstacles to this deepening. Accounting for intention is central for understanding the way mindfulness works (or fails) (Bishop et al., 2004, Shapiro et al., 2006). And, as Shapiro et al. have stated, outcomes can be correlated with intentions in a dynamic continuum from self-regulation to self-exploration to self-liberation. The mention of liberation is important here, and evokes critiques of mindfulness related to soteriological aims and traditions.

It *should* be plausible to anchor mindfulness in deeper intentions. Studies have indeed shown that mindfulness facilitates the development of "calm, fitter, healthier, and more productive" members of society (Yorke, 1997). Similarly, many corporations have embraced mindfulness because it is linked to increased economic productivity of their employees. It is less clear, however, whether such uses of mindfulness are contributing to global sustainability, or in some ways, the exact opposite. Deepening the intention of mindfulness practice in the interest of moving "towards self-liberation and compassionate service" (Shapiro 2006, p. 376) in the context of global sustainability is precisely what is needed, though the most convincing objective evidence for this may simply be the retrospective survival of our species and preservation of the biosphere.

There is a tension here: to the extent that anchoring mindfulness in deeper intentions depends on objective verification through research studies, it will be linked to the intentions of researchers and those who are funding them. This is a complicated issue in itself, and it is also unclear whether a materialist scientific paradigm is capable of accounting for subjectivity enough to meaningfully assess something as rationally inconceivable as liberation or nonduality.

A second obstacle in anchoring mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) to deeper intentions is that liberation and any matter of ultimate concern oftentimes runs contrary to what attracts many to mindfulness, i.e., that it is perceived to be a largely secular practice (Lindahl, 2015). This has implications in many of the secular environments where a deepened mindfulness might be implemented. But perhaps the narrow version of secularism in America (at least) will be willing to accommodate matters of ultimate concern when it is recognized that all of its other concerns will be irrelevant in the face of environmental and social upheaval of biblical proportions. A third, and more radical obstacle is that anchoring MBIs to deeper intentions would plunge us directly into the personal, collective, and global despair that we are in all other ways doing our best to avoid.

In this chapter, instead of defining self-liberation or liberation as a metaphysical goal, I hope to relate liberation to the possibilities of sustainable responses to the global crisis, and to assess how MBI's might effectively facilitate them. Global sustainability is directly connected to individual and collective flourishing; liberation in this context signifies the flourishing of life on earth, and an acknowledgement that life and our world is sacred, an idea which can be shared in both secular and religious contexts.

Admittedly, this deepening of intention is beyond the comfort zone of many people. What I am proposing is therefore not without serious risks and uncertainties. But, at a certain point, it may be clear that we have nothing left to lose, and the proposition of risking everything is simply acknowledging that we are always and already in mid-air. At that time, if we can meet one another, falling, without a parachute, in full recognition of the sacredness of

being alive at this time, we might discover all around the ever-present groundless ground of a sacred and flourishing world.

TOWARDS A GROUNDLESS ETHICS OF WISDOM AND COMPASSION

Nihilism and the Crisis of Being: In Mourning for Lost Ground

The deepening of our intention is therefore existential in nature. It is a question of *being*, and before proposing a "groundless ethics of wisdom and compassion" to address this crisis of being, it is important to first give time and space for fully experiencing the nature of the crisis itself.

With a typical and delightfully sinister twist, Žižek's (2011) mapping of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross' five stages of grieving onto the various dimensions of the present global crisis is both poignant and prophetic. The world as we know it is dying, and we may deny this, resist it, bargain with it, resent it, or rest in full acceptance of the fact. The question is this: how do we mature to be able to grieve in full acceptance, while at the same time devoting our very life to its preservation?

When I consider the enormity and pervasiveness of the interrelated factors underlying the present crisis, it is overwhelming to the point of reticence. It opens a deep mourning, a feeling of being suspended in a circling arc that oscillates between passionate, ineffectual intensity and apathetic resignation. I am saddened to see so many in states of denial, to witness the manifold resistance of the warning signs, and to watch the attempts to bargain with it through the use of technology or through desperate liberal programs of social justice. It is not that technology and social justice do not have an essential role to play in addressing this crisis,

but rather that, without full recognition of the depth of the problem, their application amounts to a materialist bargain that provides shallow assurances and temporary solutions, and ultimately fails to address the underlying causes.

And it is even more saddening to feel my own resentment and the resentment of many around me, fully aware of the global situation and the present and future suffering of countless beings around the world, but in a state of moral paralysis, unable to act. It is a sadness that would "swallow the whole world." The global crisis is, in many ways, reflective of these states of existential crisis that are both personal and collective.

Underlying all of these is the common malaise of nihilism, symptomatically diverse, yet singular in its essential inability to come to terms with consequences of losing ground. Following Norbu (1992), nihilism is the "habit of only seeing and believing what is apparent and observable" (p. 26). In this sense, nihilism can be seen as related to versions of naturalism, rationalism, and scientific materialism that equate the limits of knowledge with the limits of what is observable and reasonable (McMahon 2008). Elsewhere, Norbu (1992) also defined nihilism as the denial of the continuity of awareness. This aspect of nihilism is familiar to anyone who has experienced a state of despair in the face of the ineluctable nature and finality of death. For the nihilist, death represents absolute annihilation into an essentially random universe. The contrast to this perspective is what Norbu (2003) has called "eternalism," which is the habitual belief in the continuity of mind, grounded in the acknowledgment of "the permanence of eternal, continuous gods and the continuity of existence beyond death for those who have faith in those gods." (p. 8). In this sense, eternalism is a form of absolutism, and can be seen as related to versions of religious fundamentalism.

