Not Knowing (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 1:02:16

The more we practice, the more we see that we have no idea what is going to happen next.

This is true at more obvious levels—like the delay of a start of a talk because of volume issues. At more obvious levels, every day people die who wake up in the morning and have no idea they're not going to make it to the end of the day. The change, the changing nature of life is so profound and unpredictable at our ordinary levels of life, but also at the more subtle levels of our practice experience.

In entering into just this moment, just landing right here, we start to really appreciate and see that we have no idea what the next moment will be. As we receive our experience—just what's happening, what's this, what's this, what's this—when we are really present, we can be very surprised by the next arising.

We seem to think we know what the next thing is going to be. And I think often perhaps we think that because it can be roughly in the category of right. Like probably a minute from now I'll still be here sitting giving this talk. But we don't know. This thinking that we do know what's going to happen tends to obscure this very deep truth that we don't know what is going to happen.

So many things that are added to our experience obscure this not knowing. They obscure this entering into the terrain of being fully open to the next moment without preconceived ideas, views, perspectives, beliefs. These habits of mind, these patterns of mind tend to obscure this truth that we don't know what's coming next.

We carry beliefs, ideas, views from the past into the present moment. Views about who we are, views about who other people are. And we think we know. We think we know who we are. We think we know how we're going to respond, what's next. We think we know who other people are. Maybe we can open to the possibility that we are not what we think we are, and that others are not what we think they are.

We project these views, these beliefs into the future. We create these worlds of thoughts about some future that we take up residence in and believe will happen.

It can be hard to see this. This evening as I was sitting in my room down in the teacher village, reflecting about this content and these ideas, I imagined myself up here giving this talk. Because of the weather there was a recognition that I was going to have to go through something to get here, and it was kind of unknown what that going through would be. So there was a connection with that—a recognition that it's really windy out there, trees can fall down, maybe the golf cart could flip over. There was this sense of not being sure if I'd get here. But then I realized that I had assumed I would get into the process of getting up the hill, and that was still two hours away. I had no idea what would happen in those intervening two

hours. It's so quick for us to pick up these ideas and just assume we know what's going to happen.

I joined the Peace Corps in my mid-thirties. This was before I met the Dharma, before I met the practice, but there was quite a startling experience that I had as I was making my way across the ocean in the plane. I realized that I had no idea what was going to meet me on the other end of that plane ride. I could kind of envision what it would be like to be on the plane until it landed, but then there was no clue. In the way my mind worked at that point, there was almost this funny kind of belief that I wasn't going to get there because I couldn't envision it. I couldn't see what it would be. It almost felt like my life ended with that plane flight. But then the plane landed and each moment unfolded—the next moment, the next moment, the next moment. And it revealed itself. The experience revealed itself.

When we think we know what's going to happen, that's a view, it's an idea, it's thoughts, it's a world of thought that is created. And the way our minds work, sometimes this view or these thoughts can become self-fulfilling prophecies. Not always bad.

The image, for instance, of my coming up here to give a talk—that becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy by remembering it and following through on that. And this is hopefully helpful, that I showed up here tonight.

But we can also, through what I was saying earlier about views and ideas we have about ourselves or others, box ourselves in, box other people in, based on our senses of who we are, who they are. Views are a huge obscuration of this entering into the mystery of the moment and not knowing—really not knowing what the next moment will be.

And even in the present moment there are ways views enter in, but also concepts. I talked a little about concepts last week when I talked about delusion, and how we often live our lives through concept, and how easy it is for concept to be distorted by mistake or emotion. It's so easy for our ideas, what we think we are receiving as experience, to be distorted or altered through our views, our ideas, our opinions.

And so we don't just take in the world as it is. As I think it was Anaïs Nin who said, we don't see the world as it is—we see the world as we are. There's a deep truth to this that we begin to really recognize by looking at our minds.

Now concepts are useful. I think I talked about that some last week too, that we need concepts to navigate the world. But it's helpful both to recognize that we are experiencing the world through concept, and that everything we experience, all of our experience, is mediated through our mind. We are not really in touch with what's out in the world. We're in touch with an internal construction that does a pretty good job of representing the world.

