

From Judgment to Discernment

Dharma talk by Diana Clark

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Welcome. I just returned from teaching a retreat. I am just appreciating that it's so great to sit together; it makes a difference to be practicing in community. This retreat was for experienced students, so it was a little bit different, but it's not uncommon for less experienced retreatants to come in for a practice discussion and say something like, "I don't know, everybody else seems to be doing fine. Look how quiet and still they are when they're sitting, but I'm terrible. I can't do this. I'm hopeless," or some version of this. They're feeling restless, they look around and see people sitting quietly, and they make a story about it. They make a story about themselves, about what it means about them. Having seen something out there, they turn it into a story about themselves.

There is this way in which the mind likes to appoint itself as the judge of oneself. Maybe the judge, the jury, and the measurer of spiritual progress, meditation capacity, or something like this. And so, this is something I want to talk about tonight. This judging that we do of ourselves, and the judging of others, is the thief of happiness. This is a phrase that Rob Burbea^[1], another Dharma^[2] teacher, has said: "Judgment is the thief of happiness." It turns something that is seen, that is observed—perhaps a difficulty—into an identity.

A feeling of restlessness while meditating turns into an evaluation, and then this feeling of, "Oh, I can't do it." There's a constriction and a tightness, and maybe some disappointment or collapse. Maybe it's just brief, or maybe it lasts for a long time. In this way, restlessness turns into, "I'm a bad meditator." Or maybe a sense of, "I'm hopeless," if we feel like we've been doing this for a while and we're not meeting the expectations that we would like to have.

The question for practice is not so much that we shouldn't stop seeing what's painful, or we shouldn't stop evaluating, but rather: can we see clearly without putting ourselves on trial, or putting others on trial in some kind of way where we say, "Oh, this is bad"? It means something about these other people, or it means something about me. From just a limited bit of data, we construct a whole story about ourselves and about others.

Dharma practice is about finding more freedom, more ease, and peace. It's not about becoming a perfect spiritual meditator or a perfect spiritual self. It's about having more openness in meeting each moment, as opposed to a closed idea of who we think we are or who we think those other people are. We're not trying to turn ourselves into somebody who's always calm, never feels emotions, doesn't feel fear, irritation, or confusion. This practice is about whether

we can meet life with less clinging, less fear, and less judgment in which we're really putting ourselves down.

This way in which we judge ourselves quietly drains the energy and the qualities that really support practice. Judging ourselves takes away the interest we might have, the patience, the humility, and the tenderness—some of the qualities that are really needed to do this practice. We don't want our spiritual practice to turn into just one more place in which we have to perform, or one more place in which the inner critic can get really loud and be persuasive. We don't want this to feel like yet another self-improvement project, another place where we might succeed, fail, or measure ourselves. Dharma practice is inviting something gentler and braver.

I'm not saying that we don't do any evaluation. We do need to evaluate. But can there be an honesty about how our practice is going and how we're showing up in the world that doesn't collapse into shame? That doesn't collapse into an evaluation of who we are as a person because we're restless when we meditate, or sometimes we're irritated, or sometimes we're not calm? Maybe the practice is inviting us to have the willingness to begin again. Just like we do with meditation: we have the object of the breath, the mind wanders, and we just begin again. When we find ourselves completely lost in thought and story-making, we just begin again, over and over. It doesn't matter how many times we have to begin again. This can be so helpful in our life as well as in our meditation practice.

We're still seeing clearly, we're still learning. We can still recognize what causes suffering and what causes less suffering, but we don't have to make a cage out of what we see, feeling boxed in by an evaluation of ourselves.

We might say that discernment, rather than judgment, is what's needed here. Discernment asks, "Where does this lead? Is this helpful? Is this healthy? What I'm experiencing, what I'm doing?" It's born out of care, wanting to reduce suffering for ourselves and for others. Whereas discernment is asking, "Where does this lead? Is this helpful?", judgment is asking, "Well, what does this prove about me as a person? What does it prove about those other people?"

Discernment is essential for this path of practice. We need to be able to see what leads to greater freedom, what kind of behavior, what kind of speech, and what kind of qualities of the heart lead to greater ease. We notice what kind of thoughts lead to greater openness, kindness, and empathy with others. We notice what kind of actions bring greater peace for ourselves and others.

