

Knowing Knowing

Dharma talk by Diana Clark

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Good evening. Welcome. Nice to see you all.

So, the other day I was driving on a road that was one lane each direction and really curvy. And the car in front of me was going really slow, like way below the speed limit. And this road, there's no chance to pass because it's so curvy, and it's narrow, there's no place for them to pull over. And I knew that was how this road was. Like, okay, I guess this is how it's going to be. We're going to be behind this car that's going so slowly.

And I noticed there's a little bit of irritation that arose, in addition to some query, like, "Oh, maybe this person is new to driving." I have a distinctive memory when I was learning to drive quite a few years ago, being with my parents, and I was driving and being on a similar kind of narrow road where there aren't opportunities for people to pass or pull over. And I was going so slowly. My mom was getting really anxious about how slow I was going, and my dad was like, "No, she can't stop. We just have to keep on going." "Dad, can't you drive faster?" It's just funny that I remember this from decades ago. Too many decades ago.

So, I had a certain amount of compassion for this driver that was in front of me just last week. But also, there was some irritation that arose. Like, "Can't we at least go the speed limit?"

And then there was this recognition, like, "Oh yeah, irritation is here and it feels like this." It feels like a little wanting to drive a little bit faster, kind of wanting to push the car in some kind of way, or maybe holding the steering wheel in not as relaxed of a way as I might otherwise. Kind of looking behind in the rearview mirror like, "Oh my gosh, there are so many cars behind me." So, just this recognition, like, "Oh yeah. Okay, some irritation is here. It's beginning to build, maybe increase."

And then for a little while, the irritation felt completely justified. And then there was this recognition, "Oh, irritation is here. It feels like this." And then there was this recognition, "Irritation is here. It feels like this. And the knowing of the irritation feels like this."

So, there's the experience, and there's the knowing of the experience. They arise together, right? There can't be an object that's known unless there's knowing. So, what's known and knowing arise together. Most often we're looking at the objects. Makes perfect sense. But we can also notice experiencing the knowing. This is a distinct experience. This is subtle, something

that we often don't notice at the beginning of our meditation practice. And I want to talk a little bit about this this evening.

But getting back to driving on this road with this really slow driver, it ended up my heart just went out to them. But for whatever reason, I'll never know why they were driving so slowly. But when there was this recognition that irritation was known, there was a sense of ease. Like, "Oh yeah, this is just what's being experienced. It doesn't have to be a problem. The experience doesn't have to be otherwise. It's just my irritation. That's all right. It doesn't have to be different. It's just irritation. Nobody died from irritation."

And then when I recognized the knowing of the irritation, there's even a little bit more spaciousness. Even a little bit more ease. Even a little bit more relaxation and a sense of okayness, and maybe even some well-being.

So what becomes possible? What becomes possible in these moments when we are noticing this experience as something that's known? And what becomes possible when we notice the knowing? What's known and knowing? Why would we even care? Why don't we just notice all the experiences out there, or just justify why it's perfectly legitimate to be irritated with a very slow driver?

Because there's a way in which we often do not recognize experiences when they're arising. We're just having an experience and we're just being irritated with a slow driver. We're just being irritated. And being irritated is uncomfortable. It has this agitation to it. This, "Ugh, something needs to be different." Maybe has a subtle sense of like, "Don't they know who I am? I need to get there and they're in my way." We're not saying that in an obvious way, but there can be a subtle way in which we have this feeling.

So, it's not just irritation, fear, sadness, worry, hurt, pain. Often those are just experiences and we're lost in them. Completely lost in them, and lost in that discomfort of them. And this practice doesn't promise that discomfort will all of a sudden go away. That you'll never get stuck behind slow drivers, or that you'll never feel sad again, or that you'll never feel confusion again, or fear. That's not what this practice is promising, because the human condition has all of those.

