



Living in an Age of Fear

By Phillip Moffitt

Let's just all of us acknowledge that we are living in a time of heightened fear and uncertainty. I encounter these feelings of genuine alarm in individual conversations, in work meetings, and at dharma retreats. From fires to hurricanes, from floods to drought, from the rise of various infectious diseases to concerns about the food supply, we are being overwhelmed by the anxiety that these events elicit. We face economic uncertainty and the omnipresence of AI reducing the innate value of human contributions. *And now* we are confronted with political, governmental and cultural instability so intense and widespread that we cannot deny that we are living in an age of fear.

Our fears are justified but one of the things that is revealed in meditation is that when we *react* to fear rather than *respond* to it, we throw wisdom and our own empowerment out the window. As practitioners, how can we use our skills in mindfulness and the teachings of the Buddha on anicca and dukkha to steady us and provide a ground of perspective?

Living in a fear-based culture inevitably affects your state of mind and the decisions you make. As a citizen you may become more compliant, more willing to surrender your rights for vague promises of safety. As an employee you are less demanding, less willing to take risks. And in your personal life you are more security oriented, and thus less open to new possibilities—all because you see the future through the lens of fear. Viewing life in this manner is not skillful. It is not that such concerns lack legitimacy—this is undeniably a time of danger and instability in our society, and unwise actions and indifference could destroy the future for our children. The problem is that the lens of fear distorts what you see. It focuses primarily on the negative, exaggerates the potentially threatening, filters out alternative views, and causes you to compromise your core values out of the urgent need to survive.

Fear when not named narrows your vision, shuts down intuition as well as common-sense reflection, and promotes violent actions. Stated more simply, fear that is not recognized and tended to with mindfulness takes the life out of life. Your life energy is lost to dread as the body braces and the heart closes in anticipation of what is to come.

It is difficult living in a time of fear, but here you are, and the challenge becomes finding a way not to be consumed by it. This is best accomplished by first observing your responses to the culture of fear that surrounds you. You can then use this knowledge to work with your personal fears. Your reaction to dread and to uncertainty about yourself, your abilities, and what may happen to you imprison your spirit. Learning to work skillfully with fear is essential to your finding freedom and happiness.

As you deepen your spiritual practice, you will inevitably encounter all your fears, some of which you may not even know are within you. Being alert and curious about your fear allows it to become your teacher as well as to serve your growth. This gives purpose to what is otherwise meaningless suffering.

Fear Is Like This

Fear itself is not necessarily a bad thing—healthy, balanced fear can be very useful. It can serve as an alarm, a call for action, as in “Take your hand off the hot stove!” As a distress signal it triggers a sense of apprehension about the future, to which the body reacts by secreting adrenaline and other chemicals that give you the motivation and energy to act. As an experience of uneasiness, it can be a call for reflection, asking you to pay careful attention to your actions or decisions, or to reconsider a situation. It may well be your intuition warning you to be cautious. Unfortunately, most struggles with fear are of the irrational, repetitive, imagined variety.

Despite having often experienced fear, most of us do not have a clear definition of what it means in the context of an individual’s life. What one person classifies as fear, someone else would call anxiety, or another might label panic. If you are to

work with fear as a way of knowing yourself, it is helpful to sort through this confusion in order to clarify what you are feeling.

Fear is usually described as an emotional response to a perception of danger, which elicits certain neuromuscular and chemical reactions in the body. You feel it arise in response to something that you see or that you hear, to sensations in your body, or to thoughts and emotions that appear in the mind. The presence of fear may be the result of an accurate perception as well as a completely distorted one. Regardless, it is your belief in the perception and your interpretation of its implications for your well-being that control the level of fear you experience.

Hence, fear is an internal experience, a subjective response to the immediate moment or some future event; therefore, you should regard fear with objective skepticism and not treat it as an absolute truth. This calls for you to develop a certain distance from fear, to see it as a phenomenon that is predominant in this particular moment, not the ultimate decision maker in your life.

There are two ways in which fear may be contextualized in order to begin working with it mindfully. The first one is to treat it as one of three responses on a spectrum of frightened reactions to something. Lowest on this spectrum is apprehension or anxious agitation, which is sometimes called anxiety. Then there is full-blown fear, a far more stringent response by the nervous system. If the fear keeps expanding, it will accelerate into the highest distress response: outright terror or panic.

Each of the three responses is subjective, happening inside you. But the more established you are in mindfulness that is learned in meditation, the less likely you are to escalate from apprehension to fear and then terror. In order to dis-identify with fear as it is arising, my teacher Ajahn Sumedho suggests making a mental note to yourself: “Anxiety is like this; fear is like this.”

Another skillful method to gain insight is to make a distinction between fear and the anxiety of life itself. When there is a specific object to be afraid of—a noise in the dark, a verbal threat, an uncertainty regarding a commitment, the outcome of

a medical test, a truck veering into your lane—what you feel is fear in relation to that object.

