

When Measuring Becomes Me-ing

Dharma talk by Diana Clark

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So, I like to start with a little vignette. It might be, maybe, you could imagine somebody coming to a meditation center, maybe a lot like this one. And the meditation begins and they sit down, start meditating and it feels fine. Feeling the breath, feeling the body connected to the sitting surface, or whatever it is that their meditation object is. And then the knee starts to hurt. Or maybe it's the back or something like this. And then without maybe really meaning to, they kind of open their eyes a little bit and they see somebody who has this perfect posture and then there's this thought in the mind, "They're having some spiritual experience and I'm just having opinions about my knee." Or something like, "Oh, gee." But they keep on meditating. And then you're hearing somebody shuffling their stuff and changing their posture and moving around and then there's a thought like, "Oh, well, at least I'm not changing my posture noisily like that person."

So, one moment we think that we're inferior, not doing well enough. And then the next moment we think we're superior, doing better than that person over there. And then maybe there's a thought, "Oh, it's so great to practice together. We're all a bunch of meditators here together." And there's this feeling like, "Yeah, we're all the same in some kind of way."

So, there's this way in which this whole notion of comparing—comparing ourselves to other people, comparing ourselves to how we used to be, comparing ourselves to an ideal that we have about ourselves, this wish for how we think we should be, quote unquote.

And the Buddha talked about this, this comparing mind, a measuring mind. The Pali word is *mana*^[1]. Sometimes it gets translated as conceit. But conceit in regular English, we think of conceit as always thinking that you're better, this superior. But it's this *mana*, it's this manifestation of this really deeply human tendency to kind of see how we're doing compared to others.

And we could say that this is evolutionary biology, right, wanting to be concerned about our status. Maybe that's true. I don't know. But the Buddha is pointing to the *dukkha*^[2], the suffering, the stress associated with the comparing. Because it turns out it doesn't matter whether you think that you're doing better than or worse than or that you're just exactly the same. There's always some *dukkha* there because there's this self that's here compared to that other individual or group of people that are over there. And there's this real distinct separation

that happens when we're measuring. So both it's this sense of separation and it's also this self that's getting created when we're measuring.

Some of you have heard me say this. I think I might have heard this from Rob Burbea, another Dharma teacher. When there's measuring, there's a "me" at the beginning. *Measuring*. It's kind of like this cute little way of thinking about this. And I'd like to talk about this this evening.

And maybe I'll start by saying it's not that the problem is that there's discernment. We need discernment. Of course we do. We need to be evaluating ourselves, evaluating other individuals. There might be this recognition, "Yep, this person has more experience than I do. Or at this moment this person is more settled than I am. This is a more skillful, that is a less skillful way to do things." This is part of discernment. But comparison is a little bit different. We would say comparison adds on top of this discernment, this noticing, an identity. "They are more experienced" becomes "I'm inadequate." Or "I made a mistake" becomes "I'm a failure." Or maybe "Someone praised me" becomes "I'm special." This way that this identity gets created.

And honestly, when I think about this, I'm not sure which comes first, the sense of self and then the measuring or the measuring and then the sense of self. And when I was feeling into this, thinking about it, I realized it doesn't matter which comes first. We can just notice the comparing. And rest assured that there's a sense of self there. And there's this way in which, as I mentioned, the self becomes solid or reified, becomes this static thing. We're slapping a label on it. "Oh, I'm the one that's a failure. I'm the one that's so great. I'm the one that's just like everybody else and we're all the same." In this kind of way.

So, we don't need to make that this is a wrong activity. This is, as I said, what humans do. It's a very human pattern. So, we don't need to make it into another comparison. "I'm the one that compares more than everybody else compares" or something like this. It's just this recognition, "This is often what happens." And instead, can we just recognize, "Mhm. Comparing is happening. And it feels like this."

