

Fear of Others

April 12, 2011

Years back, a woman brought a friend of hers to meditate here. The friend had never meditated before. And at the end of the hour, she turned to the woman who brought her here and said, “I’ve never suffered so much in my life.”

Which just goes to show that the mind can create a lot of suffering for itself. In fact, as the Buddha pointed out, the suffering we create for ourselves is what really weighs down the mind, much more than the suffering that comes from outside—from sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, or from other people.

Our fears are often misdirected. The Buddha never says that fear is in and of itself unskillful. Many times I’ve had psychotherapists ask me about this: Why doesn’t the Buddha list fear as one of the roots for unskillful behavior? It’s because there are some things that are actually worthy of fear. Fear becomes unskillful when it’s tied up in greed, aversion, and delusion. That’s the kind of fear you want to get past. The fear that comes from knowing that your mind has unskillful habits and the conditions could come about where those unskillful habits might take over: That’s something legitimately to be feared. You want to train your mind so that it’s not influenced into doing unskillful things by any kind of conditions. Until the mind has reached that point, you’ve got something to fear.

So the important thing as we practice is learning which fears are useless and which fears are useful. Particularly with regard to the fears of other people’s opinions: Other people can hurt you, yes—we see so much of it in the world, people harming one another all the time—but you can’t let that potential dissuade you from doing what you know is right.

That kind of fear, the Buddha says, is a case of what they call *agati*, something that takes you off course. There are four kinds of *agati* altogether. You can go off course because of things you desire: You want a reward of some kind from somebody, or you want a certain kind of pleasure that you think is going to come from doing something unskillful, and that desire pulls you off. Then there’s the *agati* that comes from aversion, when you’re not willing to do something simply because you just don’t like it. Even though it may be the right thing to do, you don’t like it, and that gets in the way. There’s the *agati* that comes from delusion, when you simply don’t know what’s the right and the wrong thing to do. And finally there’s *agati* that comes from fear. These are all biases. The word *agati* basically means something that takes you to a bad destination. It takes you off course.

So you have to look at the fears that take you off course, the fears that someone will not like you, or someone will punish you for doing something that you know is right, or someone will create difficulties for you. You have to learn to be impervious to that. As for the fact that some people may not like you, well, as Ajaan Fuang once said, the people who like you are the

ones you're most beholden to. If people hate you, then you can come and go as you like. You don't have to ask their permission; you don't have to be worried about how they'll look after themselves while you're away.

There are times when you know that the right thing to do is going to displease other people and there's no way around it. You have to be willing to put up with their displeasure. If there are ways that you can smooth things over, so much the better. But there come times when you can't, where you have to stand up for what's right. In that case, you can't let conflict or the fear of conflict dissuade you.

I think I've told you about the time when I gave my first Dhamma talk. Ajaan Fuang said, "Imagine that you have a sword in your hand. Anybody out there in the audience who doesn't like what you have to say, you can just cut off their head." It's a shocking image, but it was effective. It made me reflect back on how much my own fears were actually the problem. Who knows what those other people were thinking. But it was my anticipation—that they might not like it, or they may disapprove, or they may look down on me, or whatever—that was getting in the way.

That kind of fear is an *agati*, something that pulls you off course. If people are kind enough to tell you that you've done something wrong, or even if they've let you know in not such a kind way that you've done something wrong, at least it gives you the opportunity to look at it and see: Was that really wrong or was it not? But these floating nameless fears that they just may not like you or they may do something that's confrontational: You have to realize you're hobbling yourself with those fears. Those are the kind of fears you want to get over. You have to learn how to look past them and say, "Well, what exactly would be so horrible about their disliking you or their looking down on you?" Which part of the mind would be injured? Learn how not to identify with that part of the mind. Which part of the mind feels threatened? Again, learn how not to identify with it. That's the Buddha's prime tactic in learning how not to suffer: If anything that's subject to harm leaves you open to danger, leaves you open to suffering, why identify with it?

If you can think in this way, you find yourself shedding all kinds of unskillful forms of pride, including the pride that masks as extreme shame. A lot of unskillful things hide around these things that we're afraid of, these things where we feel threatened. So it's good to look into them.

This is why we meditate: to give ourselves a good solid position inside where we can look at these other things that we've identified with so long: habits, fears, the things that can pull us off course; all four of these things—our desires that are unskillful, our aversions, our delusions, our unskillful fears.

This is where the real dangers lie, in these habits we have. These are the real things that you should fear. Fortunately, there's something you can do about them. You're not stuck with them. You've been carrying them around but you don't have to keep carrying them around. It

sometimes takes time to learn how to let go and to live with the fact that there are people out there who will never like you no matter what. No matter how well you behave, no matter how intelligent you are, no matter how much you do for the world, there are going to be people who dislike you for some reason or another: some old karmic thing, or they themselves don't like living in a world where they feel threatened by someone else doing better than they've done. There are all kinds of reasons that people would decide to dislike you or wish you harm. You can't let that stop you.

The Buddha himself was cursed by people. As Ajaan Lee once said, people can curse you, and their mouths can open a whole yard wide, but they never actually reach you. You're the one who's pulling in their criticism. That refers to the words they actually say to you, and here we're afraid simply of what other people will think. We're the ones who are stabbing ourselves with those fears. So that's a habit you want to fear and that's a habit you can learn to let go of. Fortunately, because it's something you're doing yourself, you also have the power not to do it.

Try to sort through your fears and see which ones are actually useful and which ones are hobbling you from doing the skillful thing. Realize that you're hobbling yourself. You can take off those shackles and walk with a lighter step.