

Listening for What's Beneath the Suffering

Dharma talk by Diana Clark

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So often we come to a meditation practice with this view that maybe we don't even know that we have, because it seems so obvious. It's not a view; it's just reality. And that is this idea that when there's difficulty, when there's uncomfortableness, this is a problem that has to be fixed. And it seems like, what are you talking about, Diana? That that's a view? That this is just the way the world works. We have to fix all these problems. And every time we feel uncomfortable, that's a problem.

It's fascinating how we have this idea that if we're uncomfortable, then something has gone wrong, or that we're failing in some kind of way, or something needs to stop, or something else needs to start. It's very understandable. When there's pain, we want relief. Of course, we do. When there's uncertainty, we want certainty. When there's vulnerability, we want protection. Of course, we do.

So, whenever we find ourselves feeling uncertain or vulnerable or unsafe, or any of these things, then we go into fix-it mode. How do I make this stop? How do I get out of this? How do I regain control so I can make things be different? So I can be comfortable again.

And we know this in just an ordinary way. Maybe waking up in the middle of the night, the body is tired, the room is quiet, but the mind is busy. Sometimes this happens, and the mind starts trying to solve the future: like what if this happens? Oh no, okay, I better remember to do this, and I forgot to do that. And it's fascinating, these things that we can do. What if this doesn't work out? I got to plan this.

And on the surface, it looks just like planning, but underneath, there's maybe this view that's underneath all this planning. A view that isn't so obvious. It's subtle. This way that says, if I think about this enough, then I'll be safe. If I think about this enough, then I'll feel comfortable again. If I prepare for every possibility, then I can remove any uncertainty, and then I'll feel comfortable again. I need to know what will happen before I can do anything. So, I got to figure it all out.

These are like implicit views, right? For me to say it out loud, it sounds a little bit silly. Like we don't really think that. But there's a part of us that sometimes does think this, does have these views. And this impulse to fix, this impulse to want to feel more comfortable and have certainty and invulnerability, it's not wrong. It comes from wanting safety, wanting relief. There's nothing wrong with this.

And to be sure, sometimes this fixing energy is useful. There are lots of wise and skillful things that we can do, and we do do. When the volume feels a little bit too low, I asked Jim to turn up the volume a little bit. Things change. When it's chilly outside, we put jackets on. When we're hungry, we eat, right? Of course, there are things that we do. When there's discomfort, there are things that we can do to alleviate it.

But sometimes, this attempt to fix—quote-unquote—the difficulty, fix the suffering, fix the uncomfortableness, becomes part of the difficulty. It becomes part of the uncomfortableness. There's this way in which maybe the body is bracing, the heart is contracting, and the mind is tightening around this experience. "I got to figure this out. I got to make it different."

And if we were to relate to our experience like, "This is not okay, I have to fix it." If we are relating to this as "it shouldn't be happening," and we do this with this experience, and then that experience, and this other experience, and yet one more experience... all day long there's this subtle way of saying, "This should not be happening. I should be doing whatever it is we think we should be doing."

If we start feeling like this should not be happening, then we start to relate to ourselves in that kind of way. We start to have this feeling like, "Oh, I shouldn't be this way. There's something wrong with me," instead of saying, "This shouldn't be happening." It kind of slides into, "There's something wrong with me. I should be different."

It also slides into the view that life is making a mistake. Maybe life is just nothing but a whole bunch of mistakes, and things shouldn't be this way.

And then, of course, that is just more suffering. That is more dukkha^[1]. That is more uncomfortableness. And not only that, when we encounter suffering or difficulties, and we always have this stance that it has to be fixed, and we're doing something to try to fix it, then we're missing out on an opportunity to maybe understand it. If we're just so soon bouncing off of it and turning away, then we don't even get a chance to really understand: Why is this here? How has this arisen? What is this? Is this a smaller part of something bigger? Or is this a big part of something smaller?

And so this is where having a meditation practice really can be a support. It offers a different possibility than just adding dukkha on top of dukkha, difficulty on top of difficulty.

Meditation practice doesn't offer the possibility of never having difficulties, or being able to control everything so then everything will be just how we like it. But it offers the possibility of disrupting this momentum of trying to fix difficulties, where the fixing becomes its own difficulty. Instead, it opens the possibility of meeting suffering in a different way.

And I'd like to talk about this a little bit this evening, because we could say... I heard this expression from Gil^[2] not too long ago, where he said that practice invites us to meet suffering—suffering, difficulty, uncomfortableness, dukkha—to meet suffering with what is not suffering.

