Walking in the Wilderness: Working with Doubt

Dharma talk by Diana Clark

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Good evening. Welcome. For those of you who celebrate Thanksgiving, I hope you had a nice Thanksgiving in whatever shape that showed up. I guess this officially means we are in the holiday season now.

I would like to start this evening's talk by sharing a little bit from a book by Cheri Huber[1]. The book is called *I Don't Want To, I Don't Feel Like It*. [Laughter] I think it is a great book. Cheri Huber is a spiritual teacher, and on the surface, it looks like a simple book because it has little drawings and cute stuff in it, but it actually has some really deep teachings.

I want to share a short conversation from the book between a student and a sage. The student says, "I really want to meditate, and I've tried so many times, and I always quit. This happens with a lot of things that I want to do."

The sage responds, "How?"

The student asks, "What do you mean, how?"

The sage says, "How do you *not* meditate? Go back home and meditate on how you don't meditate, and come back and report how it is."

So the student does this. They notice how they don't meditate, and they come back and describe a long list of distractions—all the things they are doing instead of meditating. There is some back and forth, and the sage points out that the student has doubt, hesitation, or uncertainty. They aren't really able to be with the practice.

What is important here is that when the student said, "I can't meditate even though I want to," the sage did not say, "Here is what is wrong with you, and here is what you should do." Instead, the sage said, "Why don't you look at it? How is it? What is that process like? What is the experience of not meditating like?"

In this way, there is an orientation towards *how* instead of *why*, or "here is a problem, tell me how to fix it." It points towards observation and how things are a process. It is not just in a nice little tidy box labeled "This is a problem." This shift moves from "What is wrong with me? Why can't I?" towards "How does this actually unfold?" Instead of stuckness, we get curious. We look at it and experience it instead of slapping a label on it that says, "This is a problem, and it has to be different."

Maybe there is something you would like to do, and you find that you haven't. Over the holiday, I spent some time with my brother and sister-in-law. They wake up very early, before the sun is up, and go for a four-mile walk every day. I thought, "Wow, that is fantastic." I joined them on the days I was there. It was great to start the day that way. There have been a number of times when I have said, "Okay, I am going to wake up in the morning and get outside." That lasts for as long as it lasts [Laughter], and then it stops. Even though I had this intention, I stopped doing it.

Maybe you have something like this in your life, too—getting more sleep, exercising more, practicing some creative endeavor. Or maybe there are things you don't quite do, but you would like to. You could ask: What is the process of not doing it? What is behind that?

Instead of getting into a loop of "I want to, but I don't do it, and because I don't do it, I feel bad about myself," we can look closer. Often, because we feel bad, we try to do something else, don't do that either, and feel bad again. Our whole life can be like this. It is terrible, in the sense that it is *dukkha*[2]—suffering. We don't have to do that.

The Buddha points to this, too, though using different language than Cheri Huber. There is a sutta called "Wilderness in the Heart" (the *Cetokhila Sutta*[3]). I love this expression: wilderness in the heart. The Pali word is *cetokhila*. *Ceto* is a word like *citta*[4], which can mean heart or mind, or a combination of the two. In Buddhist teachings, there isn't a sharp distinction between mind and heart like we often have today. *Khila* can mean an uncultivated patch of land—a wilderness. But it could also be land that can't be cultivated because it is parched, dry, or packed down, so things have difficulty growing. In the sutta, it points to how there is doubt and a lack of energy for practice.

The Buddha says there are five kinds of wilderness in the heart. First, a person has doubts about the teacher. They are uncertain, undecided, and lacking confidence. That being so, their mind doesn't incline towards keenness, commitment, persistence, and effort. Because they have this doubt, they are not leaning into the practice.

The first is doubt about the teacher. The second is doubt about the teachings. The third is doubt about the community of practitioners. The fourth is doubt about the efficacy of the practice. The fifth wilderness in the heart is having resentment towards other practitioners. There is a way in which there can be a hardening of the heart regarding our companions on the path.

We might lump this list of five into a group of three to make it easier to think about.

The first wilderness is a lack of confidence, doubt, uncertainty, or vacillation about the teacher and the teachings. This can look like thinking, "These teachings are thousands of years old; what do they have to do with life today? They seem irrelevant." Or regarding a teacher: "She doesn't quite get it. She doesn't understand my life. Is she completely enlightened? Why is she sitting

there?" We might feel the teachings are too idealistic. This lack of confidence dries up a patch of land in the heart, making it difficult for new things to take root and grow.

A second kind of wilderness is doubt about the efficacy of the practice. We might ask, "Is it really possible to have more freedom? Is it possible to have more peace and ease? Do people actually become more free with this practice? Are there people who are awake?" Or perhaps it feels like, "I've been practicing for [number of] years, and it hasn't had the results I wanted." We don't want to commit or lean in. We might want to passively absorb some teachings, be inspired for a little bit, and then go home and do exactly the same thing we have always done. Which is perfectly fine—we all start where we are. The practice is not asking us to be completely different; it invites us to show up where we are.

