From Clinging to Clarity

Dharma talk by Diana Clark

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Good evening. Welcome.

Recently, I heard the expression "failure brings freedom." I wondered, is that true? As I thought about this idea that failure brings freedom, I remembered a time back in the "olden days" when I was a research scientist writing an NIH grant. Grants are needed, of course, to fund research, and I was doing cancer research. My whole career was dependent on getting this grant.

And I didn't get it. I thought, "Oh, yikes. What am I going to do now?"

But there was also this quiet sigh of relief right in the back. "Oh, I didn't get it." [Gasps]

Of course, things unfolded the way they did, and now I'm sitting here being a Dharma[1] teacher. But I was thinking about this connection—this idea that failure brings freedom. Part of it has to do with what I didn't know back then. I had never heard the word *Dharma* before, never meditated a day in my life. I wasn't paying attention. All my friends and colleagues were doing the exact same thing I was, so there wasn't any inclination to investigate or be curious about my experience.

Looking back, I can see that I was so identified. There was so much clinging to this idea that, "As soon as I get this grant, the lab can be bigger, and I can do this other research." It was not only about what it would allow me to do, but it was a validation of me as a person and of all the hours of work I had done. I had invested so much into this one simple thing. I did the best I could writing the grant, but the result was out of my control. I didn't decide; somebody elsewhere was deciding.

This idea that failure brings freedom points to how often we don't notice the desire we have for things—the way we are pushing or identified with it—until it doesn't turn out the way we want. Until we don't get what we want.

I would like to propose that this practice finds another way to find freedom without waiting for failure to show up. Failure can be a bummer, or it can be great; often we don't know at the time.

The Misunderstanding of Desire

I like to talk about the idea of desire—really wanting something. Sometimes when we hear Buddhist teachings, in particular the Second Noble Truth[2], we hear that it says the cause of suffering is desire. Or some people *think* it says this.

I remember many years ago, when I had just started meditating, an acquaintance asked me, "So you're doing that Buddhist thing? That's so weird because they think that desire is the cause of all suffering, and that's so clearly wrong. So why are you doing that Buddhist thing?"

I was like, "What? I don't think it's all desire... wait, is it?" At that time, I hadn't even thought about it. I had just heard the teaching and thought, "Okay, desire is a cause of suffering."

That is not the case. It is a misunderstanding of the way in which we are holding desire. It's not desire; it's clinging. It's the craving pain. It's our relationship to wanting.

The wanting itself is not a problem. Of course not. When we're hungry, we want to eat. When we're thirsty, we want to drink. We want to have more freedom. We want to create the conditions in which more and more people in this world can have peace and ease. We want to feed all the hungry people. We want there to be the end of suffering. These are all good and natural wants.

So this whole idea that desire is the cause of suffering is clearly not quite right. But I would like to take that misunderstanding one step further. Not only is desire *not* the cause of suffering, but I would like to say that it can be the path to freedom. It can be a way in which we find more ease and more freedom.

Tanha and Chanda

Desire isn't the enemy, but clinging—this tightening around—is one way in which we are demanding that reality match our ideas about reality.

I want things to be a particular way. I want to get this grant funded so I can go on the merry way I mapped out for myself. I want a meditation session to just sink into some perfect stillness and bliss out until the bell rings, and then continue blissing after the bell rings. Wouldn't that be great? [Laughter] Sure, we'll take that. But reality doesn't bring this to us.

It would be a mistake if we thought that more freedom meant just bliss. Warm freedom actually means that whatever is arising isn't a problem. It's just the way that it is. There is an openness, ease, spaciousness, and warmth no matter what is arising.

In the early Buddhist teachings, there is a distinction between two words. One is *taṇhā*[3], a Pali[4] word often translated as "thirst." We could say it's the craving that binds us, causes this tightening. "I must have this," or the opposite, "I must get away from that." We might have this sense that things will only be okay if I get *this* or have *that*. *Taṇhā* is this contracted, tight feeling that things have to be a particular way, and that is the only source of lasting happiness or well-being.

