

Curiosity

Dharma talk by Diana Clark

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Good evening. Welcome. Nice to see you all. Happy new daylight savings season.

I'd like to start us off with a poem this evening. You won't be surprised to hear it's by Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer^[1]. It's called "Sacred Pause."

Sacred Pause by Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer:

Only when I stop hiking do I finally see the flowers of the wild blueberries. First one, then five, then they are everywhere. How did I miss all those tiny pink bells that will soon become dark sweet fruit? How often in my haste do I miss what is right here? The thing I most long to see. Once I start seeing the blueberry flowers, I can't stop seeing them. Sometimes it's like this with kindness, with peace, with beauty, with love.

I like this idea that only when I stop hiking do I finally see the flowers of the wild blueberries. There's this way that mindfulness practice is kind of similar. We might have these ideas when we're hiking like, "Okay, I've got to get my exercise in," or "I've gotta be in nature," or "I've got to get to the top of this hill," or "I've got to get to the next junction." And there's this way we're just hiking, hiking, hiking. But when we're doing that, we're kind of missing some of what's on the side. Of course, we're noticing things—we're not falling off the trail or tripping on roots. But there's this way, when we put down this idea that "I'm hiking," that something else becomes available. We start to see more. And what Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer is pointing to here are flowers that will turn into fruit. So maybe there's a way that seeing things that are subtle and maybe not so obvious can reveal things that can really grow and have an impact on us or on others.

In this way, seeing more doesn't require more effort. Instead, we would say it's the opposite: it's stopping that allows for seeing more. It's no longer the sense of, "Okay, I'm doing this hiking thing and I've got to get somewhere." Maybe it's not stopping literally; maybe hiking is still happening, but it's noticing how we feel like sometimes we're on a mission to get things done, and we're not really noticing our experience. Being oriented towards getting somewhere, or having some particular experience, prevents us from actually seeing what's here. We're so focused on what's going to be, we don't actually see what's happening right here in this moment.

One thing that we can appreciate is that these flowers—these little blueberry flowers in this poem—weren't created by stopping the hiking. They were there already. They just weren't noticed.

So in some ways, I'd like to suggest what is a completely artificial distinction: sometimes we can be practicing mindfulness in such a way of, "Okay, well, I've got to be mindful," and we're jumping onto the object or what we think is happening without bringing some curiosity. Curiosity is more this openness about what's here. Whereas mindfulness might be like, "Okay, I've got to note this, and note this, and note that," curiosity is like, "Huh, I wonder what's here."

Sometimes when I have practice discussions with people, like in a retreat setting for example, they will say something like, "Oh, I had so many bad meditations." They'll say some version of this, and I can't help myself, I always ask them what made it bad. "Why are you assigning this label 'bad' to these meditations?" And they'll say, "Oh well, I had too many thoughts, or too much restlessness." There are so many things they could say: not enough calm, the body was uncomfortable. To be sure, these are all uncomfortable experiences. I'm not saying that this is an ideal experience, but it's not bad. It's just what happened.

There's this way in which the mind can get into this, "Okay, I've got to be mindful of what's happening," and then it falls into the evaluative. We have to judge it and assign a meaning to it or make it be good or bad. "This isn't going well. This isn't like the last meditation I had." These kinds of thoughts come in when we notice discomfort, distraction, or restlessness.

The mind moves from noticing experiences so quickly to evaluating them. And once we make this evaluation, it turns into another experience because there isn't so much curiosity anymore. "Oh, this is a bad meditation." Then there isn't so much curiosity, because curiosity would be asking, "What's happening here? What's really happening? What's going on?" without slapping a label on it or evaluating it. As soon as we assign a meaning or a value to it, we start to have a relationship with that meaning or value. We're not so much experiencing as much as saying, "Oh yeah, here's a bad meditation," and collecting data for our judgment that it should be different.

Curiosity is asking what's actually happening here. It's not asking if this is a good one or a bad one, but just what's happening.

Maybe without curiosity, mindfulness practice can feel a little bit like surveillance—like we're just watching what we're doing and categorizing it. And again, maybe I'm making this artificial distinction, but I really want to highlight this notion of bringing some openness to our experience so that we can see what's there, not just the next step on the trail. This type of surveillance—maybe we could call it "surveillance mindfulness"—becomes narrow and evaluative. It can bring tightness and a lot of effort that's getting applied.

Part of the art of practice is to know how much effort to apply, and when it is helpful to notice, "Oh yeah, there is a lot of restlessness here, and maybe we can take longer exhales to help bring some ease to the body, which might bring some ease to the mind." There might be something we could do to help support the practice, as opposed to just evaluating.

