

# Fear (2 of 4) Our Relationship to Fear

June 30, 2020

**SUMMARY KEYWORDS** attachments, greed, generosity, hate, delusion, wisdom, confusion, care, love, messenger, anxieties, minor, panic, supermarket aisle, specificity, meeting, relationship, beliefs, reactions, attitudes, island, mountain, hillside, distance, hold, safe, bird, thaw, relax, settle, unwind

**Gil Fronsda**

We are looking at fear these days. There are two kinds of fear: the fear that we are trying to become free from, and the fear that we need to listen to. There's the fear that is motivated by attachments, by greed, hatred, and delusion, and the fear that arises out of freedom, from our wisdom, our love, and our care.

The healthy fear is the fear of causing harm to ourselves and others.

So we watch and are mindful so we can know when we're about to cross that line. In the Buddhist tradition, that hesitation, that feeling – “Uh, oh, that's not a good place to go. That's frightening” is considered to be a very healthy kind of fear. But the fear that arises out of

greed, hatred, and delusion to support the greed, hate, and delusion is what the practice is really trying to address. This is what we practice to learn to be free of.

So we learn to distinguish between these two kinds of fear. Of course, it's not always so clear that they're separate. There is often a mixture of wisdom and confusion. Or a certain greed and generosity can be mixed up.

It is very helpful to sit quietly and begin kind of unpacking the layers or teasing apart the different aspects.

Sometimes fear is the motivating force for greed, hatred, and delusion, for being attached. When there's a lot of anger, for example, sometimes it can be useful to notice the fear that might be underneath it. If you can see the fear, then there is a whole different way to work with it. Then we work with the fear. That's the primary thing, and the anger and the hostility are just symptoms.

Fear is a messenger. They say you're not supposed to kill the messenger. You need to go look at what the message is. Sometimes anger is a message that we're afraid, and that's what really needs to be addressed. Sometimes greed, hate, and delusion are the cause of fear. We want something so strongly that we're afraid of not getting it. Or we greedily want to hold on to what we

have because we're afraid of losing it. So it is important to look at this and tease it apart.

One way of thinking about this is that we want to understand our relationship to fear. How do we meet fear when it's there? I believe that just about all of us will have fear of some kind or other, whether it's healthy or unhealthy fear or a combination of both. The question is, what is your general attitude towards yourself and towards the fear that might arise for you?

Begin looking at that and answer that question for yourself. Spend a day, a week, a year, a lifetime looking at what is the fear that's here, and what is my relationship to it. How do I usually act? How do I usually meet it?

How do I generally react to fear when it arises? Do I believe it automatically? Do I recoil from it, shut down, pull away, and avoid everything that makes me afraid? Do I just put my head in the sand like an ostrich so that I don't have to look at it?

Or when I'm afraid, do I attack? Do I get angry? Do I become critical? Do I blame someone else for my discomfort, maybe to deflect the attention from myself, or to deflect my attention away from my fear? Maybe I have the idea that I have to overcome it, but not look at it or be with it. When there's fear, do I feel bad about

myself, believing that I shouldn't be afraid, and if I was a different kind of person, I wouldn't be afraid?

In this way, we begin to oppress ourselves and make life difficult because of these heavy burdens of shoulds and how we think we should be. Are we afraid of fear? When we feel the fear come do we pull away? How are we with fear? How do we meet it?

I think the answer has a lot to do with the intensity of the fear. There is a wide, wide range of what people can feel. All fear should be respected. Depending on the intensity of it, we might relate to it differently.

Our minor fears are one area that is always useful to think of as a laboratory for discovering, exploring, and working with fear. When I started looking at fear for myself, I was really surprised that it was such a constant companion in the smallest ways. If I was standing in line in a store, I had a teeny bit of fear about who was behind me or in front of me – fear of what they would think of me, fear of what they thought about what was in my shopping cart. In all these small ways, fear was there.

As I looked at it more deeply for myself, I saw that for me the specific issue was fear of rejection. Somehow the people would either reject me or they wouldn't like me. Seeing the specificity of it really helped me to look at it.

The fear was relatively mild in supermarket lines, but being mild or small doesn't mean the fear is inconsequential. Sometimes when you look at it, a small fear taps into something deeper that is really important for us – a root, in a sense.

