

The Attitude of Presence:

The Third Step of Personal Compassion Development

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After decades of research on gifted healers and mystics, combined with my personal experience, it seems that there is some universal characteristic that can be called **presence**. Presence is a relational experience that is often part of compassion. It can be thought of as charisma, or spiritual light, or healing touch, great bedside manner, or intense peace, or “something just moved inside me when we met” or even “I really felt a connection”. It is something that is definitely felt, experienced, by people who meet these heroic compassionate souls. It is also talked about when people describe (or write about) their meetings with these people. It is not just experienced by the other person. Presence is also experienced by the deeply compassionate person. Mutuality is part of the phenomenon. It is an attitude, a state of being, a way of being ready, or open, to sharing the compassion space with others, and it has unique characteristics unmistakably experienced by the deeply compassionate person. It is a richly sacred attitude found across cultures and faiths. The attitude of presence is to be considered the doorway to offering someone the compassion space. It is a mindful state that is attuned to the nature of the relationship and the possibility of compassion as it presents in that given moment.

Review of the Fundamentals – Providing the Links

Before jumping into a discussion about the attitude of presence it might help to look over the basic fundamentals of personally developing compassion. The basic fundamentals of personal compassion development include the following: 1) providing a voice for compassion development, 2) practicing forgiveness, 3) learning how to sit with suffering, 4) understanding that our view of the possibility for compassion, and our depth of compassion, is linked to our understanding of compassion at that moment, and 5) awareness of the possibility of compassion at any moment is an important part of being ready to offer compassion at any given moment. Each of these fundamentals is linked to the attitude of presence – the doorway to compassion.

Let us consider the most basic form of presence to begin with – that is the sense of connection. I am hopeful that most readers will be able to relate to this idea that occasionally (maybe rarely) we meet people with whom we feel a sense of peaceful, and/or trusting, connection. Maybe we met a doctor, or nurse, and after which we found ourselves thinking about how easy it was to talk to them and how really nice they seemed. Maybe we met someone and for no sensible reason we just felt comfortable in sharing intimate life details and might have said “I don’t know why I am telling you all this”. Putting

Attitude of Presence

aside for the moment that all feelings of connection like this are not necessarily identical, let us assume that there is enough similarity to use this trusting connection as a starting point for looking at the attitude of presence. Let's also say that there is mutuality in this experience – BOTH people feel that sense of a peaceful, trusting, connection. And finally let's add that this mutual experience carries with it the intent of wellbeing. Understand that this sense of presence is there BEFORE we starting sharing the intimate details of our lives. It is there as intent, as an attitude of presence, as a holding of compassion possibility. It is the doorway to compassion. With this foundational definition we can move to looking at the links between the fundamental concepts of compassion and the attitude of presence.

The very first problem that is often faced is that when this “connection”, presence, is experienced is that there are some people who do not understand how it is related to compassion. It has been my experience that about 66% of the population misinterprets what is happening. This is the main reason why compassion needs a voice, and a strong one. If people cannot see the door then how can they walk through? The problem becomes further magnified at deeper levels of compassion development where the attitude of presence intensifies. The misunderstanding is easily understood because it is supported by a lack of compassion knowledge – but this is something very few people like to admit because admitting it seems to equate to low self worth. But saying that you can't build the Space Shuttle doesn't equate to low self worth. Yet they are founded on the same thing. If we can increase the voice of compassion then perhaps we can decrease the misunderstandings connected to the attitude of presence. This might then allow the attitude of presence to be understood more frequently and thus increase compassion (since attitude of presence is the doorway to compassion).

The link between the attitude of presence and forgiveness is a bit more obvious. When we hold hate, anger, hurt inside, and don't forgive others or ourselves, then that WILL block (at some moment) the attitude of presence from happening. Absence of forgiveness will block that trusting connection from occurring and even worse it can turn the connection into a scary, frightening experience. This is because the attitude of presence is about walking the path toward well being. It is opening the door to a shared compassionate experience and shining a light on what is beyond the open door. Sometimes, when there is a forgiveness problem and then the attitude of presence is offered, what is first seen (felt, experienced) is that forgiveness problem. It is the wall, the barrier between, and then the anger projected.