Curiosity, the way that I'm talking about it tonight, has a little bit of a different stance than surveillance mindfulness. Curiosity is interested, but it doesn't have this pushy feeling to it. It doesn't have this "things should be a certain way, let me see if they are that way" attitude. Instead, it's intentional. Curiosity is being present, but it's not heavy. It's not landing on our experience and smothering it in some kind of way.

We could say that curiosity is aware and awake, but it's not forceful. It's more gentle. When I think of curiosity, I often think of children. When people are young, they're often asking, "Why is the sky blue?" just because they want to know. Is there a way that we can bring some of this innocence? Mindfulness sometimes brings this whole baggage with it: "It should be this way, it shouldn't be that way. I should be calm by now. That person sitting next to me shouldn't be breathing so loudly." On retreats, we hear everything, all this stuff that comes up in people's minds.

So maybe curiosity brings an embodied approach to our experience. I'm using this word "embody" to highlight that curiosity is not an analysis. Sometimes mindfulness can slip into an analysis, which maybe isn't mindfulness so much anymore. We try to figure things out so that we can fix them, so that they can be how we think they should be.

We could say these are three different ways we could approach our experience. There's mindfulness, just being aware, which sometimes has this—I like this word "surveillance" just because it sounds a little bit provocative to say. How many times have I talked about mindfulness? I've got to come up with some new words sometimes! [Laughter] So here we are: surveillance. Sometimes it has that feeling. The second one is curiosity. And the third is analysis: "Let me change this. I want to manipulate, manufacture, manage, and fix my experience." This isn't to say that sometimes our experience can't be modified by the way that we approach it, but that's very different than bringing a sense of openness to our experience.

Whereas analysis is trying to figure things out and maybe "solve" the meditation, curiosity is more like a willingness to be taught by our experience. A willingness to learn from our experience as opposed to fixing it. It's such a different dynamic.

The judging mind sometimes can say, "I know what this is. This is a bad sit. I'm distracted and restless." Whereas curiosity would say something like, "Well wait, let me look again. Let's see what's really happening." In this way, curiosity changes the atmosphere, changes the experience of meditation or just being with our experience. Judgment is narrowing and maybe

even hardening the heart. If we use that kind of evaluation, we want to have a little bit of distance from it, or we have to fix it, and it turns experience into a test. "Am I passing this test, or am I failing in some kind of way?" Whereas curiosity just makes room for whatever is there.

To be sure, sometimes what's happening is unpleasant. Sometimes what's happening is not what we want. So much about this practice is: can that be okay? Can we hold an experience anyway? So often we're running away and doing everything we can to avoid discomfort, and then we end up bracing and armoring ourselves, not even experiencing our life because there are uncomfortable experiences, including being restless or having pain in the knee while we're meditating.

Curiosity helps us to receive experience, to have openness, as opposed to going out and pouncing on experience. Sometimes when we're doing mindfulness practice—and wow, did I do a lot of this early in my practice—I had this sense that I had to really be on the object, often the breath. I just didn't notice how I was jumping on it and grabbing on as hard as I could, giving myself a headache and being tense, and then feeling, when the bell rang at the end, "Ah, finally!" We can't sustain that, and we're not trying to meditate in order to make ourselves tight and constricted.

Rather than feeling tight or overheated, if we bring in some curiosity, there's more receiving, more listening to what's happening. And if there's this stance of receiving, there can be learning that's difficult to do when we're just trying to pounce onto our experience.

What is it that we can learn? We start to learn about our relationship to our experience. That's been implicit in what I've been talking about. So often we are just noticing the object of experience—whether it's the breath, the pain in the knee, or sounds—but we aren't noticing our relationship to them. This subtle way in which we're saying, "No, I don't want this this way." This aversion that's pushing against it. Or maybe this subtle way we're like, "I really want this to stay. I want this experience, this happiness, this ease. Please don't change."

When we start to see our relationship to experience, that really opens the door to freedom, peace, and ease, because we can't control our experience. Life brings us what it brings us. Sounds arise when they arise. We don't get to choose all our thoughts precisely, or the content, or when they arise. If we could, you wouldn't need a meditation practice; you would just think happy thoughts all day long and you'd be happy. We don't control our environment. We don't control when we get sick. The only thing we control is our relationship to our experience. This is the only thing that can be different, not the actual experience as it arises. What's happening is happening because of all these other things. There's pain in the knee because there's some physiological, anatomical thing happening and you're sitting in a particular position. If you didn't have that physiology or anatomy, or sit in that position, there wouldn't be pain. It's lawful why

things arise, and there's a lawful way our relationship is to those experiences. They're uncomfortable, or we want more of them. But if we can bring some curiosity to what's happening, there can be some learning, some receiving of the experience with openness, which allows our relationship to that experience to become better seen, and known in a different way.

