Smile at Fear

Teachings on Bravery, Open Heart & Basic Goodness

By Pema Chödrön

Despite what we might think much of the time and what the news programs imply, we all wish to be sane and open-hearted people. We could take our wish to be more sane and kind and put it in a very large context. We could expand it into a desire to help all other people, to help the whole world. But we need a place to start. We can't simply begin with the whole world. We need to begin by reaching out to the people who come into our own lives—our family members, our neighbors, our coworkers. Perhaps we are inspired to enter a profession where we can spend our time and energy trying to help at a global or national level. But even if we express our wish to be open-hearted by working for global peace or justice or environmental well-being, even on that grand scale, we need to work on what is immediate to us all the time. We need to work on ourselves.

When we do this work on ourselves, however, we can still think of it in the wider context of our community, our nation, and our world. Viewing the work we do on ourselves in this larger context is very important. I don't mean to be harsh, but I have to say that a lot of people who do so-called spiritual work can be somewhat selfish. Their spiritual path is all about taking care of themselves, and they may not notice that what makes them feel comfortable and secure is actually at the expense of other people. We all know other people like this, don't we?

If we're hurting enough, and we really start looking for the source of our pain and what we can do about it, it goes beyond just wanting to feel better ourselves. In Buddhism, this is called...
the bodhisattva ideal. In the Shambhala teachings, we talk about it as warriorship, or, you might say, spiritual warriorship. At its most basic, it means working on ourselves, developing courage and fearlessness and cultivating our capacity to love and care about other people. It involves taking good care of ourselves, but whatever we do, it’s all in the bigger context of helping.

When we look at the world around us—our immediate world and the bigger world beyond—we see a lot of difficulty and dysfunction. The news we hear is mostly bad news, and that makes us afraid. It can be quite discouraging. Yet we could actually derive inspiration for our warriorship, for our bodhisattva path, from these dire circumstances. We could recognize the fact, and proclaim the fact, that we are needed.

Who are “we”? You and me and every one of us—each of us on this earth is needed at this time. Why are we needed and in what way are we needed? We’re needed because there are hundreds of thousands of billions of beings who are suffering. If even one small segment of us, one sub-community, took it upon themselves to live their life in a way that helped their families, their neighborhoods, their towns, and indeed the earth itself, something good would begin to happen.

The truth is that the ground has always been shaky, forever. But in times when fear is prevalent, that truth is more obvious. All this fear surrounding us may sound like the bad news