

# Attunement (5 of 5) Help

May 05, 2023

**SUMMARY KEYWORDS** beneficial, compassion fatigue, settled, communication, accompanying, suffering, openness, chaplain, motivations, song, emergency, introvert, extrovert, authoritarian, obligation, uprightness, TOUCH, desert, tire, dying, harm, challenge

## Gil Fronsdal

We have come to the last of the five talks on attunement. We have been discussing the acronym TOUCH. T is for Thinking – thinking well and carefully about the suffering we encounter. The attunement we are talking about is the attunement that allows meaningful, effective, and healthy compassion to come forth into our care for the world. Before we're ready for compassion, we want to be attuned to the suffering. That can take some reflection and thinking.

The O in TOUCH is for Open. We want to be open and willing to experience the suffering. The willingness to be open is profound because it is part of the movement toward freedom. It is freedom from resistance, freedom

from picking things up, and freedom from blocking. It means being so free that we are like an open window. Everything can pass through without affecting the window or breaking the glass.

The U in TOUCH is for being Upright – being upright, stable, strong, undefeated, and un-collapsed. Fully present, not assertive, not withdrawing, and having a strong sense of presence for the suffering we are encountering.

The C in TOUCH is for Communication – to communicate with people. To have a conversation to find out what is going on instead of assuming we know what is needed. To be in communication and get the information.

In today's topic, the H in the acronym TOUCH is for Help. An important part of compassion is to help, to do something to alleviate the suffering in oneself, in others, and in the whole world. The help I am going to talk about today is maybe a little bit more modest. It is a building block or a stepping stone toward more full compassionate action.

To help, you want to be able to ask the question, “What is helpful here? What is beneficial?” We ask this in all directions, including what is beneficial for oneself. Because if we leave ourselves too much out of the

equation, then we can actually cause harm to ourselves and to others. If we are not bringing careful attention to our motivations, our emotions, and our reactions, we can be so disconnected from ourselves that unhelpful things may come out of us inadvertently in words or actions. This can happen when we think we are obligated to help someone, and we're supposed to be altruistic and not care for ourselves at all. There may be anger in the helping because we don't want to, but we feel like we should.

So we ask, "What is helpful for us in this situation?" Questioning ourselves is very important because some people live under authoritarian rules of obligation, duty, and shoulds. These can override any careful attention and exhaust people. Compassion fatigue can sometimes come from this sense of obligation – "*I have to do this.*" So we really question, "What is beneficial here for me?", because when we are benefited, especially spiritually or dharmically benefited, settled, and peaceful, with a calm presence, not only can we act better, but the action that we do conveys something important.

Many times the medium is the message. If we are helping someone because we are anxious, and we are trying to assuage our own fear, that will give a very different message to people than if we don't act from fear. Instead, we can act with great energy and great

passion, but we are calm, present, and clearly connected to the person. We are unable to do this if we are motivated by fear.

It is helpful to check in with ourselves to understand what motivates us to be helpful. We can be motivated to help others not because we truly care for them. If we really look carefully, we may see that we want to help in order to feel more comfortable, to create a nice identity for ourselves, or to show the world that we are good people. We may be driven more by these motivations that are not spiritually or dharmically beneficial. They can sometimes even cause long-term harm.

So, we check in and ask, “What is really helpful?” The more we practice, the more we can answer that question in a deep and full way, with concern for our long-term happiness and welfare, not just to make ourselves comfortable in the short term.

With that as a reference point, we can also ask what is helpful for the other person. Remember, we are talking about being attuned. What is helpful for the other person is an important question so we do not bring the wrong kind of help. Some people want to be left alone. They want to figure things out themselves. They just want a companion. Some people just want to be seen and known in their struggles. They don't necessarily

want someone to help, support, or fix the problems for them.

We ask what is supportive for others. Occasionally, with people who do want to get help from others, that help is not actually spiritually helpful for them. Maybe their desire to get help represents some habit of always being helpless and looking to others to save them. At some point, we want to stop being the savior, because they may need to grow up. They may need to learn to stand on their own two feet. Always coming to the rescue is not beneficial for others. To be uncaring is not beneficial, but in a caring way, it is good to allow someone to grow up.

We ask what is beneficial for ourselves and what is beneficial for others. With attunement, we also ask, "What form of help is attuned to me and to the other person?"

Say someone is having a challenge. For instance, they are late going someplace and they have a flat tire. They don't know how to fix a flat tire. On the surface, it seems as if the best thing is to help them put the spare tire on because you know how to do it. That is nice, but maybe you have no clue how to change a tire, so it would not be helpful to help them with the tire. What might be helpful instead is to call someone who knows how to change the tire, to find someone else who can help.

Or maybe the person can figure it out but you both are in the desert. There is no place to call and no cell phone – you can't help. What help would be attuned to what you can do and what their need is? Maybe what you can do is bring them water. You realize they have been struggling for some time and it is hot in the desert. You bring them water or food and say, "Here, take a break. Have some water, eat, and we can get back to it in a little bit." That is an example of what I can do that is appropriate for me.

In another example, say when someone is a completely devoted introvert, sometimes what is appropriate is just sitting with them on the park bench and accompanying them when they are challenged. Not so involved in conversation and fixing, but just accompanying. You can be calm, centered, and present. I have gone just to sit with people and be quiet together, letting them do what they needed to do. But they felt that there was some support quietly in the room with them.

Or maybe you are a devoted extrovert and you love to sing. It might be that singing a song for the person is the right thing. I knew a chaplain who was in the hospital with someone who was dying in the emergency room. It was kind of a tragic death. The person was quite upset, discouraged, and angry. She had turned her face towards the wall and was unresponsive to anybody. The

chaplain just started singing a song. During the song, the person kind of softened, opened up, turned around, and started to engage the chaplain.

So what is the right way? What can we bring that is attuned to us? How do we help this person? How do we help the person in a way that they can receive? Some people are not able to receive what seems like the logical obvious kind of help. They feel put upon, or they feel it is too assertive, that people have entered their space too much. They feel like refusing because they will feel obligated. In some cultures, there is also a deep sense of obligation that comes with receiving help. So it is difficult to step into their zone.

This is where communication is important. What does this person want to receive? What can they receive on their end? As I said, some people just want to be quiet together with someone else. Another person may want to join in a song. If someone came to me in the emergency department and wanted to care for me, chances are that expecting me to sing a song with them is not really going to be so helpful for me.

Being attuned means questioning and considering all the factors that are in place in order to know what would be helpful here, given oneself, given the other person, and given the situation. A good assumption to go by is

that at any given time, there are many ways to help, not just one.

If we rush into that one way that we think is the right way, then there is a good chance we are going to miss what the situation is really about – the total situation that includes us. So, the acronym TOUCH - Think, Openness, Uprightness, Communication, and Help. These are all the places where we do the work of attunement.

I will be away for the next two weeks, back for one week, and then on self-retreat in June. You will be in good hands with the teachers that are coming while I am away. Please support them and appreciate them. When I am back I want to continue on the theme of compassion. Compassion is also an ongoing way of dealing with the theme of how to be with challenges. Thank you.