Trusting the Stillness

Dharma talk by Diana Clark

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Welcome, good evening. It is nice to practice together. Thank you for coming here.

In a few weeks, I will be on a plane. Many Americans probably will be on a plane. I have been noticing how, when there is air travel involved, I have this restlessness. I think, "Okay, I have to remember to pack this and don't pack that, and I have to check on this and that." I don't know; there is a certain agitation that starts sometime before. "How is the traffic going to be? Make sure I got a ride to the airport. Maybe I should bring that other suitcase. I don't need to bring so much stuff." It is crazy how sometimes this little thinking shows up.

Maybe some of you are familiar with this, whether it is having to get on an airplane or doing something you don't really want to do, like reply to that email. There is this flavor of restlessness, of not being settled, being a little bit agitated. Tonight, I would like to talk about the opposite of restlessness: tranquility.

I taught a course on the Seven Factors of Awakening[1], and tranquility is one of these factors. Because of the schedule, I didn't have time to go through all the factors of awakening in the same depth; there had to be one factor I spent less time on. I chose tranquility. I spent less time on tranquility because nobody wants to hear about that. We are in Silicon Valley here. We are like, "Okay, no, I have to go. I have to do things. Things need to happen." People don't often want to hear about being quiet. Even though we secretly are really wishing for this, there is this way in which we don't really want to hear about it, or we only want to hear about it as a good idea as soon as we finish this other thing. So, this whole quality of tranquility is such an interesting one.

What is tranquility? It is not just zoning out. It is not just sitting still, checked out in some kind of way. Instead, it is this clear, alive stillness in the heart and mind that has a real sense of presence. It is not a numbness; instead, it is a brightness that is not agitated. It has this quality of being peaceful and calm, and maybe some serenity or contentment, which is what many of us say that we are looking for and what we wish for.

All of us wish for some way in which we can just kind of exhale like, "I'm here, finally." Often we start a meditation practice thinking that we will be able to find it during meditation. Sometimes we do; we might touch into this. But wouldn't it be great if we could have this not just in meditation, but in our daily life, in all aspects of our life?

We could say that the mind has stopped pacing in a small room—that agitated going back and forth—and instead, the mind is sitting on a big porch watching the rain. It is lovely to have the rain these past few days. There is something nice to just look out the window or stand outside, especially after this whole big dry season. There is something beautiful about it. So rather than this pacing inside, just going out and saying, "Wow, isn't this beautiful," and appreciating what is there.

We have this iconic image of the Buddha sitting. He doesn't look agitated. It is often this sense of tranquility. His eyes are often half-open in statues. He has this stillness and steadiness. Being tranquil is one of the hallmarks of a Buddhist practice.

Maybe we have this just in our everyday life, this sense of after finishing a big project. There can be a feeling like, "Ah, that's done." For me, this happens when I am actually on the plane and I have buckled my seat belt. Then there is a sense of, "Okay." [Laughter] In a way, the agitation is not even so noticeable until the contrast of after buckling my seat belt. Then I realize, "Oh yeah, there has been this subtle agitation there at the airport, getting there, and thinking about the flight."

So again, tranquility is not sleepiness. It is not dullness, but instead, it has this brightness. As I mentioned earlier, tranquility is one of the Seven Factors of Awakening. It is one of the elements of practice and of life that really supports awakening. We could say that it is the soil, the environment in which wisdom and freedom grow.

It is not necessary that you have memorized this list, but the factors are mindfulness, investigation, energy, joy, tranquility, concentration, and equanimity. In this list, there is a certain amount of progression. Mindfulness and investigation help us to see what is actually happening. There is some energy that arises with this—maybe the energy of decisiveness, like, "Oh, now that I see clearly, I have a sense of where to go or what to do." This energy can support a sense of joy, a sense of uplift in the heart and mind. There is a certain lightness or happiness of the mind.

But joy can also tip into this fizziness, this bubbliness that has a little quality of agitation in it, especially when compared to happiness or contentment. Not to knock joy, right? Who wants to knock joy? But I just want to say it has this bubbly quality. In this progression of the Seven Factors of Awakening, after joy is tranquility. Tranquility is what arises when the heart and mind are no longer looking for happiness, no longer searching for the next best thing. Instead, there is a certain amount of, "Oh, I don't have to go find it. I have just been experiencing it."

