Relating Wisely With Fear

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 53:53

I'd like to talk this evening about discovering a wise relationship to fear.

To start, I'd just like to ask each of us to reflect for a moment on whether there's ever been a time in our life as adults when we felt free of the influence of fear for a short period of time. And what did that feel like?

Blissful. Free. Spacious. Serene. Natural. Sleep.

This last response reminds me of a statement I heard from Manindraji, one of Joseph Goldstein's first teachers, who said that sleep is the ordinary person's greatest pleasure—perhaps because of that freedom from fear.

There's a wonderful quality in our life in the absence of fear, a really delightful quality. I think this serves to show by contrast the sort of shadow that exists in our life when fear is present—how fear casts a cloud of darkness over our being, over our mind, over our life, over ourselves, even when many of our fears are really unnecessary or unfounded.

We react to the whole range of fears. We react to really little fears: Do I have enough gas to get home? Is there Häagen-Dazs still left in the freezer? How can I do this seminar when I have a run in my stocking?

Then there are the middling levels of fear—things like the fear of public speaking. Someone took a poll a few years ago and found that the fear of speaking in public was actually the number one fear among Americans surveyed. The number one fear in this country was fear of speaking in public, while fear of death was somewhere down on the list like number four. Personally, I'd rather be here tonight.

There are the fears that come up around job interviews—ever feel your stomach turn to jelly before going for a job you really want? Or fear of confrontation with a co-worker or manager?

And then there are the really big fears, the significant fears we confront in our life: the fear of serious illness, the fear of loneliness, the fear of death—our own or of those we love. One of the greatest fears adults have is probably the fear of harm to their children.

Fear is one of our deepest psychological conditionings, such a strong force for most of us. When it's present, not only does it cast this dark, oppressive cloud, but it brings about a contraction we feel in the body and mind that blocks our unfolding. When Jesus talked about not hiding your light under a basket, the basket most of us hide our lights under is the basket of fear. Fear keeps us constrained and small and

doesn't allow our inner beauty to come out and flower.

That flowering begins to take place as fear lifts, as this contraction starts to unfold for each of us. It's really the pathway to love.

Gerald Jampolsky is a teacher and healer many of you probably know. He created the Center for Attitudinal Healing, and much of his work was inspired by *A Course in Miracles*. He wrote a book that was his interpretation of *A Course in Miracles*, titled very suggestively *Love is Letting Go of Fear*. There's a deep truth in that. When the cloud of fear lifts from our being, we find ourselves automatically in the state of love. It's not like we have to get rid of fear and then find love. Love is the natural state when the mind is not clouded by fear.

This is really a key to our opening, a key to spiritual unfolding—being able to work with fear.

Fear is also closely tied to other root emotions. We talked last week about working with anger, how sometimes underlying anger can be the fear that I don't exist. When you don't acknowledge my existence, I start to become afraid that maybe I'm not visible in this world, maybe I don't exist. That seed of fear triggers aggression and hatred and acts of unkindness, war, and revenge.

Fear is also closely related to desire. If you look at the way our minds move and what disturbs our peacefulness, typically the mind swings between two poles: wanting what we like and not wanting what we don't like. One movement we call desire, the other we call fear. They're really closely tied.

And you'll notice that any time you really want something very much, very badly, if you look underneath, there's a fear of not getting it. So fear always accompanies wanting. And at the same time, if you look at why we want a lot of the stuff that we do, it's based on insecurity. And this is really a key in looking at fear.

We really have to acknowledge that as human beings, the situation of our lives is uncertain. Nobody is guaranteed security on this earth. Any of us could die as we drive out of Spirit Rock tonight. Any of us could wake up in the morning feeling ill and find that we are in touch with the beginning of an illness that will take us directly to our death. That can happen to any of us at any moment, young or old. And so for us as human beings, life is inherently uncertain. That is a fact. That's the truth.

Recognizing this inherent uncertainty, we tend to look around the world for something to make us feel safe, something to bring that security back. And so we tend to latch on very early on to our parents, later on to friends, partners, and significant others. We tend to find our security with possessions, with money, with status, with a job title. We tend to find some security in a self-image that we believe ourselves to be a certain way and that that lasts over time and seems to give us something to fall back on. We find security in views and opinions: "I believe the world is like this. I don't believe the world is like that." And to each of those areas we cling to some extent.