The use of concepts stabilizes the world. It allows us to navigate. Concepts can be a kind of shortcut for us. If I had to figure out every time I walked into the dining hall what tables were and what forks and knives were, it would be exhausting. So this shortcut of concepts and perceptions helps us navigate the world.

And yet what we mistake is that we think we are accurately perceiving things, rather than recognizing that we are perceiving things—that our mind is constructing what we are seeing.

This is a way of entering into this present moment more fully: to understand this constructed nature of mind, of what we are experiencing, the constructed nature of our experience. It is such a mystery, such a mind-blowing thing that we're living in.

We can understand that we are navigating the world through concepts and still know that that is how we are. We can navigate through concepts and still understand that we are navigating through concepts. It's not that hard actually, once we begin to touch into it. We can understand concept as concept and understand how error-prone concept can be.

I talked about the elephant—the blind people and the elephant—last time. And I talked about mistaking a rope for a snake. These are ways in which we solidify, reify, consolidate our experience around perceptions and take things to be. "This is the way it is"—that's a view, a concept. It's so pervasive. And one of the ways, again, even experiencing the world through concept, the stabilizing that happens through concept keeps us from really touching into that truth of not knowing. Because we've got our concepts, we think they're right, and we're experiencing things through that. We're not really open to the dynamic nature of what's happening.

And so entering into the present moment, entering into just being here in this moment, is a way of beginning to explore this truth of not knowing. Thoughts, concepts, views can be seen as just arising. We can know them as experience that's arising, as opposed to simply believing them. We can more fully open into this not knowing.

The very nature of what we are doing here, the very nature of awakening—even this word vipassanā, seeing clearly, sometimes translated as insight—the very nature of insight is that we have no idea what we're looking for.

We tend to be drawn to the familiar. We tend to be drawn to what we already know. That comes through views, through concepts, through ideas, beliefs. All of those things shape our mind through what we have learned in the past. We tend to be drawn to the familiar. It's comfortable. It feels navigable. And yet the very work that we're doing is helping us to see things that we've never seen before.

And if we're orienting to our experience through what's familiar, what we're already aware of, if we're orienting to the world in that way, we won't see what we're not looking for. As we look for something, the very act of looking can obscure understanding, can obscure the unfamiliar.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya tells a story about how sometimes it's easier to see something—especially something we don't know what it is—when we stop looking. He was teaching a retreat at Insight Meditation Society in New England, and one of the staff members was driving him around, taking him on a tour of the area. The driver said, "Sayadaw, there's a deer alarm on this car." There are so many deer in that area that he

had put a deer alarm on his car—a kind of high-pitched sound that alerts deer to the approaching car so they'll stay away. The driver said, "You can hear it. It's not at a higher pitch than we can hear. Can you hear it?"

Sayadaw said he tried to hear it. "Can I hear that? Can I hear that?" And he couldn't hear it. But then when he stopped trying to hear it, he heard it. He didn't know what he was looking for. And when he relaxed and just took in experience more openly, without any idea about what he was looking for, there it was. It popped into sound.

We hear sometimes in dharma talks descriptions of various experiences. In some of my early retreats at IMS—maybe it was even my very first three-month course—I heard the teachers talking about an experience around impermanence, of just seeing things popping in and out. It sounded so cool. I really wanted to see it. And I suffered a lot around wanting to see it and trying to see it and imagining that I could see it.

At some point, while I was suffering over this, I realized that I was suffering. I kept thinking I was suffering because I wasn't having the experience I wanted to have. But what I discovered was that I was wanting to tell the teacher that I'd had the experience. I found myself waking up into this thought of telling the teacher about it, how great it was that I was having this experience. We were laughing and celebrating in the interview room. I was having this great fantasy about how wonderful it would be to tell the teacher I'd had this experience. And I had no idea—that was a real eye-opener for me—I had no idea what I was looking for. I had no idea what I wanted. What I wanted was for somebody to praise me. That was an eye-opener too.