True absolutists are rare these days, those Žižek (2001) called “authentic fundamentalists”, such as the Amish who are comfortable in their own world and do not bother with what goes on around them. Much more common are nihilists who have reverted to fundamentalism or those who, as a result of globalization, are “Moral Majority” (2001) fundamentalists, and have been exposed to the moral chaos of the whole world being present to itself for the first time in history, and are haunted by it.

In using the term nihilism, then, I am including the whole interrelated matrix of despair that includes the modern discontent inherent in scientific rationalism and certain types of religious fundamentalism (including Buddhist versions). To this, I would add the aspects of nihilism that reflect the personal and collective despair inherent in modern life in general, with all the aspects of relativity and groundlessness that this implies.

Modern life has intensified self-consciousness to the point that many experience themselves as a fiction, intimating that their identity is contingent, constructed and without any essential meaning. Oftentimes, this is accompanied by painful experiences of recursive self-reference and despair. This despair is highlighted in many films and books that question the objective validity of “the real world,” comparing it to the illusory experiences of dreams and virtual realities. And, when combined with powerful virtual and augmented reality technologies that become more real than real, many fall into a painful experience of not knowing where the ground of “the real world” might lie. Left to construct one’s self-image and social relations in virtual spheres, the anxiety and depression inherent in the intimation that the self is a lie and that we are therefore essentially alone is amplified and desperately supplemented with more virtual images and relationships. This is compounded by our increasing alienation from the

natural world, both in terms of a grounded sense of place and the natural biorhythms that guide it.

All of this leaves the modern individual susceptible to endlessly self-referential concepts, pathologically disembodied, ungrounded and alienated from a definite sense of place. Cut off from the ground in this way, the earth is flattened and becomes nothing more than a repository of resources for exploitation. Time is growing ever more accelerated, fundamental values are being lost, and the future has meaning only in reference to the interests of immediate gratification. Ours is a culture of consumption driven by despair and ignorance, by and large unconcerned with sustainability for future generations.

The underlying despair of nihilism is then enacted in systems of power and economics that preserve and accelerate its momentum, providing all manner of immediate sensual gratifications for those with the power and means to buy them. While the majority of humans are left in poverty, the privileged minority is free to buy always almost enough fake plastic trees, safari hunts, psychedelic experiences, dolphin rides, mindfulness retreats, heart orgasms, and organic produce to remain comfortable, happy, healthy, and with solid footing on the deck of a sinking ship.

Despair of course takes many forms, its nature being to proliferate endless versions of its internal conflict. These portraits are only intended to give an impression of the modern symptoms of groundlessness and the crisis of being that accompanies it. But far from being a problem, nihilism may actually be a partial step in the right direction. We are in free-fall, and the earth is in an accelerating crisis because of it. But instead of denying it, resisting it, bargaining with it, or resigning ourselves to a state of resentment, perhaps full acceptance of

the situation opens up a space for authentic response. What is the nature of a continuity that beckons from the far side of annihilation, yet gives no metaphysical crutch or ground to stand on? What would a mindfulness of groundlessness feel like?

To authentically and thoroughly pass through the grieving process for the losses of the earth and the loss of ground many of us experience as modern individuals would mean facing our fears directly. As Macy (2007) noted, it would mean overcoming the cultural pressures to anesthetize those fears into a false optimism, it would mean surrendering to uncertainty and a complete loss of control, and it would mean recognizing that our personal grief is not just a personal pathology, but is connected to wider social and global dimensions of despair. But, as is said, these fears may be dragons guarding our most precious treasure. Just as is the case with the process of dying and grieving, in facing these fears and standing in full conscious acceptance, not only do we unleash untold resources of compassion and wisdom, we awaken to the sacredness of life itself.

Sacredness naturally emerges in experience when self and world are seen nakedly, just as they are, free from the superimpositions of the conceptual mind that is continually trying to substantiate itself and find ground where there is only stainless groundlessness. Only by facing groundlessness individually and collectively can the sacredness of life on this planet be universally appreciated and honored. The encounter with death and its loss of ground is unavoidable, but as a global rite of passage, the sooner we accept what is dying, the better. In passing fully through the process of grieving the loss of our personal and collective ground, we shed our despair, hesitation, and indifference and open up the space of acceptance. This naked and fearless acceptance encounters the sacred directly, and is fully empowered to protect and

honor it. There are many doors to this passage, both secular and religious, and it is our duty to explore them. In the context of mindfulness, I am proposing the door of groundlessness, addressing the despair of relativity directly, normalizing it and guiding it to its full expression as an ethics of wisdom and compassion that answers an existential crisis of being.

