

Dharma talk, Dec 16, 2017  
Working with the inevitable rise of fear

## **1. A safe container, building trust**

Practice listening passively. You will hear that which is useful to you. The rest can just pass you by. Just listening. There may be an idea that opens us a new understanding, even if it is just for an instant. That is enough. There are no words you need to hold onto.

On retreat, we are held by the form and structure--the rules, and the rounds of sitting and walking, and not sitting and not walking. And always not talking. We can decide to treat any running commentary, any rumination, and any conclusion we may draw, as substantial as a dream. This is an extraordinary lab. This is the time to turn the attention to how the stream of our own consciousness gets stuck in well-worn routines, always leading us to the same claustrophobic internal dead-end. Feelings and thoughts and sensations can be known to contain no final truth. On occasion, we get to experience the falling away of those constructs.

The structure of a retreat, this retreat, is a container, which holds this process of waking to our selves with great compassion. We have the stability of the schedule and the form. We have stability within the breath within our bodies. Gravity is dependable. We are held by the community. The worries and anxiety that may naturally arise in this process can be held and known as that which normally comes and goes over the course of time. In other words, we get to cultivate trust and equanimity.

It is a time to unwrap how consciousness habitually functions. How do we become so mesmerized? How do our desires and avoidances lead us around so predictably?

We are designed to run on habit. We don't like our assumptions questioned. That is too scary. Who are we without those implicit rules of perception? Who are we without our mindless drives to avoid what causes us discomfort? Who are we when we don't chase what we think we want?

Any of the hindrances can surface and come to our rescue, as defenses against knowing something new. Any of the hindrances can surface as defenses against knowing what has been avoided. Flurry and worry, ill will and hate, sloth and torpor, and doubt. They are all quite agile, and step in to protect us from feeling and knowing what we habitually don't know. Our task is to unveil the process by simply paying attention.

As we become intimate with this process, there begins to be a natural unwrapping that occurs, all on its own. This is how *dharma* functions...and once

in a while, we don't fall into the trap of the hindrances...a little bit at a time...this is a practice...knowing your favorite hindrances, so entrancing, going back to the breath, dipping your toe into the continuous stream of phenomena..letting something new happen...developing trust in the process.

And one of the things that can happen is that fear surfaces.

Krishnamurti writes: "We are boiling with fear all the time."

Is that true sometimes?  
Look and see.

So, how do we work with fear when it inevitably arises?

## **2. Active and passive elements of practice**

There are two complementary aspects of practice, one active, and one passive. The passive is the familiar allowing all occurrences to rise and pass, treating all mind moments as neutral. We bring compassion and kindness to be present as we just sit here, cultivating concentration with interest.

The more active aspect is the development of wholesomeness, and eschewing unwholesomeness. Intentionality and discrimination are present. We develop discernment to recognize which qualities of mind are skillful and those that are not. By taking on the precepts, we decide to value and protect the qualities of virtue and persistence. We build upon those qualities by cultivating the ones that aid clarity and equanimity: mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. Decisions are made through the union of intention and awareness: how is this response to the previous moment working for me? Is it moving me in the direction of wholesomeness, or am I moving in the direction of chaos, hatred, or fear?

This afternoon I want to address fear. I have been informed by the Wednesday evening group that this is shared interest. It seems that all of you have plenty of fear to address.

## **3. Varieties of Fear**

Before we start looking at the varieties of fear, we need to recognize that fear is a very physical emotion. Our heart beats grow louder, and faster, or stomach can do flip-flops, our hands and feet get cold, we can feel flushed and perspire, stress hormones are released. This can come with mental confusion. A single flash of fear floods the mind and then can recede, but it sets in motion a huge series of physical reactions that may take a long time to settle down. The stress hormones have a fairly long half-life.

We can engage and amplify the fear response, thinking you are still afraid, because the body has not settled down yet. Watch for this. See if you gravitate to telling yourself stories about being afraid, reacting with attraction to the content of the story of fear, or vilify yourself for being fearful. The physical response is not the same as the mental state. This can be taken apart, with interest. There is a lot to investigate here.

And you can ask yourself, “What is this fear? What is threatened? Where is the danger?”

