Letting Go: The Gentle Hand of Freedom

Dharma talk by Diana Clark

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Welcome, welcome. It's nice to see you all. Here we are on a warm October day. Tonight, I want to talk about how sometimes we have this feeling that things aren't quite right. They're not going the direction we want them to go, and yet we can still find freedom there.

I want to start with a very short poem that I've read before. I can't remember if I've done it on a Monday night here; chances are I have. There's something very endearing about this poem. It's by Hafiz,[1] the 14th-century Persian poet. It goes like this:

First, the fish needs to say, "Something ain't right about this camel ride, and I'm feeling so damn thirsty."

I think this is a very playful poem. I feel like he has this playful wisdom that, even though it's from 700 years ago, still speaks to us today. With a little smile and a wink and a nod, he might be pointing to what we might say is the first noble truth: there is suffering. A fish on a camel ride—we can imagine, okay, this is not usually what fish do or what they want to do.

The promise of the spiritual life is that no matter what the conditions are—the inner conditions, the outer conditions—freedom can be found. Freedom can be experienced. Sometimes this freedom is available right then, or sometimes it's helpful to put things into place, creating conditions in which more and more freedom becomes available. Part of this Buddhist practice, and I would say any spiritual practice that leads to more freedom, is about noticing the lack of freedom. Sometimes we're trying to avoid that, pretending like it doesn't exist. Of course, we don't want to feel that. But part of this practice towards freedom is noticing the lack of freedom and noticing how often we're turning away from it, how we just don't want to see it. This is just not being with our experience, not being with what's happening.

Hafiz points this out in this poem, saying, "Something ain't right." We could say that he is pointing to *dukkha*[2]—that sense of "something ain't right." Of course, *dukkha* often gets translated as suffering, unsatisfactoriness, or stress. This one word doesn't have an English equivalent, but it has this wide, wide range, from a tiny, mild irritation to horrifying, terrifying things.

We could say that in this poem, maybe the fish thought that being on a camel was a good idea. I mean, camels are, I'm sure, very useful, helpful creatures. They carry things long distances through the desert. And in my mind, Hafiz, being a Persian poet, probably was familiar with deserts. But maybe the camel isn't right for this fish, certainly not at this time, maybe while the

fish is alive. We could understand this camel ride as a way of representing the patterns that we find ourselves taken away with, that we're just taking a ride on. These patterns, these habits, these ways in which we pick up views or identities that maybe aren't so helpful, but we find ourselves doing it again and again.

In the poem, the fish is always saying, "And I'm so damn thirsty." Thirst itself is also a type of *dukkha*, but those of you who have been in the Buddhist scene for a while will know that thirst is often a translation for the Pali word *tanha*,[3] which is often given as the cause for suffering. This thirst is what's underlying suffering. It's the dryness of "not enough" or "not okay." In the poem, it might be what gets us back on the camel again, trying to find something to assuage this thirst, to make us feel like, okay, it's enough.

The recognition of suffering, of non-freedom, is part of this path of freedom. This is the first noble truth: There is *dukkha*. It's so simple. There is suffering. Seeing difficulties clearly and maybe honestly naming them.

Recently, I noticed I had been spending way too much time on screens. Some of it was work, but some of it I didn't need to be doing. It was work, and then it bled into, "Oh, this is interesting, let me go check this out." When you spend too much time on screens, it kind of creates a different reality. It was so helpful for me just to say, "Okay, Diana, enough with the screens. Just put them all down, turn them off, go outside." And it was really helpful. This is just a simple example, but there's a way sometimes just naming and acknowledging some of the difficulties we're having can be powerful. This feeling of, "Oh, I got to click on this. Oh, wait, the next thing. And oh, what about that? Yeah, I better look this up." And then I just end up down these rabbit holes. Has anybody ever done that? [Laughter]

We've created a society that's all about distraction, doing anything except acknowledging and being with difficulties. This whole social media thing is all about, "Oh, look at my curated, perfect, beautiful life." So Hafiz, even though he was writing 700 years ago, is pointing to something we experience ourselves. There is *dukkha*, and it can be helpful to just acknowledge it and clearly name it. He names this first truth, the discomfort of being on the wrong ride, if you will. And then he points to the second truth: the thirst that keeps us climbing back on, this craving.

