

Investigating fear, contemplating death

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People are afraid of many things — going hungry, meeting new people, seeing creatures like scorpions or snakes, and so on. Fears like these are really about being injured or dying, and all of us have them, but the more you practice the less afraid you become.

Fears arise through thoughts, so if you replace every thought with the mediation word *bud-dho* or with the awareness of the breath, fear cannot come up. However, there is more to our fear than meets the eye. It's not just that we are afraid of scorpions, snakes or whatever; there is a more lurking fear inside all of us that comes out when we see a fearful object like a snake. What is this fear? This is something everyone has to investigate for themselves. You have to be aware of what happens before fear comes up — what happens?

Meditation practice can bring us to the point where we know what is happening. This awareness is called *sati*, and if we can't develop it we have no means of knowing what is occurring. As human beings we try to make conclusions quickly so we know what is going on around us — but the fear of scorpions or snakes is not the real thing. Rather, something inside us is afraid, and it looks for a reason outside that it can project fear onto. In mediation practice, we have to look within ourselves and ask what we are afraid of.

When we die, we are reborn, and it may be that we are afraid now because we had a terrible death in our last life. Whatever the origin of the fear, we have to recognise that anger, greed and fear exist in every human being; they are not specific to us. There is fear inside everyone that is looking for things to latch onto, and we have to get to the root of it. Using meditative concentration (*samādhi*), we can make the mind clear of thoughts and start to investigate the situation — not investigating by thinking about things but by pulling up memories or fears so that we can re-experience them. This can be tough for some people, but we have to get used to the unpleasantness if we are to see clearly. We have to experience memories or fears over and over again, ten times, a hundred times or a thousand times until we really know what is happening.

This practice is very different from going to psychiatrists or counsellors. These professionals try to find solutions that seem to suit the situation, such as finding someone or something to blame, whether mothers or fathers or the society itself. However, there's a fundamental aspect ignored by the Western world — the *kamma* that brings about rebirth. In the Thai Forest Tradition, *kamma* from the past is an important underlying determinant of everything we experience, including fears in the here and now. We are reborn in a particular country because of our *kamma*. Some countries are quite wealthy and secure, and being reborn in them is good *kamma*, but we also have bad *kamma* and experience difficulties because of things we have done in our past lives. In young people particularly, problems may come from their previous life, so they may have to do some digging to get to the bottom of their fears. But, whether young or old, we can't just use reasoning to overcome fear; the calm of *samādhi* is necessary to see what is really happening.

To investigate fear, we should calm the mind down until it doesn't think any more and bring up the fearful situation. Bring up an encounter with the object, whether a snake or a scorpion, and see what is happening. Just see but don't judge — this is a very important point.

Don't think about it, just look at it. It's similar to looking at a documentary on the TV and knowing that something is happening on the screen. What we are really doing is showing the heart (*citta*), and we have to do it a second time and a third time, again and again. We do it until the heart tells us that it has understood. But don't be impatient; this can take months or years. When you do this practice, you are learning how to deal with fear. Fear is just an emotion that arises and ceases; after all, we are not afraid all the time. We might be afraid of snakes, but we're not afraid of them when we are eating lunch. Fear comes only in certain situations, and this aspect is also something you have to investigate. But before you can do that, you have to make the mind calm, to drop into a state where there is no thought. This state can help so much in overcoming fears. Only then can we see and understand things that are hidden beneath our thoughts. We tend to think about situations over and over again, and never come to a solution, but when there are no thoughts we can see more clearly because there is no fog. Fears that are caused by *kamma* are not so easily revealed, of course, but we can at least make a start in learning how to deal with fear and how to overcome it.

In essence, you are saying, "OK – there is fear" but recognising that the fear is not you. You have to understand what is going on inside yourself. Go to a movie and see how you are pulled into the story, how your anger flares up or how you empathise with some of the characters, yet the movie is not you and not yours, is it? Similarly, fear is not you, so when you see it coming up, just say, "There is fear" and create a distance between you and it. At the same time, you can observe the thoughts that create the fear, the thoughts associated with the fear. If you reverse these thoughts for a while, to counteract them, you'll see that no fear comes up; for instance, there is no fear if you replace the image of a snake with the image of a stick or a piece of rubber tubing, is there?

