Fear and Courage

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 23:26

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa.

Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-awakened one.

So, I've chosen this topic of courage, but really, what we're talking about is fear, isn't it? Overcoming fear.

Now, fear is, I would argue, the most fundamental of our emotional states dependent on delusion. This delusion of a self has created a self which feels uncertain because of sickness, ageing and death and all that. Therefore, it has this fear about itself and it reacts to this fear by making itself safe. That's when we start accumulating stuff. So money makes us feel safe. We've got a big bank account, lots of friends and power, of course, and lots of pleasurable things to do. So we keep our mind off these horrible things.

This fear of death or fear of sickness, ageing and all that, has this effect of making us try to escape it. Of course, this is one of the great awakeners. This was the awakener that drove the Buddha to seek liberation: sickness, ageing and death. So it plays a big part in our lives, obviously. It shapes our behaviour whenever we're in any situation which is dangerous or stressful or in any way a challenge. So it's something we need to deal with. I'm sure all of you have to some extent or other. It won't go until the very last moment when the self is destroyed. So it's going to be with us for a while.

We have to see it as a friend. After all, it is trying to protect us, right? So we have to give it a hug. Then we have to open up to it, get the feel of it, and not run away from it. Of course, that running away from it is the panic, isn't it?

If we consider the amount of fear that we have as a measure of the delusion of self, every time we undermine this fear, we're undermining the delusion of self, right? So there is a plus to it.

In fact, the Buddha in the *Dhammapada*, verse 39, tells us that in the end, all fear would disappear. This is what he says: "For one who has awakened, whose mind isn't agitated, whose heart isn't tormented, and who has abandoned both merit and demerit, fear does not exist." So once the mind has been silenced and the heart calmed, and there's no attempt to create *kamma* based on a self, me creating stuff, fear is completely gone. So the prognosis is good. This is what we have to keep remembering.

Now, psychologists have delineated six areas of experience where we experience fear. I'm indebted to Gwen for this, who runs the monthly meeting on climate change, climate crisis. So it's the physical, the social, moral, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual. This is sometimes where we need to find a certain

level of courage.

The physical, I think, is pretty straightforward—just straightforward with the fear of pain, fear of debilitating illness, etc. Whenever that touches us, we come across this fear and it's being able to sit with the fear, allow it to arise, pass away. That's the courage, the internal courage. Of course, some people have to find that physical courage in daily life. I'm thinking of sports. A lot of sports demand physical courage, especially boxing. I don't know if any of you have done a bit of boxing, but you definitely got to have a bit of physical courage there. And then there are occupations—soldiering. If we think of what's happening now in the Ukraine, both sides demand physical courage. Even the police sometimes need that.

This identity with the body is profound. You can't be here without one. It's the physical representation of our existence. So it's important that whenever this comes to us that we really turn towards it, see it as a friend, see that it's actually trying to protect us and allow, get almost get comfortable with the feelings of fear. That's the big thing. Not to push it away.

So we may use that as a sort of question of ourselves. Has there been a time in our lives when we've been physically timid, when we should have done something? And how do we feel about that? Is there some guilt and shame that we haven't worked through? And then to make these silent inward resolutions that if it's demanded of us, we'll do our best to manifest courage. So that's the physical part.

The social part usually is to do with feeling embarrassed in a meeting. So you don't want to ask a question in case people think it's silly and stuff like that. We're afraid of criticism, saying something which other people will jump down our throats for, things like that. Even expressing ourselves to neighbours, to a neighbour who you know has a different opinion or a different understanding. So that social courage is sometimes really we have to try to express.

Obviously we have great examples of that—Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela. All these people who are out on demonstrations, which are getting to be more and more policed and more danger of being fined and sent to prison. Of course, when you think of countries and the amount of courage you need, like, for instance, that terrible time in Iran, where the morality police murdered that young woman and the tremendous repressive measures that the government took, even capturing people and then hanging them.

We've got, of course, Russia. There's a man called Kara-Murza who is a political activist, journalist, author, filmmaker, political prisoner. So he spoke against the present war and he's ended up in jail for 25 years. Unless Putin is somehow got rid of, he's going to be there for 25 years. And then, of course, there's that Russian opposition leader, Navalny, who's, I think, tremendously courageous. It's unbelievable, really, whom Putin actually tried to poison.

