

# Fear (5 of 5) Protecting What Is Important

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We come to the last and fifth talk on fear. I hope this week I've been able to offer you some new perspectives on understanding fear, and living with and practicing with fear.

Today, the subject is the wisdom of fear. Part of the wisdom of fear – how to understand that fear can be wise – is when we consider one of the functions of fear to be protection. It's an attempt to protect something. So, what are we protecting? What is being threatened?

Some things are worth protecting; some things are not worth protecting. There is a notion in Buddhism that there is healthy fear and unhealthy fear, helpful fear and unhelpful fear. So to have a categorical attitude towards fear as being wrong or bad is not so useful. What's useful is to practice with fear: to normalize fear, to not identify with fear, to learn to hold fear with kindness so you can see it and know it. It's helpful to have fear sit on your shoulder and accompany you rather than *be* you. I've talked about all those this week.

It's also important to be able to look deeply at fear. Is this fear healthy? Is it helpful? Is this fear protecting me in an important way? Is it protection? Or is it the opposite – am I actually more in danger by having this fear?

Some fears and anxieties, especially anxieties that are quite strong, probably put us in greater danger than if we don't have them. We're more likely to make mistakes. We're more likely to act impulsively. Some anxieties are self-fulfilling. If we're anxious something is going to happen, that very anxiety makes it more likely to happen. For example, if you're afraid of a dog, the dog is more likely to attack you. So the more anxiety we have about the dog, we want to protect ourselves, but the very movement of anxiety keeps us from being protected.

We have to kind of look at what we are afraid of here. Is the fear healthy or not healthy? If it's healthy fear (we're protecting something worthwhile), then it can function as motivation. There's energy in fear, and that energy can motivate us to protect what needs to be protected. You might put a lock on your door, for example, if that's what is going to keep you safe. Sometimes it's to practice careful self-monitoring so that you don't succumb to unhelpful states of mind: anxiety, anger, hostility, or greed. You don't succumb to attachments that might even be the source of the fear itself. So healthy fear protects what needs protecting and can be protected.

It's helpful to protect. So what are some of the things that are helpful and healthy to protect? Certainly, we want to protect our ethical integrity. There can be fear of being caught doing something unethical – being afraid of our own conscience. Fear of wrongdoing can be healthy: "I don't want to lie." That keeps us from getting into those situations.

The deeper and more peaceful meditators tend to become, the more likely they're going to have fear of somehow harming themselves or others with their ethics. Fear of causing harm is a healthy fear. But when it is anxious and neurotic, that might not be helpful. When fear of causing harm is healthy, it's like the heart sings when it doesn't cause harm. The heart stops singing when we think about causing harm or think we have caused harm. So that's worth staying close to and protecting.

Then there's a sense of well-being we get – whatever that is. As we practice, as we go through our lives, there are times when we feel a degree of peace, happiness, and connectedness that is nourishing and supportive and brings us joy and delight. That's worth protecting. It's remarkable how easy it is to give it up. How easy it is to get distracted and caught up in very petty concerns that can wipe away the sense of balance, inner strength, or peace we might have. It's worth protecting that.

How do we protect that sense of well-being? We might protect it by being careful with what we watch on TV. We might be careful about who we spend time with or how much time we spend with people. We might be careful about where we go or the activities we do. Some activities, like watching a shopping channel or looking at catalogs, might stimulate unhealthy desire and attachment that stirs up and leads us to lose the contentment we had before we looked at the catalog.

So the wisdom of fear is understanding that fear is trying to protect something. Is what it is protecting worthwhile? Is it appropriate? Is it helpful for us?

There is this quote by Krishnamurti, which used to be read quite a bit. "There is fear as long as you want to be secure – secure in your marriage, secure in your job, in your position, in your responsibility, secure in your ideas, in your beliefs, secure in your relationship to the world or in your relationship to God. The moment the mind seeks security or gratification in any form, at any level, there is bound to be fear."

So there can be an attachment to security, to a certainty, in a world that has much more uncertainty than we often will admit. All these things we try to hold onto for our security – is that really the right place to feel secure?

For the Buddha, the ultimate security, the ultimate safety, is found in letting go, in peace, in non-attachment, non-clinging. That can make us feel very vulnerable and challenged. But it is possible to find strength, courage, and stability in non-clinging, non-attachment, and realize that it is portable. We can learn how to take that with us in all the insecure, uncertain situations in life.

Life is uncertain. There are dangers in life. But the biggest danger is what we do to ourselves through our attachments, our karma, our actions, through our dispositions of mind to hate, be greedy, or caught up in something so that we lose ourselves in anxiety.

There is a place of security within that is worth protecting, finding, and getting close to. It's a place within that cannot be threatened. No matter what happens in the world, that place is not touched. And to be centered there, to know that, is the ability to go through the world without fear.

But until we get there, we want to protect and be careful with any hints or sense of inner well-being. This is worth protecting because we're moving towards freedom. We're moving to the place where we're bringing the greatest health to ourselves, the greatest spiritual health, and the greatest freedom to our hearts.

Fear is an all-too-human experience. It wants to protect us. Fear is kind of a healthy movement of protecting something, so we don't want to dismiss it. We want to be friends with our fear, connect to it, and see it deeply. As we see fear deeply and are present for it, at its very root is probably a desire for ultimate safety.

Many fears are misunderstandings of what's really important. Hopefully, meditation connects us to what is most important, and as we go into the world, we don't fear things that are not important. There are plenty of things we might fear that we don't have to worry about.

I'd like to end with a quote from Martin Luther King, Jr. that brings this topic of fear into our social domain. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote: "People fail to get along because they fear each other; they fear each other because they don't know each other; they don't know each other because they have not communicated with each other."

So to the degree to which we are afraid of others, maybe we haven't really gotten to know them. Maybe we haven't let them know us. One benefit of becoming wise with fear is developing real communication between people because it doesn't interfere with our ability to communicate, connect, and have real friendships with people.

May you take time to become wise about your fear, even courageous around it. Thank you.