

A Beginning Exploration of Fear
Retreat at Zen Center
Sat. May 14, 2011
Rhonda Karlton Rosen

Krishnamurti—"We are boiling with fear all the time."

Is this true?

Is this a useful question for our practice?

My friend who was a young child in Brussels in the early 40's, spent night after night in the air raid shelter listening to the bombs dropping, holding her breath until she could hear the sound of the explosion. She was still alive. And then she waited, and again there would be the whistle of the next bomb falling. The fear of annihilation was embedded in every breath.

Do we all resemble her, with just the content of our stories differing slightly? Are we listening for the bomb to drop with an incomplete exhale?

Our basic animal fears get layered with the psychological fears, the patterns of our emotional and mental reactivity, our history. We panic or freeze in anticipation of some dreaded unknown consequence, of fear loss of control, of failure, of abandonment, of loneliness or pain. We have a cascade of mental reactions which are largely predictable—of self-blame or blaming others, looking for escape routes, picking fights or creating chaos. We try to avoid the feeling of fear or we try to solve the feeling. We try to create certainty where there is none. Or, worse, as a means to ignore fear, is there rising up of our impelling compulsions, and we lose our selves in our addictions.

How far from the primary experience of fear do we notice this chain of reactivity, this chain of emotional and mental events? How much of the usual mess have we made with our reactivity? How much more fearful are we now because of these patterns?

With our meditation practice we slow this process down so we can take it apart.

What is the root of this fear? Fear of being bad, speaking up, loss, death? Fear of being. Fear of not being? Are we afraid of discomfort, dissatisfaction, vulnerability, frustration, and loss of control? Or does our own physiological arousal scare us?

What should we really be afraid of? How much trouble do we get in by ignoring the consequences of what we are doing? Fear can be not simply, and always be fruitless, but actually serve intelligence and discriminating wisdom. Do we call it fear in that case? And what about the conundrum that sometimes our arousal, alertness, our fear is useful and other times just initiates a cascade of trouble? That is scary, too.

These questions are useful only when they help us unwrap the pattern, see the cycle of reactivity, but the inquiry does not change the nature of fear itself. Here, on the cushion we get to work with fear as it is.

What is this fear? Made up of thoughts, with reference to time, full of energy? My thoughts, and my inclinations are based on past experiences or imaginings, and they extrapolate to a future that is not present. How is my response to this creating an institution out of it? A big fear thing.

And when we start to examine these institutions we create, the walls can appear as a carefully constructed sense of self, sense of identity, and fear holds it all together. The mortar of our brick walls.

Ignorance is active. Ignorance has a job. Ignorance wants you to be very afraid of the disassembly of those walls. Fear lurks behind our habits. We scramble to create certainty and predictability, to solve the problem of uncertainty, of the unknown. It is unnerving to discover the self is actually cobbled together from disparate voices, tendencies, moods, personality traits, and a thread of historical continuity, our story of self. This practice of examining functioning fear is inherently a frightening enterprise.

But fear must be clearly seen, felt and known: fear can not be overcome through any form of defense or resistance or resolution. There is no freedom from fear through a search for an answer or through intellectual, discursive explanations.

Fear is uncertainty in search of security. And since this practice is one of unwrapping habitual reactivity, then it is a deliberately penetrating the familiar for the unknown. How frightening is this?

So can we look at fear without trying to resolve it? Actually look at it and not try to escape it? Will you feel that you must control it, or must get rid of it? Or at least feel like you must understand it? Any of those things mean you are trying to escape actually feeling it, as it is, in this moment.

How can we become more at ease with fear? Sitting here, for the time we have left this afternoon, all those small fears that emerge are our training ground. Is this thirty-five minutes ever going to end? Will I be able to tolerate this pain, this restlessness? What if she forgot to ring the bell? Will there be bombs dropping from the sky?

How do I get to the root of this fear beyond the language and the questions? What is the sensation? How do I stabilize my attention? Keeping the attention within the body. Concentration. What is my breath doing? As it is? The inhale, the exhale...when does the inhale turn into an exhale? And what is this at the end of the exhale before it becomes an inhale? What is that suspended moment between the exhale and the inhale? This investigation, being completely attentive, burns off the energy of the fear. The communion, the absorption into being present knows no fear. It knows no thought and no time.

But we do not live in unsuspended states of absorption. We may have moments or even minutes or hours. But through this practice we become more familiar with fear. Less avoidant of fear. We trust that we can have fear and it is a part of the totality of our experience. All fear is ordinary. It all shares the same root. And there is another dawning awareness, a fearlessness which moves side by side with fear. When we know we can simply sit here and feel what we feel, a trust grows without our bidding. When we know, through experience after experience that we don't have to fix or solve or run away from fear, the strength of faith develops.

So when the earth shakes and the heavens open up, we understand that this is simply fear and all we need to do is sit here, with interest and care.

