

Spring 2002

LEANING INTO FEAR: GATEWAY TO FREEDOM

By Tara Brach

*WE HAVE TO FACE THE PAIN WE HAVE BEEN RUNNING FROM. IN FACT, WE NEED TO
LEARN TO REST IN IT
AND LET ITS SEARING POWER TRANSFORM US.*

Joko Beck

In Pali, the language of the Buddhist scriptures, the word for fear and the word for separate is the same. The feeling of fear goes hand in hand with the sense of separation. Separation is painful because we feel disconnected from the fullness of being alive. Everything we depend on to feel aliveness—our body and mind, other people—is subject to decay and death. We live in fear of losing our physical life, losing the relationships that sustain our emotional life. This fear of loss is the primal mood of the separate self. It shadows us through every passing season. And when, as on September 11, the raw pain of loss turns harsh and immediate, fear becomes a dominant force in our individual and collective psyches.

I often find my anxiety sticking to whatever is going on immediately in my life—getting to the airport on time, the early symptoms of a cold, helping my son with a project. But when I ask what is really bothering me and then look deeply enough, the ultimate issue is death. On some level I always feel as though I am always facing death. My parents are getting older and someday there will be a phone call that lets me know the end is near. My son, the center of my universe, will graduate from high school and leave home in a few short years. My body is noticeably aging. Many dear people in my life are feeling physically handicapped. This life is fragile, and loss is all around me.

While the separation of death is the ultimate loss, any loss of connection is a part of dying. I fear the loss of love if I let down a friend. The loss of connection if I don't spend time with my son. The loss of feeling at home with myself if I don't take the time to meditate. Everything I'm afraid of has to do with the pain of separation—from loved ones, from my inner life, from life itself.

Although fearing the pain of loss is biological and universal, because it is so compelling, fear profoundly shapes our sense of identity. When fear arises, we pull into ourselves, clinging to whatever we perceive as our core, the way a sea anemone does when it is poked. We feel ourselves to be a self, protecting our life. Even when we have no conscious thoughts about threats to our existence, our fundamental sense that "something is wrong" keeps us on edge and prevents us from resting in the openness and freedom of our essential nature. We are in the trance of fear—our identity confined by fear, our perceptions distorted by fear.

Awakening from the Trance of Fear

In a popular teaching story, a man being chased by a tiger leaps off a cliff in his attempt to get away. Fortunately, a tree growing out of the side of the cliff breaks his fall. As he dangles precariously—tiger pacing above, jutting rocks hundreds of feet below—desperately he yells out, "Help!" A voice responds, "Yes?" The man screams, "God, God, is that you?" Again, "Yes." Terrified, the man says, "God, I'll do anything, just please, please, help me." God responds, "Okay then, just let go." The man pauses for a moment and then calls out, "Is anyone else there?"

Letting go of what seems to be our lifeline is the last thing we want to do in the face of fear. We find temporary security in accumulating possessions, in mental obsessing, in drinking three glasses of wine each evening. Why let go? The tiger's mouth and the jutting rocks are the last

places we want to be. But to truly awaken we must let go of the tree limb and fall into the fear, opening to the sensations and the wild play of feelings in our body. We have to agree to feel what our mind tells us is “too much.” We have to agree to the pain of dying, the inevitable loss of all we hold dear.

Ronald was sitting a ten-day retreat that I was leading. About five days into the retreat, he told me that he’d been thinking of his mother who had recently survived a stroke, but might never again be able to walk or talk. He thought about his wife who was struggling with chronic depression. He’d been telling himself that he was powerless to help. The people he loved were suffering and he couldn’t change that.

Although he could feel the rising tide of anxiety in his chest, Ronald felt removed from its real force. This numbness was familiar. At home, Ronald felt distant and detached when his wife described her feelings of hopelessness. Intellectually he cared but, as he put it, “I wasn’t able to be in the trenches with her. I couldn’t really relate.” At these times, he felt as though his body was dead and his heart was hard. Now a similar thing was happening. He knew that a huge well of pain was there, but he wasn’t going near it and his mind was racing a million miles an hour.