Judgment sees the same thing about what's helpful and what's not helpful, but then it adds something about identity on top of it. "Therefore, this means something about me as a person," or "Therefore, it means something about those people over there." Judgment adds this extra part about identity, and this turns out to not be helpful.

It's kind of like the smoke alarm in the kitchen. You're cooking and the smoke alarm goes off, really loud: *Beep, beep, beep*. It's like, "Okay, this is helpful. It's good to know when there's smoke happening so you can take care of it." Whereas judgment, instead of going, "*Beep, beep, beep*," might be saying, "You're a lousy cook. [Laughter] Just give up now. You're always making a mess in the kitchen and look what you've done again." It's responding to the same situation, but with a whole different feeling about it. One is supportive and helpful, and one is not so helpful.

Before he was the Buddha, before he was awakened, he noticed that his mind had two types of thoughts. He had a whole bunch of thoughts and he put them into two categories: those that are helpful and those that aren't helpful. Having made that evaluation, he said, "I'm going to cultivate these ones that are helpful and work to diminish, let go, and abandon the ones that aren't helpful." He didn't say, "And I'm a bad person because I have these ones that are unhelpful." He just noticed, "Okay, it's pretty clear that these experiences are helpful and the other ones aren't, so I'm going to go in this direction." And that's what helped him to become awakened.

So, of course, there's an evaluation, but it's just an evaluation to help us find more peace and freedom. We're not expecting to become passive or to no longer pay attention to anything. There is a middle way. It's not permissiveness where anything goes, we shouldn't evaluate anything, and it doesn't matter what you do. It's also not about self-condemnation and beating ourselves up. It's about seeing clearly, as best we can, without attacking ourselves and without attacking others.

You might ask, "Well, okay, that sounds nice, but how do we do this? How can we support this idea of having less identity with the self or an 'other' that gets associated with what we are observing?"

One way is to be with our direct experience. Notice the constriction when judgment happens, or when we are feeling uncomfortable because something we said feels like, "Oh, I was a little harsh there. I think I could be less harsh." Judgment says, "I'm failing, or I'm broken, or I'm angry." Mindfulness simply says, "Anger is being experienced." I know this is clunky language—this isn't how we would normally speak—but it's a real difference to say, "Anger is here. Anger is known. Anger is being experienced," as opposed to saying, "I am an angry person." It's a really different experience. Or maybe we would say, "Discouragement is here," or "Constriction," or "Openness or ease is here."

When we see the experience as an experience, it begins to open, and things can unfold differently. When we're really identified with "I'm an angry person," it perpetuates the identity. It boxes it in, instead of allowing the experience of anger to be known—recognizing that it's

uncomfortable, allowing it to arise, and then pass away. As soon as we say, "I'm an angry person," we hold on to it and are tangled up with it in a way that makes it persist.

So, this is one thing to do: just recognize experience as experience. Recognize when we're adding something on top, like, "Because I had this experience, it means X, Y, and Z about me." Maybe it does, maybe it doesn't, but we don't have to hold on to it. We can say, "It looks like anger arises over here when I feel like the driver is right on my tailgate." That happened to me as I was driving over here. I noticed a little flash of anger when somebody was right on my tailgate. These things happen.

Something else we can do to help practice with judgment is to notice when we construct a vignette. Maybe you come home, and there's a whole pile of dirty dishes in the sink. Somebody you share your household with has just left all these dirty dishes, and some irritation arises. Maybe there's this thought, "I can't believe they're doing this again. They're so inconsiderate, or disrespectful," or a whole list of things we could come up with. We're making a judgment about who they are as a person because there are dirty dishes in the sink. We take one event and assign so many things to a person based on an observation. If you live with them, I'm sure we're recognizing patterns; it's not a single time. But there's more to people's humanity than this.

A practice we can do is ask: what else is here? What else is being known? This person maybe left dirty dishes in the sink, but there's something more to them than that. Instead of assigning an identity—"they are like this"—can we maybe just feel our disappointment, frustration, discouragement, anger, or whatever it might be? Or if we don't even know the person, can we recognize that we don't know them? So often we are assigning motives to people, and we don't really know their motives. So often we don't even know our own motives, and yet we think that we know others. Can we recognize that we don't really know everything about what's happening?

