

Dharmette: Turning towards Uncomfortableness

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on January 12, 2011

An important part of the training in mindfulness practice is to learn how to turn towards what's uncomfortable. Certainly, if you think that by meditating or doing Buddhist practice, you're only supposed to be blissful, floating on clouds two feet off the ground, and surrounded by light, then you might not be willing to turn towards that which is difficult or uncomfortable. So mindfulness training involves learning how to do that.

Wisdom is different from mindfulness. Wisdom tells us when to change something – to do something about something. For example, if I have a thorn in my foot, then the wise thing to do is not to keep walking on the thorn, but to pull the thorn out. If you break a bone in your toe, then the wise thing to do is go get it fixed. Don't just be comfortable with the pain. But, if you have a spasm in your foot and your muscle is contracted and seized up, it might hurt to walk on it. Then the best thing you could do may be to gently walk on it, and be willing to feel and massage the place that's uncomfortable. Just be with it, over and over again, until it begins to relax and cease. Wisdom tells you what the pain is, what the situation is, and to know whether this needs to be fixed, something needs to be let go of, or you just need to be present with it. If the spasm needs to be massaged out, then you have to stay present and feel it carefully in your foot or wherever the pain is so that you don't overdo or under-do it. Just a real strong presence is needed. So wisdom can hopefully help us know what's needed.

With mindfulness, it is often useful to turn towards difficulty. Certainly part of mindfulness training is to learn how to be comfortable with discomfort, how to rest with it, and how to turn towards it in a way that is useful. It's counterintuitive for many people to do so, because they think that whenever something is uncomfortable, the purpose is to fix it, to do something about it, to get away from it, or to push it away. There are all these attitudes that get in the way of turning towards discomfort in a useful, productive and non-conflictive way. The approach in mindfulness is to develop a willingness to turn towards the uncomfortable. Often the uncomfortable is where we have the most to learn and to grow. So there has to be a willingness to see: Where am I uncomfortable? Let's look and be with it, as opposed to flee it and go to where it's comfortable and safe again.

Learning to turn towards the discomfort will hopefully give you a lot more information, so that wisdom can operate. The wisdom can say that's enough of going towards it, and I need to go to the doctor. I need to do something else here besides just be with it. But in mindfulness, it's training to learn how to be in a nonreactive mode – to feel, sense and experience what's there. Because when we are reactive towards something, then wisdom doesn't operate very well. So to let wisdom operate the best is to discover this nonreactive mode and to just be with it.

In mindfulness meditation, it's often useful, if you're uncomfortable in some way, to choose to move towards the discomfort and to learn what it's like to be comfortable with it, how to rest in it, and how to feel and be with it. Because even if you don't work through it, what you learn about how to be with it in meditation might serve you really well in some life situation outside of meditation, where you have no other choice but to be with the discomfort. Now you know how to do it.

Doing it in meditation is like doing it with training wheels. Most of us need training wheels at first, and then we learn this is how it is and how I react – run away or attack, blame or close up, or bury my head in the sand like an ostrich. This is what I tend to do, and then let's try not to do that so I can really see it and be with it.

One of the things that I find most helpful in this regard is to do it with the body – to feel in the body where the actual physical felt sense of the discomfort is. Generally in an uncomfortable situation, there will probably be some signs of discomfort that appear in the body. If there is emotional discomfort, we may be nervous, afraid or upset. If there is physical discomfort, sometimes it's useful to go into the body. One of the reasons for turning towards how it is experienced in the body is that it's much more immediate than going towards the thoughts, ideas or interpretations of what's happening, which is where some people tend to go.

Going to the felt sense, the physical experience of how it is in the body, can sometimes make us more uncomfortable. Because to feel it in the body sometimes makes us feel more vulnerable, open or receptive. But that is a good thing generally, especially in meditation.

Some people feel uncomfortable being vulnerable. They feel unsafe that way. So what does it take to learn to stay and rest in feeling vulnerable? It is one of the great skills in life to learn how to be vulnerable and feel safe. It seems like a paradox, right? But be present, drop into your body and feel it in the pit of your stomach, in the fluttering of your heart, or some tension some place in the body – just hold it, feel it, and be with it.

Taking into account knowing that it's there, if you have to act and speak in the world, knowing that it's there, but being clearly aware of the discomfort, sometimes even naming it, can make yourself or someone else say that I'm uncomfortable right now. I'm trying to find my way with what to say or do, but I feel uneasy. That's just what part of the picture is here, and I'm trying to find my way. Just admitting it is a wonderful thing, I think. Not everyone is going to be receptive to you admitting it. It's probably not the best place to say in a job interview that I'm feeling really uneasy [laughter], and all my insecurities have come up. Probably that's not the place to be so public about it. But there are times when it's actually very helpful publicly with friends and people to actually say that I'm uneasy. If you have good friends, they will hopefully help you stop and take a look at what's going on and be present.

I find that a variety of discomforts are very useful messages that something needs attention. If we're ignoring how we're uncomfortable, then we're ignoring that message that says something needs attention here. But what kind of attention does it need? What are we supposed to learn, resolve or deal with when we're uncomfortable? That's not always so obvious. But it becomes more obvious if you can learn how to be still and quiet. For example, in meditation, to learn how to be present for discomfort and that you are okay; it's safe, and you're comfortable with that. It's okay to let yourself just be uncomfortable, without having to react or do something about it, believe it, be pushed around by it, or act on it right away. Just feel, experience, and be with it.

What I find often happens is, if I feel discomfort in the body and allow it to be there in some general way – just breathe and be present – then nothing is fixed, and things start shifting on their own. I don't have to be the one in charge of fixing or changing it. But I can be present and feel it, and usually something begins to soften and open up. Sometimes by just being present to what the discomfort is or what's going on here, the situation is understood much better and more clearly.

Sometimes discomfort is a slow but powerful teacher. It takes its time, so you have to be willing to hang in there with it. My wish for people who do mindfulness practice is that they learn a wise way of welcoming being uncomfortable. I hope that you don't go looking for opportunities to be uncomfortable. That's not so useful; don't go looking for trouble. But if it ever should happen that you find yourself uncomfortable [laughs], then turn towards it. In a certain way, be welcoming of it, as opposed to being hostile, afraid, closed down, or spin out in stories, or blame someone else because of it. Instead, learn how to hang with it, be with it, and be open to it.

So those are my thoughts for this morning.