Even if you look back into Russian history, the misery of the Russians is unbelievable. I think it's quite remarkable. And yet they find this courage through, if you remember Stalin's time when the Samizdat,

when they were writing poems and all sorts of stuff and passing it on bits of paper to friends, trying to keep the resistance alive.

Of course, there's the investigative journalists, 67 being murdered last year. The most prominent, of course, was when the Israeli forces shot, murdered Shireen Abu Akleh in the occupied West Bank. It's awful, awful, awful.

So again, it's just social courage. It's again an opportunity for us to contemplate where we haven't made our views known out of fear, out of fear of criticism or whatever, being mocked, attacked. Again there might be some shame or guilt around that so you have to work through it. You have to allow it to come up and then to make that resolution: should I find myself in such a situation I'll make my understandings known.

Shading into that is moral courage. It's more to do with right and wrong. I'm reminded now of the 60s, which, of course, is prehistoric now. But we had a person in the UK called Mary Whitehouse who really led the charge against the loss of moral compass. In those days, it was called permissiveness, and people were getting very upset about it. Of course, we did lose the moral ground. We found out about the behaviour of the famous DJ, Jimmy Savile, and then the Catholic priests and all that, and paedophiles. So there was something that happened in the 60s which took away a grounding that we used to have as a society in morality.

But of course, these situations are never absolutely white and black. It's quite difficult to decide. Then we have things like abortion, which in Europe is now a dead subject, really. But we can see the tremendous war that's going on in the United States over it. The usual battle between the mother's rights and the right of the foetus.

I think more upfront these days for us is immigration and the impact it's having on society. No one has a clue. I haven't a clue as to what the answer is to the growing level of immigration. When climate change really begins to bite, presumably it's going to get much worse. These people are coming out of areas of abject poverty and almost unliveable. On top of that, there's the political refugees.

Of course, the danger here is that it pushes society to, the indigenous society, we can say, to defend itself and move over towards fascist regimes, which is happening. We've got Orban in Poland. We've got Meloni in Italy. And this comes out of fear. But it's something that if we want to maintain a liberal society, it's something we really have to tackle.

So again, there's this whole area of morality which demands courage. Has there been a time in the past we could have been more morally courageous? And again, to make that resolution.

The next one is the emotional courage. Well, that points to opening up to these very difficult mental states that we have within ourselves. That's, of course, very much part of our practice of *vipassanā*. Just to allow very difficult mental states to arise and to be able to see the aversion that we have to it, the fear that we

have to it, and just to allow that to pass away, and then just to sit quietly with it, to sink into the fire, tie ourselves to the bonfire and just allow it to rage. We do that because that's the healing. Once these emotions have a chance to liberate themselves, of course, what we mistake is that when we begin to create these stories in the mind and it feels like a relief. If you're angry and you go off onto a fantasy of beating somebody up, then it feels like a relief, but actually it's just exercised the anger. It's when you feel it as a physical sensation that it's actually being released. So this, of course, we know through our *Vipassanā*.

There's a little passage here that I've copied from the Buddha who had to tackle fear when he first went out into the jungles: "And while I was staying there, a wild animal would come or a peacock would make a twig fall. The wind would rustle the falling leaves and the thought would occur to me, is this that fear and terror coming? And then the thought occurred to me, why do I just keep waiting for fear and terror?" So instead of that, this is what he determines: "What if I, in whatever state I'm in, when fear and terror come to me, were to subdue that fear and terror in that very state?"

"So when fear and terror came to me while I was walking backwards and forwards, I would not sit down or stand or lie down. I would keep walking backwards and forward until I had pacified the fear and terror. When fear and terror came to me while I was standing, I would not walk or sit or lie down. I would keep standing until I had subdued the fear and terror. And when fear and terror came to me while sitting, I would not lie down or stand up or walk. I would keep sitting until I had subdued that fear and terror. When terror and fear came to me while I was lying down, I would not sit up or stand or walk. I'd keep lying down until I had subdued the fear and terror."

