

Attitudes (3 of 5) From Aversion to Curiosity

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Keyword Summary

ill will, skillful, unskillful, resentment, hostility, complaining, attitude, presence, knowing, not knowing

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Hello everyone. Welcome to our third talk on attitudes. Today we will focus on moving from unskillful attitudes to skillful ones.

One unskillful attitude that is very common in this world is ill will or aversion. This can take many forms. Resentment is a form of aversion. Living with resentment creates hurt, anger, or hostility. Being critical or complaining is a form of aversion or hostility. Complaining about people or things too much can easily carry with it a feeling of ill will.

We are not trying to deny that there are hurtful things that happen in the world. There are things that people are doing that are not helpful or skillful. We need to take these into account. But aversion or ill will can be an attitude or a pervasive way that we see the world.

For example, when we enter a new space or a room with people we don't know, we are stepping into a new situation, and we might carry with us a mood or an attitude of resentment, aversion, ill will, or criticalness. Even as we step into the room, we might have the idea that something is wrong and we need to figure out what is wrong, what to fix, or what to avoid. We might think we have to figure out who the bad or wrong people are and those who are not bad.

A built-in mood of aversion can be there. Most people don't think that they have that. There was a time in my life almost 50 years ago when my friends would say, "Gil, you always seem to be angry." I didn't think I was angry, but somehow there was a mood. There was an underlying mood of something like resentment that things were challenging. I was upset about it. It took me a while to see that this was the case.

I was able to see some of this only by starting to meditate regularly. I started to see there was anger or aversion underneath my ordinary way of being in the world and thinking about the world. Slowly that began to relax. Hopefully, now there is very little of it left.

The function of meditation practice is partly to discover these kinds of things. If we are too enamored with becoming calm and having pleasure in meditation, we might not notice. If we are too caught up in trying to avoid tension and stress when we meditate, we might not stop to take a good, respectful look at the tension, stress, or strains that we have. Taking a good look helps us to identify what is going on here for us. We can see the underlying mood, or attitude that might be operating.

Once we see something, there is an opportunity. A space has been created for something to begin to unfold, relax, evolve, or change in a healthy way. Without knowing, things can often be locked in. Knowing begins the process of changing.

Knowing is quite important – and not knowing is important. When we recognize something we can open to not knowing what is supposed to happen. We can allow ourselves to experience the not knowing of a judgment or an opinion that we overlay on top of it. Doing this allows room for something to happen that we can't predict.

Many times in my life I have been surprised that things evolved differently than the way I thought they were supposed to evolve. Sometimes I thought they were going in the wrong direction. Sometimes I thought they were going in a good direction, and then they would go in the opposite direction.

I have discovered that if I show up and am present for the situation, doing this tends to move things in a good direction. Just simple presence certainly tends to move me in a good direction. That simple presence can be

characterized by not knowing. We offer respect by being present without bringing our preconceived ideas, memories, or expectations of what we are going to see or be with.

I want to offer an alternative to aversion or ill-will if we have a simmering background of ill will, aversion, complaining, criticalness, resentment, or even anger towards someone. This applies to when the ill will is very clear – when we see that person, that is what comes up.

An alternative to ill will is to be curious. When we feel aversion, hostility, or criticalness, shift over to a curious state – a curious attitude. Ask what is happening here. What is going on here? This is a time to understand better. This is a time to have a beginner's mind. We don't really know, but let's study. Let's pay attention. What is happening with this person? What is happening in this situation?

We step forward with interest, as opposed to stepping forward critically. Even if we are angry with someone for a good reason, if it is safe, step forward and be curious about what is happening. Ask them, "What is going on with you? How are you?" Just show your interest and curiosity. This is a way of coming forward with some modicum of a not-knowing mind, genuinely curious about what is going on.

When we step forward with curiosity and interest, we are creating space for the other person to change. If we step forward with our criticalness or our preconceived ideas, people feel that, and they feel boxed in. They feel that they must defend themselves, react, or take a stand.

If we come forward with the equivalent of open arms in our attitude, it can disarm people. This is a powerful metaphor we use sometimes. Ask, "Tell me more. I'd like to know more. How are you? What's going on?" We might catch people off guard. Most people will relax if we show genuine interest in them. We might discover something deeper about the situation and the person than we would if we stayed in our critical stance or in our anger.

I am not saying it is easy to put aside anger. It might still be there. See if we can free ourselves from operating from an attitude of anger. Instead, have an attitude of curiosity. Step forward. "What's happening here? What's going on here?" That can be a gift. Many people don't experience others who are interested in really knowing what is happening to them.

Some people don't want anyone to probe. We can begin with a not-knowing mind – "Oh, hi. What's happening with you? How are you today? How have you been?" Begin by making space. Then perhaps that person begins to relax and some of the reasons why we are critical of them might disappear. Perhaps some of the reasons we are critical won't be present at that moment. Past issues might still be there, but at that moment, they might stop operating in a way that is difficult for us.

I certainly think it is much better for us as practitioners to come forward with curiosity and interest, rather than coming forward with aversion, resentment, and anger. Maybe the person who becomes disarmed is ourselves. Maybe curiosity is healthier for us and safer for us. It has greater benefits for us to be that way than it is for others.

Maybe that is when we can also discover how we are. What is happening to us? We can be curious about ourselves when we come forward curious about others. During these holidays, we may have an opportunity to be around other people. There may be several challenging family members or friends. See what it is like to come forward with interest and curiosity.

Thank you very much.