

Fear & Insecurity

September 15, 2020

A monk once came to see the Buddha and asked him, “To what extent is there a being? What does it mean to be a being?” And the Buddha played with words: The Pali word for being, *satta*, can also mean attachment. He said, “Wherever there’s attachment, there’s the being. Where is the attachment? Form, feelings, perceptions, thought-fabrications, consciousness.”

These are the things with which we create our sense of who we are, as we take on the role of a being. The problem is that the raw material from which we create our sense of who we are is pretty precarious. So there’s always uncertainty and an instability to being a being. Where there’s uncertainty and instability, there’s going to be pain. Where there’s pain, there’s going to be bewilderment, there’s going to be fear. So once you take on an identity, there it is: fear. And because it’s coupled with bewilderment, we can fear all kinds of things. We’re never really sure what we should be fearing.

Usually we’re like those generals who fight the last war. They learned a lesson from the last war. A new war comes along and it’s going to be a different war, but they’re still thinking in terms of the old one. In the same way, for most of us, whatever was the last big danger we had to face, that’s the fear we’re prepared for. But a lot of other things could go wrong.

Just look at your body. Every part of the body has at least one disease to go with it, sometimes more than one. It’s ready to fall apart, even though we do our best to keep it going. And the mind is even more changeable than that. So it’s no wonder that these are the things that grab our attention right away.

But, the Buddha says, those aren’t the things to be afraid of. The real thing to be afraid of is that you’re going to do something unskillful—particularly in trying to protect this identity you’ve taken on, to ward off whatever you think is going to be the next big danger to threaten it.

There are a lot of really horrible things that people do out of fear. And it turns out the horrible things are the things they really should be fearing more than the other fears they have.

This is why a large part of our training as meditators is to learn to see how our ordinary old fears are not nearly as scary as we think. Of course, the dangers are there—there’s instability, there are uncertainties built into the fact that we’ve taken on an identity. But the real determining factors as to how much we’re going to suffer come back to our intentions. If you act on unskillful intentions, you just make things worse. If you act on skillful intentions, though, there’s a way out.

So we train the mind. As we sit here and meditate, it’s probably *the* best way, the most direct way to train the mind. But all the aspects of the path, all the aspects of the practice, are

training the mind to fear the right thing: to fear making unskillful choices—choices that are harmful for yourself, harmful for others, based on unskillful intentions, laced with greed, laced with anger, laced with delusion.

Notice that the Buddha doesn't say that fear is necessarily unskillful. It *is* one of the wrong courses, or *agati*. You *can* go wrong based on fear. But not all fears make you go wrong. After all, as he said, if you're afraid of doing something unskillful, that becomes compunction and that's actually a virtue. If you realize that your actions will make the difference between whether you suffer or not, and you're afraid of unskillful actions, that's heedfulness, and that, too, is a virtue. In fact, as the Buddha said, that's the basis for all skillful qualities.

So part of the training is getting a different sense of who you are, and how you are a product of your actions. That focuses your attention away from the "me" inside, and focuses it more on the agent and the choices that the agent is making. You want to get practice in good choices. This is why generosity and virtue play such a large role in the training of the mind, because they get you out of yourself. The focus is not so much on the form and feelings and perceptions and what-not that make up who you are, but more and more on the goodness and merit you can create through your actions.

This is an aspect of Buddhist practice that a lot of Westerners look down on. They say people trying to accumulate merit and amassing merit are grubbing, greedy, possessive, victims of spiritual materialism. But even though generosity and virtue are not the highest parts of the practice, they provide you with a really good foundation. And the fact that you're thinking more about the goodness that you can create, and less about your identity, moves the focus in a healthy direction.

All kinds of things can happen to this body; all kinds of things can happen to your brain which will have an effect on what you can do. But if you've been amassing merit, something inside you knows you've got something good to depend on.

Back in the fifties, when social scientists were sent over to Thailand to figure out how to use Buddhism to help protect Thailand from the Communists, many of them went over having read something about the four noble truths. They came to the conclusion that Buddhism was all about suffering, suffering, suffering, suffering, and it seemed pessimistic to their eyes. But when they went over there, the Thais, they discovered, were very happy. And their assumption was, "These people don't understand their own religion." Well, of course, it was the social scientists who didn't understand the religion.

There's a sense of happiness that comes when you realize that you've got something stashed away in a reliable bank. That's Ajaan Lee's term for it: the bank of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. That way, if something happens to your body, your feelings, your perceptions, your fabrications, or your consciousness, there's still something you can fall back on that gives you at least some sense of security. It's not the ultimate security, but it's heading

you in the right direction, because, as I said, it removes the focus from who you are to what you can do.

And that's what the Buddha's teachings are all about: what you can do. You can take your form, feelings, perceptions, thought-fabrications, consciousness, and turn them into a path—like you're doing right now as you meditate. You're focused on the breath, that's form. You're creating a feeling of well-being. You use perceptions to stay with the breath, and directed thought and evaluation, which are fabrications, to adjust the breath and the mind so that they fit together. And then your consciousness is aware of all these things.

So you're looking at these aggregates not so much as “me” but as something you can do to create good results. Of course, even discernment will involve the aggregates. You use your perceptions and thought-fabrications to probe and ask questions, to figure things out: Why is it that there in the mind you're creating suffering when you don't have to?

So that's where the teachings are aimed: at what you can do. You *can* create a path that leads to the end of suffering, that leads to total happiness, a happiness that's *not* precarious—one that, as one of the arahants said, has nothing to fear from any direction. That's the security we're going for.

So learn to take your focus away from your preoccupation with yourself—who you are, what you are—and get more preoccupied with what you're doing and how you can learn to do it more and more skillfully. Realize that you're building up a stock of healthy, sane, and wise choices, and that those will support you.

If it so happens that you die before you reach awakening, those good actions, as the Buddha said, will meet you on the other side, greeting you like a long-lost relative finally coming home. So you're not heading out into nothingness or insecurity. You're creating the secure conditions for further practice.

When you focus on what you can do and the skill with which you do it, you find that there's a lot less reason for fear, because you're dealing directly with *the* thing that is most fearful, which is that you can't trust yourself to do the skillful thing in difficult situations. And here you are working on getting more and more reliable right in that area. That way, when the body goes, you've still got something solid you can rely on.