A Different Kind of Safety

Dharma talk by Diana Clark

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Good evening. Welcome.

Going to start this evening just with a recognition that we all want to feel safe. [Laughter] Jim, can we have it just be a little bit louder? I'm so happy that we're amplified, but yeah, there we go. Thank you.

All of us want to feel safe. Of course. Of course we do. And much of what we do throughout the day is part of helping ensure that we feel safe. We feel safe and have a certain amount of ease. A certain amount of planning that we're doing, we could say, is to help us feel safe. Or, maybe we're rehearsing a difficult conversation, as a way to help us feel safe. I'm using this word 'safe' in a really broad, general way. We could also use phrases like 'to have a sense of well-being,' 'to have a sense of ease,' or 'have a sense of peace.'

I want to say this is sensible. Of course we do this. We need to care for ourselves. We need to care for others. And part of caring is ensuring there's a certain amount of safety. We look for our external circumstances—our environment, our finances, our health, the individuals that we surround ourselves with—as a way to help ensure safety. We're trying to take care of some of the external things, but also the internal things. We try to know what's going to happen. We try to predict what's going to happen. We like to have this feeling of being in control, or this feeling of being right—that we got it right, we know what's true, and those other people... I don't know what they're doing, but we have it right. This is a way in which we often have this narrative going on as a way to help us feel safe.

But there's a way in which probably all of us have recognized that both these external and these internal psychological things really only provide a limited amount of security. It can't guarantee that we're going to be safe, because we're humans. We're middle-sized mammals. We are vulnerable. We try to pretend that we're not, and we organize our whole life to try to not feel it. But the truth is, humans are vulnerable. Our feelings get hurt, our bodies get injured. It's part of the human experience. So, it doesn't matter how successful we are with arranging our external lives, or having our psychological inner life all cleaned up and neat and tidy. It doesn't mean that we will never experience a lack of safety.

So, a question comes up: Is there a kind of safety that doesn't depend on circumstances being just how we want? Is there a kind of safety that's different than the vulnerability that humans experience?

And today I'd like to share a very short verse that is from a nun at the time of the Buddha, who, as part of her awakening, had this exclamation, this utterance, this verse that she shared. Some of you might know there's the Therigatha[1], this collection of verses from women at the time of the Buddha who had awakening experiences.

And this poem, the nun's name is Sanghā—the same word that we use for community. This poem isn't directly related to sangha, but that just happens to be her name. And the translation I'm going to read here is... part of it is an accurate translation, and then part of it is just really interpretive. [Laughter] The translator, Anne Waldman, back in the early '90s, translated these, and she wanted to add a little color and spice into them, and I love it. I think it's great what she added here. So just to be clear, it's not a 100% pure translation. We could call this *Sanghā Speaks*. Sanghā is the name of the nun:

Home I've left, child I've left, cherished herds far behind. Lust, even lust left. Left ill will too. Gone, ignorance. Ignorance, back off. I'm safe without you.

You can imagine it's these last two lines, right? They're a little bit more colorful, but I love this: *Ignorance, back off. I'm safe without you.* I want to talk a little bit about this.

Just as I was pointing to earlier, in this poem, Sanghā is talking about external things—home, family, livelihood—that she leaves behind. We might imagine that she's referring to her ordination. This is what happens when people ordain and join the monastery; they leave behind their family, their household, their livelihood, all these things. So she's pointing to that.

And then she points to these inner forces of lust, ill will, and ignorance. Some of you might recognize that these are the three classic unwholesome roots. We call them roots because they underlie all suffering, often translated as greed, hatred, and delusion. Here she's talking about lust, ill will, and ignorance. I'm saying that these are synonyms. Actually, in the Pali[2], they are—it's the same Pali—just this translator used different words. And these roots (greed, hatred, and delusion) underlie our suffering partly because they shape our perceptions. When we are filled with hatred, when we are filled with aversion, that affects what we see, what we notice, and it affects our interpretation of what we notice as well.

And so in this poem, Sanghā is describing something radical. She's describing becoming free of greed, aversion, and delusion. She's describing awakening. When there are no longer these underlying roots, they've been uprooted. And the Pali, if this were a really accurate translation, would talk about uprooting these: greed, aversion, and delusion.

