



## What is the Root of Fear?

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What is our understanding of fear? Fear is defined as an **unpleasant emotion** caused by the **belief** that someone or something is **dangerous, likely to cause pain, or a threat**. Fear is suffering.

Note the following words in the definition: unpleasant emotion, belief, dangerous, likely to cause pain or a threat.

What does the dharma (the teachings) and neuroscience tell us about these words?

### **Unpleasant emotion**

We know that the mind communicates to us via bodily sensations (feelings) and thoughts. So, the unpleasant emotion of fear is coming from the mind.

### **Belief**

A belief is an acceptance that a statement is true or that something exists. We know we all have beliefs of what we feel to be true and that our beliefs are stored in our memory, a part of the mind. The beliefs are unique to each of us and may or not be similar to others.

### **Dangerous, likely to cause pain, or a threat**

We know that the sole purpose of the mind is to protect us. Therefore, when the mind perceives danger, pain, or a threat, it communicates to us its concern in order to promote **action**.

### **Action**

In the immediate sense, the choices of the mind's recommended action are fight or flight. This action is often automatic, even before you are aware and it occurs before fear arises. For example, if someone is approaching and threatening you with a knife, running or fighting is initiated before fear is fully felt by you. However, in this day and age, fear often arises from thoughts where the actions of fight or flight do not apply. For example, you suddenly feel pain and the thought arises that you might have cancer or you are in a relationship and the fear arises that the other might leave you. Fight or flight does not come into play and you are left with fear.

### **What is the root of fear?**

Matt Flickstein, my principal teacher, made me aware of the writings of Andrew Holecek, a Buddhist teacher in the Tibetan tradition and his perspective on fear. Andrew notes that the root of fear is ignorance: "Fear is the minion of ignorance- where you find ignorance you will find fear."

So, when fear arises, we can look to see that the cause is our ignorance (lack of understanding) because we have forgotten the basic tenets of the dharma.

The tenets include:

- Who you are is not the mind; you have a relationship with the mind.
- The mind's sole purpose is to protect you and it acts accordingly when aware of danger, pain or threats.
- The mind has difficulty dealing with change and uncertainty because it wants certainty.
- The mind has to be reminded that there is no certainty or permanence.

We are in a state of delusion (ignorance) if we don't remember these tenets.

### **The causes of suffering**

The dharma tells us that the three poisons that cause suffering are greed, hatred and delusion.

I have been asked by students, "I can recognize greed and hatred but how can I recognize delusion if I am deluded?" Delusion is ignorance and Andrew notes: "...ignorance itself is so subtle. It's virtually invisible, another massive blind spot, something we are asleep to." The way to recognize ignorance is through fear.

Knowing this, I would rephrase the three poisons as greed, hatred, and fear.

It is easier to recognize greed and hatred as they manifested by as Andrew notes: "...passion, aggression, jealousy, or pride, for example but I've never been able to say "I'm having an ignorance attack." Instead, we have a fear attack.

This is an irony, because if I see the world as solid, lasting, and independent (dualistically), I'm under attack. It means I'm under attack right now, I just don't see it. This blindness is particularly damaging because every other visible klesha (hindrance, poison), and therefore, all our suffering, arises from this one, the stealth bomber of ignorance.

So you can use fear, which is much more visible, to work with your ignorance. When you feel fear, you're getting down to it. You're approaching some level of ignorance, and therefore, the opportunity to transcend it. If you're serious about waking up in this life, and don't know where to go or what to do, go to the places that scare you.

In summary, fear, the primordial emotion of samsara, is the active expression of ignorance. Ignorance is usually too subtle to see, but fear is something we can all relate to. This ignorance is basically unfamiliarity, not knowing who we really are. By becoming familiar with (the very definition of meditation) who we are, we transform ignorance into wisdom, darkness into light, and replace fear with fearlessness."

One of the teachings, Adhimutta & the Bandits<sup>1</sup> expresses this clearly:

Thag 16:1

*For one who sees, as it actually is,*

*the pure arising of phenomena,  
the pure seriality of fabrications,  
there's no fear.*

Seeing as it actually is is mindfulness.

The pure arising of phenomena are the communications from the mind.

When we understand and see this, there is no fear.

Try this and see!

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<sup>1</sup> [Thag 16:1 Adhimutta & the Bandits \(dhammatalks.org\)](http://dhammatalks.org)