

### 3. Becoming Comfortable with Saying No

Editor's Note: *A sense of a fixed and permanent self is often intricately intertwined with doing, and specifically with what one is actually doing, one's activities. As practice proceeds and the need to constantly congeal around such a sense of self begins to ease, there often arises a willingness to say no to the pull of activities, and even a counter-pull toward stillness, creating a new relationship to time and opening up unfamiliar mental space. This can be disorienting and can produce a good deal of anxiety. As one of Marcy's practitioners put it: "Old fears come up, like I'm not relevant, and I feel confused. How am I going to manage? It's just weird, I actually do better in some ways when I'm busier. There's this push and pull between joy and fear." The following is adapted from Marcy's real-time teaching offered to this practitioner.*

In my experience, a change in perspective can help a lot with the push and pull between joy and fear, just shifting our view a little bit to seeing what there is in these experiences that can be acknowledged as productive and meaningful. It's easier to get caught by what's frightening and uncomfortable because these are strong reactions and they grab our attention. It helps to intentionally look for what's quieter but actually more true.

These fear reactions are so powerful, and they grab our attention; saying no is a courageous action for people who are used to being busy and in the middle of things like being needed, for example, as a volunteer or to support friends. For people like us, the courageous action is to say no and step back, because that's where you see all your stuff come up.

These kinds of framings can be especially helpful when you see "Oh now, I'm uncomfortable, and now I'm beset by worry about whether I did the wrong thing, and now I'm obsessed about whether I should call someone, and there's discomfort about my own relevance, and I'm questioning what does this mean?" But you can also look at these things as validation, with compassion, like, "Oh, no wonder, of course I am always trying to stay busy because look how difficult this is to sit with, look how uncomfortable this is," and treat that experience with love.

The tricky thing right here is to notice that it's a minefield for second arrows [*ed. self-referential judgements*], to have the fear and insecurity and self-doubt come up, and then to shame ourselves about it, which causes even more suffering. It all, ironically, makes the ego stronger. The ego doesn't care whether it's fun or it's not fun, it's just looking for strength, it's just as happy with making you miserable, to build up that obsessiveness so that you're unable to be quiet.

It can be really helpful to try on that perspective of compassion and validation, such as, "There is a lot of difficult material here, and when I've been running so hard and staying so busy, I've been able to avoid that. No wonder I ran so hard, this is hard. This is scary and uncomfortable." And also, "Good job, look how much stronger I am now, look how much more resilience and equanimity I have now; I do have the capacity to feel a little bit more uncomfortable and I'm okay."

We can acclimate to that pretty quickly if we don't fill it in with more busyness. If you can sit with the discomfort, you can metabolize it, and pretty quickly those kinds of experiences won't be uncomfortable. It's just that if we keep going back to the coping skill all the time of "Oh, I'm just going to do this one more thing, I'm just going to do that one more thing," then we never get used to sitting with the discomfort and it's always there.

But it's not always easy. There is that habit energy that wants to get in the mix. I know that struggle really well. For me, the most helpful thing has been instead of looking at it like "I must be doing something wrong," flip that to "obviously I'm doing something right, because I'm really uncomfortable, so I'm growing, and that's doing a good job." Always give yourself a "good job" when you make space and then you're uncomfortable. Or you say, "Yeah, I want to do this half day intensive retreat," and then you have all this doubt. Tell yourself, "Good job. I just said yes to something in my heart and I was besieged by discomfort. Obviously. I'm doing something right."

It can also be helpful to remind ourselves, "Oh, yeah, if something really has to happen, I wouldn't have to think about it." If you got a phone call and there was an emergency involving someone in your family, obviously you would take care of that. But otherwise, the dishes can wait.

As far as formal sitting practice goes, the majority of my sitting is not peaceful and it's critical for me, to be able to practice, to be okay with that, too, to always keep in mind that I'm not sitting here to have a good experience of sitting. I need to always remember that I can just feel good about the fact that I'm sitting and I'm practicing, trusting that this is enough.

Even when you have times when there's a lot of drama and scatteredness, and you interact with people that get your nervous system feeling unsafe, those are all natural things. There's nothing wrong with you. In fact, there are things right with you when you notice that, and then allow the sitting to be a refuge, a time when you're just going to sit there and that's all. And you may notice that it's harder to concentrate. You may notice, even, that a part of you is actually indulging in the knowledge that you're distracted, and you don't really want to come back. But it's okay, when you can, you come back, and allow yourself to have compassion for that.

For me, there's a part of the compassion that has a sadness component to it. When we feel compassion, it's because we know that something's hard, that "I'm tired, this is hard," and then we can hear the value in that practice. But it's important to recognize that it's subtle because it's not a "thinking about," it's not a "now I'm going to blah, blah blah, have compassion towards myself." It's an attitude of softness, and then doing the best you can to come back to your focus range. It's not a "thinking about compassion," it's just a perspective.

It's pretty tricky, it's pretty tricky. We can almost always have more equanimity, but it's not an easy balance. I need to pay attention, too, but not with a whip. How do we soften without just sliding into total indulgence? That's not skillful either,