The other Pali word is *chanda*[5]. This is often more about wholesome aspiration. This energy toward understanding, kindness, care, loosening, or spaciousness.

So the question isn't "How do I get rid of desire?" Desire isn't the enemy. The question is, how do we shift our relationship to desire? When we recognize there is this clinging type—"I want something in particular to happen"—can there be a shift more towards *chanda*? This wanting is fueled by aspiration, leading to openness, spaciousness, and insight. These insights lead to more freedom.

Staying Close to Desire

This requires that we stay close to desire. We hang out with it. We bring awareness to it.

Often when desire arises, we are either busy getting obsessed about the object of the desire, or we are repressing it and trying to get rid of it. I have seen individuals say, "Well, I can't be a good Buddhist practitioner if I have desire, so I'm going to pretend it's not there." Or, "I'm going to dress it up and make it look different."

But is there a way we can have this counterintuitive move? Instead of thinking "I shouldn't feel this," we experiment. What happens if I stay with desire, feel it clearly, recognize it, and watch what it does?

This is really different than what we are usually doing. We have this whole society telling us to go chase our desires. I've seen billboards—I don't remember the products, but it was all about "Indulge," or "You deserve this," with ice cream cones or something.

Instead, what if we stay with the desire? We hang out with it. "Oh yeah, there's a lot of desire here." Feel it in the body—not just a mental thing. Watch what it does without trying to immediately obey it to satisfy our desire, and without repressing it.

Sometimes desires are simple: "I was thirsty, so I had a sip of water." But often we have desires to be liked, to be understood, to have a particular person respond in a particular way. Or maybe we want to get a particular object, role, job, or relationship. Often we aren't noticing those; we only notice the ones that are a distinct object we can get, like the new car or phone.

Living here around Silicon Valley, I don't understand half of the billboards. [Laughter] I'm not a computer scientist. I think, "Oh, that must be important to somebody." But it doesn't make sense to me, which is kind of fun, actually. I appreciate that. It's like, "Whatever that is, that's somebody else's problem, not mine."

The Secret Contract

Inside the wanting, there is often a secret contract—secret maybe even to ourselves. This idea that, "If this goes the way that I want, if I get what I want, if that person responds the way that I want, *then* I will finally feel happy. Then I will finally feel safe. Then I will finally feel complete."

It's not a mistake that we're out there with a desire, because we have this unrecognized contract that goes with it. We think satisfying the desire will make us happy. And then reality does what reality does. Sometimes things go the way we want them to; sometimes they don't. The person doesn't respond the way we hoped, or the situation changes. Or maybe we get exactly what we want, and then we realize three days later, "Oh, now I want this *other* thing," because it didn't bolster our sense of self or make us feel complete.

When we recognize that our desires aren't getting met, we have a fork in the road. We have a choice. We can double down and push harder. We can start blaming—blaming ourselves, other people, institutions, anything we can find. Maybe we escalate the ways we try to control things (which usually doesn't work out so well). Or maybe we get lost in fantasy or self-judgment. That is the path of clinging.

But there is also the path of the Dharma. That is to stay close to the experience. Feel the ache, the tightness, the agitation. Allow reality to be what it is.

It's fascinating how much we want reality to be different. How much of our inner life is trying to say, "If only this could be different, I could tweak that, manipulate this, manufacture this other thing."

Allowing Reality to Reveal Its Limits

If we can allow reality to be as it is and stop trying to make it different, we can recognize that the object or situation we wanted can't actually carry the burden we've put on it. It can't be a source of lasting happiness. It can't make us complete in the way that we want. We're already complete. We're not missing anything. The desire is trying to tell you, "You need that to be complete," but you don't.

Things won't be lasting sources of happiness because nothing lasts forever. Either the thing, person, relationship, or job is going to change, or *we* are going to change. Both are happening.

