

„Fear of Others“

by

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- Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā-sambuddhassa -

Years back, a woman brought a friend of hers to meditate here. The friend had never meditated before. And at the end of the hour, she turned to the woman who brought her here and said, »I've never suffered so much in my life.« Which just goes to show that the mind can create a lot of suffering for itself. In fact, as the Buddha pointed out, it's the suffering we create for ourselves that really weighs down the mind, much more than the suffering that comes from outside, the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations from other people. And the fears we have are often misdirected. The Buddha never says that fear is in and of itself unskillful. Many times, I've had some psychotherapists ask me about this, »Why doesn't the Buddha list fear as one of the roots for unskillful behavior?« And it's because there are some things that are actually worthy of fear. The fear becomes unskillful when it's tied up in greed, aversion, delusion. And that's the kind of fear you want to get past. The fear that comes from knowing that your mind has unskillful habits, and that conditions could come about where those unskillful habits take over: that's something to be feared.

You want to train your mind so that it is not influenced into doing unskillful things by any kind of conditions. And until the mind has reached that point, you've got something to fear. So the important thing as we practice is learning which fears are useless, and which fears are useful.

Particularly fears of other people's opinions. Other people can hurt you, yes. And we see so much of it in the world, people are harming one another all the time. But you can't let that potential dissuade you from doing what you know is right. That kind of fear, the Buddha says, is a cause of what they call »agati,« something that takes you off course. There are four kinds of agati altogether. You go off course because of things you desire, you want a reward of some kind from somebody, or you want a certain kind of pleasure that you think is going to come from doing something unskillful, so that desire pulls you off. Then there's agati that comes from aversion. When you're not willing to do something simply because you just don't like it, even though it may be the right thing to do, you don't like it, and that gets in the way. There's agati that comes from delusion, when you simply don't know what's the right and the wrong thing to do. And finally, there's agati that comes from fear.

These are all biases, and the word agati basically means »that takes you to a bad destination, takes you off course.« So you have to look at the fears

that take you off course. The fears that someone will not like you or someone will punish you for doing something that you know is right, or that someone will create difficulties for you. You have to learn to be impervious to that. The fact that some people may not like you - well, as Ajahn Fuang once said, it's the people who like you that you are most beholden to. As he once said, if people hate you, then you can come and go as you like, you don't have to ask their permission, you don't have to be worried about what they're going to do while you're away. So there are times when you know the right thing to do is going to displease other people and there's no way around it. You have to be willing to put up with that, put up with their displeasure. If there are ways that you can smoothe things over, so much the better. But there come times when you can't. We have to stand up for what's right. And in that case, you can't let conflict or the fear of conflict dissuade you. I think I told you about the time when I gave my first Dharma talk. Ajahn Fuang said, »Imagine that you have a sword in your hand. Anybody out there in the audience who doesn't like what you have to say, you just cut off their head.« It's a shocking image, but it was effective. It made me reflect back on how much my own fears were actually the problem. Who knows what those other people were thinking? But it was my anticipation that they might not like it, or that they might disapprove, or that they may look down on me, or whatever, that was getting in the way. And that kind of fear is an agati: something that pulls you off course. If people are kind enough to tell you that you've done something wrong, or even if they let you know in not such a kind way that you've done something wrong, at least then you can look at it and see: well, was that wrong or was that not.

But these floating nameless fears that they just may not like you, or they may do something that is confrontational: you have to realize you're hobbling yourself with those fears. And those are the kind of fears you want to get over. You have to learn how to look past them. Well, what exactly would be so horrible about their disliking you, or their looking down on you? Which part of the mind is injured? Well, learn how not to identify with that part of the mind. Which part of the mind feels threatened? Again, learn how not to identify with it. That's the Buddha's prime tactic in learning how not to suffer: anything that is subject to harm leaves you open to danger, leaves you open to suffering. Why identify with it? And if you can think in this way, you'll find yourself shedding all kinds of unskillful forms of pride, and the pride that masks as an extreme shame. A lot of unskillful things hide around these things that we're afraid of. These things where we feel threatened. And so it's good to look into those.

This is why we meditate: to give ourselves a good, solid position inside so we can look at these other things that we've identified with for so long, habits, fears, the things that can pull us off course. All four of these things are desires that are unskillful, our aversions, our delusions, our unskillful fears. So this is where the real dangers lie: these habits we have. These are the real things that you should fear, and fortunately, there's something you can do about them, you're not stuck with them. You've been carrying them around, but you don't have to keep carrying them around.

Sometimes it takes time to learn how to let go and to live with the fact that there are people out there who will never like you no matter what, no matter how well you behave, no matter how intelligent you are, no matter how much you do for the world, there are going to be people who dislike you for some reason, some old karmic thing, or they themselves don't like living in the world where they feel threatened by someone else doing better than they did. So there are all kinds of reasons that people would decide that they would dislike you or wish you harm. You can't let that stop you. The Buddha himself was cursed by people. As Ajahn Lee once said, people can curse you and their mouths can open a whole yard, but they never actually reach you. You're the one who is pulling in their criticism. And that refers to the words they actually say to you. And here we are afraid of what other people will think! We are the ones who are stabbing ourselves with this. So that's the habit you want to fear, and that's the habit you can learn to let go of. And fortunately, because it is something you are doing yourself, you also have the power not to do it. So try to sort through your fears and see which ones are actually useful and which ones are hobbling you from doing the skillful thing. And to realize that you're hobbling yourself. You can take off those shackles and walk with a lighter step.

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