And this highlights two things. One is that there is something that's not suffering while there is suffering. And what is it that's not suffering? We could say mindfulness. We could say maybe a certain amount of calmness, maybe a sense of presence or some ease, some steadiness.

So to meet suffering with what is not suffering. It's not that the suffering goes away, but that we're meeting it, and we're meeting it with not this, "This is terribly wrong. It has to be fixed," energy. Instead, we're meeting it with some care and some steadiness. This, to be sure, doesn't mean that we approve of what's happening. It doesn't mean that we become passive, and it doesn't mean that we stop responding wisely to difficulties. It just means that we're meeting it differently, with what is not suffering.

It means that we can begin to turn toward difficulties, rather than bouncing off of them all the time, and then become less swallowed and consumed by this.

And this is a really important shift: from being swallowed by difficulties to being able to meet them enough to maybe recognize them, learn something from them. And that alone can help diminish the uncomfortableness of this. Because when we meet suffering in this way, something begins to shift. This greater understanding is able to arise.

And I like this word that I've been playing around with recently, this idea of practice as a way of listening. And when we're no longer consumed with the suffering, then we can maybe listen to what's underneath it. Listen to what's maybe not so obvious, what's underneath the difficulty.

And when we listen to what's underneath the difficulty, we often hear the views that are underneath it. And by view, I mean not like a formal belief, as I was saying earlier. It's not like a doctrine or an opinion. It's something definitely much more subtle. It's more that we start to maybe listen to and discover some assumptions we have about life.

I didn't realize for myself how much I had this view that if I'm uncomfortable, this means I'm failing. And so I had to avoid discomfort because I didn't want to be failing. I also had the view that failing was bad. Sometimes failing just helps open the door for something better. But I had all these views, and so I was so much against feeling discomfort of any sort: physical discomfort, mental discomfort, emotional discomfort. I felt like, "Oh, I must be doing something wrong," because I had this assumption that life was supposed to be easy. Life was supposed to be comfortable. Life was supposed to be something other than what I was experiencing.

I didn't know this, you know, at first, until I started a meditation practice and started practicing for a while, that I started to see, "Oh, this is just a view. It's not true." It's not true. [Laughter] Discomfort is just part of life. It's unavoidable. It doesn't mean anything. It doesn't mean anything about us. Doesn't mean anything about practice. It just means it's uncomfortable. Maybe what it means is that we're human. But notice how much we add on top of this.

So maybe some of these views would be like, "I should be able to control this." Maybe that was the opposite side of my saying I'm failing. Maybe it meant like, "Oh, I'm not able to control this." I wouldn't have used those words back then, but there is a way in which we kind of feel like we should be able to control everything. And I feel like this view gets supported and endorsed by all kinds of things: "Buy this object," "eat this thing," "attain this attainment," and then you'll be happy, because then you'll be able to control all these other things. You know, the self-help on the internet. I used to say like on the book aisle, but I don't know if there are self-help books in a book aisle so much anymore. Probably Amazon; if we were to type that in, there would be the equivalent of physical books. But nevertheless, this idea about control.

Or an idea about, "Well, if I were a good practitioner, then I wouldn't be experiencing this discomfort during meditation. Or I would have a more regular meditation practice, or I would be experiencing some wild, crazy experiences by now." Surely some of these views that we have about what it means to be successful, or what it means to be doing anything different than exactly what we're experiencing.

So some of our strongest views are not even thoughts that we consciously have or condone necessarily or endorse. Maybe they're just assumptions or expectations or ideas about reality, about what it means to be human.

So with practice, as we start to settle and be able to not be completely swallowed up by difficulties all the time, then we can begin to meet it with what's not suffering. Meet suffering with what's not suffering, which we could say allows the opportunity for us to listen to what's underneath the suffering. And when we listen, what we find are views very often. And then when we find views, we find clinging.

There's always a certain amount of, "This is the way things should be, and it shouldn't be another way." And many of us who have been around the Buddhist scene know that the Second Noble Truth is the cause of suffering. One way we can understand this: the cause of suffering is clinging. This holding on. I mean, it would be one thing to have a view that just arose and we didn't really care about it. But the clinging is believing that it's true.

And sometimes clinging sounds very reasonable: "I just need this. I just need to be certain. I got to figure this out. I got to stay here until I completely understand it. I just need to work this out. I just need to know." There's nothing wrong with this until it becomes a project.