And I'll talk about this a little bit more in a moment, just with some ways that we can practice with this. But I want to point out maybe some different ways in which this *mana* shows up. There are these three different ways. We feel like we're better than, or less than, or the same. But all three of these different ways, they have underneath them this basic question that shows up: "What does this experience say about me?" It might not really have anything to do with us, what's happening. But we make it like, "What does this say about me?" And maybe underneath that is this feeling like, "Am I okay? Do I belong? Am I seen in some kind of way?" So underneath this idea of comparing, there's often something fueling this, "Am I okay? Do I belong?" And I think this is also just a very human experience. This is part of humans. We belong in groups. So it's not surprising that we have something underneath this that's fueling this.

And so maybe we see this superiority conceit shows up as saying "I'm more than" fill in the blank. "I'm more ethical. I'm more spiritual. I'm more mature. I'm smarter." All these things. But it also can show up maybe in this subtle way. Sometimes we have "My practice is more authentic." Or "My practice is deeper." Or "I've gone on more retreats" or something like this.

And so there's this way in which this superiority conceit might feel powerful. It might feel like, "Oh, okay, I'm showing up on top." But what we often are not noticing is that then we have to maintain it. Once we have this feeling that we're better than, then we have to somehow make sure that it doesn't get knocked down or doesn't get disproven in some kind of way. It's unstable. And we might have some cognitive dissonance when there's some data, quote unquote, that shows up that says, "Well, I thought I was the best meditator in the room, but then this other person showed up and they had been meditating there for hours before and I didn't even notice," or whatever it might be.

And then this inferiority conceit, in some ways, it feels—well, often in regular English, we don't use conceit and inferiority together, but here in Buddhist English, we are. And in some ways it might feel the most authentic. Some people can say or have this real feeling of inadequacy or insufficiency. "Not enough" in some kind of way. But there's also this self that's getting created. So even though in some ways it might feel a little bit more true, just because it's familiar, not because it is true. Just because it feels more familiar. And our society really promotes this implicit "You're not enough. Therefore, go out and buy this thing. Therefore, go out and get this attainment or achievement or start earning this amount of money." That's implicit in this "is not enough." But it's still a way in which we're creating this self or this self is getting reified.

So then you might think, "Well, okay, so this 'same as' conceit. That must be a good one to think that we're just the same as everybody else." And in some ways that can be the most subtle because it sounds beautiful to think, "Well, we're all equal." Which in many ways is true. But there's a way in which that can also be not honoring the differences. We're not all exactly the same. It can be a way in which we are detaching from our experience or our relationship is kind of whitewashing it and saying, "Oh, we're all the same, isn't that nice?" And to be sure, I am not promoting that we don't think that people are the same because we are in so many ways. I've even already been talking about the human experience as a way in which all this that we share. But there's this way in which we can avoid real differences. Not honoring and respecting the differences between us. And maybe it's also to say, "Oh, we're all the same" is avoiding the vulnerability of feeling like, "I don't know where I belong," or something like this.

So, there's this same movement under all three flavors, if you will, of *mana*. There's this basic structure where there's a "me," a self in here, that needs to be protected and bolstered and reified. And then there's an "other" out there, separate, there's a gap. And this promotes this sense of isolation or difference. And this self is getting created or reified. So, a difference is

noticed. A story is built, and we could say a self is created. There might not have been a sense of self before. Maybe in the story I told at the beginning, there was a difficulty in the knee, there was pain in the knee, uncomfortableness. And maybe it was just discomfort until we saw somebody sitting perfectly still with what seemed like perfect posture. And then all of a sudden, boom, "Oh, yeah, I'm not like that."

So, there's this way that this measuring, this comparing, it promises an orientation or it promises maybe to tell us who we are or where we are and some kind of measuring apparatus. It promises to tell us whether we are okay. But it never satisfies. It never delivers on this promise in terms of we might think that, "Okay, well, at least I'm doing better than that person over there." But you know, just wait. [Laughter] Right? There'll be somebody else that's doing better than we are. Or we might think, "Okay, I'm the worst ever." And then you know, just wait. We'll discover somebody that's worse than we're doing. So it's not a place to land, this comparing.

