

Appreciation (4 of 5) Acceptance

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

accept, non-harm

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We are continuing with the theme of appreciation as a foundation for compassion. One form of appreciation that makes appreciation more valuable and richer is our ability to accept people as they are. This is a nuanced topic because, of course, there are people who do things that we can't accept. We're not condoning or allowing them to continue to do harm.

At the same time, it is profound for some people to be accepted as they are. There are plenty of people in this society that are basically not accepted for who they are. Everywhere they go, there are people who don't accept or include them, who marginalize them or ignore them. Somehow, they are not accepted. The non-accepting people might think that they are not being prejudiced or hostile, but there are subtle ways in which people keep silent, overlook or ignore others, or prioritize other people to give their attention to.

For some people, the way that they are not accepted is quite dramatic. For others, it is subtle, but it takes a toll over a long time. Because nonacceptance is such a common phenomenon in the world – we don't make room for people, we don't include them in our efforts to be inclusive, we don't befriend them – acceptance is a powerful thing to do. Some people rarely get accepted for themselves as they are.

There have been homeless people I've known. When I sat down at a bench and talked with them, I could see them relax. At first, they felt kind of cautious. I remember one person said, "Oh, I can go. I don't have to be here" – as if they didn't belong there. I reassured them that it was okay, and we had a nice conversation.

Accepting people is profound, but part of the art is learning how to do it in a way that is appropriate for oneself and others. It is a little hard to know all the ins and outs of when acceptance is appropriate, and when it's not. I would like to propose that one of the first criteria, the first entry point for radical acceptance of others, is to be dedicated to not harming them – to have that as a clear guideline. Certainly, that can mean any kind of intentional harm that we do to them, such as having hate or ill will, complaining about them, blaming them, criticizing them, or making snide comments about them. Many forms of harm are caused by the words we speak. So we avoid causing harm.

We also cause harm with our attention: who is noticed? who isn't noticed? who is ignored? We can notice how we're using our attention socially: who is prioritized or zeroed in on? who is not included in our attention? Are we causing harm by excluding or ignoring them? Who is it that feels ignored, who feels marginalized in the room, and is there some way to include them in the conversation if they're standing there and not being actively included?

As we move along in this investigation and consideration of non-harming, we also take into account other people. What is the experience like for them? What's happening for them? What do they need? For those people who are causing harm or saying mean things, is there some way to accept them that gets underneath their actions?

There is a common idea that we can separate the person from their actions. We might have a way of not accepting the actions, but accepting the person – not being hostile to the person – saying no to the actions but saying yes to the person.

For example, without getting angry at someone who says something mean to us, we might say: "Oh, wow, those words stung. I feel hurt by those words. They were difficult to hear. I care for you, but not the words." That kind of turning it around makes it a little difficult for people to continue saying harmful words, when you tell them about the impact their words have, and then immediately turn around and appreciate them in some way, or hold them in kindness, or have some acceptance of them as a person.

What needs to be accepted in people? It might not be the whole person. With the person saying mean words, what might need to be accepted is that they're scared, lonely, or pretty upset and frustrated. So you say: "Those words you spoke stung. I wonder if you're feeling sad or tired. Can I do something for you? Can I support you? Can I bring you some coffee?"

You change the language, and you don't buy into the hurtful tone of voice, attitude, or strategy that people are using. It may be hard to not participate in it. But somehow you step aside from that and return to the person, addressing some aspect of the person that maybe needs acceptance and support. This undermines and pulls the energy away from the harmful behavior. This is not easy to do, but if we're dedicated to a life of non-harming, then that itself might be seen as acceptance. Although it can be naive.

When we want to appreciate people, first, we try to really understand what's going on for the person. What can be appreciated? What is really going on here? What's going on under the surface? What's deeper than their behavior that we don't like? What can we respect? Can we respect the person, not the behavior? Then, can we be here in an accepting way?

I've been in situations where people were angry at me. I think it wasn't justified – but sometimes it was justified. What helped was my ability to be accepting of the situation and accepting of the person's anger and making room for it – not accepting it because I condoned it or approved of it, but being there and allowing myself to experience it, allowing that anger to be there, so that something different could happen – so it was not a fight between that person and me.

One of the nuanced and deeper ways that this topic of acceptance works, which I think is key to all of it working, is that we accept whatever the situation is into awareness – *whatever* it is, and that's a radical thing to say. We allow awareness to receive it and to know it. That is a very different activity from whatever we might do in response, what we might say, or how we might evaluate the situation.

We allow the situation to come into awareness, so awareness doesn't shut down, and so that somehow with our awareness we're not already resisting, stopping, or attacking. There is something important about the peaceful experience of allowing ourselves to be aware of something. We accept it into awareness. Hopefully, that allows us to respond in a wise way, and we will know what to do. By making room to allow ourselves to experience it and to be aware of it, the other person might feel: "Something different is going on here. This is not what I'm used to."

This might be someone who is sad and upset, for example, not someone doing harm. They might be surprised that someone can be calm, peaceful, and attentive to their sadness. We can accept the sadness and be open to it. We don't have to fix it right away or get involved too quickly. I think this kind of acceptance and awareness – allowing awareness to be accepting – gives a lot more power to our appreciation and respect for others. Then there is a cleaner channel and a cleaner transmission of the appreciation and respect we give.

The elements of appreciation are appreciation itself, gratitude, valuing people, and understanding people. Without understanding, appreciation can't be that deep. There is respect – respecting people and treating them as valuable human beings – valuable enough for us to pay attention to. As we pay attention, we pay attention with an accepting attention, so that something deeper can happen in our acceptance, and we know what to accept in the person.

Tomorrow will be about the last element of appreciation. Thank you very much for being part of this. I look forward to our time tomorrow.