And Then Nothing Turned Itself Inside Out

I am using "relativity" as a placeholder for the insight that subjective, inter-subjective, and objective truths are situated in dependence on contexts, which are themselves unbounded and relative to other contexts, endlessly. In terms of "essence," there is nothing to hold on to, and any grasping to substantial essences is futile. The crisis of being that arises in recognition of relativity is an indication that the habit we have of grasping to substance is being disrupted. Following Varela et al. (1991), I propose that this disruption is part of a larger process of acceptance that is the basis for authentic ethical conduct:

> "Let us restate why we think ethics in the mindfulness/awareness tradition, and indeed, the mindfulness/awareness tradition itself, are so important to the modern world. There is a profound discovery of groundlessness in our culture—in science, in the humanities, in society, and in the uncertainties of people's daily lives. This is generally seen as something negative—by everyone from the prophets of our time to ordinary people struggling to find meaning in their lives. Taking groundlessness as negative, as a loss, leads to a sense of alienation, despair, loss of heart, and nihilism. The cure that is generally espoused in our culture is to find a new grounding (or return to older grounds). The mindfulness/awareness tradition points the way to a radically different

> resolution. In Buddhism, we have a case study showing that when groundlessness is embraced and followed through to its ultimate conclusions, the outcome is an unconditional sense of intrinsic goodness that manifests itself in the world as spontaneous compassion. We feel, therefore, that the solution for the sense of nihilistic alienation in our culture is not to try to find a new ground; it is to find a disciplined and genuine means to pursue groundlessness, to go further into groundlessness" (p. 253).

Furthermore, following Nishitani (1982), Varela et al. (1991) stress that this ethical movement cannot simply be a reiteration of various traditional Buddhist notions, but it must arise from within our own familiar cultural premises. Kabat-Zinn (2013), speaking of selflessness, makes a similar point: it cannot be stated as a fact, but must emerge out of personal experience. The deeper intentions in which I believe mindfulness must be anchored are influenced by traditional Tibetan Buddhist examples, but for them to give rise to an authentic culture of sustainable global ethics, they will have to inspire new iterations, collaborations, and ways of thinking, relative to a diversity of contexts in addition to and including traditionalist contexts.

We are in the midst of a process of dying, a dying to a conventional, substantial view of ourselves and our world, and it would be premature to speak of a rebirth until acceptance has permeated every dimension of the life world as we know it. To fully uproot the personal, cultural, and systemic aspects of materialist-nihilist habit, the relativism that is behind the various aspects of the global crisis must complete its deconstructive movement and open into "stainless" relativity. Stainless means freedom from conceptual superimpositions.

When relativity is subject to conceptual fixation, the subject grasps what is open and fluid and therefore falls into a recursive regress, as if they were trying to grasp the flowing water of a river. This results in anxiety, depression, hedonistic compensations, and ethical paralysis. When conceptual fixation is suspended, then anxious need and depressive withdrawal are liberated, into a space which I call "stainless relativity," i.e., a state in which the river can simply wash through us, and we are free to delight in its refreshing beauty. This suspension can then form the basis of authentic ethical conduct. An exchange from the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* illustrates this:

> Mañjushrī: What is the root of good and evil?
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> Vimalakīrti: Materiality is the root of good and evil.
>
> Mañjushrī: What is the root of materiality?
>
> Vimalakīrti: Desire is the root of materiality.
>
> Mañjushrī: What is the root of desire and attachment?
>
> Vimalakīrti: Unreal construction is the root of desire.
>
> Mañjushrī: What is the root of unreal construction?
>
> Vimalakīrti: The false concept is the root.
>
> Mañjushrī: What is the root of the false concept?
>
> Vimalakīrti: Baselessness.
>
> Mañjushrī: And what is the root of baselessness?
>
> Vimalakīrti: Mañjushrī, when something is baseless, how can it have any root? Therefore, all things stand on the root which is baseless (Thurman 1976, p. 58).

The ability to rest evenly and stand in a grounded way on “the root which is baseless” might seem like a risky foundation. In fact, it is the only foundation from which one can see clearly that the nature of everything is an expression of stainless relativity: a boundless, dynamic, and radiant interdependence that encompasses both subject and object as one taste. This in no way removes the existence or functioning of subjective and objective phenomena, rather it is the very nature that allows them to function infallibly. Constructed reality is therefore grounded, yet spacious. The full allowance of this grounded spaciousness vitiates the root of grasping at substance, for there is nothing substantial to pull or push against, nor anyone that needs to do so.

In this analysis, good and evil are unmoored from any metaphysical basis (above or beyond stainless space), and are expressed provisionally in accordance with intention and circumstance. In this way morality (or notions of good and bad) is easily differentiated from ethics (ways of living that facilitate human flourishing) (Batchelor 2012), and the individual is intimately connected to the universal.

It is important to stress that this acceptance must emerge out of one’s own culture, and out of one’s own personal experience. It is intensely personal, and therefore culturally constructed, but it is also universal and common, because everyone is alike in existing only as a contingency. Recognizing oneself as a mere contingency, it is recognizable in and by others who have also touched this place of groundlessness. There is no limitation to the doorways of recognizing this, or the ways it can be expressed. It may be expressed somatically, philosophically, rhetorically, or artistically; subjectively, inter-subjectively, or objectively; through unity and through diversity.

Intention is relative to circumstance, yet is universalizable. When one who is free of a particular habit of fixation sees someone who suffers because of his or her own fixation, ethical action is a natural expression of compassion that sees the actual groundless nature of that fixation. The ethics of this compassion does not revolve around goodness or badness, but is determined by whatever means are necessary to relieve another of their fixation. This is why it is often said in Mahāyāna Buddhism, "emptiness is essentially compassion." So, although there is no necessary basis for inherently good or bad actions, the ultimate baseless base of compassion is concerned with benefitting others—relieving their suffering by helping them to understand that the things to which they cling are ultimately empty. Traditionally, this is called "aimless great compassion." This may seem like a contradiction. How can ethics be aimless yet precise? How can the foundation of compassion be empty of any essential foundation? Perhaps the most basic claim of this chapter can be distilled into this one insight: the true nature of compassion is groundless emptiness.

