

# 2017-11-05 Befriending Fear

Tue, 9/29 9:28AM • 41:30

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

fear, afraid, people, meditation, deep, feel, arises, life, bit, meditate, sit, layers, happening, safe, monster, mind, hideous monster, story, attention, kinds

## SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

So in this most recent times, it seems that in my meetings with people to talk about their practice and their lives, one of the common themes has been a fear. And it's one of the scent one of the primary emotions of human beings. And it's one that many people contend with. Many years ago, I asked Dharma seed, which is, back then it was a company. Now it's a website, that archives that talks for all the vipassana teachers in United States and they have a big, big archive of talks back in the 90s, they would send cassettes before they had it on the web, to people who would order the cassettes, and I asked them for the list of the Top 10 themes that people asked for. And now are the top top not themes, but the top 10 talks people asked for, from different teachers. And four of those top 10 had to do with fear. Representing I think, how big an issue it is for many people.

And I think that in addressing or looking at fear through the practice of mindfulness, it's important to remember that it's something to respect deeply. And just like with anger, and other kinds of emotions, that it's best not to take them as being unnecessary or unfortunate. But take them as, as something that deserves our respect. And what we're trying to do in mindfulness is to learn to bring a mindful attention, a special kind of awareness to them, and awareness, which is healing, helpful freeing something. And in thinking about fear, it's maybe useful to think of fear as a messenger. And you don't want to kiss it, you don't want to kill the messenger, I almost had kiss. So maybe that was a good, good slip, yeah, yes, we do want to kiss the fear. We want to get that close, get kind of intimate with it. But we don't want to kill the messenger. Because it's not the messenger, which is the issue, it's the message. And so fear is often an indication that there's something deeper in us, that needs our attention, that deserves our attention should get our attention. And that if we somehow, you know, blame the fear, have a negative versiv reaction to fear that it can just make the whole thing more difficult. I remember many years ago, Joseph Goldstein, teaching about fear, and he said something like, you know, if a young child is afraid you don't beat the child. So when you're afraid you don't get angry at yourself or Treat yourself negatively, like you're bad person for being afraid, that just kind of this counterproductive, but rather, to offer our respect to fear, care to fear as something that deserves our attention. And there's many ways in which you know, many kinds of fears that we will address as we sit in practice, because humans have many fears. The I don't think it's necessarily a top 10 fears or top five fears. But in the, in the teachings of the Buddha, he gives a list of five great fears. And which was maybe true back then. So the, the fear of loss of livelihood, the fear of loss of reputation, the fear of unusual states of mind, the fear of death, and the fear of public speaking. So, but you know, we know there's many more fears, there's fears of pain, fear of violence, fear of being homeless, fear of insecurity, all kinds of fears of insecurity. There's fears of rejection, there's fears of heights, fears of spiders, fears of flying physicists, you know, the whole, you know, basically it seems that humans can be afraid of just about anything, given a chance. There's billions of people on this planet, there's probably someone who's afraid of something and what most everything.

So to be able to turn towards fear and not be afraid of fear, I think is one of the functions of Learning mindfulness practice, to have the inner stability, the strength, the wisdom, the understanding, that supports us to turn towards the fear and not be afraid of it. And for some people, it's the, it's the fear of fear, which is their big challenge. And that keeps them recoiled from it or pulled away from it. And so one of the, you know, when you sit and meditate, for example, there can be developed over time I capacity sits, very calm, stable, kind of like sitting here like a mountain solid and kind of a little bit in a good way to kind of immovable. And in that state, our relationship to fear can be very different than if we're agitated and feeling vulnerable and not stable, and kind of, you know, feeling quite easily like we're about to collapse. And one of the functions of meditation is actually to provide that deep stability. So that we have the inner capacity to open to our fears to connect our fear to see it, without being afraid of it without getting agitated by it. So sometimes what's helpful with fear is not to address it directly, but to wait until we've created some degree of calm or stability within and some meditate or there might be other things you can do if you have an opportunity that can somehow change your state of mind, change your state of physical, calm or stability, so that you put yourself in a position where you're better able to address or look at fear. One of the great places to look at fear is on a meditation retreat, we're not only do we develop over time, a personal stability and calm that's greater than what we'd have in normal, ordinary life. But the environment tends to be fairly stable and calm and often kind of more conducive towards meeting the messengers meeting what's going on. And seeing it in a clear way or more independent way be freer way than we would if we get easily entangled with it. So there's a fairy tale that I think is works well for this kind of mindfulness approach. There was a princess, who was the, the monarchs of the realm arranged for her to marry a ugly, hideous monster. So this was a little bit disturbing for the princess. So she went to a wise woman and said, you know, what should I do when I can't marry this hideous monster. And the wise woman said, he go ahead with the marriage. And when you go to your, you know, wedding bed, we go, go, go do your wedding, do your marriage, but put on 10 wedding dresses. And when it's time to, you know, go to bed with the hideous monster. It's, tell the monster that for every dress you take off, it has to take off one layer of skin. So they do this little thing where she takes off gown and the monster takes off a layer of skin. And she's down and taken off the 10th one. Oh, the instructions from the wise woman was was Take off your 10 gowns and dresses and have the monster take off 10 layers of skin. When you've taken off your 10th dress, embrace the monster that was so she's down to she taken off her 10th dress. And then monsters taken off the 10th Slayer skin and the monsters just as hideous and ugly.

