Two Wolves in the Heart:

The Evolution of Empathy and Aggression, Of "Us" and "Them"

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Introduction

This essay is about the origin of the best and the worst characteristics of human beings . . . and how to nurture the good that lies inside every heart.

What Is Empathy?

Empathy is the capacity to sense, feel, and understand what another person is going through, especially the deeper layers.

Empathy is not agreement or approval. You do not waive your rights by being empathic with someone.

Empathy is not inherently positive. For example, an autistic person who lacks empathy would make a poor interrogator.

Nonetheless, empathy is the foundation of any deep connection with another person. It asks more of us than generic lovingkindness, which is possible to offer without really allowing oneself to have a feeling for and be deeply moved by the suffering of another.

Empathy has many benefits:

- Useful information about the other person
- Often, what the other person wants most
- Sometimes, understanding others better helps us understand ourselves better.

In Buddhist practice, empathy is important because:

• Empathy is the expression of Wise View, which sees how we are all related to each other: Empathy for others is thus, in a deep sense, self-understanding . . . since who we are actually is the whole web of life, the whole thing.

• Empathy is *sila* in action, the restraint of reactive patterns to stay calm enough to be present with the other person.

• Empathy involves non-attachment to view – one of the four types of attachment that lead to suffering – so that we can truly enter into the beliefs and worldviews of the other person. At least for a moment, we have to disengage from our "case" about the other person to enter his or her world. Empathy has a "don't know mind" quality to it, an attitude that has a particularly Zen flavor.

• Empathy expresses the fundamental Buddhist ethic of non-harming. Our failures of empathy are upsetting in themselves to other people, plus they lead us to do things that hurt them: both of these are harmful.

• Empathy is at the heart of diversity work.

• At root, empathy is a gift to another person, freely offered, a kind of *dana* (generous offering).

• If you work with, supervise, or teach others, empathy helps you read their emotional signals more accurately, and sense the deeper questions or issues.

In sum, it is beneficial to give empathy, and it is beneficial to receive it.

But for all its benefits, empathy is often the first thing to go out the door in long-term relationships, or during a conflict or upset.

Therefore, it is important to <u>practice</u> empathy, to increasingly incline our mind in its direction, and to become even more skillful at it.

Two Wings of Practice: Being With and Working With
There are two fundamental aspects of personal and spiritual growth.

One is simply <u>being with</u> whatever is arising internally or in the outer world: mindful, accepting, present. The other is <u>working with</u> inner and outer conditions to benefit oneself and others.

Both are required for practice to soar. Nonetheless, being with is primary, since you can always be with a difficult condition, but you may not be able to work with it.

In that context, our focus here is on working with the mind to cultivate greater capacities for empathy and caring, both for "us" and for "them."

Nothing Left Out

In Zen, there is the saying, "Nothing left out." While it's skillful means to include everything in the field of practice, it is also true that any moment of awareness short of Nibbana, any communication, and any response, must inherently leave some things out. There is always another view, more that could be said, an improvement for a sub-group of readers/listeners, etc.

In our heartfelt aspirations to include every person at the table, and to know our intimates fully, we must live with the limitations of inclusiveness and empathy. That does not mean we should stop striving; it's the striving that is honorable and which sends an implicit message of caring. But as knowers and as communicators, we need to live with the self-acceptance and humility – which support each other – that our understandings and statements will always be partial. Similarly, when we are on the receiving end, it helps to keep in mind that the other person can never offer perfect empathy or a perfect communication.

Not leaving out . . . the inevitability of leaving things out.

The Evolution of Empathy

In the long march from tiny sponges in the ancient seas to crabs and spiders, dinosaurs and lizards and birds, squirrels and dogs and other mammals, and primates and humankind . . . it was an enormous aid to survival to get better and better at forming an inkling of the state of mind of others of their species, for mating, competition, and cooperation. It also helped to have some sense of the focus of attention, intentions, and arousal of both predators and prey.

