AJAHN PASANNO • AJAHN AMARO

FEAR AND FEARLESSNESS

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WITH GRATITUDE

TO THE AMARAVATI

WINTER RETREAT

SUPPORT TEAM 2025

HOW TO LIVE WITHOUT FEAR AND WORRY

'If one draws close to uncertainty,
one draws close to the Buddha.'

AJAHN PASANNO

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I'd like to express my appreciation to the Council of Thai Bhikkhus in America who have organized this event and continue making Dhamma teachings available for the community of monasteries and lay people. With live streaming like this, it's not just local, it's not just in America, it's all around the world. People have the opportunity to plug in and gain benefit from the teachings of the Buddha and that's something that is very important. It's a wonderful gift.

The topic I'll be speaking on today is how to live without fear and worry. I thought it was quite nice that it was written on the poster with a question mark. Is it possible to live with without fear and worry? It's a question rather than a mandate. If one forces oneself to think that one *should* live without fear and worry, one is already setting oneself up for more fear and worry. Or there is a sense of putting a lot of pressure on oneself.

The Buddha is so skillful in getting us to reflect and investigate and understand so that we can get a different perspective on our experience. This helps us understand more clearly how to work with something quite ordinary – ordinary in the sense that fear and worry are quite ordinary.

We've passed through almost three months of this period of the Covid-19 virus and the accompanying sickness, illness, economic impact and social impact. If you haven't experienced any fear or worry,

I expect that you're not thinking very much, that you're shutting down somehow. If you think in terms of evolution, any human beings who didn't have any fear whatsoever probably didn't last very long. Those without fear managed to get themselves eaten by predators or they'd harm themselves in some way so that they didn't pass on their genes.

It's ordinary to have fear. But we can obsess over fear. We can get caught by fear and create suffering around it. In the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha is pointing to suffering. There is suffering and one really has to acknowledge that. Fear is a natural response. But one can't keep going over it all the time. That is the difference between fear and worry. To have some fear is quite ordinary. We think to ourselves, 'Okay, this is quite a difficult situation. This is detrimental to the health and well-being of ourselves, our families, our communities.' But the aspect of worry is another layer that we put on top of it. That is extra suffering. So we learn to recognize the naturalness of having fear. And we learn to recognize the mind going into the state of worry. 'What if...' we recognize the presence of that emotion or that thought-train. That is why we develop mindfulness. If one doesn't have the mindfulness or awareness to recognize and articulate one's own feelings and emotions and responses, then inevitably one gets caught up in negative or quite

destructive emotions. There will be a lot of extra suffering. That is not really necessary or helpful.

We are learning to have the mindfulness and discernment to be able to separate those things – the differences between fear and worry.

A few years ago, an American neuroscientist wrote a book titled *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers.* In a natural setting, zebras have to deal with attacks by predators and that's really worthy of fear. The zebras either escape or they get eaten. If they escape, it won't take very long before they're back grazing and eating and hanging out with their friends. Of course, humans do something quite different. We are gifted with more complex layers of intelligence and emotion. But because we can project and proliferate and think about things, we start worrying. And that worry puts us back into that same fight-or-flight response which is extremely detrimental to our physical and mental, emotional well-being. So we develop mindfulness to recognize when there is something actually threatening and when there is not. Being able to recognize that is really important. There is a big difference and the body responds in very different ways.

We cultivate mindfulness, reflection and investigation so that we can see more clearly. What is actually worthy of fear? What is obsessing and getting trapped in worry? Obsession and worry is going to lead to a lot more suffering.

That is an aspect of practice that the Buddha talked about 2500 years ago. These are very human reactions, very human responses. Even in the Buddha's time, people were quite adept at creating extra suffering for themselves, just as we are. So we learn how to develop that quality of awareness and discernment. It's one thing to be aware of something. But then we also develop reflective investigation. This is discernment or wisdom. In Buddhism this is called *paññā*. The Buddha's path is very much laid on this foundation of *sati* (mindfulness) and *paññā* (discernment, wisdom). We learn to be attentive and we learn how to apply the tools that the Buddha gave us.

It's important to remind ourselves that it's not strange to have an experience of suffering. It's not strange to have an experience of fear. But what do we add to that? What are we layering on top of it? Are we adding extra layers of difficulty for ourselves? We recognize that this is actually optional. We don't really have to be doing that.

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So how do we live with fear and worry? It's the cultivation of these tools of mindfulness and wisdom, the qualities of *sati-paññā*. When I first went to live in Thailand with Ajahn Chah I didn't really know any of the Thai language. Those were some of the first words that I actually learned in Thai. *Sati-paññā*. Ajahn Chah would use those words over and over again.

Uncertainty is a great source of fear and worry. If, like a zebra, we were attacked by a lion, it is pretty clear that is worthy of fear. But some uncertainties are pretty vague, like the uncertainty surrounding illness. It's not an immediate threat for most of us, but in our day-to-day experience it wears away at us. That is where worry, uncertainty and fear start working together. Ajahn Chah would talk about uncertainty a lot in his teachings about *anicca*. *Anicca* is usually translated as 'impermanent'. But Ajahn Chah would talk about uncertainty, 'Not sure, not a sure thing'. In Thai, this is '*mai nae*'. That sense of *anicca* being a quality of uncertainty is much more of an emotional response to change, an emotional response to the reality that everything is in flux. It is changing. Everything really is uncertain. I remember Ajahn Chah saying that if one draws close to uncertainty, one draws close to the Buddha. And that is a really beautiful encouragement.

Oftentimes, especially with fear or worry, we keep uncertainty a bit distant. We objectify it. We are experiencing uncertainty as threat. But the actual uncertainty is not really investigated clearly. So instead we cultivate the sense of drawing close to uncertainty. We allow it in. We recognize, 'This is uncertainty.'

This is the same way that we deal with the Four Noble Truths of the Buddha. It is being able to look at suffering. 'Oh, this is suffering. This

is the feeling of suffering. This is this feeling of dis-ease, discontent.' And uncertainty is certainly a trigger for *dukkha*. But being able to name it, to see it, to recognize it – this is really important. In the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha teaches us that this is what we have to do.

There is a responsibility we have in relationship to each of the Noble Truths. The Noble Truth of *Dukkha* is to be understood. It is to be recognized. We are to know it clearly, to take note of it clearly, to know it fully. In Thai '*kam nod ruu*' (กำหนดรู้). This is the appropriate response, the appropriate duty. That gives us the opportunity to see the cause more clearly. What is the underlying origin of this?

Especially with fear and worry, we want to push it away. Why wouldn't we? I mean, it's a normal response. One wants to push it away or one has a feeling of aversion toward it. There is the sense of negativity. 'It shouldn't be this way. I don't want it to be this way. I don't like this.' And of course, we're in the midst of a global pandemic. Of course we are worrying about it. But that circling around the worry, that perpetuates the cycle of suffering. So we cultivate the ability to come back to this place of awareness, of knowing.