So we really don't know. Often we don't know what we're looking for. And so this perspective of curiosity—what is this experience?—this opening to not knowing... Really, this moment, right now, we think we know what it is, but look at it. What's here?

This can be a way to enter into a real intimacy, that being with, an intimacy we talked about in terms of investigation, that can support us to be here, just meeting this experience without preconceived ideas. Or if we have preconceived ideas, to recognize: this is an idea that's arising right now. That's actually what's happening—an idea arising about what I'm seeing. That can be startling to recognize: I'm seeing experience through a concept.

And sometimes we can actually touch into just this experience. Just this. Without preconceived ideas. Sometimes what's called bare attention.

This reminds me of the Buddha's teaching to Bahiya. Many of you are probably familiar with this teaching.

A wanderer who was not one of the Buddha's followers, but had heard about the Buddha from a distance, had traveled a long way to see him. When he arrived where the Buddha was residing, he asked where he

might find the Buddha, saying he wanted to ask him a question. They told him the Buddha had gone out for alms round over to the village. And so Bahiya followed and found the Buddha making his way through the village on alms round.

Bahiya said, "Please teach me the Dharma. I've traveled a long way." He introduced himself and told the Buddha his name. The Buddha said, "Bahiya, now is not the time. I'm going on alms round."

Bahiya asked again: "We don't know when you or I will die. Please teach me the Dharma. Please teach me the Dharma in brief, even." He just wanted a little short dharma talk. Again the Buddha said, "Not now, it's time for alms."

But Bahiya asked a third time, and in many of the stories in the texts, when somebody asks the Buddha something three times, he will do it. And so he stopped and gave Bahiya a teaching. Now I'll repeat this from memory—I don't have it in front of me. It is said that upon hearing these words, Bahiya became fully awakened.

So, listen. The Buddha said to Bahiya, "This is how you should train yourself: In the seen should be only the seen. In the heard should be only the heard. In the sensed, only the sensed. In the cognized, only the cognized."

That was the instruction. You should train yourself thus: In the seen is only the seen, in the heard is only the heard, in the sensed is only the sensed, in the cognized is only the cognized.

This is essentially recognizing experience just for what it is. This includes recognizing that seeing is happening, and the concept—the cognition of what is seen—knowing that to be just something that's cognized. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching. "The sensed is only the sensed" refers to those other three senses. And "in the cognized is only the cognized."

Essentially he was offering a form of bare attention, of choiceless awareness. This question came up the other day: where is this found in the Satipatthana? This is one of the main places this teaching is found—in this teaching to Bahiya. Notice your experience just for what it is. Just this, just this, just this. The mystery of experience.

The Buddha went on to explain to Bahiya the value of doing this. He didn't just give him the instruction and say, "Go off and practice and see what you see." He gave him a pointer. He said, "When for you in the seen is only the seen, in the heard is only the heard, in the sensed is only the sensed, in the cognized is only the cognized—when that's true for you, there will be no you in terms of that experience. When there is no you in terms of that experience, there is no you there. And when there is no you there, you are neither here nor yonder nor between the two. This, just this, is the end of suffering."

And so he pointed to how this practice of entering into the present moment, entering into this—essentially this not knowing, just this, what's this—creates the conditions for the understanding and insight into

not-self to arise. He didn't give Bahiya a particular teaching on not-self. He just said, "When you explore experience in this way, this is the result. There's no you in terms of that experience." You're not interpreting experience in terms of you. It's just experience. You're not interpreting experience in terms of I or me or mine.

This is the process that the Buddha called conceiving. We conceive ourselves in relation to other things, in relation to experience.

The Buddha had another pithy teaching about this—another one-line teaching, another one of these deep, penetrating sentences. He said, "In whatever way they conceive, the fact is ever other than that."

This again reminds me of the elephant story. The conceiving around "this is what an elephant is" and the attaching to that view because I had experienced it. Holding to that view and coming to blows with the other people who had different views. It's not wrong to say this part of the elephant is like this. But again, in whatever way they conceive, there's more to the picture.

