Fear and Fearlessness

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:03:18

The subject of the talk tonight is fear and fearlessness.

I wanted to talk about fear this evening because, first, I think it's a really common experience in retreat. Second, it's one of our deepest kinds of conditionings. And when it's present, it has a very oppressive nature. Unlike any other emotion that I think we experience, it tends to cast this very dark cloud over everything. It gives a sense of deep inner contraction in our being and cuts us off from the joys and happiness of life.

So in the talk tonight I want to look at the phenomenon of fear and how to work with it, but I want to start by putting it in a context of the other emotions.

Taking a big picture view of our situation as human beings, we see that we are subjected to this mix—a very rapidly alternating mix—of pleasurable experiences and painful experiences. This is our lot in life and it's pretty much the lot of all the sentient beings that we know, perhaps excepting those in the God realms with unremitting bliss at their fingertips. But as we can see looking around this world, this is the human condition and the condition of creatures. Our senses are being battered constantly by this alternation of pleasure and pain. This is unavoidable for an enlightened being or an unenlightened being.

But our neurosis as humans, where we get caught, is that we've succumbed to the temptation to try to control these experiences—and not just once, but in quite a chronic way. This is how we think it's wise to manage life. So we have gotten ourselves into this habit of manipulating our experience over and over to gain more of the pleasurable and less of the painful. This is the birth of craving.

This is the basis of the activity of self, or what in Buddhism is called the ego—this constant striving to enhance the pleasurable and reduce the unpleasurable. And fundamentally, the practice of meditation, our Dharma practice, is to stop manipulating. Or we could say to stop the activity of self-centered grasping.

We begin to become very familiar with these movements of mind. The Buddha described them primarily as greed for the pleasant, aversion toward the unpleasant, and the force of delusion that accompanies both. Because the basis of greed and aversion is we don't see what we're doing. We don't see the operation of these forces of reaching toward and pushing away, and the not seeing of them and their effect—which is basically suffering—is what sustains the operation. These three—greed, aversion, and delusion—are really synonymous with craving, the second noble truth, the origin of suffering. Where there is craving, there will be clinging. And where there is clinging, there will be suffering. This is really the whole point of

the Wheel of Dependent Origination, where it's explained quite clearly.

The afflictive emotions that we experience in practice and in life are really just variations on these fundamental tendencies of greed, aversion, and delusion. As I look at my own practice experience, as I talk to people who are in the middle of a retreat, it seems to me there are four emotions that come again and again that cause the most difficulty for yogis and, by assumption, for people in daily life as well. As I see them, they are sadness, anger, desire, and fear.

What's interesting is when you start to look at these four—what I would call primary afflictive emotions—is that they all map quite nicely onto a matrix of pleasant and unpleasant in relationship to past and future. Notice that the activities of greed and aversion are a lot about past and future. When we go away from the present moment with our thoughts, we move into past and future, and that becomes the basis for greed and aversion.

Let me spell out this matrix. In relationship to the past: If there has been the pleasant which no longer exists, that tends to be the condition for sadness. Sadness forms around the loss of the pleasant, which was in the past and is no longer. Anger tends to arise around a past experience of hurt or pain. If someone has done or said something that's injured us, that past hurt, when it hasn't been healed, is an arising ground, a seed for anger.

In relationship to the future then, the pleasant possibility that may exist in the future is the ground for desire. And the unpleasant possibility that may exist in the future is the ground for fear. We don't want to experience that which is going to be painful in the future. So sadness and anger, largely in relation to the past. Desire and fear, largely in relation to the future.

In Tibetan Buddhism, they often use the terms hope and fear. Hope is the replacement for desire. They'll talk about the whole strategies of ego or self as being these strategies of hope and fear. And meditators are encouraged to abandon the qualities of hope and fear. I think this sometimes is a helpful way to think of it. We can think of our basic movements of mind as being around hope and fear.

This points to how deep the conditioning of fear is—a central movement in the mind, a central basis of our neurosis. What we see as we start to look in this way is that these two forces of hope and fear ultimately lead us to more suffering than they bring us happiness.

This is the message of the Second Noble Truth. Craving is essentially an unskillful activity. It leads to more suffering than it resolves. We engage in these strategies because we are hopeful that they will lead to more pleasure and deeper happiness. But in fact, the message of the Second Noble Truth—and I think the heart of the Buddha's teachings—is that this is wrong. The constant engagement with these strategies of manipulation, summed up as hope and fear, leads us into more suffering.

