

Discomfort (1 of 5) Studying Discomfort

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Gil Fronsda

The topic for this week is discomfort. I present this with the hope that you can be uncomfortable in better ways. It isn't necessarily always good to alleviate discomfort. Discomfort is part of human life. Sometimes discomfort is what keeps us from living our life fully. It keeps us from being connected to others or from being honest or free.

If we react every time we're uncomfortable by pulling away from it, we might be shortchanging our life dramatically. Also, there are times in which the things that make us uncomfortable – not always, of course – can be a window into a deeper understanding of ourselves. We can understand what has been triggered that we feel uncomfortable about. Is it necessary to be uncomfortable? Is the discomfort that we're reacting to due to the situation or our reaction to the situation?

Today, I want to emphasize a willingness to be uncomfortable, not so that we suffer more, but rather so that we are not being pushed around by the discomfort; not reacting, running away, or grabbing something to distract ourselves – for example, reaching for alcohol or something because we're so uncomfortable. We can start learning how to be skillfully uncomfortable.

One thing that really helps is to understand that it is valuable to be uncomfortable. But, when you're uncomfortable, don't go make yourself uncomfortable. That is not valuable. If you're uncomfortable, realize it's valuable to train yourself to hang out with the discomfort. Hang out and be non-reactive, be present in a way that you are balanced.

The analogy I gave before is you can be uncomfortable in a rowboat swaying back and forth in the waves. If you have to stand in the rowboat for whatever reason, you find a place in the midpoint, the lowest center of gravity in the boat, and you set your legs wide and firm. You stay in touch with the slightest movements of the boat so you can adjust your weight and shift and change it.

You don't just stand stock still, but rather, your body is fluid, almost like you're swaying with the waves. When the boat lifts on the right side, maybe you lean in that

direction and bend your right knee. When it goes in the other direction, you do the opposite. So you're attuned.

Maybe it's uncomfortable, but if you react to the discomfort or get afraid of the discomfort, then you're not going to have the necessary fluidity. You're not going to be able to maintain your balance. So you have to be willing to feel where you're at and be with it to find your bearings with it.

So, how can we do that in daily life? There are a few things. One is mindfulness of breathing. For some people, there is something very effective about staying in touch with the rhythm of their breathing. To the degree to which the attention is grounded in the breathing, that attention is not going to the reactivity or the discomfort. The breathing also tends to be relaxing, grounding, and stabilizing.

When you find yourself in an uncomfortable situation, breathe. If you're anxious in a situation, breathing deeply is a common psychological technique. If you're angry, breathe deeply. Breathe in order to come back into balance. Breathe so you're not pulled into the world of the reactivity – the fears, anxieties, anger, the way you feel in relation to what's uncomfortable. This doesn't mean that you have to live forever with the discomfort. But you want to learn the skill of not being pulled into

the reactivity. And breathing is one of the places to learn that skill.

Eventually, as we learn to be balanced and present for discomfort without the reaction, then we can learn what's wise to do with it. If the discomfort is unnecessary or unfortunate, maybe there are things you can do to change it. If the discomfort is limiting you from doing something wonderful, then perhaps the balance and non-reactivity that you find with the discomfort allow you to go forward into this wonderful thing that you're going to do. So you can use the breathing to be with discomfort.

We can use mindfulness of the body. The body is such a fantastic place to rest, to be established in. We can use mindfulness of the body to stay present in the body in the uncomfortable situation. If it's a social situation, for example, have a fair amount of your attention rooted in your body. Find some comfort in your body. Breathe with your body. Find safety, if you can, with your body, so that you're not automatically being pulled and reacting to what's being said and what's being done.

Then sometimes we can feel more precisely where the discomfort is physically. Recognizing the actual place of discomfort may give it a kind of simplicity that is not there if we don't really recognize and feel where the discomfort is. This is like in the book *The Wizard of Oz*

when they finally make it to the Emerald City and the wizard is a great big voice on the wall. They pull the curtain and behind it is this little guy, the wizard. Suddenly, he's not this big, domineering, imaginary presence.

So, if we're vaguely feeling uncomfortable or more in our reactivity to the discomfort, it can loom large and seem much bigger than it needs to be. But we can drop into the body and find where in particular we are uncomfortable. Am I uncomfortable in my belly, in my shoulders, in my chest? Is it swirling in my mind? Sometimes locating that and then breathing with it – on the inhale, feeling it, and on the exhale, maybe softening and relaxing – protects us from our imagination that it is bigger than it actually is. “Oh, it's just tightness in my belly; I can be with this.” “My chest is collapsing; that's what it is.” So you learn to breathe with discomfort and learn to recognize it in your body.

Then an interesting thing to do with discomfort, in some situations, is to notice your posture. How is your posture in relation to the discomfort? Can you take a posture of strength, a posture of confidence, a posture that feels both confident and calm? If you only take a calm posture, you might settle back and become a couch potato, and there's a kind of collapse that might happen. But rather, have a confident posture, a posture that itself expresses confidence and maybe calm. If you're

tapping your fingers a lot or playing with your fingers, maybe stop doing that.

Now you don't have to feel confident. You don't have to feel calm. But assume a posture that expresses that. And then breathe with the discomfort and feel it in your body. Just be with the experience in a fuller way.

One of the purposes, advantages, or possibilities in meditation is to let that be a laboratory for discomfort. Hopefully, the situation is so simple when you meditate that you don't have to solve any social problems or do a lot of things. It's simply that you're feeling uncomfortable.

Then, in meditation, learn to breathe with it. Learn to connect to your breathing and find balance. In meditation, find a way to feel grounded in your body, and then locate where the discomfort is in the body. In meditation, you can rely on a posture that is confident and calm. And then don't physically give in to the reactivity to discomfort.

So in meditation, you're beginning to discover how you are with the world of discomfort. What are the tricks of the mind? What are the reactions of the mind? What are the beliefs that come into play? You're not giving in to the discomfort, but rather, you're studying it. You get to know it. In this way, you become a student of

discomfort: to learn all the unnecessary reactions, responses, fears, and beliefs that come into play, which sometimes hijack your attention, wisdom, and ability to be with the situation in a wise way.

Out in the world, it's sometimes hard to really assess all this and know what needs to happen. Some situations are uncomfortable, and we don't have the time and place to check in with our discomfort. It's really the time to get out of there, so we don't have a chance there to study it. But find situations in your life where it is appropriate to hang out and hang out with your discomfort. Not to suffer more, but to become wiser, to understand more what's going on. Be curious, breathe with it, feel it in the body, and feel the location. Assume a posture that allows you to have a greater capacity to just be there and feel the discomfort.

This may be an unfortunate instruction for today, but I do encourage you to look for opportunities in the next 24 hours when you are uncomfortable and become a student of your discomfort in the way that I'm talking about. This will set a foundation for what we'll talk about this week as we go along. This is not just so you can do it for today, but so that you can build on that as we go forward.

So, for today, become a student of discomfort. Thank you.