

Aspects of Compassion (2 of 5)

Attunement

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

attune, awareness, suffering, sensitivity, wisdom, compassion, stability, stable, nourishing, rooted, sensitive, respectful, empathy, emotions

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Hello and welcome to the second talk on the elements of compassion. When all of the elements of compassion are together, compassion can be effective. Compassion can be a treasure. It can be nourishing for us and hopefully, beneficial for others. These five elements are awareness, attunement, appreciation, aspiration, and action. Today's talk is about attunement. Attunement is built on the capacity for awareness.

One of the things I tried to convey in yesterday's talk about awareness is that it's not simply a matter of being aware, but of being aware in a way that's stable and rooted. We can be aware in a way that awareness is autonomous and independent of what it is aware of.

So if someone says something, you clearly hear it and know it. The awareness is like, “This is happening,” but the awareness doesn’t get ruffled. Awareness doesn’t get pushed around. It doesn’t get agitated. Parts of *you* might get agitated, but you know that. “Oh. There’s agitation.” Parts of you might be afraid. You know there’s fear. But the awareness itself is not afraid.

Awareness doesn’t get pulled into anything. We avoid that by managing not to identify with whatever the thing is. Like, “Oh. This is me.” We don’t lean into it or get glued to whatever thoughts, feelings, emotions, or events are happening. Awareness is like a still point in the middle of the storm, a still point in the middle of everything.

It’s not becoming aloof. It’s not becoming indifferent. It’s not becoming uncaring. It’s the opposite. If awareness can be free, autonomous, and independent – so we know whatever is happening – then we’re able to meet everything with wisdom. We can also meet everything with stability when awareness is stable and free. Then, when we encounter the world, we can figure out how to attune ourselves in the right way for the circumstance.

I’d like to again use the analogy I gave in the meditation. Two people are standing on a hilltop – one standing on their tippy toes on one foot, and the other standing in a very strong and stable position with both

feet spread apart and flat on the ground. If a strong wind comes along, they're both impacted equally by the wind. However, the one standing on one foot on tippy toes is going to be blown over. The one who has a stable footing – feet spread wide apart – can withstand the impact of the wind.

Using this as a metaphor for human experience, what can happen in that kind of situation is that two people can experience life events equally, but the person who is doing the equivalent of standing on one foot will say: “I’m a really sensitive person. I’m so sensitive I pick up everything.” In a sense, it’s true. Both people might be equally sensitive, but one has a strong grounding and is rooted, and the other one doesn’t.

The one who isn’t grounded will attribute the issue to too much sensitivity and stimulus. Sometimes this can happen. But it’s a whole different way of living if you can find a stability of awareness here. If you know and have that, you can figure out what direction to face against the wind. You can figure out how to stand, lean, and attune yourself to the wind so it doesn’t blow you over. Once you have the ability to be balanced and rooted in awareness, that is a fantastic foundation for what leads up to compassion.

The next thing is to be attuned to the suffering of others. I like the word “attuned” quite a bit because when we

use the word “empathy,” many people will interpret it as feeling what others are feeling. Some people feel as if that’s really what we’re supposed to do when we have compassion – that we have to really feel the other person’s suffering. Some people do that. They do feel other people’s suffering. But that’s not attunement. Attunement is to be very sensitive to our own inner feelings, the resonance, tuning into the other person, and taking in all the information of what’s there.

Because we’re rooted in awareness, attunement is how we dial in so that we have just the right level of attunement – just the right way of being present for someone. People don’t necessarily need us to feel their suffering fully. Mostly, what they need is someone to accompany them, be present, and understand them. In fact, if we feel other people’s suffering so much that it becomes our own, we’re not really available to help others well. Some people might appreciate it because they feel that they’re not alone. But there are ways of accompanying people other than by some kind of empathy, experiencing the same thing they’re experiencing.

So, attunement. I like that word because in the old days when I was growing up, we had radios that you would tune to a radio station. You had to turn the knob just right to get the right wavelength. If you positioned the

knob just a little bit on either side of the wavelength of the radio station, you'd get a lot of static.

