

Fearless Life

Deep down, we know it's healthy to welcome life's constant change and flow, and that tightly clinging to security blankets isn't what we want to do, or whom we want to be.

“Security is mostly a superstition,” Helen Keller said. “It does not exist in nature, nor do the children of men as a whole experience it. Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure. Life is either a daring adventure, or nothing.”

Meditation is a method for fearlessly embracing the adventure of life.

This post is more of a book chapter than a post, and I apologize for that. But I hope you'll bear with me, and try to get through it. Because this is the post that explains why all stressful emotions boil down to fear—and from there, how to live fearlessly.

1—Fear Itself

In insight meditation, we face our fears in order to transcend them. When we do that honestly, we see that fear is itself the heart of all stressful emotions.

There's a deep paradox to be discovered here. We think of fear as an emotion that alerts us to dangers, so we can arm ourselves against what threatens our happiness.

But in reality, fear is the greatest enemy of our happiness, because it creates the very suffering we are trying to arm ourselves against. It's as if fear was a creature that devised a cunning survival strategy. Actually impotent and harmless, it dresses itself in order to make itself look powerful, intelligent, charming and, if necessary, fearful.

But it's harmless because it's nothing but an idea. Specifically, it's the idea of "I," "me" or "mine." It doesn't even exist if you look for it. We just spent five weeks looking carefully into every aspect of our experience—our bodies, emotions, perception and thoughts.

And the only "I" we encountered in all that looking were the stressful emotions we experience in the name of keeping "me" safe, protected, happy and alive. In other words, all the stressful human emotions, all of them based on fear. When we see this, we see how our suffering keeps suffering alive, but it leaves us feeling dead.

Because by always focusing on thoughts of "I," we miss all the rest of life around us.

This is what the Buddha meant when he summarized all of his teaching by saying: "Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to as 'I,' 'me' or 'mine.'" Because the sense of "I" is what we create in order to fight back our fear of suffering, impermanence and death.

The core of the problem, as you can see, is identifying with the thought of "me."

We crave identity more than anything; we crave it even more than happiness. Or more accurately, we believe that we'll find our ultimate happiness and safety, in an identity.

The problem boils down to this: that most of the time we only think about our life, instead of being aware of it. When we see life through the lens of thought, we naturally get scared, because thought, being fleeting and impermanent itself, says that all of life must be that same way. Because thought can't imagine anything greater than itself.

When we think that who we are in our essence shares the fate of our thoughts and our bodies, we're filled with fear because we assume that we too, then, will die and cease to exist. In that state of fear, thought imagines a special thought called "I" which is designed to protect itself from extinction.

Unable to create a real eternal existence, thought fashions a kind of fake eternity, by repeating the thought of "I" over and over, basically bludgeoning us until we finally, out of exhaustion, come to believe it.

II—The Propaganda of "I"

It's basically exactly how propaganda works. When one idea is repeated enough times by the media—so-and-so is our enemy, and so-and-so is our leader, and such-and-such is the best food or clothing or brand of soap—we finally, unconsciously, come to believe it. The belief has no tethering to actual reality. It's just something we believe.

By virtue of the endless repetition of the thought of "I," we just come to believe it exists.

In the case of the "I," however, a certain very persuasive phenomenon is also created that makes the "I" seem very real: the experience of suffering. Because the fearful emotions, which all have their basis in the thought of an endangered "I," create painful contractions in the body. And we come to identify those very pains in the body, which do have a solidity and a density to them, as contracted muscles, as being the "I" itself.

They aren't "I" or "me," they are just suffering caused by identification with these ideas.

Those painful contractions are nothing but more "I" propaganda, but thanks to the suffering, the "I" seems proved. And more to the point, and most devilishly, now we've come to the point of believe that if we end our suffering, that would be the end of "me."

Which is exactly why, when push comes to shove, we're actually fearful about ending our suffering, because deep down we believe it's what defines us, what gives us our personality and our uniqueness, our specialness—and we don't want to give it up.

Many people with depression, bipolar disorder and other mental illnesses, given the choice to feel better with pharmaceuticals or to keep suffering without them, choose the latter because they can't bear to let go of their suffering. Because to do so, they fear, would be to lose their identities, their uniqueness, their understanding of themselves.

In this way, we see again that strong hold that having an identity, as the road to safety and happiness as a human being, has over us.

It seems like a real Catch 22, from the mind's point of view: to get rid of suffering, I need to get rid of "me." But to get rid of "me," I need first to get rid of suffering. So what to do?

The answer to this as with any Catch 22, is to move to a different frame of reference altogether.