How do we understand this statement? "Emptiness" means empty of limitation – i.e., "unlimited." We can see this through experience. When someone that we love dearly is in distress, rather than acting impulsively to relieve their anguish, it is often more effective to first relate to their situation with unconditional presence, free of judgment and free of any limited goal. In full empathetic resonance, we avoid our ego getting in the way, and detach ourselves from any particular outcome, regardless of how the situation is ultimately resolved. In this open space of full presence, our capacity to respond has access to the full spectrum of possibilities, and is therefore full of immediacy, ingenuity and compassion. In the absence of any

self-interest, aimless compassion most effectively achieves its groundless goal of relieving suffering.

The efficacy of aimless compassion is directly linked to the extent to which its essence is groundless. Why? Because suffering itself is also groundless: it is not inherent to the mind. One who suffers does not abide as a single persistent entity, but rather as a site of flux through which emotions, thoughts, feelings, and perceptions are in a perpetual and dynamic dance. In order for uncontrived compassion to arise from a bottomless source, the compassionate person must not fall into the same trap of thinking of themselves as a substantial and persistent entity.

"Good" actions are those that express this openness, recognizing the dynamic and interconnected nature of everything. This leads to a relaxed and openhearted state of mind in others that is more likely to recognize its own fundamental groundlessness. "Bad" actions are those that stem from a failure to recognize the dynamic interconnected nature of everything. They lead to more persistent habits, a stronger belief in a self that is independent of its interdependent circumstances, and overall alienation from basic groundlessness. "Ethics" is a way of approaching our lived experienced which leads us from "bad" actions to "good" actions, ultimately taking us altogether beyond the domain of ethics and deliberate action. As Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche (2003) is fond of saying, "Remember, as Chandrakirti said, 'Those who have ignorance will engage in bad karma and go to hell. Those who have ignorance will create good karma and go to heaven. Those who are wise will go beyond karma, and attain liberation' " (pp. 396-397).

Ethics as Method

The ethics which arise from compassion and the wisdom of groundlessness show how wisdom and compassion mirror one another. Compassion is a path to wisdom, and it is also the expression of wisdom. Compassion is a type of method: compassionate actions linked to social justice, environmental activism, or any channel that attempts to bring harmony and sustainability into the world constitute a sort of "ethical method." Method is always paired with wisdom. This dynamic interplay between wisdom (the recognition of groundlessness) and method (expression of wisdom in the phenomenal world of appearances) is fundamental to authentic ethical action. Method makes use of every aspect of our embodied experience, including sensory perception, language, conceptual thought, emotions, and intuition. Method includes any of the infinite details of personal and shared phenomenal experience, which can be directed into formal methods of mindfulness practice. An ethics of groundlessness is the pairing of the recognition of groundlessness, and the way that recognition is approached and then expressed through all of these methods of contingent phenomena and experience.

Methods can be both skillful and unskillful. On the one hand, skillful methods refine elements of human experience into sublime experience; the idea is then to go beyond experience altogether, and rest in pristine groundless awareness. Along the way, skillful methods are continually applied to express groundlessness in myriad forms. For example, openhearted goodness, expedient and provisional truths, and artistic works of sublimely transparent beauty can all be employed to lead others to stainless groundlessness. On the other hand, unskillful methods are stained by a grasping that reinforces the very conceptual fixations they intend to liberate.

A hallmark of skillful methods is that they progressively exhaust themselves in their own work, i.e., as the method harmonizes and refines the elements of experience, the method itself is transformed along the way until the point where it is no longer substantial. The way one works and what one is working on are interdependent and therefore locked in a perpetual dance. Like a knife being sharpened on a rock, both the sharp edge of the knife and the rock find their effectiveness through a process of mutual exhaustion. Similarly, whatever tools one uses along the path towards global sustainability must eventually be transformed or exhausted; otherwise, they risk becoming another object of fixation and clinging. In using a tool, we become habituated to it and it must ultimately be relinquished. But, because we cannot let go of it directly, we are given another less substantial tool to hold on to. The new method liberates the clinging developed in the previous method, and grasping to gross substance is replaced with grasping to more subtle substance. As our substantial habits of holding on become less and less strong, the methods we use become less substantial until we are able to go beyond tools altogether. At that point, methods and tools are creatively reemployed to benefit others according to the way that others are holding on to themselves and their world. The ethics of wisdom and compassion is therefore progressive: it transforms itself continually in a process that leads to a state of compassionate engagement that is free of concepts of the one who is compassionate, the recipient of that care, and the compassionate action itself.

If the methods one uses are not eventually exhausted, they will become fossilized, and their effectiveness in facilitating openness will be limited. This is the risk of any ideological solution to the global crisis. Along the same lines, if personal and collective experience is not opened and released into groundless awareness, the method is superficial. Both method and

experience must be liberated. In this way, method is a means of deliberately refining one's relationship to experience in order to move beyond deliberate action and substantial experience to rest in groundlessness. But, then again, if groundlessness itself is held to as a final method, it relapses into an incurable form of nihilism, as Nāgārjuna says (Garfield, 1995). Following Žižek (2009), this would be a "fetishization" of groundlessness, a distortion of an ethics of wisdom and compassion.