Another characteristic of the attitude of presence is that it illuminates the sources of suffering. This is a part of its true nature as a doorway to compassion. Compassion is about the relief of suffering and presence often illuminates that suffering in the doorway in order for the person to be able to make a choice – move through or don't move. If you have not learned how to sit, even for a moment, with suffering, then when confronted with the attitude of presence, with the doorway opened, you are likely to feel a conflict of emotions. You may feel drawn into the comfort yet also feel like running away. This is why sitting with suffering is linked to attitude of presence. Sitting with suffering is like sweeping away the trash in front of the doorway. Sitting with suffering sometimes takes a while as the trash is swept away. The more we learn about sitting with suffering, our own and others, the more we can sit with the attitude of presence and hold that doorway open to any possibility.

Attitude of Presence

Linking possibility (also called possibility of compassion) to the attitude of presence is in some ways so much common sense, but in others ways more complex. Since the attitude of presence is the doorway to compassion then if you think that at any moment compassion is NOT possible then the doorway simply is not there. That seems like common sense. But possibility also includes the possibility of something being revealed that would help you develop your compassion, and thus also your attitude of presence, beyond where it is currently. Remember one of the characteristics of the attitude of presence is mutuality. This means that there is the possibility that BOTH people can develop during the process of being in the attitude of presence. Holding the possibility of growth, development, or insight is part of the attitude of presence because such things are often linked to the reduction of suffering and the path of compassion.

Awareness of the possibility of compassion starts with awareness of the attitude of presence in relation to compassion. If we can maintain an awareness of the door to compassion, being aware that is (or is not) present, then that helps us to become more fully aware of when the possibility for compassion may occur. This applies to compassion for ourselves, compassion for others, and further on toward development into living as a compassionate being. This learning about the awareness of the attitude of presence is one of the more difficult aspects of personal compassion development, but also one of the most rewarding. Think about when you had a trusting connection with another person. Now consider the possibility of that happening at a deeper level and more often. This is the path of personal compassion development and we use awareness of presence to remain open to the possibility for our own growth as well as helping others.

Beyond the Fundamentals – Looking at Expanding the Attitude of Presence

Returning to the basic definition of compassion as a combination of empathy and wisdom, AND that people develop differently along both (empathy, wisdom), then the door to compassion should also fit into this definition. But here is where it gets a bit complex, because the door held open to some possible experience, although connected to that experience, is not exactly the same as that experience. This is the nature of the attitude of presence. In addition the nature of the door being held open related to the depth of our personal compassion development, you could think of it as how wide the door is opened, and that depends on the dynamics of that moment. Do you throw the door wide open to fully show the experience or do you gradually, slowly, open it to reveal what can be managed at that moment? A person with well developed attitude of presence can match the opening of the door to fit the moment (up to his/her maximum level of compassion development). When this match happens then the best possible path of compassion can be revealed behind the door – which is not the same as walking through the door. There is always a choice, to go through or not go through the doorway.

Well developed attitude of presence is an indicator of well developed compassion. When one decides to take the walk through the doorway then here is the path: 1) the attitude of presence is offered (with all the compassion fundamentals), the door is opened to match the moment, 2) whatever is illuminated then becomes the focus of sitting with suffering, this then becomes the totality of the moment,

Attitude of Presence

breathed in and held with sacred empathy and wisdom, 3) then the suffering issues presented are exhaled, let go, a catharsis (and taken in by the other holding the door), 4) the sacred bliss of peace and healing is seen (through the door) and then inhaled, allowed to fill the moment and provide insight and transcendence. This is insight that is very personal to the individual seeking relief. You can read more about these steps in my books posted on the advanced section of www.CompassionSpace.com A fifth step that is often helpful is follow-up, because it can help the person with their struggle to make meaning and integrate the experience into their life in a personal way. It is also important that this entire process is to be revered with a deep sacredness. The more a person works on developing this path of compassion, from the attitude of presence to relief of suffering, the more developed becomes the attitude of presence.

