

## *Skillful Fear*

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I've known a number of psychotherapists who've asked me why the Buddha doesn't put fear in his list of the causes of unskillful behavior, along with passion, aversion, and delusion. It's because some forms of fear are unskillful, but others are skillful. The most unskillful form of fear is the one that the Buddha lists in the four biases, when you treat people unfairly out of fear. Someone has power over you or you fear their power, so you give in to them in ways that you shouldn't.

There's also fear of death. What with the war and with the pandemic, that's a lot on people's minds. But the Buddha said that wars and pandemics can harm you only up to the end of this life. The things you really have to be afraid of are your own unskillful actions, because they can harm you beyond that. No one else can send you to hell. But you can send yourself to hell if you're not careful.

This is a kind of fear that comes not with lack of power, but with a sense of power. We have power with our actions to determine our course, how much we will or will not suffer. So the Buddha actually recommends a certain kind of fear in this area. The Pali term is *ottappa*, which we translate as "compunction." The Thais translate it as, "fear of doing evil." You have the power with your actions to do good or to do evil. As we chanted just now, "Whatever I do for good or for evil, to that will I fall heir." And it's so easy to misuse that power. Especially when we don't realize that we have it.

A lot of people deny that power. They say, "My actions will have an impact only up to the end of this life, and then that's it: zero, nothing." So in their calculations, they take only that far into consideration. But the Buddha is saying, "No, that's just one working hypothesis." There's no proof that death is the end of everything. And it's a working hypothesis that teaches you to be very careless and to place the brute survival of your body as a very high priority. Whereas the Buddha is more concerned with the survival of your goodness, and offers you a working hypothesis that helps with that survival: the hypothesis of kamma and rebirth.

This is one of the reasons why he has that image of the mother with an only child. Just as a mother with her only child would protect the child with her life—in other words, she'd be willing to sacrifice her life to protect the child—in the same way, the Buddha says you should protect your goodwill with your life. In other words, you have to maintain goodwill in all situations, no matter how much they threaten your physical survival. You have to see danger in ill will, because ill

will leads you to do all kinds of unskillful things, even when you feel you're acting out of justice. If you want to see somebody suffer, the things you do and say and think under the power of that desire will pull you down. That's something to be afraid of.

Think of the image of the bandits sawing you into pieces. They've pinned you down. There's nothing you can do. The Buddha says, though, that there *is* something you can do: You can have goodwill for the bandits. If you had ill will for them, he said you wouldn't be following his teachings. And it's for your own good that you spread thoughts of goodwill in their direction.

You may think the bandits don't deserve goodwill, but deserving is not part of the equation. Remember the Buddha compares goodwill with wealth. It's wealth that you can create totally from within. And there's no need for there to be any limit on it. It's *appamañña*: In other words, you can create as much as you want, and its value doesn't decrease when you increase the amount of goodwill you've sent out. It's not like the money of a country where the more they print, the lower the value of the money. Here, the more you produce, the higher the value.

So you don't have to worry about whether the bandits deserve it or not. You have more than enough to give them. It's actually for your own good. Because if you died with ill will for the bandits, that would take you to a bad place. You might get fixated on wanting to get revenge, and you can imagine a life devoted to the desire to get revenge: It'd be a miserable life. It would create more and more bad kamma.

So here's a case where you develop goodwill out of compunction, the desire not to do harm—and especially not to harm yourself with your own actions. Here you've got this power to create happiness for yourself. But that power, if you misuse it, can also create a lot of harm in the long term.

You want to strengthen the mind so that it can keep the long term always in mind. This is one of the reasons why we practice concentration, one of the reasons why it's so important that we have a sense of well-being that comes as we focus inside on the breath. It takes strength to go against our immediate knee-jerk reactions and to think about the long term. So to sustain yourself as you're waiting for the long term, you want to have a sense of nourishment that comes from within. As the Buddha discovered after he'd tried all those years of self-torture, the path to denying all pleasure leads nowhere.

He had had that image of sappy wood lying in water. It wouldn't be good for starting a fire. That's an image for someone who is both fantasizing about sensuality and also indulging in it. Then there was the wood outside of the water, but still sappy: not indulging in sensuality, but still fantasizing about it. Then

there was the wood that was far away from the water and was dry. That would be the good wood for starting a fire: symbolizing someone who's not only physically distant from sensual—sexual, basically—pursuits, but also not interested in even thinking about them.

At first, he misunderstood, thinking that all pleasure was bad, that all pleasure was like the sappy wood in water. So he denied himself all kinds of pleasure. But he found that that led nowhere. It led to death. So the question came to his mind: Was there a pleasure that was not harmful, not unskillful, a pleasure that was not blameworthy? And he realized the pleasure of concentration, what we call the pleasure of form, had none of those drawbacks. The only drawback you might have was that you might get attached to it, not wanting to go on to the higher levels of discernment and insight. But compared with sensuality, it's much less damaging. Nobody kills, steals, cheats over jhana. And even though they have jhana wars, they're just wars where ink is spilled. No blood is spilled.

So nurture that sense of well-being. As you look at your choices in life, you realize you've got to think of the long term—sometimes very, very long term. The pleasure of concentration gives you immediate nourishment so that you can keep it up, so you can be in here for the long run.

We do this because we have a power: the power to create happiness; the power to create misery. For ourselves, for others. We want to make sure that we use that power well. After all, that's the message of the Buddha's life, the message of his awakening, and we want to live our lives with that message in mind, conscious of the power we have, and also conscious of what should and should not be feared.

We're afraid of death, but the Buddha said that's not a thing to be feared. It's better to be afraid of rebirth, because the fact that you're going to be reborn opens you to all kinds of dangers from all sides. One of the heavenly messengers or deva messengers is a baby lying on its back, lying in its own excrement, helpless, totally helpless. You have to realize that this is what happens. You come back to the human realm, which is one of the better realms, and you're going to be completely dependent on outside help. That's when your kamma can come and get you.

So you want to be afraid of doing the kinds of things that would put you in danger when you're in that position. As for fear of people who could kill you in this lifetime? The influence of their actions can go only as far as this lifetime. The influence of your actions can go much further. They have that much more power.

So, on the one hand, be afraid of misusing that power. On the other hand, be confident that you can use that power well. If you're willing to train yourself, if you're willing to submit to the training, it can take you far.