

FEAR

ESSENTIAL WISDOM
FOR GETTING THROUGH THE STORM

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PEACE IS EVERY STEP

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INTRODUCTION

Fearlessness

Most of us experience a life full of wonderful moments and difficult moments. But for many of us, even when we are most joyful, there is fear behind our joy. We fear that this moment will end, that we won't get what we need, that we will lose what we love, or that we will not be safe. Often, our biggest fear is the knowledge that one day our bodies will cease functioning. So even when we are surrounded by all the conditions for happiness, our joy is not complete.

We think that, to be happier, we should push away or ignore our fear. We don't feel at ease when we think of the things that scare us, so we deny our fear away. "Oh, no, I don't want to think about that." We try to ignore our fear, but it is still there.

The only way to ease our fear and be truly happy is to acknowledge our fear and look deeply at its source. Instead of trying to escape from our fear, we can invite it up to our awareness and look at it clearly and deeply.

We are afraid of things outside of ourselves that we cannot control. We worry about becoming ill, aging, and losing the things we treasure most. We try to hold tight to the things we care about—our positions, our property, our

loved ones. But holding tightly doesn't ease our fear. Eventually, one day, we will have to let go of all of them. We cannot take them with us.

We may think that if we ignore our fears, they'll go away. But if we bury worries and anxieties in our consciousness, they continue to affect us and bring us more sorrow. We are very afraid of being powerless. But we have the power to look deeply at our fears, and then fear cannot control us. We can transform our fear. The practice of living fully in the present moment—what we call *mindfulness*—can give us the courage to face our fears and no longer be pushed and pulled around by them. To be mindful means to look deeply, to touch our true nature of interbeing and recognize that nothing is ever lost.

One day during the Vietnam War, I was sitting in a vacant airfield in the highlands of Vietnam. I was waiting for a plane to go North to study a flooding situation and help bring relief to the flood victims. The situation was urgent, so I had to go in a military plane that was usually used to transport such things as blankets and clothing. I was sitting alone in the airfield waiting for the next plane when an American officer came up to me. He was also waiting for his plane. It was during the war, and there were only the two of us at the airfield. I looked at him and saw that he was young. Immediately, I had a lot of compassion for him. Why does he have to come here to kill or be killed? So out of compassion I said, "You must be very afraid of the Viet Cong." The Viet Cong were Vietnamese communist guerrillas. Unfortunately, I wasn't very skillful, and what I said watered the seed of fear in him. He immediately touched his gun and asked me, "Are you a Viet Cong?"

Before coming to Vietnam, U.S. Army officers had learned that everyone in Vietnam could be a Viet Cong, and fear inhabited every American soldier. Every child, every monk, could be a guerrilla agent. The soldiers had been educated this way, and they saw enemies everywhere. I'd tried to express my sympathy to the soldier, but as soon as he'd heard the word *Viet Cong* he'd been overwhelmed by his fear and went for his gun.

I knew I had to be very calm. I practiced breathing in and breathing out very deeply and then said, “No, I am waiting for my plane to go to Danang to study the flooding and see how I can help.” I had a lot of sympathy for him, and this came through in my voice. As we talked, I was able to communicate that I believed the war had created a lot of victims, not only Vietnamese but also Americans. The soldier calmed down as well, and we were able to talk. I was safe, because I had enough lucidity and calm. If I had acted out of fear, he would have shot me out of his fear. So don’t think that dangers come only from outside. They come from inside. If we don’t acknowledge and look deeply at our own fears, we can draw dangers and accidents to us.

We all experience fear, but if we can look deeply into our fear, we will be able to free ourselves from its grip and touch joy. Fear keeps us focused on the past or worried about the future. If we can acknowledge our fear, we can realize that right now we are okay. Right now, today, we are still alive, and our bodies are working marvelously. Our eyes can still see the beautiful sky. Our ears can still hear the voices of our loved ones.

The first part of looking at our fear is just inviting it into our awareness without judgment. We just acknowledge gently that it is there. This brings a lot of relief already. Then, once our fear has calmed down, we can embrace it tenderly and look deeply into its roots, its sources. Understanding the origins of our anxieties and fears will help us let go of them. Is our fear coming from something that is happening right now, or is it an old fear, a fear from when we were small, that we’ve kept inside? When we practice inviting all our fears up, we become aware that we are still alive, that we still have many things to treasure and enjoy. If we are not busy pushing down and managing our fear, we can enjoy the sunshine, the fog, the air, and the water. If you can look deeply into your fear and have a clear vision of it, then you really can live a life that is worthwhile.

