

The Four Practices of FEAR

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Good day, and welcome to this Dharma talk. Today I would like to talk about fear. Part of the motivation to talk about it is that it's a very common state for many people, for everyone at some point or other. Also, I'm finishing up a year-long program that I'm co-teaching, which is kind of an experimental programme that we'll probably offer again in the future. It's called a Path of Fearlessness, where we spent seven months or so looking at fear, considering it, practising with it, and it comes to a conclusion this week. Bringing this topic for this program to a conclusion has it on my mind, and it's what I have to talk about today.

One thing that's very important to say is that for people who meditate regularly and are really familiar with their meditating, being present for experience, and familiar with themselves, all kinds of things in their life come along when they meditate. When they're upset, they sit down to meditate and feel the upsetness. When they are afraid, they sit down to meditate and their fear is there. When they are angry, they sit down and get to experience the anger. When they're happy or joyful or peaceful or calm, they sit down to be with that. Sometimes as we sit, some of these things shift and may become calmer, more settled, more stable.

Then we might be sitting there quietly, and something suddenly appears out of nowhere—a thought, a memory comes up, and there's anger. A memory comes up, or remembering what's going to happen tomorrow, and there's anxiety that comes up. Over time, it's not a surprise when an emotion appears while we're meditating. There can be a phenomenal shift that happens when we shift from identifying with the emotion to just recognizing that it's part of what's happening. To identify means to define oneself by it. So if one's angry, to assume "I'm an angry person."

People now are going to relate to me as if I'm an angry person. That defines who I am and how people will judge me. The same thing with fear: one feels like, "I am afraid. Boy, am I

afraid?” One is kind of leaning into the fear or being captivated by the fear so thoroughly, so fully. We're kind of assuming it's all of who we are. The same thing happens with happiness and joy.

But a shift happens in meditation. At some point, rather than saying, “Oh, I'm afraid now,” the meditator will say, “There is fear now. There is anger now. There is happiness now.” There's no inclination to define oneself by it as if it's a well-worn coat that we're putting on for another time. It's just a phenomenon, just a part and parcel of what's happening.

It might be strong, and it might be coursing through the body even, but there is a stability of mind that recognizes: there is joy, there is sadness, there is happiness, there is fear. This ability to just see it as a phenomenon gives rise to very important possibilities. This is really when the mindfulness work can begin becoming stronger, deeper, more penetrating. It's a little bit hard to penetrate phenomena if we identify with it, if we define ourselves by it, because it's almost like we've so fully defined by it. It's like we can't—normally, without a mirror—we can't see the eyes that see. We see through the eyes, but we don't turn back and look at the eyes and see them.

If we're really defined by something, by an emotional state, we might know it's there. We might recognize that “I'm angry,” “you're sad,” or “happy” or “afraid.” But it's kind of like it's the filter through which we see, so it is not really quite accessible for clearly seeing and really recognizing, “There it is.” But when it comes a time when we say, “Oh, fear is here,” this gives birth to new possibilities. I'd like to talk about four categories of possibilities with how we can be with fear once we can just see that it's present and not defined by it or identified by it.

I thought it was fun maybe to come up with an acronym with the letters for fear. The first thing we can do is—now that it's become a verb thanks to Facebook—I think we can “friend” our fear. We can friend it. This way of becoming a friend for our fear is a really powerful thing to do. It's the opposite of being afraid of fear. It's the opposite of being averse.

It's radically different from being aversive to fear, angry at fear, or ashamed of fear, or trying to fix fear, or attacking fear, or trying to analyze it or figure out what's going on. It's kind of like if you are with a friend. You don't want to do all those things with your friend. You want to be present for your friend and hear what's going on. With a friend you haven't seen for a while, you want to hear what's happening, what's going on, and be with them in a way that's respectful and caring for them. It's possible to do that with fear.

It's harder to do it when we are defined by it, but it's easier to do if we recognize it's just there

in a kind of way here, and fear is there. Fear appears part of me, and it's not quite me. So I can look at it without it being a filter through which I see. The value of becoming a friend to it is similar to—it's not quite jumping around a little bit—but if a young child is afraid, we don't get angry at it. We don't run away from it. We don't get all flustered and confused and running around in circles.

When the kid's sitting on the floor being afraid, you don't berate the kid. Instead, you sit down with the kid and maybe, if the kid is small enough, you put the kid on your lap, or you hold it, and you're there with it. So there's always ways we say that once we recognize that fear is there, we want first to friend the fear. One of the great values of friending it is that the fear feels safe. The fear doesn't feel like it's being shamed or pushed away or denied or unwanted, which is hard, just like it would be hard for a little child.

It's one of the fascinating and wonderful tasks of mindfulness to help our fear feel safe. Now, it's a little counterintuitive. Some people never thought about helping their fear feel safe. If we are afraid and we are defined by it, then it's hard to offer anything to the fear. But when we come to that point in practice, when we can recognize fear as present and we're not so inclined to say, "I am afraid," then we have something we can offer the fear. We become the one who offers safety, offers stability, or offers kindness, makes space for it to be there, and then starts to listen and look more deeply: what's here?

