

Dharmette: Love (8) Heping Fear Feel Safe

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Hello and welcome now to this eighth talk on love in this extended series. As we lay down, as I lay down the foundation for practicing more actively with love and loving kindness, the *brahmavihāras*, and one of the important things to learn to practice with, learn how to attend to wisely, is fear. And fear is one of the great kind of challenges to love. Some people, what they're afraid of is to love. Maybe people have been hurt in some big way when they loved. They loved and what they loved was lost.

Someone died and it was too difficult. Sometimes people have been harmed in such big ways that the whole way of living, orientation about life, life feels like a dangerous place, and so dangerous that there's always fear. And so mindfulness practice is meant to be a wise, caring, and maybe... safe way, hopefully safe, to begin attending to our fear, to be able to bring it under a kind gaze, a calm attention. And some of that is simply to know that we're not trying to get away from fear, we're not trying to fix it and not have it. And we're not there to just tolerate it and just go along with it as if it's as necessary as breathing air. We want to care for our fear.

We want to bring attention to it and learn how to reassure it, learn how to settle it, learn how to be seen in a deep way. And one of the surprises for me in doing mindfulness practice was the time came where being mindful itself with the mind's eye seeing what the experience was, was itself a form of love. And so to have that as a reference point for practicing meditation, for practicing mindfulness, not that you automatically now feel love as part of it, but that's kind of a reference point for maybe how to be patient and how to know this is the North Star, this is the direction we're going. So that we're less inclined to practice mindfulness with aversion, trying to get rid of something, thinking something is wrong, and it shouldn't be there. And so to know that fear is a completely worthy object of mindfulness, to make space for it, to allow for it, is a radical thing for some people.

And it's fear, the presence of fear is not the sign that something is wrong. It's a sign that you're human. And that there's causes and conditions that have come together for that fear to be there. And one of the causes and conditions that we contribute to it is the way in which we attend to it, the way which we care for it. And the image I have sometimes is that of a small child, something's happened and they're afraid.

Maybe it's as simple as they fell and scraped themselves on the sidewalk, or they fell off their bike. And if you come up to the kid and small, you know, young kid, and start doing psycho-analysis with them about their fear, or start giving them breathing techniques or, you know, try to give them exercises to not be afraid or get rid of the fear, it probably just confuses the kid and makes them even more afraid. For the small kid, you mostly want to provide them with safety, provide them with a gentle reassurance. Maybe invite them, if they're a small kid, maybe sit on your lap and you hold them gently and allow them to maybe cry and be held and to feel the safety and the reassurance and the presence that you offer. And that's all you need to do. You don't have to fix them.

The child's natural system will come into kind of equilibrium by the atmosphere, the container, the context that the adult is offering, maybe offering some cookies and milk and something that would help the kid just feel safe and cared for, attended to in a simple way. So this principle applies to adults also. Not that we have to give ourselves cookies, but can we offer ourselves this kind of caring attention that we're accompanying, we're creating through how we know, through how we see, that we see with reassuring eyes, we see with safety, we create the safety to hold the fear by how we know it. And to do this, the awareness, the mindfulness, the knowing, the way we are with it, needs to not be defined by the fear. It's important not to identify with the fear.

Even if you do identify with the fear, which is... very common and easy to do, and maybe hard not to do. The art of this kind of practice is to see, can you even so, can you find a place away, maybe deep in the mind, deep in the body, where you can gaze upon the fear without identifying with it, without it being you, just like that adult doesn't identify with the fear of the child, this is me, this is who I am. The adult knows they are something different. They are something that can bigger and competent, that can hold the container, create safety for that child.

So to learn how to gaze upon fear kindly, to have a steady... And what we would like to do with fear is find a way that we can kind of stay with it, feel it. Sometimes the image of the idea of gazing upon it is helpful, because it may be a little bit removed. Sometimes it's more like you're putting your gentle hand on the back of someone's shoulder who's afraid, so they

know someone's there for them. And so mindfulness is a gentle hand that goes and touches the shoulder of the fear.

The image I like is that mindfulness is like two cupped hands, and it comes from underneath and just holds the fear like this. But the important thing here is that there's a kind of a steadiness, a kind of a continuity of kind of gently seeing fear through. You're here to be with the fear and see it all the way through, to make room for it, to breathe with it, to relax with it, to soften the body with it, but just to respect it and care for it. And part of the reason for that is we don't know always, probably it's helpful to think, we don't really know all the reasons, the deeper reasons, why fear is here, what fear is trying to do for us. And this attitude of not quite feeling that you don't know is very respectful.

You might have good reasons for it. You might know all kinds of things, but you might not know the depth of it. And there's a way in which just being very mindful and allowing the fear to be there so that the fear feels safe. And that's the great art of mindfulness, to help our fear feel safe, just like that little child feels safe being afraid. And so let the fear feel safe so that the depth of it, the full unknown reasons and cause and conditions for it, can relax kind of even, you know, subconsciously in areas we don't even know and understand.

Because fear is a kind of holding, is a kind of a... tightening up is a kind of an agitation and being stirred up in a certain way. That inherent in that fear, in my language I like to use, there's the desire to relax. The fear wants, something about the fear wants to not be so busy, not to be so much energy engaged and taken care of, try to take care of you. And so if you can offer it this space, help it feel safe. And so something very deep in it can relax, because that's what it wants to do.

But you can't tell the small child to demand the child to relax, relax, relax. You just offer your presence. So if we want to develop our capacity for love, if we want to realistically be able to cultivate greater love through the practices of love and attention to love, we have to have a wise relationship with fear. And rather than fear limiting the love, we can find some place within ourselves to not be defined by the fear, not be defined by our emotions, so that we can offer love to the fear. We can offer kindness.

To find that still point within, to find this inner stillness, and gaze upon all things kindly. And so that way, that love that we want to develop, can have a universal quality to it. It's not conditioned, it's not dependent on things being a certain way, because we're learning a way from deep within that we can love all things, even what is difficult, even what's difficult in ourselves. And part of that benefit of being able to do that is the same benefit of learning how to be non-reactively mindful of all things. It gives space and room for all things to be

what they want, what they are, and if there's tension, it wants to relax.

It wants to soften. And most of the difficult emotions, difficult attitudes, difficult beliefs we have involve tension that wants to relax. So non-reactive mindfulness... Non-identified, non-identifying love makes room for that which wants to relax and come into homeostasis. So may these words, these teachings I'm offering, support you in a slow and steady exploration of your own, of the different aspects of love, the different aspects, things that interfere with it, the different possibilities of love, and my hope is that for many of you, you're going to learn something new about love through the combination of love and mindfulness and become wiser about the challenges to love.

So thank you very much. And I look forward to tomorrow. And I don't know, maybe some of you might be interested. This evening at 7 p.m., I'm teaching a five-week introduction to mindfulness meditation course here at IMC. And it'll be, it's both in person and also on YouTube. So, you know, some of you might want to come along for the basic instructions that I offer. Thank you.