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Breath is a tool to calm the fear. And this is where the cultivation of awareness of our breath is important. We are using something tangible to establish awareness. It's not enough to just say, 'Oh, I should be mindful, I should be more aware.' That's just another idea. Even if it's a good idea, it's just an idea. One has to have practical tools and be careful in cultivating those tools. The breath is always available. And so is paying attention. It is probably a universal experience that if one is feeling fear and worry there is a feeling of contraction. That contraction is not just emotional. It's a feeling that is very physical. You can feel the body contracting, closing in on itself, guarding itself, shutting down. So there is a simple exercise of paying attention to the breath, coming back to the breath, letting the breath relax the body, opening the chest so that your breath comes down into the abdomen, relaxing the shoulders, opening the chest, softening the belly and letting the breath inform the whole body.

It's like this in the Buddha's *Discourse on Mindfulness of Breathing*, the *Ānāpānasati Sutta* (MN 118):

> *sabbakāyapaṭisaṁvedī assasissāmī ti sikkhati*
> Experiencing, or sensitive to, the whole body I breathe in.
> *sabbakāyapaṭisaṁvedī passasissāmī ti sikkhati*
> Experiencing, or sensitive to, the whole body I breathe out.

And then...

passambhayaṁ kāyasaṅkhāraṁ assasissāmī ti sikkhati
Relaxing, settling, making tranquil the whole body experience,
I breathe in.
passambhayaṁ kāyasaṅkhāraṁ passasissāmī ti sikkhati
Relaxing, settling, tranquilizing the whole body formation,
I breathe out.

So we are making it very conscious. And by doing that, just by having that tangible base to establish awareness with, one has an opportunity to dissolve the tendency to clamp up and let fear and worry spin around on itself. That's what fear and worry does. It spins around in circles. It gets entangled in our experience and we suffer. So we come back to something as simple and basic as the breath. We always have the breath. We have to be breathing so we may as well make it mindful. We may as well become aware of it and use it as a tool for this cultivation of mindfulness, discernment and wisdom. We may as well use the breath for the cultivation of clarity.

Just an in-breath and an out-breath... not forcing the breath but just learning how to relax into the breath and relaxing the body, relaxing the mind.

This is a helpful tool, an immediate tool, one that is close by. We learn how to tap into that.

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Another aspect of how to live with fear and worry is just learning how to be kind to ourselves and others. That sense of fundamental kindness is a refuge. In our morning chanting, we recollect the Buddha as one who is with ocean-like compassion, the sense of broad, limitless compassion. That's something we can learn to turn our attention to, this sense of kindness and compassion, *mettā* and *karunā*. Ajahn Vajiro refers to the Brahma vihāras (*mettā*, *karunā*, *muditā*, *upekkhā* – loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, equanimity) as 'mature emotions'. I think it's really skillful to think in those terms.

We can turn our attention to emotions that are really mature and beneficial, beneficial for oneself and beneficial for others. In a difficult situation, one hopes to have some sort of mature response. Similarly, in our own internal world, there are a variety of reactions and responses, sometimes a whole chorus of different voices, and one hopes there is a mature voice saying, 'Just be kind to yourself. Be kind to others.' That's not a silly response. It's actually a mature response. When His Holiness the Dalai Lama was asked about his basic philosophy, what is the basis of his religion, he answered that it is kindness. And of course it's hard to

find somebody more knowledgeable and accomplished in terms of the vast scriptures of Buddhism.

The sense of kindness is important to reflect on. The *Karaniya Mettā Sutta* comes to mind. This *sutta* is one that virtually all Buddhist will know. It's the Buddha's *Discourse on Loving-kindness* and it's one that we all chant.

> *...Wishing in gladness and in safety, may all beings be at ease...*
> Or *... May all beings be happy...*

That is the wish of loving-kindness. It's good to recollect where that teaching came from. There was a time when a group of monks were practising in a forest and they were experiencing a lot of fear. There were spirits threatening them. The spirits didn't want them there and were making all sorts of noises and smells and whatnot, and creating a very disruptive presence for those monks. The monks were originally going to spend the Rains Retreat there but they just got too agitated. They found it too difficult. So they went to the Buddha and told him what happened. And the Buddha taught them the discourse on loving-kindness, the *Karaniya Mettā Sutta*, to establish the mind in loving-kindness. Then he sent them back there. He basically said to them that they should go back and deal with it, work with it. Now that they were established in loving-kindness, they had the tools to go back and live in the place where they were experiencing fear.

There are skillful tools for consciously bringing loving-kindness to mind. There are teachings and methods of cultivating loving-kindness. First, one cultivates loving-kindness towards oneself and that is so important. When one directs loving-kindness towards oneself there is a softening. There is an opening. There is a settling. It is important as a direct means of taking the edge off that push behind the mind's fear, that obsessive quality of, 'I've got to be afraid of this. I've got to worry about that.' We can just wish 'In gladness and in safety, may all beings be at ease. So that's me too. It's not just other people.' One wants to extend that to oneself, settle oneself in that quality of loving-kindness. One can cultivate that in conjunction with the breath. As one breathes in, as one breathes out... 'May I be at ease.' Breath tends to really untie that knot of contraction that happens in the heart, and in the body, when we're experiencing fear and worry. When we're in situations that are stressful – and these are stressful times – we don't try to sugar-coat it or wish it away. So how do we look directly at this and not be intimidated? How do we look directly at this and not be overwhelmed? The Buddha has given us these tools. We've got the foundation. And we don't have to 'believe'. We can use the tools and see if they work.

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Before I became a Buddhist, I was raised in a religious background where there was so much emphasis on belief. But what I find so wonderful as a Buddhist is that we are given tools. I find this an ongoing source of inspiration in training and practice. The Buddha does not say you have to believe in anything. You just have to do it. And there is the willingness to go ahead and do it.

As I mentioned earlier, Ajahn Chah said, 'If you draw close to uncertainty, you'll start to draw close to the Buddha'. So there is the sense of drawing close to the truth of *anicca*. This is really unsure. It is the same with *dukkha*. *Anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā* – these are universal characteristics that allow us to draw close to a refuge. It's like seeing things in their true nature is what opens the door for establishing ourselves in the refuges of the Buddha and the Dhamma and Sangha. Those are so essential for living without fear and worry. Actually, it's not a matter of living without fear and worry but learning how to live *with* that. And again, not to get too idealistic about it. By 'too idealistic' I mean thoughts like, 'I shouldn't have feelings of fear and worry. I've got to get rid of fear and worry so I can be a good Buddhist.' No. Pay attention to the experience. The very first teaching that the Buddha gave was, 'This is *dukkha*.' This is the first of the Four Noble Truths. Yes, there is *dukkha*, there is suffering, there is stress and discontent. But we can understand it. We can let go

of the causes of it. We can experience the cessation of it. And we can cultivate the path leading to its cessation. That is enormously inspiring and worthy of confidence. That is living with fear and worry.

In this time everything really is uncertain. There is a pandemic. We are scattered around the globe in lockdown. Who knows what's going to happen? What we can do now is be present. We can be aware. We can be kind to ourselves. We can be kind to each other. And we can learn how to look after each other. It is a fundamental generosity and kindness. These are very human qualities that are at the root of the Buddha's teachings.

QUESTION AND ANSWER

QUESTION

I have been practising mindfulness of breathing and loving-kindness but due to mental health issues, it actually caused anxiety. Do you have any recommendations on different types of meditation?

