

Frameworks for Understanding Experience

Dharma talk by Diana Clark

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Good evening. Welcome.

I don't know if this has ever happened to any of you; this has happened to me a number of times. I pick up my phone. Maybe it gives me a notification that a message I was expecting has arrived, or something similar. I pick up my phone to look at it. Just a quick check. You know, like, "Okay, I just want to see how this is." And then I stay on the phone. A certain amount of scrolling keeps on happening, and then minute after minute is passing. And then here I am on this, "Oh, I better check this and that." For some reason, I'm so interested in the World Cup these days. I never was interested in this before, but now that it's here in our neighborhood, I'm so interested in how this works, who's playing who, and how that's going.

It's not like there's this big ethical breach or terrible mistake. It's just an ordinary human moment. I mean, you all know, right? Our phones are designed to be difficult to put down. A lot of people get paid a lot of money to make sure that it's hard to put down. Which is okay. I mean, that's their job. It doesn't mean that we have to let them do their job well, though. But maybe there's something important that has happened in this moment where, in my case, I'm still on the phone checking this or that longer than I initially intended to. And that is that the mind has just been carried along without wisdom, without presence. It's just been carried along.

It seems like not a big deal. But this exact same movement that we see there with the phone, with our staying on the phone longer than we intend to, happens again and again and again. The same movement of—we could say—wisdom maybe being a little bit behind what's actually happening. It's not right there in the moment.

In this example of the phone, it maybe doesn't feel like suffering. But there is a way in which suffering can be defined as just a very subtle feeling of, "This moment's not quite right." And maybe it's just a subtle feeling that we don't even articulate so clearly, or even know so clearly. So, there's a way in which we could say the suffering moves faster than the wisdom.

We could say that part of practice is to help bring these together. So that wisdom can help understand, untangle, dissect, and pull apart, or in some way create the conditions in which the suffering doesn't arise. Again, I'm using this word suffering as just this feeling of something's not quite right, and therefore I'm going to distract myself with my phone or something like this. But also, suffering means the real terrible feeling that sometimes we can be so mean to ourselves

and we're just beating ourselves up. Saying like, "Oh, I should be doing it better. Those people over there are doing it better." And whatever it happens to be.

There's this way in which meditation practice helps us to slow things down, so that the wisdom can catch up, so to speak. It slows things down so that we can see more clearly what's actually happening. Not so that we can judge ourselves. Not so that we can try to control everything. Not so that we can pat ourselves on the back like, "Okay, yeah, I see this. I got it. I know it." But as a way for us to find more freedom. As a way for us to find more peace and more ease in our life. I think that's why all of us come to practice. Not to necessarily master some techniques or memorize some lists. It's just so our life can unfold with more ease, more peace, so we can have more freedom. In whatever way that you understand these words.

I'd like to offer a few frameworks that we might use to help us see what's happening in those moments when suffering, *dukkha*^[1], is there and wisdom isn't quite there yet in our experience.

The Three Secret Agents

One framework that I'll introduce helps us to recognize what has taken over the mind. If wisdom isn't there, what is there? In that ordinary moment of scrolling on the phone that I described earlier, we can begin to see what we might think of as secret agents. I'm saying this just to be a little bit playful—this idea of secret agents in the mind.

Otherwise known as *kleshas*^[2]. Otherwise known as unwholesome qualities. Otherwise known as defilements. I don't like this word defilements. It makes me feel like we're dirty in some kind of way, or that there's something terrible about what is a perfectly human, perfectly natural experience that everybody has until they're completely awakened. *Kleshas*, unwholesome qualities, defilements, secret agents.

These secret agents, there's three of them. That is typically the way the Buddhist framework offers them, and it can be helpful to narrow things down to these three. One is often what we use this word for: greed. The second is aversion, and the third is delusion.

Whenever wisdom is not present, one of these three things is present: greed, aversion, delusion. They move quickly. They're often underneath the conscious mind. They move quickly and are influencing actions, things that we say, things that we do. Or they're influencing the next bout of thoughts that we find ourselves being lost in.

We can understand greed as reaching. Reaching for stimulation: *Maybe the next thing will be more interesting*. Or this idea that maybe there's something that I need to know in the case of being on the phone. Or this sense of reaching for, *Okay, well, maybe this next thing will finally be satisfying*. Or, *Maybe this next thing will be a lasting source of happiness*. Greed is this idea of reaching. Reaching for something.

Aversion, we could say, is resisting. This is the opposite. Resisting boredom, resisting uncertainty, resisting a certain task, a certain feeling, a conversation that we need to have. The things that we can resist are endless. So, the second of these secret agents is resisting.