One of our greatest forms of clinging is to the body itself. As long as the body is somewhat healthy and reliable, we feel safe. And yet that can be jeopardized in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye.

So in coming to understand fear, we need to look into the nature of clinging and the effect of clinging. If I'm afraid, if I feel my vulnerability in this world and out of fear I pick up something that makes me feel secure, what happens as long as I hold on to that thing? Look what we're perpetuating. As long as I'm holding on to something, on some level I know that that thing I'm holding on to is itself precarious—whether it be another person or possessions or a big bank account or whatever. Anything that we hold on to is also subject to impermanence.

And so somehow we know that this thing can pass away. And so in holding on, we are afraid to lose this because if we lose it, we think the fear will return. So as long as we hold on, there's actually a fear involved even in clinging. Because on some level we know that this can pass. So in holding on, in the very act of holding to something for security, we're also perpetuating fear. So it doesn't turn out to be the satisfying answer. It doesn't turn out to be a final answer either. So fear and clinging really go together. They're intimately connected.

And one of the useful things about fear is that whenever we feel fear, we can use it as a pointer and say, "Well, what is being held to?" And we're all holding in many different ways. Actually, as long as there's a sense of a separate self, there is some clinging going on. The sense of separate self, or the sense of I, or ego in Buddhist terms, is formed by holding. These two are virtually synonymous in Buddhist thought—the sense of I and the sense of holding. So as long as there is a sense of I, on some level there is holding and the operation of fear.

And the only freedom, final freedom from fear, comes with letting go of this sense of a separate self, realizing our deep, deep connection to the whole universe.

The Buddha put this very succinctly when he said that wherever there is clinging, there is trembling in the mind. And this image of trembling or wavering is one that he used over and over again to pinpoint the location of fear. Ah, in one who is holding, the mind is not steady. The mind is shaky. There's trembling.

So one of the things we want to come to understand with fear are the mechanics of it. How is it triggered? How does it really operate? One of the things that we noticed in doing the short guided meditation this evening on fear is that fear is always connected to some thought about the future. And it's important to see the arising of the thought and then the emotion that trails in its wake, as it were. There's some thought about the future that we don't like and then fear comes, that emotion of fear.

This has been compared in the Zen tradition to an artist who draws a painting of a tiger, a very lifelike painting of a tiger, and when he's done drawing it, he steps back and looks at it, and he becomes frightened. And that's what we do in our minds all the time.

We draw these pictures of tigers, and then we react - how scary! That's why Mark Twain observed that

"the worst things in my life never happened." Krishnamurti, this great Indian philosopher, put it very succinctly when he said that thought breeds fear. Thought breeds fear.

This is a profound pointer because what it means is that life is not inherently frightening. Life is not frightening. Life may be uncertain. It may be unpredictable. There may be an element of the unknown or an insecurity inherent in existence, but it doesn't mean that we have to relate to it with fear. Fear is the product of thought projecting into the future a fantasy of its own making, of its own creation.

So we can learn through our meditation practice to start relating wisely to this projective quality of mind. Our mind has incredible projective strength. We actually, when we start to look closely, project out of our thoughts and imaginings the whole structure of the world. And that includes the structure of what we take to be myself. It's all a fabrication of our concepts.

In meditation, more and more we can let go of that unnecessary addition and just rest directly with the bare experience of the present moment. And that is a pathway to freedom - just resting with the natural state of things as they are in this moment without introducing past and future. Then fear doesn't find a foothold and we're simply at ease just as things are unfolding here and now.

So how can we work to start relating wisely with fear? Well, the first thing to say is that it's our tendency to want to avoid situations that bring fear up. We don't like the experience of fear. And so in our lives, we tend to weave a path through life so that this emotion doesn't arise very often. For the most part, if we could live our lives and have it never arise again, that would really be ideal for most of us.

Fortunately, it doesn't work that way. It can't work that way. If we just keep avoiding difficult situations that bring up fear, actually we only strengthen its conditioning. It strengthens that groove in the mind that says fear is really something to be avoided. But actually it's not - it's just a paper tiger. And we need to come to terms with that paper tiger through our practice. If we take the risk to start exploring fear, then we may find a way to go beyond it.

