Working With Fear

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:01:22

Tonight, I'd like to talk on the subject of working with fear. I really enjoy this theme, even though it sounds like it could be a little heavy, because as much as anything, I think this topic really shows the liberating power of the Dharma. By extension, in learning to work with fear, we also learn to work with a lot of other difficult emotions. Not only does the Dharma offer the possibility—the long-term promise—of uprooting these forces from the mind, but it also shows a step-by-step way that we can continue to reduce and weaken them over time in ways that bring a lot of relief and happiness into our lives. So I hope that in exploring this theme together this evening, some of that will come across.

Fear is one of our deepest conditionings. It goes way back in the evolutionary timeframe. It's one of the most powerful forces at work in our hearts and minds. When it's present, it feels like a kind of cloud—a heavy cloud has settled over us and blocks the sunlight from getting in and reaching us and letting the heart feel beautiful and spacious. When fear descends, it really limits our ability to enjoy the beautiful things of life and to open in the way that we're capable of opening.

There's an author and therapist named Gerald Jampolsky whose most famous book has a title I like: *Love is Letting Go of Fear*. That's a strong message that when we let go of fear, the quality of love is spontaneously there. It's not that we have to build it up little by little, but when this cloud lifts, love comes through very naturally.

Fear can be a very strong force in our life. At times it can be emotionally overwhelming. It can have a strong impact in the body. We're learning how much stress, how much illness is related to stress levels—forms of fear in our life. And it can lead to a lot of unskillful choices as we act in the world and live.

When you think about the big picture of human culture, it seems like fear has haunted our whole development as a species. From a long time ago, fear has been like a specter over the evolution of the human race. You can feel it over thousands and probably millions of years—this worry that humans have had that there's not going to be enough food, that there's not going to be enough land, that there's not going to be enough warmth, that there's not going to be shelter, that there's not going to be safety. In modern terms that all gets crystallized into: there's not going to be enough money. This fear of lack that we have struggled with has led to countless conflicts and wars and suffering.

In meditation we can find a lot of freedom in relationship to fear in general and to our individual specific fears in particular. The long-term promise of the Dharma is that this force can be uprooted from our hearts and minds—that it is possible to live without the influence of fear. That's a long-term aim. It might

not happen in this retreat, so we need to be patient and set our aim accordingly. But it really is possible in one retreat to significantly change our relationship to fear. The gist of it will be not getting rid of it, but becoming more and more comfortable with it, so that when it arises, we're not so disturbed by it. We find a greater and greater ability to accept and be with the fear.

I'd like to talk a little bit about what the emotion is and how it plays out—what its role is in the psyche. When you think about our basic existential situation as human beings, and actually all sentient beings (you see it in the animal world as well), the basic situation is that we have a shifting mix of experience which is sometimes pleasant and sometimes painful. It's mostly unpredictable and it's largely out of our control.

I imagine you're seeing this in your day-to-day experience as yogis. This is one of the most striking features of retreat. We have a concentrated sitting, and the next sitting is all over the map. We have a lot of body pain, we get up and walk and it totally goes away. We have one day where we feel very open and enjoy the beauty of nature, and another day where we're very contracted and worried or sad or angry about something. These different experiences just seem to sweep through us, not of our choosing and not in our control.

This is one of the main things that we learn as yogis: life is unpredictable, practice is unpredictable, and above all, we find a growing equanimity in being with all those changing situations. But that's because the Dharma provides us some understanding.

At the root of sentient life is this unpredictability and a sense in the middle of it of our insecurity and vulnerability. Anything can happen to us at any time. This is so fundamental to our life, this changing mix of pleasure and pain. This is why the quality of feeling tone or vedanā is so important that it's the second foundation of mindfulness, because around vedanā our emotions live.

We're constantly being hit by this contact, alternately pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral in all the sense doors. I think fear has to be understood as one response to that shifting mix of pleasure and pain.

We've talked quite a bit about the three chalaces—the three roots of the unwholesome in the heart and mind: greed, aversion, and delusion. These can all be understood as ways to relate to this unpredictable mixture of pleasure and pain.