And so but the wise woman said then embrace the monster. So she went up and embrace and gave the monster a big hug. At which point the monster turned into a beautiful human being. And they live happily ever after. So you know, it's a fairy tale and you know a little unfortunate that she didn't just accept the monster for what the monster was, you know had had to change into human being. But, but still this idea. This fairy tale that it is both these parts the monster and the prince As parts of ourselves, and that sometimes we're afraid of parts of ourselves. And that part of the kind of healing of that is to sit still and begin taking off the layers. And with fear, there can be many layers instead, it's often the messenger. And so what is it a message of? What's the need that that's underneath it? What is it? What are the layers of emotions that go underneath? What are the layers of beliefs that come along underneath the fear that we have? There was a time in my life where I was afraid of people. And if someone asked me, I would say just afraid. But when I finally turned around to look at it, I saw that the fear had to do with fear, fear of rejection, I thought that they would tell me to go away and wouldn't have anything to do with me. And then if I looked underneath the fear of rejection, there was a fear that somehow I was inadequate, somehow I was off or wrong, I was the kind of person that was unlovable or something. And then as I went below that, I saw that I felt quite tender and vulnerable, without any interpretation, or what that was. And then I kind of sat with that player, that's wedding dress. And then I

took that off. And then I saw that I could sit there and be peaceful, and just be there in a peaceful open way. And that that was enough. And that somehow that peaceful, open way was not so didn't feel safe originally for me. And then it kind of fed into ideas that somehow I internalized or I learned or something that somehow I'm wrong, and that fed into ideas that I would, because of that I'd be rejected, and therefore I should be afraid of people. And so, you know, as I went down through the layers, I came to a place where it actually was quite good. If I'd killed the messenger, I wouldn't have kind of followed those layers down and ended up sitting in this peaceful place, that turned out to be a nice refuge for me. And that was an example of kind of going, if you use the metaphor of down, like from the surface consciousness, going down into the conscious and unconscious into the mind to deeper and deeper layers. And many times people's journey is that way. And so we started to surface kind of consciousness, and we run into our surface, emotions, issues, reactions, and anything. And so then we have, we address it, we kind of have to deal with those and work through them. And it can be, take a while to figure out how to find our way. But there are times when it's possible. And this is one of the advantages of meditation, that sometimes we can it's maybe an unfortunate word, because nowadays, it's a pejorative word, I think, or, you know, it's not, it's not acceptable anymore. But you can bypass it all. You know, it's called as you know, sometimes people call a spiritual bypass. It's valuable sometimes to do that. And because you can kind of pass pass by all that to get to a much deeper, more open, calm place, without having to work through all your complexes and issues and aversions and fears, and all that. So you kind of like you go down, you go deep, but you have to surface. And so then you address them as your surface. And, but then you have a different perspective of them. Because if you come down to the kind of some base place where it's peaceful, calm, where you feel, somehow have a friendly relationship to yourself, you'll feel somehow a place of security well being, openness, place of goodness, right, if things you can feel, kind of get down to the base of who you are.