Well developed attitude of presence is difficult to describe. There is a list of characteristics one can find throughout the literature: charisma, easy to talk with, animal magnetism, lightness of being, radiant, glowing, bright, intense like a fire, a feeling of deep peace, suspension of time (loss of time), "I felt moved", "I felt called", grace, impossible to fully describe. An interesting additional note is that all living beings are affected by the well developed attitude of presence. It is not uncommon when a person with strong presence enters a home that has a pet, to see the pet comes over for the person's attention, to hear "That is odd, he never goes up to strangers". It is not uncommon to have babies, and young children stare at this person (in almost all locations, grocery stores, parks, public transportation). It is quite common to have anyone this person meets to start telling their current problems, within minutes. This can happen anywhere, like even just waiting in the checkout line. In addition these characteristics are consistently repetitive, across time and settings.

But a well developed attitude of presence is not without a yin to go with its yang, not without its other side of the coin. It is important to remember that the attitude of presence is about opening the door to the path from suffering into well being for that moment. Although some people find this to be pleasurable, there are some who do not. They can feel any of the following: vulnerable, "naked" or "seen through", violated, afraid followed by the urge to run away, threatened followed by the urge to attack or seductively attracted followed by the desire to "bond". All of these responses are part of having that door opened. In addition they are consequences attached to a well developed attitude of presence, and parts of a long established history of heroic compassion.

Not to sound repetitive, but the attitude of presence is simply a doorway that when opened illuminates what is on the path leading from suffering into well being (it is not taking the walk through). When this presence becomes well developed it becomes a way of being, it exists, and it is there all the time. It is a part of who you are, how you are seen by others. It is also important to remember that this is all part of being "called" to walk the path of heroic compassion. But that doesn't make it any easier. There are lots of ways to try to "dull the senses", "put out the flame" and "escape from the calling". The consequences related to a well developed attitude of presence can be quite difficult. This is the path of the spiritual warrior. These are all simply struggles that so many before us have faced along the journey. It is part of the balance between our humanity and becoming a radiant being of compassion. We are each somewhere on the developmental path of compassion and our initial understanding of where we

Attitude of Presence

are (how developed is our compassion) is tied to the knowing about the effects of compassion readiness and relationship stance in connection to the attitude of presence.

Whenever the attitude of presence opens that doorway to compassion it does so within a moment that contains two important characteristics: relationship stance and compassion readiness. Relationship stance simply means how we stand in a relationship at any given moment. Since compassion is about relationship then the attitude of presence will illuminate how a person is standing in the relationship at the moment of illumination. There are many things that affect a person's relationship stance at any moment, and many things that affect how we view that stance. Compassion readiness is about being ready to walk through the doorway, being ready to receive compassion. In that sense it is a characteristic that exists outside the doorway and is illuminated by the attitude of presence. As with other aspects of compassion, understanding the range of effects associated with relationship stance and compassion readiness increases with compassion development.

One final note, something hinted at earlier, there are "feelings" which can be mistaken for a genuine attitude of presence. Having a "magnetic personality" or "charisma" is sometimes that is not the same as having an attitude of presence. It is unfortunate that people get misled by these initial feelings, and fall into unhealthy relationships. It is something that has happened and will likely continue to happen. It is one of the reasons why I wrote a book describing the characteristics of being with a skilled healer, and a second book about the characteristics of sitting with a mystic. I had hoped to alleviate some of the suffering people go through when following false teachers.

The next paper will focus on building a proper foundation for developing an attitude of presence.