These are things we have to do alone – other people cannot solve our problems for us. We have to solve them ourselves for we have created them, after all. Because of our *kamma* we have created our own lives – it's not the society or the people around us that have made us the way we are. We are all born of greed and hate; these make us do bad or unwholesome things, but we also have good and wholesome things inside us. If there is more good than bad, we are born in the higher realms; if more bad than good, in the lower realms, though this is often difficult for people in the West to accept. The moment we accept ourselves, accept that we are both good and bad, we can start to deal with our problems using *sati* and *paññā*. However, if we don't accept that there are unwholesome qualities within us, they will just stay where they are. We can keep pushing them down but, in the moments when we don't have *sati*, these things can come out and ruin our lives. By the time we think, "My God, what have I done?", it's too late. However, the moment we accept the unwholesome things within us, we can deal with them. We can investigate them, and chuck them out of the heart.

There are also bad habits, of course, and habits, such as dwelling on fears, that are very difficult to break. That's why we have to hold on to wholesome things with all our strength, whether keeping the five precepts or keeping our attention on the meditation object. The longer we drive a car into the mud, the deeper it gets stuck and the longer it takes to get it out. Habits are very deep tracks in the mud, but if we don't do anything about them, the tracks get deeper and deeper. The moment we see the habit with awareness, we should try to counteract it, and if we don't succeed, we try again and again. To break a habit we need both awareness and the will to fight it; it can be done, but we have to be patient. When a car is stuck in the mud, you need patience but you also need effort or persistence, and

effort is one of the seven factors of enlightenment.* In fact, we can change any kind of bad habit using awareness, will and persistence. Of course, it is not easy, and we can come up with all kinds of reasons for not breaking habits. One of the most useful things is to tell yourself, “I really don’t want to do this any more”, and recall that the habit is harmful and does not bring happiness. This will help to firm up your resolve, so your determination will be a little stronger the next time you try to counteract the habit.

The Lord Buddha never said that practice was easy; rather, he showed us methods of counteracting the defilements within our own hearts. We need to accept whatever is in our hearts and deal with it accordingly. If you see things that are unwholesome, let them go and don’t follow them. If you see things that are wholesome, put them into action and develop them further. The Lord Buddha put it very succinctly in the Anguttara Nikaya: “Develop the wholesome and abandon the unwholesome”. And remember — don’t give up, for that is what the *kilesas* tell us to do. If it doesn’t work out today, it might work out tomorrow, so keep going. Never ever give up, otherwise you will be lost, and you will go down the drain. Imagine there is a great river with a waterfall that you are heading towards. Wouldn’t you do everything you can to get out of the river, to swim against the flow? Swimming against the flow of the *kilesas* needs awareness, and that’s why *sati* is so important. Every time we realise that we should act on the wholesome or avoid acting on the unwholesome, we should trust in this awareness and act on it.

One of the most common fears is the fear of death, but all of us are going to die, so what are we afraid of? At the moment of birth, death is programmed into the body, so we are going to die whatever we do, even though we don’t know when death will come. What is it that’s going to die? Well, the usual answer is that ‘I’ am going to die, which we take to mean that everything is going to die. But the reality is that this ‘I’ consists of the five groups or *khandhas* — the body (*rūpa*), and the four mental (*nāma*) *khandhas* of feeling (*vedanā*), memory and association (*saññā*), thought (*sankhāra*) and consciousness (*viññāṇa*) — plus a *citta* which is reborn again and again. When we die, it’s the body that dies. The *citta* does not die, however, and after death it just looks for somewhere else to be reborn in a bodily form with *nāma khandhas* appropriate to the new state. This is why suicide is not a good idea, because killing the body does not solve the underlying problem. In fact, rebirth can take place in an animal body or a heavenly (*deva*) body or in hell or in a realm where there are no bodies (in which case there will be mental feelings but no bodily feelings). We shouldn’t think that bodily forms and mental *khandhas* exist only in the human realm. Beings in the heavens and the hells also have *khandhas*; if they didn’t, how could they experience the fruits of their past *kamma*?

So, does it really make sense to be afraid of death? The moment we fall asleep, we are not aware of the body, and the moment we wake up, we are aware of it again. But most of us are not afraid of sleeping. Yet, the fear of death drives some people crazy: “Oh, I’m going to die” or “I’m frightened because I’m going to have a lot of pain”. And other people can use this fear against us. We are afraid of people and animals that can hurt us, and this fear can drive us to do unwholesome things. So, what is it that’s afraid? Let’s try to locate this fear. There is fear — where is it hiding? Where does it come from? There is fear of death and fear of pain, but the moment you say, “I am afraid”, or “I am in pain”, you cannot separate out its elements and cannot observe it objectively.

