

Fear is Not the Enemy

There's a studio portrait of my siblings and me when we were little. The baby is content; the older two (three and four) are smiling. I'm about 19 months, clutching a soft toy that I've probably been given in the hopes that it will soothe me, but my anxiety is evident.

Toddlers being as they are, the weather no doubt changed very quickly. But regardless of our age, fear can arise on any day (in my life and in yours), and the urge to contract in the face of it can be very strong. This must be why fear wears so many disguises: anger, indifference, overindulgence, rule-bound behavior, a sleek image, people pleasing, and on and on.

But hiding from our fear, denying it even from ourselves, does not allow us to live from our true nature or to connect deeply with others. Zen practice gives us tools to engage with fear, whether it is turning up as everyday anxiety—fretful, scattered energy in body and mind—or as panic, rising in waves so powerful we seem destined to drown.

So what have I learned about practicing with fear? Here's the short version:

- Be it.
- Know it.
- Embrace it.

Let me say what I mean by each of these and give a few examples.

Be it. It's my first sesshin. The teacher is Joko Beck, and when I see her in daisan, she asks, "So how are you? What's happening?" I tell her, "I'm trembling." "That's fine," she says. "What I want you to do is be the trembling."

So that was my practice: being the trembling, for as long as it was there, without clinging to it and, as best I could, without fueling it with thinking. For this to happen, I needed the willingness to do what I'd been asked to do; I needed thought labeling; and I needed a generous enough container of awareness to allow the trembling to be unhindered. Little by



August Sesshin Today is the last day to apply to enroll in the five-day August Sesshin (8/7–8/12). If you can't attend all five days you can apply for the first or last three days.

Practice Period This year Practice Period will be from September 15 through October 13. Please try to leave this time free for full participation. The September newsletter will include more information and an enrollment form.

October Sesshin The three-day October Practice Period Sesshin starts on Friday evening, October 5 and ends on Monday, October 8. Applications will be accepted starting August 5. As part of the Practice Period, this sesshin fills quickly, so please apply early.

Announcements

Sesshin Application

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Hiding from our fear, denying it even from ourselves, does not allow us to live

little, I found that, yes, it was possible to be the trembling.

When fear arises, it is helpful to catch it early so that we can experience it in bite-sized chunks. This requires recognizing the first signs of fear in the body, seeing the first thoughts and choosing not to pursue them. Because once we've jumped on a train of thought and we're halfway to who-knows-where, we've built up a head of steam, and opting out of the trip is much harder. Not impossible, but harder.

Also helpful is learning to sense the constriction that occurs around fear when the ego resists it. It turns out that fear itself is frightening! And once ensnared, it gathers intensity. Energy doesn't like to be trapped. The antidote is the wider container of awareness, both within the skin boundary and beyond the skin. By allowing all of it to be, we find our place within the unity, and we may even see and appreciate the compassion that is inherent in that, see that we are held within the greater body, that we are given space to breathe and to be.

But let's not underestimate how uncomfortable fear can be. The tiger's presence can feel very real, and resistance to facing such a threat can be fierce. Fear itself is sometimes a cover for things like groundlessness and grief, which may seem too painful to bear.

If the energy is strong and our breath constricted, just getting ourselves to sit and allowing the waves to whip through us is a place to start. The floor will ground us. In daily life, we can lean into the tactile connection with *something* physical—a kitchen countertop—to steady us until we can breathe more freely.

Know it. If we pay attention across a practice life, our habitual fear-based beliefs become apparent. Here are a few of mine:

- fear of not measuring up
- fear of abandonment, mixed with social anxiety (nothing to do with spending time alone)
- fear of squandering my life—of missing my only chance

Knowing our particular fears—what they are, how they show up, the patterns they follow—allows us to pick up on them promptly, before we get too lost in the storyline. This is helpful. In my experience, for instance, a degree of bewilderment often accompanies anxiety, and the faster I can cut through that bewilderment and recognize what's happening, the less suffering there will be. Whenever there is an anxious storyline, the practice is to drop it.

A quick example: I can almost never leave a social situation without at least a little anxiety bubbling up, even if I've been with very good friends. Along with physical constriction comes the pattern of looking over my shoulder for what might have gone wrong—*Would so-and-so have been offended by something I said? Did I not listen well enough? Why on earth did I tell that story?* And implicit in those concerns is the fear that the consequence could be rejection or abandonment. (You will surely

from our true nature or to connect deeply with others.

notice my fear of not measuring up, as well.)

Since I'm often with Scott, my husband, the easiest thing to do is ask for reassurance, and maybe a little of that is okay. It's not bad, but there's something better. If I can see the pattern—and these days I see it quite quickly—it's possible to extend mercy to the suffering by refraining from the drama and settling back into the heart of life. There's no need for us to torment ourselves, especially over things that have no substance.

Embrace it. When a young friend confides in me that he is struggling with panic attacks, I know he is suffering. And anyone seeing the little girl in the photograph would know that, right then, she was hurting. So, of course, we want to be kind.

Fear quietens in the presence of the heart. When anxiety arises, we can—in Elizabeth's words—stay with the heart's breath, and even as we feel our fear, give it the company of the heart. We can open to fear, say hello to it. We might even drop in a quick reminder: "Anxiety is arising, and the healing heart is here." As I become more comfortable embracing fear in these ways, I find that when I drop the storyline, the return is a return to awareness infused with the heart's warmth. And from there, empathy for others flows more naturally.

The faces and forms of fear that we encounter are waves in the ocean of our life. We cannot hold back the tide, and trying to control the water by swallowing the waves is not going to help. What we can do is become the wave, even as we are the ocean and the sunlight and the breeze.

By Kate Watson

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