

## Taking Fear Apart

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- Ken McLeod

On Sept. 11, 2001, I watched in shock as the great cathedrals of globalism, the World Trade Center towers, crumbled into dust. The tallest and grandest buildings of any culture represent beliefs in invincibility, entitlement, and power. When these illusions are shattered, fear arises. Events such as 9/11 and the anthrax mailings reveal that all of us are vulnerable to injury, ruin, and loss of life. Such threats can materialize at any time, from anywhere, inside or outside our own culture. When concerns about survival, safety, or identity resonate strongly with basic fears, we experience extremely difficult emotions and feeling.

Fear is a reactive mechanism that operates when our well-being and identity (including the identity of being a physical entity) is threatened. It works to erode or dissipate attention. We move into what the Buddha describes as the six realms of reactivity: 1. destroy the threat or seek revenge, 2. grasp at safety and security, 3. focus on survival (animal); 4. pursue pleasure as compensation, 5. vie for superiority, 6. or protect status and position.

Because we are less present to what is actually taking place, our actions are correspondingly less appropriate and less effective. We go to sleep, fall into the trance of our beliefs and ignore the very real consequences of maintaining these beliefs.

#### How do we experience fear or terror without crumbling into reaction and the six realms?

Sit with attention in the experience of fear, and you become aware of the feeling itself and how it resonates with other areas of life. You become aware of older, uncomfortable, buried feelings. You understand and know directly the structure that formed in you to keep you from being present in your life. The task is to take the structure apart, dismantle the projections, and know fear directly as it is, a powerful movement of emotional energy:

#### First, identify a reactive behavior and repeatedly ask, "Why am I doing this?"

Cut through the layers of projection or suppression until you arrive at "I don't know." Right there you will be experiencing an emotion. Ordinarily, we do not experience feelings directly, because we either:

1. act on them and the energy goes into the action,
  2. or we suppress them and the energy goes into the body.
- Stop doing the reactive activity. The feeling will be right there. Enter into it and be the feeling.

**Being** the feeling is different from **being with** the feeling.

A feeling is like a ball of multicolored yarn, with all kinds of secondary reactions that may conflict with each other. Open to the different shades and hues as fully as possible. What emerges is a distinct and yet identifiable feeling. Be the feeling as fully as possible, while you rest in attention.

#### At least twice a day, sit and evoke the feeling you have identified.

Bring it up and be it. It will release. When it does, evoke it again. Keep entering the feeling by evoking it until you can stay in it. Your relationship with the feeling will change.

#### When you can evoke the feeling at will, begin to work in your daily life.

Recognize the feeling when it arises during the day and **be it**. Remember the feeling or evoke it. Then engage your regular activities while you are the feeling. Look at the world while you live in the feeling. In this step, you see clearly that the way the feeling causes you to experience the world is purely projection.

#### Finally, whenever you can, look at what is experiencing being the feeling.

This step usually precipitates clarity and non-separation experiences. Work at this until you can be the feeling and look at what it is simultaneously.

#### When you can be the feeling and know its nature simultaneously, the feeling no longer has any power over you.

You are free from its projections and experience what arises just as it is. You no longer believe what the feeling says about the world, so the impulse to go to war, to fight, to grasp at security, or to protect status, dissipates. Because you see clearly, you are more likely to notice what is actually out of balance. And you understand the connections between imbalances and suffering in the world.

Buddhist practice is not an effort to confirm or validate a sense of what we are. It is about seeing and experiencing what is.

We let go of fixed positions as we understand that all experience is ineffable. We let go. We let go of trying to make the world or ourselves into something fixed in place, as we understand that all experience will arise and subside.

Instead of reacting to fear and terror with aversion, discrimination, or confusion, we live in awareness of what is, responding with awareness that is sensitive to imbalance and balance—what needs attention in the present moment