Our greatest fear is that when we die we will become nothing. To really be free of fear, we must look deeply into the ultimate dimension to see our true nature of no-birth and no-death. We need to free ourselves from these ideas that we are just our bodies, which die. When we understand that we are

more than our physical bodies, that we didn't come from nothingness and will not disappear into nothingness, we are liberated from fear.

The Buddha was a human being, and he also knew fear. But because he spent each day practicing mindfulness and looking closely at his fear, when confronted with the unknown, he was able to face it calmly and peacefully. There is a story about a time the Buddha was out walking and Angulimala, a notorious serial killer, came upon him. Angulimala shouted for the Buddha to stop, but the Buddha kept walking slowly and calmly. Angulimala caught up with him and demanded to know why he hadn't stopped. The Buddha replied, "Angulimala, I stopped a long time ago. It is you who have not stopped." He went on to explain, "I stopped committing acts that cause suffering to other living beings. All living beings want to live. All fear death. We must nurture a heart of compassion and protect the lives of all beings." Startled, Angulimala asked to know more. By the end of the conversation, Angulimala vowed never again to commit violent acts and decided to become a monk.

How could the Buddha remain so calm and relaxed when faced with a murderer? This is an extreme example, but each of us faces our fears in one way or another every day. A daily practice of mindfulness can be of enormous help. Beginning with our breath, beginning with awareness, we are able to meet whatever comes our way.

Fearlessness is not only possible, it is the ultimate joy. When you touch nonfear, you are free. If I am ever in an airplane and the pilot announces that the plane is about to crash, I will practice mindful breathing. If you receive bad news, I hope you will do the same. But don't wait for the critical moment to arrive before you start practicing to transform your fear and live mindfully. Nobody can give you fearlessness. Even if the Buddha were sitting right here next to you, he couldn't give it to you. You have to practice and realize it yourself. If you make a habit of mindfulness practice, when difficulties arise, you will already know what to do.

A Time Before

Many of us don't remember this, but a long time ago, we lived inside our mothers' wombs. We were tiny, living human beings. There were two hearts inside your mother's body: her own heart and your heart. During this time your mother did everything for you; she breathed for you, ate for you, drank for you. You were linked to her through your umbilical cord. Oxygen and food came to you through the umbilical cord, and you were safe and content inside of your mother. You were never too hot or too cold. You were very comfortable. You rested on a soft cushion made of water. In China and Vietnam we call the womb the *palace of the child*. You spent about nine months in the palace.

The nine months you spent in the womb were some of the most pleasant times of your life. Then the day of your birth arrived. Everything felt different around you, and you were thrust into a new environment. You felt cold and hunger for the first time. Sounds were too loud; lights were too bright. For the first time, you felt afraid. This is original fear.

Inside the palace of the child you didn't need to use your own lungs. But at the moment of your birth, someone cut the umbilical cord and you were no longer physically joined with your mother. Your mother could no longer breathe for you. You had to learn how to breathe on your own for the first

time. If you couldn't breathe on your own, you would die. Birth was an extremely precarious time. You were pushed out of the palace, and you encountered suffering. You tried to inhale, but it was difficult. There was some liquid in your lungs and to breathe in you had to first push out that liquid. We were born, and with that birth, our fear was born along with the desire to survive. This is original desire.

As infants, each one of us knew that to survive, we had to get someone to take care of us. Even after our umbilical cord was cut, we still had to rely entirely on adults to survive. When you depend on someone or something else to survive, it means that a link, a kind of invisible umbilical cord, is still there between you.

When we grow up, our original fear and original desire are still there. Although we are no longer babies, we still fear that we cannot survive, that no one will take care of us. Every desire we will have in our lives has its root in this original, fundamental desire to survive. As babies, we all find ways to ensure our survival. We may have felt very powerless. We had legs but couldn't walk. We had hands but couldn't grasp anything. We had to figure out how to get someone else to protect us, take care of us, and ensure our survival.