This is a time-honored tradition in Buddhist practice, this experience of confronting fear. From the very early days of the Buddhist teachings, the Buddha would often direct his nuns and monks to go do their practice in the charnel grounds - in places where bodies had just been left out in the open for animals to feed off of them, for birds to peck them for sustenance. And it was considered a very great place to meditate because it would bring up fear for people. It brings up the fear of our own mortality when we see other bodies decaying. Great meditation practice.

Ajahn Chah's teacher was a very fierce monk in the forest, a teacher named Ajahn Mun. Ajahn Chah, for those of you who don't know, was Jack Kornfield's first teacher in Thailand. He passed away a number of years ago. But his teacher was Ajahn Mun, who was born in the early part of the 1900s and was a forest monk, very ascetic.

When Ajahn Mun's monks or nuns had malaria - which is a dreadful disease; if you've ever had malaria,

you get wracked with this fever that's over 100 degrees, chills and shaking, extremely unpleasant, all you want to do is curl up and wait till it passes - Ajahn Mun would make his monks and nuns meditate a full schedule during the day, even with malaria. "It's just sensation. Don't worry. Keep sitting." He was very fierce.

One of the things that he loved to encourage, particularly his monks to do, was to go sit out in the forest where they could hear the sounds of tigers roaring. In the early part of this century in Thailand, that was not hard to find. You go out in the forest, sit down for a while, and you could hear tigers roaring. And the closer, the better. So this was serious advice. He would make people sit out where there were tigers nearby and meditate all night long, just sitting out in the forest. And that brought the fear right to the surface.

None of this five-minute imagining of some visualized situation. So this direct confrontation with fear, even though it's the last thing we want to experience, is actually a blessing in our practice. Because as we start to understand fear and relate to it directly with wisdom, there's the possibility of going beyond it—the possibility of not being so limited by fear.

So in our meditation practice, we really want to open to this experience, not to brush it aside and say, "Oh, that's just anxiety, let me get back to a place of calmness," but really to take the opportunity to see: "Oh, anxiety. Oh, nervousness. Oh, fear, trembling, panic. Let me taste this. Let me see what this is like."

So we start to explore how it feels in the body. For each of us the sensations may be a little bit different—we all have our individual physical reaction to fear—but we begin by becoming familiar with our own experience. What is it in my experience? Where do I feel this fear in the body?

As several of you commented earlier, it can be in many places. You can feel a tightening in the neck, constriction around the heart, tightness in the abdomen, maybe sweating under the arms. What I find sometimes with fear is that I get a sense of flutteriness all over my body. My body becomes very light. It's as though a breeze could blow me away because it's become so soft and shaky.

Are there any of those sensations that you can't tolerate? Look closely at those sensations and see if you can just accept them and meet them just as they are.

Then we look into the feeling tone in the mind. And again, as several of you commented, there's this sense of wanting to escape, wanting to flee, a panic sense of being trapped. I think that kind of characterizes for me the sense of fear—that I just want to move away. It's a sense of wanting to move away from something. If we look closely at what we want to move away from, sometimes it's just fear itself. We become afraid of fear itself, and that's what we want to flee.

So just noting that sort of tone in the mind. Can we tolerate that? Can we bear that emotion of feeling like we want to run away, feeling like we want to flee?

And finally, the influence of thoughts. Noticing—and this is a really important insight—that fear is always related to thoughts of the future. Because what that says is the present isn't so bad. It's not the present that we're really concerned about. It's not this moment. It's the next moment. What might come after this?

So if we can just take our pointer from that: don't worry so much about the future. Come back to the refuge of the present moment. Then that's where we can find some sense of ease, some sense of rest.

So these are the three components, again, as we looked at with anger, that we want to become familiar with: the sensations in the body, the mental tone or emotion, and the influence of thoughts. And of course, the more thoughts about the future we think that are difficult, the greater the stimulation of the fear is likely to be. So the fear breeds the thoughts, and the thoughts in turn react to create greater fear.