A third thing that we can do to help with judgment—and I've done this a few times when I felt really tangled up and felt like I needed a different perspective, and I found it really helpful—is to look at the situation differently. Re-view it. Look at it in a different way to better understand all the conditions that came together to create that experience. Instead of it just being one experience that we assign a label to, recognize that it arose out of all kinds of things happening. This is a big message of Dharma practice: to see how things are related. It's not just one isolated event; that's impossible.

For example, perhaps you meet a friend for coffee. She is telling you about some difficulty she is going through, and while you're listening, you're noticing a little bit of disquiet within yourself. You're not really connecting with her or what she's saying. You're vaguely worrying that maybe you should be feeling a little more empathy or compassion for your friend. Instead, you're

noticing that you're feeling disconnected. Later, when you reflect on that, it bothers you. "Why couldn't I be there for my friend? I wasn't really fully present for what she was saying." We might feel like, "Maybe I'm not a good friend. Maybe I don't like her." We make it entirely about ourselves.

Can we evaluate it differently? Re-view it from different perspectives. There are four different ways we could look at this. One is, maybe you had a headache. Because you had a headache, and at the coffee place it was loud and there was music, you just weren't feeling very well, and that influenced how you were meeting her. We could say your present moment inner experience influenced how you showed up. When we are judging ourselves, we tend to discount our biology or physiology. If you have a pain in your back, you show up differently. It affects us. We're not machines; of course it affects us.

Maybe the reason why you were feeling a little bit disconnected from your friend is because the two of you have a little bit of unresolved conflict from an earlier meeting. Maybe in an earlier meeting, she was giving you all kinds of unsolicited advice, and you didn't really like it, but you didn't say anything. Now you're feeling a little bit uncomfortable around her. We could call this past inner conditions that might have contributed to feeling disconnected.

Or maybe there was a way in which she was telling her story where you felt like she was holding back. You felt like, "Okay, there must be something missing to this story because this doesn't quite make sense. What is she not saying?" Or maybe she was hamming it up and laughing about something that was kind of awful, making it seem light-hearted, and you didn't quite know how to react to her. We could say that's present moment outer—what was in the environment in the present moment.

And a fourth reason why you were feeling disconnected might be that you have memories associated with the coffee shop where you met. Maybe you got in a big fight with somebody you care about deeply there, and that was the first time you'd been back there. So that would be past outer.

The only reason why we're using these categories—which are contrived, superficial, and not necessarily distinct—is to recognize that there are so many different things coming together to create each situation. Sometimes we just blame ourselves entirely or blame others entirely, not recognizing that a lot of things are coming together: things happening in the present moment (inner and outer) and things from the past (inner and outer). This helps with our judgment—our sense that "these people are that way" or "I'm this way." It becomes more of a recognition: "Okay, all these conditions came together, and I behaved this way. It doesn't mean I'm a terrible person. It doesn't mean I'm a great person. It means I behaved that way at that time." And this is where more freedom can be.

As soon as we start blaming, we close down. We're no longer connecting or being open to ourselves or to others. Blaming creates such a strong sense of separation. If we're blaming ourselves, we separate ourselves from everybody else. If we're blaming others, it's always, "Oh, those people over there." It really highlights this separation, especially when there's this self-righteous indignation. I'm not saying that harm doesn't happen. Of course, harm happens. But we back ourselves into a corner if we're stuck blaming, separating, and judging.

Instead, can we use some discernment? "The way this person is speaking to me feels disrespectful. I need to set some boundaries." You might even leave the room, or interrupt them and say, "This is not okay. This conversation is not working. Maybe we could talk about this another time." Use some discernment, recognizing that the inner critic is just a way of beating ourselves up.

It's true that we can use some evaluation to see how we're showing up in our life and in our practice. Again, I'm not saying that we should be permissive and allow anything to happen. But can we just notice experiences as experiences and not assign identities to them? Not "This means something about me" or "This means something about you." It's just what's happening right now. That allows things to unfold.

This habit of judgment, this habit of blaming, does soften. And then there's just so much more ease in the world, so much ease in one's life. It can feel like a habit, a pattern: "Of course I'm going to judge. If I don't judge myself harshly, who else is going to? I need to in order to be the best version of myself." There's plenty of scientific data showing that that turns out not to be true. The inner critic makes us shut down, not want to take chances, and not grow and learn. I could do a whole other Dharma talk on that, and I've done a number of them.

