Select Sutta Passages on Fear
Translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi

Fear and Dread MN 4

1. Thus have I heard. On one occasion the Blessed One was living at Sāvatthī in Jeta’s Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika’s Park.

2. Then the brahmin Jāṇussoṇī went to the Blessed One and exchanged greetings with him. When this courteous and amiable talk was finished, he sat down at one side and said: “Master Gotama, when clansmen have gone forth from the home life into homelessness out of faith in Master Gotama, do they have Master Gotama for their leader, their helper, and their guide? And do these people follow the example of Master Gotama?”

“That is so, brahmin, that is so. When clansmen have gone forth from the home life into homelessness out of faith in me, they have me for their leader, their helper, and their guide. And these people follow my example.”

“But, Master Gotama, remote jungle-thicket resting places in the forest are hard to endure, seclusion is hard to practice, and it is hard to enjoy solitude. One would think the jungles must rob a bhikkhu of his mind, if he has no concentration.”

“That is so, brahmin, that is so. Remote jungle-thicket resting places in the forest are hard to endure, seclusion is hard to practice, and it is hard to enjoy solitude. One would think the jungles must rob a bhikkhu of his mind, if he has no concentration.

3. “Before my enlightenment, while I was still only an unenlightened Bodhisatta, I too considered thus: ‘Remote jungle-thicket resting places in the forest are hard to endure…the jungles must rob a bhikkhu of his mind, if he has no concentration.’

4. “I considered thus: ‘Whenever recluses or brahmins unpurified in bodily conduct resort to remote jungle-thicket resting places in the forest, then owing to the defect of their unpurified bodily conduct these good recluses and brahmins evoke unwholesome fear and dread. But I do not resort to remote jungle-thicket resting places in the forest unpurified in bodily conduct. I am purified in bodily conduct. I resort to remote jungle-thicket resting places in the forest as one of the noble ones with bodily conduct purified.’ Seeing in myself this purity of bodily conduct, I found great solace in dwelling in the forest.

5–7. “I considered thus: ‘Whenever recluses or brahmins unpurified in verbal conduct…unpurified in mental conduct…unpurified in livelihood resort to remote jungle-thicket resting places in the forest…they evoke unwholesome fear and dread. But…I am purified in livelihood. I resort to remote jungle-thicket resting places in the forest as one of the noble ones with livelihood purified.’ Seeing in myself this purity of livelihood, I found great solace in dwelling in the forest.
8. “I considered thus: ‘Whenever recluses or brahmins who are covetous and full of lust...I am uncovetous...’

9. “...with a mind of ill will and intentions of hate...I have a mind of loving-kindness...’

10. “...overcome by sloth and torpor...I am without sloth and torpor...’

11. “...overcome with restlessness and unpeaceful in mind...I have a peaceful mind...’

12. “...uncertain and doubting...I have gone beyond doubt...’

13. “...given to self-praise and disparagement of others...I am not given to self-praise and disparagement of others...’

14. “...subject to alarm and terror...I am free from trepidation...’

15. “...desirous of gain, honor, and renown...I have few wishes...’

16. “...lazy and wanting in energy...I am energetic...’

17. “...unmindful and not fully aware...I am established in mindfulness...’

18. “...unconcentrated and with straying minds...I am possessed of concentration...’

19. “ I considered thus: ‘Whenever recluses or brahmins devoid of wisdom, drivellers, resort to remote jungle-thicket resting places in the forest, then owing to the defect of their being devoid of wisdom and drivellers these good recluses and brahmins evoke unwholesome fear and dread. But I do not resort to remote jungle-thicket resting places in the forest devoid of wisdom, a driveller. I am possessed of wisdom. I resort to remote jungle-thicket resting places in the forest as one of the noble ones possessed of wisdom.’ Seeing in myself this possession of wisdom, I found great solace in dwelling in the forest.

20. “I considered thus: ‘There are the specially auspicious nights of the fourteenth, the fifteenth, and the eighth of the fortnight. Now what if, on such nights as these, I were to dwell in such awe-inspiring, horrifying abodes as orchard shrines, woodland shrines, and tree shrines? Perhaps I might encounter that fear and dread.’ And later, on such specially auspicious nights as the fourteenth, the fifteenth, and the eighth of the fortnight, I dwelt in such awe-inspiring, horrifying abodes as orchard shrines, woodland shrines, and tree shrines. And while I dwelt there, a wild animal would come up to me, or a peacock would knock off a branch, or the wind would rustle the leaves. I thought: ‘What now if this is the fear and dread coming?’ I thought: ‘Why do I dwell always expecting fear and dread? What if I subdue that fear and dread while keeping the same posture that I am in when it comes upon me?’