AJAHN PASANNO

There are other types of meditation, like walking meditation. But it's good to pay attention to relaxing and settling. I've noticed that sometimes, in both English language and Thai, there is the assumption that meditation is concentration, focusing the mind on one point. Certainly in the English language, when you say the word 'concentrate' it can feel stressful. 'I've got to concentrate my mind!' It makes people uncomfortable. Oftentimes, we try too hard, we force the mind too much. It is important for everybody, and particularly anyone who has underlying mental health problems, that the emphasis is more on relaxing, on body awareness, doing walking meditation, not tightening up, not forcing too much. Just learning how to relax. We learn how to relax and just enjoy one breath at a time.

Relaxation and enjoyment is something we overlook because we tend to be very goal oriented. 'I've got to get my meditation together. I've got to make my mind concentrated. I have to make my mind peaceful.' We get so busy with that. It's really stressful. So we're just learning how to relax and enjoy something as simple as a breath. Or if we're doing walking meditation, we enjoy something as simple as one step at a time. Or doing chores, gardening, anything that's physical – we can relax into it. That's really supportive, really helpful.

QUESTION

Can we actually use stress or worry as an object of contemplation without avoiding it?

AJAHN PASANNO

Yes. That's actually one of the things I'm encouraging. It's like you're lifting up the stress. You're not trying to push it away. You don't have some idealized sense that stress is not something you should be experiencing. We are acknowledging and recognizing. 'Oh! This is stress.' And then we are turning that recognition into a motivation for the cultivation of compassion.

The fundamental basis of compassion is the wish to alleviate suffering. When we bring up compassion as an object, it is for the alleviation of

suffering. 'May I be free from suffering. May I be free from difficulty. May I be free from stress. And may I be free from *dukkha*.' That is the basis of the intention. And similarly for others. 'May all beings be free from stress.' We begin by recognizing the stress that we feel. The *dukkha* that we feel is something that everybody feels. It's not just me having a difficult time during this global pandemic. It's a *global* pandemic! Everybody's going through various difficulties and problems and stress. So we use that recognition as a catalyst to transform.

In terms of Buddhist practice, we want to be able to take something really ordinary like stress or suffering and be mindful of it. We understand how universal it is. And we transform it into a mature emotion like loving-kindness and compassion. So one is not pushing it way. One is not trying to annihilate or get rid of the stress or *dukkha*. One is lifting it up and seeing it and then using it as a bridge so that it can take one to kindness and compassion.

Of course, one has to be very mindful and alert to the habits and tendencies of mind. It is the habit or tendency of the mind to think, 'Why is this happening to me?! I don't like this! It shouldn't be this way!' And that brings the mind down. It complicates the suffering. We simply use the suffering as a bridge or as a catalyst for transforming something difficult into something that's really mature and quite beautiful.

The human mind or heart really has the capacity to rise above its habits and tendencies. This is possible. So it is a great opportunity.

QUESTION

In regard to social unrest and uncertainty, there is the feeling of helplessness. We see so much going on in the world and we feel like, 'What can we do?' How do we deal with emotions of helplessness? There is so much negativity we face in the world and it's not just the pandemic.

AJAHN PASANNO

It's important to try to recognize how we feel helpless. So much of it comes from the tendency to assume, because we personalize it. We personalize the experience. Okay, there's a global pandemic. We personalize this when we think to ourselves, 'I should do something about this and I can't do anything about it so I'm helpless.' But the assumption that I have some sort of ultimate responsibility is a bit self-centred. That is a big assumption. Now that doesn't mean we can't do anything at all, but it's important to recognize what we can do. And of course, what we can do is be honest. We can be truthful. We can be caring. We can not harm, not cheat – it's back to the Five Precepts. We can be committed to those Five Precepts and that gives us a genuine

sense of agency. We establish ourselves in skillful action and we can really feel good about that.

In the *Karaniya Mettā Sutta*, the Buddha's words on loving-kindness, he doesn't start by saying you should feel loving-kindness for everybody and get over your negativity.

This is what should be done
By one who is skilled in goodness
And who knows the path of peace
Let them be able and upright
Straightforward and gentle in speech

This is the foundation of loving-kindness – skillful action in how we relate to each other as human beings. We start to embody that intention of kindness quite ordinarily. We're being responsible. We are being established in the aspect of non-harming. We are not taking advantage of anybody. We are building trust. Of course we don't begin with all the whole world out there. It begins with the people who are closest to us. We learn how to build on that foundation.

There's a very lovely discourse where the Buddha speaks of the five bases of great generosity, *mahā-dāna*. These are like really great gifts that one can make great offering generosity. And these five gifts are

actually the Five Precepts. By keeping the precepts we are giving the gifts of safety, kindness and compassion. And we are establishing trust within this human condition. That is a very powerful foundation. The ideal and the projection says, 'I should be saving the world somehow! I should be able to do something!' But you know, the world has always been out of control. I mean, it's never been under anybody's control. But what we can do is through our actions of body and speech, through the training of our hearts, we can start to take responsibility for ourselves. And we start to build relationships of trust and caring and kindness. That is really important for being able to move past or move through feelings of helplessness.

OPEN YOUR HEART TO FEAR

AJAHN AMARO

7TH AUGUST 2021

Good afternoon, good evening or good morning, wherever you happen to be on the planet. I am happy to be engaging with the Angel Group once again, and happy to offer some Dhamma reflections on the theme 'Open your heart to fear'.

During this time, everybody is aware that Covid-19 is still raging all over the world. All of our lives are heavily impacted by this illness and the continual evolution of its variants. There are different waves of the illness in different countries. It easily brings a sense of anxiety, concern and fear about what this is going to turn into. 'Is it ever going to come to an end?!' And it's not just the Covid-19 pandemic. We also have so much shared news about the impact of climate change, extremes of weather here in Europe, Asia, Australia and the Americas. There seems to be a great deal to be afraid of. So the theme 'Open your heart to fear' is a very skilful one. It is also an area of life that I have had to bring a lot of attention to over the years.

We tend to take fear to be a problem. Many of us feel that it would be nice to not be afraid. We think that fear is a difficulty, fear is a burden. 'I am so anxious. I'm so worried all of the time. I really wish I was never afraid.' We take fear to be some kind of enemy or an ailment, a stress upon the heart. So one of the things that I'd like to do today

is look directly at those assumptions that we have around fear, anxiety and worry.

Fear is a lot to do with our concept of the future. The mind creates an image of the future and fear is about what's going to happen next. 'What is this moment going to turn into?' The way things are at this moment is one thing. But fear seems to be a lot about: 'Where is this going? What is going to happen next week, next month, next year? How is it going to be for my children, my grandchildren, my great grandchildren, the next seven generations?'

We are faced with the unknown because of our busy thinking minds. Then we react by filling that up with fear and anxieties about what might happen, possible negative consequences of things in this moment. Or we fill it up with hope. We try to fill up that unknown with hope and belief. 'It's going to be this way. I really want to be this way. This is what's going to happen. Yes! We're going to make it happen this way!' Or it can just be that we fill our mind with a set of opinions and judgments that we use to try and force the unknown out of our consciousness by convincing ourselves that we really know everything, that we understand everything, that we've got it all figured out. Or, alternatively, we simply distract ourselves. We have such a feeling of insecurity, instability and worry that we take alcohol or drugs. We

spend our time watching YouTube or shopping or travelling, filling our mind with the many and various kinds of distraction that are available to us all day and all night. These are the habitual worldly ways of dealing with the experience of the unknown.