Everyone is afraid sometimes. We fear loneliness, being abandoned, growing old, dying, and being sick, among many other things. Sometimes, we may feel fear without knowing exactly why. If we practice looking deeply, we see that this fear is the result of that original fear from the time we were newborns, helpless and unable to do anything for ourselves. Even though we have grown into adults, that original fear and original desire are both still alive. Our desire to have a partner is, in part, a continuation of our desire for someone to take care of us.

As adults, we're often afraid to remember or be in touch with that original fear and desire, because the helpless child in us is still alive. We haven't had a chance to talk to him or her. We haven't taken the time to care for the wounded child, the helpless child within.

For most of us, our original fear continues in some form. Sometimes we might feel scared of being alone. We may feel that “alone I can’t make it; I have to have somebody.” This is a continuation of our original fear. If we look deeply, however, we will find that we have the capacity to calm our fear and find our own happiness.

We need to look closely at our relationships to see whether they are based primarily on mutual need or on mutual happiness. We have a tendency to think that our partner has the power to make us feel good and that we’re not okay unless we have that other person there. We think, “I need this person to take care of me, or I will not survive.”

If your relationship is based on fear rather than on mutual understanding and happiness, it doesn’t have a solid foundation. You may feel you require that person for your own happiness. And yet at some point you may find the presence of the other person to be a nuisance and want to get rid of him. Then you know for sure that your feelings of peace and security did not really come from that person.

Similarly, if you like to spend a lot of your time at a café, it may not be because that particular café is so interesting. It may be because you’re afraid of being alone; you feel that you always have to be with other people. When you turn on the television, it may not be because there’s a fascinating program you want to see; it’s because you’re afraid of being alone with yourself.

If you’re afraid of what other people might think of you, it comes from that same place. You’re afraid that if others think negatively about you, they won’t accept you and you’ll be left all alone, in danger. So if you need others to always think well of you, that is a continuation of that same original fear. If you regularly go shopping to buy yourself new clothes, it’s because of that same desire; you want to be accepted by others. You’re afraid of rejection. You’re afraid you’ll be abandoned and left alone, with no one to take care of you.

We have to look deeply to identify the original, primal fear and desire that are behind so many of our behaviors. Every one of the fears and desires that

you have today is a continuation of original fear and desire.

One day I was walking, and I felt something like an umbilical cord linking me to the sun in the sky. I saw very clearly that if the sun was not there, I would die right away. Then I saw an umbilical cord linking me to the river. I knew that if the river wasn't there, I would also die, because there would be no water for me to drink. And I saw an umbilical cord linking me to the forest. The trees in the forest were creating oxygen for me to breathe. Without the forest, I would die. And I saw an umbilical cord linking me to the farmer who grows the vegetables, wheat, and rice that I cook and eat.

When you practice meditation, you begin to see things that other people do not see. Although you don't see all these umbilical cords, they are there, linking you to your mother, your father, the farmer, the sun, the river, the forest, and so on. Meditation can include visualization. If you were to draw a picture of yourself with these many umbilical cords, you would discover that there are not only five or ten, but maybe hundreds or thousands of them, and you are linked to them all.

In Plum Village, where I live in southwest France, we like to use *gathas*, short practice poems that we recite silently or out loud throughout the day, to help us live deeply every action of our daily life. We have a gatha for waking up in the morning, a gatha for brushing our teeth, and even gathas for using the car or the computer. The gatha we say as we serve our food goes like this:

*In this food
I see clearly
the presence of the entire universe
supporting my existence.**

Looking deeply into the vegetables, we see sunshine is inside them, a cloud is inside, the earth is inside, and a lot of hard, loving work is also there in the food before us. Looking in this way, even if no one else is sitting down with us to share that meal, we know that our community, our ancestors, Mother

Nature, and the whole cosmos are right there, with us and inside us in every moment. We never need to feel alone.

One of the first things we can do to soothe our fear is to talk to it. You can sit down with that fearful child inside and be gentle with him or her. You might say something like this: “Dear little child, I am your adult self. I would like to tell you that we are no longer a baby, helpless and vulnerable. We have strong hands and strong feet; we can very well defend ourselves. So there is no reason why we have to continue to be fearful anymore.”