So partly this is a little bit surprising that she's talking about safety this way, because so often we think about safety as coming from having things, from keeping things, from protecting ourselves with things. Often we have this idea of safety that we just have to have more barriers, or fortresses, or shielding, or armoring, whether literally or figuratively. But here Sanghā is

pointing to all these things that she let go. She's talking about safety through relinquishment, through letting go.

And so we might ask: what does safety really mean then? Because, as I mentioned earlier, there's this relative safety that comes from our circumstances, our environment. And we could say there's another kind of safety that comes from our relationship to these circumstances.

We could look at why holding on to things doesn't provide the safety that we imagine it will. In my mind, I have this idea like, well, it works on roller coasters! You know, we kind of have that feeling, right? So much else in our life, we just have to hold on. But she's pointing to something really different: let go. Let go if you want to have more safety.

Because what happens is, if there's something in our life that we are trying to hold on to, we're trying to hold on to things that don't stay. We're trying to hold on to things that change. That's their nature. There's this way we want the people that we love to remain with us, to stay with us. So we're holding on to that. Or we want our bodies to remain healthy and filled with vitality. So we're holding on to ideas of what we used to be able to do. There's a way in which we hold on to wanting pleasant experiences to continue. Of course, when something is nice, we don't want it to end. Very often, we're holding on to plans. These things that we're planning to help ourselves feel safe—we're holding on to this idea that, "Oh, this needs to work out. It needs to do what I'm thinking." And if it doesn't, that's going to be a terrible problem.

None of these is inherently wrong. There's nothing wrong with wanting the people we love to remain with us, or pleasant experiences to stay. But the difficulty arises when our feeling of well-being, our feeling of safety depends on getting what we want, when it depends on preventing what we fear. Because the truth is, how often do we actually get precisely what we want? How often do we prevent anything fearful from arising? I mean, if you were able to do that, you wouldn't be here. I'm often saying this: you wouldn't be here on a Monday night listening to a Dharma talk. You would be having perfect happiness out there. You wouldn't need meditation, Dharma, or anything like this. Hopefully, you'd be making world peace wherever you went.

So, of course, we have this way in which we want things to be a certain way, but they just aren't. And the more that we have this idea, "Okay, I need to be safe, therefore, I'm going to hold on to this relationship the way it used to be," or whatever it is, the more we hold on to it, the more we start to notice, "Oh, it's not staying." It's not staying in the way that we want it to be. It's not remaining unchanged in the way that we want, or it's not changing the way that we want.

So our attempts to protect ourselves, in fact, can generate a certain amount of anxiety or vigilance: "Is that going to go? Is that okay?" This anxiety like, "Is this going to stay?" If we feel like our happiness, well-being, and safety are dependent on it, then there's this feeling like, "Oh,

this has to be okay, because if it's not, something terrible is going to happen." And so we just spend so much of our life energy trying to make things "okay," quote-unquote. We become preoccupied with trying to make the things that are uncomfortable go away and the things that are comfortable stay.

But in addition to this, there's a subtle safety that we might be doing that's like defending and protecting a sense of self that we have. For example, we might have this sense of ourselves as being somebody who is competent, or someone who is kind, or someone who has it together. This is often what we like to portray: "Oh yeah, I got it figured out." We're trying to convince everybody of that. "I know what I'm doing, I got it figured out." Nobody has it figured out! We just like to pretend like we do.

But when these identities of being someone who figured it out, or kind, or competent, or whatever it might be—when these are challenged, then we feel threatened. Then we don't feel safe. In this way, a criticism may feel like danger. If somebody were to criticize us, we feel threatened. Or if there's a way in which we realize, "Oh, we were wrong," this may feel completely intolerable. Because if a person tells us we've been inconsiderate, when we have this idea of ourselves as being considerate, there's something inside of us that kind of contracts immediately. There's this sense of like, "Oh no, I don't want this." We feel hurt. We feel threatened. Maybe we even feel angry and lash out.

But what's actually being threatened here? It's just an idea we have about ourselves. Just an idea. And some years later, maybe we'll have a different idea about ourselves. Probably when we were very young, we didn't have that idea about ourselves. These ideas about ourselves are not permanent, static things. They're just ideas.