And in fact, here what this is pointing to is that when there is conceiving happening, when experience is interpreted in terms of I, me, or mine, there is a lot that's not being seen. The fact is ever other than that.

And so this simple attention helps us to enter into—maybe stumble into—this way of... He didn't tell Bahiya what the experience of not-self would be like. He didn't say, "Here, look for this. This is what not-self will be like." He said, "Notice experience like this. In the seen is only the seen. When for you in the seen is only the seen, there will be no you in terms of that." A kind of pointer to: what is this experience? A pointer to this possibility of something unknowable, unfamiliar, that might be available to be known in experience.

This is some of what we do in our talks. We point to things, we speak to things. Sometimes we can hear them, and then later in our experience we see something differently because there's been a kind of pointing in a talk or in a meeting with a teacher. Our mind has been shaken away from its familiar things.

"There is no you in terms of that." When there is no you in terms of that, there is no you there. It's not that the you disappears. It's really recognizing the truth of how it's always been. Nikki pointed to that last night—it's the truth of how it's always been. It's just the seeing here. The understanding of something that's hard to see because we are so familiar with looking at things through the perspective of self.

Sometimes we even—I was talking a few minutes ago about seeing things that somebody talks about in a dharma talk, that the hearing of it, we don't really get it at the time, but then later it's like, "Oh, that's what they were talking about." Sometimes something can be so out of our range of experience that we can't even hear it when it's spoken.

I'm quite sure this happened to me on another three-month course when I was doing my practice and going to the talks and listening to what they said. Some insight arose in my experience—I don't even

remember at this point what it was—but it felt very profound and very important. And I was almost frustrated at the teachers. "Why haven't they been telling us about this? This is important. They should be talking about this." So this was one of those things that I felt like I'd stumbled into by myself with nobody ever having spoken about it. And these things happen. We can see things at times that haven't been pointed to, if we are really just here and available to be here.

I almost wrote the teachers a note, but I decided not to. And in the next three dharma talks, I heard them say it. And so it was pretty obvious to me that they hadn't just magically picked up on my thoughts and started putting them into the dharma talks, but that they'd probably been saying it for weeks. And I had not consciously heard it. This too can happen because when something is that unfamiliar, sometimes it's hard to hear.

So these teachings to Bahiya to me really point to the simplicity of our practice. The instructions he gave to Bahiya were so simple. And then he pointed to the possibility of freedom that comes from that simplicity. Not from trying to look for not-self, but just knowing experience. In the seen is only the seen, and the heard is only the heard.

So what's the difference between this kind of not knowing that I'm talking about right now and the not knowing of ignorance, which we can think of also as a not knowing, a not understanding? The not knowing of ignorance is really a taking things, a looking at experience through views and beliefs. It's taking things to be permanent, reliable, self. It's interpreting experience through that perspective of "me."

And so the not knowing of ignorance is not understanding the truths of impermanence, unreliability, not-self. It comes from not connecting directly with experience. It's the habit of mind before we are introduced to this possibility of meeting the moment in a different way.

This deeper kind of not knowing is entered into by precisely connecting to the impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable nature of experience. It comes out of awareness and contacting experience directly. In the seen is only the seen. Entering into the present moment, letting go of views that create a rigid sense of what is happening, what will happen, who I am, what others will be or do, who they are, what's supposed to happen.

This entering into not knowing is a form of at least recognizing views for what they are—that they are views. I've talked about this in some of the meetings with you. It is so powerful to notice that we're holding a view. When we're not aware that we're holding a view, it is simply taken to be true. But we can become aware: "Oh, there's a view, there's a belief happening right now." And in that recognition that there's a belief happening, there's some space. We don't have to in that moment tell ourselves not to believe it, but at least to recognize: this is being believed. This particular belief may be connected to a relatively close reflection of reality, or it may be completely off. But the first step is really recognizing, "Oh, this is a belief, and it's being believed."

