

Fear and how to Overcome Fear- A Buddhist Perspective

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Fear is an unpleasant emotion which arises because of craving and attachment. Fearlessness is the state of peace, tranquility and the highest bliss, which can be achieved by all humans. Naturally, all beings get fear. We all are called beings or *satta* because we are clinging to the five aggregates [form, feelings, perception, volitional formations and consciousness]. As long as we cling to the five aggregates, we have fear. Only Arahants are entirely freed from fear. They have achieved the state of fearlessness. That is why they are called non-beings or *asatta*. We cling not only to the five aggregates, but also to many other things within and around us. Therefore, we have fear of everything, animate and inanimate. Once again, let us not forget that clinging or attachment is the cause of fear, anxiety and worry.

Our Intention

If one were able to observe and read our mentality right now, one would be able to see that we all are like spiders in the mid of our own woven web. We have woven our own web of attachment and expectations and got trapped. That is why we are suffering from fear of getting lost. Fear of **this and that**. Especially, here in the West, mostly, parents are always have fear of their children, moving out after they turn 16, Job security mortgage, credits, various bill payments also contribute to constant distress. At the same time, children themselves have fear of their parents' insecurity, such as fear of aging, sickness and death. Then, at least for some limited extend, because of untrustworthiness, the husband has fear of his wife and wife has fear of her husband would leave anytime. Likewise, regarding many factors attribute to arise fear in individuals. Fear does not arise alone itself, but with the combination of some other factors, such as suspicion, presumption, jealousy, misleading information, vanity and hostility. For the benefit of many individuals, our intention here is to explain what really fear is and how to overcome it according to the teachings of the Buddha.

The greatest fear for worldings

As we mentioned earlier, in daily life, mostly people are fear of separation of their family members temporary or permanently. The Buddha said, "Separation is sorrow". Not only separation, thinking of their future or past based on the experience they have earned, most people build anxiety and worry. Mainly, because they do not think the fact that nothing is certain, permanent, nothing remains the same animate or inanimate, which is the nature of impermanence (*anicca*). They do not know the realistic nature or teachings of the Buddha. According to his teachings, whole life is uncertain, except death. It is true that we all get fear of death. Actually, for the worldlings, their greatest fear is death. That is why even the Buddha said, "All tremble at violence; all fear death. Putting oneself in the place of another, one should neither kill nor cause another to kill."

*(Sabbe tasanti dandassa- Sabbe bhāyanti maccuno
attānam upamam katvā-Na haneyya na ghātaye)¹*

Every dark cloud has a silver line. With the guidance of Lord Buddha's teaching, you will be able to find happiness in a fearful, dreadful situations.

With full of future expectations or uncertainty of their jobs, mortgage, school, college or university entrance or exams so on day and night people are suffering from boundless fear to achieve so called goals . Whatever fear arises should be understood that it comes to be because of a cause. That is to be observed. If you remove that cause, you can remove fear as well to a certain extend or forever. Human nature is to panic, suffer or depress over every single unachevable targets, targets should be achievable, goals should be realistic, expectations should be real, worth to achieve, understand the benefits you receive out of the bad situation you happen to face. For example, laid off - quality time with the family and friends, teach culture, language, meditation, dhamma to the kids, limit screen time to save their eyes, monitor how to teach how to cook, give the essential life skills to the kids, improve themselves, such as meditation, learn the dhamma, original discourses of the Buddha, and enjoy the free time they got visiting even a nearest park with the friends and family. to the parent, having quality time with the kids leave more memorable memories rather than having money. Kids grow up faster, so it is worthwhile to spend time with the kids when they are young. they feel it, enjoy it, appreciate it. When you hear the news "laid off" parents and kids get the message differently. while the kids celebrate it, but parents take it as it is the end of the world. Although you need money, if the given situation cannot be changed, you have to learn the how to turn the bad news or bad period to great. Positive mindset is important. Learning Buddha's teaching will guide you to see and accept the situation positively . [\(Insert the ideas we discussed here\).](#)²