Really, you could say that our development of trust in the Buddha's teachings, the expression of our faith in the Dhamma, is that we allow ourselves more and more to manifest our belief in non-manipulation.

That's why it's so central in meditation practice that we give up our craving, give up our hope and fear moment after moment. In doing that, in stopping this ceaseless activity of self around pleasure and pain, we abandon ourselves to life. We surrender ourselves to the flow of life and the results of our own actions, the results of our own karma.

This kind of surrender, as I understand it, is the true openness of spiritual life—the true receptivity, trust, non-doing and non-interfering that all our practice is aiming at.

Often as we look at these two forces, hope and fear, we think it would be nice to give up fear, but we want to hang on to hope. Let's see if we can try to arrange the pleasant. Hope has something kind of positive in the experience of it, but let's get rid of this fear stuff—that's not so much fun.

But in fact, desire and fear go together. They're quite intimately linked. Because as soon as we commit to a desire for something, if you look closely, there's a fear of not getting it. Fear and desire will always show up together.

The Buddha put it this way in the Majjhima: "There is wavering in one who is dependent. There is no wavering in one who is independent." That is, where there's clinging in the mind to whatever—whether of the past or the future—that very clinging creates a dependence, and that dependence creates a wavering, a shakiness, a trembling, an insecurity, a fear in the mind. There is wavering in one who is dependent.

It's interesting to look at this question, the relationship of desire and fear. I've asked myself, which is more fundamental? So I invite you to ask yourself that in your experience. Which is the more fundamental driving force in your life? Is it desire or is it fear? Do we first feel insecure in life and then want the objects that will make us feel more secure? Is that the way it fundamentally operates? Or are we more driven by desire for the pleasurable, and then fear comes as a shadow of the desire?

When the Buddha expressed the Second Noble Truth and taught that craving is the cause of suffering, he definitely came down on the side of desire as being primary. So that's one man's opinion.

But speaking as a fear type, my primary sense is that for me, fear is more compelling. At this stage in my existence and development, fear feels like a more primary and compelling force than desire. But if you talk to a greed type, you'll get a different response. That's why I just invite each of you to look at the question for yourself.

In fact, it seems to me as a fear type, when you look at the uncertainty of the world, fear seems like quite a rational response to things. It's a mess out there. There are lots of ways to get pain. Even this body has a million ways to break down and cause physical suffering. It seems quite normal to be afraid of this situation. Sometimes it seems like the only rational response to things.

But that's why it's good to have contact with people who aren't fear types. My wife is not particularly a fear type. Her personality is more what would be described as sanguine—kind of confident, kind of

easygoing. She's Australian, which might have something to do with it. She'll often wring her hands in frustration and say to me, "Why do you always have to think about all the things that could go wrong?" She's just happily trucking along and I keep popping up with all these anxieties. I say, "Well, I'm just trying to take care of us both." "I don't need you to take care of me in that way."

So it's helpful to get that reflection. There is another response possible to life. And eventually, I think, as a fear type, we have to ask ourselves: do I really want to feel this way all the time? The answer probably is no, because fear is not a very pleasant place to live from, nor is anxiety, nor is worry. So then the quest arises. You might say the dharmic quest arises: Where is the way out with fear?

The uncertainty of life is a truism—a simple fact we cannot change. This reality will not disappear for any of us. It did not disappear even for the Buddha. Throughout his life, he faced verbal and physical attacks, abuse, criticism, and blame. People attempted to kill him on multiple occasions. We can never escape life's fundamental uncertainty.

But must we respond with fear? That is truly the question.

Someone said in a recent interview something I found deeply insightful: "I can see how I'm creating fear through my own thoughts." This recognition itself opens the door to freedom—seeing that there is responsibility, an ongoing activity in the generation of fear.

Krishnamurti, the Indian philosopher and teacher, expressed this quite succinctly: "Thought breeds fear." We can sometimes feel this directly in our meditations. We may sit comfortably for a period, and then suddenly thoughts begin churning, and we feel our fear level rising. Thought becomes a breeding ground for fear.

Mark Twain acknowledged this in one of his famous observations: "I am an old man and have known a great many troubles, but most of them never happened." Most of our troubles never actually occur, yet this doesn't prevent us from imagining them and feeling their burden.

I cannot resist sharing another Twain quote I discovered while researching: "Go to heaven for the climate, but hell for the company"—perhaps applicable even for Buddhists.