In my understanding, fear fits under aversion. Basically, desire is for the pleasant. The tendency of aversion manifests in two ways when encountering the unpleasant. One is anger, which pushes out against the unpleasant. The other is fear, which tends to draw back from the unpleasant. But they are both ways of trying to relate to the unpleasant or painful in life.

We can see that these patterns are born in the psyche and continue as strategies for dealing with this mix of pleasure and pain. The greedy temperament seeks to resolve this dilemma by constantly drawing in pleasure—"Let's just keep the pleasant coming moment after moment without interruption, and that will

be the strategy for happiness." You probably know people who live like this. We all have known friends whose addictive personality comes out of this tendency of mind.

Aversion is a strategy that seeks to find security by keeping the unpleasant away—pushing it away through anger or aggression, retreating from it through fear. And delusion has a strategy of "Oh, well, let's not feel it. It's impacting us. Let's withdraw somewhat so it's not touching us so closely." I hope you got some sense of that from Andrea's talk last night.

All of these chalaces are volitional in nature, and they enact a fundamental strategy of interacting with the world. In Buddhist psychology, personality types are described along these three lines. Those with a greedy temperament are driven more by the factor of greed than the other two. Those of an aversive temperament are driven more by that force, and those of a deluded temperament driven more by the force of delusion.

Now we all have all three, but it's very interesting—as you look into your own psychology and you look at your friends, I bet you can tell for most people which of these three is predominant in their lives. In classical Buddhist psychology, it's a way of understanding ourselves and others.

What fear does is try to protect us by projecting into the future some painful experience, hoping that by that projection we can find a strategy to avoid it. So fear is future-related—I think that's the interesting thing to note here. It's also closely tied to desire because there's a desire that we won't experience that painful experience. And when desire creates the hope for a pleasant experience, there's also the fear that we won't get it. So fear and desire are intermingled.

It's interesting that when the Tibetans sum up the strategy of samsara, they will often talk about it as "hope and fear"—almost as one word. It's what governs us: the search for the pleasant, the avoidance of the unpleasant. And it's interesting that we often want to give up fear, but we don't always want to give up wanting. Have you noticed that? Desires are kind of entertaining and soothing and oriented toward the pleasurable. They're not often felt as suffering. But the fact is, pursuing desire always involves some degree of fear also. So we can't really be free from one without being free from the other.

In fact, when you look at your experience of life, which is more fundamental for you—desire or fear? In other words, as we grow up into adulthood and realize what life is presenting, are we mostly insecure and wanting pleasant experiences to soothe that insecurity? Is fear the primary motivator? Or are we mostly searching for pleasure, and then fear comes about because we can't always find it? Which came first—wanting or fear?

In the Buddhist statement of the Second Noble Truth, when the Buddha described the cause of suffering as being craving, he used the phrase "seeking delight now here and now there." So he was putting the primary emphasis on the desire force. That's one man's opinion. But for someone who is psychologically more driven by fear, fear seems like the obvious predominating force in life, and one can see it in many

people as well. In fact, I'd say for a fear type, it seems like a very reasonable response to an unpredictable world. You never know what's going to happen. Anything can happen at any time.

A friend of ours was vacationing in southern India, staying with his girlfriend in a little cabin on the beach. He went out one morning by himself, enjoying the beauty of the waves rolling in and the warm sand under his feet, perhaps doing some movement exercises on the beach, welcoming the morning and feeling the energy of the ocean, sun, and earth. Very pleasant.

As he stood there, a big wave rolled in. He watched it come and watched it go back out, and he thought, "That is weird." The wave had gone so far out that it exposed a lot of the ocean bottom, which hadn't been exposed earlier in the day. "This is not right," he thought.

So he went into the cabin, woke his partner who was still asleep, pulled her out, and they both climbed up on a little concrete wall next to a palm tree. "I think we need to make ourselves safe," he said. So they climbed up on the wall. He held on to the palm tree and she held on to him.

Then the next wave came in.

The date was December 26, 2004. This was that massive tsunami that killed so many people and destroyed so many homes, hotels, and villages throughout India, Burma, Thailand, and Indonesia. The big wave hit them, but because he was hanging on to the tree and she to him, they weren't swept out. They survived. The big wave went back out, ruining many other things, but they were okay.

Peaceful morning, right? Beautiful beach. Anything can happen at any time.

Who wouldn't be afraid living in a world like this?

