

Crossing the Flood: Not Hurrying and Not Tarrying

Dharma talk by Diana Clark

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Introduction

Thank you, Martha. Thank you, Hillary. And thank you, Mark, for recording. Joe, for helping out with some technical stuff, and Nancy, I saw you helping out a little bit with the managing. I just love this about IMC, that there are people who come together out of their spirit of generosity to make this stuff happen. It's something beautiful about this place.

I recently heard a teacher say, "Well really, practice is just about noticing resistance." I thought, "But wait, there are the five factors of awakening, the seven factors—all these lists, and how many suttas^[1]? How many dharma talks have I given? How many dharma talks has Gil Fronsda^[2] given?" It certainly cannot be that simple, just to be with resistance, to notice resistance, and in that way to transform our relationship with what's happening.

But some of you might be familiar with this sutta, a really short one that is the first sutta in the connected discourses, the Samyutta Nikaya^[3]. It starts with somebody asking the Buddha, "How did you cross the flood?"

The Buddha, as many of you may know, lived in the Gangetic plain in this region of India which was prone to flooding. So this was a legitimate concern. It's not like they had beautiful bridges to cross things or ferry crossings everywhere. If there was a flood, you stayed on one side. You couldn't get to the other side.

We can understand this idea of a flood in a number of different ways. One is the way we feel overwhelmed, like we're getting carried away by sadness, anger, or fear—getting carried away in a way that we don't want to be. So this person is asking, "How do you cross the flood? How do you get to the other side where there aren't floods?" Or maybe we understand this idea of a flood as an existential angst, watching old age, sickness, and death. We are all going in this direction; it's completely unavoidable. Aging happens, illness happens. This could be part of this sense of flow, and wanting to get to the other side of that.

The Four Floods

The suttas describe four types of floods. The first is clinging to sensual pleasures—searching for pleasant experience after pleasant experience. If that worked, you would not be here on a Sunday morning; you would be out there having pleasant experiences. [Laughter] Not that it's not pleasant to be here—it makes me very happy, actually.

The second is the idea of clinging to becoming. This is the feeling of, "Okay, I have to be somebody. People have to see me a particular way. I'm the one that's funny. I'm the one that's kind. I'm the one who has a particular success, or a particular failure. I'm the one who..." fill in the blank. We feel we have to make sure everybody sees that, and that they don't see the things we don't want them to see: the shame, the embarrassment. Maybe we don't even know what it is we don't want people to see, but there's a feeling that if people knew what was inside, we would be rejected in some painful way.

Another one of these floods is views—holding onto particular ideas. It doesn't matter which ones, but holding on in a way that says, "I'm right and you are wrong. This is the only thing that's true, the one that I have. Everybody else, I don't know what you guys are doing, but it's wrong." We kind of get this.

And then the fourth flood is ignorance: really not knowing what we don't know, not recognizing the delusions or illusions that we are under.

These are the four classical floods. We might say they are like currents underneath that push us towards all the other dukkha^[4] that we experience in our life. They are underneath this clinging to sensual pleasures, or views, or this idea that I have to be some particular way, or just not knowing what we don't know.

Hurrying

Somebody asked the Buddha, "How did you cross the flood?" And he replies, "By not hurrying and not tarrying." "Tarrying" is not a word usually in my vocabulary. I'll unpack it in a little bit, but I kind of like the poetic feeling of this.

Let's look at hurrying. We all know this idea of hurrying. When I'm late going somewhere in my car, there's often this subtle sense of, "Get out of my way! Don't you know that I have to be somewhere? I'm going to be late," and there's this agitation. Hurrying is the sense of trying to outrun our experience. "I need to be over there, not here. Whatever is being experienced, it'll be better then and there."

Hurrying is the sense of, "Nope, wherever I am, whatever's happening is not okay." This shows up in obvious ways and really subtle ways. "I need the next moment. In the next moment, there will be more happiness. In the next moment, I'll have more ease. In the next moment, I won't be assaulted by these thoughts or this rumination I find myself stuck in. In the next moment, I won't have this physical discomfort in my knee while I sit in meditation posture." Whatever it might be, we are trying to manage our experience, or fix it, or try to get a better version of this moment. As if that were possible! It's not possible. This moment is just this moment.

