Thus Have I Heard: Fear and Dread (MN 4)

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 46:14

This talk was given at Insight Meditation South Bay.

This series focuses on lesser-known teachings, and I was delighted to be invited to speak because there is so much in the suttas. The Middle-Length Discourses alone form one of four books of this size, with fifteen additional smaller collections comprising just the sutta collection. How many of these do we really receive teachings from? There are popular ones we hear frequently, and then there are many others. Some are fairly repetitive or cover the same themes, but there are also distinct ideas worth considering as part of the whole.

What I'd like to discuss tonight is a sutta called "Fear and Dread"—that's the English translation of the title. It's the fourth discourse in this collection, and my summary of it is: from scared in the woods to enlightenment. That's a process a person goes through.

To set the framework: a sutta is simply the name for a discourse that the Buddha was said to have spoken, recorded in these texts. They were first written down over 150 years after he died, so there was considerable verbal transmission. But these represent what we have as potentially closest to his teachings.

There are a number of suttas where the Buddha describes his own enlightenment in his own words. The most famous is the Noble Search, the twenty-sixth discourse in this collection. That's where he talks about studying with two different teachers, practicing concentration, and then realizing that wasn't the pathway to liberation, leading him to strike out on his own in pursuit of full enlightenment. But there's another sutta in this same collection that includes the Buddha's own description of his awakening process—this one called "Fear and Dread." It paints a rather human picture of the Buddha, which is something I appreciate about it. Both human and superhuman. There's an evolution he goes through that I think is relatable for us.

It may help to know that some discourses are organized as what's called a story within a story. They have the main teaching in the middle, and then there's a wrapper on the outside that usually provides context and perhaps some dramatic elements. We'll include that as we examine MN4. MN stands for Majjhima Nikāya, the name of this collection—the Middle-Length Discourses.

The setup for this sutta begins with a Brahmin named Jāṇussoṇi, who appears in several discourses. He comes to the Buddha and essentially complains that practice is hard. But first, he asks if people take the Buddha as a model. He says, "When people go forth out of faith, do they take Master Gotama as their leader, their helper, and their guide? Do they follow the example of Master Gotama?" The Buddha replies

with a hearty yes: "That is so, Brahman, that is so."

Why is this at the front of the sutta? Because it indicates that in some way the Buddha can be imitated or followed. The sutta will tell us something we can imitate, something where we can take the Buddha as a guide in our own practice, using him as a model.

It may also help to know that this collection, the Middle-Length Discourses, is now considered by scholars to be a kind of manual for new monastics—people who had gone forth as followers of the Buddha but needed to learn the basic teachings. It's an amazing collection covering all the key teachings, from faith and ethics to concentration and mindfulness, how to live the ascetic life, and a little about lay life. Mostly it's for new monastics: people who want to walk this path and need to know what's essential.

This is the fourth sutta in the collection, so you encounter it quite early. This context can help us understand the teaching. The exchange continues with Jāṇussoṇi, who says: "But Master Gotama, remote jungle thicket resting places in the forest are hard to endure. Seclusion is hard to practice and it is hard to enjoy solitude. One would think the jungles must rob a practitioner of his mind if he has no concentration."

So the Buddha also agrees heartily with this, and he says, "That is so, Brahman, that is so."

What's this here for? My guess is that some young monks had some doubt about practicing in jungle thickets. I mean, you come from a householder life. Some were rich, some were poor, but they were living as regular lay people. And then to come in to be one of the Buddha's followers, you let go of all that. You let go of your social station. Remember that was very important in ancient India—still important now, but even more so then. You put on the robe and you only have the bowl. And then you're going to be told to go practice by yourself. These people didn't live by themselves. They didn't have this individualistic concept that we do here. You're going to practice by yourself in the jungle.

So kind of encapsulated in this Brahman's question is: isn't that kind of hard to go out in the forest? This is my speculation, but I think this is speaking to people who are just learning how to practice. And the Buddha agrees and says, yeah, actually, that is hard.

Or maybe a more modern equivalent is that people—this is still relevant for us—we may have people in our lives who say, "Why do you want to sit on a cushion and do nothing for half an hour? Why is that so important to you? Why do you want to go on retreat where you can't read or write and you only eat a little bit and you get up at six in the morning? Why would you want to do that? Wouldn't it be better to go to the beach?" There's this sense of: isn't that hard? Why be silent?