Fear and Emotion

As an emotional arousal fear arises in the mind as a mental state. When there is fear, our mind is directly connected to our heart. Therefore, by that time, both our brain and heart are guided not by intelligence but by emotion. Emotion is always harmful. Emotions are based on greed, hatred and delusion. This is why one has to develop intelligence and wisdom instead by developing the intellectual aspect of mind and perceptual aspect of mind through mental development (*bhāvanā*). Emotion and fear are interdependently existing like a cycle. Where there is fear there is emotion and where there is emotion there is fear. Therefore, as long as fear exists emotions exist and vice-a-versa. However, when we are intelligent and wise enough to understand and control our emotions we can come to the state of peacefulness and calmness of mind.

Fear is caused by the belief of someone or something is dangerous or likely to cause pain or a threat. According to the teachings of the Buddha, all those who have not yet completely eradicated their defilements are under the influence of fear. That

means only the Enlightened ones are entirely be free from fear. With their enlightenment they come to the state of fearlessness (*abhaya* or *Akutobhaya*).

Fear directly springs from craving

As the Buddha very clearly said in the Dhammapada, fear arises because of craving (*tanhā*). He said, "From craving springs grief, from craving springs fear. For him who is wholly free from craving there is no grief, whence then fear? "

*(Tanhāya jāyati soko-Tanhāya jāyati bhayam
Tanhāya vip̐pamuttassa-Natthi soko kuto bhayam)*³

In the Dhammapada itself, the Buddha pointed out what happens when fear arises in the minds of uninstructed, worldly people- run of the mill persons. Since they have fear of many things they need to find safety. Therefore, they go to many a refuge. The Buddha explains,

" They go to many a refuge,
Those who have been struck by fear:
They go to the mountains and forests,
To parks and trees and shrines.

But none of these is a secure refuge:
None is the refuge supreme.
Not by relying on such a refuge
Can one be freed from all suffering.

But one who has gone for refuge
to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha,
Sees with perfect wisdom,
The four Noble Truths

Suffering, the arising of suffering,
The transcending of suffering,
And the Noble Eightfold Path
That leads to suffering's final end.

This is the refuge that is secure:
This is the refuge that is supreme.
By relying on such a refuge as this,
One is released from all suffering." ⁴

Personalization and depersonalization

In accordance with this explanaiton, when fear strikes one cannot understand and know things clearly. Therefore, one does not know what is to be done and what is

not to be done. As a consequence, they go to many a refuge without understanding the real refuge. Not only that, with their perverted perception, they grasp things as mine, me and myself and then whatever is impermanent as permanent, unsatisfactory as satisfactory and selfless as self. That is the danger in them. Therefore, they start to do many types of rites and rituals. This is because of their fear of getting lost of what they have grasped with delusion. As a result, they are entirely engaged in personalization, doubt and rites and rituals (*sakkāya ditthi, vicikiccā, silabbataparāmāsa*). Hence, for them depersonalization is impossible. Instead, due to their fear they believe that there is a permanent entity as soul or self to protect them from fear and think that this form is myself, feeling is myself, perception is myself, volitional formations are myself, and consciousness is myself. In such a way, they grasp five aggregates into four ways (5x4=20 ways) thinking, "This is my form, this is myself, my self is in my form or my form is in myself". Such thinking is called personalization or personality belief. With that they have doubt about themselves referring to the past, future and the present. For them, no way to come to the path of fearlessness at all. As the Buddha said one has to cut off the above three fetters first and follow the path to fearlessness based on the real refuge which is the Four Noble Truths.