And we might not be noticing this subtle way in which this is exhausting. It's exhausting to always be doing this comparing, this measuring. There's a way in which the self is always being renegotiated, being checked and always needing new evidence. Because feeling "better than" is unstable because it needs to stay better. Maybe I feel better in this arena, but not better over there. And then we feel like, "Oh, well, I need to be better in all arenas," or something like this. There's a subtle way in which we're trying to maintain this sense of "better than" in order to feel okay. Or there's this way in which feeling "worse than" is painful. It might be familiar. I think many of us recognize the pain, but sometimes we're not noticing the way that we're always putting ourselves as "less than." It's a way that takes a toll on our nervous system, on our psyche, on our well-being, this sense of not being good enough in some kind of way. And then this feeling of being "same as" is also fragile. Because we'll just start to see some differences and then we realize, "Oh, wait, wait, I'm not exactly like that other person." And then what do we do with that, if we're wanting to maintain this "same as"?

None of these are freedom. None of these results of measuring are the peace and ease and freedom that we're looking for. Freedom is recognizing and feeling into and working with the self that's getting either created or reified. Comparing is either an expression of what a self does or comparing is creating the self. It doesn't matter which order it goes. Maybe they arise together, it doesn't matter.

So, what are some ways in which we can practice with this when we notice ourselves comparing? What are some ways in which we can use comparing as an indicator, like, "Oh, yeah, more freedom is possible here." Maybe first is to recognize that the teaching is not "don't compare." Well, that would be easier, right? Just say, "Okay, stop comparing." And we'll say, "Oh, okay." And we stop. Because as I've been saying, this is something that humans do. The

deeper invitation is just to begin to see how this sense of self works. How is it constructed? What does it feel like? What is it? So, this whole idea of comparing can be a doorway into some deeper and deeper freedom.

So, we could say, here's one scenario where things can unfold. As we see something, maybe somebody's sitting still when we're trying to meditate and we're not sitting still, or someone being praised, or someone succeeding, someone struggling. We just see something. And then the mind adds a meaning: "They're doing better. I'm behind. I'm special. Or they're just like me or I don't belong," or you know, something like this. So, there's a perception. The mind adds an interpretation of it. And then the mind repeats this story and elaborates it. "Oh, yeah. I'm not doing as well and that reminds me of that other time. I never do well. Always when I'm here meditating, everybody else is so much better and I'm not even sure why I come here." The mind just takes it and starts running with it. So, it takes maybe just a flicker of a thought like, "Wow, I'm not sitting as smoothly as that other person." And then it starts to bring in all kinds of evidence and elaborate it. Defend it. Believe it.

And then we believe it and then we begin to live as if it were true. Our whole self-image just got created in that moment. And then there's this way in which we start to meet the next moment created out of that self-image. The one who's not a good meditator. Or the one who's the better meditator. Whichever *mana*, whichever conceit, whichever comparison has shown up at that moment.

So there's this way in which, as I have mentioned, the comparing mind assumes there's this solid "me" here. And that it can be measured. And that it can be ranked or that it can be improved or that it can be diminished. All these things. And to be sure, Dharma practice is not saying that we have to get rid of this self. I am not saying that. I am not saying that we have to destroy it or anything like this. I am not saying that. I am saying practice is let's just see what is this whole self business about. Let's just see for ourselves. Those Buddhists are talking about—[laughter]—there is not a self, at least not in the way that we think about. And I would say that was definitely my experience when I first started practice. I remember so clearly thinking like, "Wow, this whole Buddhism thing is my heart so much I just love it. And there's that not self stuff like whatever. I'm just going to be the Buddhist that has a self cuz I don't like that not self thing." And that was fine. It worked fine for quite some time. So I am not saying you have to destroy it and I am not saying that you have to believe anything I'm saying here. You don't have to believe it. This isn't some doctrine to take on board. This isn't some way to measure like "I don't know what this whole self thing is about. Therefore I must not be a good Buddhist practitioner" or something like that.