So then it sort of legitimizes these concerns that we have, either internally or externally. And now the Buddha's going to offer his response. And we know from the first exchange that we can take this as a guide, as a model.

Interestingly, the way the Buddha responds is not to just directly answer, but to talk about how he considers this notion. Isn't it hard to go out in the forest and practice all by yourself in a lonely, scary place and just live by yourself and develop concentration? He talks about how he reflected on his own good qualities.

He says some people have poor ethics and they've lived a kind of unethical life. And not surprisingly, when they go out in the forest, they encounter fear and dread. Some people have lived unmindfully, or they have a lot of greed, or they earn their livelihood in an unjust way. And in that case, they might go out and have a lot of difficulty in the forest.

But he notes that for himself, he doesn't have as many of those things. He says, "I have mindfulness. I have ethics. I have purified mental conduct. I have purified livelihood. I am uncovetous. I don't have a mind overcome by sloth and torpor or ill will or doubt. I am not given to self-praise and disparagement of others. I am not desirous of gain, honor, and renown. I am not lazy and wanting in energy. I am energetic."

He goes through this reflection. And then he decides, well, because of that, it's going to be okay for me to go practice out in the woods.

What does this tell us? There are difficulties in practice, yes, but it's actually a basis of practice to reflect on our own good qualities. This is not a problem. Do you ever reflect in this same way? Do you sit down and go over the ways in which you're generous, the ways in which you have good virtue? It's actually no small thing that your mind is interested in meditation. Everyone in this room is somewhat interested in meditation or you wouldn't be here. Think about how few people in the world have that. Not very many.

So, in fact, if you could sit through this evening's meditation—if you could sit through half an hour of meditation—that's really good. There are a lot of people who would find it very difficult to sit with themselves for half an hour. A lot of people in the world would find that very hard. You're interested in Dharma talks. So for sure, you have a lot of good heart and mind qualities just to be here. And it's worth reflecting on this.

In fact, there is another sutta that talks specifically about beneficial reflections that the Buddha encourages. There was a whole series at IMC not so long ago—six talks about these six recollections, one for each recollection. Two of the six are recollecting one's own generosity and one's own virtue, one's own ethical conduct.

Now you can say, "Well, we're kind of trained in our culture that this might be egotistical—to think about our good qualities and to really celebrate the good things about ourselves." But that's not part of this way of thinking. It's not part of this religious tradition, of the Buddhist tradition. I think this is not egotistical because these qualities—like generosity, like loving-kindness, like virtue—they're not really personal qualities. The more you develop them, the more you understand: these are transpersonal, if you could call

it that. These are not qualities that we can own, that we can measure, that we can possess. We might use language—I think this sutta translates this as "I am possessed of," and so forth. But really, these are qualities that exist in relationship and that are bigger than our individual story. They are more part of our common humanity, our common heart, that we can develop.

So I think genuine reflection on these, genuine recollection of these, is really not egotistical at all. And in fact, according to this sutta, it's the basis of being able to overcome fear and dread.

There's more in the rest of the sutta, so let's continue. What happens next, after the Buddha says he recollected all of his good qualities and then decided it was actually going to be fine? He's talking about before he was enlightened. Before he was enlightened, he realized he had these good qualities and decided he was going to go out in the woods and practice. And then he considered that there are particular times of the month—now this is going into specifics of what they believed at that time—certain times of the month and also certain places that are listed as orchard shrines, woodland shrines, and tree shrines, which are supposed to be especially scary, apparently. And he deliberately sought these out. He went there to practice in order to encounter his own fear and dread. He thought, "If I go to these places on these particularly awesome, scary nights, then I might encounter this in my heart."

There are two things to observe about this. First of all, even for the Buddha—or even for the Bodhisattva, I should say, before he was enlightened—there was fear and dread. He was human. He was scared out in the woods when there were wild animals and branches. A peacock breaks off a branch—there are various specifics given here. And he would feel this because it's... I don't know if any of you have actually been out in the deep woods late at night. Maybe you've got your nice tent with the kerosene burner and all that, but if you go out to the bathroom or something, it's like—whoa—it's a pretty wild place. So it's natural.