It was an amazing thing when I first discovered this. We have this idea that if I have some thoughts that are only in my mind, completely made up and imaginary, somehow it's going to change what's out there. It doesn't change what's out there. What's out there is still out there. But somehow we have this idea, "If I get irritated inside or try to hold onto it, somehow it'll make the experience different." It doesn't. Our relationship is simply that we are resisting the experience.

So hurrying is the mind saying, "How do I get somewhere better than here?" In meditation, this can look like trying to make the mind calm down when we feel restless, or trying to force some insight. "I heard meditation is good. We're at the Insight Meditation Center—where are the insights?" [Laughter] Or maybe with discomfort, we try to push and get rid of it.

The Buddha said he wasn't hurrying. He wasn't trying to rush into the next moment, which we imagine is going to be better. But of course, the next moment isn't good enough either. You could spend your entire life—and many people do—just waiting for the next moment to somehow finally be completely satisfying.

Tarrying

The Buddha also said he wasn't tarrying. Tarrying is to not dillydally, to not just wait or waste your time. It's not so much about leaning into the next moment; it's more about disconnecting from this moment. It's about collapsing or falling into foggiess, or falling into some way in which we're not quite present. It's not thinking about a future moment, but sinking, stalling, or somehow not being fully present for what's happening.

In one of my early meditation retreats—it was just a weekend retreat—I showed up on a Friday afternoon not having had enough sleep the previous few days. I was exhausted. I would go into the meditation hall, sit, meditate, and then the bell would ring for walking meditation. I thought, "Okay, well, I'm just going to go lie down for a little bit. I have 45 minutes, so maybe a 30-minute nap will perk me up." I'd go to my room, lay down on the bed, close my eyes, and boom, I'd be asleep.

Then I'd hear the bell for sitting meditation. "Oh, okay, great, get up, go to the hall, sit, meditate. That could be okay, I can stay upright." At the end of that sit, walking meditation. "Oh my gosh, I'm so tired. Go back to the room, lay down." Forty minutes later, the bell rings. "Oh, okay. Get up. Go to the hall." I did nothing but this for the entire weekend. I slept through every single walking meditation. [Laughter]

A little bit of it was because I was sleep-deprived, but a part of it—which I can look back and understand now—was just not wanting to be with the experience. I didn't want to be there while I was on the cushion. I could be with the breath as a distraction, or I could be with the body having difficulties sitting for that long. I discovered that in my life, there were ways I was

disconnecting. "Let's get on the internet and research this thing that's so important." There are so many ways we disconnect from our experience.

Having this exaggerated version on retreat helped me see how much I was doing it in my life. And then the shame came on top of it. "We're in Silicon Valley, we should be getting things done, hop to it!" My professional and academic life had been all about this, and then to discover I was just disconnecting and checking out.

This is what the Buddha was talking about. Not tarrying is not checking out, not spacing out. Hurrying and tarrying are two different ways in which we might have resistance to what's actually happening.

A Third Option: Allowing

There's a third option between hurrying and tarrying: allowing.

Can we just allow what's happening to be what's happening? After all, it is happening. It's the reality of the moment. Can we align with reality and say, "Yep, this is what's happening," even if it's not what we want? Most of the time, it's not what we want. We want a better version where we feel comfortable, satisfied, clear, and happy all the time. But that's often not what life is bringing us.

We know this intellectually. The Buddha talks about this in the First Noble Truth: there is dukkha. He points to the big, obvious suffering, as well as the small, subtle sense that something is not quite right. "Maybe the next moment will be better. Oh, that one wasn't quite right either. Now I'm going to try to control things to make sure I feel better." If you could control things, you would not be here on a Sunday morning. You would have controlled everything so that you feel very happy and everyone around you is doing exactly what they should be doing. [Laughter] We don't control nearly what we think we do, but that doesn't stop us from trying. And this trying to control is its own sense of dukkha, because it never works in the way that we want it to.

Allowing is not passivity. It's not approval. It's not liking. It's not resignation. It's just saying, "Yes, this is what's happening right now." It's not resistance. "Yes, I don't like it. Yes, I wish it were otherwise. Yes, this is unfortunate."

This morning I went for a walk after the time change. It was earlier, and it was fantastic to hear all the little birds. I didn't realize how many birds were in the neighborhood, especially as the sun was coming up. It made my heart sing. And then I noticed my mind saying: "Okay, Diana, make sure that you wake up at this time every day and go for a walk to this other place where maybe there's more birds." Even when the experience was beautiful and uplifting, there was a sense of, "It's not quite good enough because I need to have more of it tomorrow."