The comment was that fear may be related to the past. And I think that's very true. Often our sense of the future is connected with the past. And particularly if there's been a trauma in the past, it may have left a sense of fear. So there are actually two issues here. It's a good point.

If there's been trauma in the past—let's take the case of a young child who's undergoing physical abuse as an example of severe trauma—the child is fearful in that state, perhaps, of being killed. And so the emotion of fear gets locked in at that moment because the child doesn't know how to relate to the fear with wisdom. It gets locked into the body through the contraction of fear, and we experience it as adults once we start to open to our body sensations, to our memories, to our thoughts and so forth. So there can be a residue of fear that's come from the past.

But the nature of fear itself, whether it's what the child felt at that time or what we imagine as adults, is related to a fear of what's going to happen—the fear that if this abuse continues, I'll be killed. Sometimes we take the past and project it into the future: "Oh, I was rejected by my parents in the past. Therefore, I'm not lovable. I will be rejected again."

So often the past leads through the present into the future. But this is something worthwhile to investigate. See that relationship of the future with fear.

So we look at all these components and we ask, can I be with the bare experience of fear? Because mostly what happens when fear arises, we feel more afraid. We don't want to experience the fear directly, but we lock into a feedback loop with fear. The first wave of fear makes us more afraid, and the fear amplifies, and we search for some escape. And so we never come to understand the experience of fear as it is.

And it's the experience and acceptance of fear as it is just in this moment that is freeing. Because we start to see, I can tolerate these body sensations. I can tolerate this panicky sense of being trapped or wanting to flee. I can tolerate these thoughts, these imageries about the future. I can tolerate all of that.

So in our meditation practice, we don't try to get rid of the fear. We don't try to push it away or suppress it. We open to it and see if we can really accept it. And if we can really open to the fear and accept it, what

we've done is we've made our home, we've found our refuge again in the present moment. And there is an ease and a sense of safety in that.

So in a sense, what's required at this point is that we take our focus off the future. To some extent, we have to be willing a little bit not to be so concerned about what might happen tomorrow in my job interview. We need to be more interested in what's happening right now. And how can I relate to this moment of my experience with wisdom and discover my freedom in relation to this moment, just as it is, this moment of fear?

It's a little bit like that statement of FDR's, "We have nothing to fear but fear itself." I'd give him about 70% from a Dharma perspective on that. But it's a pointer anyway. For a politician, it's a pretty good Dharma talk.

So actually having fear come up in our meditation practice or any time in our life when we can give our full attention to it is actually a blessing. Because it's only through this intimate contact with fear that we can start to understand it. In understanding it, we can open to it and accept it. And in accepting it, fear starts to lose its power. We no longer have to stop doing things because we think we're going to feel fear when we do them.

You know, when you think about trying to meet somebody new or asking a new person to do something with you and there's this momentary hesitation of fear, how much of it is because we don't want to go through the anxiety or the discomfort that that action brings up in us? A real space of freedom and spaciousness opens when we're willing to experience the fear around our actions. We can go ahead. So what if I feel afraid or nervous doing that? I can handle that. I know this guy fear. I've accommodated it. I've understood it. I can let it be there and I don't need to let it change my actions.

So in accommodating fear, we actually create a lot of space around it. And it no longer has such a power to dominate and control and rule our lives in that way. And with that spaciousness, we can act more from clarity. One of the worst things about fear is we're such fools when we act from fear. We do such stupid things, all of us—me included—when we're afraid. You know, we snap at people, we get defensive, we project onto people. Developing through meditation some spaciousness around fear, we can let the fear be there and not be so shaken by it and act somewhat from clarity, somewhat from wisdom.

So you'll notice sort of a common theme in relating to fear as in relating to anger, as we talked about last week. And the guidelines for both of them really are to embrace the feeling and guard the action. Really open fully to the feeling, whether it be anger or fear. Let yourself feel it directly. And take some care with how you act. Because if you act directly out of just a reactive state, being controlled by the emotion, to some degree you'll be strengthening its conditioning. The more awareness you can bring into your actions, even while you're feeling the feeling, the more you'll decondition the arising of that emotion. And that's another step toward greater freedom from it.

There's another approach with fear that I want to mention. I'm always a little reluctant to go into it because it's a really different approach than our sort of usual Vipassana—you know, be spacious, be accepting, open up, be gentle. And this approach with fear involves quite a lot of firmness.