It's as though we try to imagine all the things that can go wrong so that we can hopefully prevent some of them from happening. This reminds me of a joke you may have heard. There was a patient seeing a therapist in New York, and the therapist noticed that this patient had a habit of snapping his fingers rather frequently. After a while, the therapist asked, "Why are you snapping your fingers like that?"

"Oh, it's to keep the elephants away," the patient replied.

"But there are no elephants in Manhattan," the therapist said.

"Yeah, it works, doesn't it?" the patient responded.

For the worry type, the fact that we keep thinking of all these things that could go wrong and they don't go wrong proves how effective our thinking is. It's really very useful to worry, because it helps keep those things away.

But what we don't look at when we worry like that is the impact it has on the body and mind right now. We don't realize that we are really tormenting ourselves with fearful thoughts and images. Imagining all

the things that can go wrong, we're constantly evoking anxiety, fear, worry, dread, and that creates a stress in the body and mind that's experienced here and now. But we don't tend to notice it because we're thinking about making the future safe.

From a dharma point of view, the reflection is: the uncertainty in life is real. The unpredictability is real. Anything can happen at any time—that is true. But the question is, do we need to meet the moment with fear? Is the fear really necessary or not?

This is one of the opportunities for great opening and understanding. When we start to understand that our mental state doesn't have to follow either our habits or outside conditions, we find through meditation more and more choice and freedom in regard to our state of mind. Right effort is basically keeping the mind in a wholesome place. We find more and more ability to have the mind be free from fear regardless of the outer situation.

Sometimes it just becomes apparent how absurd the response of fear is. In the early 1980s, I did a number of retreats in England. I was there one summer, probably in June, and it just so happened that at this point in my life, fear was coming up a lot. I went through a couple of years where fear was arising strongly—I'll say more about that later.

On this particular occasion I was doing standing meditation out in the back garden of the retreat center—this was a precursor to Gaia House for those familiar with the English scene. I was standing after tea, in the early evening, under a tree with my eyes closed. The fear was coming up quite strongly. I was just feeling it in my body and feeling it in my mind, feeling how unpleasant this fearful response to life was.

For some reason, maybe to interrupt it, I opened my eyes and looked around.

So it was one of those really soft summer nights in England—so beautiful. It's a little bit warm. The air has a little humidity. It just feels like it's settling on you like a gentle wrap. The sun was going down, so it was already in that golden light stage. I was standing on lush green grass that was illuminated by the golden setting sun. And I was standing beside a tree that was flowering—it was probably a fruit tree, flowering in the very late spring, early summer. The white flowers were beautiful in my face.

So it was just this idyllic scene that I woke up to, and my thought was, "Wow, it's really a scary world, isn't it?" The contrast between my mind state—what I was imagining—and the actual situation I was in was so stark. I saw that this state of mind had nothing to do with the reality of the present moment. And it just made me laugh at the silliness of that habit, the uselessness of that habit. The emotion was real, so I'm not trying to discount anybody's emotions. It was something I needed to live with and practice with, but it wasn't related to reality. It was just an old habit.

So as we look into this quality of fear, it's helpful to look at what causes it. One of the pieces of advice in the fourth foundation of mindfulness in the Satipatthana Sutta is: understand what causes the hindrances

to arise and what causes them to pass away. So we want to understand why fear comes.

One of the main sources of fear was put really clearly by Krishnamurti—J. Krishnamurti, the Indian philosopher—when he said very succinctly: "Thought breeds fear." Thought breeds fear. When we think about all the things that could go wrong, we generate a sense of fear.

This is from Mark Twain: "I am an old man and have known a great many troubles, but most of them never happened."

And you may have heard the story—there's a Zen artist, generally a monk, and he had painted on a scroll this big bold picture of a tiger: sweeping brushstrokes in black on white paper, really giving the tiger a lot of vitality and fierceness and fangs and claws. And he stepped back from the painting and he was scared of the image he had painted. The tiger seemed so lifelike to him.

So this is kind of what we do. We scare ourselves with our thoughts and with our images. We make up frightening situations in our head that are just mental projections, and then we recoil from them in fear. What happens if we just don't fabricate those thoughts and images? What's the state of mind then? This is an interesting question generally. What is your state of mind when you're not fabricating thoughts and projections? Take a look and see.