Obviously, if we were a fish, we would want to get off the camel. This is partly why we meditate. Meditation practice helps create a certain amount of collectedness or settledness, instead of always looking for something more and more. Maybe some of that still happens when we meditate. Of course, it does. If we've been doing that with our eyes open, the same momentum is going to happen when we close our eyes. But if we can stay on the cushion and, as best we can, let go of the distractions, the mind starts to become more calm and maybe more balanced,

less looking forward and more just being here. It's less clouded by this craving or thirst, or the opposite, this aversion and resistance.

With this settling, it becomes easier to observe things as they are, instead of how we are imagining them, remembering them, or anticipating them. We start to see how things are here in this moment, and we stop trying to fix or flee, as best we can, and are just noticing, "Oh, it's like this." In the stillness, we start to see that experiences are showing themselves to us as they are. Everything's changing. It's always changing. Nothing's exactly the same. It's only an idea that thinks they're the same. The actual experience is always changing.

There's nothing really to hold on to when we're looking at experience. It's just one experience, and then another, and then another—arising and passing, arising and passing. When the mind is quiet, we really start to see that. When the mind drifts off into thought, that's when we start to grab on to concepts and ideas and views, because they're not actually real; they're just thoughts that seem to be constant. But actual experience, like bodily experience or even the nature of our thoughts, is changing, and there's nothing really to hold on to.

We also see that it's not being controlled by anybody. It's just happening. We can't hold on to these experiences, and we're not controlling them. It doesn't mean we're not trying. It doesn't mean that we wish we could control our experiences. Of course, we want to have particular experiences and not have other ones. But when meditation allows us to quiet down and get a little more settled and collected, we start to notice this with our experiences. This isn't a philosophy. This isn't about something to believe or something to know. I'm just planting the seed for something that you might notice when you're meditating or quiet. This is what's felt directly when we are able to be with our experience. There's a way in which we stop arguing with what is and instead are just experiencing the experiences, instead of trying to fix it or make it be different.

So when we notice that everything's changing, we can't control it, and there isn't anything to really hang on to, then there's just a natural response. We don't have to make it happen; it just occurs naturally. And that is a letting go. There can be a sigh or a long exhale. Maybe we didn't even recognize that there was this way in which we were a little bit tight and clenching, trying to make things be a certain way. "Damn it, I'm feeling so damn thirsty."

This letting go is not something that we are actually doing. It's something that's just naturally happening when we start to notice the quality of our experiences. We could say it's like gravity reclaiming what we've been holding up with effort, with this sense of, "Oh, I got to manipulate this and change it into being something else than what it is." But when we stop trying to change things to be something else, then there can be such a relief, this putting down. It could feel like, "Oh my gosh, I didn't even realize how heavy that was," what I was carrying around—these

expectations I was putting on everything and then getting irritated when none of the expectations got met. This way that I felt like people didn't see me the way I wanted them to see me, and I had to do all these things to make sure they only saw me as a kind, nice, helpful, smart, creative, strong person.

There are these subtle ways in which we're doing all this. But when we notice that experiences are changing, there isn't actually anything there to hold on to. Right now, there's a little tension in my shoulders from something I was doing earlier. It's just an experience. What is there to hold on to? It's just a little tightness in the shoulders, and I'm not controlling it. If I were controlling it, I would think about it and say, "Go away now, please." But it doesn't.

This freedom that's available in any experience, even if you're a fish riding on a camel, is about this letting go. It's about the putting down. It's about stopping the clinging or the craving or the wish to change something. It's a natural falling away.