That's the "e" of fear, and that's to explore the fear. So rather than recoil from the fear, it's to step, in a sense, towards it, to explore it, to be with it, to feel it more fully. One of the first things we can do in exploring it is we can try to assess whether the fear is appropriate or not. We can try to see: is it an appropriate fear to have or is it not? Is it a real fear or is it not? Is it a healthy fear to have or is it not healthy?

Or, my favorite part: is it helpful fear or is it not helpful? Some fear clearly is helpful to have. It protects us, and sometimes we need protection. There are times when I'm driving my car or walking on a street where I feel a little bit afraid. There's a little bit of fear there that's kind of inseparable inside of me from a sense of caution. Sometimes it is a little bit scary.

Maybe if I was different—who I am—I wouldn't be afraid of certain kinds of traffic situations. But I don't think it's necessarily wrong, because death can be instantaneous in some of these, crossing some sidewalks, some crosswalks, the way some drivers drive. So the fear protects us: look before you walk across the crosswalk or something. In Buddhism, one of the appropriate fears is a fear of doing something oneself, doing something that injures one's own integrity, that injures one's own sensitivity to compassion, to kindness, to honesty, or harms one's sensitivity or one's orientation to live a life that doesn't cause harm to anyone else.

When we feel like we are in danger of saying something to someone that's very unkind and hurtful, to feel that fear: "No, this is dangerous. I don't think I should say this. I should be careful here."

The mood that I'm in right now is not—this is a dangerous mood I'm in. I could easily snap at someone and later regret what I've done, what I've said. So I'm afraid of myself a little bit because of this mood. I see what I've done before, and so I'm going to be cautious. Maybe I'm going to learn to hold my tongue, or maybe I'm even going to avoid certain stressful situations when I'm in this mood, if I can avoid them. The idea is we have something to protect here also. We're afraid to hurt people, and the simple fear of not wanting to hurt others is a very healthy, I think, fear to have.

In the ancient world, in the teachings of the Buddha, practitioners have fear for causing the slightest fault, the slightest harm. Hopefully this is not seen as a debilitating fear, a fear which diminishes who we are, but actually as a fear that protects what's the best in us and allows it to grow. So Buddhism recognizes healthy fear, but there is also unhelpful fear: the fear that is debilitating, the fear that inhibits us or keeps us from living a full life or engaging properly in the world. Sometimes it's fear that causes us to harm others. Sometimes it's fear that causes us to harm ourselves because we're so afraid of the alternative, and so we keep ourselves in check and close down because of it or collapse. As we explore fear, we can recognize when it seems helpful and when it seems not helpful.

Even when its principal fear can be helpful, the strength of the fear, or the way that we engage in the fear or take in the fear, can be debilitating, can be limiting. So this idea of exploring the fear: what is going on here? What's happening here? For me, it's a wonderful stance, a wonderful kind of sense of inner strength that begins to operate from the stability of practice, of mindfulness. What is this? What's going on here?

One of the things we can ask is what we are afraid of. This idea of exploring fear, I see it as a movement of respect, that we respect the fear. We're not belittling fear or belittling ourselves because we are afraid. I like to think that every fear that we have should be respected, because it's a messenger. Sometimes it's a messenger that there is, in fact, danger. But sometimes it's a messenger that something inside of us feels threatened, and it's possible to feel.

Sometimes it's important to look and see: what's the real danger? Explore: is there a danger right now? Sometimes in the here and now, what we're afraid of is not present. That's a fascinating thing to realize, that what we're afraid of is partly a product of our imagination. Some people have said that anxiety is completely an issue of imagination. It might be real

imagination, but it's imagining what's going to happen in the future.

It's predicting something. Sometimes it's a wise prediction, but then it has a kind of anxiety that lives and simmers inside that. Some people have chronic anxiety that is almost a stance they've learned—there's been so much pain and so much danger for them in their life that it becomes kind of habitual and to be expected. There's always a threat, always something's going to happen that's dangerous, and we don't know what it is. There's nothing concrete right here and now, but in that sense, it's imaginary. It's potentially something here.

So we can see clearly now, and to see that it is not present may give us breathing room that here and now, maybe it's not as dangerous as we thought, and there could be some relaxation. Also, we can look at what we're afraid of. But for Dharma practice, a very significant exploration in fear is to look and see what's being threatened. What is it that's really going on here inside of me, and that I'm afraid that's going to be hurt or damaged? Or what is it that feels threatened? Sometimes what's being threatened is real enough. Integrity is real enough, important enough to protect.

But sometimes what's being protected doesn't really have such a strong, real basis. Sometimes what's being protected, what's being threatened, are the constructs that we live under—the constructs of self, the ideas, how we've identified, how we've constructed our idea of who we are. For example, if a person constructs the idea of themselves as needing to be wise and funny all the time, then if they feel fear, maybe it's because how other people see them is being threatened. Their identity as being a wise and funny person is threatened. But that's the idea—there's no need to be a wise and funny person. That's a constructed particular notion, idea. Without that idea, there can't be threatened.

