

NEWSLETTER
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DISCOMFORT IN TRAINING

In last April's newsletter, I wrote on discomfort in training. It has come up again as something that needs further examination.

In my experience many, if not most of us, come to training because we believe that it will make us, in some way, more comfortable. I know that I did. I am not at all sure that I would have recognized it as such at the time, but it is clear now. I expected Buddhism to make me calm and peaceful, and also energetic and healthy, wise, happy, lovable and, most of all, "enlightened." (I really had no idea of the meaning of that word, but I knew that I would like it.) I would then be much more comfortable and respected in this world, which was all that I could imagine. I was so caught up in "me" and all of "my" "problems," all of which I wanted to *go away*, that it took me years before I began to be willing to just sit still; before I could begin, in one sense to even start my training.

I have found that our expectations of training tend to get in our way; and one of my main expectations had been that training would somehow change things so that I would like them, I would feel comfortable with them. I did, in fact, find that as I persevered, I eventually began to learn to accept and embrace the discomfort, although I have never come to like it. Training helps us to develop perspective so that we find a place in which we are no longer controlled by like or dislike.

One of the many things confusing me in my earlier training was that, at least for some time, I experienced my problems as more uncomfortable than before I started. Although I didn't understand this at the time, it was because I had been willing to open myself to those problems rather than continuing to put so much energy into pushing them away.

As I became willing to be intimate with those parts of myself which I really didn't like, I experienced even more discomfort. I see now that this was simply due to being willing to actually face things that I found stressful or depressing. I had come to be willing to remove (at least some of) the barriers to being aware of things about myself that I didn't like, thus I felt them more clearly—and painfully. Converting these things takes time, and before we can convert them, we must allow ourselves to experience them, without turning away. If the resulting discomfort causes us to turn away, to re-erect the barriers that numb or blind us to their presence, then how can we ever hope to deal with them? We can only take one step at a time. We must open ourselves to the discomfort before we can deal with it. And I found that opening very unpleasant and confusing.

If I had recognized that coming to experience this discomfort on a more and more intimate and acute basis was the natural progression of training, I would have found it easier to endure, but I tended to think that I was doing something wrong, and so I felt that I should stop what I was doing. In fact, for many years I thought that I couldn't meditate, when what was really going on was that I just truly didn't like what I found when I did. It took me many years to get beyond this simple aversion, and it still arises. It took me even longer to really begin to understand, on a gut level, that this deeply disliked discomfort was simply impersonal feeling due to past actions, past choices, i.e. karma. It was an opportunity for me to convert this attachment to "like," and aversion to "dislike." It was, and still is, an opportunity to understand these feelings as not me, that in fact there is no permanent separate "me" to own them. I simply need to make it my training to be willing to sit still in the midst of whatever arises, accepting and embracing whatever I experience. And then the discomfort stops being an obstacle to training and actually becomes the training. This is a step in conversion.

I want to emphasize that meditation is not the cause of any of the discomfort that trainees may experience, other than to naturally enhance, over time, our willingness to be open to, and aware of, what is already there. My understanding is that meditation and training may "hurry" the arising of some feeling, or memory, or whatever, but it is never the cause of the feeling, etc. Our

willingness to train can lead us down some paths that we may find very dark, but meditation did not create those places—we did. They are the result of our choices. And as my Master said, and as I have found, we do not experience those dark places until we are somehow ready to do so—ready to benefit from the experience.

If we are not careful, as the willingness to train enhances our awareness of the discomfort, we may have a tendency to blame training for the discomfort. To help you not to make that mistake, I reiterate that training is not the cause, but merely the facilitator of the awareness of discomfort that is already there, waiting for us to acknowledge it. After all, if we are ever to deal with it, we must first see it.

Please understand that my experience of discomfort in training is a very individual thing and may not apply to you. I don't want to discourage anyone. I simply want to let you know what you may find, and if you do, to encourage you to persevere in your practice. If you persevere, you will eventually be very grateful that you did. If you experience something similar to what I have, and take it so far as to walk away from your practice, then you will end up in a worse state than when you started. It is vital to have compassion for ourselves: getting ourselves out of the way and allowing this wonderful, natural process, which is the result of Buddhist training, to take place. Whenever we persevere, we deepen our faith in the practice. Whenever we turn away, we reinforce old karmic habits.

I also want to make it clear that I am not recommending ascetic practices. Self-induced discomfort—e.g. starving ourselves, or sitting for very long periods, or deliberately getting little sleep, etc. in order to develop discomfort that we may then somehow "overcome"—is not our practice. Dogen emphasized the "koan of everyday life," simply accepting and embracing the suffering that naturally arises when we train, rather than trying to create something that forces us to try to do something special. This is why Rev. Master Jiyu recommended doing formal meditation in a chair or even lying down when the need arose, although before we do that kind of thing it is good to check with a teacher.

Our discomfort, or discontent, or distress, or dissatisfaction, or disillusionment (or however we characterize that suffering or unsatisfactoriness that all sentient beings experience, i.e. the first of The Four Noble Truths) which brings us to training, often arises from karmic habits. Karmic habits are the ways that we have learned to try to cope with the world. We all know someone with a tendency to be angry, or fearful, or discouraged, or arrogant, or complacent, or opinionated, etc. At one time, these ways of reacting to the world seemed to help us, and so we grabbed onto them, and continued to use them in whatever situation might arise—some appropriate and some not. They appeared to help just often enough that we made them a part of ourselves, quite literally, and now they have become so ingrained that we are no longer in control. And that is the problem. Each karmic habit that we have allowed to take control of us is now a source of our suffering. We literally become what we think, say, and do. It is not possible to go with anger or fear just a little bit, or in just one aspect of life. Whenever we use these "tools" we grow these habits and eventually the tools come to have a life of their own, over which we seem to have little control. This is how we literally create our "selves", and it is an aspect of karmic consequence. As long as we think of these habits as ourselves, some intrinsic part of us, we cause ourselves difficulties in letting them go. Letting go is, after all, the aim of the Buddha's Teaching, another step in conversion.

Karmic habits tend to be easier to see in someone else rather than in ourselves. They can be so much a part of us, that we simply don't recognize them. One reason that we may not recognize them is that we can literally become numb to them. Our willingness to meditate opens us to experiencing them, like a limb that has gone to sleep coming back to life, and we may not like this experience; we may think that something is wrong. To continue goes against our inclinations, and yet that is the very thing we must do. This is one of the many reasons that it is so important to have a teacher: to help us to continue our training when we wish to do otherwise. When we work on not allowing our karmic habits to control us, we are working on converting them—and us.

Someone who goes on a weight loss diet, or begins a new exercise program, expects discomfort, or at least should do so. We need to be open to the same experience in training. Anyone who has ever successfully dieted, or gotten in shape, knows that things tend to get more and more

uncomfortable before they get better. Unfortunately, because of these difficulties, as with training, many don't persevere. Perseverance is much more vital with training than with weight loss or exercise—for one reason because progress is more difficult to see. And I am here to tell you that training works. If you persevere, you will come to know Something much greater and more wonderful than you ever imagined.

I will end with a quotation from Dogen that I have always found encouraging, even, or especially, when things were very dark. It always seems to help me to look up:

The Way to Buddhahood is easy. They who do not perpetrate evil, they who do not try to grasp at life and death but work for the good of all living things with utter compassion, giving respect to those older, and loving understanding to those younger, than themselves, they who do not reject, search for, think on or worry about anything have the name of Buddha: you must look for nothing more.*

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*Roshi PTNH Jiyu-Kennett, *Zen Is Eternal Life*, 4th Edition, Shasta Abbey Press, 1999, p. 197