

Fear (4 of 4) Wholesome and Unwholesome Fear

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Welcome to the fourth and last of these talks on fear. I have a peculiar mental tendency to see things in words, so when I hear or see the word “fear,” I notice that the word “ear” is in it, so I have the idea of hearing. The idea is to be able to hear well what our fear is about, taking the time to hear it and get to know it. The word “fear” reminds me to listen deeply and ask, what's happening here? I like the idea of listening because we are not just feeling what's inside, but also listening to the mental chatter, the thoughts, the beliefs, the ideas, and also the imagery that comes up. The words, stories, what we tell ourselves, and the images we create of futures can have a huge impact on us.

For instance, I've been minding my own business and feeling quite nice, and then a particular kind of imagery or thought comes up in my mind. I can feel my body react and contract in fear, and my stomach tightens up. This is directly connected to the thought or story that came up.

We can listen deeply to our fear. Fear means it is time to listen. This is a time to really connect. Then we learn to be wise about fear. We learn what is needed – what does our fear need from us? What do we need when there's fear? For people who practice mindfulness, this begins with being present with fear – recognizing it enough to begin becoming familiar with how fear works for us and how it operates in our lives, and knowing how we need to take care of it.

There's a wide wide range of responses to fear. I don't want to give the idea that all we need to do is to be mindful of it. Sometimes we need to do something different and distract ourselves. Sometimes what we need to do is dive down right into it and allow the fear to grow and become quite strong – to pop the boil so we can really see what's going on. And everything in between.

But hopefully, all we do is based on care and love, really wanting the best for ourselves. What we don't need, in relation to fear, is to be driven by ideas that we or it

should be different, or by anxiety about or hostility towards fear, or the idea that if we're afraid, we're not good enough. All these are ways in which we make it so much harder.

One of the goals of mindfulness practice is to learn how to have what I like to think of as simple emotions. We can just allow the simplicity of emotion to reveal itself to us. This means to experience the emotion without a lot of the second arrows – the judgments, and all the complicated ways we relate to the emotion. This is why I talked about how important it is to notice our relationship to fear. Because if we can simplify that relationship, sometimes we can just let fear exist in a very simple way.

There are times when fear can resolve itself. Fear sometimes has wisdom and self-healing or self-liberating qualities if we learn how to get out of its way and be very very simple with it. This is not always easy, and I don't say it's we can always be simple. Sometimes other things are needed. But it is useful to learn how to be simpler and simpler and to listen more deeply to our fear because sometimes fear is healthy. It can be wholesome.

A life without any fear whatsoever is probably not a human life. When I'm walking along a mountain trail that

gets narrow with a steep drop on one side, there can be very simple fear – a tightening, a concern, a gathering together of attention and focus. This means, okay, now I have to pay attention. I have to be careful and maybe I need to stay away from the edge of the trail where there's such a big drop. When the trail opens up again, that little bit of fear and caution is not needed anymore. But it was needed in order to walk safely on this trail.

In all kinds of situations, fear is there to protect us and take care of us. Fear can be our friend. It can also be our friend psychologically and spiritually. Fear doesn't have to be limiting. It can actually be the opposite. Fear is what keeps us unlimited and free in a certain spiritual way. This is where the distinction between wholesome and unwholesome is so helpful. We don't need to think of fear as just one specific thing. There's a range of what fear is that covers the wholesome and the unwholesome possibilities.

When we start having a sense of what's wholesome, nourishing, healthy, healing, and good within us, then we can also start to feel the forces within us that limit, contract, and harm that wholesomeness, and take it away from us. Those are the forces of greed, hatred, and delusion – the forces of what is unwholesome. We want to protect ourselves from the unwholesome, but not with more unwholesomeness. When we have hatred, we

don't want to protect ourselves from hatred by hating the hate. When we have greed, we don't want to get rid of the greed with greed for the wholesome. That's just more of the same.