“While I walked, the fear and dread came upon me; I neither stood nor sat nor lay down till I had subdued that fear and dread. While I stood, the fear and dread came upon me; I neither walked nor sat nor lay down till I had subdued that fear and dread. While I sat, the fear and dread came upon me; I neither walked nor stood nor lay down till I had subdued that fear and dread. While I lay down, the fear and dread came upon me; I neither walked nor stood nor sat down till I had subdued that fear and dread.
21. “There are, brahmin, some recluses and brahmans who perceive day when it is night and night when it is day. I say that on their part this is an abiding in delusion. But I perceive night when it is night and day when it is day. Rightly speaking, were it to be said of anyone: ‘A being not subject to delusion has appeared in the world for the welfare and happiness of many, out of compassion for the world, for the good, welfare, and happiness of gods and humans,’ it is of me indeed that rightly speaking this should be said.

22. “Tireless energy was aroused in me and unremitting mindfulness was established, my body was tranquil and untroubled, my mind concentrated and unified.

23. “Quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, I entered upon and abided in the first jhāna, which is accompanied by applied and sustained thought, with rapture and pleasure born of seclusion.

24. “With the stilling of applied and sustained thought, I entered upon and abided in the second jhāna, which has self-confidence and singleness of mind without applied and sustained thought, with rapture and pleasure born of concentration.

25. “With the fading away as well of rapture, I abided in equanimity, and mindful and fully aware, still feeling pleasure with the body, I entered upon and abided in the third jhāna, on account of which noble ones announce: ‘He has a pleasant abiding who has equanimity and is mindful.’

26. “With the abandoning of pleasure and pain, and with the previous disappearance of joy and grief, I entered upon and abided in the fourth jhāna, which has neither-pain-nor-pleasure and purity of mindfulness due to equanimity.

27. “When my concentrated mind was thus purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability, I directed it to knowledge of the recollection of past lives. I recollected my manifold past lives, that is, one birth, two births, three births, four births, five births, ten births, twenty births, thirty births, forty births, fifty births, a hundred births, a thousand births, a hundred thousand births, many aeons of world-contraction, many aeons of world-expansion, many aeons of world-contraction and expansion: ‘There I was so named, of such a clan, with such an appearance, such was my nutriment, such my experience of pleasure and pain, such my life-term; and passing away from there, I reappeared elsewhere; and there too I was so named, of such a clan, with such an appearance, such was my nutriment, such my experience of pleasure and pain, such my life-term; and passing away from there, I reappeared here.’ Thus with their aspects and particulars I recollected my manifold past lives.

28. “This was the first true knowledge attained by me in the first watch of the night. Ignorance was banished and true knowledge arose, darkness was banished and light arose, as happens in one who abides diligent, ardent, and resolute.

29. “When my concentrated mind was thus purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability, I directed it to knowledge of the passing away and reappearance of beings. With the divine eye, which is purified and surpasses the human, I saw beings passing away and reappearing, inferior and superior, fair and ugly, fortunate and unfortunate. I understood how beings pass on according to their actions thus: ‘These worthy beings who were ill conducted in body, speech, and mind, revilers of noble ones, wrong in their views,
giving effect to wrong view in their actions, on the dissolution of the body, after death, have reappeared in a state of deprivation, in a bad destination, in perdition, even in hell; but these worthy beings who were well conducted in body, speech, and mind, not revilers of noble ones, right in their views, giving effect to right view in their actions, on the dissolution of the body, after death, have reappeared in a good destination, even in the heavenly world.’ Thus with the divine eye, which is purified and surpasses the human, I saw beings passing away and reappearing, inferior and superior, fair and ugly, fortunate and unfortunate, and I understood how beings pass on according to their actions.

30.“This was the second true knowledge attained by me in the middle watch of the night. Ignorance was banished and true knowledge arose, darkness was banished and light arose, as happens in one who abides diligent, ardent, and resolute.