What I am saying is let's bring some curiosity. So what's the experience when you find yourself comparing, when comparing is happening? And I'm using this: when there's measuring there's a

"me." What is this "me" thing? What's actually here? What's this moment being experienced? What can be found? Because when we look we see bodily sensations, emotions, thoughts, things happening in the visual field, maybe sounds. Maybe there's taste of eating or smelling. There's maybe some habit patterns that we're noticing. Maybe there's a sense of openness and ease or maybe there's a sense of tightness and tension. And all of these are changing. Which one is the self? Which one? Because there isn't anything else to experience except what I am pointing to here. And so we find our experiences arising and passing and changing. And then we can just have this gentle inquiry: Where is this separate self? That we are just trying so hard to defend. And when we spend less energy trying to defend and reify, solidify, we have more energy, we have more flexibility for what's actually happening. And that turns into more freedom. That gets experienced as more ease, as more at peace, instead of trying to make things be a certain way to bolster the self.

So the invitation is just when you find the measuring, just to ask what's here that needs to be protected or bolstered? Or what's here that's better than or worse than? Or what is this whole self thing? And just feel into your experience right then, that moment. And then the next moment, the next moment. If we can in the mind, of course, construct a whole self. And I am not saying there's no people here or anything like this. Just tune into your experience at that moment.

And then when we begin to see that this self isn't as solid as it feels, it isn't as findable as it seems like it should be, when it's not ultimately definitively who we are. It's just that experience. Then when we begin to understand that deeply in the heart, tremendous freedom. When we don't have to protect so much the sense of self. We start to be able to enter into uncomfortable experiences, have those uncomfortable conversations with other people, do those uncomfortable things. This is where freedom really begins to open up. Not because comparing never happens again. It does. But because the self that's getting created out of that stops being believed. It becomes more flexible and malleable and permeable.

So what are some ways we can practice with this?

One, I've already kind of mentioned this. It's just name the process. "Oh yeah, here's comparing." And sometimes just naming it helps tremendously. "Here's comparing and wow, this doesn't feel good." And that "not feeling good" might be obvious if we feel like we don't show up favorably. And we feel like we're underneath, or it might be subtle. But can we just name comparing as happening without adding any shame, without adding any sense of like, "And I shouldn't be doing this? Here's another indicator of my not measuring up in some kind of way." Just to name it. Don't underestimate how powerful that can be because we are doing this comparing all the time. We are encouraged to by society so much. Have you ever noticed if you ever see an interview with somebody who's an entertainer, a question that the interviewer

often asks is like, "What's your favorite X? What's your favorite scene? What's your favorite movie? What's your favorite song that you've done?" There's a way in which we use this to connect with people maybe. I don't know why this so often gets asked of celebrities. But they want them to measure and compare. And then of course, the mind will make stories, but can you just hold that story a little loosely? Like, "Oh, wow. Okay. Yeah, here's this story. It's familiar." So, just name comparing is happening. Notice any way you think that you shouldn't be comparing and hold the subsequent story lightly. That's one way to practice with it.

Another one is when you notice that the comparing is happening, there's always, and it might be subtle, but there's always a certain amount of contraction. I'm doing this with my body. I'm contracting with my body, but it might just be more of an energetic or mental contraction. Because it really starts to say, "Oh, I'm over here and everybody else is over there and there's a gap between us." In order for that to happen, there has to be this border that gets created and that's a little bit of a sense of a contraction. This is a subtle movement. It might not be obvious at first, but it can really help to notice the shrinking or the bracing that might happen. And then, can we just bring some kindness towards that? And sometimes the kindness is like, "Oh, yeah, here's the bracing. Can that be okay?" So, that's the second one. The second way to work with this is feel the contraction and the tightening, the bracing, however it shows up when you notice comparing is happening.