And then if you look up and see the fear that's up there, look up and see some of the difficult things that are up there, then you have a whole different perspective on it, then there's a perspective of certain perspective of holistic perspective, or a more friendly perspective or a more perspective, that of ourselves, we're not so threatened by what we see, we're less likely to identify with it so strongly. So if we're going from the surface mind down, there might be so much ego so much self identity issues operating, that we might think that I'm not supposed to be afraid person. I'm meditating for a few years and I'm supposed to be a good Buddhist and be fearless. And so it gets much more complicated. But if we could kind of bypass all that to come down to a more peaceful place where there is no need for self identity, there's no we're not caught up in ideas of self and proving who we are. All that and then as we come from that perspective, and come up and address the fear Then it gets much simpler. We're not complicating it with all these reactions and thoughts. And so then we kind of look at the fear and hold it in a more generous way more open way, in a way where you don't feel afraid of it or aversive to it. And that's kind of what we're looking for. And when we do, vipassana practice, is how to be present for fear, without a version, without fear or the fear, without complicating it with stories with assigning a meaning to it, I'm afraid therefore, I'm this kind of person, I'm afraid, therefore always be afraid. but rather to be able to hold the fear in a simple way. And one of the ways of saying this, that I think is a little bit evocative and kind of a little bit like a Zen koan, like a little bit of an enigmatic statement that maybe you want to understand what exactly it means when I say it. But you'll remember it, I hope, and you'll kind of what is that? How do I do this? You know, what does this mean? And it's, and it's a very different approach to fear than most people think about fear. I think most people want to get rid of their fear. So the fear quickly come to a place where they're no longer afraid. The approach of the past in their practice, initially kind of pure practice just being present for it. The task is to help the fear, be safe. Your job is to help your fear feel safe. Your fears afraid, right. That's the nature of it. And what would it like, wouldn't be like, if you approached your fear with your attention with your care with your heart, and allowed it to be there, and you reassured it. It's okay right now. It's okay, I'm here with you. Now, this

works best, of course, hopefully, in a know in the place where you do your meditation practice, hopefully, when in those times and places where you meditate, there's no immediate danger. So that right then, and there might be it's okay to, you know, to hold the fear in a kind, loving way or caring way, open way, help the fear, feel safe. So then once it's once the fear, feel safe, there's a few things that happens. One is that you can see it more clearly. Because as long as you have an agenda about the fear, as long as you have a judgment, that fear has to go away, and you're trying to kind of fix it, you don't actually see it very clearly. And you're less likely to see a deeper layer, you know, you're less likely to see how the fear is a messenger for something maybe more important. So the to let the fear feel safe, hopefully let you see it more clearly. The other thing that it does, is that when the fear feels safe, then the fear can evolve, or transform, or move or heal in the way that it needs to do. Not necessarily what you think is supposed to happen. And it's hard to know, it's really sometimes it's very hard to know what's supposed to happen with our in our life. And so to step back and kind of let the fear be safe and have room, breathing room, to be seen and be felt, then I begins to change and shift and move into something else.

