

Fear (4 of 5) Non-Identification With Fear

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Continuing with the theme of fear, I want to discuss not taking fear personally, or to say it another way, not identifying with fear. Fear will occur, but by identifying with it fully, one becomes “I am afraid.” Sometimes it can be wise to see it this way – “I am afraid” – in order to own up to fear and acknowledge it, especially if it’s something that’s been denied or avoided. To say, “Yes, I am angry” or “I am happy” may be appropriate to really let it become fuller.

But this sense of “I am” is also dangerous. The identification of “this is who I am” is also a source of a lot of suffering. Part of the delight of meditation practice and the freedom that comes from it is a healthy form of disidentification. This is not a denial of anything or not paying attention to anything. Rather, everything that is happening has full permission to be there and be included in our awareness. But we don’t add the idea “this defines who I am” because once we define ourselves by something, it tends to be a magnet for ideas of what the self is: who we’re supposed to be, how we should be, what we should not be, what we should be able to do. There are all these implications that ripple out.

If we just allow something to be without identifying with it, it tends to be a lot simpler. We can still be responsible for it. But I prefer to avoid the word “responsibility,” and instead, divide it into two words: response ability. This means we are able to respond appropriately.

So, in terms of fear, it isn’t that we want to dismiss fear or diminish its value, but it is possible to not identify or define ourselves by the fear. When we define ourselves by fear, sometimes the fear is magnified and it becomes all-encompassing. It’s easier for it to be overwhelming.

Intense fear might overwhelm us anyway, even if we don’t want to take it personally. But there are times when fear and anxiety is not so strong that it’s possible to have a shift in the mind – to go from “I am anxious” to “There is anxiety here,” or “I am afraid” switches to “There is fear here.” In some ways, that’s very respectful of the fear and anxiety because now we can bring our attention to the fear and anxiety in and of itself. “I am afraid” is kind of nebulous, like a big cloud. Where is the fear then? It’s everything. Sometimes it can be so much so that the whole world feels scary.

The fear can be that intense sometimes. But even with that, there’s a way of recognizing, “Oh, there’s chaos; everything feels afraid” as opposed to “I am afraid,” which makes a little more room to breathe and be attentive to it, not be enmeshed or caught in it. The primary reason to not take things personally or identify with things that arise is so there’s more room to be wise, respectful, and appropriate with how we are with things, rather than it being a confusing mass of stuff. So with fear, it can be simple, the practice of intentionally switching in your mind from “I am afraid” to “fear is present; there’s fear here.” And then to ask, where is that fear? And, generally, if there’s fear, it’s someplace in the body.

Maybe the fear feels like it’s in the whole body, but where is the locus? Where is it felt most strongly? And if you find such a place, that is the place to bring your cupped hands of attention and help that fear feel safe. If you can find the locale within your body where fear is strongest, then it’s sometimes easier to dis-identify with it, to not identify strongly as “I am afraid.” But rather: “There’s fear here. There’s fear in the chest. There’s fear in my legs, I want to bolt.” And then there’s more breathing room for the experience.

Then it’s also possible to accompany the fear, to be present and attentive to what’s here. There’s a world of difference between being the fear and accompanying the fear (being attentive to it, being aware of it). I think fear needs our companionship because fear is always a message. We want to understand what the message is. Sometimes we see and understand the message better if we don’t get enmeshed and caught in the fear.

Sometimes the message is “there’s danger,” but as we study what the threat is, it turns out there’s no threat at all. We’re carrying with us anxiety, conditioning from the past to view every situation with fear. In that situation, the fear really needs to be accompanied. Someone needs to be present with it, hold it kindly, help it feel safe, and not push it away, not deny it, not criticize it. “Oh, I see you. Let me be with you; let me accompany you.” And

I would suggest that is harder to do if we identify with the fear: “Oh, I’m afraid. This is so difficult.”

It’s not easy to do what I’m saying here. But with time, as the mindfulness gets stronger, as our ability to relax becomes deeper, as our ability to see clearly what’s happening in our experience, at some point, there is a shift from identification and defining ourselves by something to just accompanying something, as a subset of the whole, as a piece of nature, a phenomenon that’s arising. It’s possible to accompany fear in this way.

Over time, as we begin to become more and more disidentified with fear, rather than us accompanying fear, a nice movement would be that fear accompanies us. This means that we can live our lives without being inhibited by fear. We know fear is present, but it just sits on our left shoulder perhaps. It sits there and accompanies us. We’re not denying the fear or ignoring it, but it’s not interfering with anything. Fear is not directing the show or directing our thinking and our concerns. It’s just a companion. We know there is fear, but we live our lives fully, even with it.

This movement towards not defining ourselves by fear is powerful. And if I can be kind of generous with my use of language, perhaps, I can say that we’re not taking fear personally. What I mean by not taking fear personally is not defining ourselves by it or not taking full responsibility for it, like “This says something about me, and I have to do something. I’m a bad person.”

You might try this today if you feel some anxiety or fear. It probably works best with something that’s not too strong. But some of you might have some intense fear that you might find it interesting to try to do this with. See if there’s some way you can shift from it being “I am afraid” or “This is my fear” to “There’s fear; fear is here.” It’s kind of impersonal. Perhaps, the fear is accompanying you, like a little person sitting on your shoulder. The fear is not you exactly, but it’s there and part of the scene. See if you can see the shift that happens when you don’t define yourself by the fear, but consider it as something that’s accompanying you. It’s *part* of the whole. It’s not the whole. So freeing ourselves from this coagulation of self, of self-definition, gives us some breathing room.

One of the shortcuts to peace is not defining ourselves by our experience, not asserting a self-definition of *me*. Of course, there’s a *you* in a certain kind of way, but when we start living that way, it becomes a magnet for so many different ideas and assumptions about what it is to be a self that it can be overwhelming. It can be one of the major sources of suffering in our lives.

I hope that your fear appreciates being accompanied today. I hope your fear appreciates its chance to be there and not be appropriated by you. Thank you.