In short, our ancient ancestors evolved in part through developing increasingly sophisticated capacities for forming a kind of model in their own mind – and therefore their brain – of the internal state of other animals. The ability to do so conferred reproductive benefits through enabling better responses to:

- Threats
- Opportunities
- Care of their young

Empathy in the Brain

Humans are by far the most empathic species on the planet. Based on the slow evolution of neurological architecture, several systems in the brain enable your empathy:

- Recreation of primary emotions – The insula and other linked circuits activate both when we feel a primary emotion (e.g., fear of pain, disgust) and when we see another person, especially someone we care about, having such an emotion; these systems are

often involved in "emotional contagion," when the feelings of others stir up similar feelings in ourselves

• "Theory of mind" – Centered mainly in the frontal lobes, this is a collection of capacities to think about and imagine the thoughts, intentions, personality, history, and inner workings of the other person.

• Mirror neurons – These light up both when we perform an action and when we see another person performing that action.

These neurological systems enable us to get a feeling from the inside out – a kind of echo or resonance – about what it is like to be another person. Of course, they are complex, intertwining with each other, supported by other mental functions – and just beginning to be understood.

Interestingly, the ability to recreate primary emotions appears to be present almost from birth; for example, infants will cry at the recorded sound of other babies crying but not at a recording of their own cries. Theory of mind (TOM) capabilities come on line later, developing during the third and fourth year of life – and usually attaining their full neurological maturation in many cases in the early twenties.

As individuals age and sometimes gradually lose cognitive capabilities, the capacities acquired last are the first to go, along with other frontal lobe functions such as planning, emotional control, and judgment. "First in, last out" is the fundamental ability to get a gut sense about the deep feelings of another person – which has implications for appreciating the fact that elderly people, even ones with apparently diminished capacities, can pick up on the feelings of others, both positive and negative ones.

Empathic Breakdowns

For all this high-powered neurological hardware, breakdowns of empathy are all around us to see:

• In the raising of children

• With other kids while growing up

• In intimate relationships

• With friends and at work

• And in the larger world, of large-scale "us's" and "them's"

Within one person's psyche, empathic breakdowns lead to emotional pain, feeling misunderstood and not cared about. It's as if you don't matter to people, even as if you do not exist as a being, a person, to them. In a relationship, empathic breakdowns lead to mistrust and make it harder to work out practical solutions to problems. And in the larger world, empathic breakdowns lead to prejudice, discrimination, ethnic cleansing, and war.

Ways to Support Empathy

Here are some ways to build empathy, which you can apply to yourself or encourage in others. Empathy is a skill, and like any other skill, a person can get better at it. In order do so, it helps to consider the factors that bring it into being, practice them, and gather feedback (from one's own observations and from others) to improve over time. Since "neurons that fire together, wire together," by repeatedly practicing empathy, you'll literally build and strengthen the circuits in the brain which make you empathic.

Foundational Capacities

Before stepping into a situation that calls for empathic understanding, there are a number of ways to build up your "empathy muscles." These include:

• First and foremost, self-care – handling your basic needs so you have some attention and good will left over for others

• Steadying attention – a fundamental condition of empathy is sustained attention to others, especially when their state of mind is complex, charged, or upset with you

• Opening the heart – to receive the other person

• Wishing well – a basic stance of good will, the hope that the other person may suffer less, even if we disagree with or disapprove of him or her

• Self-awareness – deepens your knowledge of your own psyche and thus the psyche of others; heals developmental wounds by giving yourself the attunement today that might have been missing when you were young

• Mindfulness of your bodily state – this "interoceptive sensing" strongly activates the insula, which also lights up when you sense the deep feelings of others; strengthening the ability to sense your own state strengthens your ability to sense the state of others

• Integrating thinking and feeling – being able to weave clear thought into powerful emotions, and to enliven rational analysis with warm-hearted affect, are important (and uncommon) psychological capacities . . . which also enable you to understand the emotions of others and to sense the feelings lying beneath their words and thoughts

Many things strengthen one or two of the capacities above. But there is one activity that strengthens all of them, and quite powerfully. What do you think it is?

It's meditation. For example, studies have shown that meditation observably thickens the insula by adding millions of new synaptic connections, and it also thickens a part of the brain called the anterior cingulate, which is involved with controlling attention and with integrating thinking and feeling.

In Situations

Once the rubber meets the road, here are some ways to increase your empathy in the middle of specific situations:

• Establish your intention to be empathic.

• Pay attention to the other person and to yourself.