Here's a third thing to do when you're noticing that comparing is happening. Can you return to what's simply true? Before the whole comparing happening. In the beginning of this talk, I talked about there being pain in the knee. And then noticing that there's somebody who appeared to be having a completely different experience. Maybe we thought that they were having a spiritual experience while we were just having a painful experience. So, a third practice is just to recognize what's true before the story showed up. It's like, "Oh yeah, this amount of spirituality is happening now." Instead of saying, "They have more and I have less," just say, "Nope, this amount of spirituality, however you would define that, is happening now." So, just tune into your present moment experience and saying, "This amount is happening now." Whatever it is. "They are more kind than I am. Did you see how they offered their lunch or took care of that thing for that other person, they clearly are a kinder person than I am." And we can just say, "Oh, this amount of kindness is here now." Without comparing, just saying, "This amount of kindness is being experienced here." And this brings us right into the present moment experience in a way that there's a certain amount of freedom there just to align with the truth of the moment instead of that moment needing to be different in some kind of way.

And then a fourth practice we can do is for those of you who are familiar with Brahma Vihara^[3] practice, there's sympathetic joy. So, can we cultivate *mudita*^[4] or sympathetic joy? That is, when we notice that there's goodness, however that gets expressed, however we are

experiencing it, can we just allow the heart to recognize, "Oh, there's goodness here. Kindness. There's beauty here." And to recognize that there is not a fixed amount of goodness or kindness or beauty in the world, it's infinite. So, just because this person is expressing kindness, goodness, beauty, whatever, it doesn't mean that we have to have less or that there's less available for us. So, can we just appreciate it? The world needs as much kindness, beauty, goodness. So, practicing with the goodness we see, can we just be like, "Yeah, kindness. This is a good thing." And then, those of you who have a Brahma Vihara practice might be familiar with this idea of wishing, "May their kindness continue. May the goodness that's getting expressed, may the goodness that they're experiencing continue. May their practice flourish." Or something like this. And there's something uplifting in our hearts when we are sending that to others.

So, those are four different ways we can practice with comparing mind. One is just to recognize it. Two, feel it in the body, feel the contraction in the body. Three, return to the simple truth of the moment. What was experienced before the comparison? And four, appreciative joy, *mudita* practice.

So, the comparing mind, the measuring mind keeps asking, "Where do I stand?" And there might be a way in which we feel like if I could just figure out where I stand and have a place to land that's stable and constant, that that would bring a sense of relief, even if where we measured up wasn't the best. We feel like, "If only I could just find a place to land." But, peace doesn't come from finally locating ourselves on this measuring stick or whatever measuring device we want to name. A moment of kindness can just be a moment of kindness. It doesn't have to be "me." A moment of discomfort can just be a moment of discomfort that arises and passes away. A moment of difficulty can just be a moment of difficulty. A breath is just a breath, a thought is just a thought. It doesn't have to be more complicated. We want it to be often. It doesn't need to be more complicated than that. So, measuring often becomes meaning. And instead, it can become a doorway in which we can bring some curiosity to what does this sense of self feel like? What does it look like? And the not finding is significant. The not finding of this self is significant. Which can lead to more and more peace and ease and freedom. I think I'll stop there. Thank you.

Questions and Answers

And I like to open it up to some comments or questions. Some things you'd like to ask or say.

Speaker 1: I liked what you said about it being exhausting. I've noticed that myself. And somehow that seems like a helpful way for me to notice the suffering I'm having with comparing. I go, "Huh, this feels tiring." You know, helps loosen it up a bit or notice it in a way that's helpful.

Diana Clark: Mm. Thank you very much. I think this is such a good point. Sometimes we notice the exhaustion before we notice all the comparing and the selfing. Yeah, yeah. Thank you very much. Yeah.

Speaker 2: I was also thinking about comparing since I'm retired, thinking, "Oh, when I was working, a lot of the comparing was very, you know, oh, he's got a different title than I do." And this kind of stuff. But in retirement, all this comparing, of course, still happens, you know. It's just kind of interesting to me.

Diana Clark: Yes. It's such a human experience.

Speaker 2: Yeah. And when I first retired, I thought, "Oh, I think I was blaming a lot of my self on work." And then I took my personality and everything with me [laughter] to retirement. And I went, "Oh, okay." It was a big surprise.