The third, delusion, is about the way in which we're trying to make it seem reasonable. We're trying to justify what we're doing. In this example I gave of me being on the phone, it's just this: *Yeah, it's important for me to be informed about the scores of the World Cup, or informed of what the weather is going to be tomorrow.* Often I don't really need to know what the weather's going to be until I'm actually going to leave my house, so I'll know right then. But we are justifying our behavior. Or maybe we're telling ourselves, *Yeah, this helps me relax,* with things that often don't help us relax. Or it is just, *I just need one more minute.* I just need one more minute and, you know, it turns into quite a few more minutes.

We're telling ourselves, *Oh, this is harmless. This is useful. This is necessary.* Even though we're not really seeing things clearly. We're not really connected to what's actually happening. All we're really doing is trying to justify the reaching or the resisting. Just trying to make ourselves feel better about that.

Introducing this framework or this teaching is not about blaming ourselves. This is what humans have. What I find helpful and supportive about these Buddhist teachings is that they help normalize the human experience and put language around what all of us are experiencing. With this language, with this recognition, there's a way in which we can stop blaming ourselves and start just being present for what's actually happening so that we can learn about it. Can we learn how this arises? We can start to see how quickly the mind will start to go in a certain direction, how that justification likes to slip in there.

In this way, a small, ordinary, mundane moment—being on the phone longer than one expects to—can actually create the conditions to start to see how suffering is created. It might not feel like suffering when we're on the phone, but it's the exact same mechanism. It's so much easier to look at it in something mundane than in the terrible heartbreak that we're experiencing, which so often we tip into overwhelm when we first start to look at it, such as the grief that we're experiencing or the anger that we have. There can be some real skill and wisdom into looking at some of these mundane activities. Is there a way that we can slow down the moment enough that we can understand it and see what's actually happening?

Benefits of the First Framework

One way in which this framework of the three *kleshas*, the three unwholesome qualities, the three secret agents is helpful is that it helps simplify things. Sometimes when we're in the midst of difficulty, it just feels like a black box or a morass of ickiness. Maybe we don't even have

words. We just have the sense of, "Get this away from me. I don't want it." Just a lot of resistance. Or a sense of, "Oh, I need this. I need this." A lot of reaching.

Sometimes it can be really helpful just to recognize, "Oh, yeah, resistance is here." That somehow takes this complicated mixture of bodily sensations, thoughts, movements, and actions, and simply simplifies it to resistance. It can be okay to just be that simple. Or reaching for greed. Or this way of justifying or trying to make it reasonable.

Instead of trying to figure out exactly what's happening when we're feeling overwhelmed or when it feels like too much, we can instead tune into—for some people this will be helpful, not for everybody—is there a movement of the mind? Is there this *no*, this resistance? Or an *I want more, I need more*, a reaching? Or is there this sense of a lot of justification, reasonableness?

In this way, we can move from the content: *I can't believe they said this, The next time I say that I'm going to do this, Better send an email that does that, or Maybe I should change my living situation*. Our stories can be so complicated. So instead of the story, the content about what's actually happening, we shift to the process. This movement. Resisting. Reaching. Making something reasonable. And letting the content take care of itself.

It's hard to do this initially. It takes a little bit of practice, but it turns out to be so helpful. If we don't feel like we have to fix and figure out everything, we can just simplify: resisting, reaching, trying to make it reasonable. So that's one way that using this framework of these three *kleshas* can just simplify things.

A second benefit of using this framework is it can help reduce identification. Instead of saying, "I'm just a greedy person. Look, here I am again trying to... I want this and I want that and I want this other thing, and I already have all these things in my Amazon shopping cart," whatever it might be. [Laughter] Instead of saying, "Oh, I'm such a greedy person," it can be like, "Oh, the experience of greed is here." It's clunky language, "The experience of greed is here." But wow, does it feel different. *The experience of wanting more and more and more is here. The experience of reaching is being known.*

It turns it into an experience, which it is. And it drops this whole idea of what it means about me, what it means about you, what it means about anybody as a person. It just means greed is here right now. And the mind is going to protest. It's going to say, "No, no, no, we need this thing. We have to identify ourselves with this." Don't believe it. You don't need it.

