

Discomfort (3 of 5) Resting in Discomfort

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

uncomfortable, body, stop, rest, posture, reactivity, restlessness, message

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This week we are exploring the topic of discomfort, which is a common experience of life. We are becoming wiser about discomfort.

It is useful to see the distinction between the discomfort that is physical and that which is more emotional or mental. If the discomfort is primarily physical – the physical discomfort is the most obvious part – then what we can do is rest in the discomfort. That might seem paradoxical, but we find where the discomfort is in the body. The stomach might be in knots. The chest might be tight and swirling in agitation. There may be a restlessness that we feel in our arms, legs, or hands. We might be in pain.

Whatever the physical symptoms of discomfort are, see if it's possible to have the attention or have yourself rest in the discomfort so that the discomfort is not a source of agitation. We stop and rest in the discomfort – be with it, allow the discomfort to be there. We are not allowing the discomfort to do whatever it wants. We are allowing the discomfort so that something inside of us stays close to it and rests in it.

This may be like a friend who is upset and agitated about something difficult that just happened. They are obviously very uncomfortable. You come and sit next to your friend or hold their hand. You are a calm presence. You rest calmly with your friend.

So we feel the physical restlessness or discomfort and breathe with it, feel it in the body, center ourselves on it. We find a way of being grounded or centered through it, not around it (which would be like avoiding it). We are learning how not to give in to the reactivity of the discomfort. (The subject of yesterday's talk was the different ways we might react to discomfort.) We are finding how to rest in the discomfort and not allow the reactivity to take over.

If we do that, sometimes the physical discomfort will begin relaxing. It also allows for the second part of stopping, and that is seeing. There is this pairing in Buddhism of stopping and seeing. We stop, we slow down, we calm down in order to see more clearly. When we're uncomfortable and agitated, there is not going to be a lot of clear seeing. So we find where the discomfort is in the body, and rest in it and breathe with it.

If the nature of the discomfort is social, rather than spinning out in the mind and in the thoughts of what's happening socially, find the physical discomfort and rest in it, open to it, or breathe with it. This turning towards the discomfort and resting in it is an art form and a skill. By resting the attention and being with the discomfort, you might find that a calmness can be found in the middle of the storm. "Oh, this is uncomfortable" – and be with that.

If there are physical manifestations of the emotional, psychological, or social discomfort, then it's really useful to rest in that, to stop and really feel it. It might be the simplest and easiest way to begin relaxing and not be caught in the grip of the social or emotional discomfort that might be there. The discomfort doesn't have to go away. It's a little bit of a trap to think we're trying to get rid of it. But there is a way of resting in the discomfort that gives us a vantage point from which to see more clearly, to not be seeing through the reactivity we might have. Of course, not all social situations give us the time to do that. But there are times when we can take our time. "Okay, I'm really uncomfortable here. Let me feel it and be with it."

Occasionally, there is something uncomfortable that is not so much physical, but primarily mental or emotional. Then it's interesting to also come to the body and find the traces of discomfort in your body, even though the primary thing is psychological. It might be easy to relax that way. Or maybe we find the body becomes the holder or the grounding by which we're not caught or trapped by the thoughts, stories, and judgments that are involved in the social discomfort we have. Or if uncomfortable things are happening around us, we're not taking it in as

deeply. If we feel in the body, the body becomes more porous or balanced, or sometimes the body becomes more of a shield from the social discomfort coming into the mind or the heart.

So we find some place of rest in the body in relationship to the discomfort. Get grounded, get stabilized in the body. Sometimes that can involve changing your posture. If you're standing, stand in such a way that your posture is balanced and strong. Both feet are firmly on the ground, and you're standing tall. If the situation allows it, close your eyes and feel and be with the body. If you're sitting in a chair, be sure you're not in a posture that collapses or is overly tense. Take a balanced, upright posture in which the body supports an embodied awareness. So we keep coming back to the body.

The second part is seeing. Having stopped for the discomfort and felt it in such a way that the mind quiets down just enough, there may be space to study what is going on there. Maybe we can look at all discomfort as a messenger. And the question is: What is the message? What is there to learn in this situation?

Many things can make us uneasy. Sometimes the uneasiness, the discomfort, is actually a wise thing to listen to. There is a message. "Something is wrong here; something is off. Maybe I need to listen to this. Maybe I need to pay more careful attention. What is going on here?"

Many times in my life, I felt uncomfortable and didn't really stop to look at it or take it in. I overwrote it and then did something, said something, or participated in something I later regretted. But initially, there was a warning: "This doesn't feel right." That not feeling right is part of wise discomfort.

Other times, my discomfort limited me. I was afraid. I was uncomfortable because I was neurotically anxious about what was happening. I felt myself pulling back or shutting down. I was limited by the discomfort. I learned that if I stopped and really brought presence and attention to it, I could see: "Oh, here I am holding myself back. I'm anxious. I'm afraid. Do I need to be afraid? Should I give in to the fear?"

Sometimes it's appropriate to override the fear, open up to the situation, and be willing to be vulnerable. For example, if a person has a lot of warmth, kindness, care, and love, it can sometimes be frightening to have someone love us. But is it necessary to be frightened? Is it possible to open up? What is the message? What is the discomfort about?

So sometimes we stop and learn to rest in the discomfort, rest in the physicality of it, so that we can begin investigating the message of discomfort. What is it telling us? How is it useful to know it? What is the useful way of being with it? Is it to open up? Is it to heed it? Is it to step back? Is it to stay quiet? Is it to step forward? Is it to understand ourselves better? Is it to investigate? What is happening here?

We have the willingness to stop for the discomfort and rest in it – resting in the agitation, resting in the unresting. Discomfort is something that is not at ease so we are resting in the unease. See what happens, discover what happens, and what opens up.

Resting in discomfort is a stepping stone to being able to ask ourselves: What is the message here? What is there to learn here? Is this discomfort useful and wise? Is it not useful? Is it unwise? We can answer that much better if we have stopped and learned how to rest in the discomfort and make room for it.

Chances are you will have the time – maybe a minute or a few seconds – to step back and rest in the body, rest in the physicality of the discomfort, and see what happens. See what opens; see what you learn. See what might relax.

I wish you well. Some of you will be traveling during the holidays and going to gatherings where there may be lots of joy and a fair amount of discomfort as well. That might be a wonderful laboratory to explore your discomfort and develop greater wisdom and self-understanding around this territory of discomfort. Maybe these next few days will go easier for you. Thank you.