Not Knowing

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What happens next?

This question of what happens next is such a driving force in us as human beings. We so want to know. We want to know what will happen next, what will happen tomorrow, what will happen next week, twenty years from now.

I've heard some of this in the meetings over the last few days, especially from those of you who are leaving—a sense of uncertainty about how it's going to be when you're home. And I know for myself at this point in the retreat, as a yogi staying for three months, there's a little bit of that same uncertainty. The first time I stayed three months, I didn't know the teachers that were coming in, and that was pretty uncomfortable. My mind was turning over: How's it going to be? What's going to happen?

This tendency we have to want to know what's next is butting up against the truth that we have no idea what's going to happen next. Really, really no idea.

The more we practice—both on the large arc of practice in our lives and also on a retreat of this length—we begin to touch into this truth more directly. Actually, there are times when it feels like we're directly touching into this truth that we don't know what's going to happen next, but it may actually be more of an understanding of this truth.

We can understand this truth on many levels. On the more gross levels, very fundamentally, we do not know when our last breath will be. Accidents happen every day. Every day someone wakes up in the morning and it's their last day alive, yet they're not aware of that.

On a more refined level, a more moment-to-moment level, as the mindfulness gets stronger and more continuous, we start to see that moment to moment we really don't have any idea what the next arising will be. This became more obvious to me as I practiced, as I shifted from a directed attention to a more receptive kind of attention, a more open awareness where I wasn't consciously deciding what to pay attention to. Just this endless—sometimes it felt like an onslaught—of experience, and no idea what the next moment would bring.

This truth that we don't know what the next moment will bring is not a mistake. It doesn't have to be a problem. And yet our mind habitually comes back to this question: What's next? What's next? Thinking somehow that having an idea of what's next will control the uncontrollable.

This truth is related to the truth of impermanence—the changing nature of experience, the uncontrollable

nature of experience. As we come more and more fully into the present moment, we see this truth more clearly.

There are so many ways that our minds obscure this truth, that we miss it in our everyday lives. Even here on retreat we miss it. A big part of what's in the way, what's obscuring this truth that we don't know what the next moment will bring, are our views, beliefs, agendas, thoughts—especially those connected to a sense of I, me, and mine.

We carry ideas about what's happened in the past, thoughts and views about what's happened before, into the present moment. And somehow our mind thinks, "Well, what's happened before, that's what's going to keep happening." Views and beliefs about who we are, what we do, what we're capable of. What we think we have been capable of, we project that this is what we will be capable of. We box ourselves in with these views based on what we think about ourselves, what other people think about us. We box other people in based on what we think about them—carrying our ideas and views and beliefs from the past into the present moment.

What might it mean to open to the possibility that we're not what we think we are?

We project into the future this idea of knowing, of thinking that we know what will happen, in ways that are so subtle. Like just sitting here this evening, you might envision what tomorrow will be like. Maybe you don't know exactly what it'll be like, but you have the sense that you'll wake up in the bed in the room that you've been in. We just feel like we know what's going to happen.

These ideas and concepts of what has happened, we take to be what will happen. At one point this nature of the mind got pointed out to me—this tendency to pick up yesterday and put it onto tomorrow, or pick up today and put it onto tomorrow. That's what it's going to be like. Or pick up last Tuesday and that's what tomorrow Tuesday is going to be like. Oh, it's Monday—pick up last Monday and that's what tomorrow Monday is going to be like.

When I joined the Peace Corps, I had a very odd experience as I was flying. I got on the plane and left my friends behind, left my house behind, packed everything up—everything that I was going to have for the next two years in a couple of suitcases—and flew to this little island in the South Pacific. I'd read some materials; this was part of this wanting to know. I tried to educate myself about what the place would be like, what I might see there, what the culture was like.

But as I was flying in the airplane, I had this very odd experience of thinking—it was kind of like my mind believed I wasn't going to get there because I couldn't envision it. I could not imagine what tomorrow would be like. It was a very strange experience. And then when we did arrive, it was this interesting realization: oh, okay, here I am. This is where I am now. I get in this line, get my passport stamped. Okay, I can do that. I didn't know what was on the other side of customs and immigration. But each moment was just the next thing, the next thing, the next thing. And that is actually how things unfold.