So, the first step is to distance ourselves from whatever is happening and say, “There is fear” or “There is pain”. Then, we try to locate it. Where do these things come from, and who is it that knows about them? Ask yourself this — does the pain really know that it’s pain, or fear know that it’s fear, or depression know that it’s depression? So who is it that knows all these

things? Can the one who knows these things be the things themselves? No. To give a simple example, when we see an object, such as a spittoon in a Thai monastery, we can look at it and say, “That’s not me”; we don’t call it ‘me’ or ‘mine’. We just recognise that there is a spittoon, and use it for our own purposes. Similarly, with fear we can look at it and say, “There is fear” and examine where it comes from.

We spend our lives afraid of something or other. Some people use our fear to threaten us; they say that if we don’t act in a certain way, we will die a horrible death or be tortured or die of starvation or thirst, and we obey them out of fear. People in power use others’ fears to control them, and the strategy is quite successful. You can see this for yourself when you look at the world and how it works. But if we overcome the fear of death, no-one can threaten us ever again. We will experience a certain level of freedom.

So, what is going to die? In fact, what dies is the body or what we think of as our existence, but the *citta* itself doesn’t die – it just looks for a new existence in another realm. Imagine that we have lived all our lives in a dark cave, and that one day we stroll towards the mouth of the cave, see a beautiful lush meadow and start to wander off through the meadow. Have we changed? No! If we assumed that we were the cave, that the cave was ‘me’ and ‘mine’, then the only things that have died are the cave and the memory of our time in it. But that’s all. The *citta*, the never dying wanderer, just wanders on and beyond. Some people see a desert rather than a meadow, but whatever the landscape the *citta* just wanders on, even if the wandering is just from the back to the front of the cave itself. From the start of the meadow to the end, from the start of the desert to the end, from one new landscape to another, we wander through what Buddhism calls the realms of existence (*saṃsāra*). If a *citta* has amassed enough merit, it can get another human body – a cave in the example above; if the merit is even greater, it can get a heavenly body – the lush meadow; and if the merit is less, it will go to the lower realms to an animal or ghost body, or into the hell realm – the desert. But the wanderer, the *citta*, does not die. What dies is the ‘I’ that you think of as yourself but which is nothing more than the five *khandhas* !

To understand this, we have to investigate these five *khandhas* in our meditation practice, the five *khandhas* that make up ‘me’ and ‘myself’. The Lord Buddha taught that “This is not me, this does not belong to me, this is not myself“, and he was talking about these five groups – body, feeling, memory and association, thought and consciousness. If these things don’t belong to us, what does? It’s hard to imagine, but nothing belongs to us. And what is it that knows these things? There must be something remaining, and if we practice meditation we can discover for ourselves what that thing is. In the practice of *samādhi*, we can find out what it is.

When we practice *samādhi* concentrating on one point, sooner or later thoughts will stop and we will enter a completely different world, which is called access or *upacāra samādhi*. Then, when we get one-pointed, everything, including the *khandhas*, has to disappear, and this is called *appanā samādhi*, the deepest state of concentration. Once consciousness disappears, everything else disappears. What is left is one-pointedness, and that comes closest to what we can really call ‘us’. The moment we go into *appanā samādhi*, there is no longer any personality because the personality disappears with the five *khandhas*. What I mean is that during the time we are one-pointed the five *khandhas* are no longer working; they are not interfering with the true state of the *citta*, which is knowingness. Clear crisp knowingness – that’s what is left. There is no personality about this knowingness. There is no notion of ‘I know’; there is just knowing. And it’s certainly not knowing an object; there is just knowing. Unless you have experienced this for yourself, it is beyond imagina-

tion. Thoughts and memories don't work in this state, so the closest description is clear, crisp knowingness. It's up to you to get into this state and experience it for yourself. There's no other way; if you really want to know what is left over, you have to go into *appanā samādhi* and see for yourself. Actually, it's not so difficult. All you need to do is concentrate on one object until you become one-pointed. However, you need to put a lot of determination and a lot of effort into your practice so that whenever the mind goes astray you bring it back to the one point, whether the mental repetition of the word *buddho* or the awareness of the breath at the tip of the nose, as it comes in and goes out.

When I say that what is left is the knowingness, I want you to understand the method that brings us to this knowingness. We are employing this method the moment we repeat the word *buddho* — we know if it is fast, if it is slow, if it is deep, if it is shallow. Or, if we are practicing awareness of breathing, we know if the breath is coming in or going out, if it is shallow or deep, or if the in-breath is at its height or changing to become the out-breath. In each case, we speak about knowing the breath or knowing the *buddho*, and this kind of knowingness leads us to the knowingness of the *citta*. That's why this method works. It must work, and it works for everyone who practices it. And, of course, this *citta* never dies. It can never die because it has never been born. It has never arisen and it will never cease. This is why sometimes in our daily lives we have the feeling of being immortal. The *citta* is immortal, but the things around it are not. The five *khandhas* that are associated with it are not immortal because they follow the law of impermanence (*anicca*). Each of them is *anicca*; it is born and it dies, it arises and it ceases.