What are we asking life to guarantee for us? What do we believe must happen before we can be at peace?

And if we can see the views and the clinging, then difficulties become a doorway. They become a way in which we can find more and more ease, more and more peace, more and more freedom.

And I'd like to offer that one of the clearest places where we can see the struggle, the difficulty, the uncomfortableness, and we can hear the views and see the clinging, is when we are trying to control. We try to control what happens. We try to control how we're going to feel, or how we're feeling at this moment. We try to control what others think. We also try to control whether everybody understands us, that the people we care about are safe, that life unfolds according to our preferences.

The list seems to be endless, these things that we're trying to control. And again, this isn't necessarily something that you would say explicitly. And of course, we act, we speak, we practice, we make skillful choices. But there's a difference between wise participation and the insistence on controlling.

Wise participation says: "This matters, and I will respond as skillfully as I can." The insistence for control says: "This must turn out the way I want it to, or else I won't be okay."

And I realized how much I had this view, so much in my professional life, and in so many of my different settings. Like, in order for me to be okay, this thing has to turn out this particular way. Anything else won't be okay.

So there are views sometimes underneath this, or something like: "If I'm careful enough, I can prevent pain. If I think about this enough, then I can remove uncertainty. If I practice well enough, then I can stop being vulnerable."

But this is asking for something that's not possible. Perfect certainty doesn't exist. Permanent safety doesn't exist. A heart that never feels vulnerable is a heart that doesn't love, doesn't care.

So there's a way in which, if we start to see that we're trying to control, and we look at the views that are underneath this, and we start to see, "Oh, actually, this doesn't make so much sense." We can't have perfect certainty. It's impossible, unless you're completely omniscient, which I don't think exists.

So there's a way in which we are trying to fulfill impossible projects, but we think they're possible. Having perfect certainty so that we feel safe, as an example. Or maybe trying to have a body that doesn't change, that doesn't age, that doesn't get sick, that always feels the way we want it to feel. Maybe there's this way, when the body is uncomfortable and not how we want,

we have this view: "No, no, no. It shouldn't change. It should still be like that time when I was 16," or 20, or whatever age you could choose.

Maybe we're trying to love without vulnerability. To care deeply, but ensure that we'll never be hurt. Or to open the heart, but ensure that we'll never feel loss. Or to feel connected to others, but want to ensure that we'll never be affected by others.

To say this out loud sounds silly, like ridiculous, but there's a way in which sometimes we have these types of views underneath. We can, if we listen to them, we can hear them.

So there's a way that we'll discover that because these are impossible projects, the relief is not in finally getting them satisfied and figuring everything out and feeling safe all the time. Instead, it's about shifting our relationship to difficulties. This is the way forward, because we can't make the body unchanging. We can't make the future certain.

But I know for me, when I recognize, "Oh, it's actually impossible. It doesn't exist." In the same way that the to-do list is never finally done—like I never have anything else to do in my life—that's impossible, too. There's always the next day that has a new to-do list, and something carried over from before. If you wanted, you could have your whole life be nothing but a to-do list.

So when we start to understand, "Oh, it's impossible. So why am I trying to do this? Why am I trying to make the future certain? Why am I trying to feel like I'm completely invulnerable in my intimate relationships? Or why do I think I'm trying to make the body static, so that it never changes?" When we start to see this, there's a part of us that recognizes, "Oh, that's not going to work." And then there's just this natural letting go, this natural softening.

There can be a little bit—I know I had this experience a little bit like, "Diana, what were you thinking?" There was a little chastisement maybe, or something like, "Oh, that was silly," for myself. That's what I had. But maybe you'll have a different reaction. Some people have an inner critic that shows up like, "Oh, you idiot. I can't believe you believed this, or that you organized your life around this." But that's just one more of those difficulties. And if you could be with that, you could see the view underneath that: the view that you should never make a mistake, or that you should know everything.

But when we hear the views that are beneath the struggle, when we feel the clinging that's beneath the struggle, something can begin to soften. Not because life all of a sudden becomes easy and uncertainty disappears, but because the heart understands what it's been trying to do is not possible. And then we can actually really stop blaming ourselves.

It's not a personal failure. It's not a spiritual failure. When there are difficulties in life, there are difficulties in life because the conditions are in place to create difficulties. And there's a way in

which the body may soften a little bit out of bracing itself, or the mind may soften around this wish or demand for certainty, or the heart may soften about wanting to protect itself or trying to control.

