

Fear

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I read one time about an Eskimo shaman up in the far north who was being interviewed by an anthropologist who wanted to know about Eskimo belief systems. The shaman put up with the questions for a while and then finally said to the anthropologist, “Look. We don’t believe, we fear.” That’s what all of their practices came from: the need to deal with their fears.

That’s a much more solid grounding than questions of belief. That’s why everyone comes to the practice: We have fears of various kinds—fears of illness, fears of loneliness, fears of suffering of one kind or another. It’s something you don’t have to ask people, “Do you believe in dangers out in the world?” Of course there are dangers. It’s something we don’t have to discuss, something we don’t have to argue about: There are dangers in the world. The question is understanding where the dangers are, where they come from, and where there’s true security from them. Because if you look for security outside, you’re setting yourself up for a fall.

There’s that famous passage where Ven. Ratthapala, who was one of the Buddha’s disciples, is talking to a king. He points out to the king that the world is without protection, the world is without anything of its own, the world is insatiable, a slave to craving. In other words, no matter how much strength or security you seem to build up for yourself, there’s never enough.

Start with your own body: In the quest for security, your body’s probably the biggest traitor there is. It never asks permission: It gets old, grows sick, dies. It’s inevitable. And so whatever bodily strength you build up is going to be subject to aging.

In that particular passage, the king talks about how he’s now eighty years old. When he was young, twenty or thirty he said, he seemed to have the strength of two men. But now he means to put his foot one place and it goes someplace else. He can’t even control his own foot. Ratthapala also points out to him that when the king is sick: Can the king, even though he’s king, command his courtiers that they share out the pain of his illness? No. He has to face the pain alone.

No matter how much wealth he builds up, he can’t take it with him after he dies. Yet even then, with all these treasures he has, he’s so obsessed with wealth and power that if someone came along to him and said, “Hey, there’s another kingdom over to the east... to the west... to the north... to the south that you could conquer.” The king would go ahead and try to conquer it. If someone said, “Hey, on the other side of the ocean there’s another kingdom that you could conquer,” the king would take that, too. There’s never the word

“enough” in terms of wealth or power on the external level.

So the question that the Buddha asked was: Can you find wealth, security inside? Can you find strength inside? Because one of the things we’re facing right now is the fact that when people feel threatened, when they feel in a position of weakness, they start do all kinds of evil. And they try everything they can to justify their evil to themselves. That’s usually where most evil comes from: when people feel that they’re threatened.

If you identify with anything in the world as you or yours, you’re opening yourself up to that kind of threat. At the very least, there’s always the question: Can you really believe in your commitment to being good? Can you really believe in your commitment to being a moral person? Because when something close to home that you really hold onto as being you or yours gets threatened, delusion comes in. Your perspective changes. Can you trust yourself that that won’t happen, that you won’t decide you have to do something unskillful?

So you have to look inside to see if there’s any strength you can develop from within so that you don’t feel threatened by any change at all. Can you learn how to let go of things that are opening you up to that threat—so that no matter what happens, you can trust yourself, so that there’s no fear at all?

As the Buddha said, there are four reasons why people fear death. One is because they’re attached to the body. Another is because they’re attached to sensual pleasures. A third is that they don’t really understand the Dhamma, they haven’t resolved their doubts about the Dhamma. These are three things that can be cured only through meditation.

The other reason for fearing death is when you know that you’ve harmed other people. There’s always a fear that comes with the thought that maybe there is a punishment for what you’ve done. Even for people who don’t necessarily believe fully in the principle of karma, something in the back of the mind knows that there’s got to be some settling of the score somehow. They just don’t know how. They would prefer to deny it, but then simply denying things like that doesn’t mean they’re not true. That kind of fear can be overcome through observing the precepts. But even then, the question of your precepts: How trustworthy are they if you haven’t yet put the mind in a position where it’s not threatened?

The greatest security there can be in the world is not in knowing that your belongings are secure or that your body is secure—because those things are always going to slip away—it’s in knowing that no matter what the situation is, you can trust your own mind, you can trust yourself to make the right decision, you can trust yourself not to be swayed by fear. And the only way you can do that is to let go of things that would put you in a position where you would be afraid.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha said, “Look at your body, look at your feelings, perceptions, thought-constructs, even your consciousness. Can you really claim that they’re yours? Do they lie under your control? If they’re not under your control, why do you latch onto them?” It’s because of our fear that if we don’t latch onto these things there’s nothing.

What the Buddha discovered was that when you let go of these things, it’s not the case that there’s nothing. You find the Deathless. And that’s something totally without fear. It can’t be threatened, can’t be taken away from you. To speak in terms of strength, it’s a strength that will never leave you. To speak in terms of wealth, it’s a wealth that nobody can take away. To speak in terms of security, it’s by definition *the* secure place. There’s nothing more secure.

This is why there’s so much emphasis on letting go: not only because of the immediate suffering that comes when you don’t let go, but also because you can’t really trust yourself until you have let go. There’s always that chance that you’ll suddenly feel threatened and your perspective will change. You’ll start doing things and saying things that you normally would be ashamed to even think of doing. And then when the threat has gone, you’ll look back at what you did and feel a lot of regret.

So through the meditation you want to put yourself in a position where that’s not going to happen, where you can really trust yourself. You work on building up strength within the mind so that you don’t have to depend on things outside.

You build up your conviction in the power of your actions, that the good you do is not erased, it’s not for nothing. The effort that it requires is not wasted. When you believe in that basic principle, believe in the principle of karma—skillful intentions do lead to happiness; unskillful ones, to pain, suffering—you’re going to be very careful about what you do.

Persistence comes as the next strength. You just keep at it, because you realize the law of karma is not like a traffic law: It’s not enforced only from 4:30 to 6 on Thursday afternoon. It’s 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. You’ve got to be very careful, very consistent, at all times.

This is why you need to develop your powers of mindfulness, the next strength. It’s what we’re working on right now as we meditate: being mindful of the breath, keeping it in mind; being alert to the breath, watching what’s happening, making whatever adjustments are needed so that the mind can settle down.

That gives rise to the next strength, which is concentration. Once the mind settles down, it can start seeing things clearly for what they are. In particular, it begins to see that through clinging there’s got to be suffering. It not only causes immediate suffering in the present but it also leads you to do things that cause

even more suffering on into the future.

They talk about the person who practices the Dhamma as being a warrior. Well, one of the lessons of being a good warrior is knowing how to figure out which battles are not worth fighting. That's the strength that comes with discernment. You see that the battle of clinging to the body, the battle of clinging to the aggregates is one that's not worth fighting. When you can cut away the battles that are not worth fighting, that lightens your load considerably.

That's one of the secrets of inner strength: learning how not to waste your strength, to devote it to things that really are worthwhile—developing mindfulness, developing virtue, developing concentration and discernment—so that you don't have to hold onto things that can be taken away from you, things that will turn on you.

In the course of that, you find yourself letting go also of whatever potential there was in the mind for not being able to trust yourself. You find that there's a much stronger sense of self-reliance, self-confidence when you let go of the things that would make you be a traitor to your own best interests.

So this is the path to the end of fear, not only fear of things outside, but also fear of your own inside potentials for doing things that are unskillful. As you learn to let go, you find that you can trust yourself more and more. And that's the greatest security there is. Because the biggest insecurity in life is that sense that you really don't know if you can trust yourself to do the right thing in certain situations. And the greatest security is knowing that you *can* trust yourself, because it's a trust that you've tested through the practice. And you finally reach the point where you realize, yes it is solid. It's not a trust based on wishing or wishful thinking, but something that you've seen really is reliable.

That's what we're practicing for.