

Reading – <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/20/magazine/letter-of-recommendation-cold-showers.html>

THE BLESSING OF A COLD SHOWER

A Sermon Preached by Pamela Patton

All Souls New York City

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In January of 2018, my 18 year old son Vince and I spent a week in the surreal city of Dubai with my cousin and his wife. They had been living there for a few years, and we wanted to catch them before they moved back to the US. I asked my cousin about a month before our departure to send me a list of recommended activities we could look into. I received a neatly organized list with categories such as Downtown (the tallest building in the world, Burj Khalifa), Old Dubai (art galleries in the Al Fahidi neighborhood), Desert (a camel farm), and Miscellaneous.

I forwarded the email to Vince without reading it thoroughly because I wanted him to choose our activities. I knew I'd enjoy whatever he wanted to do.

Vince looked into my cousin's recommendations. His number one—by far—favorite activity was from the miscellaneous category: Skydive Dubai. I guess I should have reviewed the email a little more carefully before forwarding it to him. Not only was Vince insistent that he wanted to skydive more than anything else, but he had done his research and concluded that Skydive Dubai was an excellent operation with a perfect safety record.

What parent would permit their child to jump out of a plane at 1500 feet and fall through the sky at 120 miles per hour? That was not happening.

Disliking was shrieking. When I feel the degree of resistance that causes Disliking to shriek, it's a prompt to be curious about what's happening in my mind.

I know from my spiritual practice that our suffering is directly proportional to how much we resist physical and emotional challenges. The intensity of our suffering can be understood by this equation: $\text{pain} \times \text{resistance} = \text{suffering}$. Pain is defined as sensations that are hurting in the body or experiences that provoke difficult emotions like jealousy, anger and sadness. Resistance is the disliking—all the different ways we say, “I don’t want this to be happening to me.”

Jon Kabat-Zinn, scientist, writer, and meditation teacher, popularized the practice of mindfulness to address pain. He defines mindfulness as “awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally in the service of self-understanding and wisdom.” Mindfulness enables us to train our minds to manage our automatic Liking and Disliking so that they don’t dictate our experience.

Kabat-Zinn describes physical pain as having three parts: 1) sensory – the feeling in the body and the nervous systems’ interpretation of it, 2) affective – emotions we have in response to the pain, and 3) cognitive – how we think about the pain and judge its effects. He teaches that the affective and cognitive contributions to the pain can be lessened by changing our relationship to the pain. We suffer less if we open to the pain and pay attention to it instead of doing everything we can to make it go away. Being curious about it enables us to distinguish between the pain and the suffering, and then we can change the experience.

A research study that illustrates this used the cold pressor test in which a tourniquet is wrapped around the subjects’ biceps and their arms are submerged in ice water. Because circulation is cut off, their arms get extremely cold. To deal with the pain, half the subjects were instructed to use distraction—trying to think about other things. The other half were taught how to use mindfulness strategies of

paying attention to the sensations of pain and being with them as nonjudgmentally as possible, thus watching their emotional and cognitive resistance to the disliking. The subjects who used distraction strategies were better able to cope for the first few minutes, but this approach proved unsustainable—once the distraction broke down, “they had nothing.” The subjects who used mindfulness were able to keep their arms in the water much longer.

Cold showers are a type of mindfulness training I’ll call “discomfort training.” By choosing to undertake an experience that we’re habitually or reflexively averse to, we’re training our minds to see how Disliking has a hold on us. As Dolnick writes in this morning’s reading, “Cold showers have freed me from the prison of unexamined preference.” He continues:

“In those moments before you step into the cold stream,
Disliking will invariably begin to shriek. *Absolutely not!* ...

And if you can summon the strength to say, “Thank you, that’s very interesting,” and then proceed to step into the water anyway, you will discover something. The cold water will...not feel great. But if you can bear it for a few seconds, unclenching your muscles, relaxing your grimace, you will notice, as you begin to soap up, that Disliking has fallen asleep...Standing fully under a stream of cold water has, in less than a minute, been downgraded from an all-hands emergency to a shrug.

Once you’ve seen this fact clearly — that Liking and Disliking are voluble fakers — the whole world begins to bloom with possibility.”

Buddhist psychology understands the mind to have a reflexive reaction of liking, disliking, or neutral to every sensory experience. Being curious about these reactions and giving them some space can free us. We tend to avoid discomfort, to reduce irritations in our lives as much as possible. So we spend a lot of time trying to make things just right and creating what's erroneously referred to as our comfort zone. But what happens when we stay in our comfort zone? *It shrinks*. We become less and less tolerant of difficulties. We have to be constantly vigilant to uphold the delusion that we can stay in the comfort zone, and we pay the price with fear and anxiety—we end up isolating ourselves. Mindfulness training with discomfort helps us build our tolerance for difficulties and bring our awareness of our mind's shenanigans into the light.