In the Zen tradition, there is an image for how we create our own fear: an artist who has painted a tiger on a large canvas, working meticulously to make it lifelike. When he steps back to admire his work and sees the tiger, he jumps in terror. We become frightened of our own paintings, scared by our own imaginings. This doesn't make them real; it doesn't mean the tiger will leap from the canvas to bite us.

Through meditation, we begin discovering that perhaps we don't need to think these thoughts or conjure images of terrible possibilities. When we refrain, what becomes of our state? When we leave our condition unmanipulated—or uncontaminated—by thinking, what is that state untouched by thought? Take a look and see. Perhaps there is peace intrinsic to that state when thought isn't disturbing it.

I want to explore some specific types of fear, though in many ways the source doesn't matter. In meditation and dharma practice, we can learn to relate directly with fear in ways that don't depend on what triggered it. This understanding is crucial, but let me acknowledge various fears that arise in practice and life.

First is our fear of death. Death feels threatening to the ego, and this threat illuminates one of the primary building blocks of self—continuity. The self imagines itself continuing; without continuity over time, there is no self. I'm speaking of the fictitious self we imagine and believe in, which leads us into suffering and which we see through with insights into anatta. Death represents the ultimate insult to the ego because it presents the possibility of everything coming to an end.

Viewed differently, however, fear of death is quite irrational. What would happen if you went to sleep tonight, had pleasant dreams, and simply didn't wake up? Would that truly be such a disaster? Perhaps for the staff here, but...

It might be for the people back home. But really, what does it matter if this stream of sights and sounds and smells and tastes and touch and thoughts and emotions just comes to an end sometime? It matters only if we have a sense of ourselves as an ongoing being, an ongoing ego.

This fear of death is very natural, and I think it doesn't go away for a while. It doesn't go away easily. But curiously, they did a survey on people's greatest fears, and the fear of death came in only at number four. The number one fear that people mentioned—the highest fear on the list—was fear of speaking in public. I don't know about you, but I'd rather be speaking tonight than dying. So there's something funny about that ordering.

I have to say that I was probably first deeply inspired to practice by reading in Buddhism the possibility that one could live without the fear of death. This was just amazing to me—that in the early Buddhist readings I came upon, there were masters who had really gone beyond the fear of death and had discovered something called the deathless that they found their being to be grounded in. That was tremendously inspiring to me because the fear of death has been with me from an early age. I can remember being very young and being afraid of dying.

The Buddha said something interesting about this fear of death. He said that not everyone needs to fear death. Not everyone does fear death. He said that the fear of death is dependent on four conditions: if one has a great deal of desire for sense pleasures, one will fear death. If one has a great deal of desire for this body, one will fear death. If one has done a lot of unwholesome actions and hasn't done wholesome actions, one will fear death. And if one has not developed a faith in the Dhamma, one will fear death.

But the converse of those statements are also true—that one need not fear death if one is not so desirous of sense pleasures, not so desirous of the body, has done good actions, and has faith in the Dhamma. I mean, that's a high bar. How many of us do not desire sense pleasures? Probably not too many. How many

do not have desire around this body? Probably not too many. But it shows a way. It shows a path of practice that is really open for us and the possibility of going beyond the fear of death.

In long retreats, I notice in myself a significant amount of fear of physical pain—sitting after sitting, sitting after sitting. One retreat I was sitting and just started to notice, "Oh, there's a tension in my mind. What is that tension about?" I kept looking into it and tracing it, and the only thing I could find was that there was a subtle fear of physical discomfort. That was really all it was about. Once I saw that, I could relax more. The physical pain didn't go away, but it wasn't being added to by the fear of the physical pain.

We have a fear of judgment. We are afraid of the things that people will say about us or think about us or point out to us. In a way, I think that fear of criticism triggers a deeper fear—that in some way we're not really okay. We're not sufficient or we're not adequate, that the rest of the world has got it together in a way that I don't. The criticism is really a pointing to that insufficiency in us.

One of the things that I think is beautiful about the Brahmaviharas as a practice is that as they start to come alive in us, and we look inside and feel the living quality of metta or compassion, that gives a sense of goodness. That gives a sense that there's something really trustworthy at the heart of who we are. And that goes a long way to offset this fear of not being sufficient, not being okay.