So not only is this, "Is the mind calm or busy? What is that sound?" but "How am I relating to this?" Curiosity asks: "How is the mind meeting this moment? What's the attitude towards this experience?" Sometimes this can be dropped in like a little question. It's not that we have to find the answer. It's just to shift away from grabbing onto the object of our mindfulness, and instead to bring some curiosity like, "Oh yeah, there's the object, and then there's my relationship to it."

With curiosity, we open up where mindfulness often is just focused on the object. There's a way in which I could give this talk and not separate mindfulness and curiosity—curiosity definitely is a part of mindfulness. But I'm making these distinctions to highlight that the manner in which we practice really can have a big impact.

We begin to notice our relationship to what's happening. Maybe we notice that there's a certain amount of bracing, a certain amount of armoring, or some anticipation in the way that we're leaning forward. Or maybe there's some fear, this way in which there's a closing down. Curiosity shows us what our relationship is, and in this way, we can learn about ourselves. We can start to notice, "Oh yeah, I have aversion to all kinds of things," or "I'm actually trying to grab on to all kinds of things," or "I'm checking out from all kinds of experiences." It doesn't have to be this bad evaluation that makes us a bad person. We're just noticing, "Here's how I'm often showing up."

Not only that, curiosity can show that the difficulty—the pain in the knee, for example—is one thing, and the relationship is a second thing. Often these get conflated: the aversion and the discomfort, or the pleasant sensation and wanting more. But we can start to see them separately. We start to see what's underneath, what's half-seen.

When we start to see this, not only do we gain better self-understanding of our patterns and habits, but we also start to see some of our views and beliefs. Beliefs have such a big impact on our experience. Maybe some of our beliefs are about what it means to be mindful, or that a mindfulness experience should be pleasant. Or that it should be effortful—just like if we place a lot of effort in other areas in our lives, it'll be very beneficial.

Once a belief is seen, there can be a little more space around it. Maybe we still believe it, but maybe it's not quite as convincing. We notice some of our beliefs, like, "I'm failing unless everything turns out the exact way I think it should," or "If I don't try hard, then nothing good

will happen," or "Things are not safe unless I completely understand everything, and I have to figure everything out and make sure that I have it placed properly."

This is something that I definitely had a lot of. I used to have this idea that anything that I didn't completely understand was uncomfortable in a way that I really wanted to avoid. So I had to figure everything out. It was exhausting. And to be fair, I love figuring things out because it's fun, too. "Oh, look, okay, now I get it." But there's also this way of asking: can it be okay when things aren't known? Can it be okay that things aren't clear?

With curiosity, we can start to see some of these underlying beliefs that are fueling our experiences. Whether we realize it or not, our beliefs and our views have a much bigger impact on our experience than we realize, because they influence what we pay attention to and what we don't pay attention to.

In this way, curiosity becomes our doorway to wisdom. It reveals that experience is not only a sensation, but it's also part of our relationship to that experience, and the beliefs that are fueling it. We start to see that, as part of the Buddhist teachings, they fall into these three categories: greed, aversion, and delusion^[2]. These are strong words. But it's these ways in which we can start to see, "Oh yeah, underneath our experiences are this greed, aversion, and delusion—wanting more, wanting less, or kind of checking out."

When we start to see that, we can just open to it. "Yep, here is greed," and stop making it a problem, just allowing it to be there. And the greed for it to be different goes away. Can we just be curious, like, "Oh, aversion feels like this," and just be with it? The aversion goes away. Seeing how we're just disconnected from our experience, can we be curious and just meet it with some openness? The delusion goes away.

Just meeting things with openness, meeting whatever is there as cleanly as possible, is a way that undermines this greed, aversion, and delusion. And the more this happens, the more freedom is available. We're not being pushed around by them. We're not always seeking the next experience that's going to be better. Instead, there's this movement towards meeting experience with curiosity, with openness. This softens striving and allows us to receive experience rather than trying to dominate it.

I'll close with reading this poem again. It's called "Sacred Pause" by Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer. The title and the content of the poem don't really match, which is something I kind of love. You use this word "sacred pause" and you might think of reading scriptures or something where you have a sacred pause in the middle. And here she's out hiking, something different. I love this idea of bringing something sacred to just going out for a hike.

Sacred Pause by Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer:

Only when I stop hiking do I finally see the flowers of the wild blueberries. First one, then five, then they are everywhere. How did I miss all the tiny pink bells that will soon become dark sweet fruit? How often in my haste do I miss what is right here? The thing I most long to see. Once I start seeing the blueberry flowers, I can't stop seeing them. Sometimes it's like this with kindness, with peace, with beauty, with love.

Meeting things with curiosity is a way of meeting things with kindness, beauty, peace, and love. No longer with greed, aversion, and delusion, but just meeting our experience as best we can. As best we can with some openness. What else is here?

So, with that, I'll close and open it up for some questions or comments. Thank you.

