

## *Anxiety*

*July 29, 2017*

There are two ways of dealing with the dangers in the world. One is to tell yourself that they're not really dangers, that the world is a wonderful interconnected place and the interconnections are all for everybody's good. Which is pretty heedless. You look around you and see that people who are not prepared for dangers usually end up meeting with them—and when they meet with them, they don't know what to do because they haven't prepared.

So the other way of dealing with the dangers is to prepare for them, to realize that there are ways of avoiding them. If you learn those skills, then you're creating a place of safety for yourself. And that's the Buddha's approach, because that's the heedful approach. Heedfulness is the realization that, Yes, there are dangers but there are ways around them. If there were no ways around them, heedfulness wouldn't mean anything. We'd just be victims. But the Buddha's teaching is not a teaching to make people victims. One of his names for the path is “the unexcelled victory in battle,” in other words, you come out winning. And you do that by developing skills.

Like the skills of the meditation we're working on right now: We're engaged in what's called fabrication. We're creating a good state of mind and also a good state in the body. When you work with the breath, the body gets calmed. When the energy in the body flows, the blood flows to the different organs, nothing gets squeezed out of its nourishment. So both body and mind benefit.

There are three kinds of fabrication going on here right now. We're directing our thoughts and we're evaluating the breath. The breath in and of itself is called bodily fabrication because it influences the other functions of the body and your experience of the body. Directed thought and evaluation are called verbal fabrication: you intentionally direct your thoughts to a topic and then you comment on it or ask questions about it.

As you're doing with the breath right now: The breath is what you're directing your thoughts to, and you're evaluating, “Is the breath good? Is it not good? Is my mind with the breath? If it's not with the breath, what can I do to make it more inclined to want to stay?” When the breath feels comfortable, what are you going to do with that sense of comfort? Some people just go right for the comfort. And you can stay that way for a while, just wallowing in the comfort, but then it begins to dissolve. Either that, or you lose your focus and get into what's called delusion concentration.

So you've got to do something with that comfort. The act of evaluation tries to figure out what that is. Mindfulness helps. You've heard the directions about spreading the comfort around. Think of the breath energies going down the spine, out the legs, down the arms, out the hands, throughout the torso, all over the head. And in that way, you create a better place to live.

What's holding all of this together is mental fabrication. On the one hand, there's the feeling of ease. It feels good to stay here. And then there are the perceptions, the images you have in your mind: the image of the breath, the image of the energy flowing. Actually, there are a lot of images running through the mind. If you dig around inside, you'll find lots of ways in which your mind communicates with itself through the images and words that it sends back and forth. Those are called perceptions.

You can ask yourself right now, "Where do you perceive the breath is coming in? Does the breath start outside or does it start inside?" Remember, if we think of the breath as energy, it actually starts inside the body, the wave of energy that, when it spreads, allows the air to come in and out. When you start thinking about the breath coming from within, what does that do? Or you can think of the breath coming in and out all the pores of your skin, as if your body's a big sponge. What does that do to the experience of the breath? Notice how the various perceptions have an impact not only on the mind but also on the body, and choose the set of perceptions that has the best impact.

And as we learn to work with these things, we're giving ourselves hands-on experience with the way we create any emotional state, any state of becoming. It's composed of these same three things. And when you get experience with this in your meditation, then you can deal with other states as they arise throughout the day.

For example, you have an anxiety attack. The first thing to do is ask yourself, "How can I breathe to calm at least the body down?" Because when a state comes on like that, the body has suddenly been hijacked by the emotion and you don't know where to settle in. Your mind is churning out all kinds of thoughts; the hormones are running through your bloodstream. So you need something to hold on to. And the breath gives you one thing you can work with. It's one of the few automatic bodily functions that you can change at will. Just calmly breathe and think of the breath saturating the whole body. Make that the basis for your awareness.

Then you can look at how you're talking to yourself about the issue. What are you saying to yourself? Can you say other things? Can you comment to yourself in other ways?

Usually with the anxiety there's a fear that somebody's going to get you somehow and you don't feel protected enough. This is where it's good to think about the Buddha's teachings. The Buddha didn't teach just a meditation technique, he also taught a way of thinking to accompany it: different things to think about, different images to hold in mind—in other words, different ways of engaging in verbal fabrication and mental fabrication to replace the ways that have been causing you trouble.

For instance, you may have heard that his teachings on goodwill are good for dealing with anger. But they're also good for dealing with fear. When he talks about the rewards of metta practice, the rewards of goodwill, a lot of them have to do with the dangers that will not come to you when your mind is spreading goodwill in all directions.

