Knowing the Edge of What We Know

Dharma talk by Diana Clark

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Good evening. Welcome. Jim, I'm wondering if the volume can be just a tiny bit higher. Thank you. Yeah, there we go. Thank you. Nice to see you all.

I'd like to start this evening with a little vignette. It seems like I'm often offering a version of this vignette to make a number of different points. A number of different Dharma[1] talks have this same little story, because it's so rich and it might just be an experience you actually have.

Let's suppose that you send a text message or DM to somebody: "Hey, are we still on for dinner on Thursday?" You don't hear anything back, and you're waiting. Usually, this person texts back quickly. A few hours later, nothing. You think, "Oh, they're probably busy. No big deal. It's not a big problem." And then after a while, you start to think, "Was there something odd about our last conversation? Maybe they don't really want to have dinner with me." This story starts to sneak in. If we give the mind enough time, it will produce a whole backstory and motives. You write a small novel about why this person hasn't texted back.

It's quite something, right? In the absence of knowing, we don't know. We just don't know why we haven't heard back, but the mind fills in the blanks with all kinds of stuff, which is perfectly normal. The issue is that we believe it. [Laughter] We believe these stories that are getting fabricated. They are probably made up from a certain amount of data or something that we know about the situation, but in the absence of knowing, the mind wants to fill things in, makes up the complete narrative, and then just believes it as if it is the truth.

But the truth is, we don't know. The truth is that we don't know why that person hasn't texted back until we get a message: "Oh, sorry. I left my phone at home. Yeah, Thursday sounds great. See you then." Often, we don't even recognize how, in a moment, something that we had believed and held onto just disappears. We don't even notice that it was completely fabricated and constructed.

The mind would rather have a bad explanation than no explanation. We might even have a low tolerance for not knowing or for this empty space. It can be a form of wisdom to say, "My current thinking is maybe they don't want to talk to me because of something we discussed last time, and they're afraid I'm going to bring that topic up again." But then it can be wise to say, "But I don't actually know. This is what my current thinking is. This is a story that I'm making up." I find myself often using that exact language: "Well, the story I'm making up is A, B, and C." I say this to highlight that I don't really know exactly why this thing is happening. Using this

word "story" helps me not cling to it. If I'm using that word when I'm explaining it to somebody else, it lets them know the limits of my knowledge and that I'm making a lot of this up. It can be a form of wisdom to recognize that we don't know, just as it can be wiser to simply say, "I don't know."

Saying "I don't know" can lead to more freedom. We might think we know why somebody did something, but we don't. We might know why something is happening, but we don't. The other day, I was complaining about something. I was just complaining and complaining. I felt like, "This is weird. What's happening? Why am I doing all this complaining?" And then I realized, "Oh right, yesterday I got a couple of shots, and today I'm feeling a little out of sorts after getting some vaccinations." I just wasn't feeling well and I was irritated. I hadn't quite noticed that it was just because I wasn't feeling well; instead, everything was irritating. It was fascinating how, as soon as I remembered that I was just feeling a little out of sorts, everything was fine. Before, I was assuming that what I was thinking or experiencing was actually the truth. Sometimes it doesn't even occur to us that an explanation is just an explanation and not the truth. Recognizing what is just an explanation can help us let go. Seeking what is the truth can help us let go of explanations. There can be a relief in knowing that we actually don't know.

This is maybe where humility comes in. Humility is not this idea of trying to make ourselves think, "I actually don't know anything; everything is uncertain." Humility is not distrusting every conclusion that we make, and it is not adding "maybe" to every sentence. At least, not in the way that I'm defining it here. Humility is recognizing the limits of what we know. It's not pretending that we don't know anything; it's recognizing what we do know and what we don't know. Humility is not claiming that we know something when we don't really know it.

Perhaps what we do know, for example, is what somebody said. What we do know is how it made us feel: the clench in the stomach, the intake of breath, and the tightness as our shoulders go up. We may feel fear, or that they're going to harm us, or that we have to protect ourselves in some way. We do know all these things, but maybe we don't know their motive. Maybe we don't know why they said that. Maybe we don't know how they are feeling physiologically at that moment. Maybe they got some vaccinations and aren't feeling well either, and so they're saying something that has made us feel uncomfortable. It can be really helpful for us to recognize what we do know and what we don't know, and to make a distinction here.

Recognizing "I don't know" is not a failure of understanding. It doesn't mean that we're not capable of knowing. It's just recognizing what we do and don't know. This had a big impact on me back when I was working in corporate America. There was a big meeting in which decisions were supposed to be made, and some new information was presented. That was the first time that I had actually seen this information. Many people in the room had already seen this, but I

hadn't yet. There was a big discussion about all this information, and then they turned to me: "Diana, what do you think? Should we do this or that?" I was like, "I don't know." I remember a very senior person in the organization said, "Actually, that's probably the best answer." I hadn't had time to assess what I had just learned. So sometimes it's really helpful to say "I don't know" just to recognize our limits.