The third is doubt, resentment, or bitterness towards other practitioners. Maybe there is a sense of, "These aren't my kind of people. They look different, have different politics, or different views." Or perhaps you had a bad interaction. Early in my practice, during an extended practice period, we would break into small groups to talk about the teachings. After I shared something vulnerable, someone gave me advice that felt like, "You should do this." It felt like "Ouch, ouch, ouch." I didn't come back for quite some time because I wanted to avoid that person.

Maybe you have felt unseen, or felt hurt by something that was said—whether by another practitioner or even by a teacher. Doubt can be planted and grow, taking the form of making the ground barren, dry, or hard. It becomes a wilderness where you can't find your way in or out.

Very often, it is not dramatic when this happens. Maybe it is just a little sense of an inner lack of juiciness, a dryness. Maybe the practice that once felt alive and meaningful now feels flat, boring, and tedious. Maybe you sit and go through the motions, daydreaming until the bell rings. This wilderness in the heart can feel like a stuckness.

If you were to ask, "How is this right now?", you might notice heaviness in the body or dullness in the mind. Maybe you can tune into the breath, but it isn't very interesting. Or maybe it feels like chronic ambivalence. You like the idea of a path to freedom, but part of the mind says, "I don't know," disconnecting and pulling back.

It is not uncommon to have a season like that. We often start with enthusiasm, but then a season comes with more ambivalence. Maybe there has been disappointment, resentment, or hurt. If you turn towards the experience of it, you might find tightness in the jaw, clenching in the chest, or a feeling of heaviness.

When places in the heart and mind become like turned soil where trust and energy don't flow easily, the first step is not to argue with them. It is not to try and rustle up energy. The first step

is to see that experience clearly, kindly, and with gentleness. That is the practice—including *not wanting* to practice.

We often think that not wanting to practice is separate, something happening "over there." I am pointing to noticing how *not wanting to practice* feels. Even if briefly, we can turn towards it.

The Buddha points to how to work with this. In the sutta, he says: "To abandon these five kinds of wilderness in the heart, you can develop the four kinds of mindfulness meditation." Some of you will be familiar with the *Satipatthana Sutta*[5]—the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. These are four domains of experience to which we can pay attention.

Instead of trying to argue with ourselves or belittle ourselves, the Buddha—and Cheri Huber—points to asking: *What is that experience like?*

1. **Body:** How is the wilderness showing up in the body? What is the physical experience?
2. **Feeling Tone (*Vedanā*[6]):** Is it felt as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral?
3. **Mind (*Citta*):** How does it show up in the mind? What is the mental experience?
4. **Patterns (*Dhammas*):** Are there familiar patterns showing up?

I will say a little bit about these four.

First, **how is this wilderness showing up in the physicality right now?** Maybe the chest is tight, shoulders slumped, breath shallow, or there is a knot in the belly. Maybe there is a lack of vitality. This is a real emphasis on the physical sense. We are not interpreting it or making it mean something. We are just being with the physical sense of not wanting to do whatever it is—get up early, meditate, spend less time on screens. When we notice this sense of not wanting to, we often feel it in the front of the torso, the throat, and the face. Just turning towards the physical experience. We are not solving doubt; we are learning how it feels in the body.

The second is ***vedanā*, or feeling tone.** Is this feeling of not wanting to pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral? We are simplifying it. Maybe there is a lot of busyness in the mind trying to figure it out, but sometimes it is easier to simplify. There is a way that simplifying it can give the spinning mind something to land on. "Oh yeah, this is unpleasant." And can that be okay?

Third, we can ask **what is happening in the mind?** When we find ourselves not wanting to do something, how is the mind right now? Is it cynical, hopeful, dull, doubting, or guarded? Is there an attitude, mood, or flavor? Or maybe there is a narrative—"When there is a lot of hesitation, these are the stories that fill up the mind." For some people, they can feel if the thinking is fast or slow, clear or dull.

And the last one is: **how does this fit into patterns I might be familiar with?** You could say, "Oh yeah, this is doubt. This is how the hindrance of doubt feels." Or, "This is how restlessness feels." Or aversion. We might realize, "I am familiar with this. I am often filled with aversion; I don't want things to be the way they are." We can also recall times when the practice *did* feel satisfying, recognizing that pattern too.

Watching how this feeling of doubt—this wilderness in the heart—actually becomes the path is the pivot. "I can't, I don't want to" shifts into the way forward.

We saw this with the sage and the student. The student says, "I can't meditate." The sage says, "Watch how not being able to meditate happens." That is practice. Just notice how not being able to do something happens. Noticing it brings a softening to the sense of "I'm stuck" and the identity of "I'm the one that can't do it." Instead, it turns into a process: "Look how things are changing."

A wilderness in the heart forms through doubt and resentment. The Buddha points to meeting it with mindful attention. You might sense whether there is any area of your life or practice right now that feels like a wilderness—half in, half out, uncertain, barren. Practice with what arises rather than asking, "What's wrong with me?"

Boiling ourselves down to the label "What's wrong with me?" is stuckness. Instead, ask: "How is this wilderness in the heart showing up right now?" We don't have to fix things. This is about noticing and trusting that noticing—that things are changing processes—is the way forward. Having to fix it means we have slapped the label "problem" on it. If we can be with the experience and notice the changing nature, the way forward reveals itself.

