

Aspiration (4 of 5) Universal Aspiration

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Gil Fronsdal

Aspiration, the topic for this week, is very dear to me on my journey of Buddhist practice. It is related to the topic of intention. Aspiration is a wise way of letting desires bubble up from a deep, wise place within. To some degree, aspirations – the deeper intentions from which we want to live our lives – are among the most important aspects of our lives. Getting clarity about our aspirations is important.

Using the word “aspiration” rather than intention suggests that we’re talking about something that can be grand or central. An intention might be something very specific, although it can be broad and general. But in my mind, “aspiration” has more of a wide, broad largeness to it. It is really central. It is the heart’s aspiration, the heart’s deepest wish.

As we relax and settle in meditation, we are calming the agitation that is always going to be there if there is conceit and self-preoccupation – if we’re being driven by desires for “what I want” and “what I don’t want,” or if we’re caught up in fear. A good part of fear – not all fear – is rooted in a certain kind of self-concern and self-preoccupation. This might be a preoccupation with “my” emotions, “my” feelings, or “my” reactions. It might look like our preoccupation is with someone else’s suffering, and we’re really concerned about them. But what fuels it is our own distress.

When we’re distressed, there is a way in which that distress has roots in our self-concern and self-preoccupation, or some idea that we have to somehow take “my” distress seriously. This inner life of ours has a complicated ecology. The degree to which it is – knowingly and unknowingly – centered on self-concern or self-attachment is actually quite large.

As this practice (maybe any spiritual practice) deepens, we are calming, letting go, and relaxing the self-concern, the anxieties, fears, hate, and desires we have. These are all activities that take energy, cause stress, and require effort in some way. They might seem as if they are effortless and there’s no “me” behind them – they’re just there. But actually, as we settle and get quiet, we can see the effort and the energy that go into self-concern. That effort can be softened, can relax, and we can begin to slowly stop.

It’s not easy to do this. It is a slow process. But the goal, the treasure that’s found at the end of that process is an experience of being alive that is not self-concerned or self-preoccupied. I like the word “preoccupied.” It really stresses that there is something extra going on in the self-concern. There is an attachment, a tightening, and a drivenness in preoccupation.

At some point, what is here for us is attention, awareness, presence, and heartfulness that don’t have the limitations that come with self-preoccupation. As we’re less self-preoccupied, there is a simultaneous or parallel movement of not being preoccupied with others. Some people feel like they’re supposed to be preoccupied with others – that it is an expression of their compassion, their care, and their love, and of course, they’re supposed to be loving. Well, yes, but not all the time. We’re not required to do it 24 hours a day. It’s okay. We can feel the okayness as we deepen in meditation. It’s okay to let go of all preoccupation and all the effort to think and be concerned with others and oneself.

Selfishness begins to dissolve, but there is also a parallel movement of dissolving “otherishness” (to make up an English word), where we get caught up in creating others, the view of others, and the interpretation of others. A lot of this otherishness goes on, where we project onto other people our ideas about what they need and what they want.

I saw this when raising my children. When they were small kids at school, I saw that I projected onto them my own challenges that I had at school. As they got to a certain age and went onto the playground, because of some of the terrible things that had happened to me in the playground, I got worried that they were going to have the same thing happen, and I had to protect them and make them safe. That was a projection onto them. It was an otherishness that made them into something that had more to do with my thoughts than with who they were.

One of the gifts of meditation is the softening and relaxing of otherishness and selfishness. It is not that we're abandoning ourselves or abandoning others – it's the opposite. There can be universal sensitivity and universal care that is not restricted in any particular direction. When we have compassion for others and look into our aspiration for the alleviation of suffering, one possibility is to check in and see: is our compassion impartial? Is it available to everyone? Is it unlimited? Is it unrestricted? Are we being unselfish?

Sometimes there is a lot of selfishness in compassion. Seemingly, some people do it for themselves more than for the other person. To overcome our own distress about people suffering, we try to fix them or help them. Sometimes we are projecting onto another. Our care for others is more about caring for ourselves, because we're caring for that projection that we made of what's happening to others, and what their suffering might be like.

But there is a deeper way to care that is not actively concerned for self or others, but is 100% available to be responsive. A universal compassion – a universal aspiration – is possible. It is expressed as caring for everyone concerned. This universal aspiration of compassion cares about what is best for everyone concerned. That is important, because if we're part of a group, a couple, a family, a neighborhood, or a work team, things will go much better if we don't single out one person or subgroup of people to be the ones we have to care for the most, and we don't put aside other people's needs and situations, including our own, so we can care for others. Everyone's an equal player. Everyone's equally deserving of our care.

I know of families where the parents sacrificed themselves in unhealthy ways for the purpose of supporting their children. The children grew up kind of skewed, because they didn't understand that part of being in a group and a family is to compromise and to care for everyone – including everyone as playing an important role, and respecting everyone's needs, and finding a way to balance everyone's situation. If children learn that from an early age, it's second nature. But if the parents pour all their concern into their children without any concern for themselves, children get kind of a skewed message. I use that as an example for all kinds of situations.

When we have the desire to alleviate suffering, we can investigate and look at the nature of that desire. Can the aspiration be universal, where we're actually caring for everyone concerned? There might be a priority given to someone who is suffering the most, but not at the expense of everyone else in the room, or all those who are connected. One of the brilliant things that we can do is to take the time to not rush to compassionate action, unless there's a real need for immediacy. Rather, we can take the time to look around and ask: "What's best for everyone here? How do we care for everyone? How can we go forward here to relieve the suffering that everyone has in this situation?"

I'd like to believe that when we stop and do this wider inclusion of everyone as our circle of care, this is actually a powerful medicine for everyone involved. The people who are suffering the most can feel and sense that it's not just about their own suffering, but there are also others here so that their circle of care opens up. Then they are less tripped up by excessive concern for their own suffering (which is maybe horrible). But there's a way in which it can be beneficial for them to include others in the picture if they can, and appreciate that others are being cared for too.

In the medicine of universal aspiration, I think it is not only the universal aspiration that's the medicine, but the inner freedom of non-preoccupation, non-attachment, non-prioritization, and the absence of partiality can be inspiring, and is also a medicine for the suffering of the world.

To summarize this study of universal aspiration, I'm not suggesting that we try to have a policy of having a universal aspiration for all beings, but rather, the practice is to release ourselves from partiality – release ourselves from limiting our care and our love. I hope that the byproduct of that would be universal care, where compassion would be universally available and concerned with the welfare and well-being of everyone who is in the circle that we're involved in at the moment – whether it's a circle of two people, a circle of four, fifteen, or a hundred thousand, whatever seems appropriate for the circumstance.

May your circle of care be broad and wide in all directions. Thank you.