Similarly, as we attune ourselves to other people, we find the place where there isn't a lot of static. There's not a lot of leaning in, pulling away, spinning out in thought, or reactivity, but instead, there's finding a place to be. This is why stable awareness is so important. It's with stable awareness that we can find how to really understand another person. How do we really sense them or be with them in an effective way that is useful both for them and for us?

Attunement is not just simply experiencing people's emotions. Attunement is asking, "How can I be present for this person's emotions, life, and suffering in a way that's supportive for them and supportive for me?" There's a kind of choice, a kind of agency there in how we experience the suffering of others.

If we don't feel like we have any agency, if we feel like we're supposed to just experience the suffering of others (or if that's what we do automatically), then we're not finding that place of agency, of choice. This is why stable awareness gives us the possibility of beginning to find how we can be here in a wise way and start feeling confident in the attunement process. We can ask: "What's the wise way of being here? What should I be aware of here with this person?"

We can get a lot of information from other people who are suffering. It's clear that some people want you to sit next to them. Some of them want to have a listener who listens to them as they talk. Some people just want someone to bring them a cup of tea. Some people want to be left alone.

So, we want to be attuned to what is the need here. Then, as we feel that need or feel what's appropriate, how do we communicate with this person? How do we share our presence with them? Do we sit close or far away? Do we really listen? Do we ask simple questions?

If we don't have that kind of closeness with the suffering of the world – say it's through the news or something far away we've heard about – there's very little direct information to be attuned to. But still, we can ask ourselves: "Given what I know, how can I be attuned? How can I be present and attentive so that I can be helpful in this situation for them and myself?"

If we get overwhelmed, anxious, or upset, or we allow ourselves to feel it in such a way that we're on our tippy toes, standing on one foot, then it can be overwhelming, confusing, upsetting, and distressing. But to be attuned also means being attuned to ourselves. So the question for ourselves is: "How can I be present and attuned for

this person who's going through a really hard time – a person who's not sitting in front of me and, maybe, is someplace else?" When we're alone, away from the person, a big part of that might be: "How do I attune myself so I can be present and aware from a place of stability, balance, and strength?" Find the awareness that's calm, available, steady, able to make choices, and able, if the time comes, to be attuned. Ask: "What is useful here? How do I help this person? What does this person need? What kind of attention and presence does this person need?"

There is an acute or strong sense of knowing, recognizing, maybe even feeling in some resonant way, what the other person is feeling. But it's not feeling their suffering. If we're suffering because someone else is suffering, it's probably not empathy. Probably that's our own suffering. And that needs our compassion.

We can find our ability to be present for that suffering in a stable way and ask the same questions of ourselves: "How do I effectively attune myself to the suffering I'm having? How can I not sink in it, not be pushed around by it, or stand on one foot with it? How do I find stability? What's a useful way for me to be with this suffering?" Because as soon as we ask that – the question of how to be attuned, how to be usefully present – we're beginning to separate ourselves from being glued to the suffering, being immersed in it.

It's an expression or a growth of our autonomy, independence, and freedom to ask, "How do I attune?" It's deeply respectfully and caring to ask, "How do I attune to my suffering and someone else's?" Because without respect for ourselves and others, I don't know if it's going to be compassion. That will be the topic for tomorrow: appreciation.

So, awareness, attunement. And with attunement, having appreciation and respect for the person we're with or for ourselves. That's a really critical element in order for compassion to be healthy, clean, and nourishing for everyone.

If you want to do an exercise today, based on what I've said, experiment throughout the day with your best understanding of what I mean by attunement. Be with people and see if you can be attuned to them, not identified with them. What does that mean? One of the things it means is to ask: "What kind of presence is useful for them? What kind of presence allows me to be in this circumstance without any static and with some balance and stability?" Experiment with that, maybe in small ways, in a place and at a time that is not so challenging so you can get a feel for it. Thank you.