

Aspiration (3 of 5) Developing and Serving

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Continuing with the theme of aspiration, one of the really beautiful aspects of compassion is the desire for the alleviation of suffering – for suffering to come to an end. We are so fortunate to live in a world where people have this aspiration. Because it's such a beautiful and important wish, it is important to consider the different facets of it and learn how to do it well. If we just aspire on automatic pilot – doing aspiration the way we think it's supposed to be – we might do it simplistically, in ways that actually might not even be helpful.

I'm involved with training people to do Buddhist chaplaincy. Chaplaincy is kind of in the public sphere. It is maybe one of the few professions where it is almost like a job description to explicitly bring compassionate

care to patients in hospitals, inmates in prison, to all kinds of different situations – to hospices, schools, colleges, all the places where they have chaplains.

One of the core ideas of chaplaincy is that compassionate care should be done in the service of others, as opposed to fixing them or helping them. There was a famous article by Rachel Naomi Remen, who wrote about the distinction between fixing, helping, and serving. I'm not able to represent her accurately, but speaking for myself, fixing implies that someone is broken. If we're going to fix them, then we are fixing their brokenness. It doesn't feel good to be approached as if you're a broken person. While the compassion might be there, it comes along with a message that can reinforce all kinds of societal and personal ideas that there's something wrong with us.

The other idea is to help. The idea of help seems like it's innocent enough. Helping is often a beautiful thing to do, provided that we're not seeing other people as helpless. If we see other people as helpless, we are conditioning people or viewing them in a very limited way. If we go in there to alleviate suffering for people, and we try to get rid of the suffering as fast as we can, we might actually be limiting people dramatically.

Serving is the third option. With serving, there is a deep respect for others, for their agency, for their capacity, and for their potential. We are there to support that capacity to grow.

Yesterday I talked about going deeper, below the surface, to the causes of suffering. Today I want to emphasize that we also want to go deeper to look at people's potential – how they can develop and grow. This involves more than just removing the causes of suffering. It means growing and developing ourselves in such a way that we have the inner strength and capacity to help people. We help them to develop the inner capacity to be with the difficulties of life. The adversities and the challenges of life are often where people grow, develop, and get stronger and wiser by working through some of the complex attachments and conditioning that get in the way. Simply alleviating suffering too quickly can deny people the opportunity to grow into their potential and develop themselves.

So we see people not as broken, but as capable. We see them as whole beings moving towards wholeness. We see them not as helpless, but as having the potential and capacity to help themselves. Then we serve those capacities. We serve their ability. We serve their wholeness and their movement towards wholeness. We are available. We're there. We are not

the savior. We don't come as a savior in shining armor to be the one who helps them.

This is a delicate thing because people sometimes want to be saved. They are looking for others to take responsibility. They're looking for others to do it for them. When we come along and offer them help, and even fix them in some ways, temporarily perhaps, they're so grateful. As a compassionate caregiver, it can be so rewarding to feel the gratitude and the wonderfulness of the people whom we've saved. And we feel like we've done the right thing.

But maybe not. Maybe we've done a fine thing. Maybe saving doesn't cause harm. But maybe it has short-changed people, and what really needs to happen is they need to grow. Even if they are grown up, they are capable of continued emotional, spiritual, and relational growth. When there are emotional and psychological challenges, maybe we should be a little bit tender and careful not to interfere with people's ability to struggle and find their way with what's difficult.

While serving them, we are there with them, we accompany them, and we are available. We say: "I'm here for you. Let me know what I can do, and how I can support you." Or, "I'm here with you, and I see that you have a challenge you're struggling with. I want to support you to find a way through that struggle."

We are there as a companion, a support, or a sounding board. Maybe we offer ideas, or maybe we ask questions that help people understand. But it is important not to take away people's agency or their ability to move towards wholeness, because that movement towards wholeness and health *is* wholeness and health in and of itself.

So we allow people to develop. When people suffer, we ask, where do they need to develop? What needs to grow and be cultivated? For example, because we come from a meditation tradition, when someone is suffering a lot, you might support them to go to a meditation retreat. There they can sit and be really present for themselves and for what's going on. The deep connection and deep process of growing and developing one's capacity to work through things that can happen on a meditation retreat is remarkable. This way, when you help people, you are helping them to help themselves. You offer them the possibility of doing a retreat. There are many other things they could do, but the idea is to support people to do it and find a way themselves. Be careful with the fixing mode and the helping mode.

Development and service are two aspects of aspiration: to look for how to support people's development and to discover within ourselves how we can be of service.

One support for us to be able to have compassionate care this way is learning how to be present for ourselves and others from some place deeper than the realm of our discursive thinking. Even when we want to help people, discursive thinking can come along with so much bias, prejudice, simplistic ideas, stories, memories, and associations – it's remarkable. Discursive thinking is not innocent. It is sometimes heavily conditioned by so much background baggage that we carry along with us.

One of the great skills that can come from meditation practice is to be able to feel, know, and connect to thinking that's deeper than discursive thinking. We learn to quiet the discursive mind so that we can listen, feel, know, and be wise from a place that's below that level.

One problem with discursive thinking – constructions of stories, ideas, and commentary – is that if any of the stories we say about others or ourselves are negative in nature, the ongoing nature of discursive thinking means that the negativity gets reinforced. It creates an atmosphere and a mood. Once we start creating atmospheres and moods within us, it feels like they *are* us. The mood gives the thoughts a sense of truth: “Oh, this is how it really is.” Sometimes there is a kind of authority in the moods, attitudes, and emotional states that we end up in. But when they are reinforced by

discursive thinking, it's probably best not to give them a lot of credence.

So we need the ability to drop deeper. One way to use our capacity to know, feel, and sense from a quieter, deeper place is by turning that capacity toward our discursive mind itself. This is like being with a friend who is troubled. We're not fixing them, we're not saving them, and we're not helping them. What we are doing is being present, accompanying them, showing them they're not alone, and listening to them deeply. Maybe we ask simple questions to help bring forth what is really happening.

We can do this with ourselves in the same way. We direct that deeper presence and deeper awareness towards our discursive mind with all the constructs and ideas that it spins in. There is always going to be something deeper underneath it. Discursive thinking is always a surface expression of something more important that needs to be heard, felt, and known.

As we learn about the aspirational aspects of compassion, we're also learning how to connect and be with ourselves and others from a deeper capacity that we are developing – the capacity to be present from a place of wisdom, love, and care that is not skewed by the spinning, discursive thoughts that live in our minds so easily.

I hope that these words are useful for you and if they are not, then please feel free to discard them. We will continue with the theme of aspiration tomorrow. Thank you.