DHARMA TALK

the three things we fear most

Ezra Bayda teaches that by truly knowing our fears, we can break their spell.

When things upset us, we often think that something is wrong. Perhaps the one time this is truest is when we experience fear. In fact, as human beings, we expend a huge portion of our energy dealing with anxiety and fear. This has certainly been apparent in the present economic upheavals and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. We live with an everyday reality that is tinged with personal and cultural anxiety. Our fears are not just the product of global events, however—they go to our very core. On a day-to-day level, fear often motivates how we act and react, and sometimes even how we dress or stand or talk. But fear makes our life narrow and dark. It is at the root of all conflict, underlying much of our sorrow. Fear also blocks intimacy and love and, more than anything, disconnects us from the lovingkindness that is our true nature.

Even considering how prevalent fear is in our lives, it nonetheless remains one of the murkiest areas to deal with, in daily life as well as in practice. This may sound bleak, but what is really the worst thing about fear? Though it is hard to admit, especially if we see ourselves as deeply spiritual, the main reason we have an aversion to fear is that it is physically and emotionally uncomfortable. Woody Allen put this quite well when he said, "I don't like to be afraid—it scares me." We simply don't want to feel this discomfort and will do almost anything to avoid it. But whenever we give in to fear, we make it more solid, and our life becomes smaller, more limited, more contracted. In a way, every time we give in to fear, we cease to truly live.

We're often not aware of the extent to which fear plays a part in our lives, which means that the first stage of practicing with fear requires acknowledging its presence. This can prove to be difficult, because many fears may not be readily apparent, such as the fear driving our ambition, the fear underlying our depression, or, perhaps most of all, the fear beneath our anger. But the fact is, once we look beyond our surface emotional reaction, we will see that almost every negative emotion, every drama, comes down to one or more of the three most basic fears: the fear of losing safety and control, the fear of aloneness and disconnection, and the fear of unworthiness.

The first most basic fear is that of losing safety. Because safety is fundamental to our survival, this fear will instinctually be triggered at the first sign of danger or insecurity; the old brain, or limbic system, is inherently wired that way. This particular fear will also be triggered when we experience pain or discomfort. But in most cases, there is no real danger to us; in fact, our fears are largely imaginary—that the plane will crash, that we will be criticized, that we're doing it wrong. Yet until we see this dimension of fear with clarity, we will continue to live with a sense of constriction that can seem daunting.

A central component of spiritual life is recognizing that practice is not about ensuring that we feel secure or comfortable. It's not that we won't feel these things when we practice; rather, it's that we are also bound to some-

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Munch, *from the series "Fear," Trenton Doyle Hancock, 2008, mixed media on paper, 22.25 x 22.5 inches*

times feel very uncomfortable and insecure, particularly when exploring and working with our darker emotions and unhealed pain. Still, there is also a deep security developed over the course of a practice life that isn't likely to resemble the immediate comfort we usually crave. This fundamental security develops instead out of the willingness to stay with and truly experience our fears. Isn't it ironic that the path to real security comes from residing in the fear of insecurity itself?

Insecurity can also manifest as the fear of helplessness, often surfacing as the fear of losing control, the fear of being controlled, the fear of chaos, or even the fear of the unfamiliar. For example, nearly all of us have experienced the emotion of rage, which is like being swept into a mushroom cloud explosion. Think of the kind of day when nothing seems to go your way, or even just the last time your TV remote stopped working and no matter what buttons you pushed, you couldn't get it to do what you wanted. The urge to throw the remote against the wall can feel like angry rage, but as we bring awareness to this experience, we can discover that the feeling of rage is often just an outer explosion covering over the quieter inner implosion of feeling powerless. Rage may give us a feeling of power and control, but how often is it an evasion of the sense of powerlessness that feels so much worse?

We all dread the helplessness of losing control, and yet real freedom lies in recognizing the futility of demanding that life be within our control. Instead, we must learn the willingness to feel—to say yes to—the experience of helplessness itself. This is one of the hidden gifts of serious illness or loss. It pushes us right to our edge, where we may have the good fortune to realize that our only real option is to surrender to our experience and let it just be.

During a three-year period in the early 1990s when I was seriously ill with no indication that I would ever get better, I watched my life as I had known it begin to fall apart. I not only lost my ability to work and engage in physical activities, I also experienced a dismantling of my basic identities. At first, it was disorienting and frightening not to have the props of seeing myself as a Zen practitioner, a carpenter and contractor (my livelihood), a husband and a father. But as I stayed with the fears, and particularly as I was able to bring the quality of lovingkindness to the experience, there came a dramatic shift.