Sometimes this fear of judgment we can see really as a projection. When I was practicing recently in Burma—I think I mentioned that I ordained as a monk, which was a delight—my preceptor was a monk of about thirteen wassa, thirteen years, named Udama Saba, a Malaysian monk who was assigned to me because he speaks really good English. He's a very nice guy, a very gentle man, but he's also a good monk. He's a firm monk in terms of the discipline.

So one day I was waiting in the lunch line, standing there with my bowl waiting for the bell to be rung so we could go through and have our bowls be filled with food. My preceptor comes up to me and taps me on the shoulder and says, "Can you come to my kuti today at 5 p.m.?" I said, "Sure." And then he went off.

And then I started thinking, what does he want to talk to me about? Because normally when the preceptor calls you over for a private conversation, it's for one reason—to admonish you. So I started thinking, what have I done wrong?

All through lunch, I was in this state of paranoid reflection. Why does my preceptor want to see me? What is it I've done wrong? Have I broken the Vinaya in some really bad way? As I was dwelling on this sense of fear, three little areas kept popping up in my mind that I really didn't want to go to. When I looked into them, I saw these were the three ways in which I maybe wasn't following the rules exactly.

First, I wasn't tying my robes strictly according to the style of that monastery. I thought, hmm, is my preceptor going to criticize me for that? Second, I was eating my lunch at my kuti, and afterwards I'd have some rice and a little bit of vegetables left over, and I'd dump them out in my backyard. Way on the other end of the monastery I'd seen a sign that said, "Please do not feed the dogs. We don't really want them

around." Dogs would sometimes come and eat. So I thought, is he going to criticize me for dumping out my leftover rice?

The third thing I realized I was paranoid about was that I hadn't shaved my head for the last Patimokkha, the recitation of the monks' precepts, which is the custom in this monastery. But because I knew I was going to be leaving soon, I thought it probably wasn't necessary.

When I resolved all my fears, they came down to these three things. I realized that I had a guilty conscience about each of them. That's why I went to paranoia when my preceptor wanted to talk to me. It was really interesting. The seeds of my self-judgment were in my own judgments of myself. I was just projecting onto my preceptor that he was criticizing me for things I was already criticizing myself for.

In the end, it was none of these things, and I don't think any of them were big deals. He said, "Did you receive a spare undershirt during this vassa as a gift from someone?" I said yes. He said, "Have you determined it yet as a spare requisite?" I said no. He said, "Oh, you need to do that," and he told me the formula. So we went through this little ritual where I forfeited it to him, then I went home and determined it, and then I could keep it. But it was one of the real technicalities of Vinaya that he wanted to educate me about.

I thought it was so interesting the way it called forth my own fears of self-judgment. What this led me to reflect on is the protection within sila. When we act according to the precepts—really, really fully—then our mind is free of this kind of paranoia. We don't worry that somebody is going to come to us and say, "You did this and it was wrong," because we know in looking at our own conduct that it's been virtuous, that we've been clean.

The Buddha pointed to this too. In one sutta in the Anguttara Nikaya, he mentioned that there are four kinds of happiness that lay people enjoy: the happiness of possessions, the happiness of enjoyment, the happiness of not being in debt, and the happiness of blamelessness—of not having done wrong conduct in thought, word, and speech. But he said that the other three do not measure up to one-sixteenth of the bliss of blamelessness.

I think this is a lovely phrase, "the bliss of blamelessness." When our conduct becomes more and more refined, we have that much less fear and paranoia in our lives. So a lot of the purification of fear can happen through sila.

There is a fear that we start to notice as we get quiet in meditation—a fear of our own thoughts. I don't know if you've ever experienced this in a time when there's a relative degree of calm in the mind, but we can be nervous about the arising of a thought, as though the thought shouldn't arise, or the thought is going to disturb us, or the thought is going to harm us. We're actually, at those times of quiet, afraid of our own thoughts.

There's a fear of our emotions, which is probably deeper and stronger. A lot of this talk will go into this

point in more detail, so I'm not going to explore it now. I'll emphasize it around working with fear, but it really applies to all the difficult emotions.

There's a fear that's rooted in our separation from others, the separation from other humans. What's interesting when we look at this is that it brings in the sense of isolation, lack of connection, lack of community. But what we often don't see is how we create the separation through our own thoughts, through our own views.

And I think the way this works is we all tend to define ourselves by how we're special. I don't say this because we're all bad people. I think this is the way ego works. Ego separates itself by finding something special in the mind-body process. So we take special note of the fact that we're good-looking or handsome, or our parents are a certain way, or our friends are a certain way, or we're wealthy, or we're athletic, or we're artistic and creative. Or it might be the absence of these—we might define ourselves as "oh I'm not this" or "I'm not that," feeling badly about ourselves. But somehow ego tends to make up stories about how we're different.