What this practice is promising is that we can find freedom. We can find ease. We can find spaciousness and well-being in the midst of anything. This is a tall order. This practice can deliver, that we can find some ease in the midst of anything. And it's not by getting rid of all slow drivers, of course not. That's impossible. Instead, it's can we notice the experience? And can we notice the knowing of the experience? And noticing the knowing is a way in which brings more peace and ease.

So, how do we do this? There's this way in which, of course, our attention is naturally drawn to objects. Here's a cup filled with water. Here's a striker. So, we're usually looking at the objects.

And whether we like them or not. "This feels good in the hand. This is a nice striker, I like it." I feel kind of neutral about the glass of water. So, usually we're oriented toward objects. Bell, cushion, chair.

But there's a way in which there can be just a subtle relaxation, just a subtle ease. Sometimes we can hear it a little bit like the "backward step." So, away from being involved with the object or the experience—irritation, fear, sadness—and it's just more of an opening up just a little bit. It doesn't have to be a complete opening up. It's just a little bit that allows awareness to be known. The knowing to be known. It's often what happens when we stop wrestling with, or fighting, or trying to grab onto our experience, and instead there's just a little bit more opening. And then no particular effort on our part is needed. It can just be that knowing is known.

And it's not often until you hear a talk like this, or read it in a book, that you might even think that that's noteworthy. Often we just dismiss these types of moments because we're so used to looking at the objects, because the objects are going to be sources of lasting happiness or sources of lasting irritation or whatever it might be. But this way of just opening up, we don't have to abandon the object. We don't have to turn around or anything like this. It's more just a relaxing a little bit. It's just more of a stepping back and opening up.

Sometimes when we're really tangled up with an experience, we really don't want it to be there, or we really want it to stay. There's almost a way in which we can collapse around the experience. And then in particular, if it's an uncomfortable one, something like pain in the knee, then our whole world, our whole experience becomes pain in the knee. We kind of collapse around it. And I'm pointing to a certain way in which we can relax a little bit and open up. Sometimes we use this language to zoom in and to zoom out. That could be another way in which to talk about this movement.

And then when we do this, we'll notice that that knowing itself has qualities. It can be really broad and spacious. The sense of knowing, there can be a sense of things that are known arising within this spaciousness of knowing. Or maybe it's more an experience of, "Oh, knowing is knowing this, and then knowing is knowing that, and then knowing is knowing that." These are different experiences, but it's still both knowing, as opposed to the object. There's a way that it can feel like experiences are just flowing through, like there's just knowing and things are just flowing through, passing by in some kind of way.

So, I'm talking about maybe just relaxing, just opening up a little bit. And something that can help with this relaxing and opening up is part of this teaching by teacher Sayadaw U Tejaniya^[1]. Some of you might be familiar with this. No need to remember this name if you haven't heard it. And Andrea Fella, who teaches here, she teaches a lot in the style of Sayadaw U Tejaniya, and she recommends something that I think is so helpful and so useful. She recommends sometimes

just dropping in the question, "Am I aware?" And there's just this asking of the question naturally just causes a little bit of an orientation towards knowing. "Am I aware?" It's kind of like, "Is knowing happening?" It's going to be the same question, but "Am I aware?" just to my ear sounds a little bit softer and smoother and something I'm more apt to actually use. "Is knowing happening?" That sounds a little too busy, maybe. So, we could just drop in this question: "Am I aware?"

So, awareness, it's not this special state that we're creating. It's not a meditative attainment. It's something that's happening all the time, right? There's things that are known and there's knowing and they go together. Sometimes we look at this side, sometimes we look at this side. They're just there together. And the reason why we would do that is because it helps create more spaciousness, more ease. It's not that we have to go searching for awareness. It's not that we have to create it. We have to manufacture it. Instead, just orienting a little bit differently.