Groundlessness is not an isolated metaphysical reality, entity, or experience. It is the wisdom of the abiding nature of self and the world, always present and full of knowledge, power, and compassion. Ethical methods offer a way to approach this wisdom, to recognize it and connect with it. But ethical methods are not separate from wisdom. In every moment of using the tools of method, one is ideally aware that they are merely expedient and provisional, i.e., a helpful trick that is permeated with spaciousness, humor, and play. Key is an understanding that the method itself, the one using it, and the result are equally transparent to one another: open, groundless, and without fixed points of reference. And, because of this openness and transparency, the methods are more precise, more effective, and ethical action is authentic in its intimacy with the infinite interdependence of phenomenal experience. For method to be of any use, it must be an expression of pristine groundlessness itself, as the ethical appearance wisdom takes in order to reveal and celebrate itself.

In this view, ethics is a method, and ethical conduct is both the means to wisdom and the compassionate expression of wisdom. Fully resting in groundlessness, all of the tools one has left behind or exhausted are taken up again and employed in whatever way is necessary to benefit beings relative to their different capacities and dispositions. The infinitely diverse habits

of fixation can be met with appropriate expressions, actions, and concepts that refine and release those habits into openhearted groundlessness. In this way, nihilism turns itself inside out, becoming the very basis of ethical action. The gap between objective fact and subjective value that plagues ethical discourse is simply the arrested movement of groundlessness, held up by subjective and objective nihilistic habits of substance.

Acceptance of Lost Ground

In the same way, when we approach an ethics of global sustainability, we must be very clear that the methods we are using and the world we are sustaining are essentially groundless, i.e., groundlessness in fact forms the very ground of global sustainability. This is a radical and challenging imperative, and in many ways bares resemblance to Kierkegaard's (1985) "teleological suspension of the ethical" in which the goal of global sustainability (or even survival) is suspended in the acceptance of groundlessness, with a quiet confidence that this is precisely the ground of an authentic and effective ethical response. And, as Žižek (2001, 2009) and others have repeatedly pointed out, any alternatives that seek to either establish a foundation or fetishize groundlessness only reinforce the very causes of the global crisis.

How best do we understand groundlessness? It is essentially interdependence—a recognition that the intrinsic essence of anything ultimately only arises from its web of interrelationships with everything else. Much has been said elsewhere about the connections between Buddhist notions of interdependence and ecological ethics. In this chapter, I have deliberately avoided the rhetoric of interdependence and instead have privileged the aspect of groundlessness because it provides a corrective to the ongoing discussion of ecological ethics.

Traditionally, the concept of groundlessness is as important as that of interconnectedness, and they operate in a dialectic. Much of contemporary Engaged Buddhist discourse does not take the groundless nature of the earth or of subjectivity into thorough consideration, and therefore is biased toward materialism (even if it is fully relativized with systems theory, deep ecology, etc.)

There is ultimately no ground, inside or out, and this is an important insight if we are going to be able to effectively respond to the global crisis. Repeatedly stressing our interconnection with all beings on the planet, and the substance of the planet itself, may effectively extend the circle of concern, but only at the point when one completely lets go of the dualistic framework of self and other, self and world, can the action necessary for lasting benefit arise.

The mourning associated with the global crisis is much the same phenomena as what happens in the dying process. The acceptance of death (either for ourselves, or our loved ones), in all of its ineluctability and anguish, is the space of openness that allows for appreciation of the very life we have surrendered. Acceptance of groundlessness allows us to rest suspended yet grounded in the fullness of nature herself, and sustainable ethical action becomes immediate and intuitive.

At this point, mindfulness is provided an open space in which we can deepen our intentions. If individual nihilistic habits can be fully liberated into groundlessness, it may be possible to form wider communities where groundlessness is a shared common value that can galvanize social change. Signs of this can be seen in the development of mindfulness and compassion as an emerging discourse.

Mindfulness and Compassion

Compassion has become a buzzword in mindfulness discourse. In some ways, this reflects mindfulness' need for more robust ethics. It also reflects the increased dialogue with and contributions from the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist tradition, which has taken longer to emerge in secular domains.

There are many wonderful initiatives integrating compassion theory and practice into secular contexts, and it is also encouraging to see researchers presenting their findings in such a scrupulous and passionate way (e.g., Singer and Bolz, 2013). What I would like to add to this is the element of groundlessness. In several cases of secular compassion initiatives, most prominently the Compassion Cultivation Training program at Stanford University and Emory University's Cognitively Based Compassion Training, much of the theoretical background comes from the Tibetan *Lojong*, or "Mind Training" tradition. This tradition is indeed full of resources to offer to the deepening of secular mindfulness through compassion. What is interesting, however, is the reluctance of these programs and others to attempt to integrate the theory and practice of groundlessness that permeates the Mahāyāna source tradition of Mind Training.

Mind Training begins with what is called "Ultimate Bodhichitta," the ability to rest in groundlessness that includes the natural expression of compassion. There are many aspects of mind training that continually remind the practitioner of the illusory nature of themselves, the world and those who are suffering, and which have the potential to turn nihilistic habits into altruistic ethics.

