

Covid-19, global ethics, and *Jihi*: A voice from East Asian philosophy

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Abstract

As the Covid-19 situation has developed rapidly into a pandemic of unprecedented scale, ethicists and philosophers must work to comprehend this tragic historical scene from a macroscopic perspective, striving to create peace in the minds of people worldwide. The Buddhist concept of *Jihi* is a key idea in East Asian philosophy and implies concern for others. Specifically, it requires its constituents to pray sincerely for the well-being and peace of mind of those who are suffering, regardless of nationality, age, gender, or family origin, and mourn this situation together. Accordingly, *Jihi* may represent a vital component of global ethics, particularly in situations involving the Covid-19 crisis.

Keywords: Covid-19, *Jihi*, Buddhism, global ethics

Introduction

Covid-19, first detected in Asia in December 2019, has rapidly become a pandemic of an unprecedented scale. In Japan, it began as an epidemic as cases of the coronavirus were confirmed among the passengers of the Diamond Princess cruise ship (1). Currently, as of December 2020, the country is teetering on the brink of explosive infection spread. Depletion of medical resources and exhaustion among medical practitioners are major issues worldwide, as each nation struggles to continue providing medical care to patients in severe conditions. One year ago, no one anticipated such a disastrous state worldwide.

Society is currently demanding insights from ethicists and philosophers on so many fronts. Grasping this tragic situation from a macroscopic perspective, ie, one which considers the entire human history, and then strives to create peace in the minds of those living through this horrific era, is truly the essential contribution required of philosophers.

Jihi in Buddhism

As secularised as Japan is as a society, the Japanese people may still subconsciously seek peace of mind during the Covid-19 pandemic by turning to Buddhism, which originated in

India.

Buddha's *Jihi* is a key component of the overall Japanese mentality. Our trust in the world forms the foundation upon which we may embrace nature as it is. We place fundamental trust in the truthfulness, fairness, and infiniteness of the intellect that transcends self: this is Buddha's *Jihi*. *Jihi* is a concept introduced to Japan as an element that forms the basis of Buddhism. The characters 慈 (*Ji* in Japanese, *maitri* in Sanskrit) and 悲 (*Hi* in Japanese, *karuna* in Sanskrit) represent the first two of the Four Immeasurables. *Ji*, which means loving-kindness or benevolence, signifies "a heart that longs to provide comfort to living things"; it means to love all things that have life and to seek peace and happiness and consider their interests at all times (2). *Hi* is a result of *maitri*, and is compassion; it signifies "a heart that desires to remove suffering from people." The latter character also encompasses a feeling of compassion for living things, which are subjected to various forms of physical and mental suffering. *Jihi* is Buddha's gaze that looks upon everything and everyone equally. There is no discrimination between old and young, or good and bad (3: Ch 1). As *Jihi* applies not only to human beings, the essence of *Jihi* also represents compassion, care, protection, and nurturing for all living things (3: Ch 4).

The Pure Land faith is one of the key concepts of Buddhism. The Pure Land faith refers to the belief that a pure world can be sought by submitting oneself to the mercy of Buddha (Amithaba), by realising that we are powerless beings, and by acknowledging that this life filled with pain and endless suffering is awful. The very awareness that human beings are powerless leads one to rely on *kami* (*Shinto* gods), Buddha, fate, or nature; a greater power beyond the realm of human beings represents the philosophy underlying the Japanese view of the world that accepts nature as it is (4).

Jihi and global ethics

What are the expectations for global ethics during the current circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic? We believe that one of the fundamental pillars of global ethics is sincere prayer for the well-being and peace of mind of those who are suffering, regardless of nationality, age, gender, or family origin, and mourning this situation together. This could be regarded as a request for global solidarity, or perhaps a request for global concern, much like '*Sorge*' (care), as described by Heidegger (5).

The term "peace of mind" is not just synonymous with "lack of worry" or "calmness." Rather, it has a more positive and normative meaning. From the perspective of Buddhist thought, and using philosophical/phenomenological terminology, it would be said that the phenomenal is the horizontal, but at the same time, the horizontal is the phenomenal. In addition, "peace of mind" can mean calmness

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or a lack of worry within an individual's mind, as well as that within the whole world. Genuine peace of mind in an individual is achieved when peace for the whole world is sought. *Jihi* describes the relationship between such individuals who have achieved genuine peace of mind and the whole world.

Most other countries or regions likely have similar ideologies to the Buddhist concept of *Jihi*. For example, the Christian concept of "charity" and the Confucian concept of "*Ren (Jin)*" (6) are both similar to *Jihi* in Buddhism. It is beyond the scope of the present paper to use comparative religious studies methodology to compare and contrast these three concepts; however, as a fairly standard representative of most Japanese individuals—in other words, as one who does not subscribe to a particular faith but lives out their daily life in the mosaic comprising secularised religion—my intuitive description of the differences between the three concepts would be as follows. The Christian concept of "charity" has, at its base, the request to "Love your neighbour." Specifically, "Love your neighbour" would imply that we should draw close to all the people we have ever met, sharing their sorrows and praying with them. The objective of charity seems to be aimed at individual and specific human beings. Meanwhile, the Buddhist concept of *Jihi* has a more general target, in that it is more of a lens through which all people are to be viewed. The Confucian concept of *Ren (Jin, or humanity or humaneness)* actually differs by whether it is the *Ren* of Confucius or that of the Confucian philosopher, Mencius (6). However, the basis of this concept seems to be rooted in the relationships within a family (that between a parent and child, or sibling relationships). Within the Buddhist *Jihi* concept, the concept of "*hi*" not only expresses compassion, but also implies "sadness (悲しさ)," particularly in Japanese. It seems to me, therefore, that the Buddhist concept of *Jihi* finds its particular uniqueness in the fact that one views all living beings across the world equally through this lens of sadness.

Religious customs in Japan are, arguably, quite interesting. We celebrate births with *Shinto**, consecrate marriages using Christian traditions, and mourn deaths as Buddhists. At first glance, the Japanese view of religion seems unconventional and incongruous. However, one remarkably common belief throughout Japan is that Buddhism is linked to death. Covid-19 has heightened the awareness of death among Japanese people, leading the latter to allow Buddhist ideas to form the basis of our thinking. In other words, we Japanese tend not to confine ourselves to the limits of local ethics. We feel that this

openness exhibited toward different cultures is a positive aspect of the Japanese culture. This sort of multiculturally symbiotic way of thinking is critically important in times when the world is facing danger, and especially now that our everyday lives are threatened by the Covid-19 virus. If ideas such as *Jihi* are bringing about peace to people in Asia, then similar wisdom may also offer the same benefit to those in other regions. Similar teachings and ideas can come together as one, slowly amalgamating into a notion that surrounds the entire planet as we struggle to work our way through this crisis. This amalgamation of ideas worldwide should be one common objective for global ethics in this time.

Conclusions

In today's world, as Covid-19 continues to spread, global ethics can provide peace of mind for people around the world and ease their suffering even a little. To this end, *Jihi* is a concept that could be incorporated into global ethics in Asia. We sincerely hope that the Covid-19 pandemic will trigger the maturation of global ethics, in terms of bringing together loosely connected teachings and ideas similar to *Jihi* from around the world to form an amalgamation of ideas that could save mankind.

Note

**Shinto* is a Japanese traditional religion. It is animistic and has a creation myth.

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