Along his path, it wasn't just all bliss, sitting down with everything falling into place. He had to deal with his fear and dread. Gil Fronsdal says any spiritual practice worth its salt will eventually bring up fear.

Why is that? Because to mature on the spiritual path, we have to let go of a lot of unhelpful ideas about ourselves, about our lives, about our way of doing things. The way we're doing things now might be okay, but we have a sense that there could be something else—that's kind of why we're pursuing practice. Or we may even have a sense that it's completely not working, that it's a disaster and we need something different. Whatever it is, we're going to have to let go of something about the way we're doing things. And why are we doing things that way?

Because we believe that is safe and helpful for us. That's why we're doing what we're doing. We have needs and desires and a sense of what we want to be, and so we do things in accordance with that. And practice is going to turn that completely upside down at some point. The process of letting go of our views of how things should be and what things are is challenging, because we've put them in place because we think that's what's going to make us safe. That's how it goes.

So we're going to have to dismantle some kind of deep stuff to let go of all that.

The second point about this seeking out of places in order to encounter his own fear and dread—well, that's pretty interesting. He turned toward and actually sought out something that was going to be difficult for him. Should we be seeking out dukkha? It's an interesting question. Teachers in the West often say things like, "You don't have to seek it out. It's going to come find you anyway. Don't make it hard for yourself." And I think there's a place for that. It's a good general instruction because we have pretty stressful lives, and aging, illness, and death are coming anyway. So it's true—we don't need to create it.

But there can be times in practice where certain conditions have come together, we're ripe, we're ready, and we know this is the time to go. I got the sword. This is the time to go find the thing that needs to be cut.

So you might check internally. To what degree do you take on challenges in practice? To what degree are you willing to try something that you know is going to be a little bit hard, like doing a daylong if you've never sat for that long? What would that be like to come and be silent for a whole day, sitting and walking, not just for an evening? Or if you've done that, what would it be like to go on a retreat and stay overnight for a couple of nights and just do that—just be silent, be with my own mind and heart for two days? Wow, what would that be like? There can be times where that feels like the natural next step. Are you interested in finding and meeting the dark corners of your mind where clinging is hanging on? This sutta starts to give some instruction about that, if we're motivated to look into it.

So what happened when the Buddha went to these orchard shrines, woodland shrines, and tree shrines on awesome, auspicious nights of the month and encountered his own fear and dread? He's very explicit. He says that the fear and dread came upon him as he did this, and his approach was simply to not change what he was doing.

He talks about the postures actually—the four postures of meditation, which are sitting, walking, standing, and lying down. Those are the four basic postures. And he says, "While I walked, the fear and dread came upon me. I neither stood nor sat nor lay down till I had subdued that fear and dread. While I stood, the fear and dread came upon me. I neither walked nor sat nor lay down till I had subdued that fear and dread"—and so forth for the other two postures. He just maintained the posture that he had when the fear and dread arose.

This is a very interesting instruction, isn't it? I mean, it's kind of bare bones. But to me, it seems like an enactment of not getting pulled in. Because fear and dread have a sort of urgency to them that says, "You got to do something different. You got to do something about this." They would incite us to move or to stop or to change position in some way. And very calmly, he doesn't comply. He just keeps at it.

Just last week I was on a retreat with Ajahn Sumedho, who was the abbot of Chithurst Monastery, a Thai forest monastery located in England. He was the abbot there for twenty-two years. He himself is English, and he talked about

He used the lovely phrase "replacing fear with awareness," which I thought was just fantastic, just delicious, actually. And I thought of this sutta immediately. How perfect—I'm going to be talking about this next week.

So slowly, over time, what we do in meditation is gain greater and greater capacity of mind to be with challenging feelings and impulses. And fear and dread is surely a challenging one that really pushes at us. There are other challenging ones, of course—anger, for example, is also quite inciting to us. But there comes the ability, the capacity, of not needing to react.

