Caring for What We Cannot Control

Dharma talk by Diana Clark

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So, today is the second talk in this series: *When Life Does Not Obey Us*. As I mentioned a little bit before the guided meditation, this is kind of an obnoxious title, but I wanted it to be something that causes us a little pause. I wanted it to have a little edge to it. And for us to recognize, is this true? Do I expect life to obey me? Or maybe it's so obvious to us, but we wouldn't dare to put it in those words. I know for me, this idea of things that are supposed to obey me doesn't sound nice. But I would like to suggest that there are these subtle ways in which we are asking, demanding that life obey us.

One of the most intimate ways that we discover that life does not obey us is with our bodies. We may have ideas about how the body should be, how it should feel: comfortable, strong, energetic, youthful, flexible, healthy, reliable. We want it to obey our plans. We want it to fall asleep when it's time to fall asleep, be awake and alert when it's time to be awake and alert. We want it to digest food easily, heal quickly, sit still in meditation, not interrupt our plans, and not get in the way, but just enable us to do what we'd like to do.

And sometimes the body cooperates. It feels fine. We don't even notice. And then there are other moments when the knee hurts, the back aches, the stomach feels unsettled, the shoulders tighten, the body's tired. And our first response is so often: "No. I don't want this. No, not now." And maybe we could say this is one of the obvious ways or places where we meet the theme of this series, that life does not obey us.

But there's this way in which the body can feel like "me". It can feel like "mine". We often say in general speech, "my body, my health, my energy, my appearance, my comfort." We say this in the same way we might say "my car, my blender, my computer or phone" that we're listening or watching this on. In ordinary language, this is completely natural.

But in practice, we begin to see that we use this word "my" and yet we don't control it. And particularly with the body, we start to notice it's not an object we own in the way that we imagine. It's not a machine that follows instructions. It's not a project that we can perfect. In fact, the body is doing its own thing. So much is happening in the body without our permission, without our control. As I mentioned in the meditation, we're not controlling the breath. We can sometimes. Hearts are beating. Hair is growing or not growing. The nervous system is reacting. Aging is happening. So we can influence the body, but we're not controlling it. We might even notice how much influence do we really have.

We can bring kindness and wisdom to how we live in the body, but we can't command it. And this distinction is really important. We can care for the body, but we cannot fully control it. Because we can't control it doesn't mean that we should be passive. It's not saying, "Just be passive. Don't take care of yourself. Pain doesn't matter." That is not what we're saying. "Illness doesn't matter." That is not what we're saying. "Just accept everything and do nothing." That's not what we're saying because that's not wise. That's not wisdom. That's not being present for our life.

Practice invites something much more nuanced. Can we care for the body without imagining that we control it? We listen to the body as a living process rather than trying to dominate it as a possession.

When we are present for our experience, we start to notice that there is the physical experience itself, and then there's the suffering that's added by the demand that the physical experience be different. There's what's happening, and then there's this mental overlay that we're putting on top. Those of you who've been in the Buddhist scene will recognize there's the first arrow[1] that life brings us, and then there's the second arrow of the suffering that we're putting on top, the ways in which we're stabbing ourselves with this second arrow.

The point is not to pretend that bodily vulnerability is no big deal. The point is to notice how much suffering comes from arguing with this fact of embodiment, this fact of not being able to control the body. The body is doing what it's doing. We can understand the body was never going to be obedient. It's impossible. It will always change. It will always need care. It will always have limits. It will always be affected by causes and conditions. And it's just more suffering to think that it is possible to make that otherwise—to make it not be due to causes and conditions, to have it not have limits, to make it not change, to have it not need care.

Meditation practice is a place where we can see this clearly. We sit down maybe with a simple intention: going to follow the breath. And then almost immediately, the mind wanders. An itch appears. Maybe the body wants to cough, maybe the body wants to do a lot of swallowing. Maybe the posture needs adjusting. Maybe the knee is uncomfortable. We may have this thought that the body is getting in the way of meditation. But actually, this *is* a meditation. This is where the practice is, not in having a body that behaves perfectly, quote-unquote, but in discovering how do we relate when the body is just being the body? How do we relate when we notice that we can't control the bodily experience? Can we practice with just how the body is?

Because it's so immediate, it's something that's very palpable, the experience of how the body is. We can feel the difference between tightening around some of the discomfort, and maybe some opening like, "Yeah, this is discomfort." The difference is in our relationship. "This has to

be different. I wanted to control it. I want to make it be some other way." That's tightening. Opening is, maybe there's a big breath, "Yeah, okay. It's like this right now."

So, we can move. Maybe move the body, make adjustments. We can care. And we can do this movement—physically adjust the posture, or move the attention, move the heart. But this movement can be done from aversion: "Make this stop. I hope that if I shift in this way, it'll stop." Or, we can move from care.

There's this shift from ownership, thinking that we have ownership of the body, to relationship. Recognizing how we respond when things do not go the way that we would like. So, instead of "My body should obey me," perhaps we can ask, "Can I be in relationship with this body?" Instead of "How do I make this body do what I want?" can we shift to "What is this body asking me to notice?" Instead of "Why is this happening?" we can shift to "How can this be met?"

I'm not saying this is easy. I am saying this is a doorway to more and more freedom—this shift from a sense of ownership to relationship with what's happening. Because let's be honest, some bodily experiences are very difficult to meet. And there's often a sense of grief when we recognize that we can't control the body in the way that we want to, and it cannot be made all the time to be comfortable, reliable, or to no longer age.

But there could also be a sense of relief as we make the shift from a sense of ownership to relationship. Because if we recognize that the body was never really fully ours to control, then we don't have to take every change so personally. It's not a failure that the body is doing its own thing, we could say. It's not a personal failure, it's not a spiritual failure. It's just the way that it is.

So, the body is not under control in the way that we want or think, and we can learn to be present with it. Not with indifference, not with resignation, or trying to control, but with mindfulness, tenderness, patience, and appropriate care. And in this way, the body becomes not an obstacle to practice, but a profound teacher. We start to see some of our habitual ways of responding to difficulties. Because the body is often showing us difficulties, and it's so tangible, it's so palpable here and now.

Peace doesn't come from getting life to obey us, because that's impossible. We don't control life. Peace comes from learning how to meet life as it is. Even here, even now. Peace doesn't come from getting life to obey us. Which is good news, because life doesn't obey us. But peace comes from learning how to meet life as it is. As best we can.

Thank you. Thank you for your practice. And I'll see you tomorrow.

Reflections

It's lovely to see your chats. It's lovely to feel connected. What a beautiful thing, right? That over these years this sangha[2] has gotten created. Thank you. Bye-bye. See you all tomorrow.

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1. **First and Second Arrow:** A well-known Buddhist parable from the Sallatha Sutta. The Buddha explains that the "first arrow" is the unavoidable physical or mental pain of life, while the "second arrow" is the subsequent, optional suffering we cause ourselves through our reaction, aversion, and resistance to that initial pain. ↩
2. **Sangha:** A Pali word that traditionally refers to the community of ordained Buddhist monks and nuns, but in modern contexts frequently refers to any community of Buddhist practitioners practicing together. ↩

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Additional transcripts and links to YouTube videos at Moonpointing.com with deep bows of appreciation to Dan Murphy.

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