However, while saying "I don't know" can be wise, it can also be hiding something. This is where it gets a little bit more interesting, because these very same words, "I don't know," can point to two different things and do something quite different. I've been pointing to how it can be wise to say that I don't know, and maybe it even sounds spiritually sophisticated. Saying "I don't know" can feel spacious, open, and onward-leading, and perhaps it is. But these same words can also be a hiding place, or a way in which we want to stop the knowing. What if sometimes this idea of "I don't know" is not opening a door to more freedom, but instead is closing the door so that we don't have to walk through something we don't want to walk through?

Here's an example. Perhaps we've been practicing in a particular way for quite some time in our meditation practice, or maybe we've gone on a long retreat. We have this idea: "I need to practice this way on a long retreat." But as we're practicing, we start to notice, "I'm getting increasingly tense and grim," or we start to get increasingly filled with ideas of self-improvement and constantly measuring ourselves. "Am I better yet? Have I achieved this yet?" The practice starts making us feel a sense of lack, inadequacy, or insufficiency. We might say, "I'm not sure this meditation is helping," but everybody says that it is, and that other person in the sangha[2] did this type of thing, so it must be helpful. We have this nagging feeling: "I'm not sure this is helpful for me right now. It feels like there's a collapsing and a hardening of the heart when I'm doing these extended meditation periods."

At first, this uncertainty might be an honest reflection; actually, we don't know if this meditation is helping us find more freedom and ease in our life. But after a while, maybe it starts to become a little bit clearer. "There's something about the way I'm meditating that's not helpful. It is causing me to feel more tense and disconnected from myself, rather than feeling more settled, easeful, or open." But we have an idea of what a good practitioner should look like, and what a good practitioner would be doing. So we're meditating in the way that we think a good practitioner would. We don't want to let go of this idea, even when the way we're practicing is not helpful.

In this situation, we might say "I don't know" because we don't want to know. We're saying "I don't know" because we're afraid that if we admit what we're starting to recognize, it might require a lot of changes. Knowing a pattern of ours—a pattern of assuming our practice should look like somebody else's, a pattern of continually measuring ourselves and feeling inadequate, or a pattern of doing something just so other people will be impressed—might ask something of

us. We might have to recognize that we have these beliefs. We might have to change a practice that we took a certain pride in. We might have to let go of the idea that a good practitioner does things in a certain way, and we might have to admit that something we valued is not what's right for us right now. Something else might be better for us.

We might be saying "I don't know" because we're hiding behind those words. We don't want to admit something that might challenge us or ask us to understand something new about ourselves. This can be uncomfortable. There may be a sense of disappointment, a sense of failure ("I can't admit that this isn't working well for me"), or a reluctance to give up an identity. So we just keep saying, "I don't know."

Saying, "I don't know whether this is helping," can feel easier than admitting, "I know that what I'm doing isn't helpful, and I keep doing it anyway." Sometimes "I don't know" is not about preserving openness; it's postponing a recognition that has already begun. I have certainly practiced in ways that weren't helpful, but I just didn't want to admit it. I was practicing in a way that was different from what all the teachers were telling me, but I thought, "No, I think that this is better." I ended up getting so tense and filled with anger, and it really was not the right direction.

"I don't know" can mean two different things. It can mean, "I refuse to pretend that I know what I don't know." But it can also mean, "I'm not ready to admit what I already know." Not knowing can protect us from false certainty, but it can also protect us from clarity, which is not what we want. From the inside, these two versions of not knowing can start to feel identical. Both sound like "I don't know."

There's also a way in which the idea of "I don't know" can be unhelpful when it slides into some type of certainty. It can slide into, "I don't know, and it's not possible to know," or "Nobody really knows." We can just disconnect from the issue, be dismissive, and have this sense that everyone has their own truth, there is no real truth, there's nothing to know, and it doesn't matter. It's fascinating how we can turn this uncertainty into a certainty. We turn it into an epistemological conclusion that nothing can really be known anyway.

These are the different ways in which "I don't know" can show up in our practice and in our lives, and the different ways it can be helpful or unhelpful. But then the question naturally arises: Is there anything that we can know? What can we know?

We don't have to decide between knowing everything and knowing nothing. For example, suppose there is some resentment that shows up in your life, and you don't know the root cause of it. You don't know all the childhood conditions or why a particular person activates it. But we may discover something important. We may not know a whole lot about the origins, but we may discover that when we replay all the grievances, the resentment increases. We may

know that. We may know that when we start composing imaginary speeches of what we're going to say to somebody, the resentment increases. We may know that when we tell the story for the hundredth time, suffering increases. There might be a whole lot that we don't know about something, but we might know based on our experience, "These things increase suffering. These things increase discomfort and unclarity. These things close doors and do not lead to greater freedom." We can recognize that while we don't know everything, we do know something. We know what increases suffering in this particular scenario based on our experience.