So if this entering into the present moment is partly about letting go of views, how does right view enter into the mix? Isn't that just another view that gets in the way?

The views that the Buddha offers as wise view are views that he articulated having come to an understanding of the nature of experience—the impermanent, unreliable, not-self nature of experience. The understanding of how clinging creates suffering. This is the place where the views that the Buddha offers us land. Clinging creates suffering. Clinging creates suffering precisely because things are impermanent. Because they are impermanent, they are unreliable as a place to cling to for lasting happiness. They're all directly connected, these truths that the Buddha discovered and then articulated.

As Anisha said, the Buddha didn't make this up. It's more like discovering the law of gravity. He discovered these truths and then articulated them, like Newton discovered the law of gravity and then articulated equations that help us to navigate it. Although we were always navigating the law of gravity, even before Newton discovered it. We always knew that we couldn't place this glass in mid-air. We knew that. And at some level, maybe we also know the truth of not-self. We do, at some level, know the truth of impermanence.

But as the Mahabharata says in one place—this great Hindu epic poem, which is really kind of a play—one of the characters is asking another character, "What is the most wonderful thing in the world?" And this character responds, "This is what I think is most wonderful: that people seeing daily the truth that everyone dies, never once does it really enter that they too will die." Only the surface mind understands. The actual truth doesn't penetrate.

We know at some level these truths of impermanent, unreliable. But because we are orienting through concept, that stability of concept, we miss this truth. It's staring us in the face all the time.

And so the views that the Buddha pointed to are in alignment with these truths that he discovered. And we can frame it, perhaps, as it was done in one sutta. There's a sutta where the householder Anathapindika was talking with some people from other traditions, and they were asking him, "So, tell us what views the contemplative Gotama has." That was the name for the Buddha. And saying "the contemplative Gotama" was maybe slightly disrespectful. "So tell us what views the contemplative Gotama has."

And Anathapindika responded, "Venerable sirs, I don't know entirely what views the Blessed One has."

"Well, well," they said, "so you don't know the views of the contemplative Gautama. Then tell us what the views of the monks are."

And he says, "I can't tell you that either."

And they said, "Well, then tell us what your views are."

And Anathapindika was clever. He said, "Why don't you tell me your views first, and then I will tell you

my views."

So they each—there were ten of them or so—described their views, and they all said something along the lines of, "The cosmos is eternal. Only this is true. Anything else is worthless. This is the sort of view I have." Then the next person would say something like, "The cosmos is not eternal. Only this is true. Anything else is worthless. This is the sort of view I have."

There were many of these views: the cosmos is finite, the cosmos is infinite, the soul and the body are the same, the soul and the body are different. All these different views directly contradicting each other, and each person believing that their view was the only true view.

Anathapindika said in response, "As for the one who says 'the cosmos is eternal, only this is true, anything else is worthless, this is the sort of view I have'—that person's view arises either from his own inappropriate attention or in dependence on the words of another. This view has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently originated. Whatever has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently originated—that is impermanent. Whatever is impermanent is unreliable. Whatever is unreliable is suffering. This one thus adheres to that stress, submits himself to that stress."

The very holding to the view—that is what Anathapindika was pointing to. Holding on to that view, you are suffering.

He went through all of the views that they had spoken. He said all of these views, held to in this way, are suffering. You are submitting yourself to suffering.

Then he said what his view was. "Here is the view I have: Whatever has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently originated—that is inconstant, impermanent. Whatever is impermanent is unreliable. Whatever is unreliable is suffering. Whatever is suffering is not me, is not what I am, is not myself. This is the sort of view I have."

The wanderers tried to put his own argument back on him, saying, "Well, you're just holding on to that view. You're suffering by holding on to that view."

And Anathapindika said, "When whatever has been brought into being is seen as suffering, right there I understand it is impermanent, it is unreliable, it is suffering—and there is the release from it in the seeing of it."