The body is born and then it dies sooner or later depending on the law of *kamma*. Feelings are also *anicca*. They are constantly changing, now pleasant, now unpleasant, and now neutral. So, feelings cannot be 'us'. If we want to consider ourselves immortal, we have to find the thing that doesn't change, the thing that really is immortal. Feeling, memory, thoughts and opinions are constantly changing; they cannot be me or mine and they cannot be immortal. Consciousness is also changing all the time, but it is more difficult for us to see because the moment consciousness disappears the world disappears. In fact, our *sati* has to be very keen, and we have to be extremely mindful to see consciousness disappear. Just like when we're sitting watching a movie, it's very difficult to see the individual frames of the film as they appear and disappear, and it's the same process with consciousness. Between one frame of consciousness and the next there is, in a manner of speaking, a frame of 'darkness' where consciousness ceases to exist, but it comes back with the next frame. However, we draw a line between one frame of consciousness and the next, and label them as the past and the future. This is really all that's happening. So, consciousness is also *anicca*, and the Lord Buddha told us that whatever is *anicca* is not self (*anattā*). The five *khandhas* are not our true self, but what is? In fact, there is a true self, but there is no personality in it.

Our true being does not differ from that of the people around us, because we all have the same nature. You can use the analogy of a water drop, which has the nature of water. Individual beings are like water drops falling into the ocean. They are water drops as long as they are falling, and they can compare themselves with each other, thinking they are more beautiful, bigger or more powerful than the others. But the moment the drops reach the sea and disappear to become part of the ocean, they all have the same nature; the nature of water. Similarly, one true *citta* is the same as all the others — it has no size, no individuality, no personality; it has nothing. Each true *citta* has just the same nature, water, so we cannot say that we exist or do not exist in this state. It's not wrong to speak of immortality as far as the true *citta* is concerned, but as long as we do not realise the truth of this for ourselves, we do not know. The thing that makes us go from one life to the next is *kamma*, and it is the *kilesas* and *avijjā* that create the

kamma that keeps the cycle of rebirth going round. When you understand the mechanism, you can let go of it, and make an end of the rounds of rebirth.

The first thing that happens when we practice is that we get calm; we get into a state of one-pointedness. It's not difficult — we just have to put all of our effort and determination into it. When you know one-pointedness for yourself, you will have the assurance that what I am saying is true. Than Acharn Mahā Bua says that it is a preview of *nibbāna*, albeit that it is only a preview and not the real thing. The Lord Buddha said that we should see for ourselves; he didn't say that we should *think* for ourselves or *assume* for ourselves. There are infinite ways of understanding Buddhist texts, but these are just pointers to the truth and are not the truth itself. The moment you open your eyes and see, you will realise that the truth is just the way that the Lord Buddha described it, without any doubts. But you have to walk the path — you won't get there by sitting reading in your armchair. Other people might tell you that they have reached the truth, but you won't know if they are right or wrong unless you have realised it for yourself. Someone might say he has been to Rome, but you only know for certain that he has been there if you have been to Rome yourself.

On this path, you don't need a lot of cleverness, and you don't need praise from other people. It's all really very easy. The body plus the four mental *khandhas*, the five groups that make up 'ourselves', are really just like five wheels constantly turning within themselves. They continue to turn, like the mechanism of a mechanical watch. We can open the watch and see them, see that they are just five rotating gears. The moment we close the watch again, we see the face, the hands and the display of time from the past to the future. But the moment we understand that there are simply five gears, we can let go of them and all that comes with them. This is all that we have to understand.

So, the path of practice is to go into *upacāra samādhi*, into the world beyond thoughts, or into *appanā samādhi* where we see reality, the true nature of the *citta*. From then on, we practice investigation, starting with investigation of the body (and the six senses) inside and out, from top to bottom, until we understand its true nature. Then, having gone beyond greed and hate, we can let go of the body and begin investigating the other four mental *khandhas*. These consist mainly of memory and thought which make up delusion. Once we understand delusion and how it is created, we will have removed two of the three main armies of *avijjā*, namely, the greed and hate rooted in the body and the delusion rooted mainly in memory and association, and thought. Only *avijjā* remains, and once that is gone we have finished our work. That's all — it's so simple.

Note

*The seven factors are mindfulness (*sati*); investigation (*dhammavicaya*); effort (*viriya*); rapture or happiness (*pīti*); calm (*passaddhi*); concentration (*samādhi*); equanimity (*upekkhā*)