I believe that talking to the child like that can be very helpful, because the inner child may be deeply wounded, and the child has been waiting for us to come back to her. All her childhood wounds are still there, and we have been so busy that we have had no time to go back and help the child heal. That is why it's very important to take the time to go back, to recognize the presence of the wounded child in us, to talk to him and try to help him heal. We can remind him several times that we are no longer a helpless child, we have grown up into an adult, and we can very well take care of ourselves.

Practice: Talking to Your Inner Child

Put down two cushions. First sit on one cushion and pretend you are the helpless, vulnerable child. You express yourself: “Dear one, I am very helpless. I cannot do anything. It's very dangerous. I'm going to die; nobody is taking care of me.” You have to speak the language of the baby. And while you are expressing yourself like that, if the feelings of fear, hopelessness, stress, and helplessness come up, please allow them to come up and recognize them. Allow the helpless child enough time to express herself fully. This is very important.

After she has finished, move to the other cushion to play the role of the adult self. As you look at the other cushion, imagine the helpless child is sitting there and talk to her: “Listen to me. I am your adult self. You are no longer a helpless child; we have grown up into an adult already. We have

enough intelligence to protect ourselves, to survive by ourselves. We don't need someone to take care of us anymore."

When you try this, you will see that the feeling of safety and security you want to feel doesn't need to come from clinging to another person or from constantly distracting yourself. Acknowledging and soothing the fear within is the first step in letting it go.

Understanding that we are now safe is essential for those of us who have suffered abuse, fear, or pain in our past. Sometimes we may need a friend, a brother, a sister, a teacher, to help us not fall back into the past. We have grown up. We're now capable not just of defending ourselves but of living fully in the present moment and giving to others.

Original Fear

Many of us often find ourselves thinking of things that stir up feelings of fear and sorrow. We have all experienced some suffering in our past, and we often recall our past suffering. We revisit the past, reviewing it and watching the films of the past. But if we revisit these memories without mindfulness or awareness, every time we watch those images we suffer again.

Suppose you were abused as a young child. You suffered greatly. You were fragile and vulnerable. You were likely afraid all the time. You didn't know how to protect yourself. Perhaps in your mind you continue to be abused again and again, even though you are an adult now. You are no longer that child who was fragile and vulnerable, with no means of defense. Yet you continue to experience the suffering of the child, because you always revisit those memories even though they are painful.

There is a film, an image stored in your consciousness. Every time your mind goes back to the past and you look at that image or watch that film, you suffer again. Mindfulness reminds us that it is possible to be in the here and now. It reminds us that the present moment is always available to us; we don't have to live events that happened long ago.

Suppose someone slapped your face twenty years ago. That was recorded as an image in your subconscious. Your subconscious stores many films and

images of the past, which are always being projected down there. And you have a tendency to go back and watch them again and again, so you continue to suffer. Every time you see that picture, you are slapped again and again and again.

But that is only the past. You are no longer in the past; you are in the present moment. That *did* happen, yes—in the past. But the past is already gone. Now the only things left are pictures and memories. If you keep going back to the past to review those images, that is wrong mindfulness. But if we root ourselves in the present moment, we can look at the past in a different way and transform its suffering.

Perhaps when you were a little child, people would sometimes take your toy away from you. You learned to cry, to try to manipulate the situation; or to smile so as to please your caretaker, to make her give back the toy. As a young child, you learned to produce a diplomatic smile. That's one way of dealing with the problem of survival. You learn without even knowing that you're learning. The feeling that you're fragile, vulnerable, unable to defend yourself, the feeling that you always need someone to be with you, is always there. That original fear—and its other face, original desire—is always there. The infant, with his fear and his desire, is always alive in us.

Some of us have depression and continue to suffer even if in the present situation everything looks all right. This is because we have a tendency to dwell in the past. We feel more comfortable making our home there, even if it holds a lot of suffering. That home is deep down in our subconscious, where the films of the past are always projected. Every night you go back and watch those films and suffer. And the future you constantly worry about is nothing other than a projection of fear and desire from the past.

Don't Fear the Past

Because it's so easy to be caught in the past, it's helpful to have a reminder to stay in the present. In Plum Village, we use a bell. When we hear the bell, we

practice breathing in and out mindfully, and we say, “I listen to the bell. This wonderful sound brings me back to my true home.” My true home is in the here and now. The past is not my true home.

