

Re-Visiting Fear

When students come into daisan and want to tell me about their dreams I usually discourage them. My experience is that trying to analyze dreams is somewhat mental and often doesn't help very much. But recently I had four very short nightmares back to back in the same evening, and they didn't require any analysis—their meaning was painfully obvious. They were four of the classic faces of fear.

In the first I was in the ocean, about waist-deep, and saw a ten-foot wave coming at me. I turned back to get away, and saw a thirty-foot wave coming at me from the other direction. The obvious fear was of physical danger and loss of safety. In the next one I was waiting on a corner to be picked up. I didn't know who was picking me up, but the person was important to me. The person didn't show up, and as I waited I noticed that there wasn't a single person anywhere in sight. The fear, as you can imagine, was of abandonment and loss of connection.

In the next I was using a small massage tool for a painful headache and it stopped working, and when I tried to fix it, it unraveled into thousands of pieces. The fear, of course, was of powerlessness and loss of control.

And in the last one, I was teaching a meditation class and most of the students were sleeping soundly, and I yelled at the top of my lungs, "Wake UP!" but everybody ignored me. The fear was no doubt of unworthiness and inadequacy.

These four fears happen to be my four deepest fears—of physical danger, abandonment and loss of connection, powerlessness and loss of control, and unworthiness. These closely mirror the most basic universal fears: loss of safety, abandonment and disconnection, loss of control, unworthiness, and fear of loss, which includes fear of death. The real question is: How can we work with and learn from our fears?

Perhaps it will be helpful to approach this as a step by step process. Even if it's not possible to approach our fears step by step in the moment, it's still valuable to have the mental clarity on what we need to do—just so there's a place to start. The first step, once we recognize that we're afraid, is to try to see fear as our path.

It can show us specifically where we're stuck, where we can open out of our cocoon, and thus become free. Our direction is to



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move directly toward our fears—to say Yes to them. To say Yes means that we're willing to feel what fear really is.

Instead of greeting fear with "Oh no!"—which is our normal response, we can say, "Hello, here you are again—what will you feel like this time?"

Often when fear arises we may think we have to practice with it, almost as a grim task. But there's another way of looking at it. Instead of feeling we have to practice with it, we can remind ourselves that we get to practice with it. I learned this from Gregg Krech, a fellow teacher, and what it means is we get to have the opportunity to work with what is holding us back, with what is keeping us from being free.

So for me, when physical pain arises, I tell myself I get to work with it again—meaning I have the opportunity to work with my attachment to comfort, my attachment to my body, my attachment to my grim thoughts and to my fears—all of which prevent me from being free.

In other words, if I didn't have the fear of pain to push me, I would never work with it in the same way. This is another way of seeing our fear as our path, but in a little lighter way. Maybe not quite, "Oh boy, I get to work with my fears," but something like that. It's inviting us to be curious and explore. Sometimes, the mind of curiosity can allow us to see fear almost as an adventure instead of as a nightmare.

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The actual practice is to pause, and first allow ourselves to observe the thoughts racing through our mind. If the thoughts are mostly catastrophic or imaginings of danger, we can say, "Not happening now!"

If the thoughts are obsessive, we can cut them off by saying, "Don't go there!"

If saying "Don't go there!" doesn't work, we can slowly breathe in, hold the breath for a few seconds, and then forcefully breathe out. If you do this three or four times it can break the energetic pattern in the body. Please try this sometime to see how it works.

After we can dis-identify with the thoughts we feel the physical sensations and energy of fear throughout our body. We breathe right into them. Basically we're asking the practice question "What is this?" We're not asking why we have it or analyzing it—we're essentially asking, "What is this moment?"

This is not an intellectual question—instead, the answer is a kind of meticulous entering into the body. You notice where specifically you feel the strongest sensations—and then you feel their texture.

For example, for me, with anxiety, I feel it mostly in the chest and stomach. It usually feels queasy and quivery. Or with pain, as I breathe into it, I notice whether it's sharp or throbbing, and how intense it is, how it's changing, and so forth. So the question, "What is this?" is an experiential way of dealing with

anxiety and fear. And we do it by breathing into it.

When the experience of fear feels too strong to stay with, we can take deep relaxing breaths, as in the deep breathing meditation. When the fear is still too strong, we can also temporarily find distractions. This is part of the bigger tent of practice, as long as we don't abuse it. And it's always helpful to tune into the environment—hearing sounds, feeling the air—to experience the fear within the larger container of awareness.

These are the steps, but the real question is: Can our aspiration to live authentically become more important than indulging the story of fear? In working with fear it's important to understand that even while fear might remain, we do not have to identify with it as who we are. This is what it means to be free from fear: not that it's no longer present—that may be an impossible ideal—but that it no longer dictates who we are or how we live.

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