I think that there's a natural peace in the mind. When we're not stirring it up, the mind tends to be tranquil. So there's this kind of natural way of being, which is peaceful and relaxed, and then we keep stirring the waves by our imaginings and projections. So once we find that we can access this natural state of peace, it gives us a lot of confidence. We find it through meditation. When we stop stirring up the mind, it settles by itself, and we can trust in that. That becomes a real refuge for us.

Some of the ways we stir up the mind, some of the things we stir it up about—of course, a big one is death. There is a fear of death that's common to all animals and common to all humans who haven't fully walked a spiritual path. It's a very primal relationship to life. We are, by and large from birth, very attached to this body. It's our most precious possession—our body and this life.

And that's why it is so impressive when you find people who put their life on the line for a cause. Martin Luther King predicted that he would be killed before he was killed. Environmental activists are often targets for the violence and hatred of others. There's someone I hadn't known about at the time of his death that I read about recently. Chico Mendes was an activist, an environmental activist in Brazil. He was born as a son of a rubber tapper. Brazil had lots and lots of natural rubber trees back in the '40s and '50s, so he was born into that era.

And at the age of nine, he began working as a rubber tapper. As he grew up, he came to feel that the owners of the plantations were not truly caring for the workers or for the land. So he formed a trade union to provide better conditions for the workers, and he started organizing environmental groups to protect the land—something that he wanted to build as extractive reserves so that they would be

preserved.

But unfortunately, this threatened the ranching interests around the area where he was working and living. He was eventually assassinated by the son of a cattle rancher in 1988. But he knew that. He had predicted that he wouldn't live to see the next Christmas, and he was killed in that year. He didn't step down from his work. He kept doing his work, even in the face of mortal danger.

You may also know the story of Dian Fossey. She was an American zoologist who worked to protect the mountain gorillas in Rwanda, in Africa. She wrote the book *Gorillas in the Mist*, which was then made into a movie. Her life was on the line over and over in working to protect these creatures. She was killed in 1985, probably by a poacher. They never actually found the person, but most likely by a poacher who made a lot of money from killing the gorillas and selling their bodies.

So it's amazing when people will overcome that fear of death to stand up for what they believe—for justice, for the environment, for each other.

It's kind of interesting. I tend to think that the fear of death is the number one fear, but a poll was taken a while ago and fear of death only came out as number four. Number one on the list was fear of public speaking. That's kind of interesting—it definitely can bring up more immediate anxiety. Ajahn Amaro, who's a British monk and now the abbot of Amaravati, gave a talk with a great title: "Why Public Speaking is More Terrifying Than Worldwide Nuclear Destruction." It seems kind of true, but I don't know why that is.

So we all, until we investigate it and grow beyond it, have this fear of death. And of course, it's easy to understand. There can be pain in illness. There can be pain in dying. But there's another component of it that's kind of irrational, isn't it? There's some fear of this stream of experience coming to an end. Why should we care? It's like, suppose you went to sleep tonight and you just didn't wake up in the morning. Would that be a problem for you? It isn't really, is it? It might be a big problem for other people. But your stream of experience in this form has ended. And yet, we have a real resistance to that.

The Buddha pointed out that there's a very deep-rooted cause for that, which is that we have a very deep desire for existence. It's one of the three forms of craving that he pointed to in the Second Noble Truth. We want to exist. We want to have a body with senses so that we're having contact—sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thoughts, feelings. I'm not sure where that springs from, but it's very deep-rooted in us. And it's that, to a large extent, that leads to the fear of dying. We don't want this stream of experience to come to an end, even though it's not always that satisfactory. Still, we hold on to it.

But the Buddha said that it's not necessary that we fear death. At a certain point in spiritual life, one doesn't need to fear death. He basically said there are four conditions for that to be true: if you're not too attached to the body, you're not too attached to sense pleasures, you haven't done a lot of unwholesome actions, and you have faith in the Dharma. He said, if these four things apply to you, you don't have to be

afraid of death.

I mean, this is a high bar, right? It's not immediately available, maybe, but it's possible. This is not our inheritance. This is something that we can come to in this life—to come to that degree of settledness in the Dharma, emphasis on the wholesome, emphasis on non-attachment. This is possible for us. And so it's possible to face that possibility of one's own death without deep fear. And then in the maturing—the real maturing of the spiritual life according to the texts—it's possible to go beyond that altogether.

