

Aspects of Compassion (4 of 5)

Aspiration

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Today I will talk about the fourth element of compassion – aspiration. This is one of the core elements of compassion. It is where compassion begins to take shape and take form. This is the wish for others to not suffer. It is the aspiration that the suffering of the world is remedied, fixed, or alleviated.

I use the word aspiration purposely. It is not a very commonly used word. It is different from desire or wish. Desire and wish have a lot of associations. They have associations of obligation or that we should. A sense of self can come with a desire to help someone. There can be a lot of self-baggage around being seen or appreciated as a good person – showing that we are a good person. All kinds of things come along with that.

Aspiration has a sense of arising from something deep inside. We aspire for something, but it is held very lightly. There is no attachment or clinging. The aspiration is very simple.

The word “aspiration” is related to the word breathing. It is related to “respiration,” which in Latin has to do with breathe – to breathe out. It is to have relaxed, easy, comfortable breathing. The breathing is not too engaged or tight. It is not faster and bigger in order to run or fight, to get a job done, or to protect ourselves. Everything is soft and relaxed.

In that easy breathing, there is room for this aspiration to arise. This aspiration to alleviate and support people in their suffering or to care for them and their suffering arises from this soft breath. To have it come from such a place is precious. This softness is what makes *karuṇā*, the compassion of Buddhism, sweet. There is a kind of pleasure to it. It is a source of happiness because the feelings come from such a good, deep place inside.

I am introducing this now on the fourth day of exploring the five elements of compassion. The previous three elements are setting the stage for allowing the simplicity of aspiration to come in. In the world, many people often talk about compassion, and recognize it as a wonderful and inspiring ideal. Very few people have a

clear sense of what it is in its simplicity. It can be a vague idea that we want to feel people's suffering, want to have empathy for them, want to go out there and help them.

If that is not done carefully, then feeling other people's suffering could make us miserable. If we are not careful, then wanting to support and help someone can come along with a lot of complicated desires, attachments, and confusion.

We begin by being aware. We are present for people in the world, but we are not entangled with our thoughts. We are not proliferating thoughts, memories, fantasies, expectations, and selves – me and you. There is something very grounded and simple in the awareness that is taking in another person. When we are with someone who is suffering, we open to being attuned and in harmony with them.

It is so easy to lose harmony if we rush headlong into caring, fixing, and needing to help another. One of the most complicated things is to feel responsible for the suffering of another. We try to be attuned to the suffering and to find a sense of harmony that is very contextually situated. We take our situation and others' into account so we don't lose ourselves. We don't give ourselves up in the contact with others, but we attune ourselves to what is happening.

Then we appreciate and respect others – respect ourselves. We don't respect people if we are trying to fix them. We don't respect their autonomy if we take responsibility for their suffering. We don't respect and appreciate other people if we believe the notion: "I am the helper. I am superior. I am the person who knows it all and is capable of doing it. I am going to take care of you who doesn't know what to do." This idea of helping others can sometimes be a bit condescending.

It is so important to have this respect and appreciation for others. Then when we encounter suffering, we can allow for this deeper aspiration to arise. This is one of the most beautiful things that a human being can offer: love, care, kindness. This is an aspiration that arises from the depths of who we are. It has no pressure in it. It has no assertiveness, or hurry in it. There are no requirements or obligations.

This aspiration is the warmth, the glow, the calling, or maybe the yearning for this deep, deep, desire that we have. To discover this deep desire is a beautiful thing. We are human desire-ings. Desire is an intimate and integral part of who we are. It is a wonderful thing to discover how these desires benefit us, and fill us with goodness, and a wonderful sense of vitality and animation.

We are not supposed to give up all desire and be deflated. This deeper, deeper place comes from a place where there is no ego, conceit, or locking into an identity (“this is who I am, this is who I have to be”). There is no fixed identity that we hold on to. This deeper place, this wellspring, is deeper than any identity we can have.

We rest in this compassionate wish that others not suffer. I have been the recipient of that. They did not actually help me, but I felt their wish, their compassionate care, and the recognition of my suffering. I could feel that they wanted it to be different for me. That was their wish. Feeling this beautiful love from that person changed my life.

This is when I was quite young. I was studying with a young Zen priest. I felt in my suffering this beautiful, clear, simple care. I didn’t feel put upon. I felt that the person would have helped if it was appropriate, but it was just this simple, beautiful aspiration, this wish that resonated with me. There was an attunement, and I felt touched by that attunement.

So this is, in a sense, the beginning or the heart of compassion: a desire. We need to become wise about desire – to know the difference between desire that is erotic, an obligation, or forced. To know when desire is assertive, or comes along with fear or desperation. All

those fall away. There is a parting of the water to this beautiful, deeper place of aspiration.

A part of the art of *karuṇā*, this deeper compassion, is learning to trust that it is okay. We are learning to trust that it is okay to have a deep desire for the welfare of others. It doesn't come with anger or with desperation. It is not forced or an obligation. It doesn't come with a kind of clinging, drive, or compulsion: "I have to fix it. I have to do it. It is up to me."

It comes from a very different place. It comes from a place that says: "Yes, if I can. If it is in front of me, and if it is possible, I will consider acting and doing from this place of deep, heartfelt freedom. I will consider acting and doing something if I can. What can I do?"

That is the topic for tomorrow – action. How can action have these qualities of depth where aspiration comes from? How can action have these qualities of non-attachment, non-clinging, and non-assertiveness?

Reflect on the four elements of compassion: awareness, attunement, appreciation, and aspiration. Tomorrow we will add in action. That will complete the five different aspects or elements that make up *karuṇā* in Buddhism.

Thank you and I look forward to tomorrow.