Some fear arises just because nature abhors a vacuum, and psyche finds this is a good time to let come into conscious attention something that has been hidden from you, or has been hanging out in the shadows. Some memories wait until we are strong enough to know. This is something that a good therapist can help you process. In the meantime, this practice is stable, and gravity is functioning. There is nothing you need to do, but assure yourself that in this present moment you are safe. Memory can arise as if the trauma were present now, but open your eyes, see the wall or window in front of you, hear the sounds in this room. You are welcome to come talk with me during interviews.

Some arousal is non-specific. It might appear as feeling generally anxious. There is no specific object of alarm. You get to see if you build on this arousal with the imagination. And then, of course, the arousal itself, and the story you tell to give it coherence, can then become an object of fear.

Or you can stay with the arousal itself, as a sensation. Arousal has the same physical manifestation whether it is excitement or trepidation. See what your response is to the arousal.

Is the body held in a frozen position? Braced?  
What is the breath up to?  
Does the arousal naturally unwind itself? Is it finite?

As you sit here with fear or arousal, you can decide to investigate how fear functions. We can take it apart; see what factors are present. You can examine the roots of the factors. Fear can become interesting.

What are the elements that are present? You may find confusion, or delusion, aversion, a sense of danger, a sense of weakness, or a desire to escape. These can be present to a greater or lesser degree. Confusion and aversion are the unskillful elements. The perception of weakness, and danger, and the desire to escape are actually needed in order to avoid complacency in dangerous situations. We need to be aware of our weaknesses, our vulnerabilities, in order to take effective action, as is necessary. We need to be skillful in a sometimes

dangerous world. Being discriminate about the current perception takes keen awareness and a willingness to examine what is actually happening.

Confusion or delusion can have us misapprehending the dangers we face. We can see danger where there is none, and no danger where it actually exists. If we obsess over non-existent or trivial dangers, we will squander time and energy building up useless defenses, diverting our attention from genuine threats. If we put the fact that none of us can avoid aging, illness, and death out of our minds because they are too frightening to consider, we grow complacent in our actions. We waste time with trivial pursuits. We cling to the transient for lack of clarity on impermanence.

And finally, some fear functions as a hindrance. Flurry and worry can keep us very busy, preoccupied, in its gross and subtle forms. As we begin to examine fear, we can ask what was arising in consciousness right before the internal alarm was sounded. Is this sense of alarm a distraction? The burning questions: did Rhonda forget to ring the bell? What if the feeling never comes back to my feet? What if there is nothing I like at dinner? What happens if the floor opens up and swallows us all? What function does this fear serve? How are these burning questions helping me avoid something that is arising, or are they simple entertainment, or do these questions give meaning to naturally arising arousal?

#### **4. Working with fear**

You get to analyze fear, not as a single, solid thing, but as a compound of many factors. What part of the fear is dependent on greed or passion, which part is dependent on aversion, and which part is dependent on delusion? In this way we are disassembling the fear response.

If there is greed or passion for something, there is the fear you are not going to get it. Or, once you do get it, there is the fear that you will lose it.

Fear based on delusion can range anywhere from the boogey-man in the closet, to general existential angst, that something is missing or required of you and you don't know what it is. There may be the fear associated with what the Buddhist call *dukkha*, or the basic unsatisfactory quality that can permeate life.

When you examine fear in order to discover its root in clinging or aversion or delusion, then the fear can transform into understanding.

We begin to discover that we think our happiness depends on has so many conditions for which we have no control over: the weather, the economy, the Steelers winning, the health of our self or our loved ones. All of those are uncertain.

In cultivating the wholesome factors of mind, the mental strengths—conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration and discernment, we can cut through the clinging to fear and delusion, and avoid getting lost in confusion. Conviction insists on giving priority to a wholesome state of mind. Discernment helps you figure out what is wholesome and what is not. We must be persistent, awake and aware. If fear arises, we can examine it with equanimity.

It is this balance of mind, which will lead us to unconditioned happiness, and the capacity for kindness and sympathetic joy. Well-being will be tied to the breath and equanimity. We will notice when we are trying to cling to what is actually impermanent. We learn to abandon the quicksands of somethingness for the firm ground of nothingness. When free from clinging and aversion, there there is really nothing to fear.

Entertain the notion that everything you truly need is already present. Take refuge here.

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