Q&A

Audience Member 1: This curiosity you're talking about reminds me of the second factor of awakening. It's usually translated as investigation of dharmas. And my problem with that is I really don't know what a dharma is. So please help.

Diana Clark: *Dhamma vicaya*^[3] is the Pali word for investigation. A dhamma—this is so great, it can mean so many things—and one way we can translate a dhamma is "thing." Investigation of things. So it can be just that, and things can include experiences. It doesn't have to be tangible objects.

Audience Member 1: So it can't be done wrong, because anything I investigate is a thing.

Diana Clark: That's right. But maybe I'll just add one little thing. There's a way in which we can investigate and it can turn into, "Okay, I've got to figure this out." Whereas, I would say curiosity is closer to the investigation. I have translated *dhamma vicaya* as curiosity because investigation can turn into an archaeological dig type of thing. Yeah, thanks.

Audience Member 2: This practice is something I understand and I believe in, but I also struggle with it at the same time. I worry that having this acceptance... so for example, meditating and your mind is wandering the whole time and it's not that ideal situation. I struggle with this question of if you are so okay with it not being ideal, how do you have the drive to make things better or do better? Can an Olympic champion ever be a mindfulness practitioner?

Diana Clark: Yes, I bet they are too, actually. You have to be present to be the best. Absolutely. So, this is a perfectly legitimate question, and I appreciate you asking this because it's an obvious one. We're so used to having to get that whip out and work hard. But tell me, how would you define "better"?

Audience Member 2: I mean, if I'm meditating, ideally, I'm hitting that point of finding that calm groove of curiosity or calmness. Instead, if my mind's thinking about what happened yesterday or what I need to do tomorrow, then that would be less good.

Diana Clark: Yeah. So then I would say we would bring curiosity to that: "Wow, the mind is really thinking about tomorrow." And there you are, you're present, right? You're present with your experience. You're no longer lost in tomorrow for that moment. You're noticing, "Oh wow, I'm lost in thinking about tomorrow," and you're present for your experience. Your experience happens to be *about* tomorrow, but right then you're present for it.

So this curiosity is more about the attitude or the manner in which we are being with experience, as opposed to just being passive and not doing anything. The way I set it up in this talk, mindfulness is a little bit more "in there," trying to hold on to it, evaluate it, and make it bad or good. Curiosity would be like, "Well, what else is happening?" It's just being with experience. So maybe what you're pointing to is this "not evaluating as good or bad" that I was talking about. Bringing some curiosity to that experience is more of a neutral "just being with it." And then it doesn't really matter that a moment before something was what we might label bad, because at that moment we're just meeting experience in a neutral way. It's moment to moment to moment. Does this make sense?

Audience Member 3: A little personal take on this. I was a university professor and I was on the tenure track. I was finding that I couldn't get the stuff done. I had to work harder. I had to focus more. I had to turn off my curiosity. I had this perception that, you know, that's not what I want to be. I want to be a curious person who's open to these other things. I turned off my curiosity enough to get my tenure, and then I quit. Curiosity, to me, is critical to a good life. It surprises you with what you learn.

Diana Clark: Yeah. But you had to turn your curiosity off in order to be professionally successful.

Audience Member 3: Yes. I couldn't do it. Probably some other skills would have been another way to do it, but the only way I could see it was to really just focus and publish those papers. Publish or perish. Get my pubs and get my research granted. And I said, "That's not the person I want to be."

Diana Clark: Yeah. So the good news is that meditation is different than being a tenured professor. [Laughter] Okay, great. Thank you.

Audience Member 4: What role does beginner's mind^[4] have with curiosity? Being able to say, "I don't know."

Diana Clark: Beautiful. I would say it's the same. Beginner's mind is the opposite of saying that I'm an expert: "I already know this. I don't really need to pay attention." Curiosity, I would say, is

beginner's mind. Many of you might know that expression from *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, right? That's what I'm pointing to here.

Okay. So, I wanted to say I'm curious if you'll have a good rest of the evening. I hope you do. I hope you have a wonderful rest of the evening and safe travels home. Thank you.

1. **Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer:** A contemporary poet. [↵](#)
2. **Greed, Aversion, and Delusion:** Often referred to as the "Three Poisons" or "Three Unwholesome Roots" in Buddhism. These are fundamental afflictions that drive the cycle of suffering (dukkha). [↵](#)
3. **Dhamma vicaya:** A Pali term translated as the "investigation of phenomena" or "investigation of states." It is the second of the Seven Factors of Awakening in Buddhism. [↵](#)
4. **Beginner's Mind:** A concept from Zen Buddhism, famously popularized in the West by Shunryu Suzuki's book *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, referring to an attitude of openness, eagerness, and lack of preconceptions. [↵](#)

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