

Aspiration (2 of 5) Understanding and Uprooting

July 4, 2023

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

compassion, listening, reflecting, commenting

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This is the second talk on the aspiration that comes along with compassion – the desire for people not to suffer, not to struggle, be in danger, or be challenged in unnecessary and difficult ways. It is a wonderful occurrence to have this wish, this aspiration – one where we are not self-preoccupied. We are available to care for other people, to have care and concern for them, and to have good wishes for them, so their welfare is at least as important as our own. May it be that they are happy; may it be that they don't suffer.

The instinct or movement towards compassion involves a desire that precedes acting. Action is another whole topic that we'll do some other week. But before the action, there is the wish, the aspiration, and the care. There are times when we have that wish but it's not for us to do anything. For instance, we learn about someone far away or read about someone in the news,

and we have compassion. We wish them well. We would like their suffering to go away. We aspire for that, but maybe it's not our place to do something about it. It's not our time.

But there are times when we have the opportunity to act and to do something. There, the idea of acting and doing things for the welfare of others is also a wonderful antidote to self-preoccupation. The operative idea of self-preoccupation is that one is really caught up in one's self – spinning around in self-concern, self-recrimination, self-criticism, and desires. There is so much tension there that it generates more and more of the same. One way to step out of that current of self-preoccupation is to care for others, to be available – to be aware of others, to be attuned to others, to appreciate others, and to feel empathy for and a connection to their struggles and their suffering. Then we aspire that they don't suffer as much.

Sometimes when we throw ourselves headlong into compassion, from a sense of duty or the idea that we should, the aspiration can be somewhat simplistic or limited. The most common way this happens is when we feel that we are responsible to help end that suffering, help it to stop. The only thing that counts is somehow stopping it.

Sometimes we can do something for someone. For example, when someone is chronically hungry, it might be important to feed them. I don't want to diminish the value of feeding people, but if all we do is feed someone, then the condition for the situation in which they are always hungry is always going to be present. That condition has not been addressed. In some ways, by feeding them we perpetuate the system, the conditions, the psychology, or whatever is going on that is perpetuating their challenge.

Compassion does not simply want to stop the suffering we see directly in front of us, because it understands that there is something deeper going on. There are wider conditions – societal conditions, personal conditions, psychological things going on. To really help someone, we want to be able to go underneath and see more deeply – what is really going on here? How can we help someone to help themselves? How can we help someone so that the conditions are there for them not to keep falling back into the same difficulty over and over again?

This kind of help means to understand, to undo, and to uproot. Buddhism specializes in looking deep within ourselves psychologically. There is definitely a time and place where it is very important to understand the wider conditions that the person is in – the social conditions and family conditions. It is important to have a way to

address these as well, so that people's challenges are not just repeated and perpetuated because of how society operates.

Buddhism and meditation specialize in becoming more deeply aware of ourselves. Then, because we understand ourselves well, maybe we can understand other people as well. We can understand the underlying psychological causes for the tension people carry, the stresses they hold onto, their overwhelm, and the emotional pain they are experiencing. More often than not, something deeper is operating – some deeper fear, deeper attachments, deeper conceit or ideas of self, or some deeper desires that might not be healthy desires to have. Simply addressing the suffering without looking at the underlying conditions means that the underlying conditions are present and can show up again and again and again.

Many people are confused by how, after the suffering has ended, it revisits them the next day. There are people who have regularly moved away from jobs or people because they find the situation difficult. Some people move away from Buddhist meditation centers or Buddhist practice, and go find something else. For a little while, whatever new thing they find – the job, the person, the practice, the religion – is exciting and wonderful and has a lot of promise. But sooner or later they run into the same problems, because they brought

them with them. The underlying attachments, the fear, the way they're closed, or the way they're avoiding begin to show themselves, and then become difficult. In that difficulty, sometimes the situation outside is blamed. The situation outside is supposed to fix it for them. And if it doesn't, they're going to go somewhere else.

The idea is to help and support people to begin to understand more deeply the underlying causes and psychological conditions for the suffering they have. Helping people to do that is a delicate thing to do. We don't want to be people's therapists. We don't want to assume we understand what's really going on for them.

But there are ways of being present for people, listening, and being in conversation so that we can discover what's going on with them in a deeper way, as a way of helping them understand. This can be asking simple questions, or being a very good listener, an active listener – listening and reflecting back what you hear, or commenting briefly about it, just so they know you've heard it. When they know they've been heard and understood, some people open up more. Maybe we are not addressing the surface suffering, but we're helping to uncover the deeper suffering that's there.

This is an uncovering, an uprooting, an undoing, an understanding of something deeper. Through active

listening and being present for people, we offer to others what we can offer to ourselves in meditation – listening that begins to go deeper than discursive thought. What we actually talk about and say might be the tip of an iceberg of something much deeper that's going on. When someone is talking about a challenge they have in their life, and we simply say, "Sounds like that's really hard," that points to something deeper. Then there is an opportunity for people to go: "Yeah, it is hard. I'm afraid," or, "I'm troubled," or, "I'm discouraged." They begin to touch something deeper.

Over and over again I've seen that we don't necessarily have to help people by solving their problems for them. Sometimes just to be seen and to be known in this deeper way helps people. If we fix people's surface suffering and problems, then they don't get seen. If we say, "Just do this and that, then you'll be fine," or "Come with me and we'll go have an exciting time at the movies," that is more of a distraction than an attempt to deal with the suffering. There might be relief, but there is no release; there is no freedom. When people are seen, understood, recognized, and listened to in this deeper way that uncovers, that itself is the medicine. That itself is a phenomenal support for softening, lessening, and overcoming the suffering people have.

In the aspiration to understand, uncover, support people, undo, or uproot, we ask what is going on more

deeply. This is an aspiration of compassion that might have more lasting value than simply alleviating someone's suffering in some surface way. This is especially true if alleviating it just means it's temporary, and it will come back the next day, over and over again, until something deeper happens.

I think many people in the world have a recurrent theme of a particular kind of distress, anxiety, frustration, or anger. For us to meet them with our compassion might mean to hold whatever the surface level is with a certain kind of equanimity, acceptance, and non-reactivity, and listen deeply and support them so that they can see –what else is going on here? What's going on more deeply? The compassion aspiration is concerned not just with the surface suffering, but the deeper causes and conditions so that we're not just feeding people. We are helping people to grow their own food, as a metaphor. Thank you, and thank you for being here on the 4th of July.