Not Fighting Not-knowing

Dharma talk by Diana Clark

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Good evening. Welcome. It is nice to see you all this Monday evening.

As many of you know, Sunday was the solstice—Sunday morning, I guess. Here in the northern hemisphere, of course, it is the winter solstice. For our friends in the southern hemisphere, it is the summer solstice. For us up here, it is the longest night, the shortest day, and the official start of winter.

I would like to start us off with a poem about the solstice. It is by Rosemary Trommer[1], and the title is "Walking into Winter Solstice."

Walking into Winter Solstice

Because it is dark, I walk in the dark. Walk with no moon. Walk with the chill of the measureless dark. There is peace that comes from letting the self be with the world as it is. And tonight it's a dark world. A world where I cannot see far ahead. A world of silhouette and suggestion. A world that seems to cherish whispers and relish mystery. A world where the invitation is to walk in the dark without wishing it away, without championing its opposite. The invitation is to be the one who learns how to live with the dark.

This emphasis on "dark" in this poem is associated with the winter solstice. I have often wondered what it would be like to live closer to the equator where they don't have these big changes, where they do not have these short days and long nights. Maybe it would be terrible; I don't know. People I know who live in parts of the world where they have more seasons than we do here in California often say, "Oh, I love the seasons." I don't know if this is true or not, but this is what I hear. I wonder if I would be the same if I were to live near the tropics. Would I be missing the short days and the long nights?

Nevertheless, tonight I want to talk a little bit about this word "dark" and unpack it as it is seen here in this poem.

There are two ways we can think about it. One is maybe a little bit more literally: the absence of light that doesn't let us see clearly. The darkness makes it difficult to see clearly. Then, another way we can think about "dark" is metaphorically: the way that sometimes things can be difficult or challenging. We feel like, "Oh, these are the dark times," or when we have a low mood or low energy.

I also want to talk about this notion that she introduces in this poem: the peace that is available. She writes: "There is peace that comes from letting the self be with the world as it is." What is that peace? I will introduce a practice that I have talked about before.

Darkness as Uncertainty

First, this idea of the dark, of not seeing clearly. The type of practice that we teach here, Insight Meditation, is called *Vipassanā*[2]. *Vipassanā* can be translated as "to see clearly." That is what insight is. So, there is this real emphasis on being able to see, which we might say is to understand, or know, or be present with experience in some kind of way.

The opposite of not being able to see is this way of uncertainty. The dark maybe feels like the future is unknown, or maybe even the present moment is unknown. I am uncertain if I am petting the cat or the dog here; they are both furry, but I can't see anything. I am just making this up; probably we could tell they have different fur.

The poem says, "A world where I cannot see far ahead." Let's be honest here: we can never see far ahead. We just think we can. It is just not possible. We can just see what is here. Instead, we are postulating, conjecturing, hypothesizing, and predicting.

To be sure, we can do a certain amount of predicting. There was a time in my life where my profession was to predict, "Oh, this molecule seems to behave this way in this context, so based on that, we predict it will behave in a similar way in this different context." Then we do the experiments, and sometimes it was true, and sometimes it wasn't. A lot of science is about this, but so much of our life is about this too.

We have this idea of, "Oh, I don't understand," or "I don't know what is going to happen next." I will make a little aside: I am fascinated by how much of the media, when a big event happens, asks, "Well, what do you think is going to happen next?" They interview this person and that person. I think, "Who cares? Just wait 48 hours and we'll know." [Laughter]

It is quite something, though. It points to how all of us want to have a feeling like we know. We do not like this sense of uncertainty. But the truth is, we really don't know. We can have educated estimates, but we are always surprised.

I was reflecting this morning when I was looking to see what time the rain would start, when it would stop, when it would be the heaviest, and what about tomorrow. I was looking at which hours, so I could plan activities. I remembered it wasn't that long ago when the question was simply, "Is it going to rain? Yes or no?" And that was good enough. We had no idea if it was going to be the morning or the afternoon. Now we want to know to the hour. And not only the hour, but how much rain? What exactly is the likelihood? This is pointing to the fact that even if we do have more certainty, it is never enough. We always want more.