Can we just allow what's happening to be here? Can we let this moment be experienced more fully? Often, this moment doesn't quite meet our expectations, so we bounce right off and get lost in distractions, or we check out. We hurry or tarry. So we don't completely experience it. I've watched my mind do this so much. We're so busy trying to find something better.

Allowing means meeting the experience and knowing it as best we can. I'm not saying we have to dive deeply into the most terrible things and the floods of memories associated with them. I'm talking about meeting the sensations right now. Can you feel the experience of the chair or the cushion, the pressure against your body? Notice my voice coming through the speakers. Notice the sounds in the room. There are lots of sights happening. Maybe there are emotions—boredom, irritation, or simple ease. Maybe it's not even clear if there's any emotion. Can we allow the experience?

Experiences also include thoughts, which is trickier because we often get lost in their content, leading to versions of hurrying and tarrying. But we can be with the *experience* of thinking. Are the thoughts images? Is it a voice? Where are those images? Allowing helps us meet the moment more fully.

This does not mean negating what's painful or difficult. We are not gaslighting ourselves, pretending everything is fine when we feel awful, angry, or in physical discomfort. We're just saying, "Right now, there's a lot of physical discomfort." Physical discomfort, whether minor or terrible, is just one moment at a time. What makes physical discomfort unbearable is when we sprinkle in the idea of time. "Ouch! I hope it's not going to be like this forever. I don't know how much longer I can handle this." As soon as we add time—which is just a mental event, not a sensation—it becomes unbearable.

Notice how we want to rush to the future. That's the hurrying part, and it makes things even more uncomfortable. Allowing includes allowing that we *can't* meet the moment. Can you allow the sense of resistance? Resistance feels like an internal "no." Maybe there's a tightness in the chest, the belly getting tight, or a sense of armoring or bracing. We're saying, "No, I don't want to be with this moment, dang it." Can we allow the "no"?

Permitting the unpleasant and the pleasant—irritation, grief, fear, restlessness, pleasure, happiness, joy—is to allow the experience without hurrying and without tarrying, just being open to what's occurring.

When we do this, we notice there can be a slight, subtle sense of delight when we put down the burden of trying to change the present moment. It may not be your dominant experience—you might not be saying, "Wahoo, I get to be with this discomfort!"—but there is a relief in saying, "Okay, yeah, it's like this." Putting down the resistance creates a new ecology of the mind. It

makes room for something new to arise. Instead of pushing, "No, no, no," when there can be a "yes," there can be a blossoming and unfolding of what's going to be next.

Strange Balance

Here's a poem that points to this. Those of you who hear my Monday night talks know I quote this poet all the time: Rosemary Wahtola Trommer^[5]. This poem is called "Strange Balance":

When the boy is sneering or the glass is breaking or the woman is weeping or the streets are crowded with anger and rage, it's hard to believe a small joy has any real value. Hard to believe a single red gerbera daisy or a cup of grapefruit-scented tea might have any relevance, could bear any weight on this scale that measures what it is to be alive.

But last night, while I was steeping in worry, aching with injustice, my daughter created a stage between the threadbare couches and hummed herself a soundtrack as she leapt and spun and shuffled and flapped. And oh, how her brief flare of joy changed the flavor of the night.

An improbable balance. The way even the smallest amount of sugar transforms the bitter sauce. The way just one note resolves a minor chord. The way the barest hint of rain makes the whole desert erupt into bloom.

How to Cross the Flood

So how do we cross the flood? By meeting the difficulties of the flood as best we can. With the least amount of resistance, with allowing. Instead of meeting our experiences with disdain, dismissal, or disapproval, we meet them with presence. And if we find ourselves meeting them with disdain, can we allow the disdain? Because that's what's happening. It's not pretending everything's fine or denying our experience. It's an honest meeting of experience that transforms it.

When somebody asked the Buddha, "How did you cross the flood?" and he said, "By not hurrying and not tarrying," the person asked, "Yeah, but *how* did you not hurry and not tarry?" The Buddha replied, "When I hurried, I was swept away. When I tarried, I sank."

