

Aspiration (1 of 5) Aspiring to Stop Suffering

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Gil Fronsdal

Hello, everyone. The topic for this week's exploration of compassion is the role of aspiration in compassion.

A common definition of compassion is to recognize suffering in the world and to have a feeling for it – to have some kind of resonance with that suffering, some sympathy or empathy for it – *and* to have a desire for that suffering to be alleviated. That “and” is a hugely important part of compassion – the desire for suffering to be alleviated.

Compassion can exist without us necessarily being the person who is going to alleviate the suffering. But the desire is there. In certain circumstances, it makes sense that we have the desire to do something. We have the ability to do it, and it's appropriate to do it. Maybe sometimes there is no one else who could help with the suffering that people are experiencing, so we offer to do something.

So the common definition does involve a desire. But “desire” is a somewhat vague or broad word, so I prefer to call it “aspiration.” One reason for this is that aspiring to do something usually doesn't come along with duty or obligation. An aspiration comes from someplace deep inside. It is an inspiration. It's the welling up of an inner desire that arises freely, without need, perhaps, or without a lot of ego or self-centeredness. It has a deep source within.

There is a kind of open-endedness to aspiration. For me, it is different than hoping or wishing. Aspiration wants to see something happen but knows that it might not. Aspiration is not attached to the outcome. To act compassionately from aspiration can be a wonderful gift, because it frees us from the tightness and pressure of needing to accomplish and succeed. When we are compassionate towards others, it is sometimes enough for them to know that we have the desire to help. We're making the effort to help, even if we don't succeed. The idea that someone cares enough to make an effort to support you is sometimes the medicine that is needed, more so than the outcome.

The other reason I like aspiration is because the word is connected to breathing. In my mind, this suggests the idea that it has a deeper source within our body and our heart than anything that the mind – thinking, logic, analysis of the situation – can come up with. To aspire has a deeper upwelling.

When we are in the presence of suffering or feel it, we take the time to not rush to judgment, not rush to obligation, not rush to the idea that something has to happen here – when that rush is motivated by our own distress, our own discomfort, our own sense of self-centered obligation, or our own need to do something. Rather, we take time to relax with suffering, to be present, and to see – what is the aspiration that flows out of us? What is the desire, the wish, that has a kind of open-endedness and freedom, rather than putting us back in bondage, clamping us down, or narrowing us? With aspiration, we actually feel as if now we can breathe more easily, as opposed to getting stressed and tight, and our breathing becoming more contracted, tight, and narrow.

This week I will talk about five different aspects of aspiration. Today, the simple idea is that part of the aspiration of compassion is to want suffering to stop. We want our own suffering and someone else's suffering to stop. We want it to stop. We have that desire for suffering to no longer be there, because we know that life doesn't have to be about suffering all the time. We don't always have to live under the pressure, the tension, the hurt, the pain, and the stress that life brings us – our own struggles, and all the difficulties and heartbreak that we can have.

We know there is a different outcome, a way of coming into a very different relationship with this difficult world we are in – one in which we don't contribute or add to the suffering of contraction, the suffering of stress, or the suffering that comes with attachment and clinging. In practice, we can learn that we don't have to do that. There is another way of being.

As we learn that, then we learn how to have an aspiration that is free of attachment, free of force and assertiveness, and free of conceit. Compassionate aspiration is a beautiful quality to have. Being motivated by that beautiful aspiration is very different from being motivated by obligation or a sense of duty or responsibility, which many people get caught in, in a way that's not beneficial.

This means that we are able to not only be present for the experiences we encounter in the world, but our care comes along with that awareness. I learned yesterday that the word "awareness" comes from an Anglo-Germanic source that actually means "to care." I love the idea that awareness means "to care."

In that caring, we also care about ourselves enough that when we encounter suffering and are present for it and aware of it, we take the time to ask: where's the aspiration here? Where's the inspiration? What desire comes out of inspiration in relation to this suffering? It is the inspiration for the suffering to come to an end, to stop.

I would encourage you to spend some time exploring your desires. Think about when you have the desire for suffering and pain to end, to stop. Look at the quality of that desire. Does the desire come along with something that is actually stressful, that feels grating, or diminishes something inside of you, because of the need or the attachment that's there? In this encounter with suffering and the desires born from it, is there also a sense of aspiration or inspiration that supports the desire to stop or bring it to an end?

These are my thoughts today. Having been away for a month on a silent retreat, maybe I don't have many more words, so we'll stop early today. I'm very happy to be here and look forward to continuing the series on aspiration in relation to compassion over the next week. Thank you.