As we believe in those stories and dwell more and more on them with thought, we separate ourselves further and further from connection with the human community. We put ourselves outside it by emphasizing our specialness or our difference. What we tend to forget in this is how much we're alike. We tend to forget that we have two eyes and a mouth and arms and legs, like everybody else. We tend to forget that we have joys and sorrows, like everybody else, that we have the whole range of human emotions, that we have vulnerability, that we have the potential for happiness and for freedom, just like everybody else.

One of the beautiful things about the practices of the Brahmaviharas is they remind us of what we share. We share a wish for safety, for happiness, for health, and for ease. We share a wish to be free from suffering, a wish to enjoy good fortune. We share that we are owners of our own karma. The Brahmaviharas unite. As you go through the different beings in all the different categories, this is what you see. This is universal. This is what we all feel alike in. As you center your life more and more in the Brahmaviharas, you start to realize we're all just part of the same family. We have the same basic concerns as do all beings.

Then in meditation especially, there's fear as an edge of what is familiar. There's fear that comes when we open to something new, even if it's something delightful and ultimately freeing and liberating. There's often fear when we touch it for the first time just because it's new, and we're not sure if we can find our home there, if we can learn to be comfortable there.

This has come up, I think, a couple of times in the morning questions as people touch new degrees of calmness and absence of thought, maybe a weakening of body sensations, so that the impact of the present moment comes to be rather faint because of the degree of quiet that has been touched. Then there's a little threat to the ego in that—where do I find myself when things are this quiet? Where's the

ground in a place like this? It can be unsettling.

Insights into impermanence and anatta have some of this quality. We can feel that everything's dissolving, that there's no self there, that the self is about to be dissolved or terminated. Insights into emptiness have some of this flavor of being unsettled by taking out the foundation for ego. But these are all absolutely liberating parts of the path and essential parts of the path. Very, very important to open over time and touch these places. It's an integral part of the opening of meditation. But the difficulty is also acknowledged in the tradition. In Tibetan Buddhism, they talk about the process of learning to bear emptiness—learning to bear the truth of emptiness—indicating it's not so familiar to us right away on first contact. We have to learn to bear it.

So really what's needed is to recognize the space, first of all, of calm or seeing impermanence or seeing anatta, spaciousness. Notice if there's a reaction of fear or unease. Make that a meditation object. Don't even prefer the calm to the fear. This is the new arising. Be with that. Then more and more, we can just relax with the experience of the unease and the experience of the spaciousness. We find as we relax more and more, it's trustworthy. We've discovered that through our own experience. This is not a place of danger. It's not a place of harm. And so we relax more and more into it. It would be a shame if we didn't open to it, if we backed off thinking it was a fearsome thing.

My wife and I were staying in a place for a few weeks not long ago, just visiting, and there was this little stray kitty that was wandering around the neighborhood, kind of knocking on different neighbors' doors and looking for food.

And we're suckers for stray kitties, so it didn't have to wander very far after it found us. We would feed it in the morning and in the evening, but it wouldn't let us get close. We had to take a bowl of food and put it over near a garden where it could quickly run away if it got scared. If we got too close, it would just dash off into the bushes again. But if we left the food out and then backed away, it would come up and eat.

It was a beautiful, really beautiful little kitty—probably about five or six months old. It had blue eyes, a really creamy white coat, and little light brown stripes, kind of little tiger markings. We really grew very fond of it, but it would never let us get close.

What we wanted to do was catch it so that it could be neutered, so that it wouldn't go around creating more wild cats who basically don't have a very good life in this world. We assumed it was a female, and it would have been much better for the cat if it would let us approach it, catch it, and then take it to the vet and have it neutered. Because if it happened to be a mother, then it would have to feed not just itself but three or four or five little kitties. And then they would grow up and have the same kind of dukkha.

So we really wanted the cat to let us approach it, and it never would. In its fear, it was avoiding the one thing that could possibly save its life and lead to its greatest happiness and peace—developing contact with humans and being adopted. Fortunately, we were tricky, and we trapped it in a have-a-heart trap. It

did go to the vet, and she is being adopted. So the outcome is good.

But this is what meditation teachers have to do. They have to tell you, "Go into that emptiness." And we're not tricking you. It is for your welfare and happiness.

