

## *Fear & Uncertainty*

*April 7, 2020*

There's a story in the Commentary of a young girl who was an advanced meditator, the daughter of a weaver. One day, the Buddha comes for alms to their store, to their house. So the parents have her put food in his bowl. As she's putting the food in his bowl, he asks her, "Do you know?" And she says, "Yes." "But do you know?" "No." "But do you know?" "Yes." And the Buddha then leaves.

The girl comes back into the house and the parents are upset with her: "How can you speak to the Buddha like that? How can you show disrespect, answering back and forth like that?" She said, "I'm not showing disrespect. I knew what he was asking. First question, Do you know? Do you know you're going to die? Yes. Second question, do you know? Do you know when it's going to happen? No. Third question, but do you know? Do you know you will die? Yes, I will have to die." And as it so happened, later that day as the weaver was working, the shuttle flew out of his hand, struck her, and she bled to death.

The story reminds us that death is all around. It's nothing novel. It's not that it was suddenly invented along with the latest virus. We heard news today that the mother of one of our supporters had passed away yesterday. And tacked onto the news was the information that it wasn't from the virus, it was some something else. In other words, the fact of the virus doesn't erase the fact that there still are other diseases, other causes of death. It's like crossing the road and being careful not to get run over by a car coming to your right and you get smacked by a car coming from the left.

Normally 250,000 people die every day in the world. It seems kind of ironic that if you die during this period, if it's not from the virus, it won't count. At least the numbers won't be there on the news. But it's still death. So we know that it's going to happen, but we don't know when. There's a lot of uncertainty now. We have to remember that the Buddha said the cure for uncertainty is not simply to believe that you'll come out okay. It's to look for something more secure inside the mind.

The way you starve the hindrance of uncertainty is to look in the mind and see what's skillful and what's not skillful there inside. And as it so happens, that's the same way you provide food for analysis of qualities as a factor for awakening, which is the discernment factor. So you're developing your discernment as a way of overcoming your uncertainty, realizing that the real dangers are inside, but that your protection lies inside as well. If you develop more and more skillful qualities, then the mind is protected. That way, whether the body goes now or later, you have something you can hold on to.

So as you're meditating, you're not running away from the problems of the world. You're engaged in the solution: trying to figure out what's skillful in your mind and working with that.

You recognize that even in the case of fear, there are skillful fears and unskillful fears. Unskillful fear is kind of fear that the Buddha calls a wrong course, where you mistreat yourself, you mistreat others because you're afraid—either afraid of somebody with more power, or afraid of dying, afraid of catching an illness. The fear with which we mistreat one another is unskillful. We have to learn how to put it aside.

However, there is the fear of doing something unskillful, which is the fear that underlies compunction and heedfulness. That kind of fear is something you want to cultivate.

I know a lot of people who say that they came to Buddhism because they didn't want a religion based on fear. They wanted everything to be sweet and rosy. But the Buddha is pretty upfront: There are skillful forms of fear and there are genuine dangers out there, genuine dangers inside. But we can face them. This is why heedfulness is useful: It realizes that, in spite of the dangers, there are things you can do to avoid them. Particularly the genuine dangers: You can totally avoid the genuine dangers, the desires to do something unskillful. You can make a difference there. If you couldn't make a difference, heedfulness wouldn't mean anything. It's because you *can* make a difference, you can provide safety, the kind of safety that really matters: That's why heedfulness counts and is the basis for all skillful qualities inside.

So the fearlessness the Buddha teaches is not the kind of fearlessness that tries to pretend there's nothing wrong with death or that death is not a danger. It really is. Because when you go, it's like a trap door opening under you. And if you have good kamma, okay, there will be something to support you, to catch you. If you don't, who knows how far you'll fall. Instead, the Buddha's fearlessness is the fearlessness that can see death and danger, but can see past them.

There's that story of the shaman that Knut Rasmussen interviewed many decades ago up in the Canadian north. Rasmussen was asking the shamans in the different Inuit tribes about their tribal beliefs. One said, "It's not that we believe, it's that we fear." In fact, several of the shamans gave the same answer: "We don't believe, we fear." But one of them went into a lot of detail on how they feared the spirits, feared all the taboos that had been passed down from generation to generation.

He took Rasmussen over to another hut where his older sister was living alone, sick, weak. He said, "Here she's been a good woman all her life. She was a good mother, a good wife. Now her husband is dead, her children are gone, and she's suffering. Why? We don't understand. This is why we fear." It was because

their tradition didn't give them something to rely on, that they could really depend on. They communicated with spirits, but the spirits basically told them where the good hunting might be. Little things like that. But the bigger issues, the spirits couldn't answer, either.

This is why we're fortunate in having the Dhamma to teach us that there is a safety that can be found in spite of aging, illness, and death. There's that sutta on the future dangers, where a monk going into the forest has to reflect: He could die tonight, perhaps. Is he ready to go? There are various illnesses that can come. He's going to grow old at some point. Society could break down, and it'd be difficult to practice. So he should make an effort to attain the as-yet-unattained, to reach the as-yet-unreached, to see the as-yet-unseen, so that even though when aging, illness, death, or the breakdown of society come, he'll have the attainment in which you don't suffer regardless of conditions outside, regardless of conditions in the body. Until you've had a glimpse of that, you're going to be uncertain.

But we take heart in the kind of people who teach this, the kind of people who are truthful, who value truthfulness. So even though the cure for uncertainty is analyzing your skillful qualities in the mind, it does also depend on having some confidence: confidence in the Buddha, in the Dhamma, and in the Sangha.

Remember Ajaan Suwat: After his automobile accident, his ability to teach was compromised by his brain injury. So his teachings always boiled down to the basics: the qualities of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha as refuge. This is what you can depend on. He taught that to everyone who came to see him. Once one of my students, whom he had met, came with me as we were going to say goodbye to him before he went back to Thailand. He saw her and didn't recognize her, so he gave a Dhamma talk just for her—even though he was lying there sick in bed—on the importance of having confidence in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. These are the kind of people who would not lie. They had found that attainment where you don't suffer. And they taught the way. By taking on their qualities, you can find the way as well.