I feel it is good to explore why fear is felt as a burdensome presence – it seems to come from that perception of the unknown. 'I don't know what's going to happen. I don't know how it's going to be.' And what I find particularly interesting is the dynamic between fear and the feelings of self-view (*sakkāya-diṭṭhi*) and conceit (*māna*). When the unknown is met from the position of ego or self-view, the result is fear, anxiety. We say we are threatened and challenged by what might happen next, what's out there in the dark. We don't know, so the experience is that of fear.

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I was quite happy to receive this suggestion for the theme today because it's very familiar territory to me. I can come across as a very confident, easy-going person. I tended to be seen this way even as a child, a teenager and a young adult. But inside I was always quivering with anxiety and insecurity. And it was a constant habit. It was so steadily present in my life that I had already been a monk for seven or eight years before I realized I was worried apparently all the time. It was like the force of gravity. Who wakes up in the morning and thinks, 'Oh,

gravity' or 'Look, oxygen I can breathe – interesting!' We don't notice those things because they are ever-present. Fear and anxiety were like that for me. My basic relationship to life was, 'If it exists, worry about it.' That was my default setting. My experience of people, work, situations, being by myself, being in familiar places, unfamiliar places, whatever... I would worry about it. Even if it was nothing to do with me, I would still worry about it. It was a very strong reflex, a conditioned attitude within my mind. And as I said, I was already a monk for seven or eight years before I even realized, 'My goodness, I'm worried all the time. I create the sense of anxiety and personal responsibility over and over again in every situation.'

I was helped in working with this situation by the guidance, advice and example of Ajahn Sumedho here at Amaravati back in the late 1980s, when he was talking a lot about meditation on emotion.

One of the things to consider about fear, and why we would want to open our hearts to it, is that we tend to think of fear as a burden, as a problem. But our ancestors who were not afraid are the ones that got eaten by the predators, the ones who fell off the cliff and didn't have any offspring, didn't have any children. The ones who were afraid were the ones who stayed alive long enough to have children and grandchildren. Fear is a protective device of nature. It's not an accident. It's not an

illness. It is there for a very good reason. It is a protector. Often, we relate to fear in a very negative way or we think, 'Oh, wouldn't it be nice to have no fear.' If we look at the natural world, we see that animals are afraid, particularly herbivores or small animals. They have big eyes and big ears so they can hear when something is coming along to eat them, and so that they can see in the dark. The herbivores have the eyes on the sides of their heads so they can see as wide a range as possible. Predators have eyes on the front because they're attacking their food. The ones who are fragile, who are herbivores or who are smaller, need fear otherwise they get eaten, they don't get away.

I therefore feel it's important to recognize firstly that fear is a natural attribute and that it serves a very good purpose.

Fear is very like physical pain. You might think, 'I wish I never felt any pain' or 'wouldn't it be great if I never felt pain' but just like fear, pain does its job by being unpleasant. When we've injured ourselves and we've got a cut, the fact that it is sore means we need to protect that finger, the leg needs to be kept clean. It needs to be looked after. If you don't, it'll get infected. It will make things worse. So, pain works by being unpleasant. We pay attention to the wound, the injury or the illness. We look after it. Again, our ancestors who didn't feel much pain didn't look after their wounds, their illnesses, and they are the ones

who died young and didn't have offspring. It's the ones who responded skilfully to the pain that had us as their grandchildren, great-great-great grandchildren and so on. I hope people can follow the reasoning behind that. Even though we might think, 'Oh, it would be so nice not to feel pain' or 'Well, you don't know the kind of pain I have. It's *really* nasty'. But in its essence, pain is there as a protector. It does its job by being disagreeable. That's how it works. And the same is true for fear.

It's like traffic. Many of you live in cities – in Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Bangkok, Delhi, Manchester, London. In big cities, we need traffic lights. You might think, 'Wouldn't it be nice if I could just go everywhere I want to go and never have to stop.' We might not like to stop for a red light. But we know that if we want to get around in the city and share our lives with other people, there are going to be some red lights along the way. It would be crazy to think, 'I resent the city. Kuala Lumpur is bad because it keeps making me stop. London is really awful. I have to keep stopping for other people. This is a terrible place to live.' That's ridiculous. Life in the city is supported by the traffic being stopped from time to time.

Pain, fear and anxiety work in a similar way. They protect the well-being of the whole system. So I feel it is very important to understand that as a principle.

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In Pali, you have what are called 'the unwholesome roots': *rāga*, *lobha*, *dosa*, *moha*.

Dosa is aversion. *Rāga* is passion. *Lobha* is greed. *Moha* is delusion. They are the roots of unwholesomeness. Fear is not one of those roots. Fear is a bias, an *agati*. I don't want to get too technical, but 'fear' is simply a 'bias'. It is a way that the mind or perceptions are distorted but, importantly, it's not a defilement like passion, greed, aversion or delusion. So the Buddha recognized *bhaya* (fear) as something you can be deluded by, you can be taken up with that, but it's not a defilement in the same way as the others – it is not a corruption of the heart. It is a painful and unpleasant mental state but it is not a defilement. It is not a *kilesa* in and of itself. I feel it is helpful to understand that even in the Pali there is that distinction of fear not being unwholesome but simply unpleasant. Again, that's how it works. It does its job by being unpleasant.

In terms of opening our heart to fear, it's a lot to do with changing the attitude towards it. Rather than seeing fear as a neurotic problem or something that we wish we didn't experience, opening the heart to fear is a way we change how the mind relates to fear. You see it from a nature-centred perspective, a Dhamma-centred perspective rather than a self-centred perspective. From self-view, from the ego, there is the feeling that we want to feel no pain, we want to never be afraid, we want

to be happy all the time. That is the worldly view of ego, *sakkāya-ditthi*. That is how the ignorant worldly mind thinks. But that is not in tune with reality. Opening the heart to fear is a way of changing the attitude. We recognize that fear is an unpleasant quality but we don't have to be burdened by it. We don't have to be stressed by it or get rid of it in order to be happy and free.

There are different ways of approaching it which I'll get onto now. One good example is the way the Buddha spoke about his own practice before he was enlightened. The fourth *sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikaya* (*The Middle Length Discourses*) is called the *Bhaya-bherava Sutta* (*The Discourse on Fear and Dread*). The Buddha describes, before his enlightenment, meditating in the forest. If he heard a rustle in the bushes or a noise in the branches of the trees he would think it was a snake or a tiger ready to attack. He said that, as he was sitting, fear and dread arose in him. He would then stay in that sitting posture until the fear had passed. 'If I was walking and that fear arose within me, I would keep walking until the fear had passed.' Whatever posture he was in, he would stay in that posture until the feeling of fear had passed. Describing his own practice as an unenlightened meditator, he was skilfully turning his attention towards that fear. 'This is the feeling of fear. Stay with it.' In a way, he was taking the attention off the imagined thing that is rustling in the

bushes and turning attention on the fear itself. And what happens? You hear a sound that you think is a tiger, then you realize it is a squirrel. You think it's a snake and you realize it's a tiny little lizard. In Britain we don't have any tigers and very few poisonous snakes but we can get worried about other people very easily. The two-legged dangers are far more common in this country than the four-legged or the no legged or the many-legged.

