



MARCH 2020 NEWSLETTER

Holding Fear with Compassion

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With the recent pandemic that is sweeping our world, I thought for this newsletter it might be relevant to write about fear, and how we aspire to relate to fear within the dharma.

Anxiety. Worry. Fear. This is a stressful time for our nation and for the world. It is unlike anything we have ever seen, and it is perfectly normal to be afraid: for ourselves, our loved ones, our healthcare workers and first responders, for our economy, our way of life. But in the midst of all the chaos, we need to remember that fear is just an emotion, and like all emotions, and all aspects of our lives, our practice asks that we bring mindful attention to that fear. We don't push it away, or cling to it, but we simply be with it in a kind and compassionate way. We give our fear our mindful attention.

During our last talk we spoke of cultivating skillful actions and preventing unskillful ones. If you remember, the word skillful can be replaced with helpful, or wholesome, whichever term resonates with you better. When we spoke of

unskillful, unhelpful, unwholesome actions, we spoke of anger, hate, ill will, doubt – but we never spoke of fear. Fear is not on the unskillful list because fear is not considered unwholesome. Sometimes a good dose of fear is appropriate and useful. *"I don't touch the snake with the pretty rattling tail because I'm afraid of it" comes to mind.* But sometimes fear does not serve us. *"I won't go to the dentist because of my fear."* But what these two examples offer is the understanding that fear is just an emotion. It's our ACTIONS, our reactions and behavior following the fear which must be considered skillful or unskillful.

How do we react to fear? That becomes the question to explore. Do you hide? Respond with anger? Lean on an addiction? Or do you sit with it? Give it (your fear) space and compassion with loving kindness? Keep in mind there is no "wrong" answer; there is only skillful and unskillful. What is helpful?

In our practice, it is appropriate to sit with our fear. With insight meditation, we can be with our fear, get to know it, and with that knowledge be able to make wise decisions around it. Sometimes when we sit with fear, past fears in our lives become intertwined with it. It is important to hold all of our fears with compassion. There is no shame in being afraid. It doesn't make us weak or lesser than; it is a human process that should be met with loving kindness. We should aspire to be kind to the part of our self that feels the fear. Instead of being critical, we can treat that part as we would treat a friend or a small child. We can be a safe person to not only others, but to ourselves as well.

There are a few strategies that can be used. When fear arises, it's helpful to simply be with it, but remember, you are not your fear. Instead of "I am afraid" it is helpful to change your thinking to "there is fear here". Be independent of

the fear. Note that there is fear in this body, but there are also other things. There is compassion, kindness, the breath, the itch between my shoulder blades, there are thoughts, etc. Awareness is vast, so although you can spend time sitting with your fear, understand that it is a small part of the overall processes going on in your experience. We are less likely to be overwhelmed by fear when we can put it in the perspective of our vast awareness. We can rely on our practice. “There is fear here, but there is also the breath.” Take a few breaths and connect to that moment. Connect to your body.

We can meditate on the emotion. Like we learned in meditation training we can use the acronym B.E.L.L.A. as we focus our attention on the fear during a sit. We can (B)e with the emotion; we don't cling to it, or push it away, we simply see it within us. Then we can (E)xamine the fear. Not the story that propels it, but the human experience of fear; where we feel it in our body. Then we can (L)essen the grip of the fear by understanding that awareness is vast, and spend time with the breath or do a body meditation. Then we can (L)et go of the control it has over us. We can understand that fear is just a human process and we can tease out what is being done “to” us versus what we are doing to ourselves. We can see the emotion versus our relationship to it. And then finally (A)ppreciate the space, the peace that is left behind, or at least the softening that can happen when we do an emotion meditation using B.E.L.L.A.

Now for some practical strategies in working with our fear:

1. Lean into the practice; this is what we have been practicing for.
2. When we struggle with sitting meditation, walking meditation can be helpful. Do this out in the sunshine when possible.

3. Exercise is important during times of stress, as are getting plenty of sleep and eating healthy meals. Be mindful of what you are cooking and take care of your body.
4. Tune into your inner life. Make a menu of self-care activities that you enjoy and try to do at least a few every day.
5. Watch less news coverage; read a dharma book or listen to a dharma talk.
6. Reach out to friends, family or your Sangha via phone, email, Zoom or text.
7. Be extremely compassionate with yourself and others. This is a solid opportunity to practice Metta.
8. Be mindful of Secondary Traumatic Stress. When those around us are suffering, as well as the entire world, it can be difficult to not feel empathetic, but sympathetic is better. Remember, if a small child is scared during a thunderstorm, you do not have to be scared with him. You can simply hold him until the storm passes. A calm and wise understanding will be helpful to those around you.

Fear is a normal emotional human process. We don't need to run from it; we simply need to sit with it in a kind and compassionate way. May we all hold ourselves, and each other, with sympathetic compassion and loving kindness during the days ahead.

***If anyone needs assistance with the dharma during this time please reach out via email with a preferred method of communication – phone, text, email.*

WE ARE LOOKING FOR:

Lawn Mowing....

Can you take a turn mowing our center's lawn? Contact Lanee for what day works for you.

Gardening help....

Do you like gardening? We are looking for someone to help establish, care for, and maintain a garden at our center.



Testimonials.....

Have you benefited from the Dharma talks or meditation in general? Can we share your photo/experience on Facebook? Please contact Lanee (our Sangha Director).

THE DHARMA OF HAND WASHING

(this was taken with permission via the creative commons licence from the Insight Meditation Center in Redwood City California)

The ordinary activities of daily life provide easy opportunities for practicing mindfulness and compassion. Hand washing is one of these as it is an

opportunity to be mindful through our whole being while also caring for others. When we are dedicated and intent on practicing while standing at the sink, our body, hands, and the flowing water then become our “meditation hall,” “retreat center,” or even “temple.” Taking time to wash our hands mindfully can be an occasion to notice if we are in a hurry, distracted, or dismissive of the value of being present for a mundane activity. It is an opportunity to experience the satisfaction of letting go into the simplicity of one activity. Certainly, during the twenty seconds devoted to washing, it is OK to let go of other concerns. These seconds are enough time to become grounded, centered, and calm in our daily life. Just as one isn’t finished with mindfulness of breathing after a few breaths, so the simple practice of hand washing is not something that loses its value after a few times. It is endlessly enriching if we practice it. Hand washing is a way to care for others. Colds and flu are spread through our hands. Even if you are not sick, your hands can easily pick up germs you then pass on. Avoiding passing on illness is a simple way to support the extended communities we live in; it is a crucial protection for people with compromised immune systems. Repeated and thorough hand washing can be a vehicle for developing both our mindfulness and compassion. This dual role is expressed in the following Buddhist verse that can be recited while washing one’s hands. Doing so three times takes about 20 seconds! "Cleaning my hands, I clean my heart and mind. Cleaning my heart and mind, I clean the world for others."