It was such a clear experience for me of how much we pick things up, how we create the future and then live that creation so much of the time, rather than really entering into just what's here, what's actually here.

When we carry things from the past into the present, when we carry things from the past and the present into the future, we also construct this present moment. We live in a constructed present, and mostly we are not so clearly aware of that. Everything that we experience, without exception, is a creation of our minds.

I'm not saying that there's not stuff out there. At least I think that you're out there, and I'm not just some brain in a vat imagining giving a dharma talk. I think this is happening. But what I'm saying is that my experience—the only thing I can touch—is a creation of this mind. And the same is true for you. All that we experience is a creation of our minds, and yet so often we do not recognize this. We take that creation to be what's out there, what's actually there.

This concept-making, this perception and conceptualization, is a huge way that this not-knowing is obscured. Really entering into this truth—that we do not know what this moment, this next moment will bring, that this unfolding is a mystery—becomes difficult. And a big piece of that obscuration is because our minds believe the concepts we are constructing to be reality.

This concept-making is useful, and so I'm not advocating that we live without concepts. I think our cultures might descend into chaos if we didn't have concepts and shared ideas—yes, we have breakfast at this time, lunch at this time. These shared values, these shared senses of things matter. And yet to not recognize that this is a construction of mind is a major way we mistakenly take what is impermanent to be permanent, what is unreliable to be reliable, what is uncontrollable to be controllable.

With this kind of understanding of concepts, thoughts, and views, we don't have to get rid of them. Perceptions—we're probably not going to be able to get rid of them. But we can know that they are concepts, they are thoughts, they are views. Understand concept as concept. Understand a view as a view, a perception as a perception. And we are recognizing these too as simply arisings—impermanent arisings in the mind.

As we see our thoughts, our perceptions, our concepts as something that's just arising, we get closer to meeting or touching into, fully opening to this truth that we do not know. So much of our belief that we know is tied up in our ideas around concepts. And when we see this concept being constructed as an arising, we see it's not what's actually out there. It is just something the mind is making up. It is creating it. It is imagining it.

And yet, as I said, the mind actually does a pretty good job of imagining. It does a pretty good job of being somewhat in the vicinity of what's going on out there. And yet, as we start to see this process of concept-making, even the aspect of perception—which is a more rudimentary form of a concept, just a

bare recognition of what's happening—we see that they're really prone to making mistakes.

Recognizing concept as concept, recognizing perception as perception, we can hold it lightly and recognize: this is my perception, this is what I am understanding at this point.

The Buddha pointed to this danger around concepts, to how views and perceptions can really create a lot of suffering in our world. There's a famous teaching story of the elephant and the blind people. Many of you may be familiar with a version of this story, and it's found in the Buddhist texts.

In this teaching story, a king asked an elephant trainer to bring an elephant before a gathering of blind people in his kingdom. The trainer showed each person a different part of the elephant, telling each one, "This is an elephant." Some touched the legs, some the tail, some the trunk, some the side. When asked afterward to describe what an elephant is like, they each offered their understanding. Those who touched the leg said an elephant is like a post. Those who touched the tail said an elephant is like a broom. Those who touched the side said an elephant is like the wall of a storeroom. The story tells us they came to blows over what an elephant truly is—"An elephant is like this! An elephant is not like that!"

In this story, I notice there's a kind of deception happening, because the person showing each one the elephant said, "This is an elephant." They were being encouraged to create the view that this part was the whole elephant. Yet this kind of thing happens to us all the time. We create views based on direct experience. This is really pointing to something important: our views aren't constructed out of complete imagination—they're built on our experience. But we don't see that we're only getting a small piece of the picture. We think we have the whole picture when we've only got a part of it. And so we take our view to be the truth of what something is.

This story cautions us about creating views out of direct experience. What's so important is to recognize that they are views. When we can recognize, "Oh, this is a view," then perhaps we can hear other views. If we're not taking our view to be absolute truth, we can have a discussion, put the pieces together.

One of my favorite quotes from the suttas comes from the Aṭṭhakavagga, a text in the Sutta Nipāta. It goes something like: "Those attached to perception and views roam the world offending people." Holding tightly to views, we aren't able to see clearly.

