

Kimberly Brown

*In It Together: Kindness through Crisis*

Part 3: “Curious about Boredom? Good”

May 15, 2021



Welcome back to the third week of our Dharma Talk series, "In It Together: Kindness through Crisis." Today our topic is boredom.

Boredom fascinates me. Whenever I feel bored, I wonder, why is this such an unpleasant experience? I mean, I'm not in pain or being tormented or forced to do something I don't like. I'm simply feeling disinterested in what is happening in the moment. The past year, I heard so many people struggling with boredom, feeling very blah about each day seeming the same and nothing new happening. My own life during the pandemic felt like a monotonous routine. Wake up, make coffee in the kitchen, go back to the bedroom to work, eat lunch in the kitchen, return to the bedroom to work, eat dinner in the kitchen, take a walk around the local park, watch a movie in the living room, go back to the bedroom to sleep. Each day was very predictable, and I felt so much boredom. I wanted something to change, to break the monotony, to add some excitement or anticipation to my experience.

Boredom is one of the three poisons. In Buddhism these are mind states that cause suffering. There's hatred and aversion, not wanting something; then greed and desire, really wanting something; and then there's boredom and ignorance, a feeling of sameness flatness of disinterest not looking at, ignoring.

And then I remembered the movie *Groundhog Day*; you've probably seen it. It's one of my favorites. Bill Murray plays a man visiting Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania. He's a New Yorker and he goes there for the annual Groundhog Day holiday. He reluctantly goes there for business. He can't wait to get out of that town, to stay overnight at a local hotel and return to New York the next day, but when he wakes up in the next day, it's Groundhog Day again—and it's exactly the same as yesterday. The radio DJ says the same thing, someone spills their coffee at the same time, the parade and festival are exactly the same. This continues to happen day after day, and he realizes he's stuck in the same time and space.

At first, he hates it and tries everything to make it end—attempting to destroy himself in car crashes and suicides, trying to kill the groundhog and ruin the festival, treating everyone he encounters with meanness, contempt, and cruelty, but none of it works. Then he figures as long as he's stuck in the same day, he'll exploit it. He manipulates the people around him, seduces the woman he loves, and takes whatever he wants—expensive clothing, jewelry, wine—knowing he'll never get caught. After that, he's so bored, nothing interests him. He drinks, does drugs, stays in bed all day, pays no attention to what's happening, and feels that nothing he does matters because tomorrow he'll wake up and it will be the same day all over again.

But finally, after a long, long time—perhaps centuries—he burns through his hatred, greed, and especially his boredom. Because the boredom prevents him from seeing what's going on, the life around him, He stops trying to change events and instead starts to pay attention in each present moment. Each morning he wakes up and responds to that moment—not to “oh no this day is

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going to start over again”—but to what and who is happening right there. He begins to respond with unthinking compassion and wisdom to whatever and whoever he encounters, and when he does this, he’s free from the poisons from suffering from the ignorance of separation—and he’s happy.

So I decided to take some inspiration from Bill Murray and start to look a little closer at what’s really happening in my small and limited space. Even though it might seem like it’s the same thing every day, as I looked more closely, when I really paid attention I could see that each moment is different and new. The way the sunlight reflects off the cherry tree outside the front window and its blossoms as they opened and died; I noticed my husband and his request for homemade chocolate chip cookies that day, and heard the sound of an ambulance on its way to the hospital; I let myself feel the the sadness in my heart that would come and go; and the happiness that would arise in my mind and that comes and goes too.

So the antidote for the poison of boredom is simply to pay closer attention. There is always something happening, no matter how subtle. One of the truths of life and phenomenon is that everything is always changes. Every moment is impermanent. Nothing just stays the same, it’s all arising and coming together and falling apart. If I pay attention, I can see that even the light in my bedroom moves and changes throughout the day and it’s never exactly the same, and each moment it’s a little bit different.

Being mindfulness allows us to notice, to pay attention. The word mindfulness is used so often, but mindfulness meditation is paying attention to what’s happening as it arises—instead of focusing our attention on one object like the breath, we pay attention to what’s happening as it happens. We pay attention to many objects as they change and we notice them. This practice—like all meditation practice—requires us to be kind to ourselves, but it might be hard at first. We haven’t been trained or accustomed to noticing small and subtle changes—we’re very used to excitement and things grabbing our attention. So it takes a bit of patience and practice to relearn the art of paying attention. And we need to remember to come back. The Pali word for mindfulness is *sati*, in Sanskrit it’s *smriti*, and its meaning is “to re-collect, to gather, to come back.” What are we coming back to? Here and now.

If you’re feeling stuck or restless or bored, feeling like you’ve seen it all before, you can try this simple mindfulness exercise to help you connect with and appreciate this ever-changing nature of each moment.

Take your time to find a quiet and comfortable spot where you can sit. Stop talking and don’t use your devices. You don’t have to watch me, you can put your computer aside and listen to my voice.

Gently bring your attention to your feet, your seat, your shoulder blades, the back of your head. Just giving yourself permission to experience this very moment. Now I’d like you to rest your

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attention to the rise and fall of your belly as you inhale and exhale. Just lightly placing your awareness on your abdomen, being with each breath as your belly expands and contracts. Resist the urge to get up or to look around. Softly keep your attention on your breathing, gently feeling the rise and fall of your breathing.

Now carefully opening your attention from just your breath to other sensations that are arising. Resting in sound that might be entering your ears, the air on your skin, light entering your eyes, taste in your mouth. Letting these sensations come and go without grabbing them.

If you find you're getting caught in a plan or memory or idea, that's okay. Breath out quietly and slowly, and reanchor your attention to your belly, and when you're ready, start again—carefully opening your attention from just your breath to other sensations. You might feel an itch or tension, or see an image in your mind, or feel air entering your nostrils, hear the neighbors, see sunlight or shadows. Try not to work too hard. Letting yourself rest in what's arising.

As we conclude this meditation, take a moment to appreciate your time and your good heart, say “thank you” to yourself. I encourage you to practice this meditation whenever you have time—you can do it almost anywhere—when you're waiting online or sitting outside or when you're eating lunch. And the next time you're feeling bored, stop and pay attention to what's arising—inside and outside.

Next week, we'll discuss what to do when you just feel fed up and overwhelmed, with the world, with yourself, with the pandemic and all its restrictions. We'll discuss how we can skillfully rebalance our minds and our actions with kindness. Thank you for today's practice. I rejoice in your good hearts and wisdom.