We could say that tranquility is when the fizziness, the bubbliness of joy has settled down into this quiet, calm ease. It is this quiet, calm ease that creates the conditions in which there can be some deeper understanding, some deeper seeing, and the agitation has diminished.

Gil Fronsdal[2], the founder of this center, has said that if you feel like you need some wisdom in your life—if you feel like you need some insight, a way forward, or a new understanding—work with tranquility. Tranquility will help create the conditions in which the wisdom can arise. So often the looking, "I got to figure this out. Maybe I should do this, maybe I shouldn't do that. I'll do a pros and cons list. I'll use Post-it notes and make a spreadsheet," can really help, but there is also some agitation underneath that. If we can bring some tranquility to the ways in which we are trying to solve problems or find something, this makes it more likely that wisdom can arise.

There is a continuity between tranquility and freedom, liberation, and awakening. It helps create the conditions for wisdom, and it also has this connection with freedom. With tranquility, there is this sense of "this is enough." The sense of the stillness and quiet is like, "This is enough." Tranquility is the opposite of trying to go and find and make and do. So there is this natural willingness to just remain here. When we are tranquil, there is not this pressing need to go do something different. Maybe some of our compulsions have settled down. Some of our patterns of agitation and movement have settled down. There is this way that we don't want to disturb the stillness. There is no urge to disturb the stillness when there is tranquility.

Freedom is the same ease, the same lack of needing to move away from what is here right now. It is maybe this ease that has moved into an unbound way that is not dependent on conditions or dependent on anything really. So tranquility is a way in which the heart and the mind start to have a taste of just being here and having some confidence that it is okay to just be here. It is restful to not always be looking for the next thing that is going to be stimulating or a lasting source of happiness.

Tranquility and liberation not only have this sense of "this is enough," but we could say that tranquility is maybe like an apprenticeship in just staying. Just staying here, here and now. It is a way in which we can practice and get glimpses of the freedom that is available when we are not following each impulse or urge, but instead are able to just be with what is arising.

I know for me that to really start to feel a sense of tranquility, it took some meditation practice. I didn't realize how much agitation I had in my life, this sense of striving for more and more. I didn't realize how deep that was in everything I did. I had this sense that somehow I had to optimize everything, or I had to be as efficient as possible. "I'll do this, but it makes more sense if I do this thing first. I should stop at the grocery store on the way back from going to my friend's house. But then my friend kind of lives near here."

There is this way in which I was always planning, trying to make things work just as efficiently in my professional life. That was great; I got rewarded for that. But then I discovered I felt like I had to optimize and make my entire existence efficient in some kind of way, and there was this agitation that I didn't realize.

I went on meditation retreats where there is really nothing to be done except meditate. We have our little jobs that we do to support the center, but other than that, there is nothing. But I would find myself even doing this on retreats: "Okay, so if I leave my jacket here, then if I leave the meditation hall from there I can pick up my jacket." It is crazy. Some of that is smart and wise to do, but not rehearsing it over and over. [Gasps]

So, this idea of tranquility is just, "Yeah, this is enough." Just to be here, and to just be quiet with however the breath is, whatever the sound in the hall is like.

If we want to cultivate some tranquility, it is helpful to start with understanding restlessness. There is a way in which we kind of just want to bounce off of restlessness, this agitation, this uncomfortableness, because it is uncomfortable. So often we don't really understand restlessness. We don't see it deeply because we are so busy bouncing off of it.

It is really fascinating how restlessness shows up for you. What is this experience? It can be really obvious, this feeling like, "I just got to get me out of here whatever way I can." Or it can be really subtle. When the mind and the body are really quiet, the mind will all of a sudden pop up, "This is boring," and then it wants to create some problem that it can solve, even though it was perfectly content and happy to be settled. The mind wants to create something to do.

But how does it show up for you? Restlessness might show up as this impulse to fidget or to move. Maybe we start doing things with our hands, or moving a leg, tapping a lot. Or maybe there is just this feeling of looking at the clock or looking at the door, this feeling of just wanting to be elsewhere. Those are some of the obvious ways in which restlessness shows up.