There's this wonderful story from the Theragatha, verses of the elder monks at the time of the Buddha, involving an Arahant, a fully awakened being named Adimutta.

Adimutta was wandering in the forest when he was captured by a group of bandits. These bandits had their own religious practice and needed a human to sacrifice to their gods. Adimutta was the unfortunate soul they found for this purpose. You get from this story that life was pretty wild at the time of the Buddha. Indian society was not some completely lawful, peaceful place. Monks could literally take their lives in their hands by wandering through the forest.

So the bandits captured Adimutta and told him they were going to sacrifice him to their gods. And Adimutta was unmoved. He wasn't afraid. He didn't show any unease. He certainly didn't manifest any terror. The bandits couldn't believe it. It really threw them. They hadn't seen anything like this before.

The bandit chief says to him, "Why are you not showing any fear in the face of this?"

Then Adimutta gave this little verse, which is recorded in the Theragatha: "There is no mental pain to one with no expectations. All fears have been transcended by one whose fetters are extinct."

No mental pain to one with no expectations. Even the expectation that we will live another minute is an expectation. But he was so thoroughly in the present, he had no expectation about the future. All fears have been transcended by such a one.

We can be afraid of other people. Sally mentioned in a talk the other night that it was only about 7,500 years ago that you could run into a stranger and expect that one of you would need to kill the other before you were killed. That's not very long ago. This fear of others lingers as a residue, a psychological residue of our evolution.

Martin Luther King said, "People fail to get along because they fear each other. They fear each other because they don't know each other. They don't know each other because they have not communicated with each other."

We see this playing out across the world in the distrust between nations. We see it playing out within our own society because different races and ethnic groups have been segregated for so long. We don't know each other very well. We haven't built those bonds of trust and familiarity. That all needs to break down so that we can have a sense of shared trust and safety with one another.

There's a fear of physical pain. The sawing that's been happening this last week on making the deck outside the meditation hall reminded me of nothing so much as being in a dental chair. When it was going on, I would just notice this aversion, reminding me of drilling in the chair.

We're afraid of physical pain. And we find that often as yogis here. Sitting for forty-five minutes to an hour or longer, being still, not moving the body, discomfort often comes. It's a fact of yogi life. Sometimes it's going to hurt. And sometimes we develop a resistance to sitting because of that physical pain, not wanting to feel it or endure it.

I got to exploring this and became very interested in it. At one point in my practice life, actually I was practicing in Thailand at the time, I would have pain in the afternoon sitting almost every day. One day I got up from the sitting, and the pain was entirely not there once I got up and started walking. I thought, "Why should I worry about it?" It didn't really hurt me or damage me in any lasting way. There's some discomfort for a period of time, and I just thought, "It's just sensations. There's really nothing to fear in that." That really helped me get much more comfortable with having physical pain in my sittings. It didn't damage me. I got up and it was as though it had never happened.

There's a fear of emotional pain.

Just as with physical pain, once we begin to open to emotions, we see that they arise, move through us, and dissolve. We'll return to this point about fear again - we don't need to fear our emotions either. Once we learn how to open and allow them to be, they all pass through naturally.

There's also fear of particular events - obviously fear of future happenings. This is quite interesting. I appreciate what the Dalai Lama said: there's no reason to worry about things. One of two possibilities is always true. Either you can do something about it, in which case you should do it and then you don't need to worry. Or you can't do anything about it, so you shouldn't worry about it. Really quite simple, isn't it?

Many of these fears arise from thought in one way or another. But there's another source of fear I want to mention. At different times in life, sometimes very powerful events have happened to us that we couldn't fully open to at the time. The emotions and sensations that were present then, because we couldn't or didn't know how to accept and feel them, we repressed them. We pushed them down, and the bodily sensations and emotions that accompanied them became locked into our system. They became embedded mentally in the subconscious and locked into the very muscles and tensions of the body.

This can arise from injury, accident, trauma, or abuse. Then we grow up as adults and often have a feeling that something has been shadowing us our whole life, but we can't quite identify what it is. We come into meditation, and part of the beauty of awareness is that in the empty space of awareness, this material now has the possibility to emerge.

