

Fear (2 of 5) Helping Fear Feel Safe

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What I said at the beginning of the guided meditation is quite important and useful. Meditation is a time to experience ourselves in a new and different way than is usual in everyday life. A generic version of everyday life is we're doing things, thinking about things, taking care of things, fixing things, avoiding things, and being concerned about things. Much of that is purposeful – thinking about the future, thinking about the past, trying to change something. In meditation, the idea is to have a very different way of respecting our life as it's being lived. It's not to deny anything, but in a sense, to be present for it in a maybe radically new way.

As we learn this new way of being present for our experience, we have available to us all kinds of new possibilities for understanding, wisdom, investigation,

and questioning life – allowing much deeper processes within to heal, unfold, and grow us in new ways.

I think this new way, which is an ancient way, can be represented by the idea of meeting our experience with a quiet, maybe silent, mind. To meet and be present for our experience in a full way with the quietness of a clean window. A dirty window cannot be seen out of. When the window has been cleaned, the window itself is silent, but it enables us to see clearly what's outside the window. So as the awareness becomes quieter, it also becomes clearer, and we can see more fully what's here.

That new way of seeing and being with our experience is really useful and important for being able to find a wise, creative way to be with fear and find our way through fear.

When you sit to meditate, ideally you're sitting in a place where here and now is safe. The building is not burning down; people are not attacking you. Nothing bad is going to happen within reason. Sitting here now, it's relatively safe. There is some clarity here and now about your safety. It might not be safe if you leave the place where you're sitting or it might not be safe later in an hour. But in the way you're sitting now, you become clear, "Oh, this is safe here right now." The advantage of

that clarity is if you notice there is fear, it's not about here and now.

The fear, in a sense, doesn't have to be figured out. Rather, we want to meet it. Fear is something that we want to respect with our mindfulness, something we want to be present for. Not to avoid, not to fix, not try to attack it. Fear is a very worthy focus of mindfulness for living a deeper, fuller life.

When fear is salient, the main or strongest experience, we want to learn to bring our attention, mindfulness, to feel the fear. It might be that you're sitting in a safe place, but for 30 minutes, you're doing mindfulness of fear. That might be time very well spent. Many people don't stop and look at fear. The bumper sticker here would be "I break for fear; I stop for fear." Stop and take a good look at it. What is this here?

When we're able to stop and feel our fear in an embodied way, we are helping our fear feel safe. That is a very powerful practice. There might be a real cause for fear. It might be real fear out in the world. In half an hour, there might be something happening that's dangerous. But, here and now, in this safe place that we're in, how can we help the fear feel safe? How can we allow it to be there so it doesn't have the sense that it's wrong or bad, or we're trying to run away from it, or

trying to attack it and fix it, like we're doing the practice to get rid of it?

Doing the practice to get rid of the fear, if you are anthropomorphizing your fear a little, the fear is not going to be happy. It's not going to be comfortable. It's not going to feel like it has a place. It's going to feel unwanted. It's going to feel disrespected.

The idea of helping the fear feel safe means allowing it to be there, as if it now has time in the sun of awareness. It's like the fear has never lived in the sun, it's always been in the dark, and now it is finally able to come out in the sun. Then it's like: "Oh, now let me take it in. Let me receive it."

The task is to get to know the fear, to recognize it, to see it. Help the fear feel seen. Help the fear feel like it's being known. It's just like you're anxious or afraid, and a friend comes to sit next to you and says: "I see that you're afraid. I'll sit here with you and be a companion." The friend is not fixing you or judging you for being afraid. The friend recognizes the fear and is going to sit and be a safe person for you, be there with you and accompany you. Having that company makes a world of difference.

So this new way is to accompany the fear, to be with it for a while. What this does is it allows the fear room to

do what it needs to do: to unfold, to relax. Something begins to shift and change when we give that kind of permission for the fear to be there.

To give permission for the fear to be there and be known, to be accompanied, it does help if we have a quieter mind. The mind doesn't have to be completely silent, but quieter in the sense that it is not ruminating, judging, and criticizing – all kinds of extra things the mind is doing. It's like the thinking mind is almost saying: "There, there, I'm here with you. I see you. I'll be your companion here now. Let me feel you."

The thinking mind is very gently saying: "Where do I feel this in my body? Where does the fear live?" One way to help the fear feel safe and be seen is to recognize where it's most activated in the body. Is it in the belly, chest, hands, jaw? Then bring careful loving attention to that area. The image I like to use for that is cupping the hands together and holding something from underneath. So just holding the fear. Sometimes I'll imagine my mindfulness, my awareness, is like two hands coming together underneath the place where the fear is located in the body and holding it, being with it, as if it is allowed to be there forever.

This is a radically different way of being with fear than most people know. If in doing that, you start to panic and the fear gets very uncomfortable, then it's not a

useful thing to do. Maybe you need to do something to settle and quiet the fear; maybe stop meditating and do something else.

If we're able to sit and be with the fear, this allows the fear to process itself, which is often wiser than our processing it. More often than not, the thinking mind is reactivating the fear and perpetuating it. So for the mind to be quiet allows the fear to process itself.

It also begins helping us to do deeper mindfulness into the ecology of fear, the different elements of it that are important to also pay attention to, besides just the direct experience of the fear. That will be the topic for the next couple of days. I'm hoping that it will also give you a new perspective on looking at fear because the old perspectives often keep us trapped and caught in fear. Fear and anxiety can follow someone along for decades. So to learn a new way can be phenomenally useful.

You might try this over the next day. If you have some anxiety or fear, pay attention and look for it. If it's easy to find, great, you're on track. If it's not easy to recognize, maybe you have to be extra sensitive to recognize where it might appear. If the situation allows for it, stop and pause for a while. Maybe sit down and close your eyes. See if you can spend some time helping the fear feel safe. Find where the fear is in the

body and bring attention to it carefully. Then breathe with the fear, through the fear, as a way of accompanying it and helping it feel safe. Breathing with the fear is like: “It’s okay now. You’re safe here with me.” Then see what happens with it.

Thank you. With that as a foundation, I look forward to what we’ll be doing in the next couple of days.