

Skillful Fears

October 28, 2014

We're coming up on Halloween, a time when people think about fear and death. And it's good to reflect on the fact that some things really are worthy of fear. I know some psychotherapists who ask why the Buddha didn't include fear among unskillful mind states. And the answer is that not all fear is unskillful. If your fear is combined with greed, aversion, or delusion, then it's going to be unskillful. But there's also wise fear. The main wise fear is being afraid of the possibility of your doing something unskillful. In other words, you don't have to be afraid of things outside, or of things that are going to happen to you. You have to be wary of what your mind is capable of doing.

We're living in fairly normal circumstances right now, but things don't always stay peaceful like this. And the question comes up: When things get difficult, will you really be able to maintain your conviction that you want to act skillfully, that you're not going to break the precepts, that you're going to be harmless in your behavior?

That's something you have to be afraid of: being harmful, and the mind states that would make you act on the desire to be harmful.

This is one of the reasons why we meditate: to find something really solid inside that's not threatened by anything outside at all. Because it's usually through weakness that we tend to do unskillful things. So the mind needs to be strengthened, and there are five strengths that the Buddha recommends.

There's strength of conviction, in other words, being convinced that what you do is going to have long-term consequences, so you want to do it skillfully.

Then there's persistence: putting energy into trying to do whatever is skillful and to abandon whatever's unskillful.

Then there's mindfulness: keeping in mind what's skillful and what's not, and keeping in mind the need to develop skillful qualities and abandon unskillful ones.

And that leads to concentration, which is where you get your real nourishment. The Buddha compares concentration to food for the mind: the sense of well-being, the sense of rapture that can come when the whole body is permeated by breath, and the breath flows smoothly. It's nourishing to all the parts of your body and mind.

That gives you a place where you can step back from other things—both inside and out—and can look at them to see what's really worthy of fear. This ability, of course, is the fifth strength: discernment.

Discernment and concentration are both nourishing for the mind but in different ways. I think I've told you of the woman who was a student of Ajaan Fuang and who had

advanced stages of cancer. The cancer would seem to prowl around her body, and she was constantly having to undergo operations to have this part or that part taken out.

One time, she was going to have to undergo radiation treatment and she developed an allergy to the anesthetic. The doctors were in a quandary as to what to do, so she said “Well, try just doing it without the anesthetic.”

And at first they didn’t want to, but she said, “Look, I’m a meditator. I know how to handle pain.”

So they did, and she said she used all the force of her concentration to get through the experience. After it was over, though, she was exhausted.

Ajaan Fuang went to visit her at the hospital the next day. She told him what had happened, and he said, “The problem is that you’re using just your concentration. You’re not using your discernment. In other words, you’re trying to fight off things, but if you learn how to side-step them, you don’t have to fight them off.”

When you lay claim to things in the body or to things in the mind, and then they get painful, you’ve set yourself up for a problem. But if you learn how not to lay claim to these things, then when anything happens to them, you’re not threatened.

That’s the real strength, because it reveals to you dimensions in the mind that you didn’t realize you had before: the parts that are not affected by anything.

You can sort things out this way by figuring out what’s constant, what’s inconstant, what’s stressful, what’s not stressful, what you have to let go of by seeing that it’s not-self, to find something that’s beyond both self and not-self.

That’s how discernment takes you beyond any danger or any fear.

But all these strengths are motivated by the realization that the big dangers don’t lie outside or with other people. They lie within your own mind. So your mind is what has to be trained. Your mind is what has to be strengthened and made secure.

This is why all the teachings focus in, in, in on what you’re doing, what you’re saying, what you’re thinking right now, because these are the areas where the real dangers lie.

As for the dangers of aging, illness, and death, the Buddha has you use them as motivation for practice, but he also wants you to train yourself so that you don’t have to be afraid of them. They *will* happen, but if you develop the proper mental skill, you can experience them and not suffer.

That’s what the passage in the description of five future dangers is all about: realizing that aging, illness, separation, and death are going to come, social unrest is going to come, and you’ve got to develop these five strengths in the mind to reach the as-yet-unreached, to attain the as-yet-unattained, to realize the as-yet-unrealized, so that you’ll dwell in peace and comfort even when aging, illness, death, separation, and social unrest come.

So the Buddha’s use of fear keeps pointing inward, inward. The problem lies in here, but the solution also lies in here as well.

As for fear of death, as he points out, there are four reasons why we're afraid of death:

(1) We're attached to our body.

(2) We're attached to the pleasures of the human realm.

(3) We realize that we've done some unskillful things, and that there's always the possibility that there will be punishment after death for the unskillful things we've done.

And (4) there's the fact you haven't yet seen the true Dhamma—in other words, you haven't yet reached stream entry, so you haven't seen for sure that there is a part of the mind that doesn't die.

Those are four fears you have to work past, and you do that by working inside. You start with your attachments to the body. Right now it's healthy and does pretty much what you want it to do. But as time passes, things are going to get less cooperative. The body that has kept repairing itself over and over again without you even having to tell it to, stops being able to do that. The hormones change. It takes longer and longer to recover from excessive use of the different parts of the body. From that point on, it's basically a downhill slope. There will be few 'ups' here and there, but it's down most of the way. So you've got to reflect on that and realize that you can't stay attached here.

The same with your sensual pleasures: All of the things we like about sex, sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations: It's not the case that you're going to lose them only at death. Sometimes, well before you die, you get so that you can't see or you can't hear, your taste buds get weird, all the senses start to decay.

Where are you going to find happiness if you're dependent on those kinds of things for your happiness?

All of this is incentive to find the true Dhamma inside, the Dhamma of the deathless, which is a place of no danger, a place of no fear. You use your fears about aging, illness, and death not to get morbid or hopeless, but to motivate yourself to come to this place of no fear.

So fear is something you want to learn how to use properly, something you want to understand: which kinds of fears to develop, which kinds of fears to overcome, realizing again that the dangers lie inside, but that the place of safety lies inside as well.

So keep your attention focused here, for this is where all the necessary work gets done.