The path of the Dharma is to say: "Okay, here's a desire. Can I hang out with it? Can I get close to it? Can I walk with it until it shows its limits?" Can we make this space for it to reveal itself?

That revelation of limits allows a softening of the tightness we bring to the desire. That softening creates the conditions for insights to arise. These new understandings create the conditions for freedom—including the understanding that these desires can't satisfy us in the way we want them to.

So, even the messy desires, even the ones we are so identified with and holding on to really tightly: can we be close to them? [Snorts/Laughs] Can we walk next to desire as best we can and allow it to reveal its limits?

"Oh yeah, this isn't going to be a lasting source of happiness because it's changing." "Oh yeah, this is just another object that I have to take care of and dust and change the batteries."

When we recognize those limits, the really holding on—the identification—starts to soften. "Oh yeah, this relationship isn't going to make me complete in the way I want it to. I keep insisting that this other person make me feel safe all the time, loved all the time, okay all the time, and it's not possible."

When we recognize the limits, there is this softening. Sometimes there's a beat where we think, "Okay, I got to go find something *else* to desire." But if we can hang in there with the softening, then there can be insight and more space. These insights start to show us that what we're really looking for isn't out there. Lasting sources of happiness aren't out there. This turns out to be the road to freedom.

Beholding

This approach isn't demanding that we only have some desires and not others. That sets up a hierarchy: "I'm a good person if I have *these* desires and a bad person if I have *those*." That's not helpful. This practice is about meeting the fullness of our lives—whatever is arising.

It is trust that you don't have to go *get* whatever it is. You don't have to fix the problem that you don't have it. Instead, allow it to reveal its limits to you.

We practice this in meditation, because usually in daily life we're just stumbling into chasing the desires. During a meditation session, we can start to see it. We want calm, but we get restlessness. We want ease, but we find ourselves falling asleep. We want less tension in the body, but realize our knee is killing us and wonder when the dang bell is going to ring.

Can we just notice, "Oh yeah, here's what I want, and this desire is getting thwarted, so I'm also feeling frustration." Sometimes there's even a little aggressiveness: "How can I *make* this happen?" That is clinging.

I want to introduce a word that is a different way to be with our experience of desire: Can we **behold** desire?

Can we recognize it and be with it with some respect, care, or warmth? Clinging says, "How do I get this? How do I keep this? How do I make reality match my idea?" Beholding says, "What is this actually like? Can I let you exist as it is? Can I be present for this without immediately feeling like I have to use it or fix it?"

I like this idea of beholding because we are in a relationship with the object of desire, but it's a different type of relationship. It has some warmth and care connected with it. This practice is so much about shifting modes away from clinging to beholding. That creates the conditions for clarity, and clarity helps create the conditions for freedom.

It's not that beholding gets rid of desire. It clarifies it and allows the limits of the desire to be seen.

Regarding the idea that failure brings freedom: Failure often creates the conditions in which we can choose. Is there going to be more clinging and pushing? Or can I just be with this experience? Can I behold it and allow some learning to happen?

Chances are, if there wasn't that failure, we would just think, "Okay, that was satisfied," and not even notice it. We would just go order the next thing to get delivered. There is no end to desire. That's okay; this is what humans do. But there are so many opportunities for us to shift our relationship. To meet it with some warmth and care long enough so that it can show us that it's actually not going to satisfy us in the way that we want.

I think I'll end there and open it up for some comments or questions. Thank you.

Q&A

Participant: I so much needed to hear this talk tonight. I realized I came in with a big desire that I was struggling with. But I also really got in touch with the fact that I'm a grandmother of a four-year-old. It's the best thing, and it's so different from being a mother. I'm learning so much about *wanting* from my four-year-old. When my daughter was four and she wanted something, I wanted her to have it, and I would join her in her wanting. When my granddaughter wants something, I just say to her, "I can see how much you want that." It's different. This talk really put me in touch with how beautiful I find her, and that wanting doesn't make you ugly or bad. You just want it.

