

Aspirations Over Resolution for the New Year of 2020
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By Melissa Moore

Dear Karuna Training Community,

This year Karuna Training is offering a series of free online talks and emails - with engaging insight into a variety of Karuna related topics. Here is a little in depth discussion from Karuna Founder and Senior Teacher Melissa Moore about our next topic, which will be explored in our next online interactive session: Karuna Live!...

[Aspirations Over Resolutions](#)

It's that time of year again, where we think "It's the new year... I have to do something about me and my habits, and this is my chance to make it right!" The *fresh start* of a new year is a natural point for starting up something new or doing something radically differently. And then we go setting ourselves up with 'New Year's Resolutions' that we will inevitably abandon by mid-February. This cycle is statistically proven with Gym memberships, where attendance jumps astronomically in the month of January and inevitably drops off by mid-February. The fitness industry counts on this trend.

That is why I want to inject a more contemplative approach to the fresh start of the New Year, and introduce the idea of *ritualized aspirations*.

A ritualized aspiration allows us to make a change in our lives sacred, meaning beyond the mundane. The idea is to mark our desire for change with some kind of meaningful ceremonial commitment.

Aspiration comes from the root *aspirare* which means to exhale, "to breathe upon, blow upon, or breathe." 1 So with aspiration we are breathing life into our ambition to change. So there is a 'rising-mind' element to aspirations, we wish for something and imagine it to come forth, and give it breathing room to develop along the way.

Aspiration as opposed to 'resolutions' which comes from the Latin word *resolvere*, "to loosen, undo, settle."2 Here we are *deciding* firmly on a solution to a problem. In resolution there is a solidity and closure to any new proposition. We are closing the door, so-to-speak. There are times when resolution is necessary, when we need to say 'that's it!' At times in life we do reach these points, and it is necessary to acknowledge that we are at our end, and close the door on behaviors such as drinking, smoking, or what have you.

Nevertheless, successful change has a lot to do with our psychology and how we set ourselves up in our mind for success. How we hold ourselves in the face of achieving our goals matters a

lot. Normally we make resolutions out of frustration and revulsion, which is a good motivation for change. But then how to go about holding to a change, as we move through our day to day lives? Whether we succeed or fail is determined by our ongoing inspiration.

Aspirations for Transformation

We aspire for a lot of things in life, unless we have given up on aspiring for change completely, which I would say is a variation of depression. What we know about change psychology is that it helps if one has a big overall goal and also a day to day plan of action with which to accomplish one's aspirations. For example, if we want to own a house as a big goal, there has to be a lot of savings along the way. If we want to lose weight as the big goal, then we have to make a concerted effort and have a diet plan; if we want to make a change in our profession as a big goal, then there is a lot to consider in the details of making it happen. No matter what we aspire toward, we have to provide a lot of space, time and energy to accomplish our goals practically speaking.

When we resolve to do something we usually say to ourselves “This is it! I’m never going to ... again”. We are closing a door and then when we fail, well that’s it. We failed, it’s over. This approach is restrictive in sentiment and locks down the space of opportunity for the change journey to take place. Resolutions also set up something for us to rebel against.

When we aspire, we rouse our mind toward a goal, which means continually and repeatedly breathing life into our imagined ideals. When making an aspiration we need to rouse ourselves many times again and again. A ritualized aspiration is adding a contemplative spin to that aspiration.

Ritualized Aspirations to Set Intentions

Ritual is something we study in Karuna Training as part of Maitri Space Awareness practice.³ A ritual aspiration creates a contemplative moment of intention. “Contemplative moment” means we invite and inhabit the sacred space always available in the present moment. Setting intention in that contemplative moment is discovering and experiencing the direction of our microscopic truth, and committing to the desired change. Microscopic truth simply means distilling down the fundamental emotional and physical truth we are experiencing in the present moment -- without any explanations of why we feel the way we feel. Just what is true right now, without any reasons given to justify our feelings. Learning how to discern our microscopic truth is an essential tool taught in Karuna Training, and it can be invaluable during these sacred rituals.

We are involved in ritual all the time, whether we are conscious of it or not. Ritual is how we bind our intention to reality through our embodied action.

Most of the time we are unconscious about the intentions behind our rituals. For example when we habitually check our cell phones every 2 minutes we are binding our intention to stay connected to others. We become addicted to the endorphins that arise when we get a message, and we are often unconscious of why we feel so compelled to check the phone over and over. What makes something a ritual is that we do it in the same way over and over, and it fulfills something for us internally.

Ritual, as it is presented here, are behaviors that reinforce our intentions. Rituals are our very human way to bind ourselves to reality, and we do create rituals whether our intention is conscious or not.

