

Attunement (3 of 5) Uprightness

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Hello and welcome to our third talk on attunement. The practice of attunement is considered one of the building blocks for compassion. If we rush to be compassionate, before putting in place the building blocks for it, our compassion may be misguided and even detrimental to us.

Three weeks ago in the series “Aspects of Compassion,” I talked about compassion fatigue. It seems strange that anyone would ever be exhausted or overwhelmed by compassion. That would be like saying that the ocean is tired of being wet or the warm day is exhausted from being warm.

By itself, compassion is not tiring or exhausting. It does not make us victims or hurt us. What’s difficult is when

compassion is mixed in with our attitudes, tensions, and attachments. These things are often considered to be part of compassion, so people don't see the difference. But if we have the proper building blocks in place to be compassionate, then it can flow through us, without exhausting us, in a way that nourishes us and is much more beneficial for others.

Attunement is one of the building blocks for compassion. This week I'm offering five different aspects of attunement using TOUCH as an acronym. Today I am talking about uprightness (the letter U in TOUCH).

When we encounter suffering, it's an occasion to make sure that we establish an uprightness. That means we find a place of strength. Maybe, that's an unfortunate term in the United States because of how it's been discussed in the news lately. Being upright is like we stand our ground, we stand in our place. Not to attack anyone. Not to run away from anyone, but instead, to own the place where we are. Stand upright, firm, and strong. Not to be domineering. Not to be aloof or distant, so the openness we have can be supported by strength. This uprightness for me implies non-collapse, not giving up, not giving in.

Sometimes when people are suffering, they want us to participate in their suffering on their terms. They want

us to do what they want and what they think is important. It's not clear that's always the best thing to do.

Being upright is like taking a sacred pause. To take time to be open and present, to see the situation more fully, and to establish ourselves in a stable, relaxed, open way. It's a way that we can be embodied with our strength.

The proposal I would like to make is that when we are strong, our love is more valuable. When we stand upright metaphorically and are embodied and present in a clear way, then our love, care, kindness, and friendliness for others have more resonance. More is communicated through it. We're not asserting ourselves or dominating people when we're upright and open. We're not rushing to take care of them. Instead, we are expressing care.

Caring for and caring can be two different things. Caring for is what we do. Caring is an attitude that has more space – it can be bigger – when we're really open, and there's a kind of inner largeness and space and awareness. When we have stability, uprightness, strength, an embodiment that's really here for the situation, *then* people are more likely to notice and feel that caring.

For example, if you are sitting quietly in the corner of the room, making yourself small so as not to disturb anyone, and saying, “May you be happy, may you be peaceful,” that might be nice to do. But it doesn’t have the same impact as sitting up in your chair, or moving your chair closer to the people in the room, and *then* having an attitude of kindness. Then it’s noticed. Then it’s felt. It has more texture. It has more aliveness. It has more there. So, uprightness.

The first quality of attunement is to think (the letter T in TOUCH). Do some thinking and reflection. What’s going on here? How am I receiving this? How am I present for this? What’s the circumstance and the context for this suffering I’m in touch with or that I have myself? What’s a useful way to be with it? What does it mean to be attuned? How do I come into harmony or balance with it? Asking questions is a big part of thinking. It’s not necessarily asking why something is happening but rather thinking about how I can be present and attuned to it.

The next quality of attunement is openness (the letter O in TOUCH) – to be open to the experience. To be open is to increase our capacity to hold it. Rather than fixing things, a lot of Dharma practice is about expanding our capacity to be present for our discomfort and challenges without resisting or collapsing. When we don’t collapse, we can be upright.

TOUCH – to think, to be open, to be upright. Tomorrow you'll see that C is to communicate. To talk to people about what's going on before acting out of compassion.

Back to U – this uprightness where there's non-collapse. A powerful concept that comes from the Buddha is to be undefeated. To not be defeated by circumstance. To not sink down into being a victim but rather, arise to the occasion to be strong. Arise to the occasion to be free. Arise to the occasion to be someone who takes a stance in mindfulness; where mindfulness is the home from which we live in this world. Attentive, strong, present.

So, to practice now uprightness. Not giving in. Not giving up. Not belittling or diminishing ourselves, but also not aggrandizing ourselves. A simple, relaxed, definitive "Here I am." Not needing anything from other people. Not asserting myself on other people. Not giving in automatically to what other people want. But rather, here I am. Be present.

As you practice TOUCH – thinking, being open, being upright – it's often useful to start in areas where it's relatively easy because it's like building a muscle. If you go immediately into some of the biggest sufferings that humans can experience, you might not be ready for it. You have to work out a little bit and become familiar

with the territory in order to build your strength and confidence in the different steps.

I'd encourage you to see if there are peaceful, nonassertive ways that you can be upright today. See if you can be present and take in the experience. See yourself and the situation more fully without giving in to anything or giving up on anything, and without feeling guilt or unimportant. There's a wonderful place in uprightness of neither feeling the conceit of being important nor feeling the conceit of being unimportant.

If you are upright and present, being *neither* important nor unimportant, then what are you? What is that like?

Thank you and we'll continue tomorrow.