But there are these subtle ways too, as I said, of just making the experience be a problem and saying, "Okay, I got to figure it out." Or maybe in the mind, it is this scattered thinking, not quite able to organize our thoughts, and instead having a jumble of thoughts. Sometimes this happens to me, and I find it really helpful to take a pen and a piece of paper—this good old-fashioned pen and paper—and write things down. Then all of a sudden things coalesce. If I can just get them down on paper, then it feels like a relief. Sometimes I do that when I am organizing my notes to give a talk. Sometimes I have a few ideas but I feel a little bit agitated, haven't quite settled down into the dharma talk preparation, and I just use good old-fashioned pen and paper.

We might have it in the body, we might experience it in the mind, but in some ways, we might not even be so sensitive to restlessness because it feels like a constant companion. We are so used to maybe this low-grade anxiety, like things aren't quite right or I need to do more.

So how can we practice with restlessness? One way of working with tranquility is to understand restlessness. This is not something that you think about once and understand fully. This is really

a practice to understand all the ways in which restlessness shows up. But then also, how can we practice with it? Because as restlessness goes down, of course, tranquility goes up.

First of all, I want to say that often there is a reluctance to relax. It sounds funny to say that, but there can be this way in which the mind has the idea, "No, no, no, I have to solve this problem," and solving the problem takes the form of ruminating, or worrying, or just being busy doing things.

It is fascinating how often in our modern society we don't really settle down when the opportunities are there. When we are standing in line at the grocery store, how often we are like, "Oh, let me get stimulated again and do something," as if the grocery store isn't stimulating enough with all those products.

So there can be a reluctance to relax partly because we feel like we have this restlessness, but there is also a way in which we want to protect ourselves. We might have this feeling like, "Okay, well if I'm tranquil, if I'm quiet, then that will just make the restlessness that I have feel even more agitating. I don't want to feel quiet. It is easier just to have this low-grade energized buzzy feeling than to be quiet." We don't want to feel like there are these swings going back and forth.

What are the ways in which we can cultivate tranquility directly? We could say there are three doorways. You probably won't be surprised by these.

One doorway is the body. Can we intentionally relax the body in whatever way feels available and appropriate for you? Whatever way feels helpful. Sometimes when I do guided meditations, I encourage people to soften the face because sometimes we don't even know there might be some tightness around the eyes or the jaw. Thinking about putting the shoulders down.

It can be easeful also to have an upright posture. Sometimes we think of relaxing as being in a slumping posture. That is true, it can be. But there is a way that the mind can also get clouded or foggy when we are not in an upright posture. I was remembering many years ago when I would find myself sitting on most couches—because I am not so tall, I have to lean way back [Laughter]. I noticed how there would be this quality of just checking out. If I put pillows behind me and just sit upright, then I am more present. I am still relaxed, but there is some presentness. So one doorway to support tranquility is to relax the body, but not in such a way that it goes into sleepiness or dullness.

Also, something we can do to support tranquility is to just place attention on the exhale. Of course, we are always inhaling and exhaling. In meditation practice in this tradition, we don't control the breath. We just allow the body to breathe however it is breathing. But it can be really helpful to just notice the exhale or pay particular attention to the exhale and maybe just extend it a tiny bit. Not an exaggerated amount, just a tiny bit. This attention on the exhale

often can be really supportive as there is a way in which the tensions kind of go out with the out-breath.

One of the doorways, of course, is the mind. Meditation supports tranquility. This activity of bringing our attention back to the anchor—whether we are doing mindfulness, concentration, or loving-kindness—can be a tremendous support for tranquility.

But is there a way, during meditation but also not during meditation, to maybe have a sense of contentment? "Yeah, this is enough. This is enough." Especially in daily life, we don't recognize how often there is this sense of "I need more." We get this message in so many ways. How many emails do we get? Buy more, do more. It is quite something. Be more. Is there a way that we can say, "This is enough"? Just say, "Just this moment is enough." This is often underestimated, how powerful this can be.

What about having gratitude for what is already present? Having gratitude for anything often supports tranquility. This is part of the reason why a gratitude journal or a gratitude practice can be so powerful. It is because it helps quiet that feeling like there always needs to be more. And with that quieting, there can be this stilling and settling.

The third must be the doorway of our environment. Can we spend time off of screens? I guess more and more we are starting to appreciate how they affect us, affect the nervous system. I notice this if I am on screens before it is time to go to sleep; then the sleep just isn't as restful. I guess there is data to support this too, like the architecture of the sleep—what duration of time you are in different stages—shifts if there has been a lot of screen time before. So there is this way it impacts us even if we don't notice it at the time.

