The Doorways We May Not Notice

Dharma talk by Diana Clark

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Good evening. Welcome. Welcome. Can we turn the volume up just a tiny bit, Jim? Thank you. Yeah, there we go. Great. Thank you.

I've been gone for a few weeks and it feels good to be here, to be back practicing with you all. So tonight, I want to share a poem that I appreciate, and in some ways, this poem is its own dharma talk, and I'll maybe offer some reflections in the context of this poem. You will not be surprised by the poet, Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer[1]. And this poem, it's called *How It Is Now*.

It points to something very ordinary, and yet profound in the sense of transformative power. And that is highlighting how a mindfulness practice—just being present for what's actually happening—can really lead to a different life, or not. [Laughter] Maybe it just leads to the same life, but with a more sense of contentment, or ease, or happiness, or freedom, or something like this.

So, here's this poem. It's called *How It Is Now* by Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer.

In every moment, doors appear. Not literal, of course, with knobs and locks, but metaphoric. Yes. With thresholds and casings and simple invitations I feel in my body, an architecture of possibility.

I didn't used to notice them. Was it because they weren't there, or because I simply had not yet learned to see them? Now I marvel at how omnipresent they are. And all they ask of me is that I choose to step through them or not.

I recognize them more in my body than with my mind. As if the body has spent decades learning, "Oh, this is what it feels like when a door appears." As if the mind is at last learning to say, "Yes, body, I believe you."

Now I trust that I can change everything with just one step across that invisible threshold, or not. Now I know once I take that step I can't return to the place I had been, and there will always be another door. Another door. Another door.

I like that this poem begins with "In every moment doors appear." I find myself drawn to this image because sometimes we can have this feeling of a door opening. There's this saying, "When a door closes, a window opens," or we could do the opposite, "When a window closes, a door opens." But there's a way in which this image, or even this thought we might have, can be

a trap in the sense that we think these doors that open have to be big movements, something obvious. And what they open into has to be some grand important thing that's next.

But what if they're just ordinary? Maybe what they open up to next is just ordinary. Or maybe that experience of a door opening is ordinary. There's a way in which sometimes we miss things that are just so ordinary, and we're imagining the doors that lead to a completely new understanding, new relationships, new careers, whatever it is that we're looking for, or all those other people behaving differently.

But I would say the doors that open in dharma practice are something simple. For example, maybe somebody says something irritating, and maybe the door that opens is just this recognition: "Oh, I can just be irritated. I don't have to respond. I don't have to make this into a big problem. I don't have to make them a bad person. I don't have to make them an irritating person. It can just be, oh yeah, here's something that's irritating." And maybe there's this way that the door opening is just this idea that I don't have to follow the usual way, the way in which we have this momentum and these habits and these patterns that lead us a certain way.

Or maybe we notice that we're anxious and a little bit uncomfortable, and maybe the doorway is like, "Yeah, anxiety feels like this. Wanting things to be different feels like this." And in some ways, that's a doorway opening into a sense of doing something different than what we often do. Trying to get rid of the anxiety, trying to get rid of the discomfort. Of course, we try to do this. So many of us come to meditation practice because we have anxiety, and the last thing we want to do is be with it. We're trying to get away from it. That's why we started this whole meditation thing to begin with.

Or maybe a doorway could be when you're having a conversation with somebody. Instead of half tuning out and coming up with your reply that's going to be really savvy and smart and really get the point across, instead, maybe you just put that down and are listening. Letting the other person feel like they've really been seen. Letting the other person feel like they've really been heard. Maybe that's a doorway, out of these usual habits.

I don't know if this is still true, but I know a number of years ago I had some curiosity about people using their phone, because I noticed that I'd be having a conversation with them and then while I'm talking to them, they would be scrolling. I'm like, "Is this me, or what's happening while they're scrolling?" And so now it's not that as much as people look at their smartwatch, right? To see like, "Oh, my watch buzzed," and whatever it is, is much more important than you are. It's quite something. It's an experience that I think all of us have experienced when other people that we're having conversations with are more interested in what's happening on their gizmo.

I learned this expression—I don't know if this was just this weird thing that anybody ever says—but this idea of phubbing, a phone snub. [Laughter] So there you go. There's this way in which maybe the doorway is to not do that. Just because somebody mentioned something and you feel like, "Okay, I got to look that up," or your watch vibrated, doesn't mean you have to look at it, right? That could be a doorway.

So the poet, Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer, asks whether those doors were already there, or whether she simply had not seen them. And I would say this is what mindfulness practice allows us to recognize. Instead of just our life going in autopilot, we start to see, "Oh yeah, there's all these exits, doorways, or on-ramps that we just hadn't noticed before." Instead, we were just allowing patterns and momentum to dictate the way in which our life is unfolding. Because what is our life but a collection of one moment after the next after the next?