In meditation, we discover this new dimension in "being aware of," and not "thinking about." It's from this perspective that we see the bind that thinking gets into, and from this perspective we also see the way out.

Because the world and our experience is so much bigger than our thoughts, especially when we identify with our thoughts. When we're aware, we identify with all of reality, and it's just there of course that we find compassion, wisdom, love, equanimity and everything else we need.

III—"What Am I Clinging To?"

Let's get very practical now.

When we identify with thought, any thought, we suffer. It's as simple as that. How do we verify that? By looking directly into our experience. When we identify, we cling; and when we cling in the mind, our body contracts; and when our body contracts, we suffer.

Just think about how everything you own, and consider "yours," in one way or another causes you to suffer. You are worried it's going to break, to get stolen, to get lost. You buy insurance against such loss. You need to invest lots of money in its upkeep, its protection and safekeeping. Our bodies are themselves the prime example but the same reflection applies to anything we think that we own, or that define us, including our personalities, our thoughts, and of course so many material items in our lives.

So, practically speaking, this means the when you are suffering emotionally, you just need to ask yourself: "What am I clinging to?" Then look into your experience, find whatever you are clinging to, and let go. More accurately, notice that when you see what you are clinging to, a spontaneous and natural letting go happens. That's awareness at work.

If what you are clinging to—person, thought, object, etc.—isn't immediately clear and obvious, you can start by noticing where you are contracted in your body. Maybe your belly is solid as a rock or maybe it feels like a big void, a vacuum filled with pain. Maybe your heart feels that way; or your throat; or the muscles in your legs or your neck.

Wherever you feel it, as we've learned how, just hold those feeling in awareness, in your caring compassionate interest. Wait until they soften. As you do, also watch your

thoughts, and see what your thoughts may tell you is going on. Once in a while, amidst all of the noisy and hurtful thoughts on the surface of your emotion, a quiet and wise thought will come along that is telling the truth, and is pointing to the end of stress.

Deep down we know that our essence is flow and emptiness. Isn't it true? We are happiest when we know ourselves as just this flow, and just this emptiness. Check it out in your experience. We are happiest when we're more or less empty of thoughts, more or less empty of the wild swings of emotions, and more or less empty of body sensations—that is, when our bodies are relaxed and empty of painful contractions.

It's really not the presence of a temporary stimulation of pleasure that makes us happy, but rather not identifying with either those temporary pleasant stimulations, or temporary unpleasant ones, that give us the greatest peace. In these states we are simply abiding, very aware and happy, very content and always interested in the way things are.

IV—Positive Emptiness

In a way, all of our stress boils down to the fact that we were never taught how to understand ourselves as emptiness in a healthy and positive way. We have been trained to understand emptiness as negative, as nothing, as void of anything valuable.

Therefore, untrained in this way, our natural intuition that we are empty in our essence, causes us to experience profound existential dread. Fearful like this, we immediately start building an identity, by creating and identifying to thoughts, and especially the thoughts of "I," "me" and "mine."

In this way, although we think we are protecting ourselves against emptiness, actually we're creating suffering by clinging to things that are themselves empty and impermanent—things like bodies, emotions and thoughts.

That's the essential bind. And the solution is quite simple. It's to understand that our essence as beings is empty, but in a positive and not a negative sense. Emptiness, after all, can be understood as infinite potential, like a void that's pregnant with the potential to become anything. Emptiness is weightless, boundless, utterly clear and of course it's also invulnerable, because what possible weapon could ever wound emptiness?

In this way, once we learn how to identify with our inherent qualities of emptiness, potential, weightlessness, boundlessness, clarity and invulnerability (among many others), we have found a way to know ourselves as all of these qualities—and to never let stress bother us again.

We may feel stress again, that would only be human. But we'd always know it could never hurt us essentially in any way, and that would be the happiness of peace.

This was exactly the goal of our practice of the past five weeks. As we looked with caring interest at our breath, our body, our thoughts and emotions, time after time what we found were objects coming and going, arising and passing away. None were

permanent, and not had any density or substance. In other words, what we discovered, time after time, was our own essential emptiness as beings—our bright, beautiful, infinite, eternal and invulnerable essence.

It was all about practicing to know ourselves in a healthy and positive way as emptiness, instead of knowing ourselves as the painful grasping to objects that is the way of the untrained mind full of desire and delusion.

V—The Buddha's Checklist

The Buddha offers a checklist of three core stressful emotions to notice, if you are feeling stressed and want to approach the ending of stress in this more systematic way.