And why do we react? Because these are very unpleasant feelings. We don't want to feel that anymore. We don't want to feel fear—it's actually not that pleasant of a feeling. And so we do something to stop it. That's a lot of what reaction is about: stopping a feeling that we don't have capacity to handle anymore. But as the mind gets stronger, has greater ballast—there are all kinds of analogies you can use—then we can stand firm in the face of a wavering heart and just have awareness. We replace fear with awareness, put the energy into the awareness, not into the reactivity.

So this sutta is giving a possible method for this. You have to tease it out a little bit, but the enactment of it is that you don't move, that you keep the intention to just keep doing what you're doing. And the prior preparation for that is understanding your own good qualities. It's nice, isn't it? It's not that you bear down and say, "I'm going to beat this fear, I'm not afraid"—big boys don't cry, whatever story comes up like that. It's grounded instead in: I've led an ethical life. I have a loving heart. I have some wisdom. I've developed some ability not to have greed in my life. I don't need more and more things. Knowing that about ourselves is what's going to give us the strength that when fear comes and says, "Run!" we say, "No, no, I'm okay."

There are other methods, of course. This is one that's described in this sutta, but as long as we're on the topic—there are methods like grounding in the body when we feel strong emotions. Feeling our feet on the ground is another common instruction for handling powerful surges of energy through the body. But the basic idea is the same: don't get pulled away. Have some kind of inner strength on which we're relying to stand firm.

I recently watched a video by a Dharma teacher who's been practicing for more than forty years, who has recently been diagnosed with multiple myeloma. He has cancer, and he's making his journey through it a teaching for his community. He made this video where he talked about his encounter with the first round of chemotherapy, which didn't go very well. They did their best, guessed what drugs he needed, what dose to give them in, and so they started. And his body just couldn't take that drug at all. He had kidney failure, he had to go into the ICU, they flushed his body, and luckily it worked and he survived. But it was a little close.

Because of the strength of his practice, he was able to actually observe the body falling completely out of balance and struggling to pull the systems back together, which were not working at all with this drug

introduced that wasn't working for him. He actually had the wherewithal—the capacity of mind from all that practice—to observe the body flailing like a fish out of water. And he noted that actually there was no suffering, even though it was a horrible experience. He said that directly: it was a horrible experience. But much of the time there was no suffering through it.

So this is the promise of developing the capacity of mind. This is a taste of moving toward freedom that we're offered. Not that your life gets perfect, not that everything works, not that your body doesn't hurt or die, but that there's a way to be with that which has so much strength of attention and awareness and capacity that it's not a problem at that moment. I don't think it was easy for him. He doesn't say it was easy. But I was impressed. It reminded me and inspired me that every moment of mindfulness is one more drop in that bucket. You don't lose the drops. Every moment of mindfulness counts. And if you miss another ten minutes during meditation, don't worry about it. As soon as you start again, the bucket continues to fill. It's fine.

And it accumulates over time.

As I thought more about this, I realized that at first we are developing the capacity to be with strong experience—to be with things that are happening, like body sensations or emotions or thoughts, fear and dread, for example. We're developing the capacity to be with experience.

But there's also, at some point, a shift where we start developing the capacity to be with space, to be with emptiness, to be with not knowing, to be with groundlessness. This too is actually a skill that we need to have some capacity for.

We're so focused in our lives on what is—the things that we have and the things that we are, the existent things, getting the things and keeping the things and maintaining the things. And at some point the mind starts to notice the space around the things also. That can be a little scary when we start realizing there's not a lot of basis for all these things. They're coming and going and changing. We start noticing that our body is not like it was ten years ago and is never going to be like it was ten years ago. It's going that way. And then it starts being like, what is this about?

More possibilities start to open when we're less driven with the things. And that too can be scary, actually. There's a certain fear in the openness that we live in, the actuality of the openness that we're living in. There's a lot of possibilities, and there's a lot of groundlessness. There's some need to develop capacity to be with that also—to tolerate space, if you will. It's not discussed in this sutta, but the same principle applies: replace fear with awareness, whether it's fear of something or fear of nothingness.

Georgia O'Keeffe said, "I've been absolutely terrified every moment of my life, and I've never let it keep me from doing a single thing I wanted to do." I don't know if that's literal, but it's a nice image—that there's the fear and the dread and the terror, and you just keep doing what you're needing to do.