So what if we didn't need to defend our self-image? What if we didn't need to defend this sense of self that we have about ourselves? What might become possible if, when we recognize that we're wrong, when we recognize that we've made a mistake, that we're imperfect, that we might be misunderstood—what happens if all these things happen and nothing feels threatened inside of us? It's like, "Oh, I made a mistake. Oh, I was wrong." And it's that simple. It doesn't have to be connected with a big long story about ourselves, or something that we make up trying to defend ourselves.

This is a subtler understanding of safety. It's not freedom from feeling uncomfortable, or freedom from losing things, but it's this freedom from no longer continually having to protect and bolster a sense of self. So, a sense of safety can also be interpreted as no longer having to protect our self-image.

So you might ask, well, if this idea of trying to hold on to things causes so much suffering rather than freedom, then why do we keep doing it? Right? We know this. We know that holding on is

not the way to greater and greater freedom. And yet we still do it. Why is that? For me, I'm kind of fascinated by this. Like so many things that we understand intellectually, and yet we have these patterns in which we just find ourselves repeating again and again.

And this is maybe pointing to the ending part of this poem: ignorance. Also, we could say in this context, delusion. Ignorance is not seeing clearly. Because we could say that ignorance is just a simple misunderstanding of what does provide lasting happiness, of what does provide safety. And we rarely recognize that we have these assumptions that, "If I just hold on, I'll be safe." We don't really know that that's underneath so much of what we're doing. And it's this holding on that's leading to suffering.

I heard this from Matthew Brensilver[3], another Dharma teacher. He talked about how delusion, or we could say ignorance, launders greed and aversion. Just like the way that companies or individuals might do money laundering to make the money look better, there could be a way in which ignorance can make our greed or our anger appear reasonable, or necessary, or virtuous.

For example, greed may appear as enthusiasm, or it might appear as dedication, but it still has this underlying, "Yes, I need more. I need more." It's underneath there, but it's dressed up as dedication. Or there's this way aversion might show up as righteousness. When I was working in corporate America, we were working with another organization, and my boss had decided that we weren't going to go along with something this other organization had proposed. It's like, "Diana, I want you to write a letter filled with righteous indignation." Like, "Oh, okay." [Laughter] I just remember really struggling with this. Not because I didn't know what righteous indignation was, but it was just this way that we're going to push people around, and it really was just aversion. It really was just aversion.

So to come back to this little vignette that I offered earlier, where somebody criticizes us and aversion might arise... Nobody really likes being criticized. And there might be a way in which the mind starts explaining: "They don't understand what happened," or "They're being unfair," or "After everything I've done, how can they say that?" This is just a way that our aversion starts to look like justified indignation. It's so much easier just to recognize, "Yeah, this is aversion. I don't like it," without having to add all these extra things onto it. But to try to make ourselves feel better or look better, we add on this indignation so often. And we could say that some of the ignorance or delusion is not seeing that the indignation is actually not helpful. And maybe this way in which our being defensive starts to sound or look like standing up for the truth.

I remember this was also quite a few years ago. I was teaching a course, and the students had to write papers. They turned in a paper, and my co-teacher had given them a grade on it and given them some comments back. The co-teacher had shared with me the comments that he had made. The student came up to me and said, "You know, I'm kind of disappointed in these

comments. I don't quite understand what they are. I thought you guys asked for this in the paper." And then like a week later, the student kind of forgot that I knew what the comments were and that I had read her paper. She comes up to me: "Diana, you're not going to believe it. Your co-teacher did this and this and this," and started making up all this stuff. And I'm like, "Whoa, actually, [Laughter] I know what actually happened. I saw it. It's right there."

So there's this way, not only when there's indignation does it start to get bigger and bigger, but then we start to tell more and more people, and the suffering gets spread around more and more. It's just simple aversion, and the ignorance is thinking that somehow turning it into indignation will make it better. So this idea of Matthew Brensilver's, there's a way of the ignorance kind of laundering our greed and aversion, making it look better or feel better or somehow seem better.

