The Paradox of Fear

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 15:44

So I thought this month we'd have a look at this fear and anxiety since there's so much of it. No need to mention names, what's causing all the problems.

I mean, there are words in Pali which separate fear and anxiety, but for our purposes, we can put them all into just this word fear. The way we experience fear is a sudden jolt of bad energy in the body and it tends to go away. So if you step out on the road and a car just misses you, you get that fright. And it tends to be paralyzing and cold, I think. Whereas anxiety is something long-term. It's always about the future. It's always what's going to happen next. And we tend to feel that as an agitation. And it warms us up. It heats us up. So there's quite a difference between them. But for our purposes, as I say, fear will do.

So whenever we talk about things like this, always go back to the root problem. And there, of course, we find the dear old self. So this is the delusion of some body, some person which has a reality to it. So remember that even the Buddha has a personality. It's not as though you lose your personality when you become liberated. But you lose that sense of self being isolated from a sense of disconnect and this manifests of course mainly when we come across death. So that's our old friend death and anything that suggests endings always reminds us of that ultimate state, which brings fear.

It's the unknowability when it'll happen. We don't know what will happen after death. We might have a certain faith, a certain belief that we carry on. On the other hand, we might think we just disappear. But whatever it is, nobody actually wants to die.

Now, from that sense of self, of course, we try to buffer ourselves against the world to protect ourselves from the world and from that fear of losing. So we attach to things, we gather wealth, friends, power. We like to absorb into sensual pleasures and become attached to that sort of thing, going on holidays, sex, drugs, rock and roll. And of course, the more things we have, the more people, the friends and so on, the more we can lose. And therefore, with that attachment, there also comes fear.

So the Buddha in the Dhammapada states it quite clearly. From attachment comes grief. From attachment comes fear. One who is free from attachment has no grief. So how can there be fear?

So how do we overcome it? Well, first of all, there's just the reflection. So we've done, in a past moon celebration, we wandered into the idea of death, sickness, aging and all that. And it's bringing that up as often as we want just to get accustomed to the idea of sickness, aging and death. And it's through that sort of cusp that that sense of being OK with the feelings that come up with that, that is part of purifying the heart of its fear of it. So one who is wise and full of insight does not tremble in the face of death.

And then there's *mettā*. Now you have to be careful. *Mettā* isn't there to sort of bury it, to push it away, to suppress it. *Mettā* is there as a way of approaching it. I'm sure you've heard me speak about holding things with that sense of care.

So if we find ourselves being anxious, being afraid of things, especially with the news and all that. And it can bring up a certain sense of fear and anxiety about what's happening in the world. Just to stay with the feeling and to embrace it with a sense of care. And remember, you can always talk to the heart: "Dear heart, I can feel you. I know you're in a dreadful state, but we'll just stay here for a little while and I'm sure that you'll release that energy." See?

So by creating that distance between what you're feeling and what is doing the feeling, you're allowing that energy to dissipate. So that's a way of coming to terms with fear and of allowing that sensation to die away.

So what we're heading for, of course, is fearlessness. And part of the practice of *vipassanā* is to do with that. But remember, you can do it at any time. Any time, if there's the occasion, if you're on your own, for instance, as you'll see from a reading that I'll be giving from the discourses, you can just sit with it for a while. That's all. And sometimes it can be quite heavy. I mean, even feelings of nausea. So you just sit with it, you see. And that lack of reaction allows the heart to heal itself.

So remember, every time we're reacting, pushing it away, the energy of pushing it away is actually becoming part of that fear. And if we allow the anxiety to run away with those thoughts, then it's going to grow. So with those two ways of dealing with it, as soon as we realize we're doing that, stop, and just open up to what the heart wants to say.

So I've just chosen a passage really to show us how the Buddha himself dealt with it. And it's much the same as we've been talking. So it's nice to know that he went through the same problems. So it's called the discourse of fear and dread. And a Brahmin, Janusoni, goes to see him. And there's the usual exchange of greetings and little niceties. And then he says to the Buddha, "Remote jungle thicket 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 would rob a meditator of their minds if they have no concentration."