Fear and the Three Modes of Conduct

The Buddha has talked about fear even before his enlightenment. According to the Discourse named "Fear and Dread" in the Majjhima Nikaya⁵ he clearly says that fear and dread arise because of impurity of bodily conduct, verbal conduct and mental conduct. He said, "I considered thus: Whenever recluses or brahmins unpurified in bodily conduct resort to remote jungle-thicket resting places in the forest, then owing to the defect of their unpurified bodily conduct these good recluses and brahmins evoke unwholesome fear and dread. But I do not resort to remote jungle-thicket resting places in the forest unpurified in bodily conduct. I am purified in bodily conduct. I resort to remote junglethicket resting places in the forest as one of the noble ones with bodily conduct purified. Seeing in myself this purity of bodily conduct, I found great solace in dwelling in the forest. ...in verbal conduct... in mental conduct..."

In this manner, it is clear that fear arises because of impurity or imperfections of mind such as covetousness, lust, ill will, hate, sloth and torpor, envy, avarice, restlessness and unpeacefulness of mind and doubt. In short, as long as we have attachment by any means, we have fear. Again, it is clear the word of the Buddha, 'Attachment arises because of craving and fear arises because of craving. Those who have no craving have no both attachment and fear'.

How to overcome fear?

1. Overcoming of fear is not that easy. First and foremost, it is very clear that in order to overcome fear one has to remove the cause of fear. That is the most practical method. Here, it is not inappropriate to mention that there is a wonderful

expression of the Buddha which explains what is to be done for the overcoming of fear. This is from the *Bahudhātuka sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya*. The Buddha says, "Bhikkhus, whatever fears arise, all arise because of the fool, not because of the wise man; whatever troubles arise, all arise because of the fool, not because of the wise man; whatever calamities arise, all arise because of the fool, not because of the wise man. Just as a fire that starts in a shed made of rushes or grass burns down even a house with a peaked roof, with walls plastered inside and outside, shut off, secured by bars, with shuttered windows; so too, bhikkhus, whatever fears arise ... all arise because of the fool, not because of the wise man. Thus the fool brings fear, the wise man brings no fear; the fool brings trouble, the wise man brings no trouble; the fool brings calamity, the wise man brings no calamity. No fear comes from the wise man, no trouble comes from the wise man, no calamity comes from the wise man. Therefore, bhikkhus, you should train thus: 'We shall be wise men, we shall be inquirers'." ⁶ That is what we all have to understand first. If we are wise enough we can understand many things and we do not want to be fools to get fear of anything material or immaterial. So be wise enough. That is the first method to overcome fear.

2. As long as you are under the influence of fear you cannot understand that you are dwelling either in the past or in the future. The problem is nothing but this. The insecurity is nothing but this. You are not dwelling in the present moment. You are with full of delusion, full of expectations. Either brooding over the past or delving in the future. If you come to the present moment you see what is going on right now. You see what you have grasped as your own is rapidly changing and vanishing. The Buddha said, "All what is dear and delight to you is in the nature of changing and vanishing. This is to be repeatedly collected upon by monks, nuns, lay women or lay men". Therefore, in order to dispel, remove and completely relinquish your fear the Buddha's instruction is to dispel the darkness of delusion, illusion, ignorance through which you are shrouded from head to toes and come to the present moment which is the precious moment. He says, "Let go of the past, let go of the future, let go of the present, and cross over to the farther shore of existence. With mind wholly liberated, you shall come no more to birth and death." ⁷ Once the Buddha said, "Those who see something to fear where there is nothing to fear, and see nothing to fear where there is something to fear upholding false views, they go to states of woe." ⁸

(*Abhaye bhayadassino
bhaye cābhayadassino
micchāditthi samādānā
sattā gacchanti duggatim*)

In short, all these instruction means dwell in the present moment, be aware of what is going on now. Then you can dispel the darkness of fear. That is the second method we introduce for the overcoming of the arisen fear.

3. Let us come to the third method. Apply the six factors to whatever object is in front of you whether animate or inanimate. What are the six factors: Giving full attention mentally repeat, "This is not mine, not I am (not me), not myself. This is impermanent, unsatisfactory and soulless." This is how one comes to reality. That is again to see things as they really are or what is really happening in the present moment.