So there's this way in which mindfulness practice makes visible what habit had concealed. The way that we just usually do things on autopilot. But mindfulness is a way in which we're just present for what's happening. And then we start to see all kinds of things. We begin to recognize some of these habits that maybe we didn't even recognize were habits. We just were thinking, "Well, that's just the natural order of the universe." We didn't even think that things could be different. "Of course, when I'm bored, I'm going to look at my phone. Of course, when somebody says something irritating, I'm going to disconnect, or my shoulders go up with tightness."

Recently I had this—this is such an ordinary thing. I was on the phone with my dear mom, and she was sharing how things were going with her. She hadn't seen me for quite a while, and so we were catching up on things. Then I had this idea, "Oh, I should tell her about how earlier today I had an allergic reaction to some insect repellent and I was just covered in welts." It was quite something, the extreme itching. If you've ever had welts and hives, you know just how your skin feels. But I was just feeling into it, and I realized, "You know what? I don't think I'm going to share this with my mom right now." Her daughter, that she hasn't seen for quite some time, and there's no reason for her to worry about this or to be thinking about this. This is such a minor, ordinary thing, but it was a way of me feeling into what would help my mom feel loved and feel seen, and maybe a little bit more connected with me in a way that doesn't have to be connected through worry, or "Oh Diana, are you taking care of this? Are you doing this?"

Again, this is just an ordinary thing. But what happened is when I recognized that I could choose not to say that, of course, I have no idea what the consequences are for her. But here are the consequences for me: a subtle way of my feeling like I was taking care of her. Whether that was actually true, whether she felt that, I don't know. It's impossible for me to know. But for me, it was a nice feeling too, kind of out of respect and care for how she was at that moment. So just

this idea that these doorways can be ordinary, but that mindfulness practice helps us to see them.

And then Rosemerry Trommer talks about the manner in which we can see them. Coming back to this poem, she writes:

I recognize them more in my body than with my mind. As if the body had spent decades learning, "Oh, this is what it feels like when a door appears." As if the mind is at last learning to say, "Yes, body, I believe you."

Because there is this way in which our minds have this very convincing explanation for everything that's happening: "Okay, this is happening because of that, or because of this," and that may be true, but it also may not be true. The story, the narrative that the mind is coming up with, and the body very often may be revealing something that's not quite fully acknowledged.

I'll share for me that I notice when I'm meditating, sometimes I sit with my hands resting like this, but if I start to grip them and twist them a little bit—and I don't even know that I'm doing this until I start to feel the pressure—I realize, "Oh, there must be some tension going on that the mind hasn't quite noticed yet, but the body is getting expressed by what's happening with my fingers." I guess when I'm sitting here, you guys don't see what's happening with my fingers. Or also, I notice that I've spent a lot of time meditating, so I notice all kinds of stuff. If there's been a certain amount of settledness, and then for whatever reason there arises in the mind a story and a little narrative, it's fascinating how it shows up as a certain tickle in the throat. It's fascinating. This is so reproducible. I've observed this so many times.

Often I wouldn't have known that this big narrative was happening. I would have just known that, "Oh, there's a sensation in the throat." But having learned this, I can start to recognize, "Oh, what's going on? What feels compelling that there was a narrative there?" So I'm just sharing with you some of these ordinary, mundane things that happen over here in this body-mind system when meditation happens. But having learned the mindfulness, I can be a little bit better tuned in to what's actually happening. Because there's this way in which we often are letting the story in the mind be the only voice. Whatever the mind is cooking up, we're thinking, "Okay, well that's just exactly what's happening." But the body is giving us information too. This is what Rosemerry Trommer is pointing to.

And so then this poem continues, and it says:

Now I trust that I can change everything with just one step across that invisible threshold, or not. [Laughter]

I love this kind of "or not." First, I want to talk a little bit about this part: "Now I trust that I can change everything with just one step across that invisible threshold." There's this way just a very small response can change the direction of a moment. Pausing instead of speaking sharply. Allowing ourselves to feel something uncomfortable, instead of immediately reaching for distraction, getting lost in narratives, reaching for our phones, standing if we're sitting, or sitting if we're standing. And this moving across this threshold, as I've said, doesn't have to be impressive. It can just be asking a question, or acknowledging that we don't know something.