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The Buddha also laid out a sequence of five contemplations called *The Five Subjects for Frequent Recollection*. He encouraged lay and monastic disciples all to bring these to mind on a daily basis, in order to bring about this change of heart towards what is frightening.

I am of the nature to age. I have not gone beyond aging.
I am of the nature to sicken. I have not gone beyond sickness.
I am of the nature to die. I have not gone beyond dying.
All that is mine, beloved and pleasing, will become otherwise,
will become separated from me.

And then there is the fifth recollection about *kamma* and *vipāka*, action and its result.

I am the owner of my kamma,
Heir to my kamma,
Born of my kamma,
Related to my kamma,
Abide supported by my kamma.
Whatever kamma I shall do for good or for ill
Of that I will be the heir.

He's saying: 'Don't react out of self-view and habit to the presence of sickness, aging, death, loss and the laws of cause and effect. Notice the fear and aversion in the way the mind pushes those away.' The deluded mind thinks, 'I'm never going to die. I shouldn't get old and I don't want to be sick. I never want to lose anything that I love. And I want to do whatever I like and only experience pleasant consequences.' That's what we would like. That is our worldly pattern of thinking from the habits of self-view. We would like to never get old, never get sick, never die, never lose anything that we like and only have pleasant consequences as a result of our actions. It's totally stupid but that's how most of us think. That is how we function in our life when the mind is conditioned by ignorance.

The Buddha's encouragement is to turn towards that which is unpleasant and to literally open the heart to these innate presences, these natural

qualities. We have all aged since we started to take in these words by sound or reading. Right? Time marches on. The wrinkles are increasing. The hair is greyer. The aging process proceeds unrelentingly, inexorably. That's the way it is. Is there ever going to be a day when they close the hospitals because nobody's getting sick anymore? I don't think so. Will they close the medical colleges because nobody needs doctors anymore? I don't think so. That's not the way nature works. We are of the nature of age. We are of the nature to sicken. Everybody that is born is going to die one day. Even the body of the Lord Buddha... he was born as a human being in Lumbini, born from a mother and a father, and his body eventually stopped breathing, at Kusinara. His body passed away and the elements separated after the *parinibbāna*.

If bodies are born, then bodies will die. That is the way nature works. The Buddha is encouraging this change of attitude, this opening of the heart. So it is going against the habits and reflexes, such as, 'I don't want to think about this.' 'Not me.' 'This isn't fair.' 'Can't we put this off? Can't we negotiate?' All of these are ways that we fear aging and sickness and death. The Buddha is encouraging us to consciously turn towards these qualities that are off-putting or challenging and then saying with respect to these, 'Here it is. This is the way nature works.' And when there is an opening of the heart and letting go of self-view, then the

heart is able to see things in terms of Dhamma. It's seeing with the eye of Dhamma (*Dhamma-cakkhu*). With that seeing of things with the eye of Dhamma, then it's recognized all that is born dies. Something begins and time passes, it ages. That's the way it is. Nothing has gone wrong. It's not unfair. This is how nature is.

Seeing with the eye of Dhamma, there is a quality of rightness. Even though we might be sad that our child has died, or that our business has collapsed, or that we don't recognize that wrinkly old face in the mirror anymore, there is no sense of wrongness, there is no *dukkha* or feeling that it shouldn't be this way, we don't feel that nature is out of order, that this is not how it should be for *me* in *my* life.

Accordingly, I strongly encourage this conscious cultivation. Look at ageing, sickness, death and loss. Look at how we relate to causality. We want to do whatever we like and only get the pleasant results and never get unpleasant results. Again, if we look at that wish with the eye of Dhamma, we quickly recognize it is ridiculous. 'Carrying out the same action and expecting different results' is a definition of delusion in Western psychology and in Buddha-Dhamma as well. As Ajahn Chah would say, 'Everyone likes to create the causes of *dukkha* but nobody likes to experience *dukkha*; everyone likes happiness but no one likes to create the causes of happiness.'

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One practice that I feel is very helpful is to see how these experiences in life are all aspects of nature. We forget that. Our thinking mind takes hold of a particular illness or an injury of ourselves or the people around us, or the aging process, or looking after our loved ones, our parents and grandparents and so on, and then the thinking gets churning. That ruminating, that churning is what we call *papañca* or conceptual proliferation. It takes hold of these natural processes of aging and sickness and loss and creates a lot of imagination and proliferation around them. And that is painful. That is destructive and confusing.

So we bring our attention to the nature of an experience, to the disease or the pain or just the feeling of fear itself and we reflect on it: 'This is the feeling of fear.' In this way we are consciously training, using meditation, to let go of those proliferations, to let go of the complicating habit of *papañca*, to simply know the feeling as it is in this moment, to know the experience as it is in this moment.

I was greatly helped in this contemplation by the teachings of Luang Por Sumedho. As I said, after about seven or eight years of being a monk I realized I had a strong habit of being worried, being anxious about everything. Sometimes I'd be using an old newspaper to start a fire and I would see a report about a football match – how the goalkeeper let in a very easy goal – and I would worry about the goalkeeper and

how heartbroken he must be. And then I would realize that I wasn't even interested in football. And the article was from three years ago. And I'm feeling anxious about that goalkeeper having let an easy goal in. Suddenly it's *my* problem. I'm in a tangled knot about it. 'This is ridiculous! Why do I take things so personally and hang on to them and make it *my* problem all the time?'

So, in that era of the late 80s, Ajahn Sumedho was teaching a lot about mindfulness of emotion. And this is an exercise you can do. I began to notice I was being worried all the time. He would advise that, if you know you have a particular emotional habit, then you can deliberately bring it into the meditation and make it an object to study. You actually invite it in.

The first stage is to challenge your assessment of the issue. Ajahn Sumedho would point out, 'You tell yourself you are angry all the time, or lustful or anxious all the time but you are not really – these things arise and pass away. They might do that frequently but – in actuality – they are as impermanent as everything else. We need to change our view to acknowledge that genuinely empty, impermanent nature.'

Then, when you sit in meditation, bring the mind to the quality of calmness, steadiness. And then deliberately think of something that causes anxiety. I would bring to mind something I was worried about

that was going to happen next week, or what somebody thought about me, or something I did last week that didn't work out very well, or I thought didn't work out very well. You deliberately plant something that's going to trigger the emotions, in this example a feeling of anxiety and worry. Once you remember that event or conversation and you launch the feeling of worry, the trick is to take your attention off the memory, off the idea, and bring attention into the body. 'Where in the body do I feel this anxiety?' And for me it was always a knot of tension in my belly, in the solar plexus or down in the stomach. And so I would bring attention to that and the instruction would be, 'Don't let the mind go back to the story. Stay with the *vedanā*, the feeling. Here is what worry feels like. It's like this.'

No commentary.
Not trying to get rid of it.
Not trying to do anything with it.
Just knowing that feeling.
'Here is the experience of worry. It feels like this.' Full stop.

We keep our attention just on that feeling for five or ten minutes, and then consciously let the body relax, using the out-breath as a way of letting go and relaxing. Sometimes it would take five seconds to launch the worry and forty-five minutes to let go of it. Sometimes it's that way.