And this softening that comes from this understanding about some of our views being completely impossible—this understanding leads to softening, leads to peace. More peace, more ease, more freedom, which is the opposite direction of trying to fix everything.

To be sure, I am not saying to be passive. I am saying sometimes our fixing is the problem. But we're so busy fixing that we don't see it.

So, can we notice the struggle, the difficulty? And can we be with it? Can we meet it with what is not suffering? Can we meet it with mindfulness? Can we meet it with care, such that we can listen beneath the struggle? And this listening can hear some of the views that we have. Some of them may be helpful. Many of them are not helpful. If you're struggling, I would say they're not helpful. It's part of the definition.

And then sometimes, looking at the views, we can say, "Oh, this is actually not possible." Then there can be, with this understanding, some softening and some letting go, which leads to more peace and more freedom. Maybe not the first time we look at it, maybe not the second time, but it's definitely a way forward that opens the door instead of getting stuck. Sometimes when there are difficulties, we just get stuck and we go around and around, or in a whirlpool, sometimes getting sucked into the whirlpool.

So when suffering is present, we don't have to ask, "How do I make this stop? How do I fix it? How do I get this under control?" But we might also ask, "What is this struggle telling me? What view is underneath this? What am I asking life to guarantee?"

And I'd say asking these questions is where we'll find the peace and the freedom that we're looking for, as opposed to the endless, literally endless fixing.

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

Q&A

Speaker 1: Thanks for the talk. I was thinking about how there's a social element to a lot of this, and it's hard enough, I think, as individuals to meditate on these things, let alone amongst others. There's definitely pressure to try and get at certainty or solve problems and things like that, that certainly comes up in my life. And so you touched on this a little bit. You mentioned skillful participation. And so I'm trying to see how to thread the needle between what is skillful participation and what is just unskillful trying to respond to social dynamics. So any advice for that, I think, would be of interest.

Diana Clark: Yeah, thank you. This is a really good question, and thank you for asking it. I'd say that this is how we'll have a sense about skillful participation: doing something, working to fix a problem, we'll know that this is skillful if there's a certain wisdom behind this. It feels like, "Oh, okay, it seems like this is the way that we'll solve this problem, fix this difficulty. This is what makes the most sense at this moment. This is what makes the most sense, and it seems reasonable." And we are not so invested in the outcome that we feel like we will only be okay if there's only one particular outcome from this activity that we're going to do.

Skillful participation is thinking, "I think that this is going to change things, and I think it's going to give this outcome, but we'll see." Because there's a way in which we often feel like, "I don't like A, therefore it has to be B, and I'm going to do whatever I can to make sure it's B." And that's not as skillful; that's more just this perpetuation of this idea that I'm only going to be okay if B arises. Instead, if you're in the middle of A, think like, "You know what, it seems like a solution could be XYZ. I'm going to do XYZ and see what happens." And it might be B, it might be C, it might be purple, it might be butterflies, right? It's just something else. Does this make sense?

Speaker 1: Yeah, the bit about fixation on outcomes, we have to just catch ourselves, I think is what I'm taking away.

Diana Clark: Yeah. And I also appreciate that you're talking about the social aspect. Of course, a lot of people want to feel certain, we're not the only ones. And often people look to us to make this difficulty go away: "It's your fault," or "You have the power to do it," or "Stop doing that thing so that everything else will be better," or something like this. We're all kind of enmeshed in these ways in which people are trying to control us too, right? So that they can feel better and solve their problems.

It occurs to me that one way to do this is to say—and sometimes I have done this—"Well, this is what makes sense right now." Instead of, "Okay, this is going to fix it." It seems like from where I'm standing, this looks like the right thing to do. And to kind of use this kind of language when I'm talking to somebody else instead of, "Your dreams are going to come true after I do this thing."

Speaker 1: Thank you.

Diana Clark: You're welcome. You're welcome. And maybe we'll just put it back there.

Speaker 2: So how do you think this applies when you're in a relationship with somebody in your life who is unhappy, and you don't want to collude with their unhappy behaviors? You don't want to just be in acceptance there. I mean, you're not going to change them obviously, right? So I guess I'm just wondering what you might say to being in a situation where you're sort of in the same orbit, so you don't have the option of withdrawing from that situation.

Diana Clark: Yeah. So there was a time when I taught a lot of loving-kindness practice, or Brahma-vihāra^[3] practice, and equanimity practice is part of that. This was a phrase that we used a lot when I was part of this teaching, and for this situation or for all of them, it is: "I wish you happiness, and I cannot make your choices for you."

