

Ralph Steele
Week Two, *Mindfulness of the Body*
February 13, 2017
“Dealing with Discomfort”



[*Chants.*] Hello. For this talk series on mindfulness of the body I will be discussing discomfort in meditation and our daily life. Again, we need to begin with that the Buddha was teaching us how to become our own physician. In regards to discomfort, we are now going from being physicians to being our own surgeons. You want to have the same kind of attitude as if we were preparing for surgery. It is serious business.

When you are preparing, you want to have a joyful intention, whatever makes you feel good. The image of drinking the nectar from the devas [god-like beings] may work for you in calming your nervous system; you are dancing with the mind body and the physical body in this process. In modern-day terminology, we call it the mind body or the subtle body. In Buddhist psychology we call it the mind body. The main emphasis is to get in a good mood. Some surgeons play music when they are performing surgery. They play anything from the Rolling Stones and Janis Joplin to Chopin and Bach, whatever it is that may turn them on.

The *Mangala Sutta*, translates to the highest blessing: [*begins chant*] "Thus have I heard that the blessed one was staying as sovereignty—" At this point you could add the name of any town; it could be New York City or Santa Fe. "Residing in Jeta's grove," that could be Central Park. Here is where it gets really good: "Then in the dark of the night a radiant deva illuminated all of Jeta's grove. She bowed down low before the Blessed One, then standing to one side, she said devas are concerned for happiness and ever long for peace, what then is the highest blessing? The same is true for human kind, what then is the highest blessing?" The teachings are in there, you can listen to them and take them literally or translate. There's always more than one way to look at the teachings.

There's the inner teachings: [*begins chant*] "avoiding those of foolish ways, associating with the wise." When you're going into meditation you don't want to go into the areas that are uncomfortable mentally or physically. Associating with the wise, you want to go into the areas that make you feel good. This is very serious work you're getting ready to do. "Honoring those worthy of honor, these are the highest blessings, living in places of

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suitable kinds." Now living could be replaced with practicing. "With the fruits of past good deeds," you want to have some reflection on all the very good insight you have received in all your meditation practices. "Guided by the rightful way these are the highest blessings. Patience and willingness to accept one's faults"—you don't want to bring a depressed or angry attitude into your practice. You wouldn't want a surgeon walking into the operation room with an unhealthy attitude. No, you just don't want that.

[*Begins chant*] "Seeing venerated seekers of the truth and sharing often the words of dharma, these are the highest blessings." Yes the teachings are in these chants, which are chanted twice a day at monasteries. Currently, you're listening to Ralph Steele and he likes to sing. It's just in my bones. It's in my culture. Also, in Burma and Thailand it's deep in their culture.

I was just in Thailand. Because I am a rookie monk I got the living quarters that are approximately 50 yards from the washroom, on a slope where there's a low stream. The living quarters are called *cuti*, and during the summer, the stream is two or three feet deep and runs right below my *cuti*. There are many mosquitoes. Imagine you are there and you've been practicing all day. It's been one of those days where all kinds of mental events are occurring. In this particular monastery in southern Thailand there are 75 to 100 monks and nuns, and one nun and one monk get on the microphone.

They start chanting and singing and it sounds so good. The mosquitoes and the pain in your body fall away. After they get through, you're ready to practice for two, three, four, five hours.

Everything is just so good. Just think about it. There's no tradition where there's no good gospel or good singing. It's part of the practice. However, I'm not discounting the Vipassana lineage where there isn't a lot of chanting that goes on.

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Like I said, you can utilize any tools to perform surgery. Once you know your body you can know where the discomfort is. You want to begin where the discomfort is because it is very subtle at that point. You want to bring that nice, sweet juice that you already have.

Now here's a few steps that I want to give you. I will call it the “lion's view.” A lion because you already have courage and stamina. That lion is perched up on this ledge. Walking through the woods way below is a female lion. Meaning, if the pain or discomfort is in the front of the body, go to the back of the body. If it's in the top of the body, go to the bottom of the body. The purpose is to create some space. You want to cultivate some space and be OK with taking your time.

The next level is the lion's breath. You want to utilize a sweet, gentle voice with your intent. Sweet, gentle voice and breath to observe how the breath is moving. How the breath flows through the system is very important. I used to experience so much discomfort. I think of it as blowing on a flame. You want to be very gentle with the breath.

The next level we want to move to is the lion's massage. Taking that breath and moving it through the system, letting it flow, until you feel that you are washing your internal system with the breath. This happens before the feeling of discomfort peaks. With this process, you're already beginning to work in that area and in your entire system.

The next level is the lion's approach. Here, the surgeon has already opened the body and is beginning to move in ever so gently. That lion is coming off his perch and moving down to that female lion. You want to be gentle with it. You want to have a playful attitude. You want to have preparation; you may want to back off.

Backing off is important. As you begin to approach, you want to have an attitude of inspecting the discomfort. In this inspection, you want to let go of gravity. Even if you were upside down or sideways, it wouldn't matter, because you want to look at this

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discomfort from every perspective imaginable. If you find a soft spot, go into it. Experiment with what may happen. That female lion may growl at you. It may become discomfoting, and that is the time to back off, be careful, and be joyful—that’s an important aspect of backing off.

There was a time when I was practicing, during my rains retreat, when my concentration was high from several months of practice. It was just after midnight, and it was raining very hard in Burma—there are serious rains in the Asian countries, buckets. I told myself I would not move in the face of pain. I said “Ralph, I'm not going to move.”

I sat there, and the pain became hot. It got hotter until it became a stabbing pain, but my concentration and tranquility allowed me to be at ease and stay with it. Then sudden tears began to move out of my eyes, one eye, then both eyes, until the tears began to flow like a waterfall.

Later, I saw light coming out of the windows, and I knew that it was dawn. I sat there practicing for about three hours or so. I got up and I said to myself, “I feel good, I whooped the pain, and I didn't move.”

After I disrobed I came back to the States and my orthopedic surgeon said, "Ralph, your S1 [spine segment] is near your S5, your L5 [lumbar vertebrae] is gone, and the body has absorbed S1. We can either fuse your L5 together, or you can build the front of the body up by doing your yoga and nutrition." I decided not to have surgery.

It's important to be playful and back off discomfort. You don't want to end up like Ralph did, because that's permanent damage. Through the process of constantly re-approaching and backing off, you are simultaneously cultivating concentration as well as mindfulness. Concentration is another way of saying tranquility, of falling into the bliss pool, while constantly remembering that you're in the operating room.

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When utilizing discrimination, there are mental obstacles that may arise. The story line may tell you “I can't do this.” If fear or images from the past where you may have hurt yourself arise, back off. The tranquility helps one to be discriminative in that cognitive process. You can dance with it instead of having a reaction to it.

If we have a physical body, there's going to be discomfort. Discomfort comes with the body like our skin. Our attitude and our approach in our daily life can help us see what is disturbing at any point.

Learn how to cleanse the body through nutrition, exercise, proper rest, general reflecting, reflection with an elder, and reflection with a professional to gain better knowledge about mental and physical disagreements. Keep the mind body, or subtle body, full of breath and energy as you're walking around. Having that sensation as you're walking around in the world will leave you more at ease with what's going on. Any situation that arises, mental or psychological, can be met with a few breaths and a wise decision. This is so important as we perform surgery on ourselves.

Finally, you want to enjoy your dance. Enjoy your dance. To enjoy the dance, you need to find the rhythm, and enjoy it.