31.“When my concentrated mind was thus purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability, I directed it to knowledge of the destruction of the taints. I directly knew as it actually is: ‘This is suffering’; I directly knew as it actually is: ‘This is the origin of suffering’; I directly knew as it actually is: ‘This is the cessation of suffering’; I directly knew as it actually is: ‘This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering.’ I directly knew as it actually is: ‘These are the taints’; I directly knew as it actually is: ‘This is the origin of the taints’; I directly knew as it actually is: ‘This is the cessation of the taints’; I directly knew as it actually is: ‘This is the way leading to the cessation of the taints.’

32.“When I knew and saw thus, my mind was liberated from the taint of sensual desire, from the taint of being, and from the taint of ignorance. When it was liberated, there came the knowledge: ‘It is liberated.’ I directly knew: ‘Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more coming to any state of being.’

33.“This was the third true knowledge attained by me in the last watch of the night. Ignorance was banished and true knowledge arose, darkness was banished and light arose, as happens in one who abides diligent, ardent, and resolute.

34.“Now, brahmin, it might be that you think: ‘Perhaps the recluse Gotama is not free from lust, hate, and delusion even today, which is why he still resorts to remote jungle-thicket resting places in the forest.’ But you should not think thus. It is because I see two benefits that I still resort to remote jungle-thicket resting places in the forest: I see a pleasant abiding for myself here and now, and I have compassion for future generations.”

35.“Indeed, it is because Master Gotama is an Accomplished One, a Fully Enlightened One, that he has compassion for future generations. Magnificent, Master Gotama! Magnificent, Master Gotama! Master Gotama has made the Dhamma clear in many ways, as though he were turning upright what had been overthrown, revealing what was hidden, showing the way to one who was lost, or holding up a lamp in the dark for those with eyesight to see forms. I go to Master Gotama for refuge and to the Dhamma and to the Sangha of bhikkhus. From today let Master Gotama remember me as a lay follower who has gone to him for refuge for life.”

[Four Powers Transcend Five Fears] AN 9:5
“Bhikkhus, there are these four powers. What four? The power of wisdom, the power of energy, the power of blamelessness, and the power of sustaining a favorable relationship.

(1) “And what, bhikkhus, is the power of wisdom? One has clearly seen and explored with wisdom those qualities that are unwholesome and reckoned as unwholesome; those that are wholesome and reckoned as wholesome; those that are blamable and reckoned as blamable; those that are blameless and reckoned as blameless; those that are dark and reckoned as dark; those that are bright and reckoned as bright; those that should not be cultivated and are reckoned as not to be cultivated; those that should be cultivated and are reckoned as to be cultivated; those that are worthy of the noble ones and reckoned as worthy of the noble ones; those that are worthy of the noble ones and reckoned as worthy of the noble ones. This is called the power of wisdom.

(2) “And what is the power of energy? One generates desire to abandon those qualities that are unwholesome and reckoned as unwholesome; those that are blamable and reckoned as blamable; those that are dark and reckoned as dark; those that should not be cultivated and are reckoned as not to be cultivated; those that are worthy of the noble ones and reckoned as worthy of the noble ones. One makes an effort, arouses energy, applies one’s mind, and strives for this. One generates desire to obtain all those qualities that are wholesome and reckoned as wholesome; those that are blameless and reckoned as blameless; those that are bright and reckoned as bright; those that should be cultivated and are reckoned as to be cultivated; those that are worthy of the noble ones and reckoned as worthy of the noble ones. One makes an effort, arouses energy, applies one’s mind, and strives for this. This is called the power of energy.

(3) “And what is the power of blamelessness? Here, a noble disciple engages in blameless bodily, verbal, and mental action. This is called the power of blamelessness.

(4) “And what is the power of sustaining a favorable relationship? There are these four means of sustaining a favorable relationship: giving, endearing speech, beneficent conduct, and impartiality. Among gifts, the best is the gift of the Dhamma. Among types of endearing speech, the best is repeatedly teaching the Dhamma to one who is interested in it and listens with eager ears. Among types of beneficent conduct, the best is when one encourages, settles, and establishes a person without faith in the accomplishment of faith, an immoral person in the accomplishment of virtuous behavior, a miserly person in the accomplishment of generosity, and an unwise person in the accomplishment of wisdom. Among types of impartiality, the best is that a stream-enterer is equal to a stream-enterer, a once-returner is equal to a once-returner, a non-returner is equal to a non-returner, and an arahant is equal to an arahant. This is called the power of sustaining a favorable relationship.