The key to awakening from the bind of fear is *moving from our mental stories into contact with our immediate felt experience*. The story, if we remain aware and do not get stuck inside it, can be an opening into the raw fear itself. Without dismissing the story, we can drop under it to connect with the feelings that live in our body. We directly sense the center of the body— the throat, heart and stomach. These are the physical zones where emotions most fully manifest themselves. Here we can feel squeezing, pressing, burning, trembling, quaking, jittering life. We awaken from the trance of fear by experiencing this energy where it is most immediate and alive.

Because Ronald felt so blocked from the immediacy of his fear, he moved toward the fear by inquiring “How big are you?” In answer he could sense a feeling of terror that would fill the entire universe. He thought, “If I accept this, I’ll be annihilated and die. The bigness and pain will kill me.” Ronald realized he was saying yes and fighting at the same time. His heart was pounding, and in his stomach he felt cramping and nausea. He could feel how his tensing against the fear compounded its intensity, so much so that he felt like his heart would explode. His every animal instinct was clutching, but he wanted to stop the war. As he put it, “I wanted to surrender my fearful self into something bigger than fear. I wanted to give up trying to control life.”

His conscious longing to let go empowered him to fully say “yes” to the immensity of his fear. He imagined himself lying down and letting go into it. “I was dying. I felt like my body was breaking apart, that I was lost in a storm of burning winds and my ashes were being dispersed in all directions.” He was letting go into fear, and the fear was surrendered into the endless space of awareness.

Leaning into fear in this way might feel to us, as Joko Beck puts it, like “lying down on an icy couch.” It can be extraordinarily difficult to let ourselves relax into it—we want to hold back for fear of even more wrenching pain. Still, we can settle down into discomfort. We can let the hard edges press into us, the sharpness stab us, the violence pull us apart. We keep softening into what’s there, letting go of resistance. It’s clearly not the most comfortable place, but it suits our needs in a crucial way. When we lie down on the icy couch of our fear, we begin to unlearn our tendency to hold back from life.

Our True Refuge From Fear

As long as we’re alive, we feel fear. It’s an intrinsic part of our make-up, as natural as a cold winter day or the winds that rip branches off trees. If we resist it, we become solidified as a small, endangered self and miss a powerful opportunity for awakening. Our willingness to face the darkness frees us from our identity with the trance of fear. As we offer the forces of the night a devoted presence, we become that presence. The intensity of fear compels us to inhabit the

fullness of our Being—loving, open awareness. This is our Buddha nature, our true refuge, our only refuge in the face of fear. We become the vast sea cradling the passing waves of fear, anger and grief that sweep across its surface.

But there may be times when the fear feels like “too much,” times that it has been sustained or intense, times when we’re worn down. The art of spiritual practice is to sense what’s needed. Our intention is full and kind presence, and sometimes we need help in restoring our balance and relaxing our heart. We may need to remember our belonging by talking to someone we trust, by walking among the birds and trees. Sometimes the most compassionate approach is to take a break, drink some tea, rest. We may need to stop and pray and call on our awakened Being.

With practice, we find we can handle fear. We can even handle our deepest fear, the inevitable death of our impermanent self. We cultivate this capacity daily by letting go into less acute fears. With more intense fear, we lean in as best we can. We practice dying as we let go of resisting pain, mental preoccupation, having to be right, trying to be in control. As we let go and face fear, we naturally call on the radiant and changeless awareness that has room for living and dying. We open to the awareness that, as Rilke put it, “can contain death, the whole of death...can hold it in one’s heart gentle, and not... refuse to go on living.” We awaken into the awareness that is our true refuge, our true home.

Adapted from the book
Radical Self-Acceptance (Bantam).