Not only does it change the experience to have a little bit more spaciousness, but it also importantly shifts our thoughts, our stories, to events that are being known. As opposed to, "This is the truth and everything else is wrong." It's more like, "Oh, irritation is known, and knowing feels like this," as opposed to, "That person is a terrible driver. They shouldn't drive on this road. They should drive on other roads where there's more lanes and people can pass them," or something like this. And that becomes like a fact, right? And then we get all tangled up and agitated and all this kind of stuff.

So, this recognition of knowing, one of its powers is it kind of takes the authority out of some of our thoughts, some of the stories that we are creating about our experiences. Of course, we're creating stories about our experiences. We want them to make sense, we want them to have meaning. But we confuse the stories, the meaning-making, with truth. It's just the story that we're making about that experience. I will never know why that car drove so slowly, but I could make up stories about why and what they should do in the future, or something like that. What a difference it is to just notice, "Oh, knowing of irritation is happening." Neutral. The fact is actually a little bit pleasant because it has this spaciousness. So, there's this way that everything can be known, all the experiences. And there's a certain freedom there, there's a certain maybe openness there.

So, as I said, sometimes awareness can feel broad where experiences are arising. Maybe it can feel a little bit more narrow and be on one experience, and then the other, and then the other. It's not like one is better than the other, one experience of awareness, one experience of knowing. There's not the perfect one, the preferred one, the more spiritual one, the one that's going to lead to more freedom or anything like this. It's just what's known. Knowing knowing.

And so, we don't have to make any knowing, any experience of it, become the standard. And then, of course, the very awareness, the knowing that brings more spaciousness, brings more ease, kind of frees us from being trapped in any particular experience—it's so easy that this becomes something we want to hold because it feels more easeful. "Oh, I want to hold this knowing of knowing because it feels easeful. It feels spacious. It's not problematic." And it's available all the time. So, of course, there's this way we want to grab onto it and hold onto it because it's more comfortable. We can do this, we can hold onto it. But then, of course, we will discover that clinging leads to discomfort. It always does. It always does.

So, it can feel deeply relieving. The mind may try to reproduce it, but then there's this new obstacle that it's like, "Oh, okay, I have to make sure that I'm knowing knowing." And then we get all tangled up and try to grab onto it. And not only this—this is getting a little bit crazy here—but not only is there the knowing of the knowing, we want to create a knower that's doing the knowing of the knowing. I know for some of you you're going like, "What is she talking about?" [Laughter] It's okay. There's a way in which we want to be the one that feels safe and secure and have this ease and this spaciousness always. Of course we do.

And then when we have this experience of knowing knowing, we want to have that experience non-stop. That is, we want to create a knower, one who always is knowing knowing. There's this way in which awareness or knowing—I'm using these as synonyms—can become like an achievement. "Okay, I got to know knowing. I got to be aware of awareness." And then if that doesn't happen, then somehow we have some idea about what it means about us as meditators, or us as spiritual practitioners, or something like this. Or maybe there's a way in which we feel like we have to just try harder if we aren't able to do this. Which of course doesn't work.

Because remember I was talking about, in order to do this is a little bit of this relaxation or opening. As soon as trying harder gets involved, it's always a closing and a striving and a little bit of a pushing. It's the opposite movement. And this is part of the art of practice. Maybe even a little bit of the paradox of practice, is that we can't try in the same way that we're used to trying. We can't make effort in the way that helps in other areas of our life. Instead, this is pointing to: can there be an ease without a clinging, without a grabbing? Without the way in which we're trying to fixate something?

There's a way in which the mind wants to turn processes into things. Wants to reify them. Wants to solidify them. Wants to own them. Wants to make them solid. And this is pointing to not doing that. The mind sometimes wants to feel like, "Okay, I will be able to rest here. I'll be able to find this ease or spaciousness." But everything is changing. Everything.

So there is a way in which we can find this freedom without a fixed position when we allow things to change. They are changing. When we allow this sense of movement of things arising and passing away, without trying to solidify and reify and say, "This is what my experience means. This is what it means to be a person who knows experience."