I'm not saying that we need to abandon wisdom about what's helpful and what's not helpful. I'm not saying that we don't set boundaries with others. I am saying, can we stop making these evaluations, these judgments about our character—who we are as people—based on experiences? Instead, recognize that who we are as people, and who other people are, is dynamic, changing, a process. There's no need to have it be one particular way or apply one simple label.

This movement from judgment to discernment is a way in which we can find more and more peace, more ease, more freedom, not only for ourselves but for the people around us. We are not dismissive, saying, "Oh, that person doesn't know what they're talking about." Instead, we say, "Yeah, confusion arises for that person on occasion." [Laughter] Instead of making it about something permanent about them.

May you have greater peace and freedom. May judgment soften for yourself and for others. In this way, we can create the world in which we want to live. Instead of black and white, good and bad, just allow everybody to have their full humanity.

I think I'll stop there. Thank you. I'd like to open it up for some comments or questions.

Q&A

Question: In not judging and having discernment, how important is it to embrace the Buddhist teaching of there not being a separate inherent self?

Diana: Yes. There is no separate "I," there is no separate self. That is what I was pointing to with this idea that it's just a moment of an experience. I was pointing to the fact that there isn't a separate, inherent self, but often when we hear these teachings, it can feel abstract. So, I wasn't using that specific language, but that was what I was pointing to. Thank you.

Question: This is something that came up when you were talking about how the inner critic interferes. I started wondering why I like to sit with other people, but not so much alone at home. Even though I have a very nice place where I could sit, things don't quite work as well. I notice that when I'm at home, thoughts come up, I get sleepy, and my inner critic is right there, being rude and beating me up. It even beats me up if I sit there and feel at ease and presence. The inner critic comes and says, "You're kidding yourself. You're a foolish person." But when I'm here with other people, the inner critic has, at least for me, far less power. I wonder, is that something you can comment on?

Diana: It's magic. [Laughter] Why are you having a different experience when you're meditating here with others than at home? I'm not exactly sure. Does anybody else have this experience too, that it's a little bit easier to meditate here where there's less inner critic? Does anybody else want to suggest why that is?

Audience Member 1: I have interruptions at home. The cat. [Laughter]

Audience Member 2: I think I remember Gil^[3] saying something to the effect that just being in a space with other people that have the same intention sort of multiplies it. Having many people in the room together with the same intention is a big part of it.

Diana: Yeah. I know for me too, I'm often commenting on how nice it is to practice together. There's just this recognition that it's really lovely to practice together.

Audience Member 3: I heard a different version of that, which was like, "Why can't I do this on my own, but I can finally do it in Sangha^[4]?" And the response was, "It sounds like Sangha is super effective for you and really helpful for you right now." I thought that was a nice way of

reframing it. It's not that something bad is happening. It's like, "Oh, just lean into this thing that is actually really nice for you."

Diana: So, this means you should come to IMC every day. [Laughter]

Audience Member 4: I think there's an energy about groups that get together, whether it's a football team, PTA, or with your kids. In meditation, everyone is in an energy space. I'm not into the "happy talk" words, but I do believe that there are times when a group of people is meditating and an energy comes about that can be aimed at people or aimed at causes, and it can be very effective, but very subtle. People may not agree, but I'm told that.

Diana: It's called synergy. Well, thank you. Thank you all for your practice, for practicing together, and wishing you a wonderful rest of the evening and safe travels home. Thank you.

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1. **Rob Burbea:** (1965–2020) A respected Dharma teacher and author of *Seeing That Frees*, known for his teachings on emptiness and jhānas. [↵](#)
 2. **Dharma:** A Pali/Sanskrit word commonly referring to the teachings of the Buddha and the underlying truth or universal law of nature. [↵](#)
 3. **Gil Fronsdal:** The primary teacher at the Insight Meditation Center (IMC) in Redwood City, California. [↵](#)
 4. **Sangha:** A Pali/Sanskrit word for the Buddhist community. Traditionally referring to the monastic community, it is often used in the West to refer to the community of all practitioners. [↵](#)

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