The mind makes stuff up to fill in the future. Of course it does. Some of this is educated and might be very close to what actually happens. Some of it isn't. It makes sense that we do this, but sometimes we get into trouble with it. We have this sense that things should be one way, and then they are different. We are trying to fill in the blanks, building stories, running scenarios, and searching for interpretations.

Maybe there is a way in which we are just making these suppositions that really affect how we show up in the world, and then they don't turn out to be true. This happens a lot with people. "People who wear those kinds of socks are the type of people who go hiking, and those people that go hiking are always bringing dirt into the social hall, so we can't trust them." I am just making this up; this isn't true. But there is a way in which we can take one little piece of data and just make a big story out of it. Sometimes it is actually harmful; this is where bias and prejudice show up.

There can be a way of doing this with the rain. Not too long ago, it was raining, and I had made plans to meet a friend to go for a hike. I thought, "Oh, it's raining, should we still go?" "Yeah, let's go." It turned out to be fantastic. But when there is this idea like, "Oh, it's not going to be sunny, it's going to be wet, it's going to be cold," we bring in memories of the last time we did this when it was miserable. But this time it wasn't; it was lovely and delightful, actually kind of fun.

We want to see the future—and sometimes the future just means the next hour or the next week—and because we want to, we fill in the blanks. This is a perfectly normal human thing. But we start to think that how we filled in the blanks is how it *should* be. We are no longer with the actual experience; instead, we are just with our idea of it. For example, deciding not to go hiking because "it's going to be raining," and then having this relationship with the idea of misery, completely disconnected from the experience of this moment, which is really all that we know. Maybe it will be that way, maybe it won't.

There is a way in which the mind treats this notion that it can't see the future as an emergency, like it has to fill it in. What would it be like to just be with our experience as it is, and to let not knowing be not knowing?

I can see, and certainly I have done this myself, where we confuse clarity with safety. We feel like, "Okay, I want to feel safe, therefore, I need to know exactly what is going to happen. I don't know, so I'm going to make stuff up." This is often what happens. But real safety actually comes with being able to be with whatever arises with some openness, presence, and wholeheartedness as best we can. It is this confidence—maybe a small confidence, maybe a big giant confidence—like, "I don't actually know how it is going to be, but I trust I will find my way.

I will ask for help if I need to. Maybe I will be really confused. And if that is the case, then I will just be confused, and I will know what the experience of confusion feels like."

Equanimity in Not Knowing

One way to meet with this, of course, is to see clearly and to have some equanimity. Can we just be with the experience right now, even when we do not have the full picture? Because we will never have the full picture. Never. Even right now, in this moment, we don't know the interior life of everybody that is here. We don't know all the thoughts that are arising. We may not even know what is going on inside ourselves. Sometimes we don't even realize how tired or distracted we are until we actually sit down and try to meditate.

Is there a way that we can turn not knowing into something that is not a problem? Can we just be equanimous, have some balance, have some openness to that experience? Equanimity is not so much saying, "Oh yeah, I like uncertainty. Uncertainty is fine. It's wonderful." It is more like, "Uncertainty is here, and I can be present for that experience of uncertainty." Just recognizing that this wish to want to know is present, and saying, "Well, I don't know," and experiencing that.

What does it feel like to just not know, and to not be looking, looking, trying to find what we think will be the answer? There is a confidence that comes not from knowing everything, but from being okay in the midst of not knowing.

I remember early in my practice, sometimes I would get confused in meditation. Maybe touching into some new experiences and feeling like, "Whoa, what is happening?" I would feel a little bit frightened by this. I remember talking to a teacher and saying, "I don't know, I get confused." I have said this before, but this has been such a great help in my life: the teacher said, "No, if you know you are confused, you are not confused. You know there is confusion."

So I am just saying, "Oh, yep, confusion is here. Not knowing is here." But if you know that there is not knowing, then that is knowing. And there is something that feels comfortable about it. It is not insisting that it be different.

