

2020-08-16 Practicing with Fear and Danger

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SPEAKERS

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This morning probably from about 2:30 to eight o'clock or so 8:30, there were lightning and thunderstorms here in this general area of Redwood City. And it was quite something to be awake at three o'clock and looking out the window and watching the these big lightning storms in the sky and it was in rain came. I know it's common enough in other parts of the world to have this kind of lightning storms, but where we live here it's quite unusual, especially lasting for so long. And then before coming down here I sometimes, especially in the summer, will like to go for a walk up in the hills. And the question was, for me, is it safe to go up in the hills? Here certainly with all the lightning and there's some danger involved in going up in the hills. I can and so I was not afraid. But I was cognizant to the fact that there's danger involved. And so I reflected by where I was going to walk, I chose a trails, I chose a place to go hiking, where I felt it was safe and then as I walked, I paid attention to what was happening with the weather and how far away or how close the lightning was and sometimes was clear was quite far away and, and, and so and so, that turned out well for me and it did rain on me a teeny bit, but not much. It was just really glorious to be out there in the weather and hiking in the trees.

And I tell you this story in order to make a distinction, or to separate out two things that are really helpful to separate them, and one is fear, and the other is danger. Not all things that we're afraid of are really dangerous. And not all things that are dangerous, do we fear and sometimes the two go together. But not all things that are dangerous need to be feared. And shedding or learning to let go of fear does not mean a person no longer acknowledges that something is dangerous. And I think one of the reasons people hold on to fear is because I think that they because they conflate these two, the recognition of danger and the fear and So, in, in deep Vipassana practice, this distinction is actually quite important in the sense that there's a certain kind of fear that comes in deep, probably most deep spiritual practice that calls on us to begin letting go of some of the deepest attachments we have places of clinging, especially clinging to self, clinging to life being alive, clinging to death, being dead, all kinds of clinging that we have attachment to status into relationships into safety even. There's a

clinging and attachment to our identity that we have might have is all the different kinds of aspects of identity are there for good reason. Some of them were formed in us because of the dangers we dealt with in our lives and it's a way of protecting us. From the dangers and perhaps the fears we had that helped us protect us or was beneficial. The fact that we're afraid is not necessarily a problem. Fear can be a wise response to danger. But there's also a wise response to danger that does not have here.

And this is where the Buddhist practice is going is to learn to have a wise response to danger. And in doing so, no longer need to have here Spears not if its function is to keep us safe. But if we recognize danger, there's other ways that we can keep ourselves safe without being afraid. And, and so this movement towards becoming fearless in a certain way, is part of the movement of Buddhist practice. And part of the help for this system to Be able to see the difference between fear and the danger to different things. And with that distinction, we can ask ourselves, what is it? That's dangerous here? What is the danger? And sometimes just being afraid, does not allow us to it kind of masks or hides the status of the danger. It's actually possible to I've had this when I was younger. I was afraid, but I could not really articulate why I was afraid of what I was afraid of. And some of my fears, like the fears of social phobias that I had fear of rejection, for example, or fear of not being liked, and they were kind of deep and subtle. That I didn't really I knew I was afraid I knew I was pulling back from people. But exactly what the danger was. I couldn't actually say very clearly But if we can actually start noticing what is the actual danger we're afraid of. And see the danger is different than the fear, then it's possible to work with a fear in a different way. Because partly because then it might be possible to be wise about the danger and take care of it and the maybe in a matter of fact, way or do the right thing in some ways, that doesn't require us to be afraid to take care of ourselves. An interesting place around this distinction is a quote from the Buddha. He said, there's the person who, having the nature to die is scared, scared having care of death. There's also the person who, having nature to die is not scared, having no terror of death. So death is a danger. that all of us are facing it's there in horizon for us some point sooner or later. And it could be seen as being in danger. But they're the Buddha, there's a kind of person who's not afraid of that and has no terror and the person, the person who has it and the person who does not have it, and, and one of the functions of Buddhist practice is in fact to overcome the terror, the fear of death. And becoming, to go really deep and practice and really experiencing for oneself, how thoroughly we can relax or how thoroughly we can let go of clinging. There's something about that there are letting go of clinging, that releases from us the fear of death. And what is the connection between having no clinging And not fearing death. What's there? What's this that connection? What is that relationship? Why is it that clinging can bring fear and no clinging? releases it? What is it? Not simply that maybe clinging is a source of fear? But what is it that the absence of clinging teaching teaches us? What does it point to what is it show? And to answer that question, one way is that it shows us that we have the capacity, we have the potential to live completely at peace, relaxed and open and present. And there's something about that state that teaches us that it's not worth clinging. Even this idea of clinging to life that you know, holding on to life and not dying, if that's

what's happening, that it's somehow somehow it's not worth it. It's not worth collapsing or contracting or losing.