As the illusory self-images were stripped away, I experienced the freedom of not *needing* to be anyone at all. By truly surrendering to the experience of helplessness, by letting everything I clung to just fall apart, I found that what remained was more than enough. As we learn to breathe fear into the center of the chest, the heart feels more and more spacious. I'm not talking about the heart as a muscle in our chest, but rather the heart that is our true nature. This heart is more spacious than the mind can ever imagine.

The second basic fear is that of aloneness and disconnection, which we also can feel as the fear of abandonment, loss, or death. Our fundamental aloneness, which is a basic human experience, ultimately must be faced directly, or it will continue to dictate how we feel and live.

It's interesting that one of life's most vital lessons is something we are never taught in school: how to be at home with ourselves. When I first began going to meditation retreats, where there was no talking or social contact for days on end, I would sit facing the wall hour after hour, and invariably an anxious quiver rose up inside me. Sometimes it was so strong that I literally wanted to jump out of my skin. But just sitting there, doing nothing, brought me face to face with myself, with my fear of aloneness.

Most people will almost instinctively try to avoid this fear. Many enter into relationships or engage in affairs. In fact, the extent to which people have affairs is often proportional to the urgency of needing to avoid feeling alone. However, the only way to transcend loneliness is to stop avoiding it, to be willing to face it—by truly residing in it. Further, if we wish to develop genuine intimacy in our relationships with others, it is crucial that we first face our own neediness and fear of aloneness. How can we expect to truly love or be intimate with another if we're still relating to them from our fear-based needs?

Naturally, we still want and expect other people to take away these fears; we think that if we're with someone who will pay attention to us, our loneliness will disappear. But if this particular deep-seated fear is part of our makeup, the mere act of our partner being engrossed in a book when we're expecting attention will be enough to make us feel abandoned. We may try to deal with this by demanding or

attempting to attract his or her attention, but even if that demand is met, our fear is unlikely to be assuaged for long.

Furthermore, getting the attention we desire does not necessarily mean we will experience intimacy. True intimacy comes instead when we're willing to acknowledge the uncomfortable feelings of anxiety and fear that are part of our own conditioning; it comes when we can say yes to them, which means we're willing to finally feel them. It may be uncomfortable to feel the fear of loneliness, but breathing that aching fear into the center of the chest and surrendering to it allows us to take responsibility for our own feelings. We no longer ask that others protect us from feeling these fears we had previously turned away from. We can discover that the more we face our own fear of aloneness, the more we experience true connection, and the more we can open to love.

The basic fear of aloneness may also include a related anxiety that is not usually recognized: the fear of disconnection—from others as well as from our own heart. This fear penetrates more deeply than loneliness and often manifests as a knotted quiver in the chest or abdomen. Remember, at bottom, the heart that seeks to awaken, to live genuinely, is more real than anything. It is the nameless drive that calls us to be who we most truly are. When we are not in touch with this, we may feel the existential anxiety of disconnection.

In a way, much of spiritual practice is geared toward helping us address our feeling of basic separation. How does this occur? First, we acknowledge our fear and see it clearly for what it is. We need to remember that the fear is, in fact, our path itself, our direct route to experiencing the lovingkindness at our core.

Then we must face the fear directly, saying yes to it. Essentially, this means we are willing to experience it—to sit with anxiety in the center of the chest and truly feel—rather than run away from it. When fear arises, in order to replace our usual dread with a genuine curiosity, we might ask, "Here it is again, how will it be this time?" As we breathe the sensations of anxiety into the heart, our familiar thought-based stories begin to dissolve. As we get out of our heads, we can experience the spaciousness of the nonconceptual: the healing power of the heart. No longer caught in fear or our sense of separateness, we are free to experience connectedness, which is our basic birthright and comes forth naturally on its own.

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The third basic fear is that of unworthiness. This fear takes many forms, such as the fear that I don't count, the fear of general inadequacy, of being unworthy of love, of being nothing or stupid, and so on. The basic fear that we'll never measure up dictates much of our behavior; for example, for some, it impels us to continuously and forcefully prove ourselves, while for others, it might prompt us to cease trying. In either case, isn't our motivation the same: to avoid facing the basic fear of unworthiness? We may fear the feeling of unworthiness more than anything.

