

Fear (3 of 5) Investigating Fear

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threat, danger, rejection, afraid, message, aversion, anxiety

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Yesterday, I talked about holding fear carefully so that it feels safe. Another way of talking about this is to be present for fear and offer our attention to fear without reacting to it, being for it or against it, being impacted and influenced by it, or being pushed around by it. To learn the ability to be present with being afraid and, in a certain way, comfortable and at peace with it. Being uncomfortable and at peace with fear is possible.

What that does is begin to change our relationship with fear, and it gives us a chance to look at it more deeply. It also allows fear the chance to do its own process. The dharma in us, the heart in us, has a way of healing and moving towards health if we can get out of the way enough, while at the same time, being attentive and present.

The wonderful ingredient of this practice is to have the capacity to be present, to be attentive to something, without interfering with it, fixing it, changing it, or judging it. It's almost like our attention gives room for something to unfold, unwind, and evolve the way it needs to evolve.

Fear is a great subject to study, look at, and respect. It's helpful to think of fear as a message. To ask: What is this message? What is fear trying to tell me? What's it about? These are very profound questions that are supported by our capacity to be present. If we don't know how to be present in a relaxed, open, accepting way, chances are that when we're attending to fear, we're bringing with us our fear of fear, our aversion to fear, and our stories about fear, rather than just seeing fear in a simple, direct way.

What is the message of fear? Sometimes fear is a message that something is dangerous. When fear has to do with something in the present moment that is clearly not right or is off, maybe that should get us to stop, pause, and take a look at the situation. Our minds and hearts know more than what we consciously know. Our mental processing is quite complex and involves much more than what we see on the surface of the conscious mind. We're taking in a lot of information from the environment that we don't really process consciously. When there is fear about something that is off, it might be something to pay attention to.

I've been in a city when suddenly there was a clear message: "This situation is not safe. A person is following me. I may not be safe." Then I would change what I was doing. I remember once thinking, "This is not good." I didn't know what it was, but something about the situation told me it was not safe. So I walked into a grocery store. I think it was a wise choice. So sometimes fear is a message that there's danger.

With fear, there may be no immediate danger. Sometimes we can call that kind of fear anxiety, which is about something that we're imagining. It might be something coming in the future. There may also be some deep understanding that there is something to fear regarding where we're going or what we're doing. So to stop and feel the fear, take it as a message, and try to study it. What is this about? Can you understand more about it if there's an opportunity to reflect on it?

There are two very useful directions for investigation around fear. One is, what are we threatened by? And then more profoundly, meditators can ask: What is threatened here inside of me? What about me is being threatened by danger?

What is the threat that seems dangerous here? Is it, in fact, a mountain lion about to pounce? Or is it fear of rejection in a social situation, like "those people aren't going to like me for some reason"? That might be; it sometimes happens. But if there's a fear of rejection in every social situation that you go in – that is the threat – then it might be interesting to look at what is being threatened here. What is the common denominator that you bring to all those different social situations? What is it that is in danger in you? Sometimes you can discover very interesting things there.

I had a fear of rejection when I was young. As I looked more and more at what was being threatened, I did see it to be a lot of my ideas and imaginations of what would happen if I was rejected. That there was a cascade, a domino effect, in my imagination of things. But as I looked more deeply at what was really being threatened inside of me and in this present moment, I found that there was nothing. There was a place inside of well-being that was untouchable by whether or not people rejected me. That made a huge difference. It started to shift something in me about the fear that I had. It no longer carried much force on me. Or I didn't invest a lot of importance in it. It was still there, but I could shrug it off. "Okay, there it is again, my old friend."

I knew a kind of confidence and sense of well-being that I could protect or stay close to. I knew that it didn't have to be threatened by what other people did. In fact, I learned that the real threat is not what happens in the world, but in my own mind and what I do about it. I could see that the real danger was the fear of rejection itself. The real danger was the contraction I had: the resistance, freezing, collapse, and attachment that I had around something. And the real danger, the fear of rejection, was in my own mind.

That was powerful for me because then I could practice with myself. I wouldn't have to get everyone to like me or stop rejecting me. I could practice with my mind. It came to the point: "Well, if they reject me, it was okay. If they don't reject me, that's okay." I had worked through my reactivity around the whole issue. I had found this place inside of peace, of well-being, that I didn't want to sully. I felt that it was important to protect. So the whole Buddhist practice was then learning how to work with this mind of mine: letting go of the attachments, letting go of what I was holding on to in my mind, letting go of the reactivity that I had there.

So to ask the question, what is the threat really? And to understand that. There may be many answers to that question. Don't settle for the first answer: "Yes, I'm threatened that people reject me." What is really the threat? What's really the danger if they do that? What am I afraid of? Maybe there are layers of answers to that question. Sometimes as you go through the layers, you'll find that the real threat is in your own mind surprisingly.

Sometimes you'll see the real threat is out in the world. And because you got to see it well and understood it, that that's where the danger is, you're in a better position to address the danger out there.

What is being threatened? – that's a profound question. Even when there are world threats that need to be addressed and taken care of, at the same time, there might be aspects of what's being threatened inside that is the domain of practice. It might show you something very profound about what you're doing extra, what is not needed in the heart or mind. It might show you the very things that you're holding on to, such as your attachments, what you are trying to protect, how you're trying to prove yourself, how you're trying to protect a certain kind of inner story about yourself. You start seeing that that's being threatened. Or your desire for security, your desire to be seen in a particular way.

So what is being threatened? What is the threat? And to repeat what I said at the beginning, this investigation is a lot easier when we've learned how to hold the fear carefully and mindfully, helping the fear feel safe. Then we're in a better position to ask those questions in a good way.

You might try this over the next 24 hours: look at things you're anxious or afraid of, and take some quality time reflecting on what is really the threat. Maybe it should be plural: What are the threats? Where are the threats coming from? What is really the danger? And then, what is being threatened in you? What do you fear will happen to you or your life? Maybe there are many layers to understanding what is being threatened.

I'm confident that whatever you discover will bring greater wisdom to understand how to navigate and live with your fear. I hope you have just the right fear today, just enough to be able to do this exploration. Thank you