This state of relaxation, the state of openness a state of that state of non clinging, the piece that's there. And it's a kind of a interesting juxtapositions, interesting kind of dilemma even whether to allow ourselves to stay open and non clinging, or to feel like they feel the demand for clinging or the authority of clinging or the insistence that, you know, the danger is so great, I have to cling, I've known people who were clinging to all kinds of things. It's only when they knew definitively that they were dying, that they remember some people having cancer. And that, then they could let go fully, and they had no fear at the end of their life. It was quite remarkable. And there were people, known people who would actually go to spend time with those people. Not because they were supporting them because they were dying, but rather because there was this peacefulness about them. That was a teaching there was a wonderful to be with and around. And the way that the Buddhist teachings, the Buddhist teachings work, they are not an escape from life. They're not a removing ourselves from life. But rather it's a conflict, correct, courageous confrontation meeting of life, so that we have no fear of life anymore. We still face dangers, but then to to take care of those with the best wisdom we have without being scared.

Now in this kind of teaching, the Buddha made a distinction. It's not quite his language major distinction between wholesome fear and unwholesome face fear or useful fear, and useless fear. And not all fears are the same. And some fear has a role important function in life. And given that the Buddha had such a great emphasis on the path to liberation, there were certain fears connected to that path. And for a new monastic, he talked about for someone who's newly ordained, in other words, newly really set on the path of liberation, that they have fear for doing the slightest fault in the monastic discipline, or a slightest fault in their ethical life and this idea of being afraid To be unethical, which is another way of saying that in Buddhist language, to be afraid to cause harm for someone else, this can be seen as a healthy fear. It can be there can be nervousness, it can be anxiety, there can be kind of fright around that, that maybe is not so helpful, but a basic fear of causing harm. I think there's a lot of people who just feel that that's almost innate or natural to feel it and, and I know that I have it, and I don't want to not have it. That when I have that fear of causing harm, you know, I'm not going to debate it and question whether I should have it or not. I just It feels like a healthy kind of movement don't cause harm. There's also but then as the practice goes along, and we see more clear The how the mind operates, we start seeing that greed is dangerous to have greed, that clinging is dangerous, that hatred has a certain danger to it. delusion has danger to it. There are these movements of the mind that we think a certain way. And it's dangerous to think those ways. And we started realizing that there's an internal danger from how we're engaging in the world. And we learn that because we see over and over again, the damage that comes the pain that come to suffering that comes from certain movements of the mind. And that every time we have hostility towards ourselves or towards others, it's painful. It's dangerous to do that. And it's not necessary and to see the movements of our own mind as being dangerous, not to condemn them. Not to condemn ourselves,

but to say, No, thank you. I don't need to do that. No, thank you, I don't have to follow that train of thought. I don't have to continue engaging in that I don't have to pick that up and be involved in it. And then it's interesting that some of these fears that the Buddha talked about the whole summer useful. There's four of them. And he gave and, and it's possible we have a challenge in English to translate the first two into something that works for an English speaking audience. The bigger body's translation is this. So the first is fear of self reproach. From misconduct of body speech in mind. So I don't know if reproach what that means for you, any of you listening the word in Pali. Bye De Avada is is more divided usually means to talk or to speak. And so it's like to do it behavior that gives cause to someone to come to speak to you. Gail, I need to talk to you because of something you said. Maybe the reproaches a little bit too sounds like too much like criticism. But, you know, someone said Gil, I need to criticize you, but I need to talk to you. So I don't know what that is. But a certain kind of mature serious engagement about an honest conversation about what our behavior has been. And so this, this Avada self speaks about self concern self reproach, for do it for harming people from body speech in mind. That is a fear that the Buddhist said is healthy. The second is fear of Others coming to talk to us fear or they hear that Bhikkhu Bodhi has fear of reproach from others.