So the aikido, the wonderful movement of practice is learning how to meet what is unwholesome with what is wholesome. Saying something is unwholesome is not supposed to be a moral judgment, as if it's bad. It is just not helpful, healthy, or healing for us. We want to meet that with something that feels healing, or healthy, or in strict Buddhist terms, we meet what is not free with freedom.

It is possible to feel how some fear limits our freedom, our way of taking care of ourselves, and protecting what's good in us. Another kind of fear supports taking care of ourselves and keeps us from falling into what's unhealthy. The ability to listen to fear, to stop and look at it, to have simplicity about it, and really feel and know it deeply means we can tease apart and see where fear is useful, what is good about it, and what is not.

In one sense all fear is useful. It is a message to look deeper, to listen – what's going on here? We don't want to bat away or be unwelcoming toward the parts of ourselves that are difficult, unwholesome, or keep us entangled or caught. They need and deserve our kind

wholesome attention just like anything else. The ability to have awareness that can take in everything, the wholesome and the unwholesome, is a wholesome way of observing. It is wholesome mindfulness, and we also want to preserve that. We want to protect that.

What a great gift it is to be able to look upon our full experience through the eyes of freedom, the eyes of being awake. They don't condemn anything, shame anything, or belittle us because of what's going on. Rather, these eyes hold it all in a generous, open, free way without getting entangled or pushed around by anything.

So we learn to be free with fear. We learn to not allow fear to limit us. We learn the art of supportive, helpful fear, which is the opposite of limiting fear, so we can stay in the world of freedom. This is where fear can be a partner with confidence. As the kind of fear that undermines confidence begins to wane, and confidence in practice, in being alive, and confidence that we can rest in our own dignity and value all grow, fear can be a partner to that confidence. This fear is one where we are cautious about losing our confidence. We are cautious about things that arise that want to convince us that we're less than that, that we don't want to be that, or that we're supposed to be angry or greedy or contracted.

The idea is to have the confidence to be here in the world. One way this is described in the tradition is being fearless. Having the confidence of fearlessness is a beautiful way of seeing it. But I think we have to be careful that it's a fearlessness where fear supports the fearlessness and the confidence in a wise, powerful way.

This tender topic needs to be entered into with a lot of care and respect. I don't want to give the impression that fear is an easy topic to touch on, or that you are supposed to just do these simple steps that I teach, as if dealing with fear is a straightforward thing.. Fear is a profoundly deep and important part of our lives. It can be quite difficult to work with. Usually, fear has been embedded in us very deeply for very significant reasons. It should be deeply respected, cared for, and loved. We need to take our time with it.

But it is possible to move into the wholesome and into what is supportive for us. We can protect it and preserve it. I hope that these teachings on fear have supported your willingness to look at any fear, anxiety, and worry that you have from different perspectives and question it. Maybe doing this can help you discover your own wisdom about this very important human topic, fear. Finally, I'm convinced that if you spend time becoming wiser about your fear, you're not just doing it

for yourself. Fear is very, very common in the world around us. When as we become wiser about our fear, it's a gift to everyone in many ways. May your practice be a support for the world.

Now I am happy to try to take some questions. I appreciate it so much when I get questions because they are feedback. I want to say that I feel that I sometimes miss the intention of the questioner because I don't have the full context that I would have if we were in person.

Q: Do fear and delusion relate?

A: They can. We could think that things are not worth clinging to, holding onto, or valuing. Ideas and beliefs we have where we think things are true are the things that trigger fear. For example, if I think that in order to be a Dharma teacher what's most important is to have only white clothes. Because those are the traditional colors for *upasakas*, lay devotees of Buddhism, I should only wear white shirts, and I'm afraid that you're not going to like me as a teacher because I'm not wearing a white shirt. Being caught up in that kind of fear is a delusion.

