

Responding to the Unpleasant with Kindness

When we practice with the longer breath or a wider scope of sounds we may notice we have pain or tension in the body which are hard to bear these, or we can hear sounds we don't want to be. Habitually we resist the unpleasant—by shrinking away, or fighting against them. Yet this isn't the most easeful way of relating. Can we come towards them with kindness and care?

Something we do in meditation is open the range of what we attend to. This is going against the stream of human habits and tendencies. Our way of practising this builds on the practice of being present in the body or present with sounds, while remaining sensitive to possibility.

Possibility, because there is always a way of relating happening, and although the way of relating significantly shapes experience it is not fixed. There is dukkha (stress, unsatisfactoriness) in the way we habitually relate to the unpleasant. Yet we can adjust how we meet less pleasant phenomena to bring a more wholesome and caring attitude to what instinctively feels unwanted.

Shrinking or fighting is stress—by not following the urge to get small, tight, or pushy, and rather expand, soften, and allow to be, we support a new way of relating: one of kindness and care. We can encourage this by opening to and around pain in the body sense or less pleasant sounds in the environment.

Here are some ways we can open kindness and reduce dukkha as a practice:

- Open to something mildly unpleasant in experience; a tickle, itch, tension, or slightly annoying sound. Notice any shrinking or fighting—any subtle or strong “I don't want this!” Let it be—we increase our responsive range by allowing for the mildly unpleasant.
- Invite any tightness in the body or awareness to relax a bit. Inviting is not forcing it to: whatever remains can be allowed to be here. Use the out breath here to ease & relax.
- Can I breath with this? Can breath flow around it, or into or out of it? If we allow the breath to be conceived as a bodily energy, we have a larger playground of possibilities.
- Stretch awareness wide: a more spread awareness is more pleasant, and can allow for anything unpleasant to arise or pass with more space (less dukkha) and more intimacy.
- We can tune into the pleasant breath, whole body awareness, or an enjoyable wide scope of sounds and support samādhi—well-being. This releases resistance in body-heart-mind, allowing a wider range of phenomena to be met well.
- If any unpleasantness we noticed changes: if it softens; fades; or even disappears—consider how this implies the way something appears depends on the way of relating.

We move from mild to stronger phenomena, then to all things. Working with this first in the body or sound sense we develop our skill with the easier sense doors. Eventually we can open to phenomena sensed as more personal (like thoughts and emotions); or seemingly more permanent and independent (like sights); or feel more subtle (like tastes or smells).