• Relax and open your mind; particularly if the other person is upset with you, it can help to focus first on feeling as safe and strong as possible.

• Let yourself feel in your own body the emotional and visceral state of the other person.

• Sense, imagine, and reflect beneath the surface of the other person's verbal and nonverbal communications. Ask yourself questions like: What is he feeling deep down? What is most important to her? Form hypotheses for further inquiry. This is akin to the enlightenment factor of investigation; it's an active process that complements the more receptive bodily resonance described just above.

• As you can, try "don't know mind." Respect the fact that you never know for sure . . . and that even the finest empathic attunement always must leave something out . . .

• Consider: What *might* it be like for people to be with you? What *might* be in play in their mind, given what you know or could imagine from their history? What *might* they want from you?

• Perhaps check back, to see if you are on the right track. Some examples: "Sounds like you are feeling _______ , is that right?" "I'm not sure, but I get the sense that _______ ." "It seems like what bothered you was ________ , and that you wished _________ had happened." "Did you feel both ________ and __________ ?"

You can use the other person's responses to your checking back as new input into your sensing and imagining what he or she could be experiencing.

Try not to muddle together empathy with any disagreement you might have. Keep them separate, if only by a few seconds, and be clear about the transition from one to the other.

• Perhaps offer empathy: subtly to explicitly. Often, that is all that's needed.

Us and Them

Now let's step back and take a larger view of the human condition. How could it be that such loving and cooperative and self-sacrificing creatures as us can also be so . . . savage toward strangers, murderous, economically exploitive, willing to enslave others, capable of rape and pillage and car-bombs and carpet-bombing?

Sure, there are economic, cultural and psychological factors that make a huge difference in whether a person is caring toward "them." But innate capacities acquired over the course of our evolutionary history also play a role.

The Evolution of Altruism

First, let's consider the evolution of altruism, a hot subject in science today. In the animal kingdom, altruism is giving to others without any material reward. How could such behaviors develop through evolution under conditions in which creatures commonly lived on the edge of starvation while dodging predators and trying to pass on their genes? Put simply, how could sharing my banana help me pass on my genes?

No one knows for sure, of course, but it looks like self-sacrifice confers net reproductive benefits – the engine of evolution – when these three conditions exist:

• Individuals live and mainly breed within social groups (typically around 20 – 200 members). Consequently, even if a person's altruism led to her not passing on her genes, close relatives would live and pass on their own, and could be more likely to do so, given her sacrifice.

• Social groups compete intensely with each other for scarce resources in the wild, with a high death rate. Consequently, groups that work well together – in part due to altruistic sacrifices by some members – will pass on their genes at a much higher rate.

• The reputation of individuals is known to others. If someone became seen as a non-reciprocator – a taker, not a giver – then he or she risked others no longer sharing food, shelter, etc.

(By the way, as a result, people developed a natural interest in their reputation, in what others thought of them. An unpleasant emotion that punished individual "tribe" members for not stepping up in fights with other tribes, and for not reciprocating today for help offered yesterday, would help a tribe succeed in its brutal competition with other groups. And as a variant on that theme, an unpleasant emotion that enabled tribe members to train their young quickly in proper behavior – proper in central Africa, a million years ago, or during the last Ice Age, say 15,000 years ago – would also confer advantages to that tribe. Thus the origins of shame and guilt in the long slow grind of evolutionary history.)

The Gravitational Pull of "Us"

Second, unfortunately, there's a paradox at the heart of the ties that bind us to each other.

On the one hand, that bonding creates a secure base of "us" which helps a person venture out into the world and engage with "them."

<u>But</u>, on the other hand, those impulses to protect our own, especially our cubs, the associated rewards (dopamine, oxytocin, etc.), and our moral commitments, can create a kind of egocentrism of "us."

At a minimum, this tends to draw us away from "them." There are lots of everyday examples:

- New friends taking us away from old ones
- Parents focusing on their new baby rather than an older child
- Thinking little about groups in the world besides our own

The Evolution of Aggression toward "Them"

Third, moving beyond simple disengagement or neglect, multiple lines of evidence – from research on primates and other animals to anthropological studies of human cultures to computerized modeling of game theory – suggest that it was reproductively advantageous for our ancestors to be **BOTH** cooperative *within* their group . . . and wary and aggressive toward other groups.