I admit this is awkward and clunky language, but if you try for yourself, you'll just feel how different it is. We can see this with our emotions like, "Oh, I'm a sad person." Instead of saying, "Yep, sadness is being experienced." The second one is true, is real, is what's actually happening. The other one is a story that we're making up. It's data to support the story. I'm not saying that it's one hundred percent inaccurate, but we don't have to create a story about

ourselves. We don't have to make it mean anything about ourselves. So, that's the second benefit of using this framework of the three *kleshas*.

A third benefit is we can start to see that these three *kleshas* point to where wisdom can be a support. We start to see that the difficulty, the uncomfortableness, is not only about the experience out there—that email that arrived with the sharp tone, for example. Or didn't answer the question that we specifically asked, but instead talked about other things, or just a message of sad news or whatever it might be.

When we start to use this framework of the three *kleshas*, then we start to see the difficulty isn't in the object, the thing over there. This email, for example, is an experience that's being had over here. It's not inherent to the email. The email is just a bunch of words on a screen.

It's possible that one person could read the exact same email and go, "Oh, okay," and then go to the next one. Or they could read it like, "Oh, okay, I'll put that in the task list. That needs some careful attention. I'm really not present right now. I'll pay attention to that when I have more time." Instead of it arriving and reacting like, "Oh my gosh, this is terrible and I have to do something about it!" There are so many different ways in which we can react. And so, looking at the *kleshas* helps us to see, "Oh, yeah, the aversion, the desire, or the delusion is here in the mind. It's not actually in the experience, the object out there."

When we start to see that greed, aversion, or delusion are present, it highlights where there isn't wisdom. Because greed, aversion, and delusion in some kind of way are pointing to, "Oh, a lasting source of happiness will be just right over there." And it never quite comes up. There might be happiness, right? But it's not lasting in the way that we want it to be.

This framework of these three *kleshas* can also point out where wisdom has an opportunity. We can help shift the suffering, help us learn about ourselves, and help to create the conditions in which something else might happen.

How Wisdom Develops

The second framework I'd like to introduce is, well, okay, if wisdom is so helpful, then how does it develop? How do we get this wisdom thing? How does wisdom help our life unfold in a way in which there's less suffering?

We might think that meditation is about becoming calm, maybe having particular meditative experiences. I heard somebody use this phrase once that I really liked: becoming a "bliss blob." Just getting out of feeling nothing really, but just happy or something. And to be sure, meditation can support having lots of a sense of well-being. Tremendous, unimaginable amounts of well-being, absolutely. And it helps relaxation.

But this tremendous sense of well-being comes from when wisdom has a role with that. And so I would say, actually, the purpose—or I guess I'll use this word purpose—for a mindfulness practice, a meditation practice, is to help to create the conditions in which wisdom can arise.

How does that work? Here's a framework we might be able to use. Moments of mindfulness are noticing what's actually happening. There's discomfort in the knee. There's pressure against the body where it's sitting on this cushion. There are sounds. There's a thought of like, *What am I going to say next?* These are just events, right? One event after another. A bodily event, mental events. Mindfulness is meeting this and collecting data, if you want to say, in this particular framework. I'm going to use this language: Mindfulness is just collecting data. What's actually happening right now? Very simple. Physical events, mental events. And that's it. That's all that life is. Physical events, mental events. Physical includes our five senses, and then mental events are the mind.

This framework from Sayadaw U Tejaniya^[3] uses this language of collecting data, and then something like knowledge organizes the data. It says, "Oh, yeah, okay, this is physical: pressure, or feeling the clothing against the body, or hearing a sound. And these other ones are mental." Thoughts, views, attitudes, and emotions have both mental and physical components. But there's this way in which knowledge can categorize them.

There's a reason why it's helpful to make a distinction between physical and mental. Physical events are what's actually happening right now. They're tangible, they're real. Whereas mental ones, the events are happening now, but so often we're lost in the content. Rehashing the past, rehearsing the future. And so they have a different quality because we're lost in them. They are happening in the present moment, but we don't know that we're in the present moment because we're lost in thought in the past or the future.

Not only are we not in the present moment, thoughts are intangible, insubstantial. Like how many thoughts have you had just since you arrived here at IMC? A lot. I'm sure you've had thoughts during the meditation. You had thoughts during this talk like, *Wait, what?* They just come and go, come and go, come and go. It's amazing how many thoughts we have. And yet some of them, we just grab and say, "Okay, no, this one's true." All the ten bazillion quadrillion other ones, I don't know about those, but this one is true. It's fascinating how we give authority to particular thoughts and ignore the rest. This is a topic for a whole other talk, but just noticing that the experience is different between physical and mental—do not underestimate how helpful this can be.