And I think we've all had the experience where fear arises and our immediate impulse is to do something to escape it. Get up and walk around, or distract ourselves, or somehow avoid it. But he was taking the stance that, no, I'm going to sit right here with this until it's finished. I'm not going to be moved by it.

There's a wonderful story from Tibet about a woman named Machig Labdron, who was a great Tibetan yogini. She was practicing in a cave, and she was visited by demons—terrifying apparitions that would appear to her during her meditation. And her initial response was the traditional one: she tried to get rid of them, to push them away, to protect herself from them.

But eventually she realized that this approach wasn't working. So she changed her strategy completely. When the demons appeared, instead of trying to get rid of them, she would say, "I see you. I know what you are. You are my own fear. And I'm not going anywhere. If you want to stay, fine. If you want to go, fine. But I'm staying right here."

And she took it even further. She said to them, "In fact, not only am I going to stay here with you, but I'm going to feed you. I offer you my flesh, I offer you my blood, I offer you everything I am." And when she took that stance—when she completely stopped fighting the fear and instead offered herself to it—the demons disappeared.

This is the same kind of warrior energy that sometimes we need to call up in relationship to fear. It's the energy that says, "I'm done being pushed around by this. I'm done being controlled by this. I don't care what you do to me, I'm staying put."

But this approach requires some discernment. It's not appropriate in every situation. If you're new to meditation practice, if you're not well-grounded in mindfulness, this kind of confrontational approach with fear might not be skillful. It could be overwhelming.

But if you've been practicing for a while, if you have a good foundation of mindfulness and concentration, and you find yourself in a situation where fear just seems to have gotten a stranglehold on you—where the gentle, accepting approach just isn't making any headway—then sometimes this warrior approach can be exactly what's needed.

The key is to bring that energy not from a place of hatred or aversion toward the fear, but from a place of, "I refuse to be diminished by this. I refuse to let this limit my life or my practice."

It's like saying to fear, "You know what? You've been the host long enough. Now I'm reclaiming my seat."

Of course, you have to remember this is the same man who vowed that he would die under the Bodhi tree if he didn't get enlightened. So there was extraordinary courage there to begin with.

There's a wonderful story of a modern encounter with a Japanese Zen teacher written by Lawrence Sheinberg. He recently published a book called *Ambivalent Zen*, which tells about his studentship under a Japanese Zen teacher in New York City. An excerpt appeared in *The Sun* magazine last month, and the book is also available online.

This Zen teacher is wonderfully innocent and idiosyncratic, as many Zen teachers are. He has his own approach to the English language, which is often charming. Lawrence would often begin sentences to his teacher with phrases like "I'm worried that..." or "I'm afraid that..." And this was his teacher's response one time:

"I said, Larry-san, why are you always afraid? Forty-five years old, talk like baby. What do you think? Zen about quiet mind? Relaxation? No, no. Zen about bravery. Zazen mind, bravery mind. Must bravery, Larry-san. Must sincere. Must bravery."

That's good advice for all of us: Must bravery.

Sasaki Roshi is another great Zen master—I think I've mentioned him before. He's in the Rinzai tradition of Zen, which is the fierce, warrior-like Zen tradition. He wrote in a book once about his retreats where you meet with him for interviews four times a day. You're supposed to answer these koans, which are very puzzling and stumping. He said he felt like a fool meeting with him every time—he didn't want to go. But Sasaki Roshi would say, "Don't be cowardly. When you come for an interview with me, prepare to kill or be killed."

So, bravery mind. Vipassana teacher interviews are not like that—that's how I survived in this practice!

Let me close with a statement from Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche in a lovely little book called *Shambhala* about working with fear and working with fearlessness. Sometimes we think that fearlessness is the opposite of fear—that fearlessness comes when fear has gone away. But Trungpa says it's not like that. He says fearlessness is really the state of being able to be open to our fear.

"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. This 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 are willing to share your heart with others."

So we have a few minutes left. If anyone has any comments about fear, anything you'd like to share, any questions, anything you'd like to talk about, please feel free.

