

Dharma talk—Cultivating a skillful response to fear
March 21-23, 2025
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Introduction

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

Here 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, like that Roomba continuously bashing against the corner: repetitive, boring or depressing or scary. Leading you back to the same old feelings and thoughts and sensations which can be known to contain no revealing 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 becoming awake 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. My job is to hold down the floor. 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. Even in these times when fear has become the default state, we have this time and place where we can choose to cultivate trust and equanimity, big enough to hold the implicit fear in a larger container.

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.

Fear

1. The dilemma of fear

Kristnamurti: We are boiling with fear all the time."

We have an underlying sense, a necessary implicit sense, of not being settled, of not being safe. We have an existential feeling of uncertainty and instability which unconsciously drives us all our reactivity. And you may be feeling it keenly today, or you may have reached the point of exhaustion. Fear is exhausting.

We are mammals, after all, with a built-in vigilance looking for trouble, with a preset based on past experiences. We feel most comfortable with the familiar, healthy or otherwise. In today's climate, even the weather and the seasons have been altered. So what are we to do?

We can try to mollify that fear. Imagine if only we could become rich enough, powerful enough, attractive enough, or famous enough, to eradicate it. Yet pursuit and even accomplishment of any of these goals is an flimsy refuge, a mirage, and pursuit of these things over and over again does not settle us. In fact, it does the opposite. It exacerbates the very problem we are trying to address. There is no satisfaction in the pursuit of squashing fear. Opposition to fear does not work.

These days, some try to take refuge in self-righteous anger to stave off the fear of impotence in the face of a political juggernaut. That too is useless. This is energy that needs to be expended with care, not wasted on angry rhetoric.

In trying to conquer fear, our emotions become inflamed; our fears grow. They compound. They go haywire. We get completely captured by the fears of not getting what we want, of being separated from what we have, and having to adapt to circumstances which are wildly uncomfortable. We are afraid of being killed off. Unless we have some kind of inner refuge, a place of return, of cultivated equanimity, it becomes so easy to feel unhinged. And we are not talking about disconnecting unconsciously, numbing or sticking our head in the sand. Without an ability to work with the attention itself, we will not feel any real sense of stability. Our efforts to create stability externally will eventually fail us, leaving us exhausted and frustrated. And still frightened.

2. Why should we even do this work? It's really hard.

What is the downside of fear?

This is the sales job. Why sit here hour after hour to do this work?

Because fear can imprison us.

It is tool of our oppressors. Our fear is exploited for power over us.

Fear stops us from speaking up when we should

Sometimes we are afraid of being bad and think we are behaving virtuously.

Our sense of self relies on fear to maintain the status quo and prevents us from adapting.

This is biologically rooted. Let's learn to work with what is actually present. Let's be practical. Let's not give ourselves away to be possessed by fear.

3. By way of review, helpful hints for self-observation:

Biologically, we have two aspects to our nervous system: the part that is very reactive to any type of alarm, and the other half that allows us to let go of vigilance. The alarm reaction itself multiplies our sense of alarm and the wits we usually depend on are nowhere to be found.

Our heart rate goes up, our breath becomes more truncated and shallower; the diaphragm can lock; our stomach flip flops; our hands and feet get colder, and stress hormones are released. It is hard to know anything other than fear in this moment. And this happens in a single flash. These hormones of arousal take a good while to dissipate, so we still have the physical signs of arousal long after the danger passes. This is good to know. This period is an important opportunity to inflame the fear or move back to the awareness of the sense of that moment with interest.

I am certain that you know exactly what this feels like. I am certain you know the flash of fear and the physiological response, the cascade of feelings and thoughts. And can look for that opening which allows a new response.

This is a way to work with the acute phase of arousal.

Without any ability to secure things in the external world or without the ability to self-regulate through the cultivation of meditative skills, our reactivity is elevated and can morph into a panic or a freeze response. If it is chronic, it leads to exhaustion and demoralization.

We have these episodes of fear spikes, and we also have the slow burning existential fear of our own inevitable mortality. As long as we value life, we will know fear. This is not a bad thing. Fear is a real biological/emotional response that we must navigate, like hunger and lust. Fear is contained in the drive to live.

Do we even remember what it is like not to be afraid? We can be aroused for so long we fail to notice the level of fear we carry with us and wonder why we feel so vulnerable. What does it feel like to feel safe and comfortable, at ease? Lessening our arousal is dependent on some internal signal that it is safe enough to let go a little bit, lower the vigilance. This is a skill we can develop. This is a skill we need to develop. The memory of this feeling of release is an important touchstone. We need this.