A wilderness in the heart isn't a sign that we have failed. It isn't a sign that we are doing something wrong. It is just an experience asking us to look more closely at how things are unfolding. One moment of mindful attention at a time. Notice the unfolding. Notice how things are a process. And then a way forward becomes more clear.

Q&A

Question: I am wondering how this is different from a lack of motivation to do something.

Diana: I wouldn't say it is different. I would say it is the same. Doubt, hesitation, vacillation—not having energy to go forward or apply oneself—I would say it is the same.

Question: You didn't say anything about lack of motivation, so can you describe it? I feel like there are things I want to do, but I just can't motivate myself to do them.

Diana: What does it feel like to not be motivated?

Question: I don't know. I know I can do things, but I don't want to.

Diana: This is exactly what I am pointing out. Often we don't know. We say, "I don't feel motivated, I can't do it." The encouragement here is: what is the *experience* of not feeling motivated? It could feel like, "I should do this, but I don't want to." Just be with that experience. "Yeah, that feels heavy. My posture is not upright. I feel tired." Being with that experience is a way forward. It starts to bring brightness to the mind and interrupts the pattern of "I can't do it, something's wrong with me." Is this helpful?

Question: Not quite. It's not that I can't do things, I just don't feel the will to do it.

Diana: My invitation is to tune into the experience of not being able to do it. This can be a way forward because it stops becoming a label or a certitude and becomes just another experience. I think you are looking for a mental thing, a thought like "Just think about X, Y, or Z and then you will do it." If you could do that, you would have done it already. Instead, can you be with the experience?

Let's try this. What is the experience of your left hand right now? Just whatever is happening in your left hand.

Question: I'm holding it here, and it is warm.

Diana: Yes. It is warm. Is what it is touching soft, smooth, or rough?

Question: I can't answer these questions. I don't know. It feels like security, actually, where my hand is. It's just warm.

Diana: I'm just pointing to the bodily experience. In the beginning, this was not easy for me. I spent my life being a scientist, thinking a lot, and it was a practice for me to learn how to be with bodily experience. I am pointing to a bridge that can help you get out of the stuck hole of "I'm unmotivated." Just offering steps out to be with the bodily experience.

Question: At times, could it be helpful to listen to doubt? Like to keep us away from an unhealthy relationship or steer us away from a guru who is actually a charlatan?

Diana: Thank you for asking this. There is healthy doubt and unhealthy doubt. We shouldn't be passive and just believe everything. We need discernment and wisdom. So yes, of course—unhealthy relationships, gurus who are dishonest, or cult leaders.

Question: In terms of physical manifestations, I was told that if you feel a part of your body that is weak when you meditate, to a certain point you will feel pain in that part of your body. When I had a weak neck, my neck was the first to suffer. Is that true for everyone?

Diana: I guess it depends on how we define weak and pain. If there is a part of the body that is out of balance, as the mind starts to quiet down, parts that are out of balance or holding

tension start to show up and become known. But I don't know if I can make a global statement that a weak part will feel pain.

Question: I found it very helpful when you were talking about the resistance of not doing something and the temptation to label it. For me, I usually have self-talk where I say, "I was going to do that, and then I got distracted." Then I go into "Why am I distracted?" But that is just delaying doing it. I live alone, so it is helpful when I pull myself back and say, "Now, that is the thing I really need to do." For me, the motivation is looking at why I got away from the original plan. Usually, the answer is "Because I didn't want to do it."

Diana: Yes, "I don't want to do it"—we could say that is a distraction also.

Question: Yes, I'm procrastinating because it is the thing I didn't want to do. So I pull myself back and say, "Okay, you're doing that because you don't want to do that." It helps me get back on track. I love that you said don't label yourself as bad; just get yourself back on the track.

Diana: Nice. Thank you. I wish you safe travels home and a wonderful rest of the evening.

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1. **Cheri Huber:** An American Zen teacher and author of over 20 books, including *I Don't Want To, I Don't Feel Like It: How Resistance Controls Your Life and What to Do About It*. ↩
2. **Dukkha:** A Pali word often translated as "suffering," "stress," or "unsatisfactoriness." ↩
3. **Cetokhila Sutta:** The "Wilderness in the Heart" discourse (Majjhima Nikaya 16), which describes five mental barrennesses (doubt in the Teacher, Dhamma, Sangha, training, and resentment toward fellows) and five mental bondages. ↩
4. **Citta:** Pali word representing "mind," "heart," or "consciousness." In Buddhism, the mind and heart are often not distinguished as separate entities. ↩
5. **Satipatthana Sutta:** The Discourse on the Establishing of Mindfulness, a foundational text in Theravada Buddhism describing the four domains of mindfulness: body, feelings (*vedanā*), mind (*citta*), and phenomena (*dhammas*). ↩
6. **Vedanā:** The Buddhist term for "feeling tone" or the hedonic quality of an experience—whether it is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. It is distinct from emotion. ↩

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