Diana: You're welcome. Wanting isn't bad. It's what humans do. Instead, it can be a doorway to freedom. And it's so great for all of us to be able to feel the frustration of, "Oh yeah, I want something and I don't have it." It's great to increase our capacity to be like, "Oh, I didn't get it." Thank you.

Participant: I was thinking about wanting for me lately. There's an underlying view as to *why* I'm wanting. The underlying view is that I *am* what I accomplish. I've always known I have these to-do lists and I like crossing things off. Accomplishing isn't bad, but I'm looking at that desire to cross things off the list and the false idea that once I cross all these things off, *then*...

Diana: Then what? [Laughter]

Participant: Something good's gonna happen! And then I just add more things to the end. It never ends. So for me, it's not so much getting things; it's about this false idea underneath that I am what I accomplish.

Diana: Very nice. Thank you for highlighting that. It's fantastic that you recognize that and you can start to see: Is it true that you are what you accomplish? [Laughter] So when you notice that, can you just be with it? "Oh yeah, here's this desire that has this view." Just hang out with that feeling and see what gets revealed.

Participant: I was going to say that desire is such a big word. It looks one way when you're younger and very different when you're older. There's an urgency to a lot of things when you're younger that changes as you get older. Also, there's a distinction between, say, wanting a hamburger and wanting the best for your daughter. They are very different kinds of things in the way you deal with them in your mind.

Diana: Yeah. If wanting a hamburger is this feeling of, "I *need* a hamburger," and you go through all this effort to make sure you have one, that would be kind of like the *taṇhā*. That would be more like this craving or really needing something with some tightness around it. Wanting the best for your daughter would be more *chanda*. It's more this wholesome, helpful desire that is a force of good in the world. I appreciate you making this distinction. I was using the word "desire" mostly towards the ones that are not so helpful, but *all* desires we can actually just look at and be with.

Participant: I maybe missed some of those subtleties you were talking about.

Diana: Sorry. These are Pali words. If you're not familiar with them, they just kind of pass over back there.

Participant: What was the Pali word that you introduced as a pair with craving?

Diana: One is *taṇhā*, which is like clinging and craving—associated with the Second Noble Truth. The contrast was *chanda*, and that's a wholesome desire for awakening, for caring for others. They both have this movement of wanting, but one is associated with suffering and one is not necessarily associated with suffering. I'm leaning forward with my body because *taṇhā* kind of feels like that: "I got to get that thing, that role, that person."

Participant: Last week, I needed some advice about handling a really touchy, high-stakes situation, and I got some advice from a Buddhist abbot, Ajahn Kovilo[6]. He suggested that in this situation I should be conscious of the back of my head. Something about how it's so easy, if you want something from the other person, to just be moving forward toward it, and it feels predatory. We leave the whole back of ourselves behind. He said, "Just focus on that and you'll be okay." And he was right.

Diana: Oh, interesting. I love it. Thank you. That's one way to be present with something—in the back of your head. I hadn't heard that before. Very nice.

Thank you for your attention. I'm wishing you a wonderful rest of the evening and safe travels home. Thank you.

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1. **Dharma:** (Sanskrit; Pali: *Dhamma*) The teachings of the Buddha; also the truth of the way things are. ↩
2. **Second Noble Truth:** The truth of the cause of suffering (*dukkha*), typically identified as craving or clinging (*taṇhā*). ↩
3. **Taṇhā:** A Pali word meaning "thirst," referring to craving, clinging, or the feverish unsatisfaction that leads to suffering. ↩
4. **Pali:** The ancient language in which the scriptures of Theravada Buddhism (the Tipitaka) are preserved. ↩
5. **Chanda:** A Pali word meaning "desire," "will," or "intention." In a Buddhist context, it can refer to wholesome desire or aspiration (*dhammachanda*) to act for the good or to realize the truth, distinguished from unwholesome craving (*taṇhā*). ↩
6. **Ajahn Kovilo:** An American Buddhist monk in the Thai Forest Tradition. ↩

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