Fears

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We're afraid of so many things. There's so much fear in our lives. And yet the texts don't treat fear all that much, largely because there are many different kinds of fear—fear associated with greed, fear associated with anger, fear associated with delusion—and the texts focus more on the emotions behind the fears than on the fears themselves. The implication here is that if you want to understand your fears, you have to understand the emotions behind them. You have to analyze fear not as a single, solid thing, but as a compound of many different factors, to see which part of the fear is dependent on the greed or passion, which part is dependent on the aversion, and which part is dependent on the delusion. Then, when you've taken care of the underlying emotions, you've taken care of the fear.

If there's greed for something, or passion for something, there's the fear that you're not going to get it, or the fear that once you have got it you're going to be deprived of it.

Then there's fear based on anger. You know that if a certain thing happens it's going to hurt, you're going to suffer. You're averse to it, so you're afraid of it.

And then there's the whole area of delusion, of what you don't know, of the great unknown out there. Fear based on delusion can range anywhere from fear of a ghost in the next room, or a strange person in this room, to general existential angst: a sense that something is required of you and you don't know what it is. Human experience seems like such a huge void, something very alien. There's the big sense of fear that there may not be any meaning or purpose to life, that it's just pointless suffering.

So you have to divide out the different kinds of fear, because you need to work not so much on the fear as on its root. Unless you dig down to the different factors, you won't know what kind of fear it is. You won't be able to get to its root causes.

Now, fear is complicated by the fact that it's such a physical emotion. When fear arises there are all kinds of reactions in the body. The heartbeat speeds up, the stomach juices get churning, and we often confuse the physical reactions for the mental state. In other words, a single flash of fear floods the mind and then recedes, but it sets into motion a huge series of physical reactions that sometimes will take a long time to settle down. And because they don't settle down right

away, there's a sense that "I must still be afraid because here are all the physical symptoms of fear." So the first thing in dealing with fear, especially strong fear like this, is to separate the mental state from the physical state.

Some people say they have no trouble reasoning themselves out of the fear, but find that they're still afraid. That may be based on a misunderstanding, on mistaking the physical symptoms of fear for the actual mental state. We have to separate the physical side of the fear from the mental state, because if you're reasoning through the issue, the actual fear itself may be at bay. What seems to live on, or seems to be unwilling to go away, is the physical side, and of course it takes a while to go away because of the hormones churned up in your blood stream. It's going to take a while for them to wash out. So your first line of defense is to learn to know when there actually is fear in the mind and when there's no fear in the mind, even though there may be the signs of fear in the body. When you can make this distinction, you don't feel so overwhelmed by the emotion. You breathe as best you can through the physical manifestations of fear, the tension, the feelings that come with that shortened breath or the constricted breath that result from the fear. Then consciously expand that sensation of physical relief and open it up to counteract the fear's physical symptoms.

At the same time, ask yourself, "Exactly what is this fear?" "What's being threatened?" "Where do you feel weak?" "What is the danger?" Learn to take the reasons for the fear apart, because a lot of the fear lies in the confusion. You don't know exactly what you're afraid of, or you don't know exactly what to do. All the avenues seem closed and you can't analyze what's going on. And that multiplies the fear.

So you have to sit down, if you have the chance to sit down, or at least mentally make a note: "What is this fear? Exactly what sparked it?" Learn to look at the fear not as something that *you're* feeling but something that's simply there. And try to look at *why* it keeps shouting at you over and over and over in the brain.

Some fears are neurotic. They're based on gross delusion and they're relatively easy to deal with. Those are the ones that psychotherapists can handle. You had a really bad experience as a child and you've instinctively been avoiding that particular issue, that particular feeling, ever since, but it's gotten to the point where it's totally unrealistic. And because the fear is unrealistic, the treatment is to simply look at the situation for what it really is. You confront it, you try not to avoid it, but actually put yourself into circumstances that will bring up that fear again and watch the disjunction between the fear and the reality. You learn that the reality was not as bad as you thought it would be. As this disjunction grows clearer, the fear gets calmer, weaker, more and more manageable. That's how you handle neurotic fear.

Realistic fears require deeper practice. One of the members of our community lost her mother in a war, came to the States, and became a psychotherapist. As part of her training she had to undergo psychotherapy. After a couple of years of psychotherapy, the therapist said, "It looks like your fears are very realistic. There's nothing I can do for you." This is where Dhamma practice comes in: facing our realistic fears, our fears of aging, illness, separation, and death. These things are real and they do cause suffering—if you don't work your way down into exactly where your attachments are. This is precisely the Buddhist take on fear: It comes from clinging and attachment. And the clinging is threatened by impermanence, by stress and suffering, by the fact that these things are beyond your control. The purpose of our training here is to learn how not to let our happiness be based on things beyond our control, because as long as we entrust our happiness to them, we're setting ourselves up for suffering, setting ourselves up for fear.