Yes. There are lots of fears that are born from delusion. This is why it is important to listen deeply. Sometimes if we can recognize that our fear is connected to a belief,

a thought, or an interpretation, we can question it. The idea of questioning – putting a little question mark behind our beliefs – is so helpful. If the question mark doesn't work for you, behind whatever belief, interpretation, or commentary you have, sometimes it's wonderful to add three words – “Is that so?”

Q: Can you explain further how fear keeps us spiritually free?

A: When we have some feeling of being free, some feeling of no longer being entangled in greed, hate, and delusion, and we have an openness, a clarity, and then along comes a thought. For example, it could be as simple as this – I come out of my meditation; I feel relaxed, open, and peaceful. I have to go somewhere so I'm driving down the road. In the distance, I see a green traffic light. I think, if I just go a little bit faster than the speed limit, I might be able to cross it before it turns yellow. I can feel myself contracting, getting tight, and focused on the light. I can feel myself being a little bit worried and looking around to see if there are any police there.

Even if I know that I want to beat the light, if I see that thought and feel that movement of contraction, I know from past experience that my calm, my openness, and my peace are going to be lost just because I want to get past the light quickly. Is that worth it? I can have a

healthy feeling of fear – no, it is dangerous for me to go in that direction and build the momentum of contraction and wanting, speeding up, and being efficient with my driving. What I want to protect and preserve is a sense of freedom and openness. That's worth protecting. So there can be a very simple kind of caution or fear – Oh, not that. It is dangerous to go in that direction and get involved in that. I hope that example answers the question.

Q: What can we do to enable people in our country to make political voting decisions not from a place of fear, but from wisdom and love?

A: I think we always want to start with ourselves. It can take a long time to explore the depths of our fear and really know it for ourselves inside and out. Then we can offer ourselves to the world around us in such a way that they have nothing to fear from us. We can talk with people who have wildly different political views than we do in an honest and emotionally supportive way so they have nothing to fear from us. Sometimes when people are with someone they don't fear, something relaxes and unfolds and you can find out what's going on for them in a deeper way. Sometimes when both parties have understood themselves more deeply, something useful in our common humanity can start happening in the conversations. That's a great question, but for now, that's the short answer.

Q: Please say more about how fear supports fearlessness and confidence.

A: What I've been trying to say today is we need to discover a good, healthy, worthwhile way of being inside. The more we practice and the deeper we go, the more we discover there's a way of being in the world that's beneficial. We see that other ways we've been living for years were harmful to us. They added a lot of stress to our life. There was always something stressful and off about how we were with other people and with ourselves.

There can be fear that comes up when we see the possibility that we might lose touch with the healthy way of being. We don't want to go back to the stressful ways. We see it is not safe for us to go back to that stressful world, back to the place where we lashed out in anger so easily. So we are afraid of doing that again. That fear tells us maybe we should stop and take a deeper look – go back and find that place of confidence. If we can find the confidence, then maybe we can take care of life and go back to the world in an effective way. But we can't take care of things effectively if we go back to the stressful ways of being.

Q: Every time I calm my mind, I find that there's a lot of tension and anxiety in my stomach that doesn't go

away. I think I try to avoid it in the day. How would you work with this?

A: Great. I've had that. In my first years of meditation, I had a lot of tension in my stomach and I would hold my belly tight and contracted. In meditation, I made a habit of relaxing my belly, no more than three times in the course of a 40-minute meditation. Within a few seconds, it was contracted again. I didn't make it a project. I didn't tell myself I was wrong for having a tight belly. But at the beginning, the middle, and one other time, I would relax it. Slowly, the tension began to dissipate.

I still had it when I started *Vipassana* practice. What I learned from *Vipassana* practice was to really go into the fear, the tensions, and the contractions. Whenever there was fear, I learned to drop my attention right into the heart of the fear, right into those muscles, for example, in the belly, and just be there. Just breathe with the tension and hang with it. I wasn't working with it. I wasn't trying so much to let go and relax anymore. But I would just be with it and hang out with it until the tension in my body released itself or changed in some good way by itself.