The idea that we have to be someone that everyone likes, that we have to be someone, or what's being threatened is that we're somehow an undesirable person, and so we're constantly being threatened by everyone because we're afraid we can be pushed away by people or rejected by people. It gets a little more complicated when what's being threatened is a little bit of imagination, a concept, an idea, a construct. It may not exactly have to be there. Maybe we're stuck on some idea that doesn't have to be there. Like I know, when I was younger, I thought it was a life and death matter, almost, whether someone liked me or didn't like me. I had a lot of fear, a social fear, and I was constantly assessing and wondering and hoping that people would like me.

It was a big revelation to me to realize that everyone doesn't have to like me. It's okay if some people don't like me. I don't have to constantly be concerned about it. To see that begin to shed and drop away created a lot more peace inside of me, social peace and ease. In fact,

sometimes people don't like me, and that's okay—they're allowed to do that. Sometimes people do, and that's nice too.

The idea of exploring—there's a whole series of things that can be explored around fear. The important principle is to not be caught by the fear so that we can't. One way not to be caught by it is to explore it. Take the initiative: let's discover what's going on here. There are all these different ways of discovery, and you can have your own way, and just keep looking and feeling and getting to know. The "a" of fear is to really allow it to be there.

The more we can discover it, the more we can explore it, and then we really allow it now—but not allow it to run us and tell us what to do and how to see things. This is really now a continuation of this: there is fear here. Not "the" fear, but there is fear here with me, in me. Then to discover how it appears, how to know and discover it, how it appears physically. What's the physical manifestation of fear? Then allow that physicality of fear to be there, almost as if you get out of the way from it.

Sometimes it's best to do this in short bouts, especially when there is a very strong terror, a very strong fear that is connected to all this. It's better not to explore it and be with it very long, but just touch into it for a while, and then pull away, and come back another day, and slowly, slowly kind of befriend it, slowly get to know it. But at some point, the beautiful art of mindfulness is to really allow it to be there, and allow it without our reactivity around it, without our needing it to be different. It'll be an extension of befriending the fear and allowing it in. Part of the value of that is that our inner life knows how to take care of itself, knows how to unwind, knows how to release, knows how to morph into what needs to happen next. If we learn the art of just allowing the fear to be there, it's impressive what can happen.

That's also a hard skill to learn when the habit is we have to analyze it, or we have to engineer a change, or we have to fix it, or something like that. To learn how to allow it in meditation is a wonderful skill, because some fears maybe we can't get rid of, or will always be with us. But the art of allowing it, befriending it, knowing it's there, exploring it, and allowing it can mean that we might be able to have the fear be present but not be inhibited or limited by it. We bring it along. It sits on our left shoulder and it's there with us. We know it's there, but we're not going to stop what we're doing. It's not going to get us to cower or shut down or not live our life as we want to live it.

We allow that the fear comes along and accompanies us, and it's there. We recognize it's present, but we know how to allow it so that it can just be there and not interfere. Then the "r" of fear is to release, and that's the freedom part of fear, and that has different sides of release. Sometimes the fear is released, and it's no longer there, especially if the underlying

thing that was threatened no longer is there, or we realize that what was threatened doesn't really exist. It doesn't have any real substantial existence. The constructs of self and the self-definitions we have—when we learn to be at peace without a self-definition, be at peace without a self-construct we try to build or defend or protect or hide from people—then that fear, that thing, there's nothing there threatened around self-identity.

People can do all kinds of things. They might, you know, they can't hurt that identity, because we're not holding on to that identity. We're not defining ourselves by that, and it just goes right through, and so we're free of it. Sometimes what's being released is not the fear, but rather is a fear or clinging or attachment or selfing or identification with the fear. We release ourselves from the fear. The fear is still there, but we are released from it. Then it's much easier to have the fear be present and just live our life as we want to, as is appropriate.

So to friend the fear, to explore the fear, to allow the fear, and to release in relating to the fear—these are four things to explore. The emphasis for this talk is this is meant for people who are capable of having some disidentification from fear—not dissociation from it, but disidentification, the sense that they don't define themselves by the fear. They are able to sit, be quiet, and breathe easily, perhaps, and recognize there is fear. Fear is present, not "the" fear, but there's fear present. That fear is strong, but, you know, not "the" fear. Then that allows for this interesting phenomenon, interesting practice of: friend the fear, explore the fear, allow the fear, and release the fear.

Then fear has become a fourfold practice that we engage in. So next time you feel fear, you might remember that fear is an acronym for a practice that we look for fear, where we respect the fear by getting to know it well. It's a messenger. Do we understand what the message is? So thank you very much. May you explore your fear and discover the wonderful place inside where there is no fear, because it's a place that cannot be threatened. Thank you.