

Fear & Conviction

February 4, 2016

I know a woman who spent a month alone on Axel Heiberg Island. It's one of the northernmost, most isolated pieces of land on Earth. She told me that, as the plane that took her up there flew away, she all of a sudden became conscious of the fact that she was alone on this island, far away from any help. Anything could happen.

The feeling that washed over her was pretty powerful. It was fear. But she responded wisely to the fear. She realized, okay, she had to be careful. She was extra careful where she stepped, extra careful how she did things, so that she didn't suddenly fall and break something—a bone here or a bone there. She spent the entire month being very heedful.

This is how three qualities come together: intelligent fear, conviction, and heedfulness. They all work together to strengthen your practice.

I know psychologists who've asked me why Buddhism doesn't list fear as one of the basic unskillful qualities. But fear in and of itself is not necessarily unskillful. If it's combined with greed or aversion or delusion, then it *is* unskillful.

But the Buddha listed two kinds of fear that are actually helpful in the practice. One is simply the quality of heedfulness, *appamada*, realizing that your actions make a difference and you could very easily do something really unskillful, so you have to be careful. The second is a quality called *ottappa*, the fear of the consequences of unskillful actions. This is what motivates us to practice. If we don't see any dangers in life, why bother? If we see everything as safe, everything as designed for our comfort and well-being, then there's really no need for conviction and of course no need for the practice. Why put yourself out? Why make an extra effort?

But deep down in the mind, everybody has this sense that things could go wrong. Either we try to cover it up with platitudes or we start getting unrealistic and give rise to very unskillful kinds of fears. Neither approach is helpful. The best way to deal with our fear is to learn how to make it intelligent, so that we're very clear about what really is scary, what really is dangerous in the world. That's when we start having the conviction, "I've got to do something about this and I *can* do something about this."

The Buddha talks about contemplations for monks out in the forest. He says you can contemplate different kinds of dangers: You realize that aging can come, illness can come, disorder in society can come. When these things happen, it's

going to be very hard to practice. It's not going to be any easier than it is now. So now that you've got the opportunity, why don't you make an extra effort?—realizing that you've got to prepare your mind. Are you ready to go? Are you ready to deal with illness? Are you ready to deal with social upheavals, famines and that kind of thing? If you're not, there's work that needs to be done.

So being very conscious of skillful fears helps you to deal with unrealistic fears. It gives you a place where you can focus your efforts and your desire for what you need to do: You need to train the mind. You don't know what's going to happen in the future, but you do know that, whatever happens, you're going to need more mindfulness, you're going to need more alertness, more discernment, more concentration. You're going to need to have a safe place inside. This is why we meditate.

So if you find your conviction getting lax, it basically comes down to the attitude that says, "Why should I bother?" Then remind yourself of why you should bother.

It's worth noting that the Forest Tradition grew up in a very poor part of Thailand where people live with the facts of poverty and danger all around them. They're very alive to the fact that life is precious and it's also very fragile. Our state of mind is precious but it's also very fragile. Our happiness is precious but also fragile. That was what gave the founders of the tradition the conviction to go out and do the practice one hundred percent.

This was a period when the Pali Canon was being rediscovered in Thailand. A lot of the basic teachings were being made available. The people who were making them available practiced to some extent, but they also had other issues. They lived in more comfortable places, things weren't quite as fragile—at least they didn't see them as quite as fragile.

But it took a very strong and clear sense that there is danger in life and there's appropriate fear and there's inappropriate fear: That's what sparked the conviction in the founders of the Forest Tradition. Inappropriate fear gets in the way of your actually doing what's skillful. It's the other extreme, on the far end of the spectrum from complacency. Both extremes have to be avoided.

Well-placed fear focuses on the fact that situations could arise in the world that might get you to do something really, really unskillful. That's a danger to really watch out for. You could easily undercut the root of your happiness because of an unskillful sense of fear, combined with greed, aversion, or delusion. When you sense that there's still something in you that could do something unskillful like that, you've got to work on it. Find a basis for a happiness inside that can't be threatened by changes in society or changes in your body or changes in whatever

around you.

I remember Ajaan Suwat as he was a few months from passing away. He'd been in an automobile accident and had suffered brain injury. He mentioned to me one time that his brain was sending him very weird perceptions. But he'd trained his mind and so he could recognize them as weird perceptions. Then he went on to say, "But that thing I got from my meditation: That hasn't changed." That *thing* is our place of safety. Even though he couldn't give long Dhamma talks after his accident, he would always talk about this sense of refuge.

The teachings really do provide refuge. There are lots of dangers out there that we need refuge from and dangers *in here* that we need refuge from. And the refuge offered by the Dhamma is genuine. We need to have a sense of how much we need that refuge: That's what gives us the conviction to stick with the practice even when it gets hard.

So learn how to cultivate a healthy, wise sense of fear. Articulate that to yourself. Then articulate to yourself what your other fears are and make a comparison.

This helps to get your priorities straight and strengthens your conviction that what really needs to be done is to focus on your actions in thought, word, and deed—to develop your mind more than it is now, until you get to that point that the Buddha called attaining the as-yet-unattained, knowing the as-yet-unknown, reaching the as-yet-unreached—that "thing" that's really special and your true place of safety, your true harbor and refuge. That's the only guarantee there is. No other happiness in the world can be guaranteed.