Take good care of us . . . and fear, disdain, and attack them.

For millions of years of primate and then human evolution, in the primeval condition, there was no police system or international justice court, and tribal groups lived often on the age of starvation, so incentives were all around to take what they could, and protect what was their own, by any means necessary.

The rewards of joining with family, kin, and tribe have a dark side, sometimes leading people to push the interests of their own group unjustly, even violently, against the interests of other groups.

Our brains – us – still possess these ancient capabilities and tendencies.

You can see them at work in brawls between fans of opposing sports teams, in our contentious political culture (Red vs. Blue, news at 11), in the common indifference to the suffering of people who are "other" – Muslim or Christian, white or black, rich or poor – and so on.

Of course, those tendencies are intensified – and frequently manipulated – by non-biological factors such as economic pressures, religious fervor, and the classic whipped- up fears of not-like-us, apparent enemies as justifications for strong-father, authoritarian control.

Still, those non-biological factors find fertile ground in the between-group fear and aggression that is part of our evolutionary history.

Practical wisdom for these issues, and the healing of long standing grievances, starts with being crystal clear about both capacities within each person: to join and to exclude, to treat "us" with care and love and "them" with indifference or alarm or contempt or violence.

Yes, there is individual variation in the intensity and inclinations of these two capacities. But we each have them, to some degree. It is all too easy to consider ethnic slaughter in Africa or Bosnia, or bombs in Baghdad, or torture in Abu Ghraib, or flying planes with children on board into skyscrapers, or casual indifference to

starvation and misery in the halls of power – and shake one's head and think something like, "What's wrong with them?" But "them" is actually "us." Their DNA is the same, and if any one of us were switched at birth and subject to the same causes and conditions of that suicide bomber – or bomber pilot – who among us can say for certain "I'd never do that"?

It is a kind of ignorance – always the root cause of suffering and harm – to deny either the capacity for empathy or the capacity for aggression in the hard-wiring of the human brain, in the genetic endowment we've all inherited.

There's a Native American teaching that speaks to this. An elder, an old woman, was asked how she had become so wise, and so loving, and so respected. She answered, "In my heart are two wolves, one of love and one of hate. It all depends . . . on which one I feed each day."

The wolf of love sees a vast horizon, with all beings included in the circle of "us."

That circle shrinks down for the wolf of hate, so that only the nation, or tribe, or friends and family – or, in the extreme, only the self – are held as "us," surrounded by threatening masses of "them."

This is where we circle back to the Zen saying at the beginning of this essay: What is left out? Who is not in the room? Who is not held in my heart?

Feeding the Wolf of Love
If you choose to feed the wolf of love, your own virtues, empathy, insight, and equanimity will help you greatly. On that foundation, here are some specific practices you might like to consider:

- Exercise restraint about identifying with your own home/tribe/nation.

- Reflect on other people as they might have been as young children.

- Notice and consider good things about people who are neutral or unpleasant for you.

- Focus on similarities, not differences, between "us" and "them." Beware the little ways that you may dehumanize others, regarding them as less of a person than yourself.

- Reflect about the ways that others may appear threatening. How likely is it that they will harm you, personally?

- Consider the harms to yourself of using others as means to your own ends – in the framework of Martin Buber's "I-Thou" model of relationships, making them an "It" to your "I."

- Consider trying on the perspective from Tibetan Buddhism that every person was your mother or your dearest friend in some previous life. You can take this as metaphor or as literally true.

- Reflect on the suffering of so many people in this world. Equanimity really helps here, in enabling us to stay open in the face of the world's pain.

- Bring to mind the experience of really caring about someone who is an "us" to you; that primes your neural circuits to care about someone who could be a "them."

- Bring to mind the feeling you get around someone you <u>know</u> likes and cares about you. This is especially useful if you had a childhood that left you with an anxious or avoidant attachment relationship with your parents. Feeling cared about stimulates your capacities to care about others.

- Keep extending out the sense of "us" to include <u>everyone</u>.

All of these practices are expressions of wise view, that everything is connected to everything else. Their essence is the offering of lovingkindness to the "us" that is the whole wide world.

So that all cubs are our own.

So that all people are our family.

All life, our relatives.

The whole earth, our home.