Why haven't these groundless aspects of Mind Training been introduced, if the need is so great and the appropriateness so apparent? There are many reasons. Foremost is perhaps that this is not why people are drawn to mindfulness practice in the first place. Many people are suffering and torn to such a degree that what they need most are very straightforward instructions on how to become more at peace. Another reason is that this approach is potentially even more destabilizing than what is already being taught in mindfulness contexts, and there are already enough situations where individuals are being overwhelmed by their inner experience without introducing groundlessness. Further, given the increasingly unregulated and ad hoc proliferation of mindfulness facilitator trainings, there are few facilitators who are qualified to guide practitioners through deeper waters, and to open these doors would itself be unwise and potentially harmful.

And, it must be said that, just as has been shown in the last 50 years of contemplative practice in the west, the need for a stable and healthy ego structure is mostly recommended before attempting to look beyond the self and the "real" material world. To prematurely deconstruct self and phenomena may risk psychological decompensation and can also lead to what Welwood (2000) has termed "spiritual bypassing," one aspect of which is to use a partial experience of groundlessness to avoid or deny psychological pain or developmental issues. Despite all of these concerns, there are a significant number of people who are deeply in need of practices and guidance that not only normalize their increasing sense of groundlessness, but gives them tools to guide the turn of nihilism "inside-out" to actually unlock the tremendous resources and compassionate actions that are its spontaneous expression.

Proposals for Mindfulness Interventions in Facilitating an Ethic of Wisdom and Compassion

As Marcuse (1991) noted in the 1960's, long before Žižek's critiques (2001), the therapeutic function of something like mindfulness can serve to neutralize critical alternatives to the predominant conformist ethic of (consumer-technological) society by folding them back into its own totalizing agenda. However, an ethic of groundless compassion retains a radically critical and self-critical edge while it also addresses the causes of nihilism that modern society engenders. The notion of groundlessness has the potential to liberate the very nihilistic pathologies that society represses and obsessively medicates, transforming them into causes for social resistance and change. Familiarity with groundlessness benefits us both personally and collectively.

Resting in groundlessness cuts through the polarized tension inherent in the subject-object dichotomy: it helps us to familiarize ourselves with a state of suspension, fully present to the variety of experiences, and yet unmoored from any necessary identification, unattached and without fixation. Groundlessness therapeutically liberates us from the haunting experience of recursive self-reference (e.g., a hall of mirrors, or the video camera turned back on its own monitor (Hofstadter 1980)). It also liberates the infinite regress of endlessly nested objective contexts (a dream within a dream within a dream, or the maker of a map of the universe who must finally include himself making the map, and this mapmaker is making another map within a map and so on...). Fully able to rest in groundlessness, we need no longer fear the constructed fictions of subjective and objective realities, and can freely create within them for the benefit of others.

To give an example from within the secular mindfulness world itself, the work of psychologist Daniel Siegel provides a good illustration of this turn. In his many books, lectures, and online programs, Siegel (2007, 2010, 2011, 2012) has pioneered an extensive, nuanced, and interdisciplinary theory of mind that is also practical. As a psychiatrist, his work is both theoretical and therapeutic; its explicit aim is to help relieve people's suffering. In his presentation, the worlds of "mindfulness" and therapy continually overlap, and much could be said about this pairing and other aspects of his approach and view, but I would like to highlight one particular practice that shows the way in which "mind" and "mindfulness" are reaching the limits of their current meaning, and are flirting with deeper intentions.

As a way of strengthening the faculties of attention and awareness, Siegel (2010) teaches what he calls "the wheel of awareness," in which the patient or mindfulness practitioner imagines their subjective awareness at the center, or hub, of a wheel. The outer rim of the wheel is imagined as the various objects of that awareness. The spokes of the wheel, extending from the hub to the rim, are the various sense consciousnesses (with the addition of a few beyond the six senses, including interoceptive, somatic sense), creating a subject-object polarity. With bare, nonjudgmental attention, one notices various occurrences of sense objects and thoughts, a practice that strengthens executive functions and trains the faculty of perception to be free of distraction, bias, or partiality. This strengthening of the qualities of the "hub" of awareness provides a greater spaciousness and freedom from habitual emotional and harmful cognitive patterns. All of this is familiar territory to mindfulness teachers and practitioners.

What he does next, however, in the rare cases that he does it, is a radical departure. He then includes the instruction to turn awareness on itself, where the hub takes itself as its own object. He usually prefaces this instruction as something advanced, and does not give much guidance as to what one might find, and only tangentially remarks on why this might be a good idea. In my view, this is precisely the direction mindfulness should take in order to transform itself into a practice that is able to bridge the gap between fact and value articulated above, and it is precisely the groundless "view from nowhere" to use Nagel's (1986) phase that is capable of illuminating the dis-ease of modernity's nihilistic shadow.

This might seem like a rarefied quirk of self-consciousness, but it is in fact central to the shamatha-vipashyanā system of instruction that forms the preliminaries to Mahāmudrā and Dzogchen meditation. It is my hope that a discussion of these methods will give some inspiration to mindfulness facilitators and practitioners for deepening the practice and opening the question of ethics to a more authentic and sustainable foundation.