But it's important to stay with it until the body is fully relaxed. Stay with it until that tension in the gut or the stomach – or wherever it might be – has dissolved. In that process, you've gone from the zero-point of the body at ease and relaxed, then you've introduced that trigger of the memory, or the idea that launched the emotion, you've then felt the emotion in the body as a sensation and you have fully accepted it. 'Here it is.' Not that it shouldn't be there, or you want it to be over, or you are trying to make excuses for it. Just, 'Here it is. This is what it feels like.'

There is a quality of acceptance, of knowing of it. Then it's fully known. It's fully accepted. And then it comes to its end. You've watched the whole thing coming into being and take full form, then come around and come to its conclusion. It goes all the way from birth to death. Like an inhalation and exhalation, you watch the whole cycle.

You are changing the view from '*my* anxiety problem', or *'my* problem with what that person thinks about me', or 'what am *I* going to do next week' – we are changing the view to, 'Anxiety is a feeling that is born, it comes into being, takes shape and it dies, it dissolves. That's what it does. It's like any other natural formation. Like a cloud. Like a breath. Like a day and a night. That's all. It is just a pattern in nature.' I found that that change of view was incredibly helpful. You're learning to take your mind off what seems to be the cause of the worry and you're

looking at the nature of fear and worry as a mental event, as a mental and physical formation, just like the shape of a cloud, or wave on the sea, or the sound of a car passing by on the street... it's just that, just that much. In this way we are learning how not to take our life personally. I was using 'worry' in this instance as an example for this talk's theme, but you can do this with greed or aversion, or a complaining mind. You can know all kinds of different emotional states: grief, jealousy, any kind of emotional state can be looked at in this way.

In addition, rather than only using this in formal meditation, as you develop this skill you can use it as you go about your daily life. When you're talking with someone, or in the middle of a business meeting, or driving your car, or sitting on a train – when that feeling of worry or fear arises, or aversion or whatever the emotion might be, then even in the middle of a conversation you can bring your attention to where you feel that in the body. I felt fear as a tightness in my gut. Someone else might feel it as a stiffness across the shoulders or tightening of the throat, or everything getting hot or itchy. Whatever way it takes shape, bring attention to that feeling. Even as you're talking, even as you're walking, even as you're sitting on a crowded train, 'Here it is' – the mind can be brought to that very feeling. 'This is the feeling of anxiety or fear.' 'This is the feeling of desire,' '... of resenting,'

'This is a feeling of jealousy.'

It's like this.
It's known.
It's appreciated.

This is opening the heart to fear. This is what it is. It's just a shape in nature. Now, that doesn't mean that you're foolish and you don't follow wise caution. It doesn't mean that you stride fearlessly off the pavement and walk into the middle of traffic. No. Rather, it's more that, where conceptual proliferation has hijacked the natural emotional state – a state of sadness of losing somebody to illness or death, or sadness that a relationship broke up, or resentment of someone who's cheated you in the workplace – you are simply not adding onto it with your thinking. You are simply observing, 'This is resentment.' 'This is fear.' 'This is excitement. It's like this.'

Using that process on an everyday basis, when I began to get the hang of it during that period in the late 80s, then I would use wise reflection and investigation through the thinking mind. When I noticed those feelings of anxiety, I'd say, 'Who is afraid and what is there to be afraid of?' That was my go-to phrase. 'Who is afraid? What is there to be afraid of?' You are actively using the capacity to reflect, to look and to use the thinking mind to challenge those very habits of thinking. The Buddha described

this as 'Using a thorn to dig out another thorn' that you've trodden on. I found that was an extremely apt metaphor as well as a helpful practice.

'Who *is* afraid? What *is* there to be afraid of?'

In that wise reflection, there is a recognition: 'This is just the mind creating an idea of the future and a sense of a *me* whose problem this is.' This wise reflection also develops the insight into not-self and timelessness. The Dhamma is *akāliko*, timeless. The Dhamma is *sandiṭṭhiko*, apparent here and now. This is the *paccuppanna dhamma* – the 'here and now reality'. In that reflection: 'Who is afraid and what is there to be afraid of?' the heart opens to the Dhamma of the present moment and realizes that the future is unknown. No need to fill it up with anything. 'In this moment there is *this* feeling. It's like this. It's exactly this way.'

When I am asked, 'How are you, Tan Ajahn?' I usually say, 'I'm exactly this way.' To me that's the best answer.

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Another teaching that was helpful, during those years, was that Ajahn Sumedho would encourage us to 'think the unthinkable'. If you're worried about something, then spell it out as a worst-case scenario. 'We're all going to die painfully. I'm going to lose everything.' You take

your worst fear, the thing that you're most afraid of and, again, in exactly the same way, you deliberately bring it in and think it consciously, 'I'm going to lose everything. We're all going to die.'

It's like when you hear a rustling in the dark in the forest beyond the range of vision. 'What's that noise!' Then we bring the fear front-and-centre. We say, 'I am going to get eaten by a mountain lion, any moment now.' We bring that to consciousness.

'I'm going to lose everything!' Well yes, we knew that anyway.

'Yes. Right. That's the way things work. *All that is mine, beloved and pleasing will become otherwise, will become separated from me.* Right. That has not changed. That's always the way it's been.'

Mysteriously, by thinking the unthinkable and naming it, it then loses its power. It's rather like if you see a film of a conjurer, a magician, and watch how they do the trick in slow motion. You realize, 'Oh, that's how the trick was done.' It's not a trick anymore. Or if you're sitting out the forest in the pitch dark and you hear such noises – when I lived in California there were mountain lions and bears in the forest, there were also squirrels and chipmunks scurrying around – in the dark you don't know if you are hearing dangerous creatures or tiny little things. In broad daylight, you realize it's nothing to be afraid of. In

the dark you don't know. That darkness is the darkness of ignorance. When we bring these things into full consciousness, then they lose their power to delude.

You find over time that you become far more aware of what the mind is creating in terms of an imagined future. You also realize that when things happen and take shape, you're able to adapt, you're able to work with what's going on. So, with that fear of unwanted outcomes, you realize that if you're being mindful and you watch how life works, even when a difficult thing happens, you can work with it. You'll find a way to deal with it. Even if you felt out of your depth, 'That was pretty terrible, but we learned some good lessons.' Over and over and over again we realize that, the things we were afraid of, when they arrived, they were not so bad.

And at the other end of the scale, the things that we really wanted and then when we got them, they weren't so fantastic. They didn't really make us happy forever like that new house, or the new job, or the new car, or the new monastery, or the new relationship, the new iPhone. It's like, 'Well yes... and so what?'

This kind of reflection, opening the heart to fear, and understanding emotion and expectation, radically changes the way that the mind relates to success and failure. It sees those two imposters for what they

are. What looks like a success isn't so special and wonderful. What looks like a failure isn't so terrible. In the mind, the attitude is profoundly changed in relationship to success and failure and how the mind relates to the idea of the future outcomes.

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One of the most significant aspects of this is that, by developing that open-hearted quality and letting go of this sort of conceptual proliferation around fear of the unknown, it radically changes that experience of the unknown. Yes, we steer in the direction that we want things to go, in a direction that looks like it might be successful and a benefit to ourselves and others, but if it doesn't turn out that way, what do we learn from it? If it turns out that way and everything is good and successful and we get praised for it, rather than getting drunk on that we recognize, 'OK, well, that was sweet – what did we learn from that?' And when it has all gone pear-shaped... 'What did we learn from *that*?'