Often people come into retreat, especially long retreats, and find emotions arising, sensations coming from long ago that have simply been held by the body and mind over sometimes decades. Fear can be one

of those emotions that emerges from this kind of unconscious holding, as well as sadness, grief, or anger. Many things can be held in this way.

Sometimes fear is not triggered by thought at all. It's simply released from the subconscious as we relax, open, and trust in the unfolding of the present moment.

There's one other fear I want to mention - a dharma fear that arises. Sometimes there's discomfort in opening to what's unfamiliar. We open to a new place in practice. It could be an experience of profound calm, or it could be seeing into impermanence - how things don't last very long. In either case, there can be a feeling of "I don't know what to do now."

Calm can be unsettling because we think, "Oh, where did I go?" We're accustomed to expressing through action, thinking, doing. When that stops and there's just empty space, we wonder, "Where am I?" It can be unsettling because the familiar self doesn't seem to be there. But we simply need to trust in that opening. It's a beautiful unfolding in meditation.

Impermanence reveals a groundless quality to our whole experience - the things we've been counting on aren't as reliable as we thought. So where do we place our trust and faith then? One place we can rest it is in the space that opens. The empty space of awareness is fundamentally peaceful and trustworthy. That becomes our refuge, the reliable place we can return to.

Fear can arise through all these different avenues, all these different entry points. In a way, it doesn't matter so much what the source is, although it's useful to understand. What's most important is how we relate to fear once it has arisen. This approach remains the same regardless of what has caused the fear. We want to bring the same quality of attention.

This is the part of the talk where I hope you'll see the similarity to any kind of afflictive emotion that can arise. Working with them all follows very similar principles, whether it's fear or grief or longing or anger. You want to take the same basic approach.

Basically, we need to face our fears and difficult emotions directly. We cannot overcome fear theoretically—it simply doesn't happen that way. We need to overcome it through meeting it face to face and finding a new relationship with it. You can't do it through thinking about it, through planning, through theorizing. It needs to be a direct encounter. Fear, any emotion—we need to meet it.

In that sense, finding fear arising in a meditation retreat is a great blessing, a great opportunity. Because until it arises, we don't have a chance to work, to become free of it. This is true for all the difficult emotions that may come.

In the Thai forest tradition, the abbots or teachers would look for places to send monks and nuns so that they would meet their fears. Ajahn Mun, the Thai master who re-established the Thai forest tradition in the 19th century, would send his monks out to meditate where tigers had recently been seen. He thought

that was the best place. "Oh, there was a tiger there? You go meditate there." If you're lucky, he'll come back.

Monks would report hearing the roaring of a tiger nearby in the forests of Thailand a hundred years ago. They're not so abundant anymore, but a hundred years ago they were. That would awaken one to the present moment—one's mind would not wander far in that situation. And the monks who walked through the forest would often report coming across empty robes and an abandoned bowl, knowing that one of their fellow practitioners had passed through there and died. They wouldn't know the cause of death—it could well have been from a tiger or from sickness. But tigers were plentiful back then. So meeting one's fear was considered very fortunate and a good place to practice.

We're not going to send you into the woods at night. We're going to trust the mind will bring up what you need to see. But when it comes, it is a good opportunity.

One of the things you first want to look at is: How do you relate to fear when it arises? What's your first response when fear comes? For me, in the early part of my meditation path, the first response was more fear. I didn't want to feel it, I didn't know how to feel it, it made me very uncomfortable and it scared me. I thought I was going to be overwhelmed by it—it was too much for me to handle. This is the kind of response, of course, that leads to a panic attack. The fear comes, it makes us more afraid, that amplifies the fear, and then we get more afraid of the amplified fear.

One of the practitioners who had a lot of work to do with panic attacks in his early years was a young Tibetan Lama named Mingyur Rinpoche. Mingyur Rinpoche is a brilliant teacher and practitioner. I think he's in his late thirties now. He set off about four and a half years ago on what he called a three-year retreat, wandering in the Himalayas, and he hasn't come back yet. He's one of those beings who is already very well developed, and he has such a strong calling to develop further that he's been on retreat for the past four and a half years. We still don't know when he'll be back.