So, can we see clearly? And when we see clearly, this creates the conditions in which there naturally can be a letting go, in which naturally there can be this relinquishment of whatever is not helpful, whatever is not supportive, because this seeing clearly creates space. When we can recognize when the clinging is happening, we're not entirely caught up in it. If we can see it. If we are completely lost in it, then we can't see it. But seeing creates the conditions in which something different might arise. We might still feel the aversion, but maybe we're not just adding all this extra stuff to it. There's a way that we can allow the experience, to feel the aversion without automatically acting from it.

And this is what becomes possible when we can see clearly, which allows a certain letting go, this relinquishment, which is not throwing something away. We're not getting rid of things as much as we're just loosening the grip. We're just no longer holding on. We don't need to eliminate our feelings, try to get rid of them. We're not stopping caring about ourselves, caring about others. That's not what's being pointed to here. Instead, the clear seeing is this recognition of what's extra. Can we simplify things? "Oh yeah, this is aversion. This is desire." And just be with the experience of aversion and desire. This is what humans do. We don't have to make it be wrong.

So this nun, Sanghā, she was pointing to this letting go that can happen. She has this progression in her poem where first there's this home and family and livelihood is relinquished, and then lust and ill will, and then ignorance.

We could say that there are also these three understandings about safety. Often we're seeking safety through our circumstances. Perfectly natural. Sometimes there can be nothing wrong with that, right? If we're not holding on to it. The second understanding of safety is recognizing the insecurity of clinging. It often leads to our being anxious or agitated, and we discover the suffering—the Second Noble Truth[4]—that's involved when we have this holding on. And then

this third understanding about safety is safety through freedom from clinging. And this freedom from clinging happens when we can see clearly. And we can see clearly when there isn't ignorance.

So coming back to this poem:

Home I've left, child I've left, cherished herds far behind. Lust, even lust left. Left ill will too. Gone, ignorance. Ignorance, back off. I'm safe without you.

So, we might ask, where in our own lives are we still asking something to make us safe? Where in our own lives are we asking something to make us safe that actually can't provide that safety that we're looking for?

So, I'll end there and open it up to see if there's some comments or questions. Thank you.

Q&A

Audience 1: Thank you very much. Is it on?

Diana Clark: The buttons on the side.

Audience 1: It probably is on.

Diana Clark: It's on.

Audience 1: It is on. Oh, okay. Um, thank you for reflections on safety. The one word that I feel I'm reflecting on is "threat," because there are things that are real threats, and then there are things that are created threats, like aversion. And the things that we're dealing with cause us to be more sensitive to threats that may not be real. So, I wonder if you can kind of guide us in an understanding of how to recognize whether a threat is real through some kind of... because that feels to me like what is the most important. Because when a threat is real, one should defend themselves.

Diana Clark: Yeah, of course.

Audience 1: But most of the time threats don't require that defense.

Diana Clark: Yeah.

Audience 1: And it's kind of a tricky...

Diana Clark: Yeah. So you're pointing to fear maybe also, right? Like there's the fear of the imminent danger that might actually be happening, but then there's the fear that's in our minds about what actually might be happening. Yeah, this is such a big topic, and it's such an interesting, rich area. So your question was how might we distinguish between when the threat is real and when the threat isn't real?

Audience 1: I think just understanding that the response to threat is something we can control. The threat can or cannot.

Diana Clark: We can, because the response is whether or not we're going to defend, and the defense is what often I feel makes the situation we're in much worse. It can create suffering just by defending instead of just accepting whatever that experience is and letting it go.

Audience 1: So is there a way to filter one's response to threat? That's more the question. I don't even know if it's a question. It's just like, I need help, you know, [Laughter] with threat. I respond defensively and I'm trying to remove that.

Diana Clark: Yeah. And it's a very touchy area. So what actually—where the real way to make a real difference is to do a sustained inquiry into what is it that feels threatened? Like, well, what in here actually feels threatened? And so, and then there's just this repeated looking like, "Okay, what is it that feels threatened?" And you'll discover that you can't find exactly what it is. And then not finding it again and again and again and again. This can't be something that's done once or ten times. This is what makes the real difference. So when you start to realize, "Oh, actually, what I was feeling threatened isn't threatened," it's this sustained inquiry, I would say, is the real way to make a lasting, real difference.

Audience 2: Hi. Before you finished your Dharma talk, you were rereading the poem, and before that you were going through a list, I think with sort of three items on it, and I missed the second one. I was wondering if you could circle back to that.