When the unknown is received on the basis of Dhamma, in the heart (*citta*) free of self-view, the experience is one of wonderment, of delight. It is not threatening. When the heart is free of self-view, free of conceit, then the unknown is simply mysterious, it has the quality of wonder and it's not threatening at all. The heart doesn't feel any kind of stress or burden from the presence of the unknown. And that's just as well

because, of course, the universe is essentially inexplicable. The unknown is not an enemy or a burden or a problem but rather a great richness. There is a delight in the heart, a freedom of the heart in response to the unknown rather than an experience of threat.

Alternatively, when the unknown is met from self-view, the result is fear and dread.

QUESTION AND ANSWER

QUESTION

How do you keep your mind positive? I used to be a physician and I've been receiving 'name lists' for chanting. These are lists of patients who are in a serious condition. The lists include indications like their oxygen saturations. These are names who I am meant to chant for, and I know that the probability of them surviving is not that high. I would like to chant with a positive mind but my mind can't start chanting in a positive state anymore. When I see those lists of names, I just feel that those people are not going to make it. So I just want to ask for some tips. How do you stay positive with whatever is coming?

AJAHN AMARO

Thank you for this question. Ajahn Sumedho gave a very helpful piece of advice many years ago. He said that when you try to think positively, when you're faced with a negative mind state like fear, or feeling powerless or irritated, and you try to climb over your negative mind state to get to a positive mind state on the other side, or to try to replace the negative mind state, that 'climbing over' can easily be a form of aversion. 'I don't want to feel negative. I don't want to be worried. I don't

want to be powerless. I want to be positive. I want to be bright. I want to be a good force in the world.' This climbing over, or pushing away of that negative mind state actually makes it stronger. He would always encourage us to have loving-kindness and a quality of acceptance *for those very negative mind states.*

So if you're going into a hospital or somebody asks you to chant for them, you might find that you have a feeling of, 'Oh, I don't think I can really help. I'm not strong enough for this.' We notice that very feeling of 'I don't think I can help, I'm not strong enough'. We have loving-kindness for that feeling. We accept that very feeling. 'Here it is. Here is the feeling of not being strong enough. It's like this.' You're not saying that you like it or you are glad that it's there. But here it is.

In many of Luang Por Sumedho's teachings, he talks about having loving-kindness for your feelings of anger, or jealousy, or your laziness, or your complaining mind. You're not saying that this is wholesome or beautiful, but you're accepting that feeling of weakness or fear or suchlike, as part of nature. And what you find happens is that, in a mysterious way, when you fully accept that weakness, or that unskilful or painful quality, then there is a bit more space around it. There is a genuine quality of being able to relate to the situation in a more complete, helpful way, in a more harmonious way.

So I feel it's a mistake to try and replace a negative mind state with a positive one without that quality of wise reflection first.

Of course loving-kindness is better than hatred in terms of what is wholesome and unwholesome, however, if you meet that hatred, or feeling of weakness, or inability or powerlessness with aversion, if you are pushing that away with *vibhava taṇhā*, thinking, 'It shouldn't be here. I don't want this. This is not good.' You make that negative state stronger through that *vibhava taṇhā*. Instead, we accept it and say, 'Here is the feeling of weakness. It feels like this.' That very acceptance helps to create more space in the situation. Through that greater spaciousness, the heart is more able to fully and completely relate to what is going on.

I'm not sure if that's helpful but that's the way that I relate to these things. I've seen that working very beneficially many times over the years.

QUESTION

When I meditate, I usually feel the movement of my stomach. When there are some thoughts coming in or there is pain, I am usually aware of it and then I try to come back to the movement of my stomach. But listening to your talk, are you suggesting that when I have those thoughts or pain, I should look at it more, instead of just being

aware, and then trying to come back to my stomach? I just would like to check on that.

AJAHN AMARO

Good question. The kind of meditation I was describing is a particular exercise to get to know a certain emotional state. For me it was about worry and fear. For somebody else it might be about aversion. Someone else might be very greedy or jealous and they want to look at greed or jealousy. So the process is that of picking up a particular emotional state to explore it. It's like you're at university and signing up for a jealousy course, or the greed course, or the fear course. That form of meditation is the study program. That's the study unit this term. That's what we're looking at. So if you notice a particular aspect of your life that has a powerful impact and you want to get to know it better, particularly around emotional states, this is a very helpful way of doing it.

Emotions feel very personal. '*I*'m angry.' '*I*'m jealous.' '*I*'m afraid.' '*I*'m greedy.' '*I*'m obsessed.' '*I*'m in love.' These emotions can feel very personal and very solid and real. This practice is the way of getting to know emotions as part of the natural order. We learn not to take them personally but to understand them as psychological traits.

There are many different kinds of meditation. This is one particular type of skill that we can develop. Personally, I found this very helpful

as a way of getting to understand how fear operates. I'm not making any claims, but after working with the mind in this way for two or three years, I found I didn't worry about things in the same way – in fact, I *couldn't* worry about things in the same way. It radically changed a lifelong habit. I did this as my main meditation exercise for two or three years. Every day, I would say, 'Today, whenever my mind moves towards something and gets caught up in a state of worry, then I'll bring my attention to my stomach, to the feeling of tightness. I will notice that, feel that and relax.' That was my daily program for couple of years. By the end it had brought a profound and clear perspective onto that emotional state.

It was an area I wanted to understand, I wanted to know. I could see it was a strong limitation in the mind. Through that study, exploration and training, the mind could have a different relationship to that emotion.

Sometimes we don't realize what a big range of tools there are in the Buddha's toolkit. There are many things we can use it for.

QUESTION

Greetings from Germany. My daughter died two years ago and there was a lot of fear coming up. In regard to the practice, do you listen to your body and then use the emotions that are coming up? Or do you bring up an emotion to work on at the point of practice?

AJAHN AMARO

Both. When I realized what a strong habit anxiety was in my mind, I thought, 'Wow. This is intense.' I could see that the anxiety had coloured my perception of the world since early childhood. I wanted to understand this so I made it a particular focus. Then, after I had started taking that on as an exercise, I found that, after a couple of years, I had got a good perspective on that. At that point I quite consciously broadened the focus. If I was feeling excited or lazy or sleepy or jealous, then I would bring attention to that mind-state. 'This is what jealousy feels like.' 'This is what dullness feels like.' 'This is what indignation feels like.' The focus of attention would randomly shift with whatever came up on its own.

I don't know you but, say for example, if your daughter passed away a couple of years ago then I would expect that waves of grief and memories of her would come up at unexpected times – when you're in the supermarket or you're sitting at home or walking through the park – suddenly the feelings hit you. We don't know where those feelings come from but it's best to bring attention to those feelings as they arise. We may not know what triggered them at that particular moment, but 'Here it is and it feels *this* way' is the best way of receiving those.

It's important that you're not trying to neutralize feelings and emotions. There can be a subtle *vibhava taṇhā*, the attitude of, 'I'll accept you as

long as you go away. I'm accepting you on the basis that you shut up and get out of my life.' That aversion empowers those things. It strengthens them. The acceptance needs to be a genuine open-heartedness, 'Here it is. It's that old flavour again.' Whether it is grief or excitement or planning or regret about our own actions. Whatever. 'Here it is and in this moment it feels like *this*.'

