

Discomfort (4 of 5) Not Limited

November 25, 2021

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

strength, uncomfortable, comfort, power, peaceful, limit, restrict

Gil Fronsdal

The topic this week is how to be wise about discomfort. One of the interesting questions to consider is, What is the function of discomfort? (Yesterday was, What is the message of discomfort?) What does discomfort do for us? Is the function healthy for us or not healthy? Supportive or not supportive?

Certainly, there are times when we feel uneasy about something we should feel uneasy about. It feels not healthy, not ethical, or not safe. So the function of that discomfort is to let us know, sometimes before we're consciously aware, that, "Oh, there's something here to be careful for."

Sometimes the function of discomfort is to have us hold back, have us restrict ourselves, limit ourselves, or close down. That is not because there is a real danger out there, but because we are uncomfortable and uneasy about things that are good and healthy. We somehow assume that there is a threat when actually there is no threat.

We may project or bring along with us a concept of who we are and who we need to be that may not be necessary. We feel that our self-concept is going to be threatened. Or there may be discomfort because of what we want or don't want, or how we want to be seen by others in a certain way. So those are ways in which we hold ourselves in check when we're uncomfortable.

When we limit ourselves unnecessarily, we don't avail ourselves of the goodness, wonderfulness, and potential that is there. One dramatic way we limit ourselves is when we feel uncomfortable about love, warm feelings, or warm-heartedness that we might have or that others have. We might feel threatened by people's warm-heartedness, or feel that we're obligated to return it or do them a favor.

We may be uncomfortable with intimacy or kindness. We may be uncomfortable with expressing kindness, love, and care. Some people feel very uncomfortable with expressing gratitude – saying thank you to others or expressing their appreciation of others – even on Thanksgiving.

Sometimes we're uncomfortable simply staying present without saying anything, without actively expressing love or friendliness or gratitude. We're afraid of staying fully present and aware, receiving whatever is happening in the room, even when what is happening is good. People are happy and celebrating. They may be appreciating you, and so you don't feel it. You don't allow yourself to be with it.

An interesting issue around the words "comfort" and "discomfort" is that the word comfort comes from *confort*, Old French for strength. It's related to the English word force. We're not talking about force here, which may seem aggressive, but rather a strength – with strength, with power. So discomfort can be seen as a way in which we limit, we hold back, we hold in check our own strength.

To be comfortable is not to have a pleasant abiding – not to have a wonderfully comfortable couch to sit on. In the Dharma, comfort is to have a delightful, peaceful, inner strength in our attentiveness, in our presence, in our posture, in our ability to be with what is. This turns the concept of comfort and discomfort around a little bit. The idea is to not let discomfort limit us or discourage some natural life force to blossom, bloom, and be present in a peaceful way, maybe even a gentle way. When we're with people, sometimes we want to be careful that we're not asserting our will on them, not asserting our power or strength on them.

In the Dharma, this practice that we do, the movement is in fact in becoming strong. Buddhism is often associated with being peaceful and calm, so being strong seems to go against the grain. It doesn't seem like the two (peaceful, strong) are compatible, but they are.

To have strength in calmness, strength in peacefulness, is a wonderful possibility. One way to have that is we are not diminishing ourselves when we're peaceful and calm. There's an embodied attentiveness. We're there

and present for what goes on. We don't need to go to the back of the room and pretend we don't count. We also don't need to be the one, in the middle of the room, who has all the attention. We can be fully in the room, in a balanced way, with peaceful strength and confidence: "Here I am."

The advantage of that is we have more to offer other people when we are present in a confident, strong way – where strength is there. Our love, kindness, and friendliness for others has more embodiment, strength, and fullness. For example, I might be completely slumped on a couch, half asleep, and look over to someone and say, "Oh yeah, you know, I think you're great." And then I fall asleep. There's no strength to it. But if I walk up to someone in an unthreatening way, am there in a strong way and say, "I really appreciate you," that appreciation has so much more value than slumping on the couch and mumbling something before I fall asleep.

That may be a dramatic contrast, but today and other times, be careful with how you restrict or limit yourself with your discomfort. One of the functions of discomfort is to limit us, to protect us, when it's necessary. But we often succumb to it when it's not really necessary. We learn in meditation to have simple, embodied attentiveness and really be there for our experience without pulling back, collapsing, or cowering. Just fully there – not asserting ourselves, not insisting on who we are. That is something we can learn to do if we learn how to be wise about our discomfort – how to recognize when it is there, how it causes reactivity (the hindrances come up and take over), how we might limit and define ourselves through the discomfort.

We can learn how to stay grounded and present in the midst of discomfort – to breathe through it, to know it's there, but not let it limit us. It may be uncomfortable to tell someone how much you care and appreciate them – maybe you're shy – but the discomfort or the shyness doesn't have to limit you. We're learning in meditation to breathe with things and breathe through things, and to allow things to be there but still stay present for the breathing. Then we can learn to stay present for what the task at hand is without being limited or defined by some of the inner voices or inner feelings that might keep us limited.

Sometimes we can relax and let go of our discomfort. Sometimes we are able to not let it limit us and do what's wonderful to do in spite of it. The advantage of really recognizing the discomfort is we may get the messages from it. We may also pay attention to it enough to know whether we want to have it limit us, or we want to use our skills to be present in spite of it and offer ourselves.

So now, we may be able to translate "comfort" into English as "with our life force" and "discomfort" as "without our life force." Perhaps, our life force, when it is most healthy and free, is a peaceful force – one that has a lot of space and room for warmth, kindness, friendliness, generosity, respect, and appreciation for others.

On this day, please use these lessons as a way to live comfortably with your life force, whether you're doing that alone or with other people. Any day is a wonderful day to let your peaceful life force arrive and offer you confidence. Bring confidence, strength, and presence to your life. If you have time today to meditate a little bit, even for 10 minutes, you might see if that supports this way of being.

May today be a nice day for you, and I look forward to coming back here tomorrow. Thank you.