How to Create Your Own Ritualized Aspiration

Bringing awareness to our rituals is something we spend time on in Karuna training. Learning to craft a simple ritual to mark our aspiration is setting our intention with space and consciousness. A ritual of this kind can be very simple or complex. It is taking time and space to declare something that is important to us.

Contemplative rituals have at least four components: (1) setting the boundaries or making space, (2) making our aspiration, (3) offering something in return for what we are asking and then (4) closing the ritual properly.

First, we need to decide who and what we are asking this from; a higher power, the universe or the elements. We could also invite a witness, having someone present to help us hold the space and reinforce our commitment. To set the boundaries of a ritualized aspiration, we sit quietly with ourselves in a clean and open space, light a stick of incense, or bow to mark the moment.

Next, we contemplate our aspiration, speak it out loud or write it down with intention. We then make an offering of any kind; offering smoke, food, or whatever substance is relevant and meaningful to you. One offering could be burning the written aspiration itself (especially if we are letting go of a behavior) or we can just be with the aspiration in silence for a few moments and imagine the fruit of our aspiration as an offering. Finally, we simply close the moment by ringing a gong or bowing or just quietly leaving the space we have created.

Today, many of us feel like ritualized aspiration is not our kind of thing, however, human beings have been ritualizing their intentions for much longer than they have forgotten how to do such things.

Now we largely relegate our sacred ceremonies to priests and institutionalized religion. Ritualized aspiration is an act of reclaiming the sacred in our lives.

In my experience, creating ritualized aspiration is not a one-off thing; it must be repeated over and over. Sometimes our aspirations change and we have to renew them as our life circumstances evolve. Learning to ritualize our aspirations is giving ourselves permission to make our intentions sacred.

My Own Experience with Ritual Aspirations

I lived abroad for many years and found returning to the States after nine years rather difficult. The true definition of “culture shock” is when one returns to one’s native culture and sees it differently than before. For sure, I was suffering from culture shock when I returned to the States in 2004. I needed a good paying job and I had the idea that this job had to be a major job, a contribution to the field of mental health and a culmination of my years of experience in contemplative psychology.

Along with the usual ways of searching for a job --which is very hard work -- I also set about making ritual aspirations for my new imagined position.

I set the boundaries by climbing a mountain that overlooked the San Francisco Bay and then I voiced my aspiration out loud and made ritual offerings of juniper smoke to the universe, not to anyone specifically.

I performed this self-created aspiration ritual on the mountain not just once but several times over a few months. This particular mountain had a view of the Golden Gate Bridge and also Mount Tamalpais, which, for me, is a very powerful and sacred mountain.

The job didn’t come immediately, however, I kept aspiring and I kept up my rituals. I was called back twice for 2 different jobs that I did not want at an old social service agency in San Francisco. When they asked me a third time for yet another position, I went to the interview fully expecting again to refuse them. But then they showed me where my office would be and this office had a view of Mount Tamalpais and the Golden Gate bridge. I knew this was a sign; it was too much of a coincidence, so I accepted the position.

Within the first month of my new job, my boss offered me a paid post-doctoral position at University of California San Francisco to study community based research in mental health. The University would be paying my salary to train me in research in mental health -- they wanted someone from the field. This training led to a new position as the Director of the Felton Institute,

a research and training institute in mental health, which I founded and ran for 12 years in San Francisco.

That was the job I had aspired for, except it was much more difficult to accomplish than I ever imagined it would be. With aspirations of any kind, it is always a 'watch what you wish for' situation that evolves when your aspiration is fulfilled. In my experience, when we make ritualized aspirations, they do come to fruition, and they never ever look like what we imagined them to be. That is what aspiration is in reality - it is an imagined ideal of what could be, or what we want to be if we apply ourselves. Life as it unfolds is always much more complex than our imagined scenarios and fantasies.

Life unfolds, things come to fruition and then we have the next aspiration to work with. And around and around we go, and this is the Buddhist notion of Samsara: the endless wheel of life full of suffering. It's not all bad, and there is no getting out of this suffering aspect according to Buddhism. However it is more skillful and rewarding to aspire than to resolve, any day.

The New Year offers an excellent time to work with an aspiration and to give it space and time in which to contemplate what you truly aspire for in this wondrous new year of 2020.

That's all from us for now! We wish you well on your journey through the holidays - wherever it may take you.

Warmly,
Melissa Moore and The Karuna Training Team

Endnotes:

1. Wikipedia
2. Wikipedia
3. Maitri Space Awareness (MSA) is a practice developed by the late Chogyam Trungpa where an ancient map of the world's elements and energies is presented in a meditation practice designed to propagate the study of emotional intelligence in Buddhist Psychology. MSA is a central component in Karuna Training.