

Softening the Gripping

Dharma talk by Diana Clark

June 23, 2026 at the Insight Meditation Center, Redwood City, CA

Good evening. Welcome. Welcome.

Maybe I'll start with clearing my voice. Let's see how it goes. Oh. My voice was fine just a few moments ago. So I'm confident that we'll find our way back to a normal voice soon here.

So I'd like to start tonight with this statement that sometimes we might think—I know I did—we might have this idea that mindfulness practice, Dharma practice, has this promise that it'll make life easy. It'll make life better. It'll just improve everything in life. And this promise, you know, we come to practice of course because we want things to be different. But Dharma practice, mindfulness practice, doesn't actually mean or promise that we will always feel calm. That we will always feel peaceful. That things will go our way, even though we want them to. Of course we do. It doesn't promise that pain, grief, fear, all these difficulties will go away.

But the promise of mindfulness, the promise of Dharma practice, is something different. There is a promise in there, but it's not that all of a sudden everything's going to start going our way. I would say the promise is more radical than that. The promise is that we can find freedom, that freedom can be experienced, that peace and ease can be experienced right here. Right now. Even though things aren't going the way that we want. Even though difficulty and suffering might be experienced in this moment. But, freedom, peace, and ease can be experienced anyway. Despite that.

And so, the way that I'm describing suffering is this way in which there's this protest like, "No, things need to be different, dang it." Maybe it's obvious with that little expletive on the end, or maybe it's subtle, this subtle way in which the mind and the heart are saying, "No, thank you. No, no, no, no, no, I don't want this."

And when we experience difficulties, when we experience suffering, some of you might know this Buddhist word *dukkha*^[1]. And I'm using *dukkha* and suffering as this single word. *Dukkha* is the Pali word, suffering is an English word. But, I'm using a single word to represent a giant spectrum. From just the mild feeling of, "Things aren't quite right," to things that are awful. Just unbearable, intolerable. So, when you hear me say the single word, think of this big spectrum.

So, when we experience suffering, when we experience *dukkha*, when we experience difficulty, it's not a failure. It doesn't mean that we have failed somehow, even though we might be

thinking that things should be different. Instead, it's just something else that can be known. Difficulty can be known. Difficulty can be seen, without having to add all kinds of extra business on top. And this business on top is like, "What can I do to make this go away? What can I do to make this be different?"

But instead, what Dharma practice, what mindfulness practice points to, is that when there is difficulty, when there is suffering, this is revealing to us where something is being tightly gripped. Where there's some holding on, where there's some contraction around something. It shows us where something's being resisted.

So, gripping sometimes means that we want more, but there's this gripping of like, "No, it must be different," and we want less. They both kind of have this feeling of contraction and tightness. And so, when we are experiencing difficulties, it's showing us something. We often don't want to see it, but it's showing us something. As if the hand of the heart, in some kind of way, has closed around something, closed around a wish, closed around a fear, closed around an identity. "I need to be seen a particular way. I don't want people to see this part of me." It's closed around an outcome. "I want things to be the way I want them to be. Not any other way, just the way I want them to be."

And so, the practice is not, when we notice this gripping, to try to pry the hand open. The practice is to understand. How has this hand, if you will, how is the gripping closed? What made it close? And the gripping itself feels uncomfortable. The practice is to notice, well, what made it close? Why is it closed? What is the experience of closedness? What is the experience of gripping, this experience of difficulty? And what conditions will allow it to open? What will allow it to soften? So that we no longer have the pain, the discomfort of tightly holding.

As I said, when we're experiencing difficulties, our usual question is, "How do I get rid of this? And the faster, the better." But maybe mindfulness practice and part of its transformative power, is rather than asking, "How do I get rid of this as soon as possible, as easy as possible?" it acknowledges and honors that question. And it encourages us to ask another question. How is suffering being created here? What's being held on to? What's being resisted? What's being taken so personally?

An example there might be that you receive a message, whether it's a text, Slack, Telegram, email—I don't know, it's amazing how many there are, right? And then we receive a message that feels kind of sharp in tone and we feel it, like, "Ugh, ouch." Maybe it feels unfair in some kind of way. So there's this initial sting when we read the message and then the mind begins to build. We might say this is a way in which the mind starts to grip. "How dare they? Don't they respect me? Don't they know who I am? I need to respond right away. I got to let them know this isn't right." Or maybe there's this way they don't understand me and then there's this

collapsing and then there's this gripping around this feeling like nobody likes me, nobody gets me. "This is a terrible place to have these co-workers, to have friends, to have this family, whomever."