I also wanted to mention there is one wholesome fear that the Buddha talked about—the fear of wrongdoing. The Pali word is hiri, and it's usually paired with another Pali word, ottappa, which we could translate as conscience. So the fear of doing wrong and the conscience, which is remorse about doing wrong—these two are really wholesome forces in the mind. The Buddha called these the protectors of the world, the guardians of the world. They are the underpinnings of our commitment to sila.

So how can we work with fear when it comes? As I talk about working with fear, I think you'll see the extension to working with any of the difficult emotions and be able to extend it. I'm going to go into some detail on fear, but I hope that the transference to the other difficult emotions is also clear.

First of all, it's really important to face these difficult emotions. They are in our psyches. They are operating sometimes consciously, but more often unconsciously in our daily lives. When they're operating in that subterranean way, there's no possibility of getting free of them. Until they can be brought into the light of awareness, they simply run our lives in a compulsive fashion, and there's no liberation.

One of the beauties of having these emotions arise in retreat is that we have nothing else to do but pay attention, so we can understand them and come into a new relationship with them. The arising of fear in a situation like this is a great gift. I know it doesn't feel like that—it feels like a torment. But it is the stage, the classroom, the lab in which we learn to be free. So if not here, where? Where else can we bring a comparable amount of wisdom and steadiness of attention to the experience of fear? We are so lucky to have it here.

That's why in Asia, teachers were fond of sending their students out in situations that provoked extreme fear. Ajahn Mun, who was the teacher of Ajahn Chah—great Thai forest master—used to send his students out into areas where tigers roamed at night. He would just send them out into the forest to meditate for days at a time and hope that they would stay long enough so that they'd hear a tiger roaring nearby. Here, where sometimes the greatest real fear we face is being late for tea, you can imagine the impact—as sensitive as your minds and hearts are—of hearing a tiger roaring nearby you in the forest. But this was considered an important part of their training: to meet their fear and to face it and to work with it.

Usually our first reaction when fear arises is more fear. We are afraid to experience the fear itself, and this puts us into a loop where fear arises, we feel more fear on feeling it, and that causes an escalation—an increasing escalation of the fear.

Our first impulse is that we need to get rid of this fear. It's not pleasant. I'm not liking it. I want it to go. But that's not usually possible.

So the shift in attitude we need to make is one of being willing and interested in understanding the fear. And this really is where the freedom comes from. When we understand the way emotions are put together, the mechanism by which they operate, the mystery is gone out of them. It's like watching a puppet show and then suddenly being able to see up above where the puppeteer is pulling the strings. When we start to see how the strings are being pulled in all the different facets of an emotion, the mystery goes out of it and really the worry goes out of it.

So all the different kinds of emotions that can come are all understandable. And an important aspect of our Dharma practice is seeing them closely enough and clearly enough that we start to see the mechanism in these things.

So when fear arises in your practice, please bring your attention close to it. Very helpful to ground the attention in the body. This was the area where I first started to come to terms with fear. Feel the body sensations that are triggered in your body with the experience of fear. And it can be a lot of different experiences. There might be a shakiness or a trembling all over, a kind of flutter in the stomach, rapid heartbeat, shallow breathing, perspiration under the arms, a sense of contraction in the chest or in the abdomen, overall sense of lightness.

It's helpful to name each of these. Let your attention move throughout the body where you feel the impact of the fear. Name the different sensations that are coming so you get really familiar with them and open to feel them. Now here's an important question: Can you bear them? Can you bear those physical sensations that come with fear? Look and find out if you can bear them.

Second place to look—what is the mood or the coloring in the mind? I found it much easier to approach fear first through the body. Only after that was I kind of brave enough or subtle enough to look for it directly in the mind. What is the mood of fear as a mental state? The way sadness has a certain coloring and anger has a certain coloring and desire has a certain coloring. What's the coloring in the mind of fear? Let your attention come right up against that mood and that color.

That was even harder to do. One, because the mood or coloring is kind of vague. It's like a cloud. But secondly, because for me, what I found when I looked is that the mood of fear is escape. Escape. It was a wanting to flee from. So how do you get close to something that wants to flee? It was tricky. It was tricky to feel that fear directly. But then the question came: Can we bear that? Can we bear that mood, that color, that sense of wanting to flee?