Shamatha and Vipashyanā: Calm Abiding and Insight

Shamatha and vipashyanā meditation methods are common to many lineages of Buddhism. Here I am using the terms in the Indo-Tibetan context of an integrated practice that leads the practitioner to an unmistaken recognition of the groundless nature of mind and phenomena. It can be seen as a two-step process in which one first learns in shamatha (calm abiding) to "aim and sustain attention" (to use Siegel's language). On the basis of this, one then turns awareness on itself and uses the stability that was developed in calm abiding meditation to sustain an investigation into the groundless luminous nature of mind. This is called vipashyanā, or "higher

vision," or simply "insight." Shamatha-vipashyanā can also be seen as a circular process, as it is taught in many lineages of Mahāmudrā and Dzogchen, where the ultimate object of calm abiding meditation is space or awareness itself, without support or reference point. This is the essence of insight meditation, with stability and investigation mutually reinforcing one another. With a deepening of calm abiding, the groundless and luminous qualities of mind shine forth more saliently, with increased depth of recognition of groundless clarity, stability expands.

Much of contemporary mindfulness practice would fall under the rubric of calm abiding. Calm abiding instructions, such as, "do not review the past, do not pursue the future, rest open and relaxed in the present moment without judgment or elaboration" would not be out of place in most secular mindfulness contexts, and include most operational definitions of mindfulness. This would include many techniques of self-regulation, attention training, and awareness, e.g., practices such as Siegel's wheel of awareness. It is rare, however, to enquire into who is being aware, or into the essential nature of that awareness itself. Even more rare is to enquire deeply into the nature of external phenomena, and how their true essence may or may not cohere with our habitual perceptions of them.

Moving from calm abiding meditation to insight entails a sharpening of the perceptive faculty of mind, along with a seemingly paradoxical relaxation of focus. These two aspects begin as a sequence of investigation and release, but eventually they become a single gesture of awareness recognizing itself in-as-through vivid spacious groundlessness.

One common method is called "abiding, moving, and awareness" (*gnas 'gyu rig gsum*) which belongs to the first level of Mahāmudrā practice called "single pointedness." In this practice, one investigates both the mind at rest and the moving mind, and inquires into its

nature. Looking just at the non-conceptual mind, the practitioner asks, “Does it have a color or shape?” “Where does it abide, is it inside or outside?” “Is it something or nothing?” “Where does it come from, where does it go?”

One can then apply a similar analysis to the conceptual mind asking, for example from Tāranātha’s (2016) Instructions of the Threefold Natural Settling:

> “What is the difference between the emergence of a thought and the resting mind? Are the two the same thing or not the same? When a thought arises, investigate in detail: How does it arise? After a thought arises, for as long as it does not cease, how does it exist? When a thought dissolves, what is the way in which it ceases?” (p. 11).

Then one moves to awareness and asks, “Who is analyzing the mind in these ways?” “Are the moving mind and the resting mind the same or different?” “What is the difference between the mind at rest and the mind searching for its nature?” The questions of stillness and movement uncover the common nature of both as the nature of awareness. The investigation of awareness in itself removes any vestige of reference point to the one who has been investigating. One can then move to investigating the nature of the mind that perceives sense phenomena:

> "When the eyes see a form, what is the essence like of the clear seeing of the form? Between that form and this lucid and dynamic cognizance, scrutinize whether they are one or different things. Apply similar observations to the hearing of the ears and the other sense fields” (Tāranātha, 2016, p. 11).

Each question is followed by a period of nonconceptual resting, and one becomes familiar with resting evenly in a state of not finding anything:

> "After having perfectly examined mind, rest in the state of "just that" free of any identification. Through searching many times there emerges an experience in which it seems that there is nothing whatsoever to grasp, yet it is not nothing. While being empty, a variety of experiences arise of a bare empty awareness, clear, brightly lucent, and vividly alert. Without knowing how to express it, completely rest in that" (Tāranātha, 2016, p. 13).

These are not mere mental curiosities; they constitute a direct method for pacifying confused nihilistic habit. In analyzing and resting in this way, practitioners begin to loosen the habitual mental constructs that uphold a naïve and fixated view of mind and matter, familiarizing themselves with groundless presence. The conventional world is buttressed by unexamined assumptions about the way things are, based on the way they appear. For things to actually exist in the way they appear, they must appear, remain, and pass away. Arising, ceasing, and abiding (Tibetan *skye 'gag gnas gsum*) are the three defining dimensions of dualistic appearances and thoughts. But, under analysis, the practitioner comes to experience that inner and outer phenomena are "unborn," that there is no basis for designating the "appearance" of anything. Nor is there any place that phenomena go when they cease, and looking closely at the way they remain, there is nothing substantial or essential to be found. In the Mahāmudrā tradition, these insights are gained by looking at mind itself, rather than seemingly substantial phenomena "out there." When mind itself is seen to be groundless, phenomena are more easily recognized to be equally as groundless.

These are just a few examples of the methods available in the first step of the four yogas of Mahāmudrā. Skillful practice in these yogas results in "freedom from elaboration"

(*nisprapañca, spros bral*), a calm and abiding insight in which the elaborations of dualistic mind are completely released into the space of awakened presence.

Embodied Groundlessness

I would like to present a few more methods that have evolved out of the Mahāmudrā tradition that incorporate a more explicitly somatic approach, highlighting how groundlessness can inform an ethic of compassion and wisdom.

