Anxiety and Aging

To some degree or other, anxiety is with us intermittently through most of our lifetime. After many years of practicing with my own anxiety, I actually believed that it was no longer a real issue for me. And then, six years ago, after kidney cancer surgery and multiple complications, I began to experience anxiety and fear on a different level, including symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. And it became clear to me that once again, anxiety became my path.

For all of us, anxiety is challenging, but it’s especially difficult when our catastrophic thinking leads us to imaginings of a sense of doom. As well, we’re so used to judging states like fear as “bad,” that we often jump to the conclusion that something needs to be done to fix it. But first it’s helpful to know the nature of what exactly we’re dealing with.

The voice of fear basically tells us to turn away from whatever we perceive as dangerous. But when we believe in and indulge this voice, we remain stuck in the narrow cocooned world that fear creates. Ironically, we cling to the belief that avoiding our fears can bring us peace, yet exactly the opposite is true. The fearful thoughts will still be running subliminally, so even as we try to avoid them, we stay quietly miserable.

The first step in working with our fears is to become clear about what we’re actually afraid of, since we often don’t know what we’re really feeling or why exactly we are afraid. Think for a moment: do you know what your strongest fears are—what you’re most afraid of?

To bring the answer out of the shadows, one simple straightforward question can help: ask “What exactly am I afraid of in this moment?” If the answer isn’t clear, we can ask it again later. We just keep raising the question, and then try to stay with what we’re feeling, and at some point the answer is likely to reveal itself. Just naming a fear can sometimes weaken the dread of what the future will bring, and is a crucial step in working with our fears.

February Sesshin (Friday, February 15 through Monday, February 18) applications are still being accepted for the waiting list. The focus of this sesshin will be on Hara Practice.

2019 Board Members are Angela Milana, Bob Posert, June Cressy, Kate Watson, Scott Forbes, Shayna Kaufman, and Steve Schroeter.

April Sesshin (Thursday, April 11 through Sunday, April 14) applications will be accepted starting on February 11.

Announcements

Sesshin Application

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Fear presents us with an opportunity to see where we’re stuck, where we’re holding ourselves back, and where we can open more to life.
To help recognize our fears, it’s good to be familiar with some of the most common ones. An almost universal fear is the loss of safety and security. Because safety is fundamental to our survival, this fear will often be triggered at the first sign of danger or insecurity; for example, when we experience new or painful physical symptoms.

Another basic fear that we’re all familiar with is believing that we’re fundamentally not enough, or unworthy in some way. When this is on board we’re likely to develop a strategy of behavior to counter it, for example, the strategy of trying harder. Accordingly, we may work very hard to be productive, to demonstrate our value, to excel in whatever we do. Or, our strategy may be the exact opposite—to cease trying. The point is, we may not even be aware of how our strategies are driven by the core fear of being unworthy.

Another significant fear that we need to recognize within ourselves is the fear of powerlessness and loss of control. This will often come into play when some major change in our life circumstances or health status occurs.

And yet another major fear occurs when we experience the loss of a loved one. The fear of abandonment may arise and be particularly powerful. Or we may feel the fear of loneliness, or loss of connection.

In all of these fears, instead of viewing them as our enemy, we can begin to see fear as our path. Fear presents us with an opportunity to see where we’re stuck, where we’re holding ourselves back, and where we can open more to life. So for me, when physical pain arises, I tell myself I get to work with it again. Meaning, very specifically, I have an opportunity to work with my attachment to comfort, my attachment to my body, my attachment to my negative thoughts—all of which prevent me from being free.

We have to understand that fear is the protective cocoon of ego telling us to stop, to withdraw. But the path toward inner freedom is to move directly toward our fears, since this is the only way to go beyond fear’s cocoon. So instead of greeting fear with “Oh no!”—which is our instinctive response—we can say, “Hello. Here you are again—what will you feel like this time?” By relating to the fear rather than from it, it can substantially diminish our normal mode of being caught.

The actual practice, once we recognize our fear, is to first pause, and then allow ourselves to take a step back and just watch what the mind is doing, and see how it tries to solidify the thoughts into suffering. For example, even saying or thinking, “I am afraid,” helps solidify the sense of “me.”
Further, we may find that many of the fearful thoughts focus on worrying about the future. If we let our worrying about the future run unchecked, it can turn into full-blown catastrophizing, where everything seems dark and unworkable. So if it’s clear that there is no real danger on board at the moment, a good way to break the cycle of fear is to say, “Not happening now!” Once we can refrain from indulging in thoughts such as “This is awful,” “I can’t handle this,” or “Poor me,” the melodrama begins to lose its steam.

The next and crucial step is to inhabit the physical sensations and energy of fear throughout our body. We do this by breathing right into them. Basically we’re asking the pivotal question: “What does this moment actually feel like, in the body?” We’re not asking why we have fear or analyzing it; it isn’t an intellectual question. Instead, it’s a way to enter meticulously into the body sensations on a felt level. As you breathe into the fear, you notice where, specifically, the sensations are strongest, and then feel their texture.

If the fear is particularly strong, it may also be helpful to breathe the physical feelings and energy of fear into the center of the chest for a few breaths.

There is definitely something soothing and healing about bringing the fear to the area of the heart and simply feeling that area. We may find that our usual dread is replaced with a sense of equanimity.

Sometimes we may think we can’t lean in and embrace our fear. When we find ourselves in the midst of a painful or distressing experience, it may be very difficult to stay present with it. While fear may warn us to close down and defend, the heart that wants to awaken calls us to open and connect with what life is actually presenting. The bottom line is: Until we become intimate with our fears, until we can welcome them, they will always limit our ability to live authentically.

It may come as a surprise, but ultimately, love is the fruit of consciously and willingly facing our fears.

Ezra Bayda, adapted from *Aging for Beginners*