When American poet Jane Hirschfield was a full time Zen student for three years, she and her fellow students followed the strict regimen of rising at 3am, splashing cold water on their faces, and quickly heading to begin their morning meditation. She refers to this time in her life in her poem, "A Cedary Fragrance:"

Even now,
decades after,
I wash my face with cold water –
Not for discipline,
nor memory,
nor the icy, awakening slap,
but to practice
choosing
to make the unwanted wanted.

In *choosing*, she is replacing her habitual reflexive resistance to the shock of the cold water with an invitation to remind herself that it is simply a sensory experience that she can respond to whatever way she wishes. In practicing this every day, she is reinforcing her awareness that she has the power to choose her attitude to the cold water on her face. She is training her mind to see disliking and liking by making the unwanted wanted.

The Tibetan word *byin-rlabs* is usually translated to the word blessing in English. In Tibetan it means to bring about, as a result of an experience, a transformation in one's mind for the better. It creates a brightening of the mind. The blessing of a cold shower enables us to know ourselves better and therefore grow into a mindset in which we suffer less from the anxiety and loneliness that results from our resistance. When we practice this by choice, we create a laboratory for ourselves to see our reactions of disliking. And by virtue of choosing the discomfort, we start with a positive inclination and give ourselves a head start on adapting to the resistance.

Discomfort training can prepare us to face the physical and emotional pain that we do *not* choose. Throughout our lives we are inevitably forced into situations that we dislike and are painful in degrees—from a neighbor's noisy party to a serious medical diagnosis. When we haven't chosen the discomfort, our disliking reifies it and makes it the enemy. This is our natural reaction—some of us are going through or have been through agonizing illness and relentless grief. Of course we resist—it's overwhelming.

We can begin working on the challenges that are forced upon us with small scale emotional and physical pain. I'll call this "tolerance training." We can see

how much attitude matters when we get a shot, for example. When we're children we put up a lot of resistance to a shot. It hurts! So we try to escape, we grimace, we scream. As adults we don't resist because we know the shot is helpful to us. We tolerate the shot and accept the sensory discomfort.

Tolerance training is about catching ourselves in a Disliking reaction to a rainy day or standing in a slow moving line or stubbing a toe. On our way to becoming grumpy or angry, we notice Disliking exerting control and we interrupt the momentum.

Catching a cold is the perfect opportunity for tolerance training. Spiritual writer and teacher Stephen Levine puts it this way, "Each time you get a cold use it as an opportunity to soften around the unpleasant and investigate how resistance turns pain into suffering, the unpleasant into the unbearable... Hear yourself mutter in complaint and self-pity. Pity arises from meeting the pain with fear... We have been conditioned to withdraw our awareness from the unpleasant. When we attempt to escape from our pain we feel a sense of helplessness." Tolerance training teaches us how to take back the power from Disliking. Discomfort training is a way in to tolerance training because it enables us to see that the shift is possible.

Because I was familiar with discomfort and tolerance training, my mega-resistance to Vince's request to skydive provoked curiosity. I quickly learned that Skydive Dubai was one of the safest places in the world to skydive. And yet that did nothing to allay my fear. This indicated to me that my fear was not justified, it was irrational. When the resistance persisted so strongly, I began to see that it was not just my worry about Vince skydiving, it was fear of doing it myself.

Here was an opportunity for some high octane discomfort training. It was going to take some fierce preparation for me to allow Vince to jump, but both of us

jumping was a whole new project. I spent the next month doing mindfulness practices to become familiar with my Disliking, my fear. I revisited the safety statistics over and over so I could work with the fear. But still I'd wake up in the middle of the night in a panic—"what am I doing? I have three teenaged children!" Instead of turning away from the fear, I'd open to it and explore it. And then I could see small signs that it was beginning to transform.

I was highly motivated. This was after all voluntary exploration of discomfort. I knew if I could work with such powerful disliking, then I could work with all sorts of aversion. So by the time I heard the instructor say "Ready to jump? 1, 2, 3!" I was elated. Not because of the thrill of stepping off the plane's ledge and into the sky, but because this was the moment of *proof* of my mind transformation.

I was fortunate to have this extraordinary opportunity for discomfort training. The preparation was relatively easy compared to my ongoing efforts to work with habits like jealousy and resentment. But the blessing of skydiving gave me the confidence to persevere.

When we manage our disliking through discomfort training and tolerance training, we prime ourselves to handle the difficulties in our lives. We feel less helpless and fearful. We give our energy to genuinely coping and transforming instead of resisting and isolating ourselves in our comfort zones. For Dolnick, the blessing of two months of cold showers "changed [his] entire disposition toward the outside world." When we take steps to reduce our own suffering, we're more patient, we're more compassionate, and this naturally flows to our friends and families, our dear animals, the strangers whom we encounter, and all beings.

Blessings. Peace be with you.