The other thing that happens when we help the fear be safe, just like be there is a simple psychological, kind of simple, but a psychological technique that's used sometimes for fear, which is exposure therapy. You expose yourself to what you're afraid of, maybe initially in small dosages, your phobia, and slowly kind of learn to relax around it and not be so afraid. So we can do that also kind of for you know, directly by being with the fear itself. And sometimes being with the fear offering a fear safety. And we're being exposing ourselves to what's going on. And rather than recoiling or getting agitated or being by it, it's kind of like we're exposing ourselves to it. And one of the things we're doing is learning to be doing so as to be more comfortable with the fear. And in doing so maybe we get less afraid next time the issue comes up. But as we become more comfortable with a fear, we learn how to hold it and be present for it without getting triggered in busy thoughts or agitated thoughts. And that's a great skill to learn. Because it's you know, it's it does happen easily in life in real life. That is circumstances happen, where we get afraid. There's all kinds of dangers in this world of ours. I I don't want to be Little the dangers that exist in our world that definitely are dangerous. And so. But if we're in a certain kind of way, familiar with what fear feels like, if we've had spent time with our fear, and gotten a certain kind of kind of comfort with being afraid, not being afraid of fear, then when real fear arises, we might be less likely to be confused or spin out or closed down or contract. In such a way that we we freeze, or such a way that we feel the only options we have is fight or flight. It's kind of the gut instincts we have. And maybe we have an ability then to recognize it. There it is, I'm afraid. And I now I know how to be with fear. Let me let me settle back, let's be a little bit quiet here. If I can, then make it stable in my body and feel my body. And stay, try to stay tight and breathe and stay over calm. And let me assess the situation more carefully. Let me take a deeper look at this situation, what's really going on here? You know, is it is what's the nature of this fear, and what's the wise way of responding to it. Maybe it needs a response of some kind. And so what would be the wise thing to say or do or do something. So the theory here is that if you get comfortable with being afraid, it isn't that you're comfortable with being afraid. So you can just be afraid more often. But you'll be comfortable with fear so that the fear doesn't have the upper hand. The fear doesn't control you. But you have an ability to kind of be in charge in a sense. While the fear is there, you're not you don't give into it, you don't, you know, automatic on automatic pilot around the fear, attack, or run away or freeze up. So when fear arises in meditation, then it's useful to me, dare I say, welcome it to say, Oh, this is my chance, this is not a mistake, it's not a problem that I'm afraid, you know, if you thought you're supposed to sit in some kind of blissful ninth in, you know, ninth jhana or something, and then you know, the purpose was to have some deep, deep abiding sense of something, and you're now you're a failed Buddhist, because you're not in some, you know, wonderful concentrated state, then the fear is not going to be welcomed. And you're not going to take the time to learn the lessons for it. And it might be actually more useful in the course of a full life, to sit with fear, than it is to sit in bliss. And so I'm not saying go look for fear, don't, you know, make it up, right? Don't

you know, go sit, you know, you know, in front of the layer of the mountain line. But if you sit and meditate, or if you have an occasion to be afraid, and then sit down to meditate with it.

Then if it arises and is there, you don't have to see it as an unwelcome visitor. Make it a welcome visitor, so you can learn so you can be present so you can learn the skills so you can kind of begin finding a new way of being with it. So you can discover how you are with fear. That might be the first task. Are you averse to it? Are you angry that it's there you're afraid of fear? Do you assign meaning to it? Do you have stories associated with it? Does it arise out of the stories you tell yourselves? Does it arise out of beliefs that you have about all kinds of things of what you need and what you have to have and nature of life. There's a whole you know, a wide range of things to learn. Not that you have to do a lot of busy analysis and figuring out. But over over time, if you have an occasion to meditate with fear and be present for it, you'll start learning these different dimensions of who you are. And it's very helpful to do I just very useful. And I think in some ways it makes mindfulness and meditation more realistic makes it help us address the real issues of our lives in a better way. And then over time we get wiser about it. Over time, we learn to have this kind of unusual kind of comfort with fear so that we can not fall into the abyss your reactions around it. So to help your fear, feel safe. There's a story from Chinese Buddhism of a very good Chinese painter. It was up against his Canvas, making a painting a dragon, a ferocious dragon I think or a tiger. I forgot what it was and so he was up, you know, close during the details. And then at some point, he stepped back 10 feet to look at the dragon Tiger he had made. And it was so realistic, he got afraid and ran away. So how often are we that painter? How often are we kind of telling ourselves a story and we're spinning a tale in our minds. And that what frightens us is not a real life event, but rather the story we make up this tale. And I think there's some degree anxiety is often a result of a story, we're telling ourselves, that anxiety often is not much about an imminent danger, but little bit than imagined danger, a danger in the future, something perceived, and if it's in the future, the role of the imagination is part of the picture. So if we sit down and start getting quiet and looking at what's going on, and we start looking at what's going on, in my mind, what stories Am I telling myself? What's the role of story, storytelling, in the reactions and emotions that I have? It's quite, quite remarkable, I think, just be able to sit in meditation, and get a little bit of calm and settled. And so the body is a little bit more open and settled than usual. And then, for whatever reason, the mind in a moment, will think of something, a story, future idea or something. And then fear arises. And you're going to feel it in your belly, you feel your own physiology changes, your breathing changes, and butterflies in the stomach and tension arises, contraction happens. And you're minding your own business, nothing was happening. But sitting here quietly, you know, and suddenly, is always physiological reactions that arise because of the thoughts or story your mind's telling you. This is a fascinating thing to discover. And to see that relationship, because it's possible, occasionally, that in real life situations when you're with other people, that the fear that you might feel in this situation is not there because of what the person's other people are doing. But your mind is making up stories about what's happening, interpreting what's going on. And as you learn to pay attention to this in meditation, how these subtle shifts and movement, maybe you can start seeing the role of your, the mind's painter, how you how your imagination and stories brings up fear, anxiety, that may be independent of actually what's happening in the moment. Fears a messenger.