Anxiety, on the other hand, is anxiety about, rather than *of*. You are anxious *about* growing older, or your child getting hurt, or your marriage lasting. There is no specific object of alarm. Instead you are responding to the frailty and temporary nature of existence.

The truth is that you will never be absolutely safe. All things change constantly, even what is most precious. You know that you and those you love will die, but not when or how. This is the angst of life, the price of being a conscious human being. It is not a flaw, although many people cannot let loose of seeing it in such a manner. It is just the way life is constructed. When your awareness of this vulnerability is triggered, you can be swept into panic, collapse into depression, or desperately try to distract yourself. One of the values of spiritual practice is that you are able to come to terms with this anxiety in a conscious manner. Your life becomes more integrated because you are no longer trying to deny or avoid what is true.

Naturally, what often happens is that you compound the misery of a particular fear you may be experiencing with this general anxiety that is inherent in the human condition. When this takes place, the turbulence of all your apprehensions pours into the specific fear, and you suffer more. For instance, you simply forget a meeting, yet you are traumatized, certain that you are losing your ability to focus. Or someone disappoints you and you collapse into complete self-hatred, fearing that you have no worth to the other.

With mindfulness practice, you learn to see how the untrained mind is agitated by the human condition and how not to allow this general anxiety to fuel your fear in a specific situation. You also gain tolerance for the unpleasantness of uncertainty and also the naturalness of your own imperfection. You have confidence that “life is like this.” You cannot and are not supposed to miraculously fix it; rather, you gain the insight that happiness and peace come from relating to life just as it is.

Levels of Fear

You can begin to deepen your understanding of how fear may be affecting you by becoming mindful of the four levels of alertness in your body and mind. First is the normal state of alertness you experience walking down the street, driving, or being at work. You are awake to change in the environment. If you suddenly perceive a possible danger, the body-mind switches to the second level of alertness, vigilance. This is natural and healthy, and the vigilance ends once the danger passes.

The next level occurs when there's a prolonged sense of anxiety or fear. The body-mind goes into hypervigilance and stays there ready to fight, flee, or freeze in place until the trauma passes. Hypervigilance creates a tunnel-vision effect in which you primarily experience life through the lens of fear or anxiety. It can become a pattern if your life is so challenged that you repeatedly fall into this state. Hypervigilance in adulthood can have its roots in childhood trauma or result from working in a hostile situation or from being in relationship with a psychologically or physically abusive partner. Someone who is hypervigilant often interprets interactive signals differently than the norm and as a result suffers much tension and misunderstanding.

Our culture is presently showing signs of being in this hypervigilant stage. Given the cultural, economic, and political changes that are rapidly occurring, I witness not only many individuals getting caught in hypervigilance but also groups of people becoming hypervigilant. It *is* a scary time but hypervigilance weakens our power to respond wisely and effectively. Each of us is called on to address this for ourselves, but also to name the problem of hypervigilance when we are with others.

The final level of body-mind response to fear is the frozen traumatic reflex that occurs when danger is continuous or your nervous system loses the ability to perceive that the danger has passed. It can occur if you are thwarted in your effort to fight or flee and are locked into a pattern of incomplete motion. Or it can also arise when you brace or contract for an impact, such as often happens in

auto accidents. It can also be caused by threatening emotional situations, particularly in childhood.

If your circumstances were such that you continually sought to avoid drawing attention to yourself or you repeatedly contracted muscles to armor yourself against physical or verbal blows, these responses become a permanently frozen part of your neuromuscular system and can be triggered by stress. You can try to detect a frozen fear pattern in yourself by noting sensations of unease or numbness in the body, or feelings of mental disconnection or of not being in the body.

It is the continuous assault on our nervous systems that is occurring right now that seems to be creating widespread frozen traumatic reflex in our culture. Our meditation practice can be of tremendous help in gaining insight as to why this is occurring and how we can start to free ourselves from these feelings of helplessness. Likewise, through our sanghas and in other group situations, we can help each other reclaim our sense of choice and agency. My teacher Ajahn Sumedho would counsel us all to go to awareness, saying to ourselves, “This moment is like this.” The suffering of this moment is neither permanent nor unchanging and our Dharma path is to acknowledge what is and then live from our own values within these circumstances.

It might take you quite by surprise, but hypervigilance and frozen responses will usually present themselves at some point in your meditation practice. Almost everyone seems to have some degree of locked in fear that needs to be released; however, the amount varies dramatically. Usually you will experience some physical and possibly emotional discomfort when it starts arising. Sometimes it might be accompanied by unidentifiable images or memories of a specific event; at other times there is only a raw sense of fear or of bodily discomfort. Because it is unpleasant, there is a tendency to distract the mind or to simply give up meditation. It has been my experience that if you can stay with the uncomfortable experience, it will eventually unwind itself in both its physical and mental aspects.