But she adds this "or not." This recognition that just because we recognize there's a door doesn't mean we have to step through it. Sometimes there's a way in which there can be this sense of, "Oh look, here's a possibility." And often we have this idea of, "Okay, if there's a sense of an opening, then we should walk through it. Of course, that's what doors are for." But there's this way in which invitations can sometimes become like demands. Especially in modern discourse, we have this idea of, "Go out, seize the day!" [Laughter] My goodness, right? "Take risks, seize the opportunities, say yes, grow, change." And there can be this feeling like, "Oh my gosh, every time there's this sense of a door, I feel like I'm supposed to do something just because it's a door. Don't have fear. Be courageous." These are some of the messages we hear.

But sometimes the wise thing is to not go through the door. Sometimes the wise thing is to not act. Sometimes the wise thing is to act, and sometimes the wise thing is to not act. So not every impulse, not every sense of possibility needs to be followed. Of course not.

So maybe in some ways the question is not so much, "Can we see the door? Can we sense the door?" But with dharma practice, the question becomes, "How do I know whether to step through it? Should I step through this door now that I recognize it, now that I can feel it in my body perhaps?" How do we learn to discern what's helpful, what's not helpful? How do we understand what's leading towards suffering and what's leading away from suffering?

This is a big part of this practice. And I would say that this practice is not that we contort ourselves into somebody who always knows what to do, because that's impossible. We like to feel like we know what we're doing. We don't like uncertainty, but uncertainty is really all there is. And we just keep on trying to manufacture certainty again and again and again, which is okay. That's what humans do. We want to feel more comfortable. But instead of trying to make everything certain and try to figure out, "Should I go through this door or not?" can we observe it or consider it as an opportunity for learning? An opportunity to greater understanding, to understand ourselves, some of the patterns that we have.

So rather than figuring out exactly the right thing to do, we can have this sense of, "Okay, I think it makes sense to me, or my gut is telling me to say no to walking through this door, and I'll learn from what happens. I'm not going to walk through that door, and I'll learn from what happens."

It's impossible for us to know the right decisions. Of course, it doesn't mean that we're just willy-nilly and do whatever we feel like all the time, or do nothing. But there's a way in which we want some certainty, but what a game-changer it is if we feel like, "Okay, I'm going to learn something from here." And what I'm not saying is, "Okay, you'll always feel comfortable." Chances are you're going to feel uncomfortable. That's life. That's the way life is. But this idea of what's helpful and what's not helpful, what leads towards suffering, what doesn't lead to suffering. So you can have this idea that, "I'll learn something from it."

Here's something else: how do we have even an inkling of which way to go? Here are some clues. You can look at the quality of the mind, the attitude of the mind, the mood of the mind. I'm using kind of vague words, so I'll get a little bit more specific. Does this mind have a sense of wanting? "I need this in order to be happy. I need this in order that other people will finally respect me. I need this so that other people will finally see me. I need this because I feel so uncomfortable the way things are, and this seems like it'll be different." So, is there a really strong sense of wanting?

Or maybe there's a sense of resistance? "Oh, I got to get rid of this because it feels so uncomfortable. I got to get rid of this because somebody criticized me—some random person on the internet criticized me—and now I have to get rid of it. I have to resist this or not do this because it seems unbecoming. I don't want other people to know that I have these feelings or this experience, or that I have these weird shoes that are really comfortable [Laughter], but I don't want them to see me wearing them." So there's this way in which a door might feel attractive and we might want to go through it. But if we look at the quality of the mind, we can say, "Is there a strong sense of wanting or not wanting?"

And we know from the Buddhist teachings that a lot of wanting or not wanting eventually is going to lead towards not the freedom we're looking for. But if we're waiting for perfect equanimity, we might be waiting a very long time. I shouldn't say very long time, just sometimes equanimity is not available. So if we tune into this way we have this sense of, "I want this in order to have a particular outcome," or "I don't want that in order to avoid something else," then that gives us a clue: there might be some suffering there. Is there a way in which there can be some more steadiness or balance or equanimity? Because if we only follow what feels attractive, or avoid what feels threatening, that's not freedom. That's just following our preferences and getting pushed around by them.

So discernment isnt certainty, but there's a way in which we can maybe sense the consequences from the quality in the mind: if there's wanting, or not wanting. This idea of having some discernment, and this recognition that actually I don't know, I want to know there isn't certainty about this door that I now see. Should I go through it or not? There's this kind of humility to recognize that we don't know.

And maybe as I was pointing to earlier, the doorway is to not walk through that other doorway. The doorway is to do nothing, or not walk through that one. And sometimes wisdom is expressed through restraint, or patience.