Darkness as Dukkha

So, darkness can be this idea of not knowing, not being able to see clearly. But darkness in this poem is also about *dukkha*[3]. Many of you will be familiar with this word *dukkha*; it often gets translated as stress, discomfort, or suffering. It is this one single word that represents this huge range, from just the mild little sense of something that is not quite right, to horrifying, terrifying experiences.

We could say that this darkness is also part of this *dukkha*. One of the lines in the poem is: "There is peace that comes from letting the self be with the world as it is. And tonight it's a dark world."

Sometimes it can feel like that. Maybe dark in terms of feeling oppressed, or really tight and closed, and not a feeling of openness and ease. The poem doesn't say, "There is peace that comes from when the world finally becomes bright again," or "There is a peace that comes when we finally fix everything and everything that was uncomfortable has left." Instead: "letting the self be with the world as it is."

Much of our suffering, much of the *dukkha*, comes from our not being with the world as it is. Things want to be always just a little bit different. For the most part, it is not a problem. We can make adjustments in our posture, for example; we can scratch an itch. But real freedom is being able to have some peace no matter what is happening, not only during those times when we feel the most comfortable.

We start with the easy things. Can I be with the discomfort of being in the waiting room of the doctor's office? "Waiting, waiting... when are they going to call my name?" Or the discomfort of getting a confusing email: "I am not sure exactly what this person wants here. Am I supposed to respond to this now? Are they expecting me to take care of this?" We start with some of these small ones. Can we just notice those discomforts and allow them to be there?

The Second Arrow

But a lot of *dukkha* is what we might call this "second arrow"[4]. There is the initial discomfort—terrible diagnoses, death, a loved one's sickness, terrible loss and grief. And then there is our relationship to the discomfort that can make it worse. The way that we may be wishing it away. She says in this poem, "wishing it away." "Dang it, when is this going to go away?"

This feeling of pushing and wanting it to be different creates resistance and aversion, which makes the discomfort increase. It amplifies the experience in some kind of way. Sometimes this aversion looks dramatic, like anger. Sometimes it is just ordinary restlessness, being distracted and unable to quite settle down. That itself can be an uncomfortable feeling of never quite settling during the day.

But there is also another type of second arrow which Rosemary Wahtola Trommer mentions in this poem: "championing its opposite." This is the idea that when we have difficulties—the dark—we say, "We have to find the light! Everybody, get all your lights! Bring your flashlights and your lamps and your cell phones! We have to make as much light as possible!"

There is a way in which we can ignore the difficulties and just be going towards the opposite. We could say it is a way in which aversion is being more polite, or in nicer clothes. It is pointing to something different.

I once had a practice discussion with somebody who was saying, "Well, practice is just about bliss. We just have to find the bliss." She had come up through a different tradition and brought that idea here. Something that I was pointing out to her was that when you have these ideas that it *should* be the opposite of *dukkha*—for example, bliss—then you find yourself always measuring. "Is this blissful? I think it could be more blissful. Oh, this isn't bliss." And then there is disappointment, and there is this sense of "me": "I have to make it be more blissful. I am failing if it is not blissful."

So we might think when there is *dukkha*, some of this darkness, that we want to do the opposite. But that often turns into more *dukkha* too.

Again, we bring this idea of equanimity. Can we be in the middle? Not wishing it away and not championing its opposite. "Nope. This is what is happening right here, right now." As best we can.

This is so much what our meditation practice is, right? We are being with the breath, and when the mind wanders, we just come back. Choosing the breath as an anchor allows the mind and the body to settle, but importantly, it shows us how often our mind is elsewhere, wanting to go elsewhere. This turns into a habit of not wanting to be with our experience.

The RAFT Practice

So you might say, "Okay, Diana, that sounds interesting, but are there some ways we can do this? Some supports for this?"

I will offer this practice. I have mentioned this a few times. I love this practice. RAFT: Recognize, Allow, Feel in the body, Trust.