This is how the meditation in and of itself is a way of dealing with the fears—the deeper fears, the realistic fears. Ask yourself, "What exactly does my happiness depend on?" Normally, people will allow their happiness to depend on a whole lot of conditions. And the more you think about those conditions, the more you realize that they're totally beyond your control: the economy, the climate, the political situation, the continued beating of certain hearts, the stability of the ground beneath your feet, all of which are very uncertain. So what do you do? You learn to look inside. Try to create a sense of wellbeing that can come simply with being with the breath. Even though this isn't the total cure, it's the path toward the cure. You learn to develop a happiness less and less dependent on things outside, and more and more inward, something more under your control, something you can manage better. And as you work on this happiness you find that it's not a second best. It actually is better than the kind of happiness that was dependent on things outside. It's much more gratifying, more stable. It permeates much more deeply into the mind.

In fact, it allows the mind to open up, because for most of us the mind jumps around like a cat. Wherever it lands, it's always going to stay tense, for it knows it has to be ready to jump again at any moment. But when you find something you can stay with for long periods of time, the mind can allow itself to relax. When it knows that it won't have to jump anytime soon, it can soften up a bit. When it softens up you find it easier to know the mind in and of itself: what it's like, where its attachments are, where it's still clinging. That allows you to go deeper still.

And we find that our ultimate fear is fear of death, which is an extremely realistic fear. It's going to happen for sure, and for most of us it's a huge mystery. This is where the solution has to lie in the meditation, for only meditation can

take you to something beyond death, beyond space and time. Death is something that happens within space and time, but there is something that can be experienced outside of those dimensions. That's what we're looking for.

As the texts say, there are four reasons why people fear death. One, they're attached to their bodies—they know they're going to lose their bodies at death. Two, they're attached to sensory pleasures—they know they're going to lose them at death. These two types of fear are based on passion: passion for the body, passion for our sensual appetites. The third type of fear is based on aversion, when people know that they have done cruel things in the past and that they may have to face punishment for those cruel things after death. The fourth type of fear is based on delusion, when people are uncertain about the true Dhamma: "Was the Buddha right? Is there really a Deathless?" As long as you don't know these things directly for yourself, there's always going to be an uncertainty, a large amount of ignorance and delusion surrounding death, creating fear.

The whole purpose of the practice is to counteract these causes for fear, so that you aren't dependent on the body, you don't have to cling to the body for your happiness, you don't have to cling to sensory pleasures for your happiness, you train yourself to do good things, and you reach the point where you taste the Deathless and know for sure that you're on the right path to the right goal.

To do this you have to take apart the basic building blocks of experience, as you encounter them in concentration: form, feeling, perceptions, thought-fabrications, and consciousness. You look to see where these things are inconstant. Where they're inconstant, you realize they're stressful. There's stress right there in the inconstancy. Then when you look at stress, look at suffering—although at this level it's more stress than suffering—you ask yourself, "What am I doing to cause that stress, to aggravate that stress? What activities are accompanying the stress?" You look for the cause, and it's right there in your intentional actions.

When you can take those intentions apart, things open up. Once they open up, you realize that you've come to something totally different, a totally different dimension, outside of space and time. And you realize that death can't touch that. Only with that direct experience can you say that you've overcome your fear of death. The only fear you're left with is the fear you might have lapses of mindfulness where you might do something unskillful. So there is still work to be done. At the very least, though, in the gross sense of the five precepts, you wouldn't intentionally do anything unskillful.

So this is how the meditation deals with fear. It breaks the fear down into other emotions, looking for the underlying causes in terms of the greed, passion, anger, and delusion that give rise to the fear and keep it going. At the same time,

the meditation points directly at the way we pin our hopes for happiness on undependable things, and opens the way for us to pin our hopes, not on something changeable or out of our control, but on a dimension beyond the reach of things that could harm it. So the cure for fear is not just a matter of talking yourself out of it, but of putting yourself in a position of strength, where there really is no danger, nothing to fear.

So these are a few thoughts on dealing with the emotion of fear as it comes.

—Learn to separate the physical from the mental side, so you don't misunderstand what's happening in the body, so it doesn't stir up more confusion in the mind.

—Learn how to focus directly on the mind, to see exactly what the problem is, where the sense of weakness is, where the clinging is, because wherever there's clinging there's weakness. And that's what constitutes fear.

—Then look to see if that danger is realistic. If it's not, there's one way of dealing with it; if it's realistic, there's another deeper way of dealing with it.

This way you find you can not only get a handle on your fear or learn to cope with fear but ultimately put yourself in a position where there truly is nothing to fear. And that's what makes this practice so special. Freud once said that the purpose of psychotherapy is to take people out of their neurotic suffering and leave them with the ordinary miseries of daily life. The Dhamma, however, takes you from the ordinary miseries of human life and leads you beyond, to a dimension where there is no misery, no suffering, at all. It deals not only with unrealistic fears or fears that are way out of proportion, but also with the fears that are genuinely realistic and well founded. It can take you beyond even those to a point where, in all reality, there is nothing to fear.