What Anathapindika was pointing to was that holding a view that clinging to views is suffering is itself onward leading. This is the sort of view that the Buddha held, that he offered to us. He offered views that help us to transcend views—to recognize that holding to any view, clinging to it and saying "only this is true, anything else is wrong," that this clinging is suffering.

When we notice that—when we notice that we're clinging to whatever, to sense experience, to concepts, to views—when we notice that clinging, the seeing of it brings understanding of the suffering of it. And the

mind begins to release.

At first, the views that the Buddha offers are more of a conceptual wisdom, helping us recognize where the traps are in our minds. But the understanding that results from the seeing of that clinging, from the seeing of the impermanent, unreliable, not-self nature of experience—

That understanding is not a concept. It's a direct experience. It's a shift of understanding that allows us to be with things as they are—this entering into the mystery of experience. We don't know what the next thing will be, what the next experience, the next moment will bring. We have no idea.

It's useful to recognize that as we begin to touch into this truth—that we don't know what the next moment will bring—we have relationships to that. Often relationships of fear, a sense of vulnerability, maybe confusion, a feeling of insecurity. This too is something that needs to be seen and known and recognized. Not to try to convince ourselves, "I should just be with things, be with this not knowing," when what's arising, part of what's arising in this moment's experience, is fear. And that can be known as an arising. It's just, "Oh, this too is cognized." The cognized is only the cognized—fear is happening right now.

So there are different relationships we have to this not knowing, and it may be useful to unpack a little what's going on there. Sometimes the fear or insecurity, the vulnerability around this not knowing, is about a projection into the future. We're thinking, "I don't know what's going to happen. Maybe something bad will happen." And so we pick up some imagined future and then get afraid of that. In this not knowing place, our mind sometimes fills it in with something and then responds or reacts to that. In that case, it's not really the not knowing we're reacting to—it's the imagined scenario we're reacting to.

Another way we can react to the not knowing is to the very idea of not knowing. We might just sit here with this thought, "I don't know what's going to happen. Oh no. What do I do?" And it's more about the idea than the actual experience. The fear or insecurity there is related back to a sense of me that feels vulnerable, that feels like it's happening to me—it's me that this not knowing is happening to.

On one retreat I had an experience of this fear around just, "Wow, it's like..." I felt like I was going to step off the edge every single step. Just this really entering into having no idea what's going to happen next. A very disorienting kind of state. And so there was fear coming up, and my teachers, as we do, encouraged me to notice this fear.

So I was like, "Okay, I'm going to meet this fear. I'm going to meet this not knowing. What is this fear about anyway?" I was doing walking meditation as I was exploring this. And I would take a step. "Okay, where's the not knowing?" There is no not knowing right now. The step is known. And I'd take the next step and it's like, "Well, that step's known too." I could see that the mind was just slightly projecting—again, that sense of slightly projecting into the future: "I'm not going to know the next thing." But when I actually looked at this moment, the knowing was just revealing itself.

I felt like I was standing on the edge of an abyss, being asked to step into it. And as I took that step—just

with trust, taking that step—the edge of the cliff grew out and there I was, standing on the edge of the abyss again. Every step was known. But the feeling of stepping into something unknown remained.

So it takes some kind of trust to meet this experience.

Even sometimes, in that experience, every step is known. I know what's happening there. There's the pressure and the pulsing and the tension. It's just so clear in that moment.

And yet sometimes, even being in the present moment, just the entering into the present moment, even that feels unknowable. Slippery. Streaming. Like there's nowhere to land. As soon as the mind touches any experience, it's already dissolving. It's just vanishing, vanishing, vanishing.

So sometimes even this feels very slippery. And yet this is a kind of entering into groundlessness. There is nowhere to land. The only problem is we think there should be somewhere to land. It's like our lives are an endless falling.

Joseph mentions an analogy of parachuting. First you jump out of an airplane—free falling can be kind of exhilarating, the feeling of falling. But then maybe you realize you forgot your parachute. Then there's terror. But in this practice, there's the understanding: there is no ground. There is no ground.

And so this takes trust. Letting go and trust to enter this moment.

Just this.

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