**The Gift of Fear**

Fear is a part of human nature, so there is little point in forcing ourselves to overcome it or pretending to be unaffected by it. In fact, we do so at our peril.

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Fear is a given; it is a fundamental part of life and consciousness. And while it may not feel good, fear is useful and necessary. In spiritual life, the problem with fear lies in whether we have the wisdom to respond well to it.

In Buddhism, fearlessness, in regard to both internal and external obstacles, is often extolled as a virtue. It takes fearlessness to tackle one’s own neuroses, and it takes fearlessness to not become overwhelmed when facing, say, physical danger. In the [Majjhima Nikaya](https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/index.html%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) of the Pali canon, a whole sutta, the *Bhayabherava*, is devoted to how to overcome “unwholesome fear and dread.” But fearlessness is not the whole picture.

The presentation of the dharma as a whole is couched in terms of taking [refuge](https://tricycle.org/magazine/the-three-gems/) from samsara, from the round of dukkha, or suffering. But one does not seek refuge unless one is afraid. Which means that fear, and not just fearlessness, has an important role to play. How is this seeming paradox to be reconciled? Different Buddhist traditions have approached it in different ways. One well-known approach is what we might call the heroic path, the path of overcoming perceived shortcomings, including fear. As you progress on the heroic path, so the logic goes, fear will naturally decrease. Reach a level of spiritual perfection and you will feel no fear at all. So get busy perfecting yourself right away!

By contrast, there is what might be thought of as a pragmatic approach. Here, we start from the way we actually find ourselves to be—fallible, vulnerable, and mortal. The Japanese Pure Land schools call this our *bonbu* nature. On the pragmatic path, the foundation is not striving to better ourselves; rather, the basis is naturalness and honesty about our very imperfect selves.

Here’s a little story I heard about fear. There was a monastery in the mountains in China. Wild deer would come onto the monastery’s beautiful grounds. The monks loved the deer and enjoyed feeding them. When the abbot heard about it, he came out shouting and waving his arms and attacking the deer with his staff. The deer became alarmed and ran away. The abbot put up a notice saying there must be no more feeding the deer and any deer seen on the property were to be chased off. The monks protested, saying, “We came here to learn kindness and compassion. What sort of example are you, getting so mad at these gentle animals? This can’t be right.” The abbot addressed the community: “Look, there are hunters in these mountains. The only defense these animals have is their fear. If you take that away from them, they will all be killed very soon.”

If we did not have fear—if we were truly fearless—we, like the deer, would be in terrible danger without knowing it. We have awareness in order to be wary. The most primitive animal will shrink away from noxious contact. Consciousness itself is closely related to fear, and to grasping as well. If we did not need to get things, or to run away from things that want to get us, then we would probably not have developed consciousness at all. We would not need it. Rocks do not need to be conscious. They are all-accepting. Acceptance is also one kind of Buddhist ideal, but it would be a mistake to take it to an extreme. We are not aiming to be rocks.

It is sometimes said that faith takes away fear, and there is truth in this. But I think the more important point is that faith redirects us from mundane stress to the great fear and exhilaration that frames our spiritual life. When the practitioner experiences such fear, she knows that she is close to the raw energy of life itself, the élan vital. It is this life energy that gives meaning to the holy life. If we try to hush it up, we might well end up pouring a kind of sanctimonious *avidya*, or ignorance, on top of the worldly kind.

As a young enthusiast for the dharma, I began on the heroic path and learned much. But along that way I also encountered, at every step, self-deception and spiritual pride. As I have mellowed with age, I have found greater peace, sanity, and spiritual consolation in the more pragmatic approach of starting with things as we find them. It’s a fact that we get frightened, and simply exerting more and more willpower to overcome our fright, or posing as though we’re unaffected by it, does not send the fear away.

Pragmatically, it may make more sense to view relating to fear as akin to using fire to combat fire. The pragmatic dharma-farer can use greater fear to drive out lesser fears. When we realize our smallness, seek refuge, and find a place within the great dharma realm, we have nothing to lose. Such a reorientation helps one find peace in the center of life’s whirlwind. But the whirlwind does not stop. From that position, the wise person, cherishing the fear and mindful of the dharma, chooses the most compassionate course, fearing more for others than for self and realizing that we are all in one boat together.

Fear has its uses, too. For instance, if one wants to cultivate awareness, one can readily see that one is never so acutely aware as when one is frightened. At such times one stays compulsively alert and cannot sleep. The cultivation of awareness, therefore, is a refinement of the energy of fear that is close to the core of our basic makeup.

Fear is sometimes exciting, as when one is testing a new motorcycle to its limit. Usually, though, it is unpleasant. But either way, it motivates us. It gets us moving. The most basic action that it suggests is to run away—and in many situations this is the best course. It might be brave and magnificent to stand up to an enemy who is much bigger than you are, but it is also a first-class way of getting yourself killed. If a tiger comes, you had better run away, or you will soon be its next dinner.

Fear galvanizes. We can do feats of strength when we are frightened that we cannot achieve at other times. Fear mobilizes all of our resources. Zen Master Dogen says that we should train in Zen with the same energy we would employ if our hair were to catch fire. If that were the case, one would most certainly be alarmed and take urgent action.