So, the message might need a response. But, the suffering, the difficulty, the sting of that message grows when there's this, what I'm calling like this hand in the heart really starts to tighten around it. When the body contracts and the mind narrows and starts to build stories. And the mind kind of collapses around this, "What am I going to do? I need to do something."

Because it could be that that message gets received and it could be like, "Wow. That was an ouch. Huh. Look at that. Okay, well, when I feel better, I'll come up with a message or I'll come up with a response, but until then, I'm going to do the next thing to do." It can be that simple. It doesn't have to have the mind collapse around it and create a narrative about what that message means about us, what it means about the other people. It can just be as simple as acknowledging the sting. And then think of like, "You know, I think I'll respond at another time when that sting is not so stingy."

So, this is where mindfulness practice can help us. Not because we're supposed to suppress the reaction to the message. We're not supposed to pretend like it didn't sting when it does sting. We honor our experience. We're not trying to pretend that things are different. And we're not trying to suppress it and we're not trying to pretend like, "Oh, it was fine."

But, instead maybe we can take the opportunity to recognize that oh yeah, when difficulty arises, when suffering is here, here's an opportunity where we might be able to learn something. Because difficulties don't go away just because we want them to. But often understanding what's happening creates the conditions in which something different can happen. Something different can unfold.

So rather than distracting ourselves or avoiding it, or starting to blame others, blame ourselves, starting to explain away, or often trying to fix—there are so many ways in which we often try to initially meet difficulties. But if we're just bouncing off, explaining, or trying to fix, or blaming others, or avoiding, or distracting, then we don't really have an opportunity to understand it in a different way, in a fresh way. We don't see how the difficulty, the suffering is getting compounded. How that suffering is getting created, is getting bigger and bigger by our relationship to it. By this way in which we are quietly, insistently demanding that things be different. "No, I don't want to feel the sting of this message. How dare they? Don't they know who I am?" Or something like this.

So, instead, can we come close to this little vignette that I'm offering, can we come close to what I'm calling the stinginess, the uncomfortableness? Can we come close to it, can we

experience it without tipping over into overwhelm, without feeling like we absolutely have to avoid or distract or start blaming?

Instead, can we just feel? Feel one breath coming in, one breath going out. Can we feel the feet on the floor? Can we feel what our hands are touching, if they're touching anything? Can we feel the contact with the chair if we're sitting down?

So, when the difficulty arises, can we get embodied, feel present, and then maybe touch this difficulty, this stinginess, gently? Maybe there's tightness in the chest. Maybe there's some tightness in the face, a grimace or frowning, or sometimes tightness around the eyes or the jaw. Maybe there's the sense of urgency in the mind, like, "I got to fix this, I got to make it be different." Can we just gently contact that?

And we might move back and forth. Here are the sensations of the chair, of what I'm sitting on, and here's that tightness in the chest when I bring to mind that message. And here's a breath. And here's that tightness in the jaw when I bring it to mind. And here's an exhale. I don't think you have to make yourself bring it to mind. Often when there's something that feels uncomfortable, it's often just right there underneath our experience. In some ways, it's kind of saying, "Look at me. Look at me."

And so the practice is here, the promise of freedom is, okay, can we just touch into it gently? We do not have to plunge into the most difficult part of this. That's definitely a recipe for overwhelm or for avoidance or jumping right into distraction. But can we touch it gently? And maybe with some way in which we're also moving back and forth between our breath, sounds, sounds of cell phones going off in the near, not too far distance.

So this isn't avoidance. I can say it's wisdom. It's about meeting ourselves exactly as we are in that moment. It's about meeting difficulties without becoming overwhelmed or drowned in them. And going back and forth between acknowledging the stinginess—this word that I'm using, difficulty, uncomfortableness—and then going back and forth between neutral bodily sensations, and then maybe tight bodily sensations, helps create the conditions in which equanimity, some more steadiness, some more balance can be experienced, can be met.

