

Fear (1 of 4) Understanding Fear

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Welcome to the beginning of the week and a new theme for dharma talks. This week I'd like to talk about fear. One of the motivations for this is to follow up on last week's topic on the three roots of the wholesome and the three roots of the unwholesome.

When we talk about greed, hate, and delusion as the root motivations and the sources from which all unwholesome, unhealthy behavior arises, some people will say, "Wait a minute, what about fear? Isn't fear just as important for human beings and just as afflictive as greed, hatred, and delusion? Why is it left out?"

Some of you know about the teachings of the Five Hindrances – desire, ill will, sloth and torpor,

restlessness and regret, and doubt. Some people will ask why fear is not considered a hindrance. Then people will try to squeeze it into one of the hindrances (as in: it's probably a kind of ill will and it's not talked about because it's included within that).

The lack of emphasis on fear is sometimes a little bit surprising, given how huge it is for human beings. For many people, it's often fundamental at some point in their lives. It's like a fundamental base that influences or conditions how we see the world, how we see ourselves, and the choices we make about how to live. So I'd like to look at this topic of fear today and for the next three days.

In fact, one of the very important aspects of Dharma practice is to understand fear and to be willing to not only understand it but also respect it. I think that fear should always be respected. Respect doesn't mean that we give in to it or we give it authority. Respect means we give it a second look because there's something there to learn.

Whenever there's fear, it is a message. Whenever there's fear, it's an indication that something needs attention.

Certainly, if there's imminent danger – something's happening in the present moment and we feel afraid because a car is driving down the wrong side of the

street toward us – that's a clear message to get out of the way. Often when there's fear about real danger in the moment, that is a message that we better heed and take care of.

But some fears belong more to the imagination, to our predictions of the future and our constructed ideas about what could be or should be or what will be. The danger is not immediate. Sometimes our fears are unfounded.

But regardless of what kind of fear it is, it should be respected, because it's a message. It is a symptom of something that needs attention. If a fear is unfounded or not really necessary, it is often a symptom of something deeper inside of us that does need attention, our care, and our mindfulness.

We can start this process of looking at fear by beginning to appreciate the value of understanding it. That's one of the great advantages of mindfulness practice, because mindfulness practice is the practice of giving a second look at everything. We stop long enough to not be reactive. To the best of our ability, we put aside our reactivity enough so we can really be present and see what this experience is. Of course, doing this is a little bit more complicated with fear, because fear itself is a kind of reactivity. When fear arises, we try not to be too reactive to the fear. We try to look at it and to be present for it – to study fear.

One helpful way to begin understanding fear is shifting our orientation to fear from thinking of fear in terms of “I am afraid” to “I have fear.” The difference between them is that “I am” implies all of you. It's like we are identifying with and defining ourselves by fear. If all of who we are is afraid, that's a very different orientation. We need a very different door inward to understand it than when we view it as “I have fear,” or “there is fear here.”

Fear is not the whole picture of who we are. It's always a subset of our whole being. Fear can be strong and course through us so it feels like it is everything. But as soon as we allow it to be our whole being, it is too easy to get entangled and caught by it or to judge ourselves for it. Switching to “I have fear,” or “There is fear here” is a strategy to not be over-identified with it and not get caught in it. Then we can look at fear clearly and see it a little bit objectively.

One of the theories about why fear is not one of the three roots for unwholesome behavior or one of the hindrances is that there is a wide range of fear. There is fear that is motivated by the three unwholesome roots, and fear that is part of the wholesome roots.

The word “fear” itself, like the word “anger” we talked about last week, should maybe be seen as an umbrella term or a category of a broad range of feelings that fit

within that category. This is a category of things that bring up a sense of caution, care, wanting to become safe, and wanting to be protected. There are healthy forms in that category and there are those that are not so healthy. There are helpful forms of fear and not-so-helpful forms of fear. So making a categorical statement that fear is a root of what's unwholesome and unhelpful just doesn't fit for the whole range of what this emotion is.