Right now, the existential threat seems more obviously present. It reinforces our vigilance. We can become afraid of revealing who we are because that makes us vulnerable to attack. This is real. And as long as we ‘cling’ to life, we want to live and live well, we will know fear. Fear cannot be eradicated, but we can cultivate the skills to live with it more wisely.

4. Buddhist teaching on living with fear

The Buddhist Sutra on Fear and Terror describes the Buddhist instructions for approaching our entrenched habits of dealing with fear.

It instructs that we must not let fear plunder our minds, take possession of our faculties. How this happens is the object of our attention. Fear is the “obstacle” that becomes our path.

We cultivate habits of mind that work better for us. We practice letting go of self-destructive responses. These we come to understand through paying interested attention to how our responses function.

We are taught that this takes unflagging persistence, clarity, concentration, and the capacity for absorption. That is why we are here, cultivating these skills.

We can intend to let go of unskillful fear, fear that just multiplies itself as if it were the essential thing.

Skillful fear is not idiot fearlessness. Fearlessness born of ignorance is folly.

It is not the idiot fearlessness of anger.

Skillful fear is not naive of the danger.

We can't develop fearlessness—real compassionate, generous fearlessness—without exploring our relationship to fear itself. Fearlessness develops from an ability to face fear as it presents itself. Much is asked of us. This takes courage, determination, persistence, and great kindness.

When the Buddha sat under the Bodhi tree, harnessing his capacity to persist, with clarity, he summoned all his fears to present themselves. He prepared himself for the assault by touching the ground. He proclaimed, “the earth is my witness.” I have a right to be here. Mara, in all her demonic forms attacked with bows and arrows. The attack itself was greeted by the Buddha as the object, to be witnessed from a place of cultivated equanimity, and a compassionate heart. The arrows, according to this myth, fell as flowers around his feet. His hand touched the earth.

And we have so many things that can give rise to fear, so much to practice with.

5. The Buddhist list of fears. Of course there is a list.

Here is the list of the “eight great fears” according to classical text:

Wild elephants—blindness, ignorance
Bandits—erroneous philosophies
Imprisonment—greed
Flesh eating dragons—disease, doubt
Snakes—jealousy, envy
Fire—anger
Lions—pride
Drowning, flood—craving

I find this list worthy of great discussion, for a later gathering.

I am certain you have your own list. It might include:

Fear of being still
Fear of your own thoughts
Fear of loosing your mind
Fear that I may never ring the bell
Fear of the pain that is gnawing somewhere on your body

There is an endless cascade of fears and its basis is in both reality and unreality.

And, of course, we need to acknowledge our mortal fears. In fact, we are instructed to have a daily practice of recalling what is obvious, so starkly enumerated, and quickly forgotten. Illness and death are inevitable and yet frequently takes us by surprise.

In this practice these facts are referred to as the Five remembrances:

I am of the nature to grow old.
There is no way to escape growing old.

I am of the nature to have ill-health.
There is no way to escape having ill-health.

I am of the nature to die.
There is no way to escape death.

All that is dear to me and everyone I love are of the nature to change.
There is no way to escape being separated from them.

My actions are my only true belongings.

I cannot escape the consequences of my actions.
My actions are the ground on which I stand.

As a daily practice, we work with our reactivity to this as a way to open the heart to the ephemeral nature of life. This helps put the value of this moment in stark relief.

Our perception of fear is affected by our level of vigilance. So, we have work to do today which addresses both the acute arising of fearful thoughts and emotions and how they operate, as well as the existential fear that is simply present here.

6. The instruction set: dispelling unskillful fear

The very act learning to face fear is attaining fearlessness. To learn to approach fear straight on, we need to develop both stability and insight. And stability in itself is not sufficient. Feeling a bit more calm and more relaxed is not sufficient to overcome the deep sense of anxiety and anxiousness at the core of our being. To effectively begin to loosen the roots of fear, we need insight, which includes looking deeply at how fear functions. Looking deeply shows us its nature and teaches us how to work with it. Looking deeply with clarity changes the nature of the fear itself.

Paraphrased Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche , ibid

The first thing we usually notice is our ruminative, non-productive worry. It is a hindrance at the first level. We use worry as if it will solve fear. That is a fool's approach, opposite of the kind of productive investigation of the phenomena itself.

"Why do we spin out so many thoughts all the time? We sit and try to quiet the mind but it just rumbles on and on, churning out masses of thought, small and large and pink and yellow and bland and slimy. Why? It's because of this undercurrent of fear. It's as though we have to keep things moving. We have to keep ourselves distracted." (J. Lieb, ibid)

We need to use our concentration practice to redirect the mind toward a single object. Practice will lead to the quality of absorption, where the observer of the breath drops away, and there is simply the immersion within awareness of the breath. This will steady us; give us a sense of refuge.