In fact, we are often merciless in these self-judgments of unworthiness—not just when we're upset at ourselves, but as an ongoing frame of mind. Even if they're not glaringly obvious, our self-judgments are always lurking under the surface, waiting to arise. For example, those who have stage fright, including the anxiety of public speaking, may feel the constant underground dread of having to deal with it. There's a joke that people can fear public speaking so intensely that at a funeral they would rather be in the casket than give the eulogy. I can attest to the lurking dread of stage fright, as I had to face this particular fear for years. And yet ultimately giving public talks has been a very fruitful path.

Fear of public speaking triggers the dread and shame of public failure and humiliation. But what is really being threatened? Isn't it just our self-image of appearing strong, calm, insightful, or (continued on page 107)

(continued from page 35) whatever our own particular narrow view is of who we're supposed to be? We certainly fear appearing weak or not on top of it. Why? Because that would confirm our own negative beliefs of unworthiness. Even though there is no real danger, isn't it true that the fear of failing often feels fatal? Yet ironically, our very attempt to fight the fear is most often what increases it and may even result in panic.

There is a better alternative: We must learn to let it in willingly, to breathe the sensations of fear directly into the center of the chest. In other words, to say yes to the fear.

At one point in my life, when I was struggling with my fear of giving public talks, I joined Toastmasters, a group designed to help develop skills in public speaking. But I didn't join to learn to give better talks, or even with the goal of overcoming my fear. I joined so that I could have a laboratory, a place to invite the fear in and go to its roots. In a way, I actually began to look forward to the fear arising so I could breathe it right into the heart, entering into it fully. Paradoxically, the willingness to be with the fear completely is what changes the experience of fear altogether. It's not that fear will no longer arise; it's that we no longer fear it.

Eventually, we all need to be willing to face the deepest, darkest beliefs we have about ourselves. Only in this way can we come to know that they are *only beliefs,* and not the truth about who we are. By entering into this process willingly, by seeing through the fiction of who we believe ourselves to be, we can connect with our true nature. As Nietzsche put it, "One must have chaos in oneself to give birth to a dancing star." Love is the dancing star, the fruit of saying yes, of consciously and willingly facing our fears.

When we can feel fear within the spaciousness of the breath and heart, we may even come to see it more as an adventure than a nightmare. To see it as an adventure means being willing to take the ride with curiosity, even with its inevitable ups and downs. Over the years, because I had to speak in public quite frequently, this situation provided an opportunity to tap into what was really important to me—to remember that my aspiration is to learn to live from the awakened heart. Whenever I remembered this right before giving a talk, it was no longer an issue of whether or not I felt the discomfort of fear. This allowed me to say yes to it and to willingly breathe the fear right in. In other words, when we connect with a larger sense of what life is, negative beliefs such as "I'll never measure up" may still come

up, but they no longer dictate who we are. Instead, we begin to use the fear as our actual path to learning to live from lovingkindness.

Remember, it's a given that we don't want to feel the fear of unworthiness, but at some point we have to understand that it's more painful to try to suppress our fears and self-judgments, thus solidifying them, than it is to actually feel them. This is part of what it means to bring lovingkindness to our practice, because we are no longer viewing our fear as proof that we're defective. Without cultivating love for ourselves, regardless of how much discipline we have, regardless of how serious we are about practice, we will still stay stuck in the subtle mercilessness of the mind, listening to the voice that tells us we are basically and fundamentally unworthy. We should never underestimate the need for lovingkindness on the long and sometimes daunting path of learning to awaken.

Please note that these three basic fears—insecurity and helplessness, aloneness and disconnection, and unworthiness—are not just mental. Scientists tell us that fear is written into the cellular memory of the body, particularly into a small part of the brain called the amygdala. That is why simply knowing about our fears intellectually will not free us from their domination. Every time they are triggered, we slide into an established groove in the brain. So until we can see our fears clearly, we will not be able to practice with them directly.

When I was a child, my father told me repeatedly, "The only thing to fear is fear itself." Although his intentions were good, what I actually heard was that I should be afraid of fear! Fear thus became the enemy. We have to remember that fear is neither an enemy nor an obstacle; it is not a real monster. When we feel fear, we need to remind ourselves that it is our path; and when we truly understand this, we can welcome it into the spaciousness of the heart.

Interestingly, it is this nonconceptual experiencing of our fears that allows the grooves in the brain, which are preprogrammed to react to fear, to slowly be filled in. How this works is a mystery; it is no mystery, however, that unless we can clearly see our individual fears for what they are, it is unlikely we will overcome our habitual and instinctive aversions to them. The bright side of this is that once we are able to face our fears, once we willingly let them in, they become a portal to reality. ▼