So often we're just lost in thought and disowning the body, but the body is here and now and can be a tremendous support. So mindfulness is collecting data. We're going to use this word: knowledge is categorizing the data into physical and mental.

And then we might say wisdom is starting to recognize relationships between these. Between the mental and the physical. And between physical and physical, and mental and mental. This is really all of the relationships. And starting to recognize causes and conditions. When I don't sleep very much the night before, I tend to be cranky the next day and my emails are short and maybe have a little bit more of a bite to them. If I haven't drunk enough liquids during the day and I'm dehydrated, then I don't have a lot of energy. There's all these ways in which we often don't notice how this leads to that, leads to that, leads to that. Again, in the mundane and in the complicated things. The difficulties of our life are constructed. They're created. They're not just completely out of thin air. That doesn't exist. Nothing's completely out of thin air.

Wisdom comes from data and knowledge. Mindfulness practice helps collect the data. Knowledge helps us organize it, and then wisdom allows us to start to see the relationship between them. Because if there are things that are supporting the creation of suffering, there are things that can support the un-creation of suffering. Maybe we can do the work with those conditions. Maybe we can't undo this difficulty, but we can notice, "Oh yeah, I'm going to just try sleeping more, eating better, drinking more, not reading emails when I only have a few minutes," or whatever it is for you. Whatever kind of suffering is there, it's arising because there are a lot of things supporting it.

We might not control this first moment of anger or fear or wanting or confusion. That's the first arrow^[4]. Those of you who are familiar with Buddhist teachings know this is what life often just shoots us with, and it's painful. But wisdom begins to see how what we're doing keeps the experience going. Nothing keeps going, right? We know that things arise and pass away. Impermanence. So, why things are painful for as long as they are is because there's something that's prolonging it or perpetuating it. Wisdom can start to see that, "Oh yeah, it's because there's this resistance." I'm trying to control it and make it go away, and therefore I'm entangled up in it and unknowingly prolonging it, even though I'm trying to make this uncomfortable experience go away.

Wisdom is a way of asking, *What's feeding this suffering? What's underneath it? What's making it stay here longer?* As I said, we never control what life brings us first. But wisdom points to, *Okay, things arise and pass away, and it's been here for quite some time. What's feeding this? What's fueling this?*

Wisdom starts to understand the relationship between what the mind brings and what the body brings. You might say, "Well, what's so helpful about this framework of recognizing that it goes from mindfulness, which is data, to knowledge for organizing the data, to wisdom that can start to see what's prolonging the suffering?" Hint: it's usually in the mind.

Recognizing it as at least three steps helps reduce the shame, this way in which this sense of self shows up like, "Oh, I shouldn't still be having difficulty around this. What's wrong with me? I have been meditating for so long, and I'm still having this experience."

Instead, we can just say, "Oh, it's a three-step process: awareness, knowledge, wisdom; data, organization, seeing the relationship." And when we just say it like, "Okay, it's a three-step process," maybe there's some curiosity that can be brought in instead of, "Oh, I should know better. Why is this still happening to me? I'll never be able to stop this." Curiosity can support this inquiry: *What's fueling this? What's feeding this? What's happening right now?*

Reflections on Frameworks

Frameworks are a way to simplify and depersonalize. Make it something that's not a mistake. It's not something terrible. But I also want to say they're not the point. I'm just offering them as tools or something that can be useful. Practice isn't becoming experts in categories. Practice is about freedom. How can we have less suffering? How can we have more ease? How can we have more peace?

I offer these as two frameworks that can support us approaching or being with our experience when it feels uncomfortable, when it feels like it's too much. In any moment of suffering we find ourselves in, any moment of *dukkha*, we can begin simply. We can ask, "What's being noticed? What parts can be distinguished, physical and mental?" Maybe we can ask, "Is the mind reaching, or resisting, or trying to make something be reasonable?" I like this alliteration of reaching, resisting, reasonable.

And then, little by little, moment by moment, the mind starts to really understand and see how suffering is constructed, created, and what's underneath it. With that, this opens the door to freedom. I can stop. I can see like, "Oh, we don't need to do this." There's something about when the mind starts to really understand something deeply, there's this way in which letting go just naturally happens. We don't have to force it to happen.

In this way, we can understand that *dukkha* can be known, it can be softened, and it can be released. It helps us find more peace, ease, and freedom.

I'll stop there. Thank you. And now I'd like to open it up to see if there's some comments or questions.

Q&A

Q: What's the best way to do contemplation? Is it like conscious thinking? Would it be like you do mindful meditation for 15 minutes and then enter into some contemplation?

