Fear

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One time, a visitor who had never practiced meditation outside had always practiced in the sealed environment of a meditation center. He came here and, after the first day, complained that the orchard was too noisy. The sound of the wind and the leaves, the snails crawling over the leaves. The lizards, the bugs. There’s too much noise for him to take. So I have to remind him that an important part of meditation is learning how to stay focused in the midst of sounds, and that these sounds were very harmless, good sounds to work with. Of course, there’s more to sitting under the trees and being out here in nature than just the sounds. Animals, and not all of them, are friendly. Some of them pose dangers. It’s not that they have ill will. Simply, if they’re frightened of you, they can do harm. There are other dangers as well. We’ve got avocados that can fall on people. So this, too, is a good test. Can you learn to meditate in a place that’s not totally safe? After all, how many places around are totally safe? And still maintain your concentration, not get overcome by fear. It’s important to realize that fear is not always unskillful. He talks about the unskillful roots. He talks about greed, aversion, and delusion. He doesn’t mention fear. I’ve known a number of psychotherapists who’ve wondered about that, because for them, the main issue for their clients is fear, irrational fear. And sometimes even rational fear is a problem. What’s being threatened? And to what extent is greed getting involved in what you would like to have? Of course, that gets threatened. To what extent does anger get involved in your fear? Does delusion get involved with your fear? Those are the things you want to ferret out. Of course, we do what we can to protect ourselves from dangers. When you do walking meditation at night, don’t do it in the dark. One of Ajaan Fuang’s favorite phrases is, “Never trust a path.” In other words, there may be a path you’ve been down many, many times. It’s dark out. The moon is out tonight. You figure, “Well, there’s little patches of moonlight on the path. I can see my way.” You never know. There might be something hiding in little bits of shadows. A snake or something might be there. You might step on it. It might retaliate. So if you’re doing walking meditation, make sure you’ve got light. Walk down to your place in the grove. Walk down to the guesthouse. Make sure you have light. In other words, you don’t go looking for unnecessary dangers. And you don’t let your carelessness cause a problem. Because after all, one of the things we do preserve our life for and we preserve our health for is so that we can practice. It would be a shame if you’ve got a good opportunity to practice like that. But still, you’ve got to look at what your true treasures are, what you’ve got to be afraid about. There comes a point where you’re going to have to leave this body. It may come suddenly, it may come slowly, but there comes a point where you’ve got to leave. So you know that the body is something that eventually has to be put down, put aside. So the fear is, “Did you get the most out of it while you had it?” That’s a reasonable fear. The best way to deal with that one, of course, is to practice as much as you can. Be as serious as you can about your defilements. All too often we can put off a particular defilement, saying, “Well, I’m not ready for that one yet. I’ll put it aside. I’ll let it go for the time being.” But what time will you have to deal with it? You really don’t know. When the Buddha talks about being in the present moment, he never talks about the motivation, being connected with the fact that it’s a wonderful place to be or it’s the only place to be. He says it’s a place where work needs to be done. And you can die tomorrow, you can die tonight. You’ve got work to do, focus on right now, what you can do right now. And don’t get used to letting the big issues pass by, pass by, saying, “Well, I’m not ready for them yet.” See what you can do with them. Take a little bite out of them. Take a little hunk out of them. Don’t just let them stay there festering. So if the time does come when you have to leave this body, you can tell yourself, “Well, I did my best. I put time in. And I did my best.” Because that’s one of the big fears, is that you’ll look back and say, “Oh, I could have done more, but I didn’t. I wasted my time.” You can go down the long list of things that people do to waste their time. It’s something that’s slipping away, slipping away, and it doesn’t come back. Once it’s gone, it’s gone. So make the best use of it before it slips out of your fingers. When we talk about fear, we can also stop to think about what are your important treasures. Material things, they’re going to have to be put aside, too. The Buddha says to focus on your noble treasures, your conviction, your virtue, your sense of shame and compunction, your learning, your generosity, your discernment. These are things that you could legitimately be afraid of if you were going to lose them. You don’t lose them because of anybody else’s actions. You lose them because of your own. This means you have real control over them. But you have to learn how to exercise that control. And the fear that drives you to exercise that control, that’s actually skillful fear. Loss of conviction is something to