I love going back to this poem that Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer writes: *Now I trust that I can change everything with just one step across that invisible threshold, or not.* I was using this "or not" to refer to whether or not we're crossing that threshold. But what if this "or not" is about the first part of this phrase? *I trust that I can change everything with just one step across that invisible threshold.* With mindfulness, and noticing these doorways opening, and some of them we walk through and some of them we don't, we start to recognize, "Oh, we don't control things nearly as much as we want to, nearly as much as we think we can."

She's writing, "I trust that I can change everything... or not." We think that we can. We think we can change everything sometimes. We think we can make things go a particular way. But what a powerful thing it is to recognize that very often, actually, we can't control things. And there can be a relief, this putting down of these impossible projects of trying to control things. I would say this is part of discernment: to recognize that we don't control things in the way that we would like.

And then we come to the last stanza in this poem. Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer writes:

Now I know once I take that step, I can't return to the place I had been. And there will always be another door. Another door. Another door.

This way in which we can't return to where we've been, because of course there are consequences. Whether we walk through the door, there's consequences for that, and whether we don't walk through the door, there's consequences to that, and we have learned something. So of course we can't go back to where we were, because now there are consequences including some learning. It's just not possible because what was there before doesn't exist anymore. Now is now, a new now.

So, there's this way in which we might think, "Okay, I'm just going to hang out here and figure out if I'm going to go through this doorway or not." But what we learn changes the conditions for what happens next. So what happens next will always be a little bit different.

But I like that Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer has this end that she says, *And there will always be another door. Another door. Another door.* This way that we don't have to make this moment be a decisive moment of our lives. It doesn't have to be this big giant, "Okay, here's my one opportunity to do something." It's true, we're not going to have endless opportunities for things. I have told this story where when I was a research scientist, I applied for a grant to continue my cancer research at that university, and I didn't get the grant. I was heartbroken, like, "Oh my goodness, how is this going to work?" But that created the conditions for my now

having a life that feels so much more meaningful. I felt it was very meaningful for me to be working on cancer and to be helping people in some kind of way, but this touches my heart in a different way. But it all started with, I had this one opportunity, I could have resubmitted and rewrote it and all this kind of stuff, but I didn't.

So there's this way that we don't have to turn every mistake or loss or difficulty into something like a failure, or a missed opportunity, because there's freedom in just letting the past be the past. I just said, "Oh, there's a silver lining from this failure." But what if we don't have to make silver linings? What if it was just like, "Yeah, okay, that didn't work." And it's that simple. It doesn't have to mean something about us. It doesn't have to mean anything, really. Learning happens. We can't help it. So there's this way that we can learn from what happens without requiring everything to justify itself. Maybe what we did was just unwise. Maybe it was just painful. Maybe it just did not turn out the way that we hoped it did. Can we acknowledge this without needing it to find some hidden benefit, some silver lining? Can we just learn from it? And let the past be the past.

So I would say this is one of the gifts of practice, is that we can recognize the doors that are opening, and we can cultivate some wisdom about those doors that we see opening. Should we walk through them? Will that lead to more suffering? Will that lead to more freedom? Sometimes we tend to think that these doors are these big giant movements, but it's just ordinary things too. And there's a way in which our life starts to unfold differently just through these small ordinary things that are happening.

So I'll read this poem again. It's called *How It Is Now* by Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer.

In every moment, doors appear. Not literal, of course, with knobs and locks, but metaphoric. Yes. With thresholds and casings and simple invitations I feel in my body, an architecture of possibility.

I didn't used to notice them. Was it because they weren't there, or because I simply had not yet learned to see them? Now I marvel at how omnipresent they are. And all they ask of me is that I choose to step through them or not.

I recognize them more in my body than with my mind. As if the body has spent decades learning, "Oh, this is what it feels like when a door appears." As if the mind is at last learning to say, "Yes, body, I believe you."

Now I trust that I can change everything with just one step across that invisible threshold, or not. Now I know once I take that step, I can't return to the place I had been. And there will always be another door. Another door. Another door.

Thank you.

Q&A

And now I'd like to open it up, see if there's some comments or questions.

Participant 1: And Diana, there was a question on the chat about what's the name of the poem.

Diana Clark: The poem is *How It Is Now* by Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer. And I thought about, you know, I could do this whole other dharma talk with this same poem about how she uses the word "now" in here. I didn't even go into that here. This is so rich, so many things, but *How It Is Now*.

Anybody? Yes.

