

Location for Awareness (5 of 5)

Compassion and Locations for Awareness

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

attention, suffering

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Welcome to the fifth talk on locations for awareness, or perspectives on awareness. The theme for this week was selected because the last time I was here, I talked about compassion and next week, I would like to continue the theme of compassion, but in between, I want to explore the medium through which compassion travels, or by which it is stimulated. That medium is our capacity for attention.

If we have compassion for another person who is suffering, the only way we know they are suffering is that we know it. There is an awareness of it. When there is attention, we experience their suffering in some way. That act of knowing, of being aware, can often go unexamined and unconsidered. It is sometimes almost as if there is no separation between us and the

experience – it is just suffering, and we experience that suffering.

Sometimes the experience of so-called empathy for other people's suffering is too hard for people. They feel overwhelmed and way too sensitive. They get exhausted from it. Or sometimes people do not quite understand how to have compassion because they feel kind of apart from other people's suffering. They don't feel it – in some way, it doesn't touch them.

Much of our experience of compassion has to do with the nature of how we are aware. We can be aware in different ways, so we begin to learn the range and the variety of ways that knowing comes into existence.

We can know something because we see it, or we can know something because we hear it. When someone tells us a story about a person suffering, the medium through which knowing comes is hearing. If we are with someone who is suffering and we see it, then knowing comes through the seeing. If we are sitting by ourselves and we remember someone who is suffering, then we know it through the medium of our thoughts – our images in the mind, our memory. These are all different means of becoming aware.

There is also the sense of how we are aware – where we are aware from. Often enough, the locus of

awareness is our sense of self. In fact, that locus is sometimes what we construct a sense of self around. Also, how we're aware – the location that we're aware from – is something that we can change and adjust. That has been the theme for this week.

A skilled use of awareness, of mindfulness, is to be sensitive to the different ways that we can be aware, and then to have some skill in choosing how to be aware. If we don't choose between all the different modalities of awareness, if the modality of awareness that we have is not serving us when we are with others' suffering, we are just going to keep touching into an unhelpful way of sharing the suffering of others. It can feel exhausting or debilitating, or we feel too much pain to really have effective compassion.

So we need to find a way of being aware that allows us to be balanced, allows us not to suffer more than the person who is suffering – to suffer less – but allows us to be empathic, to feel and know what's happening. We can move our awareness around.

Sometimes it helps to feel like we are really removed. The mind steps back and gets the bird's eye view. Sometimes we can get really close. We don't get physically close, but we can sense up close what is happening. This might mean feeling up close what is happening to us, because if we only use the medium of

awareness to be aware of others, then we miss out on the impact the experience has on us, and how we are participating in it. If we are only with ourselves, the whole situation can also be imbalanced. Yesterday, I talked about the 50/50 approach to being aware: 50 percent here with us, and 50 percent there with the other person.

As mindfulness becomes richer and fuller for people, one way that we can be aware of people's suffering (aware of compassion, or aware in general) is for the awareness to not be yoked to our sense of self – to me, myself, and mine. We don't allow that part of the mind to hijack or engage with how we are aware and what we're aware of.

This is not receptive awareness because with receptive awareness, there is someone who is receiving. It is not active awareness, where I am actively aware of going out to be aware out there, because then there is an actor, someone who is doing the awareness. There is a marvelous kind of middle way where we can be aware without being the receiver, and without being the actor who does it.

There can be a lot of clarity in this kind of awareness. It is not aloof or disconnected, but it is a connection that does not have a receiver. It doesn't have a thought, idea, concept, or story about who I am, what I have to

do, and my responsibilities – this is something I have to deal with, I have to respond to, and this is happening to me. There is a victim here – here I go again. A lot of extra stuff comes along that has mostly to do with our conceptual mind, our thinking mind. A kind of activation is going on, and we don't even know we are activated. It just seems like this is how it always is.

As we get quieter and quieter, and more and more settled in meditation, at some point the construct of a receiver, even of receiving, is not needed. The construct of having the mind go towards something and become aware of it is not needed. There is just allowing whatever arises in awareness – whatever it might be, without choice – to just arise without a sense of a doer or a receiver, and without a sense of, “It's out there and I'm here”: without distance. At the same time as there is no distance, there is no concern about distance.

It isn't as if we are glued to anything; it is not that kind of lack of distance. It is because there is no reference point for distance and no reference point for being glued to something. Something just arises. This kind of very relaxed, open awareness can be phenomenally respectful towards oneself and others because it allows each thing to be just what it is, for itself.

Sometimes it is completely wonderful, fun, and appropriate to take agency over how we are aware, to

adjust how we're aware, and find the right way for the moment, one that is appropriate for us and the situation. Then sometimes this dropping away of self – of a reference point of self – can be available to us.

It is not that we're becoming shut down, aloof, or disconnected. There is a lot of sensitivity to what is happening in our body, our mind, and our thoughts. But the awareness is not organized around the idea of a central person who is having this experience. We are responsible for all of this, and we know all of this, but we are not engaged in that kind of preoccupation and agitation around me, myself, and mine.

There can be a lot of presence for another person. There is a sense of freedom, a sense of infinite space, where things just exist there in their own simplicity. At times when the awareness is really strong, there is no future and past. It is just what it is. There is no here or there. It is just what it is. There is no closeness, and no aloofness or distance. It is just what is there. Everything is just there.

That is a marvelous way for compassion to arise. Compassion is just there. Compassion has been triggered, has been awakened, but there is no burden with compassion. There is no obligation with compassion. There is no me that has to do something with this. It is all just allowed to arise and be there.

Compassion arises, and if there is something we can do, the motivation to do it arises in that same freedom. There is deep, deep trust in allowing this deeper stuff to occur.

As long as we have this heightened sensitivity to and heightened clarity about what's happening in our body, our minds, and thoughts, then the intuition is not going to be hijacked by our preferences, our unhelpful desires, or our ego.

However, sometimes people just let go and trust their intuition in this way that I'm talking about, but they are not very in touch with themselves. They are not really aware of what is happening in them. Sometimes they make mistakes and act impulsively because they don't realize how much they are acting from ego or desires. It feels like they are just freely allowing things to happen.

Next week I'll talk about compassion. I am hoping that this prepares the ground. I hope that as you hear about compassion, you will consider how to adjust the medium – the way to be aware of suffering in the world, so that how you are aware allows something deeper to happen. In preparation for that, if you have the time and the inclination this weekend, as you become aware of your own suffering and the suffering of others, explore the topic of the medium of awareness. How are you aware? What is the location from which you're aware?

What is the way that you know it? Is it more feeling in the body, or is it more in the head with thoughts? Is it more from a distance, or closer in? Which of all those is a useful way to be there? Maybe they all have their own use at different times.

Is there something about being with suffering that is radically simple – so simple that it is just suffering, just compassion, just presence, just attention, without being crowded in by thoughts, obligation, responsibilities, fixing it, experiencing and being the experiencer, or how it is for me? It is all just allowed to be.

So explore this. I'm hoping that the more you can explore this over the weekend, the more you will understand the tremendous value that compassion has for the path of mindfulness, and that it is a very significant way to learn about mindfulness and how to develop on this path. Thank you very much.