When this letting go happens, not only is there more freedom, there's also more joy and more happiness. Maybe it's born a little bit out of that relief, but it's also just this greater ease and peace. And when there's ease and peace and relief, a certain amount of happiness arises, a certain amount of well-being.

In some ways, we could say that this practice all comes down to just this letting go. But when I use this expression, it makes it sound like we are doing a letting go. What's being pointed to here is a letting go that happens. We're not making it happen. It's a letting go that is so thorough, such a complete letting go, that it's a letting go of letting go. It's a letting go of anything that needs to be let go of. It's a letting go of a person who is doing the letting go. This is the deepest freedom. *Nibbana*[4] is pointed to in this way, as a thorough, complete letting go, in a way that nothing is left. Or we could say everything is available—the opposite, too.

There's another poet I'd like to read, Matty Weingast.[5] He's a contemporary, and he's maybe echoing some of the ancient wisdom that Hafiz pointed to, but in a little bit of a different way. He is a poet who is inspired by the *Therigatha*,[6] which are the awakening poems of women from the time of the Buddha. The poem goes like this:

After a long day meditating on Vulture Peak, I watched an elephant splashing its way out of the water and up the bank. "Hello, my friend," a person waiting there said, scratching the elephant behind its ear. "Did you have a good bath?" The elephant stretched out its leg. The person climbed up and the two rode off like that together. Seeing what had once been so wild now a friend and companion to this good person, I took a seat under the nearest tree and reached out a gentle hand to my own mind. Truly, I thought, this is why I came to the woods.

The poem begins with this image of strength and power: an elephant coming out of the river. In the Pali Canon, the elephant can sometimes symbolize the mind—huge and strong, maybe even

easily disturbed, but capable of being trained. Practice is sometimes likened to training an elephant. In this poem, she recognizes, "what had once been so wild," her mind, is now tamed. The same energy that caused the suffering, this reactive, craving mind, is actually responding to care and understanding, as opposed to us trying to make it be different.

Then she reaches out a gentle hand to her own mind. We could say that maybe this gesture is a letting go. It's having this gentle touch with the mind instead of trying to make the mind have certain experiences. There's a little bit of a paradox here because with meditation, we're bringing the mind back to the anchor for mindfulness practice. But it's also acknowledging, "Oh yeah, having a mind that's restless or not really present is like this." Can we bring it back not because we want it to be different or because we think it should be otherwise, but because we care about ourselves and we have made a commitment for this period of time to train the mind? It's born out of some gentleness, as opposed to trying to make the mind be something different.

We could say that suffering tightens and makes us tense, and the softening or the bringing of gentleness or care allows us some opening. The movement towards greater freedom is from tense to open, from tightness to open, from clinging to just recognizing how things are.

The fish on a camel represents suffering, and a person befriending an elephant, with the elephant stretching out its leg for the person to climb on and ride off together—these two different images represent the movement from suffering towards freedom, towards befriending what had once been so wild and having it be a companion and something that's helpful, as opposed to something that just feels like "something ain't right."

Q&A

Questioner 1: I was thinking about a spectrum of letting go, from partial to total. I experienced that over the weekend. I was with a 14-year-old girl at the beach, and she wanted to go into the ocean in her leggings and her t-shirt. My first thought was, "Well, I might have to get wet too if she gets into trouble." But I let go enough to let her do that, and it was lovely to see how happy she was in the water. I think about many Buddhist concepts, like self/non-self, on a spectrum. What do you think about that idea?

Diana Clark: Yeah, I would say the more we let go, the more freedom we have. And definitely, this movement is towards more freedom. Absolutely, we let go of some things. I would say just let go, let go, let go, wherever you can. It doesn't matter if it's something really small or something really big. We just start to discover that the more we're trying to hold on, that's just unnecessary suffering. My first impulse in your situation would be, "You don't have a swimsuit, you're not going in the ocean." But then I'd think, "Well, she really wants to. Okay." Not too long ago, I was hiking and found this beautiful alpine lake. I thought, "I kind of want to go in." I just

went in wearing my hiking clothes. They're supposed to be quick-dry. There's something just about breaking the rules and being in the water in this kind of way. Like, "I'm just going to do it." It made me and everybody that was with me, we were just laughing and smiling. Hopefully, you guys were laughing and smiling, too.

