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Learning with Atisha

By Helen Mirra

What might it mean to recognize that autistic people—after a century of being pathologized—seem to be particularly aligned with certain of the qualities that are described in early Buddhist thought as supreme?

A key word in contemporary autism theory is *monotropism*. This is also referred to as “single attention,” “concentration,” or “perseverance.” Also mentioned, often anecdotally, is an “unusual concern” with non-harming, and an intense connection with non-human animals. The overlap with the paramitas of *virya* (perseverance), *dhyana* (one-pointed concentration), and perhaps *sila* (ethics), are conspicuous.

The diagnostic list known as the Broader Autism Phenotype Constellation consists of sensory awareness, non-conformity, attention, systemizing, object-orientation, and memory. While these traits are familiar among other human traits, some of us were born directly beneath this particular cluster of stars. In combination, I relate them to wide-open sense doors, “going against the stream,” relational interdependence, and an inclination toward and ease with *shamatha* (tranquility). To be clear, I am not proposing that to be autistic is to be awake, nor that one needs to be autistic to awaken. Yet I find this a compelling intersection to contemplate and a vivid edge of experiencing to abide in.

In 2018 I attended a retreat with Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo in which she expounded on the *Therigatha* (Verses on the Elder Nuns). She also shared Atisha’s *Lojong Root Verses*, or *21 Lines of Advice*, written in the 11th century. Thus I heard: *The supreme conduct is to be in disharmony with the world... the supreme generosity is non-attachment... the supreme patience is to take the lowest place...*

The simple verses resounded, contextualizing the paramitas both *as* and *with* provocation, while also remaining mundane. And hearing them supported by Jetsunma’s keen and buoyant gloss, accompanied by her broad grin, blinking eyes, and inquiring brow, was a doubly sparkling gem.

Having delved into the literature of autism, and plainly recognizing myself in descriptions of autistic people, I sought and received a diagnosis in early 2020. This afforded me an opportunity to look back to my childhood through a new lens. I was assessed by someone with long-term experience in the field, who confirmed that I thoroughly fit the profile. The process was revelatory; until now I had eschewed identity labels of any kind. *The supreme wisdom is to not grasp onto anything as the self.* And here I was, categorized, feeling like a fully-fledged autistic person, rather than a non-human. I'd always felt estranged from our species in general; all of a sudden I felt included, and thereby, inclusive. Rather than reifying self, identifying with fellow Autists brought non-self into much brighter awareness.

In part, I see my autistic awakening as the unexpected culmination of a phase of formal practice with a Soto Zen teacher, with whom I felt markedly connected. In the last few years, each time we met, I would leave feeling perplexed and hurt. Not wanting to turn away from what was difficult, I kept recalling Atisha's admonition: *the supreme spiritual teacher is the one who exposes our hidden flaws.* But I couldn't see which hidden flaws were being exposed. Was confusion as to what my flaws were my flaw? Was seeing him as a supreme spiritual teacher my flaw? These tautological loops persevered. In retrospect, what I perceived as his increasing unfriendliness coincided with my gradual dropping of some subtle aspects of unconsciously passing, as my natural dysfluency and atypical physical behaviors emerged.

The supreme method is to be natural. Autistic people, especially those of us with female bodies, are known to camouflage our autistic qualities in order to be accepted by non-autistics. This takes a tremendous amount of energy. *The supreme effort is letting go of activity.* I saw this relationship mirroring those of my childhood, when peers sensed my vulnerability and responded with maltreatment. Viewing the situation through the twin lenses of dharma and autism allowed me to step away, with both grief and relief. *The supreme accomplishment is a continuous decrease of disturbing emotions.* I was able to return my faith and attention to where it belongs: in and on the path.

Being quite literal, as Autists are known to be, I am often literally walking on paths. One day, circling Mount Tamalpais counterclockwise, the thought came, "A-tisha? Or Au-tisha?" It let itself go, as thoughts do while a-walking. Some months later I read aloud the root verses, doing the best I could to share their candlelight with two friends whom I met

last summer at Autscape, a conference by and for autistic people. (Organized in the UK, it had been moved online.) One of these friends asked if I would read through them a second time. Without deliberation I did so, now substituting “autistic” for the keyword “supreme,” which recurs in most of the lines. This was *not* to draw an equivalency between the two words, but to replace a humble one for a hierarchical one. It seemed to all three of us to be appropriate and pertinent, describing—in an amalgam of reality, reminder, and aspiration—what we claim as autistic traits and tendencies, which can be cultivated by anyone.

I then wrote out the adapted text and together we refined it. The lines remain ambiguously between a proposal, a call, and a challenge, for perspectives and for directions to grow in. The context is the individual and collective experiences of rejection—both micro and macro—for autistic ways of being. It is a response to the claims made by clinicians, and widely accepted, that we Autists are selfish, preoccupied with unimportant things, move and speak inappropriately, and cannot cooperate. That we are unfortunate aberrations, rather than welcome participants in the matrix of life on this planet. We don’t accept this, nor do we believe in a fixed conception of autism. An autistic identity is as elusive as any other. As E.H. Gombrich wrote in 1950, “there is really no such thing as Art. There are only artists,” so it is for autism and Autists. Self-advocacy is a necessary response to discrimination if we are to shift from vertical to horizontal ways of ordering the world, from official judgments to conversations, with mutual recognition and benefit.

These verses are not meant only for autistic folks, but for anyone who is willing to let go of any supremacist views they may be holding—of course including those of race and class and gender, but also of physical ability, intellectual ability, and of species—in order to live wholly. Atisha’s lines could be adapted into an even terser form, without any qualifying adjective. Please consider this version as provisional:

AUTISHA’S VERSES

Autistic understanding is to realize the absence of self

The autistic mind is rewilded

The utmost autistic quality is vast *citta*

The autistic example is of continually observing the mind

The autistic remedy is to know that nothing has self-nature

The autistic pilgrimage disagrees with the worldly

The supreme accomplishment is a decrease of troubles

The clear sign of this accomplishment is a decrease of desire

Autistic generosity is non-attachment

The pivot of ethics is pacific

The peerless patience is to take whichever place

The greatest perseverance is abandoning activity

Autistic concentration is to not alter awareness

Autistic wisdom is to not conceive of anything as a self

The true friend questions our errors

& their counsel is to attend to those errors

The supreme companions are mindfulness and clear knowing

The best incentives are hindrances and aches

The autistic method is to be natural

The way of benefiting is to help others enter the open

Benefit is a mind that turns

Autists are known not only to sometimes use pronouns irregularly, but also to mix our metaphors, analogies, and similes. So, to close authentically: abiding in the particular pivot of the Buddhadharmā and autistic awareness has felt like being in a lightning storm of insight.

There are many facets of this, and we hope to continue to slowly move within this particular and subtle alloy-sky of precious-ordinary elements.

Helen Mirra is a 2020 Guggenheim Fellow, and was on the faculty of Harvard University and the University of Chicago. She left teaching in 2013, and has taken formal vows in the Plum Village and San Francisco Zen Center lineages, while identifying more with poet-hermits than with institutions, and is most aligned with early Buddhist teachings.