The Dharma makes a fairly bold claim: it says that suffering can be understood, the conditions that lead to suffering can be understood, and the release from suffering can be understood. We can take all the uncertainty we have—uncertainty about the future, which is impossible to actually know until it's here—and simplify it. We can recognize what leads to suffering and what doesn't, and what leads to greater freedom and what doesn't.

We could say there are three kinds of wisdom related to not knowing. Sometimes it's wise to say, "I don't know," to recognize the limits of our knowledge. Sometimes it's wise to recognize when we're saying, "I don't know," because there's something we do know but don't want to admit. We recognize that this "I don't know" is a way of not looking because what it points to is uncomfortable. And finally, there is the wisdom of knowing what leads to suffering based on experience.

Practice is learning the difference between these, and learning to find the edge on the inside between what we know and what we don't know. Practice is also recognizing that the edge between what we know and what we don't know might be made up of assumptions, guesses, hopes, fears, and beliefs that we may be reluctant to acknowledge.

Sometimes wisdom is knowing that we don't know. Sometimes it is recognizing that this "I don't know" is a place where we're hiding. And sometimes wisdom is recognizing that we do know what leads to suffering and what doesn't. As we practice more and more, we do not necessarily become certain about everything or learn everything there is to know. In some ways, practice is simply about knowing more about knowing and not knowing.

Maybe I'll just end there. Thank you. I'd like to open it up to see if there are any questions or comments.

Q&A

Audience 1: As a kid, I was taught to just be straightforward. I've always been... well, I don't know what it was like when I was a kid, but now I'm just straightforward. I don't beat around the bush. How many times did I hear that when I was a kid? [Laughter] I mean, then there's your attitude and your tone of voice. It totally changes it. **Diana Clark:** Nice. **Audience 1:** I can angrily

say, "I don't know." [Laughter] There are many versions, but it's so simple just to be straightforward with people. Sometimes it upsets people when you're too straightforward. I do get in trouble. [Laughter] Anyway, that's my thought. **Diana Clark:** Thank you. And sometimes people can say, "I don't know. I don't know," as a way to kind of stop the conversation. It's a way of saying, "Stop talking about that." It's not actually that they don't know, but they may be saying that. Yes.

Audience 2: Thanks for your talk. I actually heard a Dharma talk yesterday. The teacher was talking about grief, like when somebody might be dying. She was talking about how she would be in the anteroom before seeing this person and say, "I don't want to be here, but I'm going to do this anyway." For me, I push through a lot of times on things I don't want to do. I think what you were saying helped clear some of that fog out. You can use these different ways of "I don't know"—like what do I know?—and maybe have a softer approach instead of this binary: "Do I push through? Do I not push through if I really don't want to do something?" In a way, it's kind of like what you're saying with "I don't know." **Diana Clark:** Yeah. We can get ourselves into traps if we think, "Okay, this has to be completely one way or completely another way." It's really helpful to recognize: what is the edge? What do we know, and what do we not know? Having some clarity around that can be really helpful. Having clarity about what our hesitation is to do something, and why we want to do it, can make it easier to do it. That's what I'm imagining you're pointing to. Thank you. Anybody else have a comment or a question?

Audience 3: Thanks. I was thinking about when you were saying "I don't know" in terms of clear seeing. If I'm saying "I don't know" in a defensive way, maybe it's because I don't want to see something. Maybe seeing more and more clearly lets me see what I know and what I don't know. **Diana Clark:** Yeah. **Audience 3:** But sometimes what we see clearly is uncomfortable and we don't want to feel uncomfortable. **Diana Clark:** Right. Like a truth about myself that I don't want to see right now. **Audience 3:** Yeah. **Diana Clark:** Great. Thank you. Seeing clearly. Thank you.

Audience 4: I was thinking about the difference between grief and depression. Depression is sadness that's stuck. Similarly, there are problems when we're stuck... **Diana Clark:** In either knowing or not knowing. **Audience 4:** Knowing. **Diana Clark:** Nice. **Audience 4:** And that sort of freedom is recognizing the continuum of how much we know or don't know. **Diana Clark:** Very nice. Yes. Thank you. Stuckness. Excellent.

Okay. Well, thank you all for your kind attention. Wishing you a lovely rest of the evening and safe travels home. Thank you.

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1. **Dharma:** In Buddhism, the teachings of the Buddha or the fundamental truth of how things are. ↩
2. **Sangha:** A Buddhist term referring to the community of practitioners. ↩

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