

Aspiration (5 of 5) Peaceful Aspiration

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peace, distress, discomfort, suffering, compassion, clinging, self-concern, discursive, compassion fatigue, non-reactive, inclusive

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For the fifth and last talk on aspirations that are a support for, or an aspect and a manifestation of compassion, I want to emphasize the possibility that aspiration can arise out of peace. Peace is a wonderful reference point for the motivations connected to being compassionate.

Some people confuse compassion with distress – with their own discomfort around being in the presence of suffering. They confuse the motivation to act compassionately with the motivations that flow from that discomfort and distress. Some of this has a lot to do with our attachment to self and other kinds of attachments we might have. Even in some of the most important things we can do to be compassionate and caring towards others, we can carry with us something that is not peaceful – something stressful that has attachment and clinging as part of it. That attachment has a force, an assertiveness, and a tension.

The aspiration to be compassionate can be peaceful and easeful. It can arise in an easy, light way where there's not a lot of self-attachment or self-concern entangled with it. This motivation does not come from any sense of being distressed, challenged, or uncomfortable with being uncomfortable. But rather, it comes from our capacity to be attuned, to be open, to be appreciative, and to be aware in a broad, open way.

Awareness, attunement, and appreciation are three of the important aspects of compassion that we've already talked about in this series. All of them lead to the possibility of a certain degree of peace, and a certain degree of ease and non-clinging. When compassion arises out of non-clinging, it looks very different from what people conventionally think compassion is supposed to look like.

Sometimes people feel that if there's some injustice in the world, we are supposed to be angry and upset, and if we're not upset enough, we are not showing that we care. But that upsetness and anger may very well be a symptom of something that we're attached to and clinging to – some assertion of self that is not really a necessary part of compassion. The alternative to being distressed and angry is not passivity or avoidance, but allowing an equally or even more powerful motivation to arise within us that can change the injustice. In a sense, this motivation can fight injustice, but it comes out of the inner world of non-clinging and peace.

The Dharma orientation around this is that we want to trust the Dharma within us. We want to trust the natural processes of healing, freedom, love, and compassion that can flow and move through us without bringing along clinging and self-assertion. In a categorical way, I call this “peace.” We trust peace, and we use peace as a reference point to understand our motivations for being compassionate.

Peace is the motivation to be compassionate when the actions of compassion come from a peaceful place, a settled place, a place of calm or quiet. This place is below the level of discursive thinking, where we spin stories, fears, fantasies, projections, and memories – where all kinds of things are swirling around and driving a certain kind of attached attitude towards it all. This attitude supports fear, anger, and distress.

But if we can listen to the place below discursive thought, which is more peaceful than most discursive and reactive thinking, then we have access to something quite different. We can have the flow of life. Life knows what to bring forth. Life knows the movement towards homeostasis, harmony, and peace for everyone concerned.

This is not passivity. It's very important to understand this. We trust the Dharma and listen deeply **i**n order to make room for this deeper motivation. Sometimes this can lead to tremendous courage, which perhaps does not look like courage, because it's not forceful. But it can give birth to a lifetime of dedication to living for the benefit of the world and trying to find a way to alleviate suffering in this world.

If we can be compassionate from a place of peace, then it is sustainable. Then compassion doesn't give birth to compassion fatigue or compassion overwhelm. Maybe that is an ancient phenomenon, but only in modern times does it have a name. It is unfortunate when fatigue and compassion are connected. Compassion fatigue refers to when our so-called compassionate actions in the world come along with the complications of attachments, clinging, self-assertion, self-definition, and self-victimization. Those occur when we act without knowing how to come from a peaceful place, and instead, we come from another place where we're much more vulnerable to being impacted in negative ways and becoming exhausted.

We can use peace as a reference point as we study and are mindful of our aspirations and realize all the different aspects of aspiration that make the world of aspiration richer. It is wonderful to have a reference point of peace. We can ask: "Is it peaceful? Is this aspiration free of clinging?"

One reason these questions are important is that one orientation for where to be compassionate is, in fact, towards ourselves. Of course, many of us will be attached and cling. Many of us will have inner challenges. Many of us will have fatigue and distress. It's not a crime to be this way. It is very important not to add layers of self-criticism or shame on top of distress. But using this peaceful place of awareness as a reference point can help show us, "Oh, I'm not peaceful."

Compassion can also be directed here toward ourselves and what's happening within us. We can ask: "Can I hold this with the kind of peaceful presence that a friend might offer me when sitting on a bench in a park, just being present and listening to me while I talk about my difficulties?" It is so meaningful that someone is just there in a non-reactive, attentive, peaceful way, not asserting themselves, not fixing you, not treating you as someone they need to help, but treating you with respect and serving you with their presence, attention, and attentive care. We need to be able to do that for ourselves in a deep way.

Of the different aspects of aspiration that I've talked about, this last one (peace) is maybe the most difficult, because it is what comes with deep spiritual growth, deep growth in the Dharma. We become more and more attuned to the possibility of peace, calm, and ease. It can't always be that way or fully that way, but peace becomes a reference point for seeing more clearly what is here. That peaceful way of being aware can be seen to be a 360-degree awareness that includes us and the whole world.

The possibility for aspiration to be peaceful and inclusive is one reason that I feel that this deep aspiration and deep motivation to live for the welfare and happiness of the world is one of the most beautiful things that we can have. I think that even when it's partial, even when it's halting, just knowing that we have this capacity for peace and we can live from there is a beautiful, beautiful thing.

We are going through the different aspects of compassion. The four that we've done so far are awareness, attunement, appreciation, and aspiration. Next, I'll teach five days on action, the fifth aspect of compassion, which is very important as well. We want the action to arise once the other four aspects have been considered and included in the picture. Then the action can become much more important and valuable for everyone concerned, including ourselves

I certainly appreciate this chance to explore compassion this way with all of you. I look forward to continuing when I come back on the last day of July. Thank you very much.