Trial and error. He tried to hurry through and realized it wasn't helpful. He tried to tarry and realized that wasn't helpful either. There are so many ways we can do this hurrying or tarrying, and the Buddha was doing it too. The only way he found a path was by actually doing it, instead of just memorizing lists and suttas. I'm a person who loves lists. I study suttas, I teach suttas, I know Pali^[6]. But there's something transformative about just being with our experience and not demanding that it be different. The practice is not asking us to endure terrible things that shouldn't be endured; it's asking us to learn how to be with what's uncomfortable as best we can.

The "In-Order-To" Mind

Can we be with our experience with an attitude of curiosity and openness? What's happening right now? I learned this the hard way on a long retreat. I knew this idea of allowing, and I was trying to meet my experience. And it wasn't working! I was expecting everything to be fine afterwards. I reported this to Joseph Goldstein^[7], my teacher at the time, and he pointed out that I had an "in-order-to" mind. "I'm going to allow this *in order to* make it go away. I'm going to allow this *in order to* make it be different." We subtly have an agenda where we're allowing because we want the next moment to be different. It's just a more sophisticated version of hurrying.

Instead, can we meet this moment with curiosity and openness as best we can? It's not easy. If something's uncomfortable, it's hard to stay open to it. Meditation practice helps us with this. We see the mind drifting away, and then it comes back to the anchor, like the breath. "Oh yeah, I'm lost in thought, I'll come back." It's this same movement to allow. We notice the mind wants to jump off the moment, and we gently come back.

If we can allow with curiosity and openness, it creates conditions where we can learn from these experiences. Often we can't learn from them because we're so busy pushing them away. We can learn what our usual responses are when we're uncomfortable. Is there blaming—blaming ourselves or blaming others? Is there anger? If we can allow with openness, we start to see the patterns in which we show up in the world. And when we see these patterns, their authority can start to diminish. They have momentum, so they won't stop the first time we see them, but seeing them creates the conditions for something new to arise.

Allowing interrupts the momentum of mental ruminations. The thoughts often take us to doomsville or disconnect us from reality. Allowing helps bring us back here. It increases our capacity to stay balanced with whatever life brings us.

Equanimity and Freedom

This balance leads to equanimity^[8]. Allowing is a beginning that matures into equanimity—this evenness, no matter what life brings you. Those of you who know Buddhist lists will know that equanimity is always the last member of a list. It's the one right before freedom. It's right before peace and ease.

Not hurrying, not tarrying, but instead allowing. Allowing helps increase our capacity to meet each moment fully, which helps create the conditions in which equanimity can arise. This radical contentment. Even though things are uncomfortable and not exactly what you want, there's some equanimity, and equanimity leads to greater freedom, peace, and ease. Just like in the poem, even a hint of rain allows the whole desert to bloom.

When a teacher first said to me, "It's just about noticing resistance," I thought, "You mean I did all this practice just to learn it was about resistance?" In some ways, yes. Just notice all the ways in your life where you are quietly or not so quietly saying "no" to your experience—emotions, sensations, sounds, thoughts. Notice how "no" has a contracted feeling, whereas openness and allowing have an open feeling.

I'm not telling you anything you don't already know. When we put down trying to change things we can't change, there's a gentle sense of relief, like a burden that's been put down, and more ease. From more ease, we make different decisions than when we're agitated. Those decisions most likely will support more ease.

I don't know how many times I've said it in this talk, but "not hurrying and not tarrying" is a way to cross the flood. Whether it's the flood of minor annoyances or the floods of those deep currents that underlie the dukkha in our lives.

My wish for you is that you find a way to allow whatever is available for you—an allowing that meets experience with openness and ease, that allows for greater peace and freedom in your life. And may this greater ease, peace, and freedom spread from you to others. The world needs some peace, ease, and freedom. Why not start with us?

Thank you.

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1. **Sutta:** A Pali word for a Buddhist scripture or discourse. ↩
 2. **Gil Fronsdal:** Founding teacher at the Insight Meditation Center. ↩
 3. **Samyutta Nikaya:** A Buddhist scripture, the third of the five nikayas, or collections, in the Sutta Pitaka. ↩
 4. **Dukkha:** A Pali word often translated as "suffering," "stress," or "unsatisfactoriness." ↩
 5. **Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer:** American poet. ↩
 6. **Pali:** The ancient language in which the foundational scriptures of Theravada Buddhism are preserved. ↩
 7. **Joseph Goldstein:** A prominent American insight meditation teacher. ↩
 8. **Equanimity:** A balanced, peaceful state of mind that is not easily disturbed by the ups and downs of life. ↩

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