“These, bhikkhus, are the four powers. When a noble disciple possesses these four powers, he has transcended five fears. What five? (5) Fear of [loss of] livelihood, (6) fear of disrepute, (7) fear of timidity in assemblies, (8) fear of death, and (9) fear of a bad destination. The noble disciple reflects thus: ‘I am not afraid on account of my livelihood. Why should I be afraid on account of my livelihood? I have the four powers: the power of wisdom, the power of energy, the power of blamelessness, and the power of sustaining a favorable relationship. An unwise person might be afraid on account of his livelihood; a lazy person might be afraid on account of his livelihood; a person who engages in blamable bodily, verbal, and mental action might be afraid on account of his livelihood; a person who does not sustain favorable relationships might be afraid on account of his livelihood.
“I am not afraid of disrepute…. I am not afraid of timidity in assemblies…. I am not afraid of death…. I am not afraid of a bad destination. Why should I be afraid of a bad destination? I have the four powers: the power of wisdom, the power of energy, the power of blamelessness, and the power of sustaining a favorable relationship. An unwise person might be afraid of a bad destination; a lazy person might be afraid of a bad destination; a person who engages in blamable bodily, verbal, and mental action might be afraid of a bad destination; a person who does not sustain favorable relationships might be afraid of a bad destination.’

“When a noble disciple possesses these four powers, he has transcended these five fears.”

[Recollect the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha for No Fear to Arise] SN 11:3

At Sāvatthī. There the Blessed One addressed the bhikkhus thus: “Bhikkhus!”

“Venerable sir!” those bhikkhus replied. The Blessed One said this:

“Bhikkhus, once in the past the devas and the asuras were arrayed for battle. Then Sakka, lord of the devas, addressed the Tāvānta devas thus: ‘Dear sirs, when the devas are engaged in battle, if fear or trepidation or terror should arise, on that occasion you should look up at the crest of my standard. For when you look up at the crest of my standard, whatever fear or trepidation or terror you may have will be abandoned.

“If you cannot look up at the crest of my standard, then you should look up at the crest of the deva-king Pajāpati’s standard. For when you look up at the crest of his standard, whatever fear or trepidation or terror you may have will be abandoned.

“If you cannot look up at the crest of the deva-king Pajāpati’s standard, then you should look up at the crest of the deva-king Varuṇa’s standard…. If you cannot look up at the crest of the deva-king Varuṇa’s standard, then you should look up at the crest of the deva-king Īsāna’s standard…. For when you look up at the crest of his standard, whatever fear or trepidation or terror you may have will be abandoned.’

“Bhikkhus, for those who look up at the crest of the standard of Sakka, lord of the devas; or of Pajāpati, the deva-king; or of Varuṇa, the deva-king; or of Īsāna, the deva-king, whatever fear or trepidation or terror they may have may or may not be abandoned. For what reason? Because Sakka, lord of the devas, is not devoid of lust, not devoid of hatred, not devoid of delusion; he can be timid, petrified, frightened, quick to flee.

“But, bhikkhus, I say this: If you have gone to a forest or to the foot of a tree or to an empty hut, and fear or trepidation or terror should arise in you, on that occasion you should recollect me thus: ‘The Blessed One is an arahant, perfectly enlightened, accomplished in true knowledge and conduct, fortunate, knower of the world, unsurpassed leader of persons to be tamed, teacher of devas and humans, the Enlightened One, the Blessed One.’ For when you recollect me, bhikkhus, whatever fear or trepidation or terror you may have will be abandoned.

“If you cannot recollect me, then you should recollect the Dhamma thus: ‘The Dhamma is well expounded by the Blessed One, directly visible, immediate, inviting one to come and see, applicable,
to be personally experienced by the wise.’ For when you recollect the Dhamma, bhikkhus, whatever fear or trepidation or terror you may have will be abandoned.

“If you cannot recollect the Dhamma, then you should recollect the Saṅgha thus: ‘The Saṅgha of the Blessed One’s disciples is practising the good way, practising the straight way, practising the true way, practising the proper way; that is, the eight types of individuals—this Saṅgha of the Blessed One’s disciples is worthy of gifts, worthy of hospitality, worthy of offerings, worthy of reverential salutation, the unsurpassed field of merit for the world.’ For when you recollect the Saṅgha, bhikkhus, whatever fear or trepidation or terror you may have will be abandoned.

