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Cultivating Fearlessness

An article on finding inner strength

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CULTIVATING FEARLESSNESS

One of the positive things emerging from the recent outbreaks of violence in the UK is a very strong reminder that nothing about our world is safe. Everything can fall apart without any warning. Often we are spectators to events in the world that are traumatic but our observations are often from the comfort of our homes or offices. The perspective is different when things happen closer to us, and, understandably, we may experience anxiety or fear. Some people have the misfortune to live in fear all their lives; for many of us, fear isn't apparent until something triggers it, for the rest of the time lying dormant beneath the surface.

The word 'fearlessness' can imply different things. We might equate it with great courage, where in spite of fear, an action is carried out anyway. Or it may be taken to indicate recklessness, where there is a temporary suspension of perception of danger so that there is no concern as to consequences. But suppose we take it to mean a total absence of fear because of its opposite – the full presence of inner strength and confidence.

Fear comes from a deep-seated belief that actually everything is not all right and that a state of loss is going to befall us. That loss could be of current circumstances, material things, physical well-being, self-identity, loved ones and of life itself. Some fears arise because of memories of painful experiences, which may have been

physical, emotional, mental or all three. We know from experience that most fears are totally illogical because we are still here in spite of everything we have lived through. An exhaustive list of fears would be impossible to compile because of their sheer number and complexity. But to become fearless doesn't require a huge analysis into every source of anxiety. Rather, it needs a development of fearlessness itself; the "ness" indicating the presence of a positive quality rather than the absence of a negative one.

That positive is unshakable confidence based on knowledge and to find it we have to transcend - go beyond - everything that makes us feel otherwise. To transcend in this sense means to take our awareness to a deeper level of our being - beyond our thoughts, beliefs and feelings that fuel our habitual patterns of reaction. We have to travel to a part of our nature that doesn't crave self-identity or survival. It is an aspect of us that has the quality of radiance and is sometimes known as "pure awareness" because it is without colouring or qualification; it simply is. But if it is that simple, why is it so difficult to find?

The reality is that pure awareness is always present in the same way that in our three-dimensional world space is always present. We don't see space, though; we see the objects within space and understand, if we think about it at all, that space is present. But really we react to and with objects without giving too much thought to space. We might think that object A is too close to object B but will normally think of that as a problem of

objects rather than of space. So it is with awareness. All thoughts, feelings, beliefs and habitual tendencies can only arise in the space of awareness but they are generally so strong that we cannot experience awareness just as it is. It is there but we cannot see it because we are so engrossed with everything else.

To take the path to pure awareness requires a change of focus. Instead of focusing on everything that is going on within us and around us, we focus on space and stillness. Sometimes we can do that by sitting down to meditate; at other times it will involve being aware of stillness in what we do and in our environment. It means practising mindfulness: mindfulness of action - full awareness of what we are doing - and also mindfulness of speech. Both of those will generate mindfulness of thought. Gradually, by deliberately slowing the mind down, it becomes clearer and life is more enjoyable and fruitful; some describe their lives as becoming far less stressful.

Is this the experience of pure awareness? No, but it is a major start because we are becoming more aware of space, both inner and outer, and enjoying the interaction of everything that arises in the "space" of consciousness. But we will also find that it is difficult to maintain mindfulness all the time. Thoughts, emotions and innumerable distractions will temporarily pull us off course. We may be feeling more confident and experiencing a greater degree of fearlessness but probably not one hundred percent or for one hundred

percent of the time. The reason for this is that our internal currents of thought and belief patterns are extremely strong. They don't become entirely still except after many years, and some would say lifetimes, of training; but they do weaken if we apply a little effort.

Many teachings say it is necessary to have a refined nervous system in order to experience pure awareness and to maintain it. They detail at some length practices which are designed to purify subtle energy channels within the body. It is not enough just to sit still, they say. There is work to be done. For most people leading busy lives, though, such practices are not realistic and in any event need to be explained and taught by a reliable teacher. However, we can still make significant progress, even if we have a busy lifestyle.

In meditation, we may sometimes be able to observe a gap between thoughts. Rather than getting lost in the streams of thoughts, feelings and sensations that can arise in meditation, we remain alert. That alertness can only be maintained if the nervous system is reasonably clear. Tiredness, illness, medication and poor diet are some of the things that can cloud our awareness, so we should look after our body as best we can. The posture in meditation is important, too. If we adopt a lounging position, the meditation is unlikely to be clear so the better advice is to ensure the spine is reasonably straight, some would say with the back unsupported though that is not practical for everyone. Our meditation posture

should reflect a state of poise but shouldn't be uncomfortable.

If we practise t'ai chi, we may be silently aware of space, movement and energy with no interruption of thoughts. But we won't experience that if we begin our practice without any preparation. Some quiet standing, allowing the mind and body to settle and the chi to begin to flow more coherently, makes an excellent start to a t'ai chi session. Some light stretching movements can help to bring the nervous system to a more alert state, as well as physically preparing the body, before practising the form or sequence of t'ai chi. As we continue with the form, we may have the experience from time to time of mind and body acting as one, united within awareness and uninterrupted by thought.

When we have those still moments, we enjoy fearlessness. Nothing matters except the present moment which transcends all time. Although those fearless moments are temporary, gradually they will last longer and occur with increasing frequency. It is important that we remember these experiences because although they are spontaneous and cannot be recreated, to recall them can help strengthen us.

People who perpetrate violence – physical, mental or verbal – are not fearless. On the contrary, they live in great fear and are totally out of touch with their pure nature. It is easy to judge them but if we look at our society as a whole, we will observe a general lack of inner strength because society is based on wrong

principles – one might even say a lack of principles. Consumerism has led to a disastrous economy because it has been fuelled by desire and countered by fear. But the way society acts, and indeed is led, is governed by the collective consciousness of those who make it up.

Collective consciousness is suffering from the effects of a lack of coherence - and that stems from a loss of pure awareness. We may think we can do nothing as individuals but we can. We can nurture our own consciousness so that we become increasingly still and fearless. If we want to live happily, we have to do that, and as we do so, we contribute to the greater whole.

One day, our bodies will give up on us; that's the way life is. But we can choose to be strong internally. Fearlessness denotes invincibility – not of physical structures but of consciousness – and over that we have more than a little control.

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