The Buddha particularly cautioned us around views related to meditative experience. In the sutta Bhante has been mentioning—the teaching on the all-embracing net of views, with its extensive list of views people held at the time of the Buddha—many of the stickiest views come out of deep meditation experience. When we touch into something in meditation, something that feels so true, so deeply present, we can attribute some ontological reality to what we have experienced rather than recognizing that this too is an experience. The Buddha really cautioned us about creating views that arise based on our meditation experience.

This wanting to know—we can start to see it. I've heard some of you over these past weeks talking about

this urge to understand, to know. The mind starts searching: What is it that I need to know? It can be uncomfortable. We can feel a sense of discomfort if we don't have a sense of knowing.

This begins to point to what happens for us as we touch into not knowing. As we begin to open to just what's arising—including recognizing that this concept is a concept arising, this belief is a belief arising—we begin to see that we don't know what's coming next. This can be uncomfortable. At a deep human level, we want to know. So we can start to look at that wanting to know, and the discomfort that comes with it.

By its very nature, insight is something we cannot anticipate. In some ways, opening to this truth of not knowing becomes a kind of practice for the opening to insight. Because we cannot know what we don't know. We tend to be drawn to the familiar. We like knowing that we know. We like paying attention and feeling certain about what we're paying attention to. We like that.

Sometimes we can gravitate toward what we're already familiar with, and it feels pretty good. Being right with the breath feels pretty good—knowing how the breath feels. And yet at some point in our practice, orienting toward what we're already familiar with, keeping the mind directed there, is not going to let us see something new.

Sometimes if we're in that place of wanting to know, we might be searching for something familiar to land on, or trying to figure out what the awareness is paying attention to. And the very act of searching might be obscuring something. It takes trust to open to this truth of not knowing.

On one retreat, I suffered a lot over wanting an insight—wanting to have an insight about impermanence. I really wanted that insight. Teachers had talked about things in the hall, and it seemed like that would be a really cool thing to see. And so I was suffering a lot because I wasn't experiencing what I thought I might experience.

At some point I was feeling into the wanting—wanting this insight, wanting this understanding. I was doing walking meditation out front here, and I noticed that the mind was creating a story. It was telling a story about being in the interview room with my teacher and telling my teacher that I'd had that insight. And we were laughing and celebrating, and it felt really good.

In that seeing, I realized: I have no idea what I want. What I want is to be able to tell somebody that I had that insight. So the idea that I wanted this understanding—I didn't know what that was. I wanted some perks or something that I thought would come with it. We don't know what we're looking for. We really have to enter into this not knowing.

Even in more ordinary ways, there can be things that we miss because we're looking for the familiar or orienting toward what we already know. Sayadaw U Tejaniya talked about a time when he was here visiting in Massachusetts. Somebody was driving him around in a car, and the driver mentioned that there was a deer alarm on the car—a high-pitched tone that deer can hear, higher than humans typically notice.

He said to Sayadaw, "You can hear it if you try. It is possible to hear it."

So Sayadaw said he was trying to hear it, trying to find it. And he couldn't find it, couldn't hear it. Again, he didn't know what he was looking for. And then he said he relaxed and stopped trying. And he heard it.

This is a pointer for us—this relaxing and stopping looking. This kind of curiosity, not of "how can I see this thing," but more of "relax and what's here?" That supports a kind of investigation—a meeting of investigation that is not investigating something we already have our ideas about, but more of a "What's this? What's this?"

So what's the difference between this truth of not knowing and the not knowing of ignorance? In some ways, they're completely different things. The not knowing of ignorance actually gets in the way of seeing this not knowing of moment-to-moment experience.

Because in the not knowing that we've been exploring, we touch into really being present for moment-to-moment experience. Really being here. It points us to this truth of impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable—to the nature of experience being impermanent, unreliable, and uncontrollable. It's about letting go of views, concepts, and ideas, or recognizing that views are arising, so that we can see into this truth.

The not knowing of ignorance is a not understanding of the nature of impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable. Because of views, we take things to be permanent, we take things to be reliable, we take things to be controllable. The not knowing of ignorance is bound up with these views and concepts, and not seeing that that's what they are.