Then the third area to look is the area of thoughts. When an emotion is strong, a difficult emotion is strong, it's often accompanied by thoughts, usually accompanied by thoughts. With fear, the thoughts are somehow related to the future. And it's something like: this moment may be bearable, but something really bad is about to happen. This moment is bearable, but the next moment is not going to be. It's going to be more than I can bear.

You could say that this is kind of the storyline of fear. If you look closely, every afflictive emotion that's a problem has got a storyline associated with it. So there are the body sensations, there's the mood, and every strong emotion that we have a problem with, as far as I can tell, has a storyline also. Some view, some thought that we've believed in about the situation.

So with desire, a sample storyline is: if I get this thing, it will make me happy. With sadness, a sample storyline is: I can't be happy because I've lost this thing. With anger, the storyline might be something like: the other person is wrong and I'm right. And with fear, it's something like: something disastrous is about to happen. This moment's okay, but the next moment won't be.

As long as we believe in the storyline, we're sustaining the emotion.

The trick to coming out of these emotions is to step out of the storyline—which always concerns past and future—and come into the present moment. When we arrive here, we discover there are only body sensations, mood, and thoughts coming and going. That's it. That's all there is to fear.

When we see the mechanism this clearly, it loses some of its power. We realize that the presence of fear doesn't mean something disastrous is about to happen. It simply means my armpits are sweating, my stomach is tight, and I have this fleeing feeling. That's all it means.

When we examine the details this way, we find we're actually able to accommodate the presence of fear. We can bear it and come out the other side. We always emerge because fear is impermanent. All emotions are impermanent, and that's why it's safe to feel them. We can open to them because none will last.

Here is a poem by Rilke. To set the context, he imagines a creator God who, after creating each being, gives a little pep talk before launching them into life. This is God's pep talk just before sending a being into existence:

God speaks to each of us as he makes us, then walks with us silently out of the night. These are the words we dimly hear: You, sent out beyond your memory, go to the limits of your longing. Embody me. Flare up like flame and make big shadows I can move in. Let everything happen to you, beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final. Don't let yourself lose me. Nearby is the country they call life. You will know it by its seriousness. Now, give me your hand.

Experience everything—beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final. That's why it's safe to feel the whole range of what we experience as human beings. No feeling is final. None have to get stuck.

When we see this way—the emotion's mechanism, the lightness of its expression through the body, this fleeting and insubstantial coloring in the mind, the conditioning created by phantasmagoric thoughts and images—what we're really seeing, what wisdom opens us to, is the emptiness of the emotion. There's nothing there. There's not really anything to these emotions.

When we can see that it's just an arising and passing that doesn't really mean anything, it loses its hold

over us. It may arise many more times, but it doesn't have to dominate us. It doesn't have to control us.

Even if we lose sight of that emptiness, if we've seen it clearly, that insight remains with us as a form of faith. Even when the emotion comes and we may get lost in it again, something in us knows this is not the final truth—this being lost. There is a deeper truth, a truer way of seeing.

Because fear is difficult and we may get lost in it many times, it's also helpful to have other skillful means. Mindfulness and the opening of mindfulness into wisdom are our primary means of freedom. In the longer term, successive moments of enlightenment can actually uproot the process of fear altogether. Short of that, it's helpful to have skillful means. The journey is long—pack a lunch. Pack some skillful means too.

The first skillful means, of course, is mindfulness and the understanding that comes from it. Here are others that may be helpful:

There's always refuge in awareness. You may feel that fear is engulfing, consuming, overwhelming—the only thing in your universe. But if you are knowing fear, there's another factor present: awareness and mindfulness. Take refuge there.

There is a kind of sane and sober part of yourself that's still working, that knows what's happening to you. This is not fear. This is a separate quality of mind. This is a strong and safe and secure quality of mind. Take refuge in mindfulness and awareness.

Check out the moment. I was practicing in England one time in May or June, which is a beautiful time there. I was out in the back garden practicing as night was falling, probably after the dharma talk around eight o'clock. A soft summer evening was settling in England. I was in a walled garden standing next to an apple tree. The birds were singing around. There were blossoms on the apple tree. My eyes were closed. I was doing standing meditation.

I was in this state of fear, fear, fear, feeling the body shaking, trembling. Finally, I just decided to open my eyes, and I saw that really soft evening twilight, the setting sun, listened to the birds, looked at the apple blossoms, and I thought, "Wow, it's really beautiful out here." What was I lost in? Just some huge projection, some huge papañca I'd gotten wrapped up in. Check out the moment. Open your eyes. You're in the dharma hall. You're in a dharma sanctuary.