So back to the sutta. What happens after that? He's able to be with the fear and dread. He just keeps

walking or sitting or standing or lying down when the fear and dread comes upon him, and he just waits. It says, you know, I just waited until it went away. I just kept doing the same thing.

What happens after that is that it arouses in him energy and mindfulness and concentration. It brings about the development of these spiritual faculties.

For those of you who know the list of the five spiritual faculties, it begins with faith or confidence, which is pretty much what this whole fear thing is pointing toward. Developing the capacity to be with the fear and dread, to be in scary places, to develop seclusion—that's really an act of faith. You have to decide: this practice is so important, I'm willing to be in the woods by myself on scary nights. There's a lot of faith involved in practicing that way. And so that's developed—the faith to just keep walking even when you're afraid, to just keep sitting even when you're afraid.

The result of that is the second spiritual faculty: energy. And then it says unremitting mindfulness was established, my body was tranquil and untroubled, and my mind concentrated and unified. So after the faith comes the energy, the mindfulness, and the concentration, which are the next three faculties. And the fifth faculty, the last one, is wisdom, which is what comes after that.

There's a description then of how he reaches enlightenment. He starts with, "I was afraid to meditate." And it goes all the way to the four jhānas—the four deep concentration states are established in him after he's gotten through the fear and dread. There's a stock description of those. And then it talks about the insight that comes from concentration, the arising of wisdom from a concentrated mind in the form of these insights.

I won't go into a huge amount of detail on these, but these are called the three knowledges that a Buddha attains upon enlightenment. And actually I believe arahants see them also.

The three knowledges are: the first is that one sees all of one's past lives. Remember, there's an understanding in this culture that we've been at this for a while. There's rebirth, there's living lives again and again in different places. It says, "I recollected manifold past lives—one birth, two births, three births, four births, up through a hundred thousand births, many eons of world contraction, many eons of world expansion. There I had such and such a name, of such a clan, with such an appearance. Such was my nutriment, such my experience of pleasure and pain, such my life term, and such my death. And when I passed away from there, I reappeared over there, and there I had such and such a name and such and such a clan."

You can imagine this is a pretty exhausting thing to see. Can you imagine seeing hundreds of thousands of prior lives, none of which resulted in enlightenment? And here you are in the woods reviewing all of this. This is just left as the first knowledge: I understood everything I've been through to get to here.

We can put this in more psychological terms. We're going to have to open everything in our mind to be completely free. We can gain freedom from certain things in certain ways along the path. But at some

point, you've got to include everything. And perhaps our past lives are our past days and years and seconds, if you want to think of it in that way. But basically, all of experience has to be seen and held. We need the capacity to hold anything in our lives.

And we have things in our lives that we don't really want to include. "I'm going to forget that moment five years ago, really." Or "I'm going to forget my whole childhood." But we have dents, we have bumps, we have wounds. It's part of the mind. And this teaching is encouraging us to turn toward all of that, to open to all of that—developing the strength of mind to do so.

The second of the three knowledges is understanding of karma. That's the usual summary of it. What the text actually says is "understanding of how beings pass away and reappear." So first, we simply saw the process—there I was there, then I was there, then I did that. And then comes the understanding that there's a logic to that process.

We understand that if we live a life of greed, we're going to pass away and have not as good a life the next time, because we didn't make very much merit doing that. This is a karmic understanding of cause and effect. It basically says that the mind, by what it's doing now, creates the home it's going to have in the future. And we understand how that process happens. If I do something harmful, it's going to have painful results. If I do something meritorious and helpful, it's going to have good results. If I do something like meditation, it can result in freedom. We understand the different kinds of karma and how things unfold.

This is sort of the ultimate wave function of the universe—you know, how things really work. What physicists are looking for is the grand equation for everything. So you get to see that in meditation. But it's not for the physical universe; it's for the unfolding of the heart. A slightly different process.

So this is the second knowledge. It's interesting, right? We understand completely how things unfold. This is complete wisdom about how to live well, which you can understand is important if you're going to be enlightened. You're going to be able to live always making skillful choices. So you have to understand these things.