I would encourage people to spend time getting to know and working with the small anxieties, and the small nervousnesses that happen throughout the day. Try to understand what's going on, and try to find a different way to be with them.

One way of relating to small anxieties is to just ignore them and not think they are important or let them influence us, but without really understanding them. On the other end of the spectrum, some fears are very, very intense. People can have panic attacks or feel terrorized. That fear is so strong sometimes that the idea of being mindful of it, being present for it, or letting it just be the river that flows by could actually make it worse.

Sometimes intense fear is self-reinforcing and we spiral out.

So we have to ask the question, how do I relate to fear? What happens to me when I meet fear? We can also learn through trial and error when it is not the kind of fear to meet or to bring mindfulness to. We learn that for this one we might need something else. We may need

to not pay attention to the fear right away. Maybe we need to ground ourselves, or even to distract ourselves. We might need to get some fresh air or the equivalent. Maybe we need to find a friend to talk to. We might need to do something that stabilizes us and allows our whole system to come into a bit more equilibrium. Of course, with certain kinds of intense chronic fears sometimes we need help from other people.

But in between the very mild and very intense fears, there is a whole range of fears where it's fascinating and very helpful to sit and meditate with it. Sometimes when you feel some fear in your daily life and it feels like this is a good one, sit down and meditate there and then. Really be with it. But rather than investigating deeply what's going on, investigate your relationship to it. Try to understand your attitude toward it, the beliefs you have toward it, and the reactions you have to it. What are the secondary emotions you have about the presence of fear?

Many of these attitudes might be like a branch sticking out from the island on which a passing log gets hooked and stuck. If we can understand the attitudes and relationships we add to fear, it might be easier to leave the fear alone and let it go by, rather than reacting to it or getting caught by it.

One way to discover a useful hands-off attitude toward fear is to imagine that you're on an island and the fear is just going by. Maybe it's a very big island, and there's a big mountain on the island. You are way up on that hill looking down at the fear far in the distance. Then it's okay to be with it. Somehow being too close to it is too difficult. With mindfulness, we sometimes can adjust the distance from which we look at something. With fear, it's sometimes better to be far, far away, so we can just leave it alone. If we get too close, fear can be agitating or worse. We can get frightened by the fear, or by the discomfort of it. Ask how close or how far away you need to be in order to be able to feel what's going on.

Sometimes the relationship we have to fear can be very intimate. There are times when I've had fear where I placed myself right in the middle of it and allowed the fear to flow through me. Mindfulness, the island, was right in the middle of it. Then I really felt it flow. There were other times when that was not appropriate. That was too close.

We look at our relationship to fear – how do we meet fear? What do we do when there's fear? One of the goals, maybe a long-term goal, of mindfulness practice, is to meet the fear with simplicity, just allowing it to be there. We don't allow it to be there so it can run us and control us, but so we can see it clearly.

The fear is part of who we are. It is not who we are. If anything, who we are is the awareness of what's happening. Even that doesn't work in the end, but provisionally, that's a useful way of seeing it. We are the island upon which everything else flows.

By just being simple, relaxed, and not troubled by fear, we can learn how to be comfortable with fear. In a way, a relationship that can be very helpful in practice is to help our fear feel safe. Rather than fixing the fear, getting rid of the fear, or solving the fear, maybe the greatest need of our fear is for us to be able to spend some time with it so that it feels safe. What we can do from our island, or from whatever wisdom and place of stability we have, is to find a way to hold the fear and be with the fear. We do this in such a way that what's frightened inside of us doesn't feel criticized, or as if we're poking at it or running away from it, or any of the unhealthy ways of being with it.

The fear begins to feel it's okay to be there. Finally, it's safe. I have an image of holding our two cupped hands together like this, and just holding the fear, gently holding something precious. Maybe it's like a little bird that has been stunned, and we're just holding it to bring it outside the house. Maybe we can learn how to help our fear feel safe. Then the fear we have can begin to do what it needs to do. It can begin to thaw, relax, settle, unwind, and maybe even dissolve.



So spending time looking at your relationship to fear is one of the great things to do. I hope that these explorations of fear give you something to consider throughout your day in a way that helps you to not be limited by your fear.  
Thank you.