

Attunement (2 of 5) Openness

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harmony, balance, suffering, compassion, nonresistance, discomfort, open, door, window

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This is the second talk on the topic of attunement. Other words for attunement could be “harmony” or “balance.” We are looking at attunement in relation to compassion and our connection to suffering in others and ourselves. Simply experiencing suffering in the world or ourselves in our usual, habitual way might not be in harmony. It might not be well attuned.

It is probably a bit of a challenge to think about being attuned to suffering. Attunement is about having the right level of connection, the right way of being present for suffering, so that we do not let suffering impact us negatively. The suffering doesn't strike the windows in our hearts such that they shatter, and we don't close down or resist what's happening.

I like to think of attunement as like tuning guitar strings so that the different strings are attuned to each other. Somehow they exist in the right relationship to each other. And so, when we encounter suffering, we can ask ourselves: “How do I attune? How do I establish a useful way of being aware and present, and a helpful attitude towards what is here?”

I think it is a nice principle that every encounter with suffering is different and requires a different attunement, asking, “What is this?” As soon as we start looking at and thinking about attunement, we are doing something very significant. We are not just a victim of suffering, a passive recipient of it, but we actually have some agency. Part of us is not caught in the suffering. It is engaged in looking at: What is the right balance here? how to be present?

Today's concept of attunement is being open to suffering, and in being open to suffering, also being open to compassion as a response. Being open involves being mindful and monitoring ourselves for its impact on us when we're in the presence of suffering. Do we close down? Do we resist? Do we attack? Do we get swept up in our thoughts? Sometimes people get distracted, and they go into fantasy. They start predicting the future.

To really understand, “This is my usual habit when I'm uncomfortable and things are difficult for me.” Then to ask ourselves, “How can I be attuned?” That is different from asking, “How can I be present for it?” because sometimes we are present in such a way that the experience strikes us. It hits our wounds; it hits our resistance; it hits our judgmentalism or our self-criticism. Only being present can fail to take into account what impact the experience has on us.

So we monitor ourselves and ask, “Given who I am and what is happening to me with the situation, how can I be open to this?” Open does not mean that you approve. Open does not mean that you don't care. Being open means that you are not responding first with habitual patterns of resistance. Openness kind of means nonresistance – how can I not resist the suffering?

Some of the nonresistance comes from the ability to be uncomfortable. There is discomfort. The stronger the suffering is, the more uncomfortable it is. Often people think they're responding compassionately to something, but instead, they are trying to make their own discomfort go away – and that is not compassion.

So, to be open, to have no resistance, to have no need to change what's going on – just to be open. This does not mean that we end up being passive. It means that this is a preparation for knowing what to do. We wait a while for the doing, for responding to compassion. That time might just be a few seconds, it might be minutes, or it might be longer, depending on the context and the situation we're in.

When we are reading about suffering in the news and feel alarmed or feel something strongly such that we are connected less to the people and more to the ideas and stories, the more likely it is that we're not open in a clear, free way. There might be more stories, opinions, and judgments that come into play. But what would it

mean to be open? To be open and allow the experience to touch us and move through us – open to all the ways we are, as a way of seeing clearly and coming into an ability to be present without the reactivity that is so common when we are in the presence of suffering.

So nonresistance, openness, being open to the experience. This might not be easy to understand how to do when the suffering is great. But you might look for small difficulties or small suffering that you or other people are in that don't require immediate action. Take time – maybe go sit down and meditate, or take some time by yourself. Just take the time to say: "Okay, given this, I will not do anything right now. I will not come to any conclusions right now. Let me just be open to this experience. Let me be present for it."

Be open like an open window, an open door, as if the experience is blowing right through you. As if there is nothing stopping it – no resistance, no picking it up, nothing to figure out, nothing to have to think about in relation to it. Just be an open door to it.

People might not have to know that you're doing this because others might be confused by your attitude. But I'd like to propose it is phenomenally respectful of others and of the suffering in the world to first and foremost be able to meet the suffering with nonresistance – with a non-picking-up-ness – without getting involved. Just let it be and make room for it – lots of room.

As we learn to do this, we learn to expand our capacity for discomfort, and expand our capacity to make room for what's there. Not so that we can suffer more, but so that we suffer less, and are available to see and understand what's happening in deeper ways.

I have been in situations where there is some difficulty, challenge, and suffering around me, and I have rushed to judgment. Sometimes I've rushed to action, only to discover later that what I did was not what was needed. If I had taken time to be open, receptive, and present for it – not resisting it or rushing to action, I would have seen what was needed, and I would have known better what to do.

This is a continuation of yesterday's talk. Yesterday's talk was about when we are in challenging times and in the presence of suffering, and compassion might be the healthy response to the situation – first, to take time to think about it. Think well. Partly, this means thinking about the proper way to be attuned to the suffering. Might just being open and non-resisting have a role right now? Being open probably has a role more often than not.

This does not mean that every single time you need to have nonresistance and be open. But openness is a skill, part of the repertoire of things that we're trying to do as we become attuned and come into a kind of harmony with the suffering of the world, so that we are in a good position to respond compassionately. Openness is a stepping stone to compassionate action, not a rush to compassionate action.

Today I'd encourage you to look for occasions – this can be a private practice; no one needs to know you're doing it – when you can be present for some way that people are having difficulty and are suffering. See if you can take a few moments to not resist it. It is almost as if you open your heart wide open, spread your arms wide open, and say: "Here. This can come right through me." This is very different than saying: "Here, this can land here and I can hold it." For this exercise, we say, "Oh here, this can just go right through." By allowing it to go through, maybe you will come to a wiser, better position to understand both yourself and what's happening.

Thank you – as we go through the acronym "TOUCH" for how to live an attuned life.