Equanimity allows experience to be known without immediately grasping or resisting. It doesn't say, "Oh, this is fine. No problem." It says, "This is here." This persistent cell phone in the other room. And it can be known. And it can be known with some balance. It can be known with some spaciousness or ease.

So, this quality of spaciousness means in this little vignette that the painful message is still there. The unpleasantness, that stinginess of it, is still there. But the problemness has drained out of it. It's just the next thing that's known.

This can be so powerful, this recognition that it's not that everything has to be different. It's just the insistence that it be different goes away, and then it just becomes the next thing that's known, including the uncomfortableness, including the irritation, including the wish for things to be different.

So, there's this way that with equanimity that gripping is no longer being strengthened. It's no longer being supported, no longer being fueled. We're no longer adding more resistance. We're no longer making the feeling, this experience, into a problem that has to be conquered, a problem that has to be fixed. And it's when we're no longer fueling the problemness that allows letting go to happen. Not as something we force, not as something we perform.

So, this letting go from the clinging, this gripping to more ease, this is a natural thing that happens when holding on, when gripping is no longer being fed.

So, there's a way that poetry can help with this. Dharma practice often says, "Oh, you should practice equanimity. Just let go. Stop clinging." And it can sound kind of dry. It can sound like these tasks that we are supposed to do, and if we're not doing them, there's something wrong with us. But I like to use poetry in Dharma talks because it can point to an experience or an image. It can let us have a different experience than this demanding that things be a particular way.

So, Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer, you will not be surprised, is the poet here. In her poem, she's pointing to a house burning. A whole island might burn up. And she has to choose what to take. So, this poem is called *When Living on a Tiny Island*.

It was a dream. But I tell you everything was on fire in the house. I knew the whole island would burn and I had to choose what to take. And I ran past the old records and thought I have those songs in me. And I ran past the books and thought I have those stories. And I ran past the photos and thought those memories are already within me. So, I ran chased by flames toward the ocean with the only thing I can really carry. This buoyant love. And I dove in hands empty able to cup the water and pull through the tide. The salt water lifted me, whispered in waves, letting go is what keeps you alive.

I love this idea. It's kind of like we're able to move this way with our hands open instead of with this gripping that sometimes we're trying to do. So, the speaker doesn't let go because she doesn't care. She lets go because she sees what can and can't be held, what needs and what doesn't need to be carried. The records, the books, the photos are left behind. Instead is this recognition of what's inside, what's in her heart, and what can be carried differently. It can be carried in her heart.

[A very persistent ringing from a cell phone is heard]

I'm sure hoping that cell phone is not my cell phone.

[Laughter]

I got a new phone and I don't know all the sounds it makes yet, but maybe that's mine. Oh.

[Laughter]

So, in this poem, she's letting go not because she doesn't care. And it's not a passivity. Letting go is not just this passivity. In the poem, she still moves. She runs, she dives, she swims.

So, things still happen. But there's this way in which maybe the emptiness of the hands is not having nothing. The emptiness of the hands is what allows the movement. The emptiness of the hands is what allows life to continue.

So, this letting go allows this unfolding towards more freedom. And this is part of the promise of the Dharma. This is how we can find the freedom in this moment even in the midst of the difficulties. Even in the midst of when things are not what we want them to be.

And here's something that's kind of interesting. I love this kind of stuff. There's a paradox here. That we often hear something like this like, "Oh, that sounds nice, Diana. Okay, well, I'm not going to hold on. We shouldn't hold on. I'm not going to hold on anymore." But there's this subtle trap where the mind turns letting go into a project. Into, "Okay, I'm going to let go. I'm going to be less reactive. I'm going to become equanimous." And this becomes a whole project. And letting go becomes this way in which we're trying to grip this idea of how we should be. The idea of letting go can be a way in which we're gripping. And this can be a subtle way or can be part of the paradox of practice. The activity of letting go can be a way in which we're not letting go. Because the desire to become free, the desire to have more ease can become another identity. It's like, "Okay, I have to be the one that lets go so that I can be the one that's free." This is a way in which there can be more gripping. That maybe we don't notice it because it feels like we're doing exactly what the Dharma teachings are pointing to.

But something that I really appreciate in this poem is that it doesn't point to how the letting go will enable her to swim through the water as this heroic spiritual achievement. This poem isn't talking about, "Okay, I have now become the great one who has let go." Instead, this poem is more immediate. It's more tangible about what's happening right now. The fire is there in the poem. The ocean is there. The love is there. The body is moving. The hands are opening.