So we can do a little bit of relaxing. But in *Vipassana*, when it's appropriate, it's good to just go right into those contractions in the belly and hang with them, as if you're going to be there forever with them. Don't make them a

problem. Don't make them a project. Accompany them. Care for them. Our muscles are self-liberating. Our muscles know what to do to relax if we give them a chance. We give them a chance by being present for the tension.

Q: What is the difference between fear and anxiety?
How to deal with anxiety?

A: Maybe the definition of these terms varies from person to person. This week I have been defining fear as an umbrella term that covers a whole range of things. Anxiety is one kind of fear. But what characterizes anxiety is that it generally has nothing to do with what's happening in the present moment. Generally, it's some kind of prediction about what's going to happen. As a prediction, it belongs a little bit to the world of the imagination. We imagine what's going to come. I'm anxious about people I'm going to meet because I imagine all kinds of ways that meeting can go wrong.

Sometimes the more the imagination comes alive, the more anxiety there can be. This can be a feedback loop. The more anxious we feel, the more that tends to promote anxious thinking or anxious predictions. And the more we're predicting something terrible will

happen, the more the system feels anxious. This can sometimes lead to panic attacks.

When we're anxious, learning to see that a belief system, ideas, and imagination are operating can sometimes be helpful. I don't mean this is easy. I had a lot of anxiety when I was younger. I'd be anxious about things that were going to happen later in the day, the next day, or the next week. But one thing that helped me, after a long time of paying attention to what was going on, was noticing that my predictive abilities were really poor. Earlier I had just thought my predictions were true. I didn't question them. I just thought, well, of course. I was kind of living in my imagined predictions about what was going to happen. They seemed like the truth because I didn't know any differently. My imagination was so compelling it seemed as if this was reality.

But as I started seeing my mind more clearly and it settled more, I realized after a while that most of the time I predicted it wrong. Sometimes the event was canceled and that was wasted anxiety because it didn't happen after all. Or I came to a situation where the whole thing was different than I ever could have imagined. In so many different ways my predictions were wrong. After a while, when I saw that clearly, that helped me to not believe them so much and not get as

involved in imagining the future in ways that made me pretty anxious.

Q: Can you comment on the difference between peeling back the layers of fear while sitting in meditation as opposed to dealing with fear outside of meditation, such as talking it through with friends?

A: Oh, there definitely can be a difference. But first I want to say that they're both valuable. If you don't have to choose one over the other, please do both. I think often when we're talking about something like fear or other difficulties, we are addressing it and looking at it from a different point of view than the experiential where we just make room to experience it. Talking about something like fear, it's easier to be in a problem-solving, analytical mode.

When it's not analytical or problem-solving, talking about a fear or emotion is sometimes a useful way to give it expression so it can come out of us and not be bottled up. It is almost as if the fear shows itself more clearly when we express it. That can be really helpful. Sometimes we talk with other people, we get into a feedback loop where we hear ourselves say things that we would never have said privately to our thinking mind. Sometimes our subconscious mind will bubble over into the things we say and we'll see, "Oh, that's what's

going on. I didn't know that.” Sometimes clear seeing is it's not as available when we're just sitting quietly by ourselves and doing our own thing.

But on the other hand, sitting quietly in meditation allows for some deeper processing to unfold. We can drop down through layers and layers of what is going on – reactivity, thoughts, beliefs, and feelings. Sometimes we can just let go, let go, let go, and settle, settle, settle, until it's easier to get down to some of the more fundamental layers that are associated with fear. Also, the experiential side of meditation, which is not thinking, or problem-solving about things, can allow the self-liberating or self-healing processes of our inner life to unfold and evolve on their own.