Diana Clark: Yeah. Funny how that works, right? [Laughter] Thank you. Thank you. Anybody else have a comment or question?

Speaker 3: Hi.

Diana Clark: Hi.

Speaker 3: Well, I just had the thought about how I want to be happy about myself. That's a belief I sometimes have, like I want to be happy about myself rather than just be happy. Like I want to make some self that another self for me can be happy about...

Diana Clark: That's fantastic. Yeah, yeah, that's fantastic that you thought like "Okay, I want a self here so that this self can look at that self and then be happy." Is that what you're saying? Yeah, yeah, right. It's quite something the mental gymnastics that we do. Yeah, I mean wanting to be happy of course is a natural thing and we're trying all these ways and often with practice we start to discover that some of the ways that we thought were going to make us happy turn out not to. But that maybe there's a certain level of more ease but the more we practice probably you're experiencing right then we start to see more and more subtle layers in which there's non-happiness or something like that. Yeah. Thank you. Thank you.

Speaker 4: What if comparison inspires growth?

Diana Clark: I'm sorry, I couldn't hear the first word. What does what?

Speaker 4: What if comparison inspires growth?

Diana Clark: Yeah, then maybe I would say that's more like inspiration then. Like this recognition like "Oh, it's possible to have more freedom. It's possible to bake something so quickly and deliciously or it's possible to do this." That's what I would say is like some inspiration, but that's

coming out of an uplift of the heart or a care or something like this. Whereas comparison is often like "In order for me to be okay, I need to do whatever this other person is doing or need to be better than that person or less than that person." So, on the surface they may look like the same thing, but what's fueling it, what's underneath it, is different. Thank you.

Speaker 5: Thank you for that. That was great. One of the things you said really got me thinking and the way that you put this: the self is over here and the other's over there and there's this gap. So, I started thinking about that gap. And then you talked about letting go of the story that we start to tell. And just the way you said it really clarified for me something that I've been thinking about a lot and it's like when we're in the present moment with another person if we can drop the story then there's space to be and to discern the difference without the story. So, thank you for that because I hadn't thought of it that way, but it feels very profound somehow.

Diana Clark: Nice. Nice. Yeah, yeah. The way that we sometimes are with the space or it's this reification, this border or precinct.

Speaker 5: We hold people to the story about them, so we don't experience them.

Diana Clark: Yeah, there you go. Beautiful. Nice, nice.

Speaker 6: I think my question is similar to what that gentleman said, I just guess checking, if you're noticing like you showed up differently than you did before and you're proud of that, right? And you're like "Good job, dude." That sounds—I mean, it sounds like you were saying what is underneath that. That sounds like a wholesome kind of thing. So...

Diana Clark: Right? And I would say that's like some discernment. Like, "Yeah, that was great. That was helpful. This is skillful," whatever happened. So, that's what I would make discernment versus what I'm calling comparison. Yeah, yeah.

Speaker 6: Thank you.

Diana Clark: Uh-huh. Okay. So, here we are at the end of our time together. So, thank you very much. I hope you have the best evening ever. [Laughter] I don't know why I said that, but just to be weird. [Laughter] Yeah, it's so funny. So, wishing you safe travels home and a lovely rest of the evening. Thank you.

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1. **Mana:** A Pali word typically translated as "conceit" or the "measuring mind," which compares oneself to others as superior, inferior, or equal. [↩](#)
 2. **Dukkha:** A Pali word often translated as "suffering," "stress," or "unsatisfactoriness." [↩](#)

3. **Brahma Viharas:** Also known as the Four Immeasurables or Divine Abodes. They are four Buddhist virtues and the meditation practices made to cultivate them: loving-kindness (*metta*), compassion (*karuna*), empathetic joy (*mudita*), and equanimity (*upekkha*). ↩
4. **Mudita:** Appreciative or sympathetic joy. The joy in the good fortune of others. ↩

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