So, in other words, he turned towards it. The word subdue does suggest some sort of suppression, but that's not what he means. So again, if we have a specific mental state that arises that we find very difficult, if it comes up at a convenient time when it's just you by yourself, whatever, just to be able to move into it and stay with it.

Then there's the intellectual. So recently here in the UK, we had a Professor Kathleen Stock, who's a philosopher and a gender critical academic. She's been hounded out of the university that she worked in. There was a whole rumpus at Oxford University, asking her to be cancelled. She basically stated in her book that trans women are not, it's difficult to say, are not the same as born women. Let's put it that way. So that's created quite a rumpus. Of course, she lost the job and everything from it.

This whole area is one where people have to have the courage to speak their truth, you might say. It's a dodgy area because it depends which way you're looking at it. One of the paradoxes of this particular argument is nobody complains about a woman who becomes a man, changes her gender to a male. I presume that's because there's not much problem with that. If a trans man walks into a male toilet, it's not a problem for the men. If they happen to be in the same sport, boxing or something like that, it wouldn't be a big problem for men. But on the other side, it's obviously some women feel threatened by it in hospitals, in toilets and in sport. So it's a difficult area, difficult area.

We need to think about it because there may come a time that we have to express our views, our opinions and feel free to do so. Here in the West, we have that freedom. Interestingly enough, in Hindu or Buddhist countries, and I think also true in the Far East, there isn't this obsession with sex at all. The funny thing is that in the East, Buddhist especially, there's a myth that you're much better off to become enlightened if you happen to be born a man. So many women make the determination to be born a man in the next lifetime. There was a case in Sri Lanka, which is the opposite, where a Catholic bishop became a Buddhist. Towards the end of his life, this is, I think, going back to the 60s, 50s, 60s, towards the end of his life, he determined that he wanted to be reborn as a woman. So he began dressing as a woman and trying to change his gender before he died.

Anyway, it really is just a case intellectually of really being able to hold our views and opinions just a bit more lightly to see them more as perspective. If you hold on to your views and opinions too strongly, I'm right and everybody else is wrong, then there's always conflict. But to be able to be open to critique, to have your views challenged, even nuanced, that really takes courage.

Finally, we have the spiritual courage. There's one little example here, which I think really affected me when I found this out. When the Inquisition started, and they attacked the Cathars, the Albigensians, down in the south of France, what's today the south of France, there was an occasion where about some escaped from the first town that was attacked in Béziers, and they ended up in a place called Minerve, which was a heavily well-fortified small town with a river running through it, etc.

There was a certain Simon de Montfort, who was really quite a cruel soldier. Anyway, they were eventually conquered and he just kept lobbing stones at them with a catapult. When they finally collapsed and they entered into the town, they built a big bonfire and 140 Cathars threw themselves onto the flames. That's courageous. And ironically, there is a monument to that right in front of the Catholic Church. So that's a bit cheeky.

So in our actual spiritual practice, there is, remember, this whole process of renunciation, of letting go, letting go, letting go. Really, this idea of *nibbāna*, it's a shady idea. The Buddha tells us it's the highest happiness. It's absolutely you want it when you've got it. But we don't know what it is. In the Christian tradition, they talk of the mysterium tremendum and fascinens. So it's the mystery which is both frightening, makes you tremble, and yet it fascinates you. Yet you want to find out what it is. So it's going to take some courage because it's like you're walking backwards towards a cliff. There's a drop coming somewhere.

You know, you've got to let go of everything at some point, but you don't know when it's coming and you haven't a clue what's going to happen when you actually fall off the cliff. So there's a bit of anxiety, fear, existential anxiety around the whole process of spiritual practice. So again, whenever that sort of fear comes up, we just turn to it. The usual thing, give a hug. It's only trying to protect us and make a determination to continue with our practice.

So these six areas just give us a way of examining ourselves. The whole idea of timidity when fear comes and courage.

There is another side to this, which I'll tackle on another talk. And that, of course, is the courage of forbearance, the courage of patience. And the Buddha has a lot to say about that.

Yeah, very good. So I can only hope my words have been of some assistance, that I have not caused confusion, and that by your ability to stay with fear, to overcome fear, you will be liberated from all suffering sooner rather than later.

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