Another question might arise: Okay, so views get in the way of seeing the nature of things as they are. So what's this wise view about? Isn't that just another view that gets in the way?

This reflection was one that was around at the time of the Buddha. There's a story of Anathapindika. I love this story. It's such a deep teaching, and it's given by a householder. Anathapindika was a householder, so that's a nice thing to reflect on. He was talking to some followers of other

religious perspectives, other sects. And they came up to him and said, "Tell us, what are the views that the Buddha has?" And Anandapindika said, "Well, you know, I can't tell you what the views are that the Buddha has." "Well, how about the monks? Can you tell us the views that the monks have?" And he said, "No, I can't tell you that either." So they finally asked him, "Well, can you tell us what your views are?" And he said, "Yes, I can tell you that, but first, why don't you tell me what your views are?"

And so they did, and each one of them offered their perspective—in this case, on some aspect of ontological reality. One of them said something like, "The universe is infinite. This alone is true, everything else is wrong." Another said, "The universe is not infinite, it's finite. This alone is true, everything else is wrong." And they had various views like this, again held in this way, kind of along the

lines of the story of the blind people and the elephant—that this is what's true.

After they all told Anandapindika their views, he said, "This view of yours has either arisen based on something somebody else told you, or it's based on unwise attention to an experience that you've had. And clinging to that view creates suffering." They turned that over a little bit, but then one came back to him and said, "So what are your views?" And Anandapindika said, "Here's the kind of view that I hold: I hold the view that clinging to anything—clinging to views—is suffering."

They tried to use his own argument against him: "Well, you're clinging to that view too." And he said, "Well, when I see that I'm clinging, I see that it's suffering. And right there, the mind lets it go."

This points to what right view is about. It's about a view that is in alignment with the nature of experience—the impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable nature of experience—and that clinging creates suffering. It's an experiential kind of view, a view about what's the nature of experience. It's not about what's the nature of some ontological reality. It's about understanding how clinging to experience creates suffering, and how not clinging is release from suffering.

So it's a different kind of view in a way. But at the same time, initially we do have to pick it up as a belief. We do have to pick up these teachings that the Buddha offers as a kind of belief. If we didn't pick it up as a view or as a belief, we would never step on this path. But what seems to happen as we practice is that we start, because of that view, to look at our experience in a different way. We start to recognize what's happening in our experience, not through the concepts but through what's arising and what's passing away.

Through holding that view and bringing the practice of mindfulness—these two together, mindfulness and wise view—then we see in our direct experience what leads towards suffering and what leads away from suffering. So again, it's experiential. And the experience of wise view, the understanding or the insight there into wise view, is the insight that clinging causes suffering, letting go releases suffering. It's a direct experience. It's not another idea. It's a direct connection with the actual experience of the truth of release.

You can experience this. When you see some wanting release, you feel the freedom of that. That's not an idea. That's the release from suffering. And so this way of experiencing lets us touch into things as they are, seeing the impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable nature of experience.

We begin to touch into this truth that we do not know what the next moment will bring. As we touch into that more fully, it can be really uncomfortable—seeing this truth that we don't know, seeing how impermanent, unreliable, and uncontrollable experience is. At some very deep level, our system, the system of this being, just goes, "No. I don't like that. I don't want it to be that way." And so we resist it. We fight it.

We're afraid. There are many different relationships here—feelings of vulnerability, insecurity, fear—when touching into this truth, touching into this unreliability, this not knowing.

There are different ways this happens. When you explore and experience this—and I heard some of this in meetings today about some of you going home—there's a sense, a feeling of "Wow, what's waiting for me?" A little bit of fear. The idea of not knowing creates fear. On a kind of bigger level, a more ordinary or conventional level, we can experience this fear of not knowing. And on a more moment-to-moment level, we can also experience this fear of not knowing.

Sometimes this fear, or feeling of vulnerability, or feeling of insecurity is actually not based on the actual experience—it's based on the *idea* that you don't know. The idea that something's going to happen and I don't know what it is. The mind reacts to that. A kind of projection into the future. A little bit of imagining what's going to be waiting for me. "I don't know what's going to be waiting for me." And it's true that we don't know what's going to be waiting for us. But we're not actually in that. We're not actually responding to the fear of this deeper level of not knowing. It's more of a fear of an idea that we don't know.