Also, is there a way that we can practice monotasking instead of multitasking? It is a little bit agitating to be task-switching all the time. Instead of this feeling like I have to hurry or to be the most efficient possible, can we just do one thing? Even if that means that we are maybe just standing there for a few minutes while the water is boiling for tea. It doesn't take very long for water to boil. What would it be like to just stand and wait, instead of thinking, "Oh, okay, while the water is boiling, I'm going to do this and that and the other."

I would say that our brains, our minds, haven't evolved to be so constantly stimulated. And what would it be like just to allow things to be a little bit more simple and quiet? You don't have to go live in a cave. You don't have to sell all your belongings. You don't have to get rid of your smartphone. I am not talking about that. I am just talking about those small moments: waiting in line, the stoplight, driving without music, or going for a walk without a podcast.

Sometimes I would be astounded. I had this idea that I was going to go for a walk and wanted to listen to something entertaining or interesting. And then the amount of time it would take me

to find and line up just the right thing... Sometimes it is nice to listen to things when walking, but sometimes it is nice just to be outside walking without listening to something.

So our environment, of course, is also a doorway into which we can support tranquility. Maybe we could discover for ourselves, in a world that is constantly pulling us to do things and fix things and accomplish things, what happens when we simply rest? What is that like? I feel like we are losing this capacity these days.

So maybe this week you could just choose this tiny little mini practice. If you find yourself at a stoplight, standing in line for something, or going for a walk, what would it be like to experiment with not adding anything? Just keeping things simple and allowing the body and the mind to quiet down so some tranquility can arise. There can be more and more of a feeling of "just stay here" instead of this urge we often have to move and do the next thing.

What importance do you give to calmness, peace? What role does it have in your life? Is there a way in which you could maybe appreciate those moments when it does arise, with a sense that it is really connected to more freedom? Even though we often feel like we have to do more to have more freedom, what I am pointing to here is maybe there is a way in which just not adding anything extra and allowing tranquility to arise is a way towards freedom.

What happens when we simply rest? Stop adding anything. Allow tranquility to be part of our experience.

Discussion

Question: I never thought much about tranquility; that simply didn't come up in my inquiry. But I think a lot about contentment or the lack of it. I wonder, is there a difference?

Diana: This is a legitimate question. What is the difference between contentment and tranquility? This is how I understand it, though the early teachings don't say specifically; they show up in different lists. Tranquility is more of a bodily experience and contentment is more of a mental experience. But I am broadening the definition of tranquility to be both body and mind. And I often am doing that with contentment too. So in the way that I am often teaching, there isn't such a big difference between them.

Question: Your voice is so calming that I tend to fall asleep, but I'm not asleep. I hear the words... maybe my chin goes down. But it feels very tranquil. But then when I kind of wake up from the state the mind is in, then I'm going, "Oh, reality is back." I don't know what to make of it.

Diana: Can you tell me a little bit about what the experience is like? Is there a way in which it is kind of like closing in, or is it out and bright? Is there energy or not a lot of energy in the tranquility?

Question: I'm kind of half asleep. It is a little hard to explain. But it's... I don't know. But then reality comes back. "Oh, I'm supposed to be paying attention." It is kind of negative in a way, what I'm realizing. "Okay, I wasn't really paying attention to what you were saying, but it felt wonderful because I felt so relaxed."

Diana: It could be something that we call "sinking mind," where there is a way in which the mind is wrapped in cotton. There is a coziness to it, a quietness, and not a lot of energy. It is just kind of like a little cocoon.

Question: Oh, that's good.

Diana: And in contrast, when you say, "Oh, there's reality," reality is probably a little bit more bright and energetic. Would you say that that's kind of the way that it is?

Question: Well, sometimes it is more... I liked it the way it was. I like that tranquility. It is kind of like I'm asleep but I'm not asleep, and then I come back to reality and I'm going, "No, I'm not happy with reality." [Laughter]

Diana: Oh, I see. So then it makes sense that if you feel like you are not happy with the reality, the mind wants to do this, right? Wants to kind of get into that cozy place. I certainly have experience with this. Sometimes it can be when somebody is speaking.

Question: Well, I think it is more that I didn't get enough sleep last night for what I need. It was probably about six hours and that's not enough for me.

