Comfort Comes and Goes

Dharma talk by Diana Clark

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So, in this series we're exploring, we could say, the humbling and freeing truth that life does not always obey us. And you don't need me to tell you this. You know this. We all know this. But one of the first places we can see this is in our relationship to comfort. I mean, one of the ordinary things about being human is that we wish to be comfortable. We want the body to feel good. We want the mind to be peaceful. We want relationships to feel easy. We want the day to be manageable. And there's nothing wrong with this. This wish for comfort is not a problem in itself. It's natural and human.

And in many ways it's skillful and wise to care about comfort. To adjust our posture when it feels like we're in too much of a struggle and just lost in the trying to find the posture that's more bearable. We put on sweaters when it's cold. We take sweaters off when it's warm. We take medicine when we are sick. We rest when we are tired. We create the conditions for safety, ease, and well-being. This is not a problem.

But the trouble begins when the wish for comfort quietly becomes a demand that life obey our preferences. And this is usually not at the front of our minds, this idea that we're demanding that life obey our preferences. I know it certainly wasn't for me. But this is part of what meditation practice has revealed to me is that the suffering, the *dukkha*[5], that the Buddha was talking about begins when we start to believe that life should stay comfortable and that discomfort means that something has gone wrong. Because there was this belief that if we were practicing well enough, then we could prevent any discomfort. If we were managing well enough, then comfort would just be around all the time.

And maybe I'll say a note here about the way that I'm using this word comfort and discomfort, a little bit different than these usual Buddhist words that we find: pleasure and unpleasure, ease and not ease. I like this word comfort because it is a little bit different than what we're often hearing and it's a way, and maybe with the vagueness of this word, you can find your own way with it. You can define it in a way that feels meaningful for you. Because we all have this experience: pleasure comes and goes, ease comes and goes, calm comes and goes, feeling settled comes and goes, feeling approved of, feeling like we belong, feeling safe, all these types of things. I'm kind of putting into this basket called comfort.

And perhaps in this guided meditation, you noticed this. When we sit down to meditate, maybe there is a moment of stillness or quiet. Maybe the breath feels gentle or the body begins to soften and the mind becomes a little more spacious. And then something changes. The knee

hurts. An anxious thought appears. We remember something awkward we said two days ago or an email or a message we haven't sent yet. And then some part of the mind says, "No. No. This isn't the meditation I ordered." So then we can notice this subtle assumption that meditation practice should deliver a certain kind of comfort, calm, stillness, spaciousness. And sometimes practice does bring those things, but comfort comes and goes, so the atmosphere changes.

When the body aches and the mind wanders, right? Often, not always. But sometimes when the comfort starts to shift and discomfort arises, we have not only the discomfort itself, but the added suffering, the added *dukkha* of believing it shouldn't be there. And this is such an important place to look. The unpleasantness of the experience, and then the extra struggle. "This shouldn't be happening. I should feel better now. What am I doing wrong? Why can't I just be peaceful?" Sometimes these thoughts are really subtle. Sometimes they're really obvious.

So the invitation of practice is, can this too be met? The comfort, the discomfort, and our relationship to this practice. Because this second layer of the protest, the disappointment, the resistance when things aren't going the way that we want, the discomfort. This is where practice can become very tender and very freeing.

So, the invitation is not to stop caring about comfort, it's not to become indifferent and stoic in a way that we become cold. We're not pretending that pain doesn't hurt and we're not pretending that disappointment is not disappointment. The invitation is more subtle. And we notice this quiet demand that comfort stay. And we feel the grip around pleasantness. And we notice the inner protest when discomfort arrives. And we become interested in the moment when the mind says, "This shouldn't be happening. Make it go away."

The question becomes, "Can this be met? Can this discomfort be met? And the wish for it to go away be met? These two different things. Can both of them be met? Either of them be met?"

So, it doesn't mean that the discomfort is liked or approved of or made into some spiritual achievement. It's just met. It's just known. And we let all the moments be included in our life. Even the ones that are uncomfortable.

So, there's a kind of humility in this, this not trying to control, but responding wisely. We don't control the coming and going of comfort, of ease, of well-being. Even though we spend so much of our life energy trying to control it, we don't control it in the way that we want. We can influence conditions, we can care for the body, we can practice wisely, choose skillful actions, but we cannot make comfort stay in the way that we want it to. We don't own it. We don't possess it. We can't command it. Comfort isn't something we can keep in a jar for later and take it out later or something like this.

So, this letting go of trying to control isn't passivity. It means we stop believing that life should arrange itself around our preferences. Because it doesn't, it can't, it won't. It means we stop taking the arrival of discomfort so personally.

So, you don't need me to tell you that comfort and discomfort are both visitors. They arise because of conditions. They change because conditions change. Ease and unease are part of the movement of being alive. Of course, we prefer comfort. But, is there a way that we can become less offended or shocked or resistant to discomfort? And this is one way to understand practice, not as the project of becoming comfortable all the time, but as the capacity to stay intimate with life as it changes.

Comfort comes and goes. And beneath all this coming and going, something can be cultivated. Steadiness. Kindness. A willingness to be here. A trust that this moment can be known.

So, perhaps the invitation is simple. The next time comfort is here, can we receive it gently without demanding that it stay? The next time discomfort is here, can we meet it gently without insisting that it should not have come? This isn't easy, but it's freeing. Because when we stop asking comfort to be permanent, we can begin to discover deeper ease. Not the ease of everything feeling good all the time, but the ease of not fighting so much with the changing nature of things. The ease of not trying to control that which we cannot control.

Comfort comes and goes. And practice helps us learn how to live with this coming and going. And to recognize that life does not obey us. It doesn't follow our preferences in the way that we wish. And I hope you'll stay with me for the rest of this week as we explore these ideas that were introduced here today.

It's not a failure when things aren't going the way that we want. It's just the nature of experience. And the readiness[6] to meet what arises, whether it matches our preferences or not, is absolutely a doorway to more and more and more freedom. I promise you.

So thank you. Thank you for your practice. Thank you for your attention. And I'll see you tomorrow.

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1. **Second Arrow:** A reference to the Sallatha Sutta, where the Buddha teaches that when we experience a painful event (the first arrow), our reaction of resistance, anger, or despair is like shooting ourselves with a second arrow, compounding the suffering. ↩
2. **Dukkha:** A Pali word often translated as "suffering," "stress," or "unsatisfactoriness." It refers to the fundamental unsatisfactoriness and painfulness of mundane life. ↩

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