

# Discomfort (5 of 5) Comfortable With Discomfort

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

meditation, freedom, investigate, reaction, reactivity

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We come to the last talk on discomfort. I hope you've been usefully uncomfortable this week – not that you have been more uncomfortable than usual, but rather you have learned about the value of mindfulness of discomfort. Buddhism focuses ultimately on a certain kind of spiritual freedom: an inner freedom. If we become free only when we're comfortable, we are not really free.

One of the tests for how free we are is to discover if we're free while we're uncomfortable and uneasy. There is always going to be discomfort in this world, so to fight it or feel like it's a mistake is going to be exhausting. We can develop a power: the power of being comfortable with discomfort. This is discovering how to be free *with* discomfort, not free when discomfort has gone away.

Learning how to be free with discomfort is extremely useful. Sometimes if people think that they have to be comfortable to be free, then we're never going to learn how to be with discomfort wisely. If we feel that we have to react to discomfort when it is there – change it, fight it, hide from it, give in to it, collapse around it – then we'll never discover how to be free. We learn how to center ourselves or to be present for discomfort without reactivity. While we're uncomfortable, we stand tall or upright metaphorically and look directly at reality.

Discomfort might always be a message, and the question is, What is the message? Is the discomfort a message to heed or not give in? This practice is to be present for discomfort and be able to look reality in the eye, really see what is happening here. Sometimes we need to look at what is happening with ourselves. Sometimes it's a call to look at what's happening around us. We take discomfort as a message for greater attention. Something here needs attention, and then we look at it directly: What is really going on here? This is beginning to exercise our freedom to look at what's happening as opposed to giving in to our reactions about what's happening.

This ability to be able to stand comfortably with discomfort also gives us the ability, when it's appropriate, to allow ourselves to be uncomfortable and do what has to be done. The discomfort doesn't interfere with or distract us from what has to happen.

For example, it can be very uncomfortable during COVID to take a neighbor to the emergency room when the hospital is full of people and there is a long line. "I have to help my neighbor. I know how to be uncomfortable. This is a time to be uncomfortable, not be caught by it, and stay focused on the task of helping my neighbor." So, to have the strength, maybe the dedication, the ability to stay present to investigate – to see what's going on and take care of what needs to be taken care of without being sidetracked by the discomfort.

Sometimes the task at hand is to investigate the discomfort itself. This investigation works a lot better if we are not living in the reactivity with discomfort, where we've learned how to be comfortable with discomfort. Then we don't have filters over our eyes to see what's happening. If we're looking at ourselves, we're more able to be honest and see more clearly and deeply what's happening.

It's the same if we're looking outwardly. "This is an uncomfortable social situation. I think it's important to take a good look and see what's going on here." Again, we are able to not give in to discomfort, not be distracted by it, but not ignoring it either. We use our capacity to look and investigate, see what's really going on here.

So I see this as a capacity to do two things at once: to know we're uncomfortable, and to be okay with that, enough so that we either look and see more deeply what's happening, or we dedicate ourselves to the tasks at hand. We do what needs to be done even if we're uncomfortable.

For example, giving a public speech for some people can be very uncomfortable. Learning to be comfortable with discomfort might mean: “Yes, I’m uncomfortable and I’m not going to hold back. I’m going to go up to the stage. I’m going to stand there and do it. I’m not going to be held back by the discomfort. I’m not going to be inhibited by the discomfort, but I’ll know it’s uncomfortable.”

I think that this ability to look and hold all this is one of the great skills that we can learn from the practice of mindfulness. It requires a little or a lot of not being discouraged, upset, or avoidant of discomfort that occurs while you’re meditating. Don’t hold up a standard that meditation is only supposed to be relaxing, calm, blissful, or whatever you might think it is.

Sometimes the greatest inner growth can happen when we’re willing to practice with our discomfort in meditation. Don’t go make yourself uncomfortable for this lesson, but when discomfort comes, don’t shy away from it. Don’t feel like, “Oh, this is not the day to meditate.” This might be the ideal day to meditate.

You might learn more about freedom, yourself, your reactivity, and how to not give in to discomfort if you sit with it, upright, clear, present, and really practice mindfulness of it. Feel how it is in the body; feel how it is in your attitudes and reactions.

This week has been a call for all of us, myself as well, to understand the value of practicing with discomfort. As I said yesterday, sometimes when we give in to discomfort, we actually shortchange some of the most beautiful parts of what’s possible in our life. We might be uncomfortable with love. We might be uncomfortable with receiving generosity from others. We might be uncomfortable with honesty. We might be uncomfortable with all kinds of things that interfere with the rich, valuable social interactions we might have.

Learning to be comfortable with discomfort so that our love, generosity, care, and receptivity of others’ generosity and love can flow freely is one of the advantages of being comfortable with discomfort. I hope this has been useful for you. I hope it does lead you to greater comfort in this life, including comfort with discomfort. Thank you.