This naturally arises with practice.

With reliable steadiness, we do the work of insight. We are not trying to attempt to conquer fear, but to disassemble it. The act of investigating fear serves to dispel it, scatter it, dissipate it, disburse the fear. Investigating the fear is to loosen it from its tight knot. From the safety of this cushion, we can cultivate this new interested perspective. Fear can be the object of attention, not something that takes our attention prisoner or pushes us around.

Usually, we reach edges of our fear, like standing on the edge of a cliff, and we shrink back unconsciously. We shrink back from fear, tighten up. And then we notice and return again to the edge of what frightens us, over and over again, until it gets more familiar. We cultivate patience with this process, calming ourselves, while holding the intention of careful examination. We can investigate: when does fear arise? Do I feel the contraction in my body—in my breath, my eyes, my jaw, my hands? Is this reflected in my thoughts; in whatever emotions are present?

And, of course, just paying attention can be scary.

So, we can remember the story of the Buddha under the Bodhi tree and perhaps place ourselves within it.

All the afflictions that assail the mind come to attack us with bows and arrows: lustful desires, fears, and doubt...all that the Buddha, that we are prey to. And we and the Buddha are invited to sit here unmoved with one hand on the ground, literally or in your imagination: I have a right to be here" The earth witnesses the sincerity of my practice. With that sense of noble and dignified presence, equanimity and compassion arise naturally. For Buddha, the arrows of attack became flowers falling harmlessly at his feet. We learn to do the same.

So, we can ask questions of what seems to assault us. What are these arrows? We can ask--what is going on around us, are we actually in danger, how close and immediate is the potential source of threat, is there something we should do or stop doing or somewhere we should go right now?

Are we actually in danger at this moment? Is fear in proportion to what is actually taking place? Or is more clearly resonant with frightening past experience? What degree of damage can it cause? We bring the rational element on-line. What have we here?

The act of just noticing the fear puts it in a larger perspective. Our identification shifts from being gripped by the fear to one of interest and investigation.

This way we uncover the mind habits that engulf us in fear. We come to understand that our fear is subjective. One day something may seem horrific and the next day it seems a little less inflammatory. Our level of rest, and clarity, and perspective taking effects how we perceive danger. We can begin sorting the effect of certain ingrained responses. How is this response working for me? With kind attention, can I redirect myself and learn to choose stability and clarity over fanning the flames of my fear?

Where do we want to abide with our attention?

The work we need to do is within our skill set. We can do this.

7. Our skill set:

One pointed concentration practices are known as the tranquility practices. Single pointedness will help calm the mind and settle the body. Even if the mind is all too busy, the breath is still breathing itself. It can be a relief to have a place of return to wait out the periodic cognitive eruptions without getting frustrated. And sometimes we simply move into absorption. That is always helpful.

We have the tools of insight, knowing whatever we are confronted with at this moment is temporary. We can make a big enough container to hold what is distressing, and with practice it become stable enough to hold anything.

We have been cultivating a capacity for receptivity to kindness and compassion, for solace, for comfort and ease, for tenderness; place of profound rest through our metta, or loving-kindness practice. The sutras call for us to cultivate remembrances of moments of comfort and ease. This memory can provide a way into cultivating a reliable place of return, of solace when we need to seek refuge in order to keep functioning well. This, too, is part of practice. Equanimity requires rest, and infusions of kindness, compassion and joy. We can calm ourselves so we are not held prisoner by fear. We practice this with one-pointed attention on the reliable breath. We need to be capable of holding what is difficult to know. We need all these qualities, and we need to continue to hold them dear no matter how we are internally or externally assaulted. They are the key to sanity in insane times.

Plus, this cultivating of a regular meditation practice helps provide stability to us. No matter what is going on in the world, I can count on myself. I return here over

and over again, resting, cultivating the tools I need to be of use to myself and the people around me.

We learn to gather our emotional, mental, and spiritual energies onto our self through regular practice. An inner richness develops.

Looking deeply at our own fear develops stability and insight. We become more robust and less prey to being manipulated by events intended to make us feel impotent.

So, we return once again to practice, to rest and stabilize enough to learn to dispel the fears that naturally arise and live with the ones we can not dissipate. Becoming more skillful navigating the fear that naturally arises.

Source material:

<https://www.lionsroar.com/fear-and-fearlessness-what-the-buddhists-teach/>

[Bhaya-bherava Sutta: Fear & Terror - Access to Insight](#)