Overcoming Fear

May 29, 2025

I knew a psychotherapist one time who asked why in Buddhism we don’t list fear as one of the roots of unskillful behavior. All we have are greed, aversion, delusion. Where’s the fear? And the answer is that fear is not always unskillful. Depends on what you’re afraid of. The Buddha lists five kinds of losses you can be afraid of. Loss of health, loss of wealth, loss of your relatives, loss of your virtue, loss of your right view. The first three hurt a lot, but they’re a normal part of the world. They’re going to happen, whether you’re afraid of them or not. And as the Buddha said, when you lose these things, that loss doesn’t take you down to hell. Even though it hurts, it doesn’t necessarily mean that you want to act in unskillful ways. It’s the loss of your virtue, loss of your right view. That’s serious. You start acting in ways that are unskillful and that could take you to hell. You have to ask yourself, “What are you afraid of?” When fear comes up in the meditation, you have to treat it like any distraction. In other words, if it’s a serious issue, you have to think through and tell yourself, “Not right now. Let me get my concentration together. Then, at the end of the session, we’ll talk about this.” Because the Buddha doesn’t have you run away and cover up your fears right away. It leads to anxiety. You’re not clear about what you’re afraid of, and it’s just a lingering malaise, a lingering dis-ease. That’s the important point about dealing with fear, is that you understand what you’re afraid of. That means understanding what you’re clinging to, what you’re trying to hold on to. That’s where the greed and the aversion and the delusion come in. Delusion is a big one. There are things you want to hold on to, and you think they’re going to make you happy and make you secure, and then you realize it’s not all that secure after all. That accounts for a large portion of our fears, which is why we have that reflection so often. We’re subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death. Subject to separation from all that is dear and appealing to us. That’s normal. In fact, the Thai translation of that passage is, “Aging is normal. Illness is normal. Death is normal.” So you’ve got to prepare. The losses that are not necessary, and the loss, in general, is your ability to act skillfully. This comes under virtue and right view. It also comes under the quality of what is called uttapa, or compunction, where you think about the fact that you could behave in unskillful ways. And as long as you haven’t had your first taste of awakening, it’s always possible that you could lose your virtue, lose your right view. We live in very comfortable circumstances here. Who knows how long they’re going to last, and who knows what you’re going to do when they don’t stay comfortable anymore. Think of all the horrible places in the world right now where people are forced to make really difficult decisions. They’re close to starvation. It’s a real challenge to maintain your virtue in situations like that, to maintain your right view. Because it’s so easy to focus on how unjust the situation is, and how much you want to get revenge, and how much the situation justifies whatever you might do. But remember the Buddha didn’t teach the Dhamma only for people who are in comfortable circumstances. This is why the precepts are so short. They’re there to remind you. They’re easy to remember. They’re very clear-cut. No matter how difficult it gets outside, you’re not going to kill, you’re not going to steal down the line. You want those to be clear-cut so that you can remember them easily, and hold on to them no matter what. Same with your right view. You’re not going to harm anybody, because you know if you harm others, the harm is going to come back to you, no matter how horribly they’ve behaved. Their behavior is their behavior. Yours is yours. That’s your treasure. That’s the kind of wealth that no one can take away from you. You lose it only when you throw it away. Remember, the fear of compunction is basically the fear, not of powerlessness, but of having power, and being afraid you’re going to abuse it. That the Buddha recommended as a skillful fear. So when the mind is settled down, and you want to bring up the issue of fear, these are the kinds of questions you’re going to ask. What are you clinging to? Is this fear the kind of thing you’re afraid of, the thing you’re clinging to? Is it a loss that’s inevitable? If so, you’ve got to learn how to prepare. That means preparing your mind, and also preparing your determination that no matter how bad things get, you’re not going to throw away your valuables. You’re not going to throw away the things that really are worth inside you. When you can be confident in that, then you find that the fear doesn’t hold onto you so strongly. But to be confident, you’ve got to get really good at the meditation. This is one of the reasons why we practice. Some people say, “Here you are with your eyes closed, looking after your own mind, when so many people in the world are suffering.” But you have to ask yourself, “What are you responsible for?” The very first thing you’re responsible for is your actions. And if you can’t trust your actions, how can anybody else trust them? You have to make your actions trustworthy, by digging down inside and finding something of genuine worth inside. One of the results of deep gain in the Dhamma eye is that your precepts are pleasing to the Noble Ones from that point on. In other words, you’re not going to break them intentionally. Because you’ve seen that it was because of your unskillful actions that the Deathless was obscured. And you see how valuable the Deathless is. So you don’t want to keep making those mistakes again and again, to delay your eventual awakening. The Buddha says that gaining the Dhamma eye is the highest form of merit. Now, merit is usually associated with the goodness you do for other people. And this is the ultimate case. When you can make yourself trustworthy, that’s a huge gift to the rest of the world. So no matter what they do to you, you’re not going to behave in ways that are going to harm them. So these are kind of the ways you should think about the issue of fear when it comes up. What are you clinging to? Why? And is it foolish clinging or is it the why is holding on? Are you clinging out of fear, out of being powerless? Or are you clinging out of fear that comes with power? You want to use your power wisely. The possibility that you could use it unwisely, that’s the primary thing to fear. But you don’t just sit around fearing it. You do your best to ensure that you can trust yourself. This is why we practice. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2025/250529_Overcoming_Fear.mp3>