So, can there be this freedom without a fixed position? Instead, just allow knowing to be known. Allow objects to be known. Allow the experience of being a knower to be known. And to recognize that all these moments are coming and going. And this is what it means to be a human. It can't be otherwise. Even though we're often trying to make things be otherwise to match our preferences, to help us feel more comfortable. But it can be fascinating what happens when we stop taking a position, insisting that things take a final form, but instead just meeting each moment as best we can. As best we can.

Irritation can be known. Knowing of irritation can be known. The knowing of the knowing of the irritation can be known. The sense of a self that knows can be known. It's fascinating. It's really where the freedom is, too. Experiences being known.

So, in this way, nothing needs to harden. Nothing needs to be grabbed onto. And this awareness of awareness creates the possibility of not being swept away, not being overwhelmed, not feeling like it's too much. But this does take some practice. And the meditation practice really supports this. And having heard this idea, even if some of you are scratching your head like, "What is she talking about?", having heard this idea, maybe it starts to open up a window in which you will start to notice this just happening already, but perhaps there was a dismissing of it.

So, we could say freedom is just allowing experience to remain fluid. It already is. But there's a way in which we want to solidify it. Nothing needs to be reified into *me* or *mine*, *my* irritation. Just allowing things to flow through. In this way, practice is actually very simple. Noticing what's happening, noticing what's known, and noticing the experience of being a knower, and not making a fixed thing out of any of that. Just noticing. I think I'll stop there and open it up to some comments and questions. Thank you.

Q&A

Speaker: How does breathing meditation fit in with this?

Diana Clark: The question was how does breathing meditation fit into this? Yeah, this is a perfectly legitimate question. Like, "Wait, Diana, you're talking about this, and..."

So, breathing meditation, actually any type of meditation in which we have an anchor, is a way... you know, like if we say the breath is the anchor and we bring attention there, the mind wanders, does whatever it does, past, future, all this kind of stuff. And then we come back to

the breath, and then we come back to the breath, we come back to the breath. So, what happens when we come back to the anchor, is that it's disrupting the momentum of all the thinking and the story making and the planning and the fantasizing and all that kind of stuff, because when we're lost in thoughts, you can't notice knowing.

So, in here I often am practicing and teaching using the breath as an anchor. It could be any anchor. It could be sound. It could be body sensations, something like that. It's more to interrupt the being lost in thoughts so that then we have half a chance of noticing knowing. Is that helpful?

Speaker: Yeah.

Speaker: So, there's multiple aspects... like, can awareness have aspects of Wings of Awakening^[2] versus hindrances^[3]? Like, do these... or is awareness just awareness?

Diana Clark: Yeah. So, there's the objects of awareness, and there's awareness. And I would say... how does it fit into either of those models? What did you say? Wings of Awakening and hindrances.

Hindrances are things that would hinder us from seeing this, I would say. Just in the same way that I recognize there's irritation, you could recognize "here's sloth and torpor," "here's restlessness." So, you could know the knowing of restlessness. But that's just a different object.

Wings of Awakening, for those of you who don't know, it's a list of lists of all kinds of stuff that supports liberation, awakening. And included in there is mindfulness. That's in the list a couple of times, actually. And maybe we would say this is a type of mindfulness: to notice noticing, to know knowing. Yeah, great. Thank you.

Okay, so maybe we'll end there. I wish you all a wonderful rest of the evening, and safe travels home. Thank you.

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1. **Sayadaw U Tejaniya:** A Theravadan Buddhist monk and meditation teacher from Myanmar whose teachings focus on awareness and understanding. [↵](#)
 2. **Wings of Awakening:** (Bodhipakkhiyādhammā) Thirty-seven qualities or principles in Buddhism that are conducive to awakening or enlightenment. [↵](#)
 3. **Hindrances:** (Nīvaraṇa) Five mental states that impede meditation and insight in Buddhist practice: sensory desire, ill will, sloth-and-torpor, restlessness-and-worry, and doubt. [↵](#)

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