be afraid of. There’s a story in the Canon where a man had made an arrangement to give a meal to the Buddha. And then a woman gave birth to a child after an extremely long pregnancy, and she wanted to give a meal to the Buddha as well—seven days of meals. So the Buddha told Moggallana to go talk to the man. Would he be willing to put off his meal for a week? He said, “If you can be my guarantor for two things—one, my life, and two, my conviction—I’ll be willing.” Moggallana said, “Well, I’ll be your guarantor for your life, but as for your conviction, that’s your responsibility.” Here conviction means conviction in the principle of action, because that’s what enabled the Buddha to gain awakening, which means further, of course, that you have the ability to. Because the qualities he developed as he gained awakening are qualities that you have in potential form as well. And he never claimed that he had any special dispensation on any of these things, simply that he had developed them himself. This is something you can do. So make sure you have that conviction intact. Virtue, shame, and compunction all go together. In other words, virtue is abstaining from harmful activity. A healthy sense of shame is realizing that unskillful activity is beneath you. In other words, this is the obverse side of a healthy sense of pride, of self-esteem. You know that you are capable of skillful activity. And that it would be a shame if you stooped to something beneath you. So that protects you. Compunction is looking at the results of unskillful actions and actually feeling fear. This, of the noble treasures, is the closest in quality of skillful fear—fear of the consequences of doing something wrong. Fear that your strength of action will be destroyed. Virtue, concentration, and discernment might not be strong enough to withstand difficult situations. When society is going relatively well, it might be easier to observe the precepts than when things start falling apart. Are your precepts solid enough so you can trust yourself, say, in an apocalyptic situation? Would you be one of those few people who maintains his or her virtue? Or would you let other things sneak in and take your virtue away from you? That’s something to be afraid of. So you want to develop your compunction so that no matter what, you’re not going to do anything that you know is unskillful. Learning is a treasure in the sense that you have things inside to fall back on. Learning here, of course, is learning the Dhamma. When times get difficult, it’s good to have a freeze in the back of your mind. I was reading a book recently. A small kid is lost up on the top of a plateau. He tried to track his uncle and his father as they were out hunting. He wanted to join them, but they had slipped out without letting him know. But he followed them. He gets lost. The day is ending and he’s afraid. He doesn’t know where he’s going to go for shelter. Then he remembers a sentence that his father had taught him every time he taught him to write, cursive, or printing. The sentence was this, “There’s no need for hope in order to undertake something, and there’s no need for success in order to persevere.” So the kid repeated that over and over in his head. It calmed him down. He was able to figure out a way to get out of the situation. So, good knowledge like that in your head, stored away, is good to have so you can pull it out when you need it in a difficult situation. Do you have that kind of knowledge? How many of the Buddha’s teachings have you remembered? We’ve got the chants that we do every night. By doing them day after day after day, they do ingrain themselves in the mind. So think about those. If you find that you have a particular fear of certain things, well, find a phrase that will give you encouragement. That’s a treasure. Generosity is a treasure. Discernment is a treasure. These things are good because they protect you from doing unskillful things. The big thing to fear, of course, is losing these treasures. Losing them away because you’re attached to something else. Your fear gets focused on things that are really insubstantial, things that you’re going to have to let go of anyhow. So sit down with your fears and sort them out. Which ones are skillful? Which ones are not? If they’re unskillful, what can you do to develop the skillful fears that will counteract them? The Buddha doesn’t tell you to have no fear at all. Have fear of the right things. If you see something within you that would make you destroy your noble treasures, okay, that’s something to be feared. Do what you can to overcome it. This is where concentration comes in handy. If you’ve got a sense of well-being right here, right now, the need to grasp at other things outside gets a lot weaker. You realize you’ve got a skill that you can fall back on. Make the most of it. It is your protection. If concentration is based on goodwill, that too is a protection. If you use goodwill, as we do every day, it reminds you that you’re out there with all those animals, you have goodwill for them. You don’t want to do them any harm. Sometimes they’ll pick up on that. And the fact that you haven’t been harming them, that’s your protection too. So try to get a sense of where your genuine protection lies, where your genuine wealth lies. Make sure that your genuine wealth stays protected.

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