When Mingyur Rinpoche was about thirteen years old, he entered his first three-year retreat directed by his father. One of the things he really had to deal with was the frequency of his panic attacks, which came upon him when he thought of going to meditate, because he knew he didn't have anything else to protect him. He would just be there with the fear. So he just had to work with it, and his father encouraged him—his father was also a meditation teacher. His father just encouraged him to open to it and make friends with it. That was the advice he followed and eventually overcame the difficulty.

This is the key teaching in relating with fear: open to it and make friends with it. When fear arises, note that your reaction may be fear, but you want to try and shift into a relationship to it that is allowing and accepting.

Often when fear comes, it will encourage you to point your attention to where the fear is pointing. "I'm afraid of what's going to happen next week. I'm afraid of getting old. I'm afraid of dying. I'm afraid of a

panic attack." Fear will point you in a bunch of different directions, and normally that's where the mind goes.

But in meditation, we don't want to go where it's pointing. We want to come right here into the fear. We want to be with the present moment experience of the fear and not get misled by where the thoughts are directing us.

In meditation terms, that being misled is called unwise attention. Unwise attention means placing our attention where it's not going to be helpful. And you'll see this happens with all the afflictive emotions. They tend to lead us to place our attention somewhere it's not helpful—past or future, something situational. The proper place for our attention, the wise attention, is to come into the direct experience in that moment of the emotion, in this case, of fear.

So we bring our attention fully into the present moment and let ourselves feel the fear, all the time working to open to it with an allowing and accepting attitude.

As we start to form a relationship with fear and other difficult emotions, we want to look at the fact that they are made up of, from a meditation point of view, three components: body sensations, mood, and thoughts. And we need to make our relationship with each of these pieces more or less independently, because they're all separate aspects of the phenomena.

So with fear, with all difficult emotions, the best place to start is the body sensation. When fear arises, how does it feel in the body? Bring your attention to that and just feel it. There's a contraction, maybe in the abdomen. The heart rate may increase. Under the arms feel sweaty. There's maybe a lightness or a vibration through the whole body as though you can't find a ground or any place solid to be. Maybe the breathing gets a little rapid and shallow when fear is strong.

Let yourself just feel those sensations. They won't be pleasant. And then ask yourself: can I bear them? Can I bear it?

What fear is sort of telling you is something bad is about to happen—meaning something like, maybe you can bear this moment, but in the next moment, something really unbearable is going to happen to you. So that's the tenor of the thinking that's going on, the thoughts that are coming.

The sensations, as we land in them, we find out they're bearable. And so even though the thoughts are saying the next moment's not going to be bearable, what we find as we come into the body is this I can bear. It's not pleasant, and at first it may not seem like I can, but I can. I am. I have. I'm doing it. It's happened before. I've gotten through it. I've survived. I've borne up with these sensations before. So we start to trust: I can bear this.

Then we start to examine them and we see they're unpleasant, but I can be with them. This is a huge step—being with the sensations of the difficult emotion. That opens the door for us to accept the

experience.

Then we look at the mood. This is not so easy to locate, but every emotion has a flavor—a flavor in the mind, you might say. Let's say you meet an emotion in a dream and you're not so in touch with the body, but you know the flavor of happiness is one way. The flavor of sorrow is another way. The flavor of love is a different way. And the flavor of fear just in the mind is a different way.

So feel what that mood—I'd call that the mood of fear—is. It's just a mental thing. What's that flavor in the mind? Get familiar with that. It's also not pleasant.

When I came to really be able to feel it clearly, what it seemed to me it was saying was: run away, run away. It's not safe here. Get out, get out. So that was what I just tried to relate to and move to accept and allow.

And then the thoughts—start to notice that all the thoughts in some way or another are saying something bad is going to happen or something bad is about to happen. But that's just a figment of our imagination. That's just like looking at the drawing of the tiger and getting worried. It doesn't mean that it's true.

So we start to see: I can be with the sensations, I can be with the mood, I can be with the thoughts. All of them are basically okay. So that provides the foundation for us to be able to say, okay, let me open to this and really accept it. Really accept it.

