



AMMA THANASANTI is a Buddhist nun. While on pilgrimage in Southeast Asia and hiking in the mountains, she encounters the unexpected. As she looks to gaze at the sky, a growling sound catches her attention. At that moment, a large form lunges toward her from a dark mountain cave. Landing on Amma's back, the black bear knocks her to the ground and begins chewing on the back of her head. Frozen with the fear of impending death, she blacks out.

Moments later, she awakens with the realization, "There's no way to negotiate my way out of this one," and she immediately shifts into the Buddhist practice of "taking refuge." Meditation teacher Tara Brach explains refuge this way: *"By willingly meeting fear with his full attention, the Buddha discovered fearlessness — the open, clear awareness that recognizes the arising and passing of fear without contracting or identifying with it. Taking refuge in the truth of his awakening can inspire us on our own path toward fearlessness."*

Aligning with the sensation of a bear gnawing on her head, Amma's body relaxes and curiosity arises. Spontaneously, an om sound wells up in her mind, and she is consumed in it. A feeling of joy rises. At this exact moment, the bear jumps off and runs away.

Amma's story is extraordinary. Although most of us live with fears, they are generally ordinary: Will I make it to the airport on time or miss my flight? Will my friend forgive me after I spoke to her harshly or will our friendship end? Will I survive this illness?

Either way, fear is a potentially life-taking force to deal with.

WHAT IS FEAR?

Fear is an autonomic (automatic) response in the caveman part of your brain, tasked with keeping you safe. It has subconscious sensors that organically pick up on potential danger without you thinking about it — because that would take too much time and a saber-toothed tiger might be lurking nearby. With the scent of danger, an adrenaline siren sounds, and your body immediately responds by moving into survival mode without thinking.

Physiologically, your body now supplies the functions needed to outrun, outfight or hide from whatever is stalking you. Your heart pounds, the sweat beads, while other bodily functions — like digestion, relaxation and enjoyment — go on standby until the danger passes.

We don't have saber-toothed tigers hunting us any more, yet our fear response continues to be present to keep us safe from threat. The primitive brain, however, doesn't discern between actual life-threatening dangers and highly stressful experiences. For example, a disagreement with the boss can trigger a body sensation that is interpreted by the autonomic nervous system as the same level of threat as being physically killed or annihilated.

Do you ever find yourself holding a problem or decision as if it is life-threatening when intellectually you know it is not? I know I have. With the awareness that I won't actually die if I don't create the perfect solution or decision, I breathe a sigh of relief and become present to my inner guidance and external facts.

UNTETHERING INHERENT FEARS

There are only two fears inherently present from birth: the fear of falling, an instinct to support the survival of our species; and the fear of loud noises, triggering a startle response.

Your common sense immediately guides you to discern whether there is a real threat or a false alarm. If it's a false alarm, which is most common, the secret to instantly calming the body's panic is to access that part of the brain where fear and anxiety originate.

You can do this by intentionally controlling your breath. Because breathing is an automatic body process that can also be intentionally regulated, it connects the voluntary and involuntary nervous systems. Thus, you can interrupt the panic by consciously regulating your breathing pattern. For example, you could make your inhale longer than your exhale for several breaths and then reverse it. Another exercise is to inhale to the count of 1-2-3-4, hold your breath to the count of 4-3-2-1, exhale to the count of 1-2-3-4, and then hold your breath to the count of 4-3-2-1. Notice how the body relaxes.

MOVE THROUGH FEAR

UNTETHERING LEARNED FEARS

Many fears are learned through evolution. Research suggests, for example, that we carry ancestral bias toward snakes and spiders. As we get older, we develop fears based on association. For example, a ski instructor broke her arm from slipping on ice. She became so afraid of walking on ice and snow that she couldn't do her job and began to retreat from life.

These associations, however, don't have to be permanent. In fact, in 2000, a graduate student at the College of William and Mary discovered that emotional memory could be biochemically unlocked by remembering it. It's similar to how you unlock your smartphone to move or delete icons. When ready, you lock the new screen into place by pressing the button. Similarly, the technique Regenerating Images in Memory (RIM) uses the organic emotional system to track a memory that's stuck. Once it's unlocked, the emotional memory is regenerated into an affirming one.

When the disabled ski instructor above used RIM to heal, she first sensed in her body where the fear of walking on ice was localized. Her imagination gave it form and a red-hot ball in her right hip appeared. Asking imagination to call in the perfect virtual resource, God appeared. She and God together imagined moving into the red ball and fully embracing it (fear). As they sat in the discomfort of it, the fear stuck in her body spontaneously dissolved. Several months later, she began teaching skiing again.

When we feel our inner resources, we know the truth that our spirit is greater than any human experience we have.

When you have a fear of something other than falling or loud noises, you can guess that it's a learned or associated fear that you've acquired from watching the people around you or your own painful experiences. For instance, it's common for people who have had a painful divorce to fear getting hurt in a new relationship. It can show up as sabotaging behaviors — dating people who are unlikely candidates, becoming moody and difficult when a relationship becomes more serious, or never dating at all. In these situations, bringing safe and powerful virtual resources into the memory of the source pain can be profoundly healing.

FACING SUSTAINED FEAR

On the battlefield, soldiers commit to continuously face death. They face enemy fire and support their buddies during the fight. Is it possible to untether this kind of fear? Aristotle wrote about this question, although he never quite made up his mind. He says that it requires a commitment to be courageous that is not to have "no fear," but to "persist in the face of fear."

MOVE THROUGH FEAR

I recently guided a mother whose children survived the Parkland school shooting through the RIM process. She spontaneously uncovered a myriad of feelings, such as guilt that she couldn't protect her children, anger with others for not protecting them, fear that it would happen again and they wouldn't get a second chance.

As she and her virtual resource (a passed grandparent) sensed the energy of whatever feeling showed up, she slowly and tearfully unraveled a string of feelings from her body. Although the external experiences never changed, she felt lighter. By externalizing and safely expressing the jumbled feelings swirling in her head, heart and soul, her mind grew clearer. And with the clarity, she began to see her plan of action to help interrupt the pattern of school violence.

7 STRATEGIES TO MOVE THROUGH FEAR

1. Understand the fear and embrace it. Fear exists to help keep you safe. It's not good or bad. When you avoid fear, it grows, and when you face fear, it shrinks.

2. Name the fear. When fear is translated into words, it becomes specific and less overwhelming. The simplest form of RIM is to breathe, feel your feelings and express them as a way to empty the emotional charge from your body.

3. Meditate and pray regularly. The intensity of fear fades in comparison to feeling connected to a Higher Power.

4. Learn from others who have successfully mastered fear. When you speak with others who have successfully mastered the specific fear you're experiencing, you gain new ideas and a greater belief that mastery is possible.

5. Use group support to push through fear. Studies show that we'll do scary things as part of a group that we wouldn't do alone. Support groups are a great way to overcome a shared fear.

6. Imagine your life on the other side of this fear. What we focus on expands. Keep imagining your life after you're beyond the fear.

7. Get help. Seek help if you feel immobilized by fear and can't find your way out. ☸

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