This was pointed out to me on one retreat. Even on a very moment-to-moment level, this kind of fear can play out. I was experiencing a kind of fear about just realizing, "I have no idea what the next arising is going to be." And I was in this place of agitated fear around not knowing what the next moment's arising was going to be. "Am I going to be able to meet it? I don't know if I'm going to be able to meet it. I don't know what it is. How can I know if I'm going to be able to meet it?" And so the experience of fear was prevalent.

During one walking meditation—I was walking in the hall right outside the meditation hall—I decided, "Okay, I'm going to face this fear. This fear about not knowing what is going to happen." And what I discovered, as I decided to get curious about this fear and about the unknown, was that every step I took, it was known. And then the next step was known. There's nothing unknown in this moment's experience. I could see that the mind was projecting just to the next split second, not knowing what that was, and fear that "I'm not going to be able to meet this. I have to be able to control how I meet this." And it was just—in the next moment there was a step and there was the awareness of it. With that came the recognition that fear is not about what is actually unknown; it was about the idea that I didn't know.

This is one way that happens, and I think this happens a lot to us, both in this moment-to-moment way and also in our everyday lives. When we are thinking about not knowing, or not being certain about the future, feeling vulnerable or insecure—what is it that we're actually relating to? What are we reacting to? Often it's an idea, a construction of our minds that we're afraid of.

And sometimes there is this experience of a slipperiness to the mindfulness. It's like as soon as the mind is touching into something, it's already vanishing, and we don't even know what it is. So sometimes there's this feeling of just slipping, slipping, slipping—and nowhere to land. A more direct experience of this, a more visceral experience of this place of not knowing. And again, we can have different relationships to that—fear, confusion, anxiety.

It's really important to recognize that, because the path unfolds by noticing. Essentially, that fear, that

anxiety is a resistance to this truth, to this experience, to this slipping away of experience, this passing away of experience. And so it's a form of clinging. It's a form of "No, it's not okay that it's like this." That is where, that is how the practice deepens—by looking at the clinging, by knowing the clinging. Sometimes in that kind of place you might look at the anxiety and see it too is just slipping away. Nowhere to land.

Joseph gives an analogy of the practice, a kind of summary of this talk in a way.

I think Joseph came up with this analogy about skydiving — that the practice kind of unfolds like skydiving.

Initially, perhaps you're strapping on your parachute and getting in the plane. Maybe there's some enthusiasm and excitement: "Oh, I'm going skydiving, this will be fun." You get in the plane and you're climbing, experiencing that. Then you get to the place where you've come to altitude and you're told, "Okay, it's time to jump out of the plane." You kind of look over the edge and it's like, "Yeah, no, I don't want to let go." So there's this clinging and this fear around the letting go, to step into that falling.

Then you finally get up your courage to let go, and you've got your parachute on, and you're falling. Initially it's a little bit scary, but then at a certain point you hit this place where it almost feels like floating — the place where the body has reached terminal velocity so that it just feels like you're floating. There's this delight of experience, a kind of joy and bliss of just being right there with the falling.

And then you realize you don't have a parachute. And then the fear really kicks in. You're trying to navigate — what am I going to do? How am I going to figure this out? There's terror, dread, imagining what it's going to be like when you hit the ground.

And then, he says, you realize that there's no ground. That's that understanding of not knowing — just this endless changing of conditions. No ground. And that is actually a relief.

Letting go like this requires a lot of trust. Part of our practice is recognizing this. The parachuting analogy is great because there are times when it's like, "No, I don't trust jumping out of this plane." There are times where we run up against our edges, and that's not a mistake — that's just running up against our clinging, and we simply know that. So we take the step of opening to, "Okay, this is what's here, and there's fear." Or, "This is what's here, and there's patience to be with it." Trust. And let go, and let go, and trust.

It's a process. The whole of our practice could be looked at as a deepening of this trust — to let go at deeper and deeper and deeper levels.

Sometimes meeting this unknown can feel like we're standing on the edge of an abyss, and we're asked to step into it. The trust there — hard, hard to trust that. And yet as we start to trust, we take the step into the abyss. And in the next moment, we find ourselves standing on the edge of the abyss.

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