The Fear-Based Person

Some individuals so habitually view the world from their various fears that they are referred to as living a fear-based life. If you are such a person or know such a person, you know well what this means. There is very little mental rest for such a person, because life seldom seems safe, even just temporarily. You continually mistrust your judgment or question the reliability of others, or both. You perpetually second-guess yourself and also others, always seeking yet one more opinion or assurance. You may change your mind frequently or endlessly postpone making decisions in order to seek more information. If you buy something, even if it is at a good price, you feel, “I paid too much; I could have gotten it cheaper,” or “There must be something wrong with it.”

It is confusing when a fear-based person has developed the ability to pull you into soothing his worries and solving his fears. You feel bombarded by the person’s apprehensions, and you carry anxiety that is hard to shake because it is not yours. Being mindful that this is occurring will allow you to separate from fear that is not yours and to develop a protective boundary. The skillful response to another’s fear is to acknowledge that you feel their fear, show compassion for it, and in a very modest way, share any wisdom you may have.

If you are fear based, you might move from one obsession or worry to another as a way to cope with your general anxiety. When you go to a meditation retreat, you get to watch the mind become agitated and actually look for a problem to grab hold of, and you come to see that what the mind chooses to focus on is not reliable as a priority. One yogi I met on retreat learned to say “my old friend fear” whenever his mind contracted into fear. This enabled him to no longer give it credibility, and the world became a safer, more enjoyable place for him. But beware of identifying yourself as a “fearful person.” You may often see life through the lens of fear, but it is only a mental state that is coloring your perception; you are not that fear.

This is a critical understanding. If you jump into a cold lake and your body gets cold, you don’t suddenly think you are a cold lake; you are simply cold as a

response to the environment. Fear is like that: Your nervous system may be flooded with the sensations of fear, but this is still only a reaction.

Meditating on Your Fear

Most people who start practicing mindfulness of fear realize for the first time how much of their behavior is motivated by fear. If this happens to you, you may begin to feel discouraged or possibly defensive, or to adamantly assert that your fear is justified and even needed. You are used to fear and you know how to work with it, so these responses are natural. It is as though you are afraid to be without fear! Of course, you might be right; I can only report that it has not worked that way for the yogis I have known. Without exception, as their reliance on fear has diminished, their sense of well-being has grown.

You can see what is true for you by mindfully working with some of your smaller, more approachable fears and then seeing what happens. Be patient, please. It helps to remind yourself that fear is not a stigma. Even the Buddha had to work with fear, which he describes in the “Sutta on Fear and Dread” in the Majjhima Nikaya.

Although it may seem as though fear is dominating your decisions, if you look more closely, you will find that there’s an energetic response that is even more powerful, and that is love—love in all its forms: appreciation, generosity, caring, tolerance, patience, creativity, and service. The core spiritual teaching about fear is that it inevitably arises whenever you experience a sense of separateness, either from others or from the environment. Fear overwhelms the mind, causes you to project that which you find despicable in yourself onto others, breeds paranoia, and fuels self-justifying, self-serving behavior.

As you grow spiritually and begin to see how interdependent all of life is, your sense of separation diminishes, and fear then starts to lose its grip. For this reason it is sometimes said that a person who has fully realized the dharma is completely without fear. Unfortunately, for the rest of us, there remains the ever-present need for practice.

Loving-kindness practice is the classic antidote for fear. If you see through the lens of love, you are not afraid of what is out there in the same way, even though it remains just as difficult and may still succeed in harming you. Your relationships to fear and to yourself are thus changed by experiencing the threatening aspects of life through the lens of love.

Doing loving-kindness practice formally for just five minutes each morning, followed by saying loving-kindness phrases as you go through your daily routines, may well begin to make a difference in your life. I specifically suggest doing the following loving-kindness meditation to work with fear: “May I find freedom from fear in my life. May I also in turn help others find freedom from fear in their lives. And may I meet the fear in our culture with the courage of the open heart, which acts with decisiveness but never divisiveness.”

You can begin practicing mindfulness of fear today. When your mind seems to be caught in a storm of thoughts about how bad the world is or about something in your own life, take a moment to notice what happens in your body. Then notice how your mind is communicating with images and words. Remember to be curious and receptive without taking any of it personally. Let your heart open to the suffering the fear is causing.

The story is often told of a monk who lived in isolation in a cave where he painted beautiful murals on the wall as part of his meditation practice. With his strongly developed concentration and acquired skill, he painted a ferocious tiger that appeared as real as any live one. It seemed so real, it scared him to death! All things that arise in your mind are like the monk’s brush strokes on the cave wall—none of them, not even the ones that seem to be the most solid, are composed of lasting, unchanging substance.

When the fear feels stuck, realize that you are clinging to a perception that is merely painted on the walls of your mind. It’s this clinging, not the danger, no matter how genuinely threatening it might be, that is the cause of your greatest distress. The proper response is threefold: continual mindfulness of the fear, deep

compassion for the suffering it is causing, and cultivation of equanimity that allows you to stay with it. You will find that the dharma will do the rest.

A further resource for practicing with fear: [Getting Past Fear](#)

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