

Dharmette: Distinguishing Between Discomfort and Harm

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So in these few minutes we have here, I want to try to bring alive for you the distinction between discomfort and suffering. Big words. Discomfort is... is an expected part of human life. What the Buddhists call suffering, *dukkha*, is a particular... The word literally means pain, but the way it's used in the teachings of the Buddha, it's a certain kind of emotional pain that is not emotional discomfort, but rather a certain kind of emotional pain that comes because of how we... have gotten contracted, or are we clinging, or resisting to something?

It's kind of like if we get contracted in clinging, then it's kind of like water. If you try to hit water, you know, karate chop on water, the water just smiles and just kind of parts its way, and the water doesn't really care. And your hand goes through and the water just fills, you're trying to make space there, but it just fills in again. You know, smiles and look how silly you are. But if part of the water has become ice, like the surface has been frozen over, and then you hit it, you'll break the ice. And if it's really hard ice, like many inches thick and you hit it hard enough, the ice is not going to break. It's your hands are going to break.

So when we become solidified around certain things that we're really holding on to tight, clinging, desires, aversions, identities, all kinds of beliefs that we have, we become more fragile. And not only is it painful to become ice, it actually sets up that we bump into the world. You know, if an icicle decides to kind of explore the world, but doesn't have any eyes, it'll bump into things and just kind of keep breaking and chipping and pretty soon it's no longer ice. And if it goes to the tropics, it's not going to last long at all. Or to the East Coast now. it's not going to last. And so the idea is to not get frozen.

And so what Buddhist practice does, it teaches us to recognize ways that we get frozen or ways in which we suffer from the ways in which we have this *dukkha*, this emotional pain, that is in fact there because of the way that we've contracted, gotten tight, clinging, resisting,

saying certain kind of ways, saying no to something or a certain way being driven by something that sets up the conditions that there's pain there. And it's a kind of pain... that invites or sets up the conditions to cause more pain. So just to be frozen is painful, to be ice. But then, you know, the icicle, something's going to come and knock the icicle. And the icicle is going to shatter. Water just sitting there peacefully. Something bumps into it. It might jiggle a little bit. Does water get... maybe water gets uncomfortable, but it doesn't, you know, it's not going to suffer. It's no emotional pain there.

So what we're learning to do in Buddhist practice, one of the very important parts of Buddhist practice and why ethics is at the heart of Buddhist practice, is that we're trying to become very sensitive to how we add, how we freeze, how we cling, how we... contribute to our own unnecessary emotional pain, and to become finely attuned to how, what happens in the mind, what happens in the heart, what happens in the body, where we freeze, where we get tight, where we get resistant, where we make ourselves more fragile, set up the conditions by which we exasperate the emotional pain that we're living under. And part of it is we don't even know that we have emotional, this kind of emotional pain, because our society sets up these expectations that we're supposed to be a certain way. We're supposed to be angry. We're supposed to be defending ourselves. We're supposed to be doing these things. And so we take these on, not because it's wise, but because we take it on. The way we take it on can be with clinging, with attachment.

And what's fascinating about Buddhist practice is you can feel how you're harming yourself in the process. You can feel, oh, this is harming me, and I'm the one who's causing the harm. That's fascinating to see. On the other hand, we can also see that how we're relating to others, how we're relating to the world, can be done in ways that we are also harming ourselves. If we feel justified to yell at someone with hostility because they're being terrible, I don't know what that means, but... And we hide behind the justification. We might not take the time to feel and sense the impact that anger has on ourselves. But if you take the time to know it, you'll see that you're harming yourself in the process. And you might ask yourself, is there a different way? Can I take care of myself? Can I take care of what's going on in the world without harming myself? And maybe without harming others.

A friend of mine explained that she had a bitter, difficult divorce. And for many, many years, she carried a lot of resentment to her partner. and it's steaming, simmering in this resentment. And then one day she thought to herself, wait a minute, for all these years, my partner is off having a full life, probably doesn't think about me at all whatsoever, and I'm here kind of causing all this inner turmoil and suffering of my own by this resentment I have, I think I'm

trying to get back at my partner. This is my way of saying, I'm going to get you or something. But we have no contact. I'm not having any impact, no effect. The only person who's miserable with this resentment is me. And that understanding freed her from being caught in that grip of that resentment. When she saw how much self-harm she was doing, This is a powerful thing to be able to really be sensitive to harm what's harming us, what's not harming, what's harming others.

But distinct from that is the discomfort. It's very important to distinguish these two because discomfort is an ordinary part of life. And sometimes if you want to help someone, it might be very uncomfortable to help them. It might be gory. It might be messy. It might be they're difficult to be with. It might be that you have to stay up late. You're ready for sleep, and this person needs you late at night. Maybe the neighbors ask you to take, if you would take them to the ER and You know, and you want to stay there to support them, but it's so uncomfortable. ER, it's cold, it's unfriendly, and probably everyone there has COVID, and you don't have a mask, and this is really uncomfortable. And, you know, but you want to be there for your friend. And so maybe you're put up with this tremendous discomfort of not enough sleep, maybe there's no food, you're hungry, but you're going to be there with your friend. Right? There are times we choose discomfort. It's wise, it's compassionate, you can't help it. Sometimes you have to do it because it's required. And you have to go, you have to get a driver's license update, new one, and you have to go stand in the line there, you know, and so maybe it's uncomfortable. That's part of...

So then we can be uncomfortable... and harm ourselves in the discomfort. We can be uncomfortable and harm others as a reaction to the discomfort. We can be uncomfortable and be comfortable with the discomfort. The situation can be uncomfortable, and we can be comfortable with being there in the discomfort situation. So part of one of the things we're navigating in Buddhism is this distinction between discomfort and maybe ordinary pain And then this emotional pain that is kind of a self-harm, self-caused, freezing, tightening, clinging.

And the idea is to find a way of living that is gloriously peaceful, gloriously happy, where we become free of harming ourselves, harming others, harming both self and others, and harming the whole world. That's kind of the ethical foundation of Buddhist practice. That's more than just ethical. It is the foundation of Buddhism to live this way, to find this way. And the tool for that is mindfulness, is meditation, is compassion, and care and kindness, is kind of really developing the kind of attitude and sensitivity... that we can really start feeling for ourselves, becoming our own teacher, by seeing the movements in the mind and the heart, the

ones that are harmful and those are not, and being able to choose more and more, living in a heart, living with a mind, that causes no self-harm. That's glorious, even if you're uncomfortable.

So I hope this made some sense to you. And if you felt uncomfortable hearing all this, maybe it was the right kind of discomfort, no harm caused. And so now we'll do the cleaning of the