

# *Fear is not a useful emotion*

These questions and answers come from an interview with Andrea Liebers published in 'Buddhism' in May 2012

**The opposite of fearlessness is angst or anxiety. What happens in the citta (heart–mind) when it is afraid?**

It shrinks. An anxious heart is closed and does not allow anything into it. When we meet a dangerous animal, for example, our physical heart contracts because we are afraid of physical pain and especially of death. The same thing happens with threatening situations – we are unable to face them openly. Fear is an emotion that is generated by the kilesas (defilements) to control us.

**Permanently?**

Permanently. Fearing the aging process, we go for medical checkups or take out insurance. Fear is a basic emotion that drives us to do many, many things. The fear of death also makes us avoid things, such as travelling in cars, planes or trains. Fear makes us avoid unpleasant situations, avoid people we do not want to meet or avoid dealing with upsetting situations.

**So, fear cuts us off from life?**

Yes, because of fear, we are narrow-minded. The opposite is an open heart which openly accepts all situations. Whatever comes, whether a tiger, a tsunami or a plane crash, if we could face the situation with a heart that is open, then...but who can do that? We all fear death. Can you really find a person who isn't afraid of death?

**Dhamma should be there for us to overcome fear. How does this work?**

First of all, you have to become aware of fear. You really have to become aware of whatever happens within you.

**What is the opposite of fear?**

I'd say it's courage – not fearing anything or anyone. But which creatures are not afraid? All beings live in fear, especially human beings. When we see someone who is sick, we are afraid that we might get sick. If we see someone die, we are afraid that death might take us. Subconsciously, this fear is always there.

**Is this the basic fear of losing one's own life?**

Yes. And the basic fear in meditation is of losing oneself. This is why most people do not get into deeper states of meditation, because they are afraid that they will stop existing if their thoughts stop. Descartes said, "cogito ergo sum", i.e. "I think therefore I am", which implies that I 'am not' if I do not think. The fear of letting go of thinking, the fear of letting go of anything – that's all fear. We can not be really open, because we are always afraid. Some are afraid that they will be exploited, afraid of being different, afraid of being blamed or becoming scapegoats, afraid of losing their jobs, afraid of losing their partner – fear determines our lives, more so in Westerners than in Asians.

## **So in meditation people are afraid of losing control?**

Yes. We are all control freaks.

## **At the same time, though, we turn to meditation to get away from those fears and wake up from the nightmare we are in?**

Yes, everyone wants to be free of fear and wants to be free of dukkha (suffering) but they are not ready to abandon the various things that they still possess or cherish.

## **Is it fear that keeps them clinging on to things?**

No, not necessarily. There is still greed and hate, and there is also delusion. Fear is not one of the basic kilesas (defilements). The main ones are greed and hate, and fear hides within greed and hate; it is a mixture. The Lord Buddha said very clearly that greed, hatred and delusion keep us trapped in the cycle of existence. He did not say that fear, angst or arrogance keep us trapped in the cycle. At the moment when you overcome greed and hate, fear is gone. Why should you be afraid if you have nothing to lose or if you don't care anymore about losing or winning? When you accept things as they are, where can fear arise?

## **That would be fearlessness?**

Yes, whoever awakes from the illusion of a dream is fearless. We are afraid only as long as we are dreaming, but if we open our eyes, we see that there was no monster. There really is no need for us to be frightened, yet we see monsters at every turn. These monsters don't have to be ghosts. The fear of the future is also a monster, and fear of disease is another. These fears whisper to us that we must die. Someone who has no fear no longer clings to this life; that's a fearless person. He knows things as they really are. And someone who has awakened, of course, can see much more, but he cannot say everything that he knows because people would think him crazy.

## **Can we make ourselves fearless?**

No, you can't. You can only try to overcome your own fear. But awareness is a prerequisite, and you can make that arise in yourself – at moments of anxiety you can try to open your heart. For the first few times, you will notice how 'tight' the feeling is, how everything feels really cramped. Then, you can try to resolve this inner blockage – think how a tight fist becomes open as one finger after another gets released. It's then that you suddenly realize that you can breathe again.

## **Can we train ourselves to be fearless step by step?**

Without awareness you will not be able to overcome fear. If you don't notice that your heart is cramped, then you can't even begin. You will react automatically and immediately: you come to a threatening situation and...whoosh, all of a sudden you are frightened. But if you are self-aware and can recognise that you are frightened, then look at your heart and try to make it open. This won't be easy, I can tell you! And that's because opening the heart hurts more than keeping the heart cramped. Put it like this, a cramped heart is cramped because it wants to hide all the hurtful emotions buried within it. A cramped heart hurts, and if we open the heart, the hurt is released. But once released, all the hurtful emotions that we have stored in the heart will come to the surface.

## How does that work?

Can you open your fist when it's tight?

### I need to want to open it

You need to trigger an intention – wanting alone is not enough. You can want and want and want, but if you don't send a signal to trigger an intention for the fist to open then it won't open. Desire alone will not make anything happen. Only with aim, drive and execution can we open our hearts. Of course it is much easier to open the fist than the heart. But, we can do it if we really want to. Why are people not doing it? Because it hurts, and they will have to experience the pain that has been blocked by their cramped heart. They have to feel the fear, the angst and the pain!

### Can it be a useful exercise for people to expose themselves to frightening situations?

Yes, of course. For example, putting oneself in the path of a tiger or going to the brink of a precipice or living alone in isolated areas that everyone else shuns will make all of our fears come up! These are things that Buddhist monks have done in the past to confront their fears. The Lord Buddha didn't say that we should all remain in the monasteries; he said, "there are the caves, there are mountains, there are forests that are the fearsome places shunned by people. Go there, not in groups but alone, and practice in these forgotten places". If you read the stories in the Buddhist literature, all the Arahants (enlightened ones) or Buddhas attained realisation in caves or under the trees; and these were all lonely places! A meditation group is certainly not a place where you can reach enlightenment.

### So, fearlessness cannot be achieved without solitude?

Without solitude, you cannot become truly fearless because you cannot look at your fears and your imaginations. There are no opportunities for both of these to arise and show themselves. In solitude, there is no way to project your fears and desires onto people, but your greed and hate will arise nonetheless. Then you'll have to learn how to deal with them. You can't nip down to the village to buy chocolate or ice cream, or to have a chat and then run back into the forest. As a monk, you can't just run away. In many cases, the places where a monk goes for seclusion are one or two hours away from civilization. It's there that he has no other choice than to face his fears!