

Aspects of Compassion (3 of 5) Appreciation

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Gil Fronsda

This will be the third talk on the aspects of compassion. One way of thinking about them is that they are the building blocks for compassion.

Compassion is such a wonderful ideal and wonderful attitude to have. It is championed in many ways, but I think it is often presented as something you are supposed to be, or you want to be, as if you could just muster it up and do it on a moment's notice. More realistically, I think a foundation can be put in place for healthy compassion, so compassion doesn't slide into distress or into losing ourselves in other people – losing touch with ourselves through excessive preoccupation with others. So we put in the foundation and the building blocks.

On Monday, I talked about awareness as not just being aware, but having autonomy and a sense of stability and strength in the awareness so that the awareness is not entangled or caught in what we are aware of. This autonomy is a very healthy and sane kind of distance, openness, or bigness, so that awareness is bigger than anything that we are aware of. Awareness takes a step back and can gaze kindly upon what is there. That sense of autonomy comes into kind of a fullness as we put these elements into place for compassion. When compassion is mature, there is a clear sense of autonomy, independence, or freedom in the compassion itself.

Yesterday we discussed attunement. One of the meanings of attunement is to come into harmony with something. Rather than a headlong rush into having compassion, caring for someone, helping them, fixing them, doing something, attunement is taking the time, with that sense of autonomy, to find a harmonious way of being here – a way to be attuned or resonant with someone that is appropriate for both of us.

The effort to find that harmony means we are exercising a certain degree of autonomy. We are not lost in the experience or in our preoccupation with it. We are standing there upright and stable, and then finding a harmonious position. How can we be here in an appropriate way? We do not identify with the person's

suffering or become it, but rather, we attune to it, recognize it, accompany it, and are present in a helpful way.

The next step in these five elements of compassion is appreciation. Appreciation carries a lot more value if we are autonomous, if we are our own person who can meet someone with appreciation. If we sink or are less than a full person, or if we feel that we have to take care of someone or join them in their misery, they might feel that there is some companionship. Some people want others to prove that they are committed to caring for them. But there is less for us to offer. If we can be upright and autonomous, then we can bring and radiate a certain kind of healthy strength, a healthy presence, so that our appreciation and our respect for others has a fuller feel, a fuller presence.

Appreciation has a lot to do with valuing someone else, valuing who they are. It also means appreciating the wholeness of a person and not getting stuck on particular things they've done or said, or particular quirks they have that you might like or not like. You step back and appreciate this is a human being who has been born, who has been a baby, who has gone through tremendously different kinds of life experiences growing up, some of them very challenging, some maybe wonderful. This is a person who has had to navigate so many things in the complicated challenging

lives we all have. Here is a person who has taken a lot of knocks in this life and had a lot of challenges, perhaps. This is a person who is finding their way. This is a person to whom we grant their autonomy.

There is respect in appreciation. This is an especially important thing. We respect their autonomy – their ability to make choices for themselves, their ability to be a dignified, valued person whose opinions matter, whose experience matters, whose life matters – without interfering or bringing compassion and trying to tell them what to do.

So we appreciate others. The appreciation factor does not necessarily begin with gazing upon the other person, thinking about the other person, or thinking about what to appreciate. Rather it begins within ourselves as we get settled in the place of awareness, settled in our body, settled in the present moment. One of the functions of meditation and mindfulness is to settle the reactive mind, the judging mind, the opinionated mind, the scared mind that offers disrespect or disappreciation – or worse, prejudice and bias, or resentment, envy, or blame.

We settle all that so that we can live in the world from a different place, where we appreciate how special it is to be grounded, centered, and calm. We appreciate being aware. It is a miracle to be aware. It is a miracle to be

mindful, but when we are busy in life running around doing all the things we do, we do not realize what a miracle it is. It is such a miracle to come to a place where we simply appreciate being aware.

Then the gaze of appreciation is one that appreciates regardless of what it sees. It is not dependent on the other person being just right, and just perfect, and doing everything the way you want them to do. The person can even do things that might be unethical. Appreciation is not an approval of that, or letting them get away with it, but it means not being limited to that, and seeing the whole person.

I have known people who did live an unethical life, and it all changed for them. What transformed them was meeting someone who did not see them through the lens of what they had done, but saw them as a whole person, and appreciated who they were. Being seen that way by someone else opened them to a greater fullness of who they were and what they could be, which was powerful for them. They stepped into this fuller person that they were, and their unethical behavior stopped. This is maybe kind of a miracle story, but it is powerful to be gazed on and be seen in this whole way with appreciation, rather than being limited to a particular small part of who we are.

Having compassion without appreciation might not be compassion. If we have compassion without appreciation and respect for the person, I don't think that the compassionate action we do will be as clean, or as effective, or touch something as deep. It might be fixing or helping; it might even be enabling something that they should not be enabled to do.

There is something about engaging someone with compassionate care, where they feel the appreciation and respect in the care. They feel like they are being treated as a dignified, autonomous person who can make their own decisions. We are there to be their friend, to accompany them, to be available to offer what support might be needed. But we are not asserting ourselves, proving ourselves, feeling sorry or having pity for them. The appreciation and the deep respect are there.

I like to believe that Dharma practice brings forth a lot of respect for ourselves, for the world, and for others. To live with mindfulness is to live with respect – the kind of respect where we are always ready to bow to everyone. A bow of respect, a bow of maybe a little reverence, of deep appreciation; sometimes bows of gratitude, sometimes bows of delight and joy. Something like that – we are always ready to bow. We might not actually bow, but the heart is always ready for that kind of

appreciation, that kind of respect, even for our enemies. At least in our hearts, we are always ready to bow.

This is a tall order, but some modicum of this awareness, attunement, and appreciation is really the building block for us to eventually get to compassion.

As you go around the day today, I think it would be fantastic if you would explore this concept of appreciation and/or respect for others. How often do you have appreciation for the people you pass on the street, or in the stores, or at work, or in neighborhoods? Is it part of your social orientation to appreciate or respect the people that are around you, or is appreciation something you have to remind yourself about? What is it like for you to bring that forth? Can you bring forth appreciation and respect that is less a doing and more an allowing – a deep capacity for respect and appreciation that is almost innate, once disrespect and non-appreciation have fallen away? If you wish, explore that until we meet again. That may be a foundation for tomorrow when we talk about aspiration as an element of compassion. Thank you.