

Beyond Comfort

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As humans, we tend to avoid situations that scare us or in which we feel uncomfortable or ill-at-ease, where we are awkward or unsure of ourselves. So we repress, suppress and sweep under the rug until the world, our everyday lives, becomes an unknown, scary place. We secure the windows and doors so that nothing can reach us that calls attention to our unease, our uncertainty, our insecurity. Perhaps we go so far, and our area of comfort becomes so reduced, that nothing can reach us at all, nor can we reach anything.

In the *Scripture of Avalokiteshwara* we recite, “If bound in chains, in prison, let a man just think on Kanzeon’s great holy power, at once the shackles will then set him free.” When we are bound by our uncertainty and fear, the shackles themselves can set us free. Calling on Kanzeon, moving from compassion, allows us to see the shackles for what they are—they are not us, they belong to fear and we can move to freedom even in the midst of fear.

When we gradually make living in this way—the way of comfort—a habit, things can feel unpleasant to us in the anticipation, in the doing, in the result and in the end. This is the consequence of a complaining and judgmental mind. Past, present, and future, we live from resentment and fear. What does this do to us? Can we take something that is unpleasant, or that we don’t feel we do well, or that tweaks all of our insecurities and ideas of who we are, and do it with an open heart? Can we do it without complaining inside? Can we see it as just the next thing?

We don’t need to let our mind paint the past, present and future with discontent because we are afraid to give a public talk, or because we believe we cannot function without 8 hrs. of sleep, or because even the thought of conflict makes us anxious or protective. Right now as you are doing what is in front of you: how is it? Separate from your ideas, your personality, your sense of justice: how is it, *actually*? Can we step back? Can we have the courage to approach it just not knowing?

If we approach our lives grasping after comfort—emotional, physical, spiritual—perhaps we approach our spiritual practice in the same way. We want it to feel good, we want signs of progress, of success. We are demanding. So when distressing emotions or confusion arise, or we are feeling uncomfortable because we don’t experience what we believe we should experience when we sit on the cushion, we begin to doubt our practice. Wouldn’t I be more comfortable reading a book, or taking a walk? Perhaps we judge what we become aware of when we meditate as being ugly, as we judge ourselves as being ugly. Can we find the courage to look, to truly look without judging?

If we can't feel good, then we don't want to feel anything at all. We anesthetize ourselves with food or music or television because we don't want to see; we just want to be comfortable. This may work briefly, but it is not long lasting.

Unfortunately, there are drawbacks to living the comfortable life:

1. It requires a lot of "maintenance". We are either on the alert to make sure that nothing or no one threatens our comfort, or we are scrambling to regain that comfortable feeling.
2. When we put our comfort first, we are putting "me, me, me," first. This is a very lonely place to be.
3. If comfort is essential to us, we will never explore the possibilities—spiritually or mentally. We cling to our habitual ways of doing and, more importantly, of thinking. Our comfort space becomes very tiny, what we can accept becomes very tiny. Without stepping forward when we are afraid, we are always moving backwards. (To paraphrase Bob Dylan, "If we are not busy being born, we are busy dying.")

Ironically, in guarding our peace of mind, we lose all sense of peace. In guarding our territory, the land where we feel a sense of confidence and comfort recedes, becoming more and more confining. There is a continual tension and anxiety that we may be required to extend ourselves past what is comfortable for us to do and a growing doubt and reluctance to move beyond comfort.

Ironic, too, that the more we are willing to extend ourselves into that which we do not know, into that which we fear, the more we become comfortable with the threatening, the unknown—our nightmare that seen with other eyes, just is. We become comfortable with our discomfort.

How can we be bodhisattvas, how can we ask what it is good to do, when our eyes, mind and heart are ever-alert to protecting our comfort?

Fear and doubt separate us from others and from the ground of our being. We cannot truly be separate from Buddha Nature, yet the more we grasp after comfort, the more we will *feel* separate. When we meditate, we begin to know the fear and doubt at the root of our desire for comfort, and to see that fear exists because we do not understand that this separate self we are protecting is an illusion.

Understand the desire for comfort, have patience with the fear, respect it, but do not let it lead. Acknowledge it, bow to it, and then do what it is good to do. This is the "going on, going on, always going on beyond, always becoming Buddha."