And here it's useful to engage not only in the verbal fabrication of goodwill but also in mental fabrication, perceptions that help strengthen your goodwill. The Buddha says you can think of your goodwill as being like the earth. People can come and do things to the earth—they can dig in it and spit on it and do other horrible things—but the earth will always be earth. No matter how much they try to erase it or efface it, the earth is still earth. So think of your goodwill as being solid like the earth.

Or you can perceive it as being like the River Ganges, which is vast. Someone might come along with a torch and try to burn up the River Ganges, but the River Ganges is so much bigger that the torch will have no effect. Think of your goodwill as being cool and impermeable like that.

Think of goodwill as being like space. People can try to draw pictures on space but there's nothing there to draw on. You want a mind full of goodwill like that, where no other thoughts that other people can have toward you will remain scribbled on your mind.

So here you're giving yourself some new images to hold in mind. Because a lot of the anxiety attack comes from an image emerges from the primitive brain and then sends out alarm signals. If you really want to understand the anxiety, you have to look at: What is the image that sparked things in the mind? And what are the images that follow on that?

And is there some other emotion in there as well? Sometimes when you dig around in fear you find an underlying anger. And then there's the fear that if you express the anger you're going to get into trouble. That's why the anger and the anxiety go together.

So staying with the breath gives you a place where you can look at these things. But even before you look at them, you try to reprogram yourself, to put new ways of thinking in the mind.

Another way of thinking about issues of safety and danger is the Buddha's reflection on the body. Body contemplation is not just for overcoming lust. It's also to help you realize that the mere fact that you've got a body is going to open you to dangers, but the body is not you. So you have the choice: You can hold on to the body and claim it as you and then expose yourself to the dangers of sticks and stones that can break your bones. Or you can identify with the awareness that knows these things but doesn't have to say, "This body is me," or, "This body is mine."

Then you ask yourself, "What can damage the awareness?" Well, your own thoughts, your own attitudes. Of course, you can hear things from other people and they can say things that will get buried in your mind sometimes. But if you've been quiet enough, you can begin to sort out: Whose voices are these in the mind that speak words of fear?

And when new voices come in from the outside, the Buddha has you depersonalize them. Just tell yourself, "An unpleasant sound has made contact at the ear." And that's it. You don't have to get involved in the stories. Because the stories you tell yourself that create more and more fear: That's directed thought and evaluation gone bad. You want to create better stories, so that sounds can come at the ear and then can stop right there. After all, once the person has said those words, they're not in that person's mouth anymore. And once the sound has hit your ear, it's gone.

Where are the hurt feelings right now? Well, they're in the part of the mind that holds onto those words and keeps using them to stab you. That's something you can stop. And all the other narratives that go around the words, "Why did the person say that? Don't they have any care for me? Don't they have any respect for me?": Whatever it is, you can just drop those and say, "Why do I need these? I've got better things to think."

This is one of the reasons why it's good to read in the suttas, read in the teachings of the ajans, because they give you another way of looking at things, so that it's not the same old conversation over and over and over again in your mind, or even the same old series of pictures, triggering pictures that set things off.

If you think of yourself as small and vulnerable, you react in one way. If you think of your mind as vast and impregnable, you can go through the world in a very different way. You realize that people will do and say what they want. And as long as you lay claim to things that they can do bad things to, you're going to

suffer. But you don't have to lay claim. Even your name, it's not really yours. You didn't come into this world with that name. It was given to you. It's a property of the world. And the world can say and do what they want with your name.

So on the one hand, you want to train your mind so that it does have a sense of its own strength and its own goodwill for the world, because that's your protection. If you have ill will for somebody and then they do something bad to you, part of your mind will actually feel that you deserve it. That's what lets these seeds in. But if you have goodwill for everybody, then when they mistreat you, you say, "Well, this has nothing to do with me. It's all them."

So you put your mind in a position of strength, where it can let go of the things that the world can mistreat. That's where you gain your place of safety. It's inside—and it comes by strengthening yourself and learning how to use different kinds of fabrication in more skillful ways. We've been using them for who-knows-how-long to create suffering for ourselves. Now the Buddha's saying you can use these things to create a sense of well-being, to create a sense of strength. You can make a path for yourself that goes even beyond them. And while you're on the path, you're in a place of safety: alert to the dangers of the world but not subject to them.

So it's a clear-eyed path. The Buddha didn't have us put on pink-colored glasses to look at the world. He had us look at the world very carefully for what it is, but also to realize that a lot of the problems come not from the world coming into us, but from our going out and trying to grab hold of the world and finding that we're getting our fingers burned.

So learn to hold on inside to the parts of the mind that really are useful, and then you can let everything else go. All the other things are avenues by which danger can come, but the good things in the mind are a place of safety.