Diana Clark: Can you say a little bit more about contemplation? What do you mean by that?

Q: You know, all the stuff you're talking about, right? It requires some thought. Some mental energy, right? What would be the best way to go about using that and doing that?

Diana Clark: Thank you. This is a good question. Exactly as you said, I would say meditate for a certain while, and allow there to be a certain settledness. Then one way to do some of this inquiry—like *what's fueling this?* or *what's feeding this?*—is to just drop in the question. And then don't look for it. Because looking for it becomes a whole different project. We're just creating the conditions for the answer to bubble up. Often the answers do bubble up. Sometimes they don't, and that's okay, too. It's not like we have to find the answer right there. Just the activity of asking actually changes the inner ecosystem. We're no longer lost in it; we're bringing some curiosity to it. So simply doing the asking has tremendous value, and sometimes the answer bubbles up and sometimes it doesn't.

Q: Thanks. I've been thinking about greed, resistance, and delusion, and to me at least it seems they are qualitatively different. With greed, I have some agency. I'm capable of putting down that phone and even laughing at myself wanting to scroll. With delusions, I have my mind, and I have some agency—I can recognize delusion, and that helps. But aversion feels qualitatively different to me, and I'm not sure if I'm thinking clearly about this because I feel I have no agency. At least in my definition of this resistance, which says, "I don't want this."

Diana Clark: Thank you for pointing this out. Not everybody is the same. Some people will say, "Yeah, okay, delusion's not a problem for me," or "Wait, no, that's the one where I feel like I don't have agency." Different people have different relationships to these three. The Buddhist teachings would say—and I tend to agree—that actually we don't have the agency we think we do with these three. With all three of them. Some of them may feel more familiar. Some of them we may feel we get less caught by. But what the teachings are trying to point to is that these are really underneath everything that isn't wisdom. If it's not wisdom, it has some version of one of these. So, you're saying that you feel like you don't have agency with aversion. Some other people would say, "Oh, yeah, I have plenty of agency with resistance or aversion, but not with greed."

Q: Okay, so it's personal preference.

Diana Clark: Yeah.

Q: I'm wondering about the relationship between greed and attachment.

Diana Clark: Can you define how you're using attachment?

Q: One of the things I found helpful is the concept of attachment is like something I can let go of. I can identify when I'm having urgency about something and I'm attached to it. I can slow down and go, "Oh, attachment." I can do that. With greed, I'm not sure if that's the same thing.

Diana Clark: I think I would say so. We can get really technical, and that's not really the way that I practice. It's the same. There's just this general movement of *I want this* or *I need this, this will be a lasting source of happiness*. This shows up as greed, clinging, attachment, *tanhā*^[5], *upādāna*^[6]. There are all these different words. They're all just pointing to this same movement.

Q: Sometimes it's hard to tell whether it's aversion or attachment. Like just a petty example: scrubbing the sink when I know I should be leaving for work. How do you figure out which one it is?

Diana Clark: Thank you for asking this question. They're always related. It's impossible for them not to be, I would say. It's so interesting how they are just two sides of the same coin. As I was saying earlier, some people tend to notice one side more than the other side. So maybe it's helpful to just notice that. But I think what's most helpful is to recognize that what's really underneath that, whether it's desire or aversion, is this view that things should be different or could be different. That's what's fueling however it gets experienced. And that's what's fascinating. When we get down to see that, we realize we always have this idea: *Wait, this needs to be different. I want it to be different. It shouldn't be like this*. Rarely is it so clearly articulated. It's just this subtle feeling like, "No, it should be like this, how I want it to be, or how I think it should be."

Okay. Thank you for your kind attention. Wishing you a wonderful rest of the evening and safe travels home. Thank you.

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1. **Dukkha:** A Pali word often translated as "suffering," "stress," or "unsatisfactoriness." ↩
 2. **Kilesas:** Mental states that cloud the mind and manifest in unwholesome actions; often translated as defilements or afflictions. ↩
 3. **Sayadaw U Tejaniya:** A Theravada Buddhist monk from Myanmar who teaches Vipassana meditation with an emphasis on continuous awareness. ↩
 4. **First Arrow:** A reference to the Sallatha Sutta (The Arrow), where the Buddha teaches that the first arrow represents unavoidable physical or mental pain, while the second arrow represents the optional suffering caused by our reaction (aversion or resistance) to that pain. ↩
 5. **Tanhā:** A Pali word meaning "thirst, desire, or craving." ↩
 6. **Upādāna:** A Pali word meaning "clinging, attachment, or grasping." ↩

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