

Discomfort (2 of 5) Reactions to Discomfort

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We continue this topic of discomfort. Discomfort is a simple, ordinary experience, and there is so much to learn from it. There is so much room, for many of us, to discover how to be freer with our discomfort. How not to be pushed around by our discomfort or react to it. How to be present for discomfort so that we see clearly what's happening, rather than being distracted by the discomfort.

One of the things to study with discomfort is when you're uncomfortable, stop and take a good look at how you're uncomfortable. See if you can understand the unhelpful ways in which you react to discomfort. When things are not comfortable for you – whether socially, physically, personally – what unhelpful ways do you then respond and react to that? What behavior comes out of the discomfort that is not really in your best interest?

There is a famous list in Buddhism called the five hindrances. They can be understood as five unhelpful ways of trying to cope or deal with discomfort. Sometimes when there is discomfort, we go to desires. We want something different. We want to be soothed. We want to escape. We want to be distracted. We want things to be different than how they are. We get pulled into a world of wanting and desire, which can be quite strong.

Sometimes in meditation, we can spend a long time fantasizing about something comfortable, which is an alternative to the way that we're feeling. It could be that we look to have interpersonal conversations or activities with others that somehow bypass our discomfort and give us pleasure.

Sometimes people drink alcohol. An interpersonal relationship is uncomfortable, and perhaps, there is tension between the couple. Alcohol settles the tension and breaks through the barriers of the tension between them. Rather than staying in the interpersonal discomfort and seeing it as a doorway to a deeper connection to each other and to resolving something, people go towards alcohol to change the dynamics of the relationship. So there are all kinds of things that people do – watch television, for example.

Another strategy is hostility: to blame, to be angry with oneself or others; push things away; throw things away, stomp away; run away out of hostility and anger. "I don't want this; this is uncomfortable for me." Sometimes there can be a spiral of hostility, anger, and irritation that builds up. We're uncomfortable. We're irritated that we're uncomfortable. We're indignant that we feel uncomfortable and so we feel more uncomfortable. Pressure builds up inside that makes us more irritated or aversive. And so it goes until something maybe really unhealthy happens.

Another strategy with discomfort is a kind of giving up, a collapsing, around it. It may be around self-pity, hopelessness, or a lack of personal efficacy and agency. There is a kind of giving up that is characterized in Buddhism as sloth and torpor – a shutting down, a numbing out.

The fourth strategy is restlessness and anxiety, or restlessness and regrets, or anxiety and regrets. It's not exactly clear what the classic words mean, but it is a whole complex of things that are energizing, whereas sloth and torpor are numbing or make us tired. Sometimes it is fear. People are uncomfortable and they're afraid – "Where is this going? What is going to happen?" Sometimes people get restless, like a trapped deer or rat pacing in a cage. We take the energy of restlessness and express it with some kind of behavior, like chewing our fingernails, tapping our fingers, or reaching for a cigarette because we need something to do, somewhere that the energy can go into.

The fifth is doubt – perplexity, indecisiveness. We're stuck in a hard place between knowing what to do and what not to do. We're not sure if we should be here or not, who's at fault, what's happening here. There is a swirl of confusion, of delusion, that goes on when we're uncomfortable. "Am I allowed to take care of myself? Am I allowed to be comfortable?" "I can't really blame someone else." "I'm supposed to be comfortable, but I'm not comfortable. What am I supposed to do here?" "I'm somehow wrong and I'm failing at something."

So that is a description of the five hindrances, and perhaps, somewhere in those, you can see yourself occasionally. The task of mindfulness practice, the instructions in mindfulness, is to be a connoisseur of the hindrances. Become a connoisseur of how you react unhelpfully with discomfort.

When you're uncomfortable, stop and pay attention to it. I talked about that yesterday. Really get to know it; become familiar with it. As you get more familiar with it, discover what your common reactive patterns are. Seeing the common patterns is very helpful because they are likely to reappear a lot. Your PhD in the hindrances can be on the particular ones that are your specialty. The idea is to really get to know it well so that you can't be fooled by it, so that you can see it coming in the distance. You learn how to not give in to it. This is learning how to work with the hindrances.

It might be that the discomfort you're feeling is a lot easier if you tease apart or separate out the hindrances that are operating from the discomfort itself. The hindrances add power to the discomfort. They hinder our ability to see clearly. Seeing the hindrances for what they are and putting them aside, maybe then we can feel and be with the discomfort in a more direct way. We'll see the rest of this week how useful that is and what can open up.

Today, when you get uncomfortable, look around and see what is your unhelpful reactivity to that. Don't let go of it right away. Don't be upset with yourself for having that reaction. But rather, stop and take a good look. So the bumper sticker for today can be: "I stop for the hindrances. I stop to look and study: How does that feel in the body, and how does that feel emotionally? Why do I believe in them? Or why do I get caught in them? What are the dynamics there? What is the stickiness? What are the beliefs that come along with them."

If you want some help, tell a friend or stranger that you're doing this exercise and share a little about what you're discovering throughout the day. That might give a little more substance to the study and the understanding that comes from it.

May your discomfort and your reactions to them be the arena of mindfulness for this day. Thank you.