"Two different things. One is sometimes I'm not sure if it's fear or excitement. The other situation is sometimes the body sensation and the fear is telling me I have to move away from the situation, and it's the correct decision to make."

Good point. So how do you know those things? Yes, good questions.

The first comment is that sometimes fear is very close to excitement. I think that's true—sometimes something that's about to happen evokes mixed feelings, and the mind goes back and forth between success and failure. "Oh, is this going to be great, or am I going to fall on my face?" Sometimes we have both reactions to the same situation.

It's interesting to start looking at excitement from a meditative frame of mind. When you really encompass either fear or excitement with a very spacious meditative mind, you see that both are just energy. The way the energy gets colored has much to do with our thoughts or beliefs. When we can relate to it just on the level of energy, it takes away much of the added charge. Again, it returns us to a sense of freedom. So yes, they are really close at times.

The second comment—sometimes it's absolutely true that situations are not safe and we need to respect that feeling. Sometimes fear is a good pointer that we need to move away, and that's wisdom. That's really seeing what's skillful in a certain situation.

The encouragement to confront our fear isn't an encouragement to put ourselves in situations where our life is actually in jeopardy or something really unfortunate might happen to us or those we care about. We really want to use discriminating wisdom to know when to move away.

I think there's no rule of thumb to tell when to avoid situations and when to stay present. We have to make an appraisal of the seriousness of the threat. You don't want to walk in certain parts of New York City after dark alone—that's just reasonable precaution. But you also don't want to avoid things that would be wholesome in your life because of fear. We have to find that balance. I don't think there's a formula.

Another point about recalling fear—about ninety-eight percent of the fears I've had have been apprehension about things I thought were going to happen, and very few have turned out to be what I thought they would be. When you try to recall something you were afraid of in the past, you know what it was. Unless it really was fearsome, by that time it's academic. It's not like anger, which you can remember forever.

This is true. In my experience, the twenties and thirties were times of much more anxiety than my forties have been. When I look back to all the fluctuations my mind went through in my twenties and thirties, I think, "What was the point of all that?" Everything turned out fine, but when we're younger we don't know it's going to have a happy ending.

If you want to cultivate fear for practice purposes, it may be necessary to think about things that have yet to happen. Sometimes I say with meditations like this, it's like those TV commercials: "Filmed on a closed course with professional drivers—don't try this at home." These meditations on fear and anger aren't meant to be done at home very often. It's just to get in touch with the sensation.

I was wondering about the whole notion of avoidance. In the past when I've experienced a fearful situation, I realize I'm feeling fearful. Then the fear is so unpalatable that I force myself through it and do what I need to do. In a way, it's avoiding—I mean, it's going through the fear, but afterward I feel good. Really, it's almost like I just don't want the fear because it's so unpalatable that I push through it. I'm not sure if that's avoiding it. In a way it is, because I don't want to deal with it, so I just go through it.

The comment was that sometimes fear arises, the experience is so unpalatable, and we act really quickly to get to the other side, to complete the situation, to get through the fear. And I think that happens all the time in the world. Something comes up that we have to do, it doesn't feel comfortable, we sort of plow ahead and we do find ways to kind of block out the experience of fear by focusing on what has to be done. And it serves to get us through the situation in the world.

But I think it is a kind of avoidance of the fear itself. Sometimes in the world we just have to do that. Sometimes if you have to make a sales presentation to 500 people and your manager is sitting at the front table keeping an eye on how you're doing the presentation, it can bring up nervousness, but you've just got to perform at that point. So there are times when you just have to go ahead and do that.

But if you have the luxury to be still and be with yourself for a while, the more attention you can give to that bare experience of fear, the more palatable the experience becomes. And that's really what starts to decondition the fear response. If we can be okay with feeling the fear, it really starts to lose a lot of its charge. Fear becomes not such a big deal.

And to tell you the truth, the aim in our meditation practice is to develop a degree of spaciousness and a degree of equanimity that fear can arise and be present and we literally don't care whether it's there or not. That's the degree of equanimity that we want to find through our meditation practice. And it's not to say that we can find that in every situation then for the rest of our lives, but we want to know that that's possible. We want to know, and usually it's through our meditation practice or through an experience where we feel pretty strong and centered, that fear can be there and we really don't care. It's fine for it to be there. Just as good for it to be there as if it weren't there.