And in Buddhism, there's a clear distinction between two kinds of fear between fears, which are unhelpful unskillful that are suffering, and fears, which are helpful fears, which are beneficial. And the understanding in Buddhism is that a healthy sound human being will have healthy fears. So it isn't that we're looking to be completely fear free in Buddhism, but there are healthy kinds of fears. And the healthy fears have to do with a fear of causing harm in the world. A fear of doing unethical things, which is a saying the same thing. The so and what I've seen is the more settled and more cleansed or clear or free or the heart becomes, the more we have a compass for more we have a guide, or we have a



reference point to notice when we're going to do something that we would regret that we started doing something that would be unethical. Because to do something that's intentionally going to cause harm for other people. It actually causes us to lose and contract to kind of violence to what's beautiful, what's clean, what's free, within us. And so this fear, you know, if you come up against this ethical junction and feel this fear, oh, no, I can't do that. I'm afraid of that. I'm afraid to even getting close to that, that in Buddhism considered the healthy kind of fear to have it protects you and it protects others. It's called the guardian of the world, that kind of fear. And it'd be good if more people have that fear. That kind of healthy fear for fear of causing harm things. That which keeps us ethical, a little bit. The Then finally, if we can become someone, a person who does not cause harm in the world, not gonna say things and do things which hurt other people, or at least not intentionally, then we can become a person who offers one of the great gifts to the world. And this is the gift of fearlessness. So not only do we help our own fear, to feel safe from ourselves, but the idea that other people no longer have to fear us. And this is a wonderful thing, that people don't have to fear you, you might not think that you're a dangerous person, you can't imagine that people would be afraid of you. But when I was 20, I think I was afraid of everyone. Regardless of whether they were really frightening or not, they just they breathe and walked on two legs. And that was enough for me. And I can tell you stories of how you know, I froze at times I remember going in, in freshmen in college, so I guess I was 1819. And I actually took us English class. And one of the requirements of the mandatory English class was English composition, because we wrote essays and things was once during the semester, you had to go and have go to the office hours with the professor. And that was, you know, terrifying for me. And so I went in and sat down, and chair opposite the professor at his desk. And I promptly disappeared. And I was wondering why they fester kept looking at the wall right here. Because the wall was right behind me as it like, and I don't have any memory. And so at some point, the next thing I knew I was walking down the hallway. And I had no idea what happened when it transpired. No idea if I said anything, we had any conversation at all, nothing. I had disassociated because of my fear. And then I'll tell you another story that may be hopefully encouraging for you. And, you know, in some ways he is, you know, in this Buddhist context, you know, and me being his ferocious teacher. The first time I had a one on one private practice discussion interview with a Buddhist teacher, I was so afraid, with Mel Weitzman, my Zen teacher that I couldn't speak. And so the first one on one instruction I got from my Zen teachers was Gil, breathe deeply.