But fear that, you know, I have people in my life who are my teachers and I hold them in high respect. And I kind of don't want I wouldn't want to say certain things do certain things that they know about. Their view of me, is important for me or still has an impact on me or concern for me and, and, and so because of my respect for them because of their support for me and all kinds of things. So, I do have some fear. I don't think they'd reproached me that's but they would fear them kill I need to talk to you about something. That's kind of a healthy concern. I feel like it's an act of respect and acts act of responsibility to be amenable, to be open, to have my elders and my friends or anyone to come and talk to me kill. We need to talk talk about something. So a certain kind of fear around my behavior. The fourth fear is not about oneself, the Buddha talks about fear of punishment, that that sometimes that's the only thing that keeps some people from stealing, for example, breaking the law. And then the fourth one, he talks about this a fear of a bad destination, which means a fear of a bad rebirth. And for some people that's very motivating. But as practice meditation practice deepens, it's really the inner life that we recognize this is where the whole movement towards freedom is. And the deeper and deeper the spiritual life is, the more sensitive we become, to the movements of the mind that are dangerous to ourselves that harm us. That a stressful that are agitating. And those movements of the mind that move in the other direction. And at some point in deeply passionate practice, there's a movement from feeling afraid to simply recognizing the danger to recognizing no longer being afraid of losing things of impermanence of change, how much of some things are changing, no longer being afraid of losing a sense of self or self identity that we're holding on to have to be a certain person and define myself a certain way, no longer holding on to certain pleasures and joys and things that tell me that I'm successful and good person. And it's been Feel free to let go of those things. And that shifts to recognizing the danger involved in Holding on in clinging doesn't mean we have to let go of some identities are fine to have, which they clinging to them doesn't mean we have to let go of all pleasures, it's the clinging to them. And we've started recognizing where the danger resides, is in the clinging. So

we're no longer and when that clinging drops, then the fear of losing those don't have has less and less power. So to make the distinction between fear and danger, and to use that distinction, to study ourselves when we are afraid, and this movement to study ourselves when we're afraid, is a movement to not be caught and trapped by the fear. And at times it's studying the fear just enough to know what we're doing. desperately need. Sometimes we need to become safe. Sometimes we need to go get out of a situation. Sometimes we need to be quiet and just protect ourselves. Sometimes we need to go and exercise or, or go to bed or I don't know what. But there's all kinds of once we started recognizing there's fear, and then there's often just first aid that might be needed. But as we be able to take care of ourselves better and better have confidence in ourselves. Then we can start studying the fear more carefully. We can begin working with it. And one way to work with it is to learn to relax. Relaxing is one of the ways to overcome terror to overcome anxiety attacks, and relaxing.

One of the skills of relaxing is deep breathing. There's really a lot of, you know, something really dramatic has happened. It's almost natural to some people to breathe deeply. But to use the breathing to keep ourselves from getting frozen from the fear and, and to learn to stay focused on the breath and to learn how to use deeper breaths and longer breaths, to keep it focused to keep things moving to keep cut, discharging, the charge is built up when there's some dramatic thing that's happening, to settle ourselves, to relax something to have to go in front of a group of people to give a talk and which is frightening for many people to learn how to stay focused on breathing. So breathing is relaxing. To learn where in the body we hold tension and learn to relax attention. And then to learn to question what is the danger here? What really is it danger. And if we can clearly become aware of what we think is the danger, then we can ask the question, is that really a danger, I have to be concerned with me, I'm going to be afraid of what people think of my wardrobe. And I show up at a social situation, and I'm nervous and afraid to people, but I don't recognize it's what they think about my clothes, then I might act kind of funny. But if I ask myself what I'm afraid of, it's my wardrobe. At least I think I would just shrug my shoulders and it's tight and say, you know, I don't need to be afraid of that. Let them think what they think of my wardrobe.

So and then one of the things we realize if we ask ourselves, what do we think we're afraid of? What is the danger is some dangers are imaginary. Some dangers are predictions and about the future, some dangers that have more to do with our imagination than what's actually happening. And so do we want to it doesn't make sense, we really see that it's the act of the imagination is to predictive predictions of the future that can start creating a little space where we can begin maybe allowing ourselves to enjoy and relax and feel the safety here of the present moment. And to keep learning how to relax, keep learning how to relax, as I said before, is met during the meditation. Relaxation is often taught for people as a beginning, beginners practice for meditation. Often a good beginning of meditation, it's good to relax. It's also a practice or it's also a skill for someone who's advanced practitioner. developed and experienced a person comes in meditation, the easier it is for them to relax. And then they find themselves able to relax in so many different circumstances so that they can be wiser, more intelligent, more caring, more attentive to the situation, they can be focused on the task much better if

you're relaxed. So those are my those are my thoughts about today. And I hope you find them useful. And I hope that you find this distinction between fear and danger and nice thing to separate out and help you find your way with your fears more and, and working with fears are part of parcel of personal practice and rather than feeling somehow that something's wrong with you because you're you're afraid if you're the person A mindfulness practitioner. The occasions you have to work with fear, are actually a great occasions of practice. fears are there because of fears are really a symptom of some deeper, something deeper inside of us that really needs our attention needs us to connect to it. And so to use his mind, use the fear as a doorway to deeper self understanding is one of the great parts of this path of mindfulness. So no need to be, you know, afraid of your fear. So, thank you very much for today. And I really appreciate the chance to be here and talk on this subject. And now it looks like it's clearing up and I think the lightning is over and I'll go on to the next danger, which is driving on the freeway so the Bay Area.

Thank you.