Diana Clark: Yes. So three understandings of safety. One is that we're often seeking safety through circumstances. And then two, an understanding of safety is, I used the words "recognizing the insecurity of clinging." So maybe I could reword that to say, two is recognizing that safety does not come from holding on in the way that we imagine or hope or wish. And then the third was safety through just not holding on. It's freedom from clinging. Maybe it's not a nice, neat and tidy list of three.

Audience 2: So there are three ways to attain safety. Is this like...

Diana Clark: Or just understandings about safety, I would say.

Audience 2: An understanding that hopefully leads to attaining safety in a sense that we're not defending something unnecessarily in ourselves.

Diana Clark: Yes.

Audience 2: Thank you.

Audience 3: Hello. Hi. First of all, thank you so much for your Dharma. It just touched me so much. On the drive here, I was overwhelmed with so much fear. I think the last week, my dad was diagnosed with a heart condition, and I can just see his health declining.

Diana Clark: Yeah.

Audience 3: And I want so badly to control, I want so badly to just be with him and help him. And the reality is I really can't.

Diana Clark: That's right.

Audience 3: But it's so hard to let go. And it's easy for me to kind of let go of a lot of things. But I think because I care so deeply about my dad, and I want just the best for him... I don't want him to suffer, and I see that he is suffering. You know, he can't do the things that he wants to do anymore. I guess my question is, how do you let go of that type of fear? Like, what is even the start to it? Maybe like meeting him in meditation, or meeting that fear in meditation, because I just see that it's really affecting all aspects of my life lately because it's just making me unmanageable in some ways. And a lot of the things that I'm usually very tuned into, I realize I'm not right now.

Diana Clark: So we could start by just recognizing—and you didn't use these words; I'm making up these words here—recognizing the grief, the loss, the sense of helplessness, the sense that it's being out of control. And really just allow yourself to feel that. Because so often we're like, "Oh, no, no. I don't want to feel that. I have to take care of this. I got to do that. I got to be strong," and all this kind of stuff. But shoving those things down turns out to be exhausting, and it just leaks out in other ways. So that's one: just to honor and respect your experience. Of course, you feel grief and loss and helpless. Of course you do. And then, can that be okay? Can you just experience that? And the second thing I would say: love, love, love, love, love, love, love.

Audience 3: Thank you so much.

Diana Clark: I think somebody else wanted to say something. I thought... maybe not.

Audience 4: Um, thank you for the talk. I think maybe an even more radical version of what you're saying is that the concept of safety is just delusional in a world where anything can happen any time. And just... what do you think about that?

Diana Clark: Yeah, if we think safety... it depends how we define safety, I suppose. But I mean, I wear a seatbelt! [Laughter] I do all these things. But we don't control things, and we're vulnerable; there's no changing that. But what there is changing is this shedding of these ideas that I can only be safe in certain conditions. That can be shed, so that there can be a feeling of safety, comfort, ease in more and more conditions, more and more settings, until a person is

completely free. They feel safe, I would say exclusively. Well, except for elephants running over them or something like that.

Audience 5: Yes. Can we send the mic? How much suffering is caused by trying to avoid pain, as opposed to accepting that life will have its ups and downs?

Diana Clark: How much suffering?

Audience 5: Yeah. I mean, is avoiding pain a common source of suffering? Trying to avoid pain.

Diana Clark: Yeah. So it depends how we define pain exactly, but we could define it in a way in which it's the number one source of suffering. And all the ways in which we're saying, "No, no, no, no, no, no, no. I don't want that. I don't want that. I don't want this. I don't want that." And then when we can finally just shed some of that saying no, and letting things unfold how they're unfolding—they're going to unfold that way anyway—then that starts to bring more ease. Thank you for that question. Okay. So, thank you. Wishing you a safe drive home [Laughter] and a lovely rest of the evening. Thank you.

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1. **Therigatha:** A Buddhist scripture, a collection of poems from awakened women from the time of the Buddha. ↩
2. **Pali:** The language used to preserve the Buddhist canon of the Theravada Buddhist tradition. ↩
3. **Matthew Brensilver:** A contemporary Dharma teacher.
4. **Second Noble Truth:** The Buddhist teaching that the origin of suffering is attachment or craving. ↩

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