So I've come a little bit since that time, I'm not really afraid of public speaking anymore. Maybe I should be a little bit more. So here I hope that this talk will encourage you to take a second look at your fear, and a third look, and fourth look, to stop and pay attention to it. And I'd like to suggest there's kind of a goldmine to be discovered. If you take time to get familiar with your fear and your look at it and make space for it. And then don't dismiss it, don't override it. Don't think that the right thing to do is just courageously burst through it and overcome it. And that's, you know, overcome it by just kind of overriding it. That certainly has its time in place. But But if you really want to go kind of deeply and address your life, stop and take a look at it. And you'll discover all kinds of layers and depths. And some of you will discover that fear is a much more pervasive emotion in your life than you realized. And if that's the case, congratulate yourself. Because if you have pervasive fear apprehension that underlies your life, how you think how you act, how you're on the world, it's much better to know it, that that's the case then not know it. So if that's what you discover, congratulate yourself, and this is the beginning of a new life a new way or finding a way forward. There is hope. There is practice there is freedom, there is a way to no longer have fear be debilitating or get in the way. And I'm confident all of you can do it. Absolutely. But it takes time and it takes and one of the many things that can help but prior to doing this practice steadily, steadily, meaning your life as it is over and over again, looking more deeply at what's going on helping your inner life feel safe. And so it comes out and shows itself to you, is a phenomenally powerful way of becoming free. So please be afraid we have about five minutes. If the

talk like this, maybe there's some burning question or concern or something you're afraid of that you want to bring up. And so we can take a couple of minutes. For one or two.

This is not something that I am afraid of. But I was sitting, we were giving a talk another girl and myself and she was actually giving the talk. And I was sitting there and she said, letting go of all your attachments to self. And I felt this ripple of fear got through me. And I was delighted, because that I could actually see that, because I know there's a lot of fears that I don't see. But that just came for me. And I think it's because of my being able to be with myself. Nice. Great, thank you all for that.

I said, that's wonderful to hear a little testimonial, thank you. Someone else. testimonials are nice little stories.

I just had an image based on you were talking about embracing the fear from a deep place, instead of looking down being up. And the image that I had is if I'm above the water, it may look dark. But when I'm under the water, looking up with the sun shining, there's an illumination there. That isn't from when I'm looking down. Nice, very nice. I appreciate you.

When I was it, I spent a lot of time in the water ocean when I was a kid. And I love to go down six feet and look up when I talk to be waves and agitation. But it was always peaceful down below them. And I'd hold my breath as long as I could look up and feel that peacefulness here and watch the

Yes, thank you.

I'll make this very fast. So I have a fear of bringing up a different view, I have a fear of bringing up a different subject kind of in a personal. So if anyone is in equally, if anyone is interested, I have some little half page fliers here about what's happening in Yemen, we're going to be going to see our congress people to great possibilities, the United States will stop funding that war. So I'm sorry to bring up a political thing. But that is happening.

Take one more question or comment.

I have a relative my brother who I think has a lot of fear and kind of issues and concerns he needs to work through. And I kind of think like, Wow, it would be really helpful if he would have the practice Buddhist practice. But that's easy for me to think and not necessarily easy for him to do or to influence. And I'm just kind of wondering if you have any advice if there's, you know, in terms of loved ones who you think could benefit from this practice in terms of what may be the good way to support them or encourage them or something.

probably the safest thing I could say is that hopefully you can make yourself a safe person for him. So that even if he has a lot of fear that he doesn't feel like you're judging him or that you're trying to fix him or you're telling him somehow that this is wrong or bad or something like that, that he feels accepted for who he is. That's probably the best thing you could you could do. And then if there's openness to some suggestion, you can fit you in, I suppose you could have a conversation and explore possibilities. You have to be a little bit careful. You know, I'm glad you brought this up. So I can say this that. You know, there's so many different kinds of fear and so many different dimensions of how it works for people. And especially if it's chronic fear, deep fear. There's issues have connected some very, very deep issues and in human beings, both. And sometimes if not best address some of these issues with meditation, for example, people who go through major forms of trauma, it's hard in meditation sometimes to respond to it, and sometimes occasionally is counterindicated. Even, because the very any attention we

bring to it can just make the trauma be reactivated. And people panic and things like that. And, or there might be physiological things, reasons for why there's fear and, and nothing to do with men, nothing about meditation with particularly help maybe or even psychology, just maybe some medication. So there's, it's such a broad range of things. So if someone has really deep chronic issue around it, you know, it's much harder to know how to support them because of, we could easily say simplistic things I'll just meditate or, you know, do something. And sometimes professional help is needed to really address it. But I think that if you can make yourself safe, so that person, your relative can just relax a little bit around you and just be afraid and not have to worry about you. Thank you. Great. So thank you all very much and hopefully this gives you something to look at