We see that it goes on for a while and then it passes away. This is really important and really helpful to see. Any emotion that comes to you during this retreat is going to come, it's going to last for a while, and it's going to pass away. Have you had any emotions here that have lasted more than about a day? It's rare. I'll put it that way. It's rare. They come, they last a while, they pass away.

And we start to see these emotions are just like weather. Some clouds come, they cover the sun, then they pass, it's clear again. Rain comes, sprinkles a few drops, seems gloomy, it goes away. Clouds are back. Clouds pass, it's nighttime, the stars are out. Emotions are just like that. They come, they cast their influence for a while, and they pass through. They will exhibit their impermanence if we let them, just like everything does.

This is why you don't really have to worry about emotions and why you don't have to push them away. By just not doing anything, they're going to go. Now, there is a way that you can make them last longer: reach out, take hold of them, tussle about them, think about them, think of all the things that could happen, why this is such a terrible experience to have on your precious meditation retreat, and dwell on that for a long time. Then you can extend their life. But if you don't do that, they will come, they will express, and they will pass. They'll all pass if you let them pass.

We start to see that fear doesn't mean anything. It doesn't mean that something bad is going to happen. Wanting doesn't mean anything. It doesn't mean that I have to have that or my life will be miserable.

Sadness doesn't mean anything. It doesn't mean that I'm destined to be depressed forever because I lost something. All these emotions are rich. They have their place in human life, but they don't have the meaning we attribute to them when we think that they're so threatening and so difficult.

As we start to accommodate the fear, it loses its power over us. And that power is lost through our full acceptance of it. I got tested on this because one of my teachers said, "If you really accept it, it's okay if it lasts the rest of your life." And so I checked out my fear. I said, "Would I be okay if this lasted the rest of my life?" The answer was really easy: No way. Absolutely not.

So I had to live with that for a while. Why not? Why couldn't I let this last the rest of my life? And the answer that came when I looked into it was: I'd lose some of the things I really enjoy. I couldn't open to a sunset the way I had. I couldn't sort of merge with nature the way I did sometimes. I couldn't get so blissed out with music the way I was used to. If fear was present, it would create a barrier.

So I clung onto that for a while. And then the fear continued. And I thought, okay, do I really want to hold out the possibility of future bliss at the price of present conflict and disturbance of peace? Or could I try giving that up and finding peace now?

So I gave that up and said, "Okay, if this is going to last the rest of my life, I'm going to be okay with this." And I found that okayness—I really meant it. At that point, the fear kind of shrank and almost rotted away. I could see that in that full acceptance, I had somehow broken its back. It was my resistance that was continuing to feed it energy and sustain it as such a threatening force. When I just said, "Okay, you can have me for the rest of my life, you got it," and gave up, it just kind of wilted.

I practiced for quite a while after that and was completely easy about fear. If it came, that was fine. If it didn't come, that was fine. It really didn't matter to me one way or the other. That kind of equanimity and openness shifted something fundamentally in my relationship to fear. It broke some hold, some grip that it had in my mind.

Fear has come many times since then, and I've suffered with it on occasion, but I don't suffer with it for long. I haven't ended my life yet, so that story could change between now and the end. It's not easy getting old and ill and dying. But so far, fear has never had that kind of grip again. Fear is a living thing—it still comes sometimes—but I feel very confident in my ability to work with it and open to it when it arises.

I think this is the promise of opening to these emotions: they lose their power to intimidate us. We develop this confidence that anything that comes to me, I know how to work with. If you really know to the very bottom how to work with one emotion, you've learned the secret for working with all of them. Whatever comes, you've got the skill through your practice and through your wisdom, through your awareness, to learn how to open to it, work with it, accept it, and not be overwhelmed by it. You find a refuge through understanding and through mindfulness to create a healthy relationship with any emotion that arises.

This is really the way I now understand fearlessness. It's not that fear never arises, but rather there's

confidence that when it arises, one has the capability to work with it.

This is from Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche: "True fearlessness is not the absence of fear, but going beyond fear. When we relax with our fear, we find sadness, which is calm and gentle. Real fearlessness is the product of tenderness. It comes from letting the world tickle your heart, your raw and beautiful heart. You're willing to open up. You're willing to share your heart with others."

Let's just sit for a minute and let these words settle: Real fearlessness is the product of tenderness. It comes from letting the world tickle your heart, your raw and beautiful heart.

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