And so part of the work then is to be clear about what is somebody else's choices and what are our choices. That actually starts to open things up. Like, we can't make other people's choices for them. We can care for them. We can wish them happiness, but they will make their own choices, and there's nothing we can do about that essentially. Right?

Speaker 2: Yeah, I'm just thinking of situations where their choices are impacting your own well-being or your own peace of mind, or your own... whatever it is.

Diana Clark: Yeah. Well, then it's exactly as I talked about here. There's difficulty; your peace of mind, your well-being is being impacted, so there's a sense of struggle, difficulty, uncomfortableness. And then you can look under, listen for the view that's underneath that: the view that I should be happy all the time, the view that I shouldn't be impacted by others... I'm just making these up, of course, I don't know what they are. But there's a way in which, when we start to see some of those, then maybe they can be loosened up a little bit. And then this can absolutely be the doorway to more freedom and ease there.

Speaker 2: Thank you.

Diana Clark: Maybe right behind you.

Speaker 3: You mentioned listening to your suffering or your difficulty. Can you say more about concretely how you do that? Do you ask yourself questions while meditating or what?

Diana Clark: Yeah, thank you. Thank you. There are a number of ways. One is to just be present for it, for the difficulties. And so what does that mean to be present? One way is to have a little bit of curiosity about the quality of the mind. What's happening in the mind? Not the content, not the thoughts, but the quality. So, what do I mean by that? It's like, wow, the thoughts feel like they're going around and around and around. Or it feels like the thoughts are moving through Jell-O; they're not quite clear. Or the thoughts are going really fast: "I've got to figure this out, I've got to..." So, one is to notice the quality of the mental events.

Two is to notice what the bodily experience is. Are the shoulders up because it's uncomfortable? The hands are clenched. The jaw maybe is tightened. Maybe the belly has this knot in it. So just bringing some curiosity to like—I just offered a few specific things like what's happening in the mind, how does the body feel.

That curiosity is a way we could say is meeting suffering with what isn't suffering. You're being present with it, but in a way that's not insisting that it be different at that moment. And then

with a mindfulness practice or maybe just curiosity, we could notice like, "Oh yeah, the shoulders are up here." Often when we notice, we can't help but the shoulders go down. When we notice, they may go back up again, but they go down. And then when there's just this natural softening that happens when we start to notice, then it starts to become possible to see something more than just the suffering.

Before that, we were completely tangled up in the difficulty. We brought some curiosity to it. So now there's curiosity and difficulty. And then when there's a little bit of softening, then there's a little more ease. Now we have curiosity, difficulty, and ease. These three things are happening. Before we were just, you know, kind of stuck in the suffering. This is what happens when we're suffering a lot. And when there's that ease, then the curiosity can start to see, "Oh, here's the view that's underneath." But often we can't see that when we're in the midst of difficulty. Is that helpful?

Speaker 3: Yeah. Thank you.

Diana Clark: Sure.

Speaker 4: [Inaudible off-mic comment] [Laughter] Yeah, it was a series of questions. This is my first time here. I want to ask you about what is a reasonable goal for the Buddhist path: full enlightenment and the end of suffering, or almost the end of suffering, reducing suffering?

Diana Clark: Now my microphone isn't on. That's very funny. The end of suffering is the goal. And how the end of suffering happens, and how it gets defined, is that it's not that difficulties don't arise. It's not that pain doesn't arise. It's that they're not a problem. It's just difficult. It's just uncomfortable. It's not a problem.

It's fascinating that with this practice, more and more, our capacity to be with difficulties gets bigger and bigger and bigger. I know that's certainly the case for me, that things that would have been intolerable before are tolerable. And then more and more they're just like, "Oh yeah, okay, there's that habit of the mind." It's not a problem anymore. So yes, I would say the goal is the end of suffering.

Okay. So, thank you. Thank you for your attention and your practice. Wish you a wonderful rest of the evening and safe travels home. Thank you. Or for those of you who are already at home, may you sleep well. Good night.

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1. **Dukkha:** A Pali word often translated as "suffering," "stress," or "unsatisfactoriness." [↵](#)
 2. **Gil Fronsdal:** The founding teacher of the Insight Meditation Center (IMC) in Redwood City, California. [↵](#)

3. **Brahma-vihāra:** The four "sublime states" in Buddhism, which are loving-kindness (mettā), compassion (karuṇā), empathetic joy (muditā), and equanimity (upekkhā). [↩](#)

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