Metta is a wonderful refuge in times of strong fear. When mindfulness and understanding and non-identification and insight don't loosen the grip and you're still caught, then it's okay to apply an antidote. And metta is the classical antidote to aversion in general and to fear in particular.

In using metta as an antidote to fear, it's really helpful to have a being in your range of beings who really lifts your heart up. It could be a benefactor, it could be a friend—somebody that when you turn to them, you feel uplifted. You feel the presence of their happiness or their wisdom or their strength or their love

for you. And if you don't have anybody who exactly fits that category, let me recommend the Dalai Lama to you. He's a wonderful being to call on in times of fear.

The last of the refuges I mentioned is compassion. Sometimes when fear seems overwhelming and it's really settled in, turn to compassion for yourself. "May I hold this fear with compassion," and just try that practice for thirty or forty-five minutes and see if it shifts the feeling of the situation. I find that when I do the compassion practice for that length of time, it's like channeling Quan Yin, and some wiser, more grown-up, more parental part of myself starts to come through that can hold this difficulty like holding a child that's screaming.

Now there's one other approach to fear that I just want to mention. It's being firm with fear. Normally the experience of fear is the opposite of being firm. It's an experience of wavering, trembling, shaking, quaking, running away from, escaping—anything but firm. But sometimes the very way to meet that fear, which has pushed us around all over the place in life, made us quake in our boots and do lots of unskillful things, the way to meet it is to become firm and essentially say no.

Sometimes in practice you may find you reach a point where you're just not willing to be pushed around anymore by fear. One yogi said in an interview a few days ago, "Fear was there but I stood my ground, and it felt really good to me. I stood my ground." This is part of the sense of this firmness.

This came one time in my practice when I was also in England, in the early years. Fear was arising quite strongly for me, more strongly than it ever had before. I'd learned about the gentle approach of opening to the sensations and accepting the mood and being with it—"Yeah, come on in. Make yourself at home. I can open to this too." And it wasn't working. It had been about three days, and I was still being really pushed around by the fear.

I was doing standing meditation again—and I think there's no coincidence I was doing standing meditation. In the middle of it, I was just ready to give up. I kind of looked at this experience of fear, which had gone on for two or three days, and I just finally said, "Fuck it."

I'd rather die than live like this.

And I meant it. I was ready to die rather than live with that fear. And as I said that, I could just feel the fear start to run down my spine and into my legs and out into the ground. I just stood there and it sort of started running down my body and into the ground.

There was a lot of energy in my body for the next day. The fear would come back, and I'd get firm again. The fear would come back, and I'd get firm again, and I'd ground it, and it would pass. So I still continued to relate with it, but somehow in that experience, it lost something of its hold over me. Something in its hold over my mind got broken then.

Although I've had fear many times since then and it's been suffering, it's never dominated me in the same

way again. I've reached many points in my practice where I had complete equanimity with the fear. If the fear arose or if it didn't arise, I really didn't care. It made no difference to me one way or another. I really attribute that to the firmness and the strength to stand my ground against the fear.

When we can really open to the whole experience of fear and not feel we have to run away from it, not feel we have to shrink from feeling the fear, then we start to see the possibility of fearlessness. I would like to suggest that we can consider fearlessness not as a state where fear never arises—that may be a long way off in our practice for all of us—but that we're not afraid to work with it when it comes up. We're no longer afraid of the experience of fear itself. This is possible for us. This is not that far off for any of us.

Then it just becomes another workable condition, like body pain, like hunger, like momentary frustration that comes from time to time. Trungpa Rinpoche, a really creative and inventive Tibetan teacher, said that when we become willing to work with whatever comes up on this path of practice, this path of opening, when we're willing to work with anything that comes, this is the lion's roar of fearlessness. This is our declaration of fearlessness.

I'll close with another quote from Trungpa Rinpoche: "True fearlessness is not the reduction of fear, but going beyond fear. When we relax with our fear, we find sadness, which is calm and gentle. The sadness comes because your heart is completely exposed. There is no skin or tissue covering it. It is pure, raw meat. Real fearlessness is the product of tenderness. It comes from letting the world tickle your heart, your raw and beautiful heart. You are willing to open up without any resistance or shyness and face the world. You're willing to share your heart with others."

Let's just sit for a minute.

Real fearlessness is the product of tenderness. It comes from letting the world tickle your heart, your raw and beautiful heart.

Thank you.

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