This is one of the great gifts of meditation practice – coming to the point in meditation where we're comfortable enough, safe enough, open enough, and our mindfulness is strong enough that we don't have to be the person in charge of our healing or our unfolding. There are powerful and very effective processes within us for resolving, opening, freeing, and healing. If we can just get out of the way and really allow these, they give us a very different feeling about our life than if we're always the one in charge, always the one doing it. When we're talking, we are sometimes talking from the point of view of the self, who's the agent a little bit. Meditation allows the agent to take a rest so a deeper

wellspring of goodness can take care of things, if we get out of the way.

Q: When strong fears arise, is there a technique that you could suggest to get centered? Thanks.

A: That's a great question and it's a very personal answer. People are so different from each other in their fears and what the impact of the fear is. It's so different from person to person that it's good to learn a whole series of

different things – to know what's best for you and also to know what's best in different circumstances.

Sometimes if there's strong fear it might be really good to find someone to go for a walk with and talk it out.

Maybe you will hear for yourself what you're thinking and it's good. Sometimes with strong fear, you may want to do something that's a clear antidote. Find someplace that's safe. Find a person to be with where you feel really safe.

Sometimes when there's really strong bottled-up fear after something dramatic has happened, it's good to move. It's good to exercise or go for a vigorous walk someplace or if you're the kind of person who likes to do this, close the curtains in your home, turn on music, and dance by yourself and let your body move in whatever way it wants. This way the fear is not held or

bottled up in the body. Fear that is strong sometimes really wants to be discharged, not stuck.

Sometimes it's useful to do writing or journaling around fear. One interesting exercise for journaling is to start with a sentence, "I'm afraid of" and then write it 50 times. Each time see what different words come up. Don't have any inhibitions, don't worry about what you write, don't worry about the grammar, don't worry whether it's even true. The idea is to let the expressivity find its way on paper, starting with the words, "I'm afraid of." It can be fascinating to see all the different things that come up, all the layers and aspects related to the fear that you're feeling. Also, there's something about putting it on paper. It can create a certain objectivity or disentanglement – a feeling of, "Oh that's what it is. There's fear. I'm here, and fear is there" – as opposed to "I am afraid; I am the fear."

I hope meditation is helpful with fear. It certainly has been hugely important for me with the fear and anxiety that I had in my early years of practice. Meditation probably did more for me in working through fear than almost anything else. This was partly because I discovered that some of the beliefs about myself in the world weren't really true. I discovered something truer in the depths, the clarity, the peacefulness, and the calm of meditation itself. This began to break up the authority of the fear that I was living with.

Q: Can you give an example of fear being helpful for confidence?

A: I think that's similar to an answer I already gave. I imagine myself going to give a speech someplace and having confidence about giving the speech in front of a group of people. Then I start thinking about a time I gave a speech and it didn't work out; I made a big mistake. I can feel myself sinking into, "Oh poor Gil. I don't know how to do this, and maybe I'll make a mistake again." I could feel instead, "I better not lose this confidence – I'm about to give this talk. This is not the time to sink into this self-limiting train of thought. This is not good. I'm a little bit afraid that if I sink into that, I'm going to lose this healthy, relaxed, open confidence that I'm showing up here with. So I'm going to let go of those thoughts. I'm not going to pick them up. I'm not going to look into it. I'm going to let that fall to the side so I can stay here with this confidence."

Another time it might have been useful to look at what happened the last time I gave a speech when I felt bad. Maybe it's useful to let the fear come up around what happened before, but not now for this purpose. So the fear protects me and helps me to stay confident.

Q: For a long time, I tried to figure out how fear figures into the hindrances. The more I looked at it, the more it

seemed that fear is what underlies and feeds all the hindrances. Your thoughts?

A: It's fantastic that this is what you found for yourself. Fear is one of the surprises for many people who practice. This especially happens on retreats where all day long there's a heightened sense of attention to what's happening moment by moment in a way we often don't have in daily life. It's not uncommon for people to say, "Wow I had no idea how pervasive fear is for me. Fear and anxiety underlie everything – every thought, every action, every way that I walk, and everything I do. I had no idea."