This approach adds the further benefit that, by seeing deeply and accurately into the causes of clinging, the therapeutic effect of awareness will be deeper, potentially going so deep that once you have let go, your mind thereafter may spontaneously let go immediately when it sees new stress arising, meaning you have permanently ended stress. In practical terms, that means that while up to now your sadness, anger, addiction or whatever will just start naturally to subside, like a morning headache just disappears through the day.

So one day, quietly and without fanfare, you will just start noticing, “I’m a lot less angry/sad/anxious than I was before.” In the same way that in the afternoon you just notice that your morning headache has quietly disappeared.

According to the Buddha, the one root stress is identifying with “I,” “me” or “mine.”

However, in any given moment, we may notice this identification manifesting in one of three primary forms: desire, aversion and delusion. This is the basic checklist.

Therefore, whenever you are feeling emotional stress, you scan your awareness and see if one of these three types of clinging are present: desire, aversion or delusion.

All of the virtually infinite types and styles of stressful emotions are made out of one or more of these three basic forms of stress. All three of which, in turn, are ways to create identity with the thoughts of “I,” “me” and “mine”—because we fear that in our essence we don’t really exist, that we are empty and purposeless, unloved and cast away.

Desire is the outward movement of consciousness to grab what we feel we lack in our essence, especially love, represented as all forms of sensual pleasure. Feeling we lack the security of love, we go out to grab love in the form of pleasing sights, sounds, touch, taste and smell, and also pleasing thoughts in the forms of ideologies, axioms, theories.

Aversion is the outward movement of consciousness to strike in fear at what we feel endangers our fragile, exposed essence, in order to make those threats go away or even to smash them so hard we cause their extinction, before they cause ours.

Delusion is the outward movement of consciousness in an aimless manner, having given up on ever discovering anything of meaning inwardly; it is the most absolute and dangerous of the three stress stressful emotions because, unlike desire and aversion, it makes no effort to solve the problem, because it has already accepted defeat.

VI—What's Your Type?

Therapists and counselors who use the Buddha's dharma as a tool, often type their patients according to whether they are primarily one of these three types: a desire type, an aversion type, or a delusion type.

Usually, people have personalities that revolve around one of these three modes.

People who are "desire types" will typically interpret the world in terms of whether it is fulfilling their desires or not. "Aversion types" will first assess situations in terms of the amount of threat or discomfort it poses; and with "delusion types" tend to say "whatever," claiming they have no preferences or inclinations, no dog in the fight of life.

What's important to realize is not so much that each of these emotional styles create suffering, although of course they all do. The key thing is to notice the particular manner by which they cause suffering. And, specifically to notice that they do so by creating identities to which the person who is suffering clings—and seems unable to let go.

So in practice, whether we notice that we are desire, aversion or delusion types, the thing to notice is how we cling to that type *as a definition of who we are*. How we take it to be our identity. On the one hand, we of course don't like the suffering that it brings us. On the other hand, we are quite delighted with the identity it creates for us—because deep down, we crave identity more than anything else, even more than happiness.

For example, when you found out that all people fall into one of three basic personality types—desire, aversion or delusion—did you find yourself eager to discover which of the three you were? That eagerness, to find out who you "really" are, is exactly the sense of identity that we seek. And we feel so comfortable when we get it, even if all it tells us is how we suffer.

Because deep down, it's not just that we don't know who we are, it's that we are afraid that we don't actually exist—and we want verification that we do. And it's having an identity, especially an identity of suffering, that gives us that proof.

If that proof comes in the form of suffering, so be it. It's a deal we readily accept.

It sounds counterintuitive, but just check in your own life to check it out. How often do you choose to stay with people, situations and thoughts that quite obviously cause you suffering? At the same time, we can often see all kinds of options, such as trying out relationships with new kinds of people, new situations and new thoughts that would

surely work out for us better. But somehow we find it so terribly hard to make that leap and to leave our old modes of suffering behind us.

We do that because to do that, would mean to let go of our sense of self, which we so carefully create out of our suffering. We cling to our identities more than anything else, out of fear of the flow and impermanence and the threats we imagine surround us. We believe that our identity is the first line of defense against those threats.

But there's that paradox of fear again. The guns we think we are pointing at our stress, and indeed are actively using all the time against our stress, are instead exactly what is shelling us day in and out, naturally giving more than ever suffering and stress.

We think we use desire to quell our suffering; in fact, it is creating our suffering—out of fear.

We think we use aversion to protect ourselves against threats; in fact, our aversion is directly attacking our happiness—out of fear.

We think that saying “whatever” means going with the flow of life, by just accepting what is, when in fact it's giving up on the challenges and opportunities of life—out of fear.

When with awareness we see what's happening, we turn the guns of fear around and point them into empty awareness.

Even before they fire, the guns themselves dissolve.

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