Questioner 2: If *dukkha* is suffering and Mara[7] causes *dukkha*, what exactly is Mara? Is it made up of false ideas that we hold on to?

Diana Clark: Yeah, I love this idea of Mara. I've given a number of talks on Mara. I wouldn't necessarily have said that Mara causes suffering. For those of you who don't know, Mara is a character that shows up in the Pali Canon and kind of pursues the Buddha. I would say Mara is a personification of those things that can lead to suffering, those things that are obstructions for us or that get in the way. So your question was, what does that make Mara? Is it a bunch of false ideas that we hold on to? I think that's a great way of thinking about it. But it could also be patterns that we have, just this momentum. In the Pali Canon, when Mara shows up, the Buddha often just says, "I see you, Mara," and then Mara poof, leaves. So when we see things clearly, they often shift and change. Maybe in the same way here, when we see things clearly, then we start to let go. Maybe it's the same thing. Maybe letting go is Mara going "poof" and leaving.

Questioner 3: The thought I had while you were speaking is that the practice is self-care. It comes from a place of self-care, letting go. For me, oftentimes it's actually the opposite. In order to take care of myself, it often requires imposing an expectation. In other words, letting go is sort of a natural state, and oftentimes not in my own best interest.

Diana Clark: Can you unpack this idea of self-care a little bit? What do you mean by that?

Questioner 3: Allowing for something to not be right, and to not allow it, is self-care sometimes. For example, you wouldn't allow yourself to keep your hand in a flame. You don't let go there and let things be. It's not self-care to just let go and let things be.

Diana Clark: I see. So you're saying if we let things be, we might harm ourselves. Thank you for saying this. I'm pointing to our direct experiences. If there's a flame, we can't even choose whether we want to leave our hand in or not. We're going to pull away from something that's painful; that's just biology. But I agree that we shouldn't just passively accept everything. Sometimes there are harmful things happening to us, people are crossing boundaries, or we're eating too many donuts, or whatever it is. But if we let go of the idea that things have to be otherwise, thoroughly, then we will also be letting go of what's driving the donut-eating or what's driving our not setting boundaries more clearly. If we can be with the completeness of our experience, then the way in which we're trying to distract ourselves or people-please because we feel bad starts to go away. Does this make sense?

I can appreciate hearing "let go" and thinking, "No, no, no, I don't want to let go because if I do, then A, B, and C is going to happen. Something terrible is going to happen." But I'm talking about our experiences. If we can allow what is, thoroughly, then we will discover that so many of our coping mechanisms aren't needed. It's uncomfortable, but we spend so much energy trying to not be with our experiences—the sadness, the grief, the anger, the disappointment, the confusion, the longing. If we can just allow those to be, then so many other things will just fall into place.

Questioner 4: Your comment reminded me of a sermon where the deacon talked about coming in on her daughter, who was on top of the dresser playing with lipstick. She started to get upset, and then she had a turn, like, "This is my daughter." And then all of a sudden it was like, "It's okay." In that moment, it felt like you were on this journey where you're feeling light, like, "Yeah, we need to just let go." But then she made it into a "should," and it just became a heaviness. I feel like there's that aspiration, those moments where you're like, "Oh yeah, just allow this," and there's this lightness about life. But then I make it a "should," and it's heavy. I was wondering if you could speak to that.

Diana Clark: I have a sense that the fish felt like it *should* ride on the camel. There's this sense of, "I'm doing this, but it just feels so uncomfortable." This sense of "should" often comes from outer and inner expectations. Instead of having these expectations of how we believe we should behave, can we bring curiosity to all of our experiences? Curiosity requires some of this openness of the heart and mind, instead of slapping labels on things like "this is good, this is bad." Instead, it's like, "Wow, what's going on here?"