This can be a shock. It is very healthy to have that shock from seeing what's going on because it's part of the process of becoming free of anxiety and finding a very different way of being. So it's kind of good news to see this, provided we don't get discouraged but feel encouraged: this is good to see because now there's a possibility of going beyond it. If that's your experience – great! Look at it.

I'm defining fear this week to cover both the wholesome and unwholesome. Maybe you can look at fear from a little different perspective after this week. You might ask how is this fear unwholesome. What are the unhelpful qualities and aspects of this fear? One thing you might discover is that your fear is probably anxiety rather than

a more immediate kind of fear, such as when a car is barreling down toward you on the street. There's a whole different physical experiential feeling in a real fear, a helpful fear, as opposed to anxiety.

Q: Can there be a manifestation of fear in the body – rapid heartbeat – without any fear or anxiety detected in the mind?

A: I'm not sure, but I believe that's the case. We are not always that conscious of what's going on for us. There can be deeper subconscious things going on. This is why when we learn to be mindful and present for our bodily experience, sometimes we get physical sensations that are symptoms of what's happening emotionally. We wouldn't have these if we just stayed in our conscious thinking mind, where we might be overriding what we're feeling or busy with other things.

I know for myself that sometimes the first times I've recognized that I was afraid was not through cognitive recognition. For me noticing that was the tension in my belly – “Oh there's tension. Oh yeah, I'm anxious. So that's what's happening.” I can imagine that a racing heart can be a symptom of fear as well. We should be a little bit cautious because there are medical reasons why the heart can race, and when the heart races, that is fear-producing. So I wouldn't necessarily say that

rapid heartbeats are always from fear. Sometimes it's the other way around.

Q: I'm always wondering about anxiety. For me, restlessness sounds more like how it feels. How is it related to fear? Or is restlessness also a kind of fear?

A: I like that question. I don't know if I necessarily have an answer for that. I think that restlessness can often be accompanied by fear, or it can be caused by fear and anxiety. But I can imagine there's also a kind of restlessness with greed or even hatred. Any time there is a strong motivation and desire to do something and it can't be fulfilled – we can't act on it – the bottled energy can make things more agitated and restless. I think restlessness often comes with fear. It's a great question.

I have to always remember that the wisest response is sometimes to appreciate how good the question is and then turn the mirror back on you. It's your job to bring your attention inward and use that question to help tease it apart and see more clearly how it works for you. That's really where we discover what's going on, rather than learning how it's supposed to be or how we think it's supposed to be from someone else.

Q: Like fear, can grief also be either wholesome or unwholesome, depending?

A: I think so I believe that, as Charlie Brown says, there's good grief. Remember that this is a little bit delicate because there is a question of semantics – how we define words. There is sadness – a feeling of loss – that I think is a hugely normal, ordinary part of life. It can be simple and just ordinary. It can even be healthy. It is not a problem. This sadness is part of our freedom. My heart gets broken often when I read the news or I talk to someone who is going through some huge difficulty, challenge, or loss. It is kind of heartbreaking. I certainly feel sad. I feel what I would be comfortable calling “grief” and it feels wholesome. It feels healthy. There is a rightness. I like the word “rightness.” There's a feeling of rightness in it – this is what life is like.

But there are other times when with grief there's a lot of attachment, clinging, shame, fear, and expectations related to it that just make it all gunked up and much more challenging. I think one of the benefits of sitting with grief with mindfulness practice is the ability to settle down the layers and layers of reactivity and commentary – the second arrows, all kinds of other things that we add on top of grief. Then the simplicity of grief can operate. I think if we can allow the simplicity of all emotions to come, even grief, then they can unfold the way they should. And it is best not to have ideas of what “should” be.

I need to stop. I very much appreciate these questions and I hope that they were supportive of you and offered you some useful ways to look at your life and be more mindful. I hope that you learn to be wise about your fear and wise about how to be fearless. We are really here to benefit self and others and the whole world.
Thank you.