

Attitudes (2 of 5) From Fear to Being Present

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Hello and welcome to the second talk on the topic of attitudes. This week I'm pairing up an attitude that is not very helpful for us with an attitude that is helpful. Here I'm focusing not so much on an attitude of the moment, which we might not like: we're impatient, or we feel frustrated with something, and it only lasts while we're present for that particular activity. I'm talking about something that's more pervasive in our lives.

Today the topic is fear.

One of the advantages (and maybe challenges) of doing mindfulness meditation practice, especially when on retreat where we practice bringing attention and being mindful all day, is that we start seeing how often we get caught. We start to see the patterns of what our mind is thinking or our emotions are feeling. Many of us discover that there's a much more pervasive level of fear or anxiety throughout our lives than we realized. It's the background to all the other kinds of concerns we have. Being pervasive, it can influence the way we think, the way we behave, and even the way we physically look at the world. We can be looking at the world through the eyes of anxiety, of fear, of apprehension.

There's a lot of wisdom in bringing attention, care, and maybe even love to our fear. One of the roles of mindfulness, really being present for anxiety, is to help our anxiety feel safe so we don't spin out even more when we touch into our fear. Instead, we allow our fear to be there so that it can begin to relax. I think of fear as secondary, unless there's some imminent danger. I think a lot of chronic anxiety is secondary to something deeper that needs our attention. The avenue to that, in classic mindfulness meditation, is to learn how to be present for fear or anxiety, so that it can begin to relax and reveal to you what's deeper.

For today, I would like to suggest that an alternative to the pervasive attitude of anxiety, apprehension, or fear that we are carrying with us is having a clear sense of being present in an embodied, physical way. Even if we don't feel confident or strong, or we lack a sense of stability and presence, we can assume it with our body by adopting a physical posture that says: "Here I am. I'm present."

That doesn't mean that we have to go toward the thing we're afraid of. We don't have to resolve it. We can even take a few steps back. If there's a social situation where we feel anxious, we don't have to be in the middle of it. We can stand on the edges of the group. The point is to not give in to the fear or apprehension, not let it condition us or influence us. Instead, we can recognize that it's there and then offer our presence to the situation, offering a clear statement that we are taking our place here and now. If we're standing, we're standing our ground; if we're sitting, we're taking our place, like this is our throne. This is where we belong, sitting here upright and dignified. We're not resolving the fear, but we're not acting from the fear or addressing the things we're afraid of directly. We're just not cowering or shrinking or being preoccupied by the fear. We offer our presence: we're here.

One version of this that I learned was that when I noticed how much fear I had, I tried to be counterphobic. I couldn't do that initially, but at some point, I had the confidence and ability to turn towards the things I was afraid of and take a step towards them, sometimes literally. That made a world of difference for me. I learned not to allow the fear or apprehension to dictate my posture, my voice, or my behavior, but to break through it. This idea of taking our place, standing upright and strong, or sitting upright and really present is not to deny that there's apprehension and fear. We just don't want to let it unduly influence us or affect the choices we make about our

posture, what we say, how we look, or what we look at. We don't look away or avoid things excessively. We try to really take our place here and offer our presence.

I'm offering this suggestion as Thanksgiving approaches for many of us in the United States. There might be social situations at Thanksgiving gatherings that bring us anxiety. The objective is not to resolve those, but not to cower either: not to go forward or backward, but to take our place here: "I'm here, definitively. I don't know what to do, but I do know how to be present. I don't know what to say, but I do know how to be quiet in a way that feels like I'm really taking my place. I count, I have value, I'm here." Other people might not treat you differently because of it, but it might make a world of difference to have that as a practice rather than the implicit or unintentional practice of fear or anxiety.

When fear or anxiety has become an attitude, it means that we have spent too much time being conditioned by chronic thoughts that there's danger, there's fear, and there are problems. There certainly are in this world of ours. I don't want to deny the reality of some of the things we're anxious about, but it's not necessary to be anxious all the time when the danger is not imminent. If we are, then it's conditioning us and strengthening this pervasive attitude. There's a loop between having an attitude of fear that influences us to have thoughts about fear, which create more feelings of fear. Sometimes this spirals into a panic attack. We need to find a gentle way to break that loop by not always giving in to the fear, but taking our place, standing up, and being really present.

This is different than just being mindful of situations. When we are relying only on mindfulness, we don't see how much our attention is unintentionally, maybe even subconsciously, being shaped or influenced by the fear itself. We can break the cycles of fear, the mold we're stuck in, by sitting up – clear, strong, present, with a sense of steadiness and stability. Maybe that sense is not very strong, but it is an alternative to letting the attitude of fear have the upper hand, or have too much influence on us. I'm not suggesting that this is easy in many circumstances, but you may want to practice switching the attitude from fear to being present in an embodied way. Then see what happens.

What happens next? Maybe life gets easier for you. Maybe you feel like you're breaking out of a kind of prison where you are surrounded or caught up in apprehension, fear, and anxiety. I'm not offering this as a final solution or suggesting that this is going to make everything go better or easier, but it is a different attitude that we can step into that can begin to make a difference. It can also change the relationship we have with fear. When we bring mindfulness to fear in a way that respects it and holds it gently, we build a greater capacity to deal with it because we bring a sense of stable presence. When we're fully present for the fear, then we don't get pulled into it or unduly influenced by it.

We want to be careful: this practice might not be appropriate when there are strong fears and strong tendencies towards anxiety. However, if you find yourself with minor fears or anxieties, practice with those and see what difference it makes. See what happens to the anxiety and fear when you offer this alternative – embodied presence, being really present here.

I'm hoping that this focus on attitude today will be a particularly interesting topic of mindfulness on this holiday weekend when our lives have different kinds of challenges than usual.

Thank you very much.