Clearly, there is a range within which fear puts us on our toes and brings out our best. When there is too little, we become complacent, bored, and lazy. When there is too much, we become paralyzed. When I first began speaking in public, I sometimes would sweat and shake and be unable to even get my words out. I found that the best thing was simply to tell the audience that I felt terribly nervous, which to my surprise allowed me to relax a bit and the audience to become more sympathetic. And the thing went off all right.

From experiences like this I realized that the venom that paralyzed me was not so much the fear as the pride that made me try to hide the fear, that wanted me to present myself as a master over my human nature. But when I could be natural and share how I was feeling, a bond was established with the audience. Fear can connect people.

Fear and love are closely related. To cut ourselves off from one is to cut ourselves off from the other. Suppressing awareness of our own vulnerability, we inevitably and correspondingly lose sensitivity for those around us. I find that the most wrenching fear that one experiences is the fear one feels for others. Love is like that. When one loves, one fears for the other. When one fears for them, one watches out for them. I have been much more afraid when my children were in danger than when I myself was in a life-threatening situation. This is true not only for regular people. Just as a mother is fearful for her child, the buddhas, ever watchful, are fearful about what shall become of us.

It is common to see the dharma in terms of self-development and, ultimately, self-perfection. But any perfection that does arise does so as a by-product. It is all very well to take techniques from Buddhism and use them to enhance our worldly lives, but that is not really what the dharma is about. It is about taking up a more wholesome attitude to reality as it is.

If we could somehow get rid of the traits about ourselves that we don’t like and by force of will make ourselves perfect, we’d probably be much the worse for it. Achieving success in the heroic endeavor, one would probably just become completely egotistical about one’s superb achievement. Even before arriving at such glory, one would along the way be tempted to pose as having made more progress than one actually had and turn a blind eye to one’s own failings. I’ve certainly done this.

We are deluded beings, weak and vulnerable. We are especially vulnerable to self-centered impulses that arise from our karmic continuum. It is no good pretending that because one has read a few books on Buddhism or been to a retreat or two, one is now immune to any such failing. Even more sad is the case of the person who, after many years of rigorous Buddhist discipline, realizes, with despair or cynicism, that he is still prey to powerful, unbidden emotions and so concludes either that the dharma does not work or that he himself is a hopeless failure.

Realizing that we are hopeless cases is, in a sense, essential. We are not going to eradicate features of our basic nature, and real spiritual awakening has more to do with facing this honestly than it does with arriving at a fantasy of some kind of Superman Buddha dwelling within one. To see our *real* nature, our human nature, is not cynicism—it is awakening.

Knowing one is imperfect, and deeply so, undermines pride. It puts one on firmer ground—a ground of empirical reality. It is, in fact, a relief. It may be a disappointment, but even there one can observe the ego at work and, hopefully, laugh at oneself. This too is part of one’s all-too-human nature. Disappointment with oneself is not something to get rid of; it is something to share with others.

In Buddhism, we talk a lot about impermanence. The Buddha talked about impermanence in order to make us frightened. You might think it odd that Buddha wanted to frighten us in this thoroughgoing way, but how else was he to get us to take our spiritual and existential situation seriously? Life is short. There is much to be done. Our very world is in peril because of our spiritual state. I recently came across a listing of countries that are considered dangerous to visit, and the list included more than half of the countries on the planet! There are ecological perils, military perils, health perils, and, above all, spiritual perils, perhaps the greatest of which is losing concern about all the other perils.

Buddhism is a refuge, a space where we are accepted as we are, with our faults and fears, and where we are encouraged to do what we can for the good of all sentient beings. The buddhas are working to help us all the time. They see us as being in peril. We do not see this as clearly as they do. This failure to see clearly the spiritual peril that we are in is ignorance, *avidya*. *Vidya* means to see clearly. *A-vidya* means to be without such clarity. If we saw our plight more clearly we would be more motivated to respond to our peril. Things will not inevitably get better of their own accord. The state of our world depends upon the spirit in which we approach and care for it, and that spirit is much more soundly based when it is grounded in an acknowledgment of our true nature—fears and all—than when we pose as purer than we are.

There is an apparent paradox here—that holding too tightly to our ideals may well make us worse by making us blind to reality and thus very likely to get ourselves into trouble in both worldly and spiritual ways. Becoming proud of ourselves and our own understanding, we easily get into quarrels and rivalries. Many of us have been members of spiritual communities in which unkind quarrels have broken out or, even worse, have gone on and on in a hidden, underground kind of way, suppressed by the attempt to pose as being more enlightened than we really are.

This is often the result of an unwillingness to acknowledge fear, a refusal to see its central place in our makeup, its intimate connection to life itself. We are blind to our own blindness and do not see the danger. The blindness is much more dangerous than the fear. We do not see our own role in its creation. If we did, then we would be more afraid, and our practice would be more careful. We would see the spiritual danger that threatens us and threatens others even more. We would value the help of the buddhas and ancestors and be less arrogant. Then our fear would bring us a little bit of enlightenment, and we would realize what a gift it is.