Participant 2: When I think about the doors in the poem, and maybe it's just semantics, I'm not sure, but I think of them as choices, and that it can be kind of beautiful to see more little, like you said, mundane little choices and kind of pausing. To me lately, it feels like there's not anxiety, like, "Oh, I've got to make the right choice." It's like, okay. Like I was with a 15-year-old who's got lots of challenges, and just being with her and just taking the time to think about what I wanted to say in response to what she was saying. Or like a day later today, sending her a text, what do I want to say? Anyway, so for me, I feel like I've found it interesting and kind of joyful to see just all the little choices. Like, should I have asked for the mic? I was thinking about that one. I don't know, I always talk, you know, such an extrovert. [Laughter] I love it. I love it.

Diana Clark: Yeah, I think we could use the word "choices" for our doorways. But one thing—this is such a subtle thing—is that with the idea of choice, then there's often a strong sense of a chooser: "I have to choose. It's up to me." A doorway feels more like an opportunity opening, or something like this. But I definitely agree we could use the word choice. Thank you, Elena.

Somebody else have a—

Participant 3: Hi. One thing I was thinking about in terms of doorways, like I feel it in my gut, kind of get a sense of it. And I feel like sometimes, actually seeing a doorway is like you're seeing it, but then it's like one of those holographic things—as you get closer to it, everything's changing. It made me think of the dharma, its characteristic of immediacy and onward-leadingness. So it's like you almost don't need to go through any doors, but also like you're going through doors.

Diana Clark: Yeah. And that's absolutely true. Yes. Well, I don't know what to say. I'm using this poem and it's also true that we feel like we have choices to make, and we often have that experience. But what you're saying is too, that we're not going through any doors, there's just things unfolding, and don't ask me to explain this. [Laughter] I'm not sure that I um, yeah, it's because this is a poem that I'm using, I liked it, I think it's a vehicle to talk about something that's ordinary, but also what's implicit in here is time: that, okay, there's a doorway and then

I'm going to go through it, and then something else is happening. But what the dharma shows us is like, oh, it's just always just *now*. It's just now. It's just now. It's always now. So, thank you, Daniel.

Participant 4: Yeah. I sort of went through that. I was engaged to a Norwegian man and I lived in Norway for about nine months and couldn't decide what I wanted to do. I mean, I knew I should leave him, but I didn't know if I could make up my mind. But it really didn't matter because one evening I said to myself, "I'm leaving him." And that was it. I didn't need to analyze it. I just needed to wait. It makes sense.

Diana Clark: Yeah. Sometimes it just becomes clear like, "Oh," it just becomes very clear. I've had moments like that too.

Participant 4: So that was it.

Diana Clark: Mm-hmm. That's a big doorway. But there are smaller doorways that we can just recognize. Maybe this poem is pointing to just recognizing that there are smaller doorways too.

Participant 4: That was a big doorway. But I didn't need to get stressed about it. I just needed to wait till the answer came and that was it.

Diana Clark: There you go. So just clarity arose. I think for some people, big decisions like this, it does happen like, "Oh, there's just all of a sudden some clarity." Yeah, I've heard of this. Thank you, J.

Participant 5: So nice to have you back.

Diana Clark: Thank you.

Participant 5: Yes, I was going to ask if Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer is actually your pen name, but I'm not going to ask that. [Laughter]

Diana Clark: Wouldn't that be great if I were a poet? I would love it.

Participant 5: I've never felt that I had a good grasp of the Third Foundation of Mindfulness[2]. But when you talk about as I'm on the doorstep trying to figure out if I should go through or not and examining the content of my mind, is that the Third Foundation?

Diana Clark: So the Third Foundation has a lot of stuff in there other than just this, but this kind of stuff is in there: greed, aversion, delusion. But it also, the language is clunky language that we often know, like an "expanded mind" or a "surpassed mind." We often don't know how to talk about it, so often we'll use that language to kind of point to concentration. Is there greed, aversion, delusion, concentration, and just—I'm using this word "quality" or "attitude" or

"mood." So rather than specific content, just orientation maybe. So I would say that is the Third Foundation. Yeah.

For those of you who don't know what we're talking about, the Third Foundation of Mindfulness is found in the Satipatthana Sutta[3] text that the whole insight meditation uses as their foundational text.

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

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1. **Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer:** An American poet whose work often explores themes of mindfulness, transformation, and finding beauty in ordinary moments. ↩
2. **Third Foundation of Mindfulness:** Part of the Buddha's teachings on mindfulness (found in the Satipatthana Sutta), focusing on mindfulness of mind (cittānupassanā)—observing the state, mood, and presence or absence of mental states like greed, aversion, delusion, and concentration. ↩
3. **Satipatthana Sutta:** A foundational discourse (sutta) in early Buddhism that establishes the four domains (foundations) of mindfulness: body, feelings, mind, and dharmas (mental phenomena/principles). It is the primary textual source for modern insight (vipassana) meditation. ↩

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