“For what reason? Because, bhikkhus, the Tathāgata, the Arahant, the Perfectly Enlightened One is devoid of lust, devoid of hatred, devoid of delusion; he is brave, courageous, bold, ready to stand his place.”

This is what the Blessed One said. Having said this, the Fortunate One, the Teacher, further said this:

“In a forest, at the foot of a tree,  
Or in an empty hut, O bhikkhus,  
You should recollect the Buddha:  
No fear will then arise in you.

“But if you cannot recall the Buddha,  
Best in the world, the bull of men,  
Then you should recall the Dhamma,  
Emancipating, well expounded.

“But if you cannot recall the Dhamma,  
Emancipating, well expounded,  
Then you should recall the Saṅgha,  
The unsurpassed field of merit.

“For those who thus recall the Buddha,  
The Dhamma, and the Saṅgha, bhikkhus,  
No fear or trepidation will arise,  
Nor any grisly terror.”

[Freed from Fear] SN 6:13

Freed from fear, liberated in the fearless  
Where terrible serpents glide,  
Where lightning flashes and the sky thunders,  
In the thick darkness of the night  
There sits a bhikkhu devoid of terror
[Mindfulness of the Body Conquers Fear and Dread] MN 119.34

“Bhikkhus, when mindfulness of the body has been repeatedly practiced, developed, cultivated, used as a vehicle, used as a basis, established, consolidated, and well undertaken, these ten benefits may be expected. What ten? […]

34.(ii) “One becomes a conqueror of fear and dread, and fear and dread do not conquer oneself; one abides overcoming fear and dread whenever they arise.

[The Way to Fearlessness] SN 1:46

“Resounding with a host of nymphs,
Haunted by a host of demons!
This grove is to be called ‘Deluding’:
How does one escape from it?”

“The straight way’ that path is called,
And ‘fearless’ is its destination.
The chariot is called ‘unrattling,’
Fitted with wheels of wholesome states.

“The sense of shame is its leaning board,
Mindfulness its upholstery;
I call the Dhamma the charioteer,
With right view running out in front.

“One who has such a vehicle—
Whether a woman or a man—
Has, by means of this vehicle,
Drawn close to Nibbāna.”

[Doing What is Hard to Do] SN 2:6

At Sāvatthi. Standing to one side, the young deva Kāmada said to the Blessed One:

“Hard to do, Blessed One! Very hard to do, Blessed One!”

“They do even what is hard to do,
[O Kāmada,” said the Blessed One,]
“The trainees endowed with virtue, steadfast.
For one who has entered the homeless life
Contentment brings along happiness.”

“That is hard to gain, Blessed One, namely, contentment.”

“They gain even what is hard to gain,
[O Kāmada,” said the Blessed One,]
“Who delight in calming the mind, 
Whose minds, day and night, 
Take delight in development.”

“That is hard to concentrate, Blessed One, namely, the mind.”

“They concentrate even what is hard to concentrate, 
[O Kāmada,” said the Blessed One,] 
“Who delight in calming the faculties. 
Having cut through the net of Death, 
The noble ones, O Kāmada, go their way.”

“The path is impassable and uneven, Blessed One.”

“Though the path is impassable and uneven, 
The noble ones walk it, Kāmada. 
The ignoble ones fall down head first, 
Right there on the uneven path, 
But the path of the noble ones is even, 
For the noble are even amidst the uneven.”

[Look Upon the World as Empty] SN 5:16

“I have asked the Sakyan twice,”
(said the Venerable Mogharāja),
“but the One with Vision did not answer me. 
Yet I have heard that the divine rishi 
answers upon the third request.

“As to this world, the other world, 
the brahma world together with the devas, 
I do not know your view, 
[the view] of the famous Gotama.

“Thus I have come in need with a question 
to the one of excellent vision. 
How does one look upon the world, 
so that the King of Death does not see one?”

“Look upon the world as empty, 
Mogharāja, being ever mindful. 
Having uprooted the view of self, 
one may thus cross over death. 
The King of Death does not see 
one who looks upon the world thus.”
[For One Who is Awake, Fear Does Not Exist] Dhp 39

For one who is awake,
   Whose mind isn’t overflowing,
   Whose heart isn’t afflicted
   And who has abandoned both merit and demerit,
Fear does not exist.