Diana: Oh yeah. So having a little bit of sleepiness just makes it more and more likely that this will happen. But there is a way in which it starts to feel like a dead end or a cul-de-sac. It starts to feel like, "Oh okay, I have that experience, maybe comfortable, but it doesn't lead anywhere." It is just an experience that has a beginning, a middle, and an end. There isn't greater wisdom that arises or greater understanding so that then we could do something with our life differently. It is just an experience we have which might be pleasant, but it doesn't make a big difference in our life. This is what I discovered for myself.

Question: It is sort of a follow-up to that question actually. I find that I often go through something very similar, and I'm still trying to work out basically how to navigate it. They say that the awakening factors stack on each other, and this rapture or joy kind of leads into tranquility. But I often find that I'll experience something positive and pleasant, and then the mind just gets lazy and it's like, "Ah, we've done it." And it calms down, but it becomes this kind of sinking mind. It kind of just drifts off in this dreamlike state where the mind is not absorbed or completely still, but it feels very calm. Do you have any general suggestions on how to sort of work with that while you are in that sort of sinking mind, but also before you get into it? Kind of how to avoid it skillfully.

Diana: I would say something that is really helpful is mindfulness. Mindfulness is in the middle of the activating/energizing factors and the tranquilizing awakening factors. Mindfulness helps to keep it balanced. So one is just if you can notice that you are either going into sinking mind or about to go in there—that's mindfulness.

And then here is what can make a big difference. Even if you find yourself in this cottony, fluffy, cozy place: investigation. Just feel like, "Wow, there's this cottony fluffy cozy place." How does it feel in your shoulders? What is your breath like? What is the mind doing? Is it going slow or fast? Is it having images or is it words? Just bringing a little bit of investigation in will bring the energy up, and then that will bring you out of sinking mind.

Question: I like what you said near the beginning of your talk, that tranquility is what arises when the heart and mind are no longer looking for happiness. That's radical. It just flips everything on its head.

Diana: Very nice. Thank you.

Question: Near the end you were asking, why do we keep distracting ourselves? And I realized I had something that feels like an object relation, almost like parents. If I'm kind of anxious and agitated, then I'm hearing that I need to settle down. And so it becomes something more in my head about resisting calming down, because I feel like it is not okay to be the way I am, rather than "I want to calm." So it is almost like a judgment against myself. And so then I also don't feel like I can calm down. So it is like a double... rather than trying to face the fact that I am having trouble settling down, I almost go over into this other thing. It feels like there is this resistance to calming down, like there is a judgment against how I am right now.

Diana: I see. So it feels like something you are supposed to do or that you should be doing, and you don't want to do something that you should be doing?

Question: Like it is not okay for me to be how I am.

Diana: Yeah. I love this recognition that you are showing. Just bring some okayness to the restlessness or the resistance or whatever is happening. If there is some real authentic okayness with the restlessness, there can be a tranquility as well. This okayness can grow; that can be the seed from which tranquility can grow. So instead of being agitated about agitation, can you just bring this: "No, I'm going to accept this." And this activity of accepting creates the conditions for tranquility to arise.

And then maybe something I'll just add on there also is that I can appreciate, instead of accepting just how things are or the sense that "you should be different," it can be helpful just those moments when tranquility *does* arise. It arises naturally in our life on certain occasions. There can be a way of just appreciating it, like, "Oh, actually there's a real sense of calmness

right now, a sense of serenity," and allowing the heart and the mind to recognize, "Oh, this is actually pleasant and supportive to have some calmness." And just that recognition, then the mind is more likely to incline that way. So it is not because being agitated is bad. It is just because it has this inclination towards quiet, the appreciation of quiet.

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1. **Seven Factors of Awakening:** (Bojjhaṅga) A set of seven mental qualities that lead to enlightenment: Mindfulness (Sati), Investigation of the nature of reality (Dhamma vicaya), Energy/Effort (Viriya), Joy/Rapture (Pīti), Tranquility/Relaxation (Passaddhi), Concentration (Samādhi), and Equanimity (Upekkhā). ↩
2. **Gil Fronsdal:** A Norwegian-born American Buddhist teacher, writer, and scholar based in Redwood City, California. He is the primary teacher for the Insight Meditation Center (IMC). ↩

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