It's more useful to see that fear can be motivated by the unwholesome roots. It can be motivated by greed, hatred, and delusion. Or it can be motivated by non-greed, non-hate, and non-delusion. It can be motivated by a feeling of generosity, friendliness, or care. It can be motivated by love. It can be motivated by self-respect. It can be motivated by deep understanding and wisdom about what's really best for ourselves and best for others.

With certain behaviors, when we are up against some behavior, some way of thinking, or some way of speaking, there can be a healthy fear that comes along when we see the danger of speaking or acting that way. We see it causes harm in the world, it causes harm in us, and it causes harm in our relationships. We have a capacity for something like self-respect, so there's some caution around harming that, some caution about protecting ourselves – protecting our own sense of

confidence and trust in ourselves. So we feel some fear when we're about to do something that's going to cause us to lose that. This is considered healthy.

On the unhealthy side, if there's a lot of greed, there can be fear about not getting what one wants. Or we can have greed about what we already have, and we have a fear of losing it. There might be a lot of hostility, and in the hostility, we're afraid of the thing that we're hostile toward. We don't want it to get too close; we want to push it away.

There can be a lot of delusion, confusion, or ignorance about all kinds of things. One of those things is the nature of self. The ideas of who we are that our self constructs are not very useful, maybe not even true. But when we hold on to ourselves as being a certain kind of person, that idea can easily be threatened.

For example, someone grows up feeling quite insecure, but then they find a group of people, maybe a gang, where they feel a sense of belonging. They feel safe, but that comes along with an identity of being someone who is really tough and strong and bosses people around, or worse. The idea of being strong and tough and bossing people around turns out to be a construct that is actually quite fragile and is easily threatened. So then there's fear.

But if we study that fear and see it as a symptom, we see that deep down inside it began with a sense of insecurity. That insecurity may have a better avenue of being resolved and dealt with in other ways than being part of a gang and belonging and taking on a gang persona.

So we can study our fear, and we can hang out with it long enough and respect it long enough to be able to feel and sense what is going on here. We can question and reflect on it, going for walks and asking what's happening here with my fear. Then we can ask ourselves, is there any greed, hate, and delusion underneath here or not? Is there any wisdom or non-hate, non-greed, love, self-respect, generosity, or care? What's underneath here? And what is underneath that really needs our attention?

The idea of going down deeper and deeper to look reminds me of this fairy tale that I'd like to read:

“There was once a beautiful princess who was engaged to a hideous serpent monster. Terrified, she sought the counsel of a wise old witch. The witch told the princess that she should go ahead with the marriage and that she should wear ten white gowns on her wedding night. And when it came time to go to bed with the serpent, she should take off each one of the gowns one at a time and ask the serpent to take off one of his skins for each

of hers. After she took off her ten gowns, she was to embrace the serpent. , The princess didn't like it, but she took the advice of the older woman. As she took off the last of her gowns, she saw that the slimy repulsive serpent was still there. Although she was repulsed, she nevertheless had the wisdom to follow what the old woman had said, and she embraced the serpent. When she did, the serpent transformed into her wonderful spouse.” (We don't know the gender of the serpent in the end.)

So we take off the gowns – these things we've built up – the layers of fear we've built up over a lifetime; layers of personas; layers of ways in which we understand, see, and measure the world; ways we expect things from the world; and ways we fear the world. There might be layers and layers of taking things off.

It's a fantastic process to learn how to come from a deep place of trust, or maybe better said in Buddhist language, a place of fearlessness – knowing how to be safe while at the same time being fearless. The direction that the Dharma is going is toward having the wisdom of how to live fearlessly. Perhaps becoming fearless – without fear – might ultimately be a better, wiser, deeper place than living with trust. Discovering this place of fearlessness is part of the gift of studying fear, understanding it, and becoming wise about it.

We'll go through this a little bit more over the next few days. If you're one of those people who has some fear, anxiety, or worry, maybe this week could be a time for you to take a different look at it. If you find it hard to stop, sit, be present, and study your own fear, you might do one of two things, or both. You could journal about it, just write about it. Or you might find a friend or total stranger who is willing to talk to you a little bit, and talk out what you understand about fear, and explore it. Let's get to the bottom of fear this week. Thank you so much.