The wheel of awareness and the traditional methods of calm abiding and insight discussed above can appear to have a cognitive bias, which may actually exacerbate some of our common existential anxieties. This can lead to a denial of feeling, of somatic wisdom, of sensuality, and of the material world. There is a risk that insight into groundlessness remains "in the head." The Mahāmudrā tradition presupposes a natural degree of embodiment, and many of its preliminary practices are designed to cultivate an intimate connection with the body. It is important that the experience of groundlessness is fully embodied, i.e., grounded in the open spacious presence of somatic awareness. The same principle can be extended to our relationship with the earth: the fact that the earth is the ground of our life-world cannot be denied, yet the essence of our foundation in the earth remains open and empty. That the somatic sense of grounded spaciousness is both rootless and suspended is an important part of training in insight meditation. It parallels the global ethic that arises when one rests suspended, yet grounded in the fullness of the earth.

The contemporary meditation teacher Reginald Ray has developed a host of protocols for training practitioners in this type of somatic insight into groundlessness. A blending of Qi

Gong, Tibetan yoga, and his own inspiration, Ray's (2008) "earth breathing / earth descent" practice illustrates these connections well.

There are several variations, but when I lead this practice, I generally direct the practitioner to begin by connecting with his or her body, and then to release somatic fixation into the earth by relying on the outbreath. They then begin to breathe through the perineum, the root of the body's connection to the earth, drawing breath through this point of contact into the belly. After a period of breathing in this way, one drops awareness down through the perineum into the earth, and breathes from below the body into the body. This process continues gradually, with awareness sinking further and further into the earth, descending hundreds, and then thousands of feet. Awareness is finally released into a free-fall. At this point the reference point of awareness is released and one rests suspended in the grounded, spacious, embodied and groundless emptiness of the earth.

The seeming paradox of somatically grounded groundlessness is a completely accessible and intuitive experience that bypasses the dualistic conceptual mind and connects directly with non-conceptual somatic awareness. When combined with traditional methods of calm abiding and insight, these practices can inform and enrich one another.

Another meditation protocol I have adapted from Ray was presented in his "Seven-Fold Bodhichitta" training. When I lead this practice, I direct the practitioner to begin by bringing awareness to the center of the chest at the level of the heart, noticing with open presence what they find there, whether it is positive, negative, neutral, or nothing at all. They then begin to breathe into this region of the heart, slowly developing an attunement to the somatic texture of this region. The somatic "felt sense" of the heart is then slowly expanded with every breath

until it gradually fills the entire chest. One continues to breathe directly into the heart while expanding its sphere of awareness. This then continues to fill the entire body, and then goes beyond the boundary of the body into the environment. This is slowly continued until the practitioner reaches the practical limit of their awareness. The boundaries of this awareness are then investigated: “What is the boundary like? What lies beyond it?” One rests in an expanded, spacious awareness that is grounded in the body. Finally, one turns one’s awareness back on itself, looking into, feeling, and sensing the center of the heart while simultaneously maintaining an expansive spacious presence. The simultaneity of this experience cannot be accommodated by the habitual dualistic conceptual mind, yet it is undeniably clear and present. The practitioner is encouraged to rest, evenly suspended in this way of being.

This meditation is a powerful way to illustrate the common essence of groundlessness (or the lack of any fixed reference point) and heartfulness (the full and open qualities of an awakened heart, free of referential limitations). This gives an intimate experiential taste of the way groundlessness and compassion are of the same empty essence.

CONCLUSION

There is great potential for these introspective methods to be adapted and presented in secular contexts, without explicit dependence on the source traditions. But, as always, this unbundling must proceed with great care, and is not exempt from theoretical and methodological challenges.

Having taught these methods in various secular contexts, I do not believe they pose any obstacle to secular sensibilities, apart from challenging the nihilistic habit patterns within

modern minds and society that ultimately cause a separation between the secular and the sacred. My own experience teaching groundlessness in this way seems to normalize the pervasive experience which many in our culture suffer, i.e., of vertiginous "relativity sickness," and the psycho-somatic "dizziness" that Kierkegaard (1980) refers to as an analogue to the sickness of the spirit. In many ways, this is a genuine insight, shared by many, that phenomena are not as solid or real as they appear, that we live in a world of dream, illusion, and digital simulation, and that between and beyond these streaming ones and zeroes there is a tremendously vast groundless space with no top and no bottom into which we might infinitely regress. At first blush, this might not seem to be such comforting news. Those whose capacity for introspection has not been entirely overwhelmed by media and technology find "themselves" to be essentially a patchwork of anxieties and depressions—a set of conflicting emotional possibilities and transient Facebook post traces, all suspended over and around nothing at all.

But the good news is, this is all okay. It's all rather normal, actually, and this good news can be a source of great relief. Not only is this all normal, but it is also a doorway to great joy. This empty groundlessness can form a very strong foundation of our connection to one another and our inborn intimacy with all things. "Emptiness (groundlessness) has the heart essence [of compassion]" (Tibetan: *stong nyid snying po can*). Resting in groundless relativity opens the world to the sacred, to the basic goodness of each person, and to the possibility of realizing an enlightened secular society on this earth, at this time. It is the source of true sustainability and vital flourishing. This dynamic rest is enacted through globally sustainable ethics emerging from a groundless ground, without reference to transcendental norms or external and temporary

sources of inspiration. In the face of destructive forces that batter it on all sides, this foundation is strong. It is made from the same empty essence as the forces that would appear to challenge it, but with the unlimited advantage of resting with stability and in openhearted ease in recognition of its own groundless nature.

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