

Attitudes (5 of 5) From Stress to Freedom

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Summary Keywords

Discomfort, moods, anxiety, fear, resentment, anger, middle way, contentment, pressure, contract, relax, chronic, reinforce, fuel, forcefulness, reactivity, tension, apathy, collapse, visceral, absence, ease, simplicity, demands, duty, burdensome, breathing room

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Warm greetings for the fifth and last talk in the series on attitudes. Today we will discuss moving from stress to freedom.

I propose that stress might be experienced as an attitude that can feel pervasive and chronic. We carry stress in our bodies, hearts, and minds. It is also like a mood that influences us.

There is a cost to being stressed. It is not without an impact on us. One of the impacts stresses can have, especially ongoing stress, is that it self-reinforces. Ongoing stress is stressful and uncomfortable. We often react to this discomfort with more stress.

If we are afraid, that is stressful. Living with chronic anxiety is stressful. The discomfort of the anxiety makes us want to respond and react in ways that reinforce the anxiety. Feeling stressed and anxious produces more stress. That creates discomfort, and then we have more reasons and more fuel for being anxious.

The same thing occurs when we are angry, resentful, or envious, and when we are full of cravings, ambition, or confusion. Many things feel very uncomfortable. In that discomfort, there is a birth of stress. This makes us more uncomfortable and adds even more stress.

For this reason, I think of stress as being like an attitude. We have an attitude of stress. If we go into a situation with the attitude that this is going to be a challenge or uncomfortable, then we tense up. We contract and feel internal pressure. We might push and lean forward, or hold back, making ourselves small. We might make ourselves big in an assertive way to get what we think we need to protect ourselves or what we think we need to have.

All these things – this kind of forcefulness, or stressfulness – become chronic. They continually reinforce discomfort, which drives more of the same.

The alternative is to search for the freedom in any circumstance we are in. We look for freedom from stress, reactivity, pressure, or tension. We look for freedom from straining, pulling back, making ourselves small, or asserting ourselves. There is a freedom that comes from not aggressively asserting ourselves and not diminishing ourselves. There is freedom in just being able to breathe as if we have complete permission to be alive, to be present, to breathe, to be valuable, and to feel important. No one can take this away. No one can take away our basic capacity to find that middle way between assertion and collapse, or pushing forward with pressure, and pulling back and giving up with apathy. Apathy is also stressful.

The middle way is just like: “Here we are.” We are here, allowed to breathe. We are allowed to relax our eyes, not straining, or trying to figure something out. We are allowed to be relaxed and present in our bodies.

A milestone or turning point in the practice of Buddhism and meditation is to have a visceral feeling of freedom – an absence of stress. We have a feeling of freedom in the absence of the mind straining, pushing, collapsing, or pulling back. There is a sense of ease and simplicity. It feels as if there is an absence of any demands on us – an absence of any of the demands we put on ourselves.

We can still take care of things. We still do things and accomplish things, but we do them without stress. We do them without a sense of demand, a sense of should, or a sense of duty that is burdensome to carry. We do them with freedom.

For some people, the idea of doing things with freedom means that we do it without expectations or measuring ourselves by the results. We do it completely, fully, and freely. We deal with the results when they occur, whether they occur or not.

It is in doing in a free way that we find our joy and happiness. At some point in meditation, there starts to be a little hint of what it is like to be free. It is like the beginning of light as dawn begins to show. It is a little inkling or hint of what it is like to be unattached or non-straining – what it is like to be without stress.

There may still be stress in our system, but there are places where chronic stress is beginning to relax. “Ah, look at that, that is possible.” As the sense of non-stress, non-strain, non-contraction, and non-pressure begins to get stronger, a point comes when this becomes compelling. This becomes a reference point for how we live our lives. This becomes an attitude of freedom that orients us towards the freedom that is always here, always available here and now.

Most of us have more freedom in the moment than we avail ourselves of. We are living in more freedom than we notice because the mind has selective attention. It focuses on what it is afraid of, what it wants, and what it doesn't like. It tends to get absorbed in those things and then spin out. The mind is caught up in its own little world.

At some point, there is an attitude of freedom that we live in. There is a mood, an orientation, or a view of freedom that we live in. It is an absence of strain.

Many things come with this sense of freedom. Today I am thinking of contentment. We are content just to be alive, just to be here. We are content to do just what we are doing. Sometimes this comes with a sense of love or care for the world around us.

Not having stress does not mean we don't care. Caring that is done with stress is probably not done with love. It may come more from a sense of duty or something else. The love, the joy, and contentment come out of freedom.

When we move from stress to freedom, we don't just assume that the alternative to stress is being without stress, or de-stressed. The alternative to stress is a kind of freedom that gives us lots of breathing room. It is a freedom that gives us a sense of fresh air for the heart and mind. It gives us an openness, a brightness, and a peacefulness. That is what is available when we figure out how to release our stress.

As we become more relaxed, as we live with less stress, look for the freedom. Let freedom be recognized so that it becomes the attitude with which we live. Cultivate an attitude of staying free, and not getting caught up. In so doing, we are wonderfully available to the world as an emissary of freedom. We become a model of freedom.

We are able to give the gift of freedom because we are not imposing our stress on anyone. We are doing the opposite. We are offering others the space to be who they are.

Thank you for this week. I hope that those of you in the United States appreciate this holiday of giving thanks. I offer my thanks to all of you. I am thankful for the chance to be together in this way, to meditate with you, and to be able to teach. I look forward to beginning again with a new series on Monday.

Thank you.