You may want to say to the little one inside you, the past is not our home; our home is here, where we can really live our life. We can get all the nourishment and healing we need here in the present moment. Much of the fear, anxiety, and anguish that we experience is there because the inner child has not been liberated. That child is afraid to come out to the present moment, and so your mindfulness, your breath, can help this child to realize that she is safe and can be free.

Suppose you go to the movies. From your seat in the audience you look up at the screen. There is a story; there are people on the screen interacting with each other. And down there in the audience, you cry. You experience what’s happening on the screen as real, and that’s why you shed real tears and feel real emotions. The suffering is real; the tears are real. But when you come up to touch the screen, you don’t see any real people. It’s nothing but flickering light. You can’t talk to the people on the screen; you can’t invite them to have tea. You can’t stop them or ask them a question, but yet it can create real suffering, in your body as well as your mind. Our memories can cause us real suffering, both emotionally and physically, even though they are not happening in the moment.

When we recognize that we have a habit of replaying old events and reacting to new events as if they were the old ones, we can begin to notice when that habit energy comes up. We can then gently remind ourselves that we have another choice. We can look at the moment as it is, a fresh moment, and leave the past for a time when we can look at it compassionately.

We can make the time and space, not in a busy moment but in a quiet time, to tell the suffering, wounded child inside us that she doesn’t have to suffer anymore. We can take her hand and invite her to come into the present moment and witness all the wonders of life that are available here and now: “Come with me, dear one. We have grown up. We no longer need to be

afraid. We are no longer vulnerable. We are no longer fragile. We don't have to be afraid anymore."

You have to teach the child in you. You have to invite him to come with you and live life with you in the present moment. Of course, we can mindfully reflect upon and learn from the past, but when we do this we stay grounded in the present moment. If we are well grounded in the present moment, we can look skillfully at the past and learn from it without being sucked in and overwhelmed by it.

Contemplating the Future Without Fear

We likewise can prepare for the future without getting consumed by our plans. Often we either don't plan at all, or we get caught up in obsessive planning because we fear the future and its uncertainty. The present moment is where we need to operate. When you are truly anchored in the present moment, you can plan for the future in a much better way. Living mindfully in the present does not preclude making plans. It only means that you know there's no use losing yourself in worries and fear concerning the future. If you are grounded in the present moment, you can bring the future into the present to have a deep look without losing yourself in anxiety and uncertainty. If you are truly present and know how to take care of the present moment as best you can, you are doing your best for the future already.

The same is true about the past. The teaching and the practice of mindfulness do not forbid looking deeply into the past. But if we allow ourselves to drown in regret and sorrow concerning the past, that's not right mindfulness. If we're well established in the present moment, we can bring the past back to the present moment and have a deep look. You can very well examine the past and the future while you are established in the present moment. In fact you can learn from the past and plan for the future in the best way if you are grounded in the present moment.

If you have a friend who suffers, you have to help him. “My dear friend, you are on safe ground. Everything is okay now. Why do you continue to suffer? Don’t go back to the past. It’s only a ghost; it’s unreal.” And whenever we recognize that these are only movies and pictures, not reality, we are free. That is the practice of mindfulness.

Reconciling with Our Past

Our original fear isn't just from our own birth and childhood; the fear we feel comes from both our own and our ancestors' original fear. Our ancestors suffered from hunger and other dangers, and there were moments when they were extremely anxious. That kind of fear has been transmitted to us; every one of us has that fear inside. And because we suffer from that fear, we make the situation worse. We worry about our safety, our job, and our family. We worry about external threats. Even when nothing bad is happening, that doesn't prevent us from feeling fear.

Once, a young American came to Plum Village and practiced meditation with several others. During this time, I suggested to everyone present that they write a love letter to a parent, regardless of whether that parent was still living. Writing a letter is a form of meditation practice. This young man could not do it, because every time he thought of his father he suffered greatly. His father had already died, and yet he could not reconcile with him. His father had terrified him when he was growing up, so much so that even now he was afraid to speak to him through a letter. He could not bear to even think of his father, much less write to him. So I gave him an exercise to practice for one week: "Breathing in, I see myself as a five-year-old child. Breathing out, I smile to that five-year-old child."