Nowadays, I work far more randomly, that is to say with whatever comes up each particular moment, but back in the late 80s I was in my 'Let's look at anxiety' period. I talk about it quite often because it was a very directed effort. I was amazed at how radically it changed everything. I first noticed it and realized, 'My goodness, anxiety is my relationship to everything. How have I never seen this before?' And then, working with it and bringing attention to that steadily, every day, every day, every day, over two or three years, then the landscape radically changed.

It's like learning a language. After three years of being in Germany, you can chat in German. You start off in a small ways and then it becomes part of the landscape. That former habit has changed in a radical way.

So that's how I relate to it. It becomes a pattern of approach to the whole field of experience, not just around emotions but around opinions, memories and imagination, the entire field of the mental realm.

QUESTION

I have been practising taking *pañca-sīla* (the Five Precepts) and doing *ānāpānasati*. How can progress be increased by doing other methods? Calmness is there, but what further improvement could there be?

AJAHN AMARO

We could spend weeks discussing this! There are so many different aspects to the development of well-being. The Buddha said, just on the subject of the four foundations of mindfulness, that he could start talking, pausing only to answer the calls of nature and for sleep, and he could talk continuously until you had to carry him around on a stretcher and he would not run out of things to say just on the four foundations of mindfulness. There is a lot that could be said in terms of how to develop spirituality.

Along with *sīla* and calmness meditation, one other aspect is the development of wise reflection using what is called *yoniso manasikāra* or *dhamma-vicaya*. This is the investigative aspect of mind. It isn't merely creating mental chatter or an inner commentary, but rather it means consciously using the faculty of how the mind recognizes patterns, how it fits things together so that the mind considers, 'What's going on here? Where did this come from? This happened last year, now it's happened

again, how am I handling this now?' It is exploring the way the mind works. 'Why do I get irritated? I'm calling this good and this bad, where do "good" and "bad" come from? How do I hold that feeling of badness or wrongness?' These are just some random examples.

It's the practice of picking up the pattern of experience of the present moment and exploring it, seeing how things fit together. *Yoniso manasikāra* is one of the bases of stream-entry. So along with *sīla* and *bhāvanā*, our concentration practice, wise reflection is a very direct cause for the development of wisdom.

Another beneficial aspect of Dhamma practice, and one which is also a factor supportive of Stream-entry is drawing close to good people. You can bring this about in person or through some sort of remote communication like this online talk. In this way we are joining together with others in a skilful fashion, we are also taking time to listen to wholesome, helpful Dhamma teachings and, thirdly, developing wise reflection. These are all factors supportive of Stream-entry, ways of cultivating the Path.

The fourth of the factors supportive of Stream-entry is 'practising Dhamma in accordance with Dhamma'. Many people find this a little bit mysterious. How would you practice Dhamma *not* in accordance with Dhamma? Well, if your Dhamma practice is based on thoughts such as,

'I'm going to be the first Arahant in my hometown' or 'She's much wiser than I am... I wish I was like her' or 'I need to get *jhāna*! I haven't got *jhāna,* I want it!'... As long as the mind is under the influence of self-view – '*I* need to try harder; *I* need to get more concentrated; *I* want to be a Stream-enterer' – all of that 'I-making' and 'mine-making' leads to 'practising Dhamma *not* in accordance with Dhamma'.

When we make effort to train the mind to concentrate, to develop wisdom, to practice *sīla*, if we think in terms of 'I', the mind is building a burden of self-view on top of that. 'Practising Dhamma in accordance with Dhamma' is learning how to make effort – to keep the *sīla*, to train the mind, to develop wisdom – free of self-view so that the guiding force of Dhamma practice is mindfulness and wisdom, *sati-paññā,* rather than 'me trying to get something or get somewhere'.

As long as Dhamma practice is driven by self-view, that is all *bhava taṇhā* and *vibhava taṇhā*, the desire to become, the desire to get rid of. And that is a direct cause of suffering. So it might be a little hard to understand, but that is one of the most important aspects of development of genuine well-being, unshakeable well-being.

QUESTION

Do you have any advice for someone who I think is a hypochondriac? It's not me personally but someone close to me. Some of the things that you

mentioned in your session, I feel like he did try to practise some of those already. But you know sometimes he would get a headache and just go deep into the fear and actually go to the hospital to get it checked out because he thinks he is getting brain cancer. Do you have any advice on how to deal with this fear better?

AJAHN AMARO

There are members of sangha that I've lived with who I would put in the same kind of category. Rather than trying to *fix* them in some way, my effort would always be to just stay as relaxed as possible in relationship to them – to not be feeding their delusions, or what I would perceive as their delusions, but also not saying, 'You're a hypochondriac'. In my experience with people who do have that tendency, if you express that to them, they usually get very defensive and upset, and it can damage the friendship. It's more important to sustain the friendship as much as possible, to indicate, 'I'm here for you. I care about you,' but within yourself, you are not going along with their anxiety.

On a physical level, if you are in the same place with them and they are tense and uptight and breathless, you can turn your attention inwards and make sure that you're not being swept up by their tension. You are relaxing your own body. You are at ease in your own breath, in your own being. So that if they are with you, you're actually an embodiment

of calmness for them. Rather than saying, 'You need to calm down,' which doesn't help, you are instead embodying that calm quality in the way that you speak, the way that you stand, the way that you walk and in your genuine attitude.

I find that has a balancing effect.

Sometimes people have gone off to the doctor and then you politely and ask them in a friendly way, 'So, how did that go?' 'They said there was nothing but I don't think they were right.' Now, we don't want to say, 'I told you so,' but rather, simply keep that message of your own being as relaxed and open, to quietly show, 'I care about you, I'm paying attention but I'm not caught up in the same mind state that you are.'

QUESTION

That person is a family member, so perhaps I could teach them some Dhamma practices to relax them? Or would it be better to use those practices on myself?

AJAHN AMARO

Of course, it depends on the person. People are very different. But my experience is, whenever I get that feeling that someone has got hypochondriacal tendencies, it's very rare that someone will admit

that they've got these tendencies and that they're making too much of something. Very rarely does anyone say that. They're generally defensive. I'm not a psychologist but it does seem to be a very common aspect of that mind-state. They want to be believed. They want you to take it seriously. And they're upset when people don't support them in that. So I think if you approach it from a slightly different angle, it can be helpful. So you consider, 'How do I stay relaxed? How do I find the quality of calm?' Meditation on body awareness is particularly helpful, using the sweeping of the attention through the body, and relaxing.

The body is a very helpful thing. Often, anxiety is fed through tension in the body. I didn't mention that in the Dhamma talk, but I could do a whole piece on that at some time. If the body is in a state of tension, no matter how much you try to empty out the mind of anxious thoughts, the tension in the body is restarting the fire, if you understand what I mean. If my stomach is soft, it's challenging to keep a good worry going. If the body is relaxed and you use the 'body sweeping' practice, then it helps to take the fuel away from that anxiety-creating habit. In relaxing the body – particularly if there is a lot of focus on the out-breath, that is Mother Nature's sigh of relief, as we call it – it can be a wonderful balancing agent.

FEAR AND FEARLESSNESS

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