The question is, is that courage? I think it takes courage to let the fear be there with that much openness. So courage is kind of the other side of this fearlessness or opening to fear. A lot of courage is required.

There's another thought I just had, which is that a lot of times I will create situations that will put me in fear because I'm in a boring routine. So I create fear as a way to entertain myself. I hear a few rumblings around the room. It sounds like you're not the only one with that entertainment device.

Well, it's really interesting to look at this in relationship to a 45-minute period of meditation practice. And you kind of realize each of us has two choices. We can just be with the coming and going of the breath. But after a few breaths, that gets kind of boring, doesn't it? Or we can divert ourselves with all sorts of thoughts. And some of the thoughts are going to be positive and some of them are going to be negative and

some of them are going to be exciting and some of them are going to be fearful.

But I think it's really interesting to tune into the fact we have an appetite for this stimulation. And it's our appetite for this stimulation through our own thinking that blocks us from resting in the peace of the moment. Because frankly, to tell you the truth, most of us find peace boring. And so, honestly, we are all choosing moment after moment to be entertained by the flow of thoughts with their ups and downs and the positives and negatives, rather than to rest in peace, because peace is always accessible. It's always here, and we turn away from it. It's a great insight.

In the light of what you just said about getting to a point possibly where one wouldn't care whether or not fear is present, I was just thinking about the other thing you said about coming to a point of not being able to tolerate the fear and having anger saying, fear out. Would you say that that's just a possible technique on the path towards getting to where you don't care whether fear is present or not?

I basically see the anger as a kind of temporary way through that kind of breaks the grip. It's really important to break the grip when a pattern has really set in. And then once the grip is broken, then you still need to go back and accept fear with that total equanimity. And that may take years. For me, it was sometime after that before I could be that equanimous with fear. It was probably a couple of years later before I could be really equanimous with fear. But for me, it broke the grip. And so it was a temporary helpful thing.

One aspect concerns what I would call chronic fear or chronic anxiety, chronic anger. The second involves when these emotions come from other people—for example, a person who is chronically angry that you must deal with, which naturally creates a situation where you may find yourself chronically fearful of how to handle that relationship. So it isn't just about working with your own emotions in isolation; you're dealing with another person as well.

The question addresses both chronic fear or chronic anger and the habitual pattern of fear that arises in response to someone else's chronic anger. This is remarkably common in our culture—perhaps in all cultures—this tendency to become afraid when someone directs anger toward us. It's a deeply ingrained conditioned response.

Yet in most cases, this fear isn't necessary. For the most part in our society, people aren't going to physically harm us, damage our property, or threaten our safety simply because they're angry with us. So there isn't necessarily any real threat when someone becomes angry with us, yet we instinctively respond with fear.

One participant offered an important observation: "Often the fear and the anger arise when you feel caught in someone's judgment. It's not that you're invisible—quite the opposite. It's as if you're being seen, but only through a particular lens, a distorted perception of who you are."

This insight points to something crucial. Even when anger comes with direct personal condemnation, I

would suggest that responding with fear remains a conditioned reaction that isn't necessary. Consider this: even if someone thinks I'm the worst person in the world, why must I fear that possibility? If I know myself well—my motivations, my intentions, the reasons behind my actions—and their perception doesn't align with truth, why can't I simply rest confident in my own understanding?

And if what they're saying does contain some grain of truth, why should I fear seeing that truth clearly? This inquiry leads us into deeper territory—questions about self-image, our desire to appear a certain way to the world, and how threatened we feel when others don't perceive us as we wish to be seen.

I suggest that much of this particular kind of fear stems from clinging to self-image. This doesn't mean such patterns are easy to work through or become free from—they're deeply embedded in our conditioning. I certainly include myself among those who struggle with these reactions. But these patterns are workable. They can be investigated, understood, and gradually transformed through patient, mindful attention.

The key lies in recognizing that beneath our fearful reactions often lies another form of clinging—attachment to how we want to be perceived, to maintaining a particular identity or image. This clinging, like all forms of attachment, creates suffering. Yet when we can see it clearly, we create the possibility for greater freedom.

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