

Fear (3 of 4) Friendly Toward Fear and What Is Fearless

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Gil Fronsdal

This morning's talk is the third discussion about fear. I don't feel that I'm an expert on fear, but I am a great proponent of the willingness to be present for it, study it, and be with it. The idea is that our fear needs us. Fear is an indication that there is something important and valuable to pay attention to.

One of the important functions of fear is to protect us. The instinct and the desire for protection is a very important part of human life. Some of that desire to protect is healthy and important, while some of it may not serve us and can even be harmful to us. So we need to be able to stop and take a look at fear. Maybe

the bumper sticker for this week is “I stop for fear.” In other words, I stop and really take a deep look at it to see what's here.

There have been times in my life when it was appropriate to be afraid – situations where there was physical danger. From these, I learned that fear was my friend. Fear was there to protect me in the situation. I learned to keep the fear present and allow it to be there as if it was over my right shoulder. It accompanied me, but I didn't let it limit me. I did what I had to do, but I saw fear as my companion, my guide, and my support, helping me to find my way more cautiously than I normally would. Fear was a good thing. There were other times when I've been fearful and anxious in my life and fear didn't serve me. It limited me, contracted me, and shut me off from myself and the life around me.

The idea is that we stop to look and see what's really happening here. We do this with friendliness, so that in the looking, what's inside doesn't have to be afraid of us. In that looking, it's important to find a way to look and be present that is not harsh, critical, demeaning, shame-making, or unfriendly toward what's going on. Whatever fear we have inside does better with a friendly, accepting attitude, where we see, “That's how it is.” In this way, we begin to find our way with fear.

Yesterday I talked about how important it is to study our relationship to fear. Independent of what we're afraid of or the fear itself, there is a second layer there, which can be understood as the second arrow or the third arrow, that we add on top of our experience. This arrow is not really the experience itself. So we can have the fear of fear, or the shame of fear, or the recoiling from fear, or the automatic believing of fear, or the falling into fear. These are all secondary reactions we can have.

Sometimes it's useful to step back and look at the secondary reaction and see how we are. I've known people who couldn't touch or get close to their fear, but they could hang out with the fear of the fear, or the resistance to the fear, or the walls that came up around the fear. It was safe enough to be with the relationship. Once they saw that and maybe that quieted down, it turned out they were ready to be with the fear and to feel it.

As the relationship to fear becomes simpler, more accepting or allowing, with a friendly willingness to be there without much reactivity, an interesting thing to explore further is not so much the fear itself, but what is being threatened. What is the fear protecting? What is it that can be threatened inside of us? Asking this can reveal all kinds of interesting things. The deeper layer of what we think is being threatened sometimes reveals

whether it's a healthy or unhealthy, helpful or unhelpful, wholesome or unwholesome kind of fear.

For example, there was a time in my life when I had a lot of social anxiety. At some point, I realized that when I was nervous, I was afraid of something particular. I was afraid of being rejected by people, being disliked by people, and being excluded. Deeper inside, what was threatened by that possibility? I felt a kind of insecurity, a kind of emptiness or tenderness that was deeper than the fear of rejection, which was easily threatened.

I learned that I could take care of that part of myself in a different way. Meditation helped me a lot because I started to learn to settle and relax deeply and soften into this place of tenderness, this place that felt it could be threatened. I eventually discovered that if I relaxed, settled, and opened, what was inside couldn't be threatened. This was kind of counterintuitive to what I had imagined before that. The idea is to recognize what is it that's threatenable. In situations of physical danger, that might be my life or my well-being, and maybe it is wise to be careful. But if what's being threatened is my self-definition, how I want to project myself in the world, that is different.

In my first year in Buddhist practice, I was very surprised at how much I was trying to talk to or be with people

so they would see me in a certain way. It wasn't so much that I was attached to an identity, as I was attached to the identity I wanted other people to give me. I did these social gymnastics trying to get people to see me the way I wanted to be seen. That's a kind of a headache. In meditation, I could see how tiring and counterproductive that was. More importantly, I got to see that there was a place inside that was not threatenable.

I love that in Latin the word “integrity” apparently means “can't be touched.” I don't know if that's true, but integrity apparently has the root of “tangible.” The idea is there's someplace inside of us that's so complete and so free that it can't be touched or threatened by what's around us. Certainly, we can get injured, and all kinds of things can disappoint us. But we have a home inside, which we carry with us, that's not threatenable. Maybe this is a little bit like an empty space where things just go right through. This is a rich, valuable, nourishing place inside.

We turn around and look to see what is being threatened here. Then we question, is this a useful and important thing to protect? Or is it not such a wise thing to protect? Does this come from someplace that doesn't represent the best in me, what's most useful or supportive, or even what is most true? If I want to protect my story or protect the idea that I'm right, or

protect the idea that I'm powerful and I could have control over other people, is that really useful? Is that worth protecting?

If we feel that having power or status does need to be protected, chances are we haven't dug deep enough. We haven't relaxed and settled deep enough to see what is not threatenable. That is the big question, the koan, or the reference point in practice when you really learn to be with fear. Sometimes it takes years to learn to be with fear in a simple, kind, supportive way. Then you can ask yourself the question, what feels threatened here?

And then you keep asking it. Below that, you ask, what's threatened here?

Until perhaps you can settle, relax, be friendly, and have kindness toward what is here. In the quiet and stillness of your mind/ heart, you'll discover that there is a place (or maybe it's an absence of place) where there is freedom, there is breathing room, there is clarity (I like the word "freedom") – that is not threatenable by anything.

Then there's a basis, a foundation for friendliness that can be unconditional. This is a friendliness where we can just be with what is here, even what's difficult, even with difficult people. Sometimes we're friendly from a distance, sometimes close in. But we can take care of

ourselves in this place that we're at home in, deep inside, where we're free.

Those are my thoughts for today. I hope this gives you something to explore for yourself. I think my wish for these talks on fear is not to tell you how it is with fear. I apologize if that's the way language comes across. I want to give you material to question and look at yourself and explore this wonderful topic of fear. It's such a huge part of life. I'm convinced that if you're able to turn around and become an expert on your fear and recognize the ins and outs of it, that'll also be a gift to others. I believe that when you get a good understanding of and wisdom around your fear, you're not just doing it for yourself. You're doing it for the whole world. It's valuable for all of us to become wise around this important part of human life.

Thank you very much.