Conditions have changed, but there isn't this big self: "I'm the one that made this happen." Instead, the conditions have changed. And so, the unfolding has happened because clinging arises through conditions. This holding on, this gripping, this tightening of the hand arises through conditions. The vignette I offered earlier, there's this message that arises that feels uncomfortable. The body contracts, the mind tells a story, and there's this self-sense that forms

around the sense of hurt. So, clinging arises through the conditions, but letting go also arises through conditions. Of course, it does. How could it be otherwise?

So, when mindfulness is present, when some equanimity is present, once a certain amount of wisdom is present, then letting go just happens. It's not a personal achievement. It's not a proof that you're an advanced practitioner. Letting go isn't something that we possess. It's not a new identity to be, "Okay, I'm the one that let go." Instead, it's just this recognition that things happen in a lawful manner. It's a recognition that when the softening around the gripping happens, then that allows opening, which allows the letting go, which allows the freedom, which allows the peace and ease in the midst of difficulties.

We're so accustomed—I know I certainly was so accustomed, and part of the reason why I came to practice was thinking that, "Okay, I just need help getting all my ducks in a row. And then when all the ducks are in a row, then everything will be fine." Newsflash, ducks never stay in a row. They swim around. That's the nature of nature. And so, practice is about recognizing it's not when the ducks are finally all lined up. It's about finding ease no matter what formation the ducks are in. And it arises through conditions.

So, suffering reveals the gripping that we're doing. And then, often the gripping softens, not because we're forcing it, not because we're making it, not because we become someone special who knows how to let go, not because we created a project to make letting go happen. It's because the conditions for holding have softened. Maybe we've met the difficulty by meeting the breath and touched into the difficulty softly. With some equanimity, with some mindfulness. There's this way that the breath gave some steadiness and the body gave some immediacy to the experience and maybe some warm-heartedness gave a sense of safety and some equanimity gave some space. And in this way, letting go happened.

So, this is the invitation. The next time you find some difficulty, you might ask, what is being held on to here? It might be really subtle. It might be obvious. A hint is it has something to do with yourself and what you want. And then we might ask, can this be known without blaming? And we can ask, what would it be like to soften here? Soften anything. Soften the mind. Soften the body. What would it be like to soften here? So that letting go can happen. So that freedom can be experienced even in the midst of difficulty.

So, thank you. Thank you. And with that, I'll open it up to see if there's some comments or questions. Thank you.

Questions and Answers

Speaker 1: Yesterday I had exactly this experience. So, it's always amazing to me how timely these things are. And when you use the analogy of a sting, because that's how you started, I have in my life many, many times comforted children, mostly children, but sometimes adults,

when they've had stings. And you can take a piece of a leaf—we call them dockens in Scotland—and if you peel it open, there's a little stickiness inside. You can put that onto nettle stings, and it stops them stinging. Or you can cut an onion, and it'll pull out the sting. You put a cold compress, you can put creams on it. And sometimes you don't have anything. You can just put something a little cold and give a little love to it. And it just allows this kind of hysterical response of, "Oh my god, I'm stung, I'm stung, I'm stung, I'm stung. What am I going to do?" You know, and you just shh, especially since some people are much more prone to this than others.

And yesterday I couldn't, that sting wouldn't let go. It just kept vibrating, vibrating until I finally just said, "Okay. Let's calm the sting down." And my first aid in a situation like that is that I know, "Okay, I've got a problem," but I listened to a talk from Gil about problems: "A problem that can't be solved is not a problem. Because problems can be solved." So lose all these non-problems. I thought, "Okay. I have a non-problem." And then I thought, "Okay, what does Nikki have to say to this?" And so I listened to a talk about self-compassion and radical self-compassion. And then it started to calm down a little bit more. And finally I was able to pick myself up and do the next thing. And over time, it calmed and my perspective changed. And I mean, I used to just live with these enormous mountain volcanoes that just kept going and going and going because of what I projected into them. So, and I apologize for the background music. I didn't want to miss the talk.

[Laughter]

Diana Clark: It could have been a worse cell phone sound.

[Laughter]

Diana Clark: Great. Thank you. Thank you.

