

Aspects of Compassion (1 of 5)

Awareness

March 20, 2023

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

suffering, autonomy, care, sensitivity, alleviating, action, attunement, appreciation, aspiration, empathy, entanglement, identified, discursive, clarity, upright, channel, story-making, hijacked, obligation, reactive, wellsprings, lotus

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With this talk, I am beginning a five-part series on compassion. Compassion is one of the wonderful capacities that human beings have, probably one which is underutilized, maybe underappreciated. It can be the central organizing principle for human life, giving life purpose, meaning, direction, support, and inspiration.

This has certainly been true for me. I think that compassion was the central organizing principle for a good part of my adult life. I set the direction of my life based on compassion for the suffering of the world. Whether that is still the case is maybe a matter of nuance. Things change over time, and I don't know if it

is still compassion. Now maybe the central principle is what I call “care,” which, although somehow a little different from compassion, is still compassion.

The simplest definition of compassion is being sensitive to the suffering of others in such a way that we have the aspiration and the wish to alleviate that suffering. So compassion has these two things: sensitivity to suffering, and the desire to alleviate it. In the Buddhist sense, compassion is not an obligation – not something we “should” be doing. We might want to do it, but compassion is meant to be something that wells up within.

When some people hear the idea that we should *be* compassionate, they interpret the “be” part as “do,” as in: “We should *do* compassion.” The idea that we *be* compassion, rather than *do* compassion, is very profound. With the idea of being compassionate, compassion is something that wells up and is there for us. It is not something that we have to make happen or where we have to act in a certain way.

This way of being is a profound possibility that has different characteristics and qualities. This week, I am going to talk about five different characteristics or aspects of compassion. In order to be compassionate, there is a whole slew of ways of being within us that set the stage for compassionate action, which is the fifth

aspect. Without that preparation, that foundation, compassionate action might not be compassionate. An action might be actively involved with alleviating suffering, but it can be done with anger, with distress, with a sense of strain, stress, and tension. It can be done in a way that can be exhausting, stressful, or worse, for people.

How can compassion be acted on without it being exhausting, without diminishing us, so that the compassion is sweet, and there is a beauty, a kind of profound beautiful pleasure that comes along with the compassionate action? For that to happen, it would be good to gather together four other things as part of compassionate action.

The five things I will be talking about all start with “A.” (Maybe that is helpful for remembering.) Today I want to talk about awareness; tomorrow, attunement to others – maybe a little different than empathy; then appreciation, aspiration, and action. So: awareness, attunement, appreciation, aspiration, and action. The first four support the action. Being grounded in those and having them well-developed and practiced in us means that the compassionate action is well-supported and has a chance to be a beautiful and profound thing, so that we are glad to have compassion and to feel it. Compassion does not need to come with distress.

Compassion begins with awareness (mindfulness). There is a very important point I want to make about awareness practice, or having a strong presence of attention, awareness, or mindfulness. This is that, in mindfulness, we are not leaning into things or sinking into things. Rather, there is a kind of autonomy in being aware. There is a capacity to be attentive without being entangled, caught, or reactive to what is happening.

This autonomy might be a little bit like being at a gathering of people who are having an angry shouting match, or maybe they are really afraid, and running around not knowing what to do. You are standing in the middle of them. You care for them, you are supporting them, and you are a friend to them, but it is clear that you are not in the quicksand with them. You are not involved with the anger or caught up in the fear, but you are present. It is a little bit like you are standing on a stool above the fray, looking down at it all, kind of amazed: “What’s going on here? This is quite something.”

My first experience of this possibility made a big difference for me. I was in my second year in college – I guess I was 19 or so. Four other guys and I were living in a three-bedroom apartment with a balcony sliding door to the living room. I was out on the balcony with the sliding door closed, and two of my roommates were on the couch in the living room having an animated

conversation. All I could see was their gestures and animation; I couldn't hear the words. Not knowing what they were talking about, just watching how animated they were, I could feel I was present and attentive, but there was no entanglement. I wasn't caught in what they were saying. It was as if I was autonomous, I was free, and I was available, I was there. That experience of being aware of people actively having an animated conversation, and my being free of it, was the first glimpse I had of that possibility.

This is not the same thing as aloofness. It is not the same thing as being removed or indifferent. It is just that, although we might have all kinds of feelings about and connections to people – attunements, aspirations, and interests in them – there is a way that awareness is calm, peaceful, not ruffled or agitated, and does not lean into the situation.

One way that awareness gets mixed up in and identified with what is happening is when awareness is pulled into the discursive thoughts we're having. Then it is almost as if we identify with and we become the discursive thoughts, and the awareness happens through the filter of those discursive thoughts. Or we can get caught up in the emotions and feelings we have, and awareness gets channeled through them on its way to being aware of the world.

With clear awareness, awareness is its own thing. When it is really strong, there is a clarity, as if it is above the fray, taking a step back from being entangled. Awareness is just there, very present, but it is upright and autonomous, clear, open, available, and not identified with anything, not caught by likes and dislikes. It knows the likes and dislikes, and it knows discursive thinking, but it is not those things.

To cultivate this sense of autonomy in the awareness itself is very, very important for compassion. Then compassion has a channel where it can be clean, a channel in which not to be entangled or reactive – not mixed up with the whole range of emotions that might come, and not mixed up with all the story-making of the mind, with the discursive thinking, or the beliefs and judgments we might have.

That autonomy creates a context and a foundation for being compassionate. Without it, if there is a headlong rush into being compassionate, then awareness gets pulled along. We can't be as present and attentive to what we are doing, so that whatever little awareness is present gets hijacked or mixed up with our reactivity, our sense of duty, our sense of alarm, our sense of being in a hurry, our sense of requirement or obligation, or our sense of distress. All kinds of things come along if awareness is not autonomous.

If awareness has this kind of upright autonomy where it is standing on its own two feet and is not being pushed around by the winds of life, then there is lots of room for some of the deeper wellsprings of our best qualities to flow into that space. But if awareness has been hijacked and is caught up and not quite there, then these deeper qualities are not as easily available.

So really learn and develop awareness. Be grounded in it and have faith in it. If you hear the idea that you should be more compassionate, I would propose that the best way to interpret that or take that on is don't be compassionate. Begin by slowing down, standing straight and tall metaphorically, and just being aware. See if you can find the place where awareness is autonomous or free, like a lotus blossoming above the muddy water.

A healthy foundation for compassion begins with awareness. With that kind of autonomous awareness, then we are ready for attunement with someone else, attunement to their suffering. I'll talk about what that means tomorrow.

If you are interested in an exercise for the next 24 hours, I'd like to recommend that when you are in some situation where it is not really required for you to do anything, but you are aware of someone else's suffering, see what you can discover about autonomous

awareness – being really present for the person and the situation, not removed or aloof. Really open to the situation with clear, autonomous awareness that is not entangled or caught up in the situation. The best option for doing this is a situation where you don't have to act to help someone. It could be a situation in public where you see someone suffering, but other people are helping, or a situation you read about in the news. Thank you.