Recognize: Just as I was saying, if you know that not knowing is happening, there is a way that you are knowing. There is a way of just actually saying, "There is uncertainty, and I wish that there were certainty." Just recognizing that that is happening can be helpful.

Allow: Can you just for that moment allow it to be there? Recognizing that we so often want to push things away, can we just back up a little bit and allow? Some people want to say "accept," but for me that feels like too tall an order. "Allow" means it is already happening. Can you just align with the reality of the moment? It is already there, whatever the experience is.

Feel in the body: Can you be embodied in any way that is available? The pressure of the cushion or chair against the body, feeling your feet on the ground, feeling your breath, feeling your

hands. Part of the way is to interrupt the spinning of the mind, which is going into the future trying to project things, and just help bring us into this present moment.

Sometimes that allowing allows you to feel the jaw loosen a little bit, or a softening of the forehead. Softening the body allows us to allow our experience, and allowing our experience softens the body. It works both ways. So whichever lever is available, you can work with that one.

Trust you don't have to fix it right now: There is this sense of the mind and the body always trying to fix things, treating things as an emergency. But when we do this—Recognize, Allow, Feel in the body, Trust that you don't have to fix it right now—then that allows for some equanimity, for this balance.

Then there is a way that we can see more clearly what is to be done next. Speaking truthfully without aggression, for example. Or setting a boundary without hostility. Or maybe there is a way we take action without any sense of panic or urgency when there really isn't an urgency. Or maybe there is a way we can wait without numbing out.

So, RAFT is a way that helps support this idea of equanimity. And then maybe the next wise step is something very small. Maybe it is just being with the next breath. Maybe it is taking a walk. Maybe it is asking for help. Maybe it is going to sleep.

I appreciate this idea that we don't have to see everything, because so often our trying to understand everything prevents us from actually being where we are. This is part of life, to balance this. Many of us have parts of our life where we are waiting for things to be just perfect. We tell ourselves, "Oh well, when I understand better, when all this is clarified, then I will start walking outside regularly. Then I will repair my relationship with so-and-so. Or when I feel better, when I am more confident, when I am less afraid." We are thinking, "Oh, the future somehow is going to be better."

Well, can we just be with this moment? Even if it feels like there is some darkness here and we don't see what is happening.

I am going to close by reading this poem again. "Walking into Winter Solstice" by Rosemary Wahtola Trommer.

Because it is dark, I walk in the dark. Walk with no moon. Walk with the chill of the measureless dark. There is peace that comes from letting the self be with the world as it is. And tonight it’s a dark world. A world where I cannot see far ahead. A world of silhouette and suggestion. A world that seems to cherish whispers and relish mystery. A world where the invitation is to walk in the dark without wishing it away, without championing its opposite. The invitation is to be one who learns how to live in the dark.

This idea that it is going to be dark sometimes. Can we just be with that as best we can?

So maybe just as a very simple practice this upcoming week, when you notice yourself wishing something away—maybe it is a feeling or maybe it is this moment of uncertainty—can you just name it gently? "Aversion is here. Resistance is here. I am wishing this were different." And can you allow the experience to be there? "Yep. It feels like this might be uncomfortable." Chances are it *is* uncomfortable. Feel it in the body. Just get embodied, get present, get here. Interrupt the spinning the mind is doing. And then trust that you don't have to fix it right now.

Then maybe the next wise step becomes known then and there, and there is a little bit of settling and less of the pushing and pulling that is happening.

Thank you.

Q&A

Speaker 1: I'll just comment. I pressure myself to fix things immediately, and that's fantastic hearing it from you that I don't have to fix it. When the time comes, it will be fixed. Thank you so much for that.

Diana: You're welcome. We often have this pressure like, "Oh, I have to fix this right now. Take care of it." It's exhausting.

Jordan: Hi, Diana. I'm Jordan. I used to practice here years ago. I wanted to make a comment. Since the last time I saw you, I lost all my grandparents. I lost my grandma this year. Some unfortunate stuff happened with my family, and at one point, there was a lot of anger. I guess the training kicked in because I stepped outside for like two hours and sat through it. Reflecting on that now, instead of reacting or saying something or doing something, I was just able to breathe through it. That happened earlier this year, and I'm glad I had that tool to help me through a tough time.