It's kind of a nice phrase, actually. Let me read what it says about when he gains these knowledges: "This was the second true knowledge attained by me in the middle watch of the night. Ignorance was banished and true knowledge arose. Darkness was banished and light arose, as happens in one who abides diligent, ardent, and resolute."

This arising of understanding from concentration—it's quite beautiful. But he's not free yet, actually. It's only two out of three.

The third knowledge is understanding of the Four Noble Truths, the understanding of the destruction of the taints. I'm using technical language, so what are these so-called taints? They are the tendency of the mind to seek out sense pleasure, the tendency of the mind to want to be something—to want a certain kind of identity, basically—and the tendency of the mind to not want to see everything, to ignore certain

things. In more technical language: the taint of sensuality, the taint of being, and the taint of ignorance.

These are banished once one has seen everything and once one understands how things unfold. You understand that it's not worth it to chase after sense pleasure. It's not worth it to chase after identity. These things are not—you've done it for so many lifetimes, going up and down and around. You see that that's not the path. It's not what ultimately gets you there.

And so from that unfolds the understanding of the Four Noble Truths. This is what suffering really is. This is what dissatisfaction is, and why we feel it. And then the cause of that—the arising of clinging or craving is why that happens. And then letting go, opening, not seeking after such things—that is freedom. And there's a path to do so.

Some of this path is laid out in the sutta itself, and the rest is laid out in the broader teachings. But there's a way to get from here to there. It's a very hopeful message.

The Buddha has seen hundreds and thousands of past lives. So he's been everyone, he's been everything—that's the implication. He's been a murderer, he's been a courtesan, he's been a king, a queen, a computer programmer maybe. Somehow there was a path from those to this night of sitting under the tree.

I don't think you need to buy into this literally. I don't think it's meant to be literal. The point is that we live in a lawful universe, and it's possible to navigate through that and get the mind into a state where it can let go of everything that's binding it to its own discomfort.

But the sutta's not over. The Buddha basically says, "That's what happened. I got scared. I didn't buy into it. I got concentrated. I had these three amazing insights and my mind was freed." It's pretty compressed—from regular ordinary scared person in the woods to enlightened.

But remember, this is a story within a story. That whole account about the woods was the teaching, the main teaching. But it started out with the Brahmin Jānussoṇi saying, "Isn't practice hard?" And the Buddha agreeing.

Interestingly, the scene pulls back and the Buddha is talking again to Jānussoṇi. He says, "You might think that I still go out and practice in the woods, that I still go on retreat because I still have stuff to work on in my mind. But that would not be correct."

He says, "I do still go on retreat. I do still resort to remote jungle thicket resting places for two reasons. One, I see a pleasant abiding for myself here and now. And two, I have compassion for future generations."

This is interesting. We learn that the Buddha still goes on retreat, even after he's enlightened. He still practices, he still meditates every day, even after he's enlightened. Why would he need to? He doesn't have to clean out anything else in his heart. Why would you still meditate?

And he gives two reasons. One is it's a pleasant abiding. It's okay—you can enjoy your life. Just like enjoying your good qualities. If you have the ability to have a pleasant abiding sitting in meditation, great. You can enjoy that. The Buddha was not all about the pain and all about the asceticism.

And the second reason: "I have compassion for future generations." What's that about? I think he's setting an example. It's said at the very beginning, do people take you as their guide, as their model? The Buddha says, yes, they do. When they practice, they look to me as an example of what to do. So of course he's going to go out and meditate in the woods, because that's what he wants people to do. He wants them to see him doing that. So it's not about him. Yes, he has the pleasant abiding, but his life is about helping other people. He's free. He doesn't need anything more.

But he has so much compassion. He uses his very behavior, his whole way of being, as an example for us to do the same. Wisdom and compassion—that is all that was left.

And so the Brahman Jānussoṇī becomes a lay follower of the Buddha and declares refuge in him for life.

So whatever fear and dread there is in your heart, don't be afraid of it. There is a path—a step-by-step training of the mind to hold each thing in our life tenderly, not giving in to its urgency. Out of compassion. Out of the possibility that we can overcome that and see for ourselves how to live skillfully, how to live with wisdom, and how to offer compassion to the world.

Thank you.

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