So the Buddha agrees with that. And then he lists a whole load of things that if we suffer from these things, it's going to be hard to sit in solitude. So it's unpurified of bodily conduct, verbal conduct. Covetousness and full of lust, ill will and intentions of hate, sloth and torpor, restlessness and unpeacefulness in mind, uncertain and doubtful, given to self-praise and disparaging others, subject to alarm and terror, that suggests trauma to me. Desirous of gain, honour and renown, lazy and wanting in energy, unmindful and not fully aware, unconcentrated, with straying minds, devoid of wisdom, idiots. Such people will find it very difficult to find solitude in the forests, in the jungle thicket resting places.

So now he says of himself that he felt that he wasn't suffering from all that very much. And so he decides

there are especially auspicious nights of the 14th, 15th and the 8th of the fortnight. So this is the moon calendar. "Now, what if on such nights as these I were to dwell in such awe-inspiring, hair-raising abodes as orchard shrines, woodland shrines and tree shrines?" So these shrines were where the gods were and some of them weren't particularly nice. Interestingly enough, he doesn't here suggest that he went to sit in the charnel grounds to overcome the fear of death. Here he is talking about these shrines and of course he's there during the night.

"I dwelt in such awe-inspiring, horrifying abodes as orchard shrines, woodland shrines and tree shrines. And while I dwelt there, a wild animal would come up to me or a peacock would knock off a branch or a wind would rustle the leaves. And I thought, what now if this is the fear and dread coming?" So he's gone to experience this fear and dread.

"And then I thought, why do I always dwell expecting fear and dread? What if I soothe that fear and dread while keeping the same posture that I'm in when it comes upon me?" So he stops expecting this fear and dread. However, it does come.

And he says, "While I walked, the fear and dread came upon me. I neither stood nor sat nor lay down till I had soothed 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 soothed the fear and dread. And while I sat, the fear and dread came upon me. I neither walked nor stood nor lay down till I had soothed the fear and dread. And while I lay down, the fear and dread came upon me. I neither walked nor stood nor sat down till I had soothed that fear of dread."

So there he is, you see, he went through the same sort of rubbish that we have to go through.

Now, so that's to do with, shall we say, fear as something unwholesome. But interestingly enough, fear can be wholesome. And one writer calls it the paradox of fear. So take a very simple instance. Why don't we just step out on the road and cross to the other side? Because, within us, there's a fear of being knocked over. And it's reminding ourselves of that, even if it's only in the background, even if it's only, say, subconscious. We know that if we don't take care and we walk out into the road, we may very well have a serious accident.

So there are two qualities that he points to, which are, shall we say, wholesome fear. And that's the dread of consequences and shame. So he gives a whole list of things that we should be afraid of in terms of consequences. Some of them pretty straightforward. Things like misconduct of body, speech and mind. But he also talks about famine, catastrophes, schisms.

So these things are being afraid of famine and catastrophes and things like that. We prepare for them. So, as you know, we've had floods in this country and we finally did have done a little bit about them. So knowing that there are going to be catastrophes, there are going to be famines, you build up situations where you can undermine them. So this fear of things going wrong and the fear of doing things which are

unwholesome and will have consequences, that sort of fear is a wholesome fear. It stops us doing things or it makes us do things for our own personal benefit.

The other one is shame. So shame is when we feel that we've lost esteem in people's eyes if we do something that they see or hear. And that, of course, is something that we don't like at all. But it's also at times when we have thought something or we do something where nobody's around, but we just feel that it's not something that I expect of myself. I had an old aunt who used to say, if I did that, it wouldn't be me. So it's that understanding about how we feel when we do something that humiliates us, that we feel that our worthiness in people's eyes and in our own eyes has been undermined.

So fear and dread of consequences, in the Buddha's understanding, are actually our guardians. They stop us doing unwholesome things. And it's interesting that the academics who study this are sort of confounded by it. I mean, to me, it seems pretty straightforward. So one of them conjured up this phrase, the paradox of fear.

So there we have it, in short, how the roots of fear and anxiety based on this self and attachment to things, how we deal with it through loving kindness and insights, *vipassanā*, and allowing that energy to dissipate and how some fears that we have and some loss of face, the fear of the loss of face are actually our protectors.

Very good. So I can only hope my words have been of some assistance and that by your careful investigation of fear, you will be liberated from all fear sooner rather than later.

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