

Attunement (4 of 5) Communicating

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Gil Fronsdal

We continue with the theme of attunement. Living attuned to the suffering of the world – the suffering of the people we encounter and our own suffering – means not experiencing it in the usual way or the ways that are challenging for us. Instead, we are being attentive to suffering in a way that leads to our betterment and the betterment of the world. One way to be attuned to suffering is to be in harmony with it – to find a balance with it.

This week, we are using the acronym TOUCH to reflect on five aspects of attunement in relation to compassion. To be compassionate means to be touched by the suffering that we encounter. This idea of being touched in some deep way is kind of tender and loving. We get touched by things that are important to us and move us. And in turn, we touch others, maybe not literally. But we touch others with our kindness and support.

Sometimes we do touch others literally. A gentle touch on the shoulder or the arm can be very meaningful for someone who feels lost, broken, hurt, or isolated. To touch others is to let them know that they're not alone.

Using the acronym TOUCH, the letter T reminds us to think about the suffering we encounter – to find a healthy way of thinking about it. The letter O tells us to be open to suffering. The letter U says to be upright in the presence of suffering. And today, the letter C reminds us to communicate.

We take time to communicate with the people we are involved with who are suffering. This is important because it is easy to assume that they're suffering in the way we would in a similar circumstance. When we project our experiences, history, and fears onto them, we can misunderstand what is really going on. So, to communicate is to find out more. What's happening here? What is this experience like?

People who are suffering don't necessarily appreciate being asked probing questions. But simple, open questions or statements like, "This must be hard," are an acknowledgment and recognition of what's happening. That can sometimes open the door for people to feel seen and recognized. Then they may be willing to share. They may volunteer how it's hard. A simple question like, "What's the hardest part of this?"

What's the most difficult thing for you in this circumstance?" can be eye-opening.

Someone might have broken their leg and have to stay home; they have to rest their leg and be immobilized for a while. They're suffering and it's difficult. You can ask, "What's the most difficult thing?" They may say: "Oh, the most difficult thing is that I was counting on going to the graduation of a dear friend. It is really important – a culmination of so much of their life. I want to celebrate with them, and now I can't do it."

You had no idea that was the biggest thing causing their distress. Maybe for you, the idea of being independent is most important. You assumed their difficulty was that they didn't have freedom of movement and were dependent on others. So first, find out what is going on for people; hang out with them, talk about what's happening, and learn more deeply. Don't assume you know what's going on.

Sometimes a nice question to ask is, "How might I support you with this?" Or, "What are some ways that you can be supported?" Don't promise that you're going to do it, but rather ask, "What are some of the ways you find support with this kind of challenge?" Some people find that question helps to remind them of what's helpful. Then they think: "Oh yes, I forgot. Meditation is

important. Maybe this is a time to meditate.” Or, “Being with friends is important.”

Very simple questions and statements that acknowledge what is happening is an active expression of compassion and care. For some people, that’s what they need the most. They don’t necessarily need someone to fix them or do things with them, but rather to just sit with them and recognize, “Oh, that’s what’s happening.”

When I’ve been challenged by something, sometimes the people I was with wanted to act quickly: “Let’s go do this and that. That’ll make it all better.” But I just wanted to be quiet and present with what was going on. I would have valued having a friend who sat with me, and we gently, quietly talked about it. Then I could voice some of the feelings and thoughts that I had.

We can listen deeply and communicate in such a way that we’re not trying to fix people. We’re not trying to be the helper first and foremost. We’re trying to be the person who sees, gets to know, and understands the suffering. And the more we can directly be with people, the deeper we can understand their suffering.

If we read in the news about suffering that’s happening far away on the other side of the world, we can certainly have compassion for that. We can feel the pain of that.

But chances are we're projecting a tremendous amount of our own assumptions onto that situation. Our imagination has come alive, and some of that might be true enough. But it's very different when we're on the ground being with people and seeing exactly the details of what's happening.

This approach of communicating – seeing and learning more – is essential. When the suffering is happening far away, really take the time to read, study, and look more deeply at the situation so that you have a sense of what it's like for individuals in that circumstance. With social media, the news, and videos, we can often see people being interviewed or people talking about how it is. That can provide a deeper connection to what's actually happening for people.

So find ways to communicate – to listen and speak – that are open-ended, caring, and not in a rush to fix and help. Also, we want to be very careful that in our communication with people who are suffering, we're not first and foremost taking care of ourselves or moving the attention to ourselves. A classic way of doing that is to say: "Oh, I know exactly what you're feeling. I went through the same thing." And then you start telling the story of what you went through.

Maybe it's not the same thing. You don't actually know what's going on with others. It is a way of disconnecting,

an extreme version of disconnecting. Now the conversation is more about you than the person you are with.

The more people are suffering, the more you want to be careful with how much you talk about yourself.

Sometimes talking about yourself is a way of caring for yourself or trying to assuage or calm your discomfort with what's going on. Sometimes talking fast, talking a lot, asking a lot of questions, or rushing to solutions is more about taking care of your discomfort than taking care of the other person whom you haven't gotten to know yet.

Communication is such an important and profound phenomenon that sometimes I think of the phrase "sacred communication." Somehow when we communicate from the place of practice, from the depths of who we are, then the communication goes better. This is why something like meditation, where we've learned to listen deeply to ourselves, can show us a place inside from which we can listen to others with some depth.

Maybe with our way of listening and communicating, our depths can touch their depths. This is really something profound that goes on between two people.

I've been in situations of being challenged by some suffering and had conversations with practitioners that turned out to not really be about the suffering I was having. But we somehow dropped into some deeper place of where we find the most value and importance in the practice. Being reminded and touching in to that place was the best medicine for me in that situation. From there, I had the resources and the ability to be open, upright, and present for the challenge.

So, TOUCH: think, be open, be upright, and communicate.

Tomorrow I'll talk about help. This is the last part of the acronym TOUCH. What is important here is that helping comes after the first four steps. Rather than helping immediately, first and foremost we want to prepare ourselves to be ready to help. Thinking, openness, uprightness, and communication prepare the ground for effective ways to be supportive and serve other people.

Thank you.