In your example, there's lightness, and then there's heaviness. Can we bring some of this curiosity to the heaviness instead of thinking, "I shouldn't feel this," or "I wish it weren't this way"? Then the heaviness can just be heaviness without it being a problem. The desire for that lightness can be inspirational, but then it can also turn heavy. Inside the aspiration is this expectation that "it should be" or "I want it to be" this way. We're trying to fix it or make it be different. It turns out that the way is to, as best we can, be with our experience. Can we acknowledge what it is? Can we feel, "Oh, I want things to be lighter, and they're not lighter now"? And to just be with the heaviness and disappointment. "Wow, this is so heavy. This is terrible. This isn't what I wanted." If we can just hang out there for a little bit, it starts to open up. Curiosity is pointing to our being open. Then the experience opens and it becomes lighter. The more we're able to meet experience, the more we can let go, and the more opening there will be. It's almost like you bring lightness to the heaviness, and the curiosity is an attitude that can eventually make that happen.

This is a tall order. I'm not saying this is easy, but this is the way to more and more freedom. As best we can, can we meet what's happening, our actual experience? I'm not talking about ideas

and concepts, memories, or what other people are doing. I'm talking about what our experience is. As best we can, can we hold it and be with it? And then this letting go brings lightness, brightness, openness, ease, spaciousness, more freedom. But it does require that we're turning towards the *dukkha*. It does require that we acknowledge the heaviness, the uncomfortableness, as best we can.

Questioner 5: I've been thinking as you've been talking about control and holding on, and the counter to that being letting go. The other word that comes to me is trust. Trust is sort of an antithesis to control.

Diana Clark: Nice. Yeah, and even to trust that it's okay to just hang out with the experience. In the path of practice that the Buddha laid out, he pointed to trust as one of the early steps. One way we can talk about trust is we just learn from our experience. At first, maybe it happens accidentally that there's some letting go, or we end up staying with an experience and we realize, "Oh, I could handle that better than I thought I could." Sometimes I talk about trust as knowing you don't have to fix it right now. Maybe that's all the trust that's required. You don't have to fix it this moment. Then we learn, "Oh, that wasn't so bad," and actually a little bit more ease and lightness showed up. So the trust isn't a big trust, like, "Oh, just trust Diana." It's more just learning from your experience, but maybe trusting that you don't have to fix it right now.

Thank you for your attention. May you have a safe journey home, and I wish you a wonderful rest of the evening. Thank you.

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1. **Hafiz:** A Persian poet from the 14th century, whose collected works are regarded as a pinnacle of Persian literature. ↩
2. **Dukkha:** A Pali word that is a central concept in Buddhism, commonly translated as "suffering," "stress," or "unsatisfactoriness." It refers to the fundamental unsatisfactoriness and painfulness of mundane life. ↩
3. **Tanha:** A Pali word that literally means "thirst," and is a central concept in Buddhism referring to craving or desire, which is identified as the cause of *dukkha*. ↩
4. **Nibbana:** The Pali word for Nirvana, which is the ultimate goal of the Buddhist path. It translates to "extinguishing" or "quenching" and refers to the cessation of suffering and the cycle of rebirth. ↩
5. **Matty Weingast:** A contemporary American poet and editor, known for his translations and interpretations of early Buddhist poetry, particularly the *Therigatha*. ↩

6. **Therigatha:** A collection of short poems in the Pali Canon, composed by early Buddhist nuns, recounting their experiences on the path to enlightenment. The title translates to "Verses of the Elder Nuns." ↩
7. **Mara:** A celestial being in Buddhist cosmology who personifies temptation, distraction, and the forces that obstruct spiritual progress. He famously tried to prevent the Buddha from achieving enlightenment. ↩

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