Speaker 2: Hi Diana. Thank you so much. So, I kept coming to the word curiosity. And when you said like we sometimes make a project out of letting go. And I was thinking what's the alternative and it's kind of not "should" but what is it?

Diana Clark: Very nice.

Speaker 2: And also it occurred to me that in my native language the word for being curious is wanting to, literally loving to ask.

Diana Clark: Loving to ask. Oh, very nice.

Speaker 2: So, what is it?

Diana Clark: Yeah, yeah. Great. Thank you, Svetlana.

Speaker 3: In your talk you talked about how letting go is a result of conditions, just like craving or clinging is. And that when letting go happens, it's not really a personal achievement. It's just the conditions are in place for it. But, effort is in one or two of the Buddhist lists of useful qualities to cultivate. So could we join these two ideas by saying maybe the effort that we do is to put ourselves into an environment or a set of conditions that's helpful for seeing the cause and effect that leads to suffering. And then when we can see that with clarity then letting go just naturally occurs, and those conditions that we put ourselves into through effort could be, you know, reading Dharma books or going on retreats or all kinds of things.

Diana Clark: So, your question is, one way to help support letting go, can it be effort in particular towards putting ourselves in environments which would support letting go? Is that—

Speaker 3: Exactly.

Diana Clark: Yeah. Yeah. I would agree with this, but I think it can be helpful to maybe, as Svetlana was saying, to bring some curiosity, some understanding towards, "Okay, there's a difficulty here, and there's some tightening around it or some gripping around it." So, maybe that's what was implicit in what you were saying, but I think it can be really helpful to point to these two opposite movements, one towards tightening around and one towards opening up. And maybe part of the effort are the conditions that could help us to see these two different movements. I'm using this word. Would you agree with that, Bill? Is that what was implicit in what you were saying?

Speaker 3 (Bill): Not sure. But you talked about tightening. And that corresponds to my idea that emotions, which involve clenching, occur with clenching. Emotions are bodily events which often involve some clutching or tightening or contraction in the body. And then maybe the conditions that are helpful is to learn how to see that happening. Then you say, "Oh, this horrible emotion I'm feeling is just a bodily event."

Diana Clark: Yeah, that's one way, right? To meet it with equanimity. It's like, "Oh, yeah, it's just a tightness in the chest. It's just a clenching of the jaw." And then there's a way in which that alone has that problemness drain out of it, to be able to just say, "Oh, yeah, it's just a bodily experience." Yeah. Yeah.

Bill: I love a quote by Spinoza who said, "All emotion, which is suffering, ceases to be suffering as soon as we form a clear and precise picture of it." So, I don't think it happens that automatically. But seeing—

Diana Clark: "All emotion, which is suffering." So, he's saying that every single emotion equals suffering?

Bill: That's what it sounds like.

Diana Clark: Yeah, I wouldn't agree with that.

[Laughter]

Bill: ceases to be suffering, however.

Diana Clark: Joy. I don't know if that's suffering. Happiness, is that suffering? Delight, is that suffering? Love? All this good stuff.

Bill: Well, then you start to parse the meaning of happiness.

Diana Clark: And you start to parse the meaning of suffering. Yeah, we can go down that road.

Bill: If happiness is getting what we want instead of just—

Diana Clark: Yeah, I would define it differently.

Bill: —then that's a suffering kind of emotion. But then there's joy, which is just being happy anyway. So, that would not be included in what Spinoza said.

Diana Clark: What I appreciate about what you're saying is Spinoza's apparently pointing to the role of seeing. Seeing clearly. And I would say that's what practice is about, too. We might quibble about what's being seen and the definition or something like that, but the importance of seeing, being present.

Bill: Sorry if I got too intellectual about this.

Diana Clark: It's fine.

[Laughter]

Diana Clark: Okay. Well, thank you all for your kind attention. Wishing you a lovely rest of the evening and safe travels home. Thank you.

-
1. **Dukkha:** A Pali word often translated as "suffering," "stress," or "unsatisfactoriness." [↩](#)

Additional talks by Diana at AudioDharma.org

Additional transcripts and links to YouTube videos at Moonpointing.com with deep bows of appreciation to Dan Murphy.

More information about Diana's teachings at DianaClarkDharma.org

Share the love! [Donate to Diana](#)