I guess I have a question. When times get really tough and we're trying to maintain a daily practice, sometimes it feels like maybe I need to take a step back because the thoughts can be intense. How do we deal with that? How to continue on practicing when it gets intense? I've been going on *Vipassanā* retreats, so I can get in touch with what's going on, and then sometimes it feels like I'm going a little too deep, or it can get scary or frightening.

Diana: Well, one thing I'll say is that when you're meditating, you can always open your eyes. This can be helpful sometimes to practice—to just be meditating and then purposely open your eyes and become present again with what is happening. Knowing that there is always an escape valve, a different experience available. We don't have to stay if we get into some territory that feels too uncomfortable.

Two, it can be of tremendous benefit to understand ourselves better. You mentioned how when something terrible happened and your anger came up, you were able to step outside for two hours. So you learned that you have that capability. Sometimes if we can be with meditation when it is uncomfortable, we start to see the ways in which we work with difficulties. Sometimes anger arises, sometimes blaming—blaming other people, blaming ourselves—sometimes collapsing and wanting to run away. Recognizing our patterns in what we might call the "laboratory of meditation" can be enormously helpful in our daily life. We can start to see, "Oh, okay, I know how I start to check out when the difficulty starts to arise." Knowing this about ourselves helps us to bring some more awareness to our actions.

Three, it can be helpful to ask, "Why do we meditate?" Is it just to have good experiences? For some people it is, and that is perfectly legitimate. Is it just to help support relaxation? That's perfectly legitimate. But I'll speak for myself: it has touched me deeply and changed my life in ways that I couldn't have even imagined just by hanging in there.

Jordan: I can relate to what you just said about how meditating has changed my life in many ways that I never thought was possible. That gives me faith to keep going, to hear it from you too. Thanks.

Speaker 3: This isn't very formulated, but I was struck in the poem with her talking about "whispers and mystery." I think of darkness as the not knowing, but I think of whispers and mystery as sort of an invitation to try to hear better or to understand. So I'm just seeing a balance between allowing the little tantalizing desire to try to get closer to some experience versus leaning away from it and being okay with not knowing it.

Diana: Thank you for highlighting this. Darkness can mean a lot. And mystery—there is a whole genre of books called mystery; we kind of like to figure things out. So darkness is maybe sometimes fun too. The poem says "relish mystery." Sometimes it is perfectly appropriate to figure something out. But what I want to point out too is: can we be with this moment, and then maybe what arises in the next one is, "Oh, it is time to go figure this out," instead of always going to "figure out, figure out, figure out" and never really being *here*?

Speaker 3: Right? So maybe sometimes the next thing to do is to solve the mystery and solve the problem.

Diana: But not be lurching towards that.

Speaker 3: And compelled to go straight to, "I got to figure this out," but more like sit with the not knowing.

Diana: Yeah. And even sitting with the not knowing might just be a very short while. I like this word you use: "compelled." Sometimes we just feel pushed, and that is not freedom. Freedom

is like, "Oh yeah, I think this is the wise thing to do now. This is the beneficial thing to do now," and doing that as opposed to this compulsion to have to figure everything out or fix it.

Happy solstice, just a few days late here. And for those of you who celebrate the holidays, happy holidays. Thank you.

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1. **Rosemary Trommer:** A poet living in Western Colorado, author of *The Wind Is Our Mother* and other collections. ↩
2. **Vipassanā:** A Pali word meaning "insight" or "clear-seeing." It is the traditional Buddhist meditation practice of mindfulness used to gain insight into the true nature of reality. ↩
3. **Dukkha:** A Pali word often translated as "suffering," "stress," "unsatisfactoriness," or "discomfort." It is the first of the Four Noble Truths. ↩
4. **Second Arrow:** A teaching from the *Sallatha Sutta*, distinguishing between the initial pain of an event (the first arrow) and the additional suffering we create through our aversion and mental reaction to it (the second arrow). ↩

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