4. The fourth method is this. For this purpose one has to understand the cause and effect or causal conditionality. One has to reason out things, rationalize things with a clear mind. This is the way to overcome fear. The Buddha, even before his enlightenment as an unenlightened Bodhisatta, practiced the same thing while he was at the palace and practicing as an ascetic in the woods. He says, "And while I dwelt there [in the woods], a wild animal would come up to me, or a peacock would knock off a branch or the wind would rustle the leaves. I thought: What now if this is the fear and dread coming?" I thought: Why do I dwell always expecting fear and dread? What if I subdue that fear and dread while keeping the same posture that I am in when it comes upon me? While I walked, the fear and dread came upon me; I neither stood nor sat nor lay down till I had subdued that fear and dread. While I stood, the fear and dread came upon me; I neither walked nor sat nor lay down till I had subdued that fear and dread. While I sat, the fear and dread came upon me; I neither walked nor stood nor lay down till I had subdued that fear and dread. While I lay down, the fear and dread came upon me; I neither walked nor stood nor sat down till I had subdued that fear and dread." That is how he dispelled the arisen fear with a clear mind, clear intention and a firm determination. When the people are with delusion and fear they are certainly deluded and perceive things differently, perhaps completely upside down. The Buddha says, "There are, brahmin, some recluses and brahmins who perceive day when it is night and night when it is day. I say that on their part this is an abiding in delusion. But I perceive night when it is night and day when it is day. Rightly speaking, were it to be said of anyone: A being not subject to delusion has appeared in the world for the welfare and happiness of many, out of compassion for the world, for the good, welfare, and happiness of gods and humans," it is of me indeed that rightly speaking this should be said."⁹

5. One day a certain brahmin ascetic named *Bawari* sent his sixteen disciples to the Buddha in order to see the Buddha and ask a particular question based on ignorance. As they went to the Buddha as instructed by their teacher they first asked questions mentally and then asked the question on ignorance. Thereupon, the Buddha gave the right answer. Being satisfied and gladdened, they then asked their personal questions as well. One disciple named Ajita asked the following questions first. He asked,

"Bhante, the world, by what it's wrapped?

and why it shines not forth?
 say too with what it's smeared?
 and **what's its greaatest fear?**" [The world here means person]

Then Buddha answered.

"The world is wraped by ignorance;
 It shines not forth due to doubt and negligencce;
 Its smeared by longing,
 And **suffering is its greatest fear.**"¹⁰

According to this expression it is clear that the greatest fear for humans is dukkha or unsatisfactoriness. People are always unsatisfactory with what they have. This itself is a cause for fear. Therefore, the remedy for this is developing satisfactoriness or contentment. The Buddha pointed out clearly that satisfaction or contentment is the greatest wealth (*santutthi paramam dhanam*).¹¹ Hence, this is the fifth method we introduce for the overcoming of fear.

6. Once the Buddha taught us that one should not follow wrong courses (*Agati*). Therefore, he taught us four types of wrong courses. We need to remember that one of them is fear. He said, "Bhikkhus, there are these four ways of taking a wrong course. What four? One takes a wrong course because of desire, because of hatred, because of delusion, or because of fear. These are the four ways of taking a wrong course." What really happens if one takes these four wrong courses, off courses?

" If through desire, hate, fear, or delusion
 One transgresses against the Dhamma,
 One's fame diminishes like the moon
 in the dark fortnight.

If one does not transgress the Dhamma
 through desire, hate, fear, or delusion,
 One's fame becomes full like the moon
 in the bright fortnight."¹²

So if one does not take wrong course of fear, that itself is a way to remove fear of taking off course (*agati*). When one takes these wrong courses one does evil deeds.

