

Attunement (1 of 5) Thinking

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This week I'm going to continue with the general topic of compassion that I have been talking about for a number of weeks. I will fill in some of the gaps from earlier. Some weeks ago, in the series "Aspects of Compassion," I talked about five building blocks for compassion, which would ideally all be present when we feel compassion and act compassionately in the world. These are five A's: awareness, attunement, appreciation, aspiration, and action. The week after that, in preparation for looking at compassion, I spent a week on different ways of being aware.

Today I'd like to talk about the second building block for compassion, which is attunement. As an introduction to the topic of compassion and attunement, I would like to repeat something I said before. That is – if we have just one mode of being compassionate, it is easy to become overwhelmed. It is easy for that mode to not be appropriate for some situations we find ourselves in.

Some people have never considered what compassion is, never considered different modes and ways of being with suffering. Some people have only one mode of being with suffering – when there is suffering in oneself or in others, it is overwhelming. Suffering awakens all kinds of feelings of soreness, of overwhelm, feeling that, "Life is difficult, I'm a victim, it's so hard for me, I don't know what to do, and this is too much; I don't feel safe."

There are many ways that people can be impacted by the presence of suffering. Sometimes people rush to fix it. Sometimes their rush to fix the suffering in the world and the suffering of others is not really about caring for others as much as it is about trying to stop their feeling uncomfortable. By fixing others, they are trying to fix themselves.

So there are many different ways that we can relate to suffering. Some of them are not very healthy, and some of them are. In some of them, we identify too much with the suffering, or we take it in or receive it in such a way that we feel challenged by it, or we feel that now we have even more suffering of our own. Especially when empathy is understood to mean simply feeling what other people feel, it can tie into previous suffering that we carry within ourselves. Feeling the suffering of others can trigger our own background and cause everything to be much more difficult.

In understanding the different building blocks and aspects of compassion, the idea is to start having some agency in working with our minds and hearts, so that we can be with suffering in a useful, healthy way for ourselves and others. One of these ways is attunement. We take time to attune ourselves to the suffering that we are encountering in ourselves and others.

As soon as we have the notion that we are doing something – attunement – there are a number of things that can happen. One is, we can ask: What is attunement? Another is, we can bring some ideas and practices to address and to meet suffering. We are not just feeling the suffering in some kind of unmitigated way, or in the old way where we identify strongly with it, or where suffering touches our own wounds that we may be carrying.

Now we are beginning to engage suffering with a sense of agency: "Oh, I have an ability to do something here – to question, to wonder, to look at suffering." By rising to the occasion to meet suffering, we start to bring a kind of personal wherewithal or involvement (I keep using the word "agency") that is different than simply being impacted by the suffering or fixing the suffering. By asking the question, "What is attunement?", we begin to meet suffering with agency.

For this week, I'd like to offer five different aspects that I think are important for attunement – for coming into harmony with suffering, and into a healthy balance in relation to suffering. I have the acronym "TOUCH" for this. It begins with thinking, then openness to suffering, uprightness in relation to suffering, and communicating –

actually talking and communicating is an extremely important part of attunement. The last one is helping. Part of attunement is figuring out how we can be helpful – how we can best serve the situation.

The first step involves thinking. This involves the use of agency: “Okay. I am encountering suffering. Maybe I feel it deeply, or maybe just in a moderate way, but I am aware of it in some way. Now let me think about it a little bit. How is this impacting me? What is a useful stance in which to be present for it? What background do I have that influences how I experience it and how I think I should address it and do something about it? Maybe I carry with me a sense of responsibility for everyone in my family or everyone in my neighborhood, and so, when I encounter a difficulty, it automatically means I have to do something to fix it – I have to solve the problem.”

So we begin thinking about suffering. We ask: Is this really the case? Is there another way of being with this? Is there another way of experiencing it or understanding it? For example, I’d like to propose that compassion can have a very different quality when we read or hear about suffering in the news, where it’s far away and unconnected to us – versus when we are present for someone close to us who is suffering in some way, where we can feel and read them, and know the context and the situation.

In the news we know so little about the context – we know so little about it all – that there is a rush to rely on our thinking mind, our opinions, and our imagination to know what it means and how the situation is affecting people. That kind of cognitive explosion might not be the best source for compassion. It might be the best source for alarm, anger, and distress. Those emotions can then get confused with compassion. We may feel, “Of course, it is part of compassion to have those emotions.”

We can spend some time not just being mindful of the impact of the situation on us and how we’re feeling, but we can also actually think it out. In our mindfulness tradition, we don’t talk much about actively thinking and having critical thinking skills. It is easy to imagine that this practice does not involve wise thinking. There is wise mindfulness and wise concentration. They are often presented as a letting go of the thinking mind. This can do us a disservice if we think that we are not supposed to think. Or we can become kind of lazy with the thinking mind.

Thinking is a rich part of our life. It gets us into big trouble at times. But thinking is also very helpful if we can think out what it means to be attuned – what is a balanced way of being present for suffering, and what is a way of being in harmony with it?

Rushing to judgment is not harmony. Rushing to fix is not harmony. Immediately feeling the suffering and getting preoccupied with the impact that suffering has on us is not really in harmony. So what is it to be harmonious? Just asking that question begins to create space, a little bit of healthy distance, and healthy receptivity.

The ability to think about situations where suffering is involved is partly a matter of thinking about our usual responses and questioning them. Is this really the best way? Is this really wise? Is this really coming from a place of love and care? Is this response appropriate for the situation?

To think about a situation where there is suffering, we can ask: What is the context of this suffering? What is my role in it? What is the role of other people? Given the context, given the people who are suffering, do I understand them well, or am I projecting my own assumptions onto them?

I have sometimes had compassion for people suffering who were not suffering. I had been in situations similar to the one they were in, so I thought, “Of course, they’re going to have bad experiences.” One place I saw that was with my kids. I had challenges in elementary school. I went to a lot of different schools growing up – I changed schools a lot, so I was often a new kid in the school. There were concerns about being accepted and being bullied.

To simplify, when I knew my sons were going into the playground, I had a concern for their well-being. I imagined they were certainly going to suffer and have the same experience I had, so I tried to intervene. But my concern was all based on my own history, my own ideas. In some of the situations where I was so concerned, compassion was not needed. The concern was more a legacy of my own challenges.

So we can use the thinking mind to think things through. Some people like to journal about what’s going on. By journaling, they are thinking in a deeper, fuller way than simply relying on their capacity to be mindful, as in, “Oh, let’s just be aware here.”

The first element of attunement is thinking. Don't overthink, but don't under-think. I'd like to suggest that you experiment today with the thinking aspect of attunement. If you find yourself in a situation where there's some suffering, your own or others, or something of a challenge, don't rush to do something. Don't shut down. Go get a cup of tea or water, go for a little walk, or sit quietly if you can. Excuse yourself to go to the bathroom to breathe for a little while. Think it out: What's going on here? What just happened? What are some of the elements and the context? What does it mean to be attuned here?

One reference point for attunement is to ask yourself, as an exercise, "How would you like other people to be attuned to you?" Maybe then you can get a sense of what attunement means, and what you can bring to others. Have conversations with people today about what attunement is for you. It's not a common word, so maybe you will be discovering together what it is to be attuned to the suffering you encounter. Thank you very much.