

Dharmette: Comfortable with Discomfort

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on January 18, 2012

In the earlier talk today I encouraged the inclusion of enjoyment or pleasure as part of mindfulness practice. If you can enjoy or feel some pleasure, some sense of well-being in your personal experience with meditation, that can make it easier to want to be present, to be here. In this talk now, I will balance that with the other side. An important part of this whole enterprise of becoming free, of using mindfulness to become freer, and not being caught by things, is learning to become comfortable with discomfort.

There are times when the task of mindfulness practice is to notice how we're uncomfortable – not avoiding it, but going right into it. Then, find out how to be comfortable with it – how to have ease, equanimity, and how not to be caught by the discomfort. The task of becoming comfortable with discomfort is a process of self-learning. One of the first things to learn when you're uncomfortable is:

- What your relationship is to the discomfort?
- What's your attitude toward it?
- What happens to you when you're uncomfortable?

I use the words *discomfort* or *uncomfortable* as placeholders for just about everything that is not comfortable: whether it's physical, psychological, social, or interpersonal – the whole gamut of things. Do you have a default? Do you have a common approach, strategy, or response to being uncomfortable?

A common response people can have when they feel uncomfortable is that something is wrong, and it has to be fixed. Someone better fix it, or I'd better fix it, or they'd better fix it. Another common strategy is that if discomfort means something is wrong, then I've failed. I'm a complete failure as a human being. This idea of personal failure can get built in. If I'm uncomfortable, I've personally messed up. But if I were spiritually mature, wise, and capable, then everything would just be comfortable. I'd float like a cloud through everything. The freeway traffic would part for me, and there would be no smog, and no horns. Everything would just float. So if it's not like this, then I've done something wrong. That's a strategy some people have.

Another strategy some people have when there's discomfort is blame. Someone has to take responsibility for this. Someone has messed up. Then there can be an attacking mode. We attack ourselves, or we attack other people. The attack mode, or being angry with other people can be a response.

And sometimes the response is giving up in discouragement. It's too much, I can't handle this, I'm uncomfortable. I've been uncomfortable too many times, and even though this is a small thing, it's just too much. I'm exhausted.

Part of the process of engaging mindfully with discomfort is to learn what your common reactions, strategies, and responses are. Then you can begin questioning those responses: Are they necessary? Are they appropriate? From what authority do they come? Why do we invest them with so much power and significance?

Start questioning, wondering: Where is this coming from? Is this true? Is this really the nature of the universe that if I feel uncomfortable, it means I've failed spiritually or personally? Begin questioning as a way to loosen the grip of some of these beliefs around discomfort. Then you may be willing to enter into them – to look more carefully at them, and begin to explore other wiser, more useful ways of relating to them.

The very effort to do this exploration – to be curious and interested, and study the situation – can be the beginning of a radical change in business as usual in the mind. This is because now you're using the wisdom factor in the mind – that part of the mind that is not caught or reactive – in order to look at and study the part of the mind that is reactive. In a sense, you put a wedge in the reactivity – some distance or freedom in the midst of reactivity. The strength of that investigation is directly connected to the strength of how free you are from what you're investigating.

As you begin investigating, getting curious, and putting more effort into investigating, you might find yourself

becoming freer from what you're caught in. Don't underestimate the power of investigation, of looking more carefully. Then you can begin exploring some more useful ways of relating to discomfort.

One useful way of relating to discomfort is to investigate how you react to it, and then learn how not to get caught by the reactions of anger, frustration, despair, or aversion that may come into play. What do I have to let go of? What can I let go of?

Another way is to reframe the situation, to understand the uncomfortable situation in a different way. Some people reframe the situation as, "This is a great practice opportunity! Lucky me!" That works for some people. Some people might see the discomfort as a character-building situation. "I have to learn patience here, I have to learn something." Seeing what is positive, seeing the good side can be helpful.

Another approach is just to see discomfort as an area to learn to be mindful, to strengthen mindfulness. In learning to be mindful, we discover a way of being present for something that's uncomfortable, where we're at ease with it. We have equanimity about it, and we're not for or against it. I think the most radical thing in mindfulness practice is actually learning to be present for something, clearly and fully, and being okay with it. It's a certain kind of "okayness," a certain comfort level with being uncomfortable, a certain ability not to be for or against. It's the ability not to need to fix it, to run away from it, to relate it to my identity, not to take it personally, and not to need to blame it on someone else.

It's just having this full presence: "Here I am, and I'm uncomfortable." There might be some situations in your life where that is the wisest, most beneficial thing you can do. You can't fix the situation, and so fixing is not really called for. It doesn't make sense to blame someone else, or get angry with them. It doesn't make sense to run away, or to close down. What is required of you is to stay present, open, relaxed, and available in a situation that's quite uncomfortable, and then find your way through that.

An example of parenting comes to mind. There have been some quite uncomfortable situations. A strong-willed four-year old in the store wants, and insists, on getting his way with every possible strategy of his voice. It was very uncomfortable for me! This is a situation where I think that the best thing to do is to start off by being comfortable with the discomfort. Then I don't buy into the demands or the reactivity of the child. Let me just be with it, be present. Then, because I can be comfortable with discomfort, I can just be there and feel it. This opens up the space for a wise response, and the task is to figure out the best thing to do.

Learning to be comfortable with the discomfort doesn't mean always being passive and just sitting there – but it's a starting point. It's a great vantage point from which to see and understand what needs to be done. If we don't have the ability to be comfortable with discomfort, then we're reactive, agitated, restless, and spinning. Then how we see things will be colored. We won't be able to see accurately. The practice of learning to be comfortable with discomfort is wonderful in its own right, but I think it's really a wise stepping-stone to knowing how to respond to the world when we have to.

These are the two sides today. One side emphasized the role and importance of feeling pleasure and enjoyment in your practice. The other side is when that doesn't work, and you're thoroughly uncomfortable, then the practice involves learning to be comfortable with the discomfort, and learning how to practice with it.

One of those two might be relevant someday. I don't know which will come first for you.