7. For our mental protection, the Buddha has exounded us many discourses as protective discourses (*Paritta*). Specifically, for the protection from fear and worry he delivered several discourses. Among these discourses, there is one particular called " The Discourse on Banner protection" (*Dhajagga sutta*) where the Buddha said, 'Monks, I shall relate a former incident. There arose a battle between the *Devas* (gods) and *Asuras*. Then *Sakka*, the Lord of the *devas*, addressed the *devas* of the *Tāvātimsa* heaven thus: "Happy ones, if the *devas* who have gone to the battle should experience fear or terror or suffer from hair standing on end, let them behold the crest of

my own banner. If you do so, any fear, terror or hair standing on end arising in you will pass away. If you fail to look up to the crest of my banner, look at the crest of the banner of *Pajāpati*, King of gods. If you do so, any fear, terror or hair standing on end arising in you will pass away. If you fail to look up to the crest of *Pajāpati*, King of the gods, look at the crest of the banner of *Varuna*, King of the gods. If you do so, any fear, terror or hair standing on end arising in you will pass away.” ‘Monks, any fear, terror or hair standing on end arising in them who look at the crest of the banner of *Sakka* ... The Lord of the gods, of *Pajāpati* ... of *Varuna* ... of *Isāna*, the King of the gods, any fear terror or hair standing on end, may pass away, or may not pass away. What is the reason for this?

Sakka, the Lord of gods, O monks, is not free from lust, not free from hate, not free from delusion, and is therefore liable to fear, terror, fright and flight. I also say unto you O monks — if any fear, terror or hair standing on end should arise in you when you have gone to the forest or to the foot of a tree, or to an empty house (lonely place), then think only of me thus: “Such Indeed is the Blessed One, *Arahant* (Consummate One), supremely enlightened, endowed with knowledge and virtue, welcome being, knower of worlds, the peerless trainer of persons, teacher of gods and men, the Buddha, the Blessed One.” Monks, if you think of me, any fear, terror, or standing of hair on end, that may arise in you, will pass away. If you fail to think of me, then think of the Dhamma (the Doctrine) thus: “Well expounded is the Dhamma by the Blessed One, a Dhamma to be realized by oneself and gives immediate results, a Dhamma which invites investigation and leads up to *Nibbāna*, a Dhamma to be understood by the wise each for himself.” Monks, if you think of the Dhamma, any fear, terror or hair standing on end, that may arise in you, will pass away. If you fail to think of the Dhamma, then think of the Sangha (the Order) thus: “Of good conduct is the Order of Disciples of the Blessed One, of upright conduct is the Order of Disciples of the Blessed One, of wise conduct is the Order of Disciples of the Blessed One, of dutiful conduct is the Order of Disciples of the Blessed One. This Order of Disciples of the Blessed One — namely those four pairs of persons, the eight kinds of individuals is worthy of offerings, is worthy of hospitality, is worthy of gifts, is worthy of reverential salutations, is an incomparable field of merit for the world.” Monks, if you think of the Sangha, any fear, terror or hair standing on end, that may arise in you, will pass away. What is the reason for this? The *Tathāgata*, O monks, who is *Arahant*, supremely enlightened, is free from lust, free from hate, is free from delusion, and is not liable to fear, terror, fright or flight.”¹³ This is another method to dispel your fear. Recollect the qualities of the Buddha, Dhamma and the Sangha. This works very well. All monastics dwelling in the woods do this for their protection from different spirits and creatures like snakes.

8. According to the teachings of the Buddha it is because of not knowing the fear of *samsāra* we are wondering in *samsāra* hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving. This *samsāric* fear is to be understood properly. Only then, we can find the real remedy for this malady. The Buddha says, “Monks, this *samsāra* is without discoverable beginning. A first point is not discerned of beings roaming and wandering on hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving.”¹⁴ If we know this *samsāric* fear we do not cling to things and strive to live as if we are not dying. Since we all have to face death, being fear of death, we should do more and more good

deeds in order to be reborn in good destinations. Should do more and more good deeds for the happy and peaceful *samsāric* journey as well. So knowing the malady of samsara itself is a way to dispel the fear of existence which brings us suffering.

9. In the Numerical Discourses, referring to fear or peril the Buddha said how the uninstructed worldling speak about when there are three type of perils where mother and son will be separated [Fear of separation]. As they say, they are the peril of a great conflagration, a great deluge and a time of perilous turbulence in the wilderness. However, the Buddha himself pointed out some other times of peril or fear. The Buddha says, " There are, monks, these three perils that separate mother and son. What three? The peril of old age, the peril of illness, and the peril of death. When the son is growing old, the mother cannot fulfill her wish: 'Let me grow old, but may my son not grow old!' And when the mother is growing old, the son cannot fulfill his wish: 'Let me grow old, but may my mother not grow old!' "When the son has fallen ill, the mother cannot fulfill her wish: 'Let me fall ill, but may my son not fall ill!' And when the mother has fallen ill, the son cannot fulfill his wish: 'Let me fall ill, but may my mother not fall ill!' "When the son is dying, the mother cannot fulfill her wish: 'Let me die, but may my son not die!' And when the mother is dying, the son cannot fulfill his wish: 'Let me die, but may my mother not die!' "These are the three perils that separate mother and son."¹⁵ So what is to be done? Nothing but be more and more intelligent and wise. Be aware of the nature of changing. Nothing unchanging. Everything is changing, everything is unsatisfactory and everything is without a core, substance or soul. With this understanding you can dispel, overcome your existing fear or fear to arise in future. That is the ninth method.

10. The Buddha delivered a special discourse on five types of fearful Animosities. Here, the Buddha pointed out clearly that as long as one has not subsided five types of fear one is not safe because one has tendencies to be born in animal realm, hungry ghost realm or any other woeful states like hells. That is the fear in *samsāra*. Nobody is escaped from this fear, danger if not has realized the Four Noble truths. Addressing the householder, *Anāthapindika*, very clearly and positively the Buddha said, " Householder, when five fearful animosities have subsided in a noble disciple, and he possesses the four factors of stream entry and he has clearly seen and thoroughly penetrated with wisdom the noble method, if he wishes he could by himself declare of himself: "I am one finished with hell, finished with the animal realm, finished with the domain of ghosts, finished with the plane of misery, the bad destinations, the nether world. I am a stream-enterer, no longer bound to the nether world, fixed in destiny, with enlightenment as my destination."¹⁶ That is how one enters the state of fearlessness. In order to complete his/her mission needs to continue and accomplish with three more stages, namely the once returner, non-returner and the *Arahantship*. The *arahant* is the real person who has completely cut off fear and attained the state of fearlessness (*Abhaya*). He/she has no fear of defilement like greed, hatred and delusion at all. The Buddha is the most excellent Fearless One in the world who brings fearlessness to the whole world. In this manner, let us understand the nature of fear and how to overcome fear to come to the state of fearlessness as the Buddha has taught us. That is the Buddhist

perspective that the Buddha has well expounded in his discourses.

By the power of the Buddha, Dhamma and the Sangha may all fear cease for you!

¹ [Dhammapada verse .129](#)

² Dhammapada verse .129

³ Dhammapada Verse. 216

⁴ Dhammapada Verses.188-192

⁵ MN. Sutta No. 4

⁶ MN. Sutta No. 115

⁷ Dhammapada Verse 348

⁸ Dhammapada verse 317

⁹ MN. Bhayabharava sutta. (Sutta.No.4)

¹⁰ Sutta Nipata 5.2. Ajita's Questions

¹¹ Dhammapada verse 204

¹² AN. 4. 18.(8)

¹³ The Book of Protection by Venerable Piyadassi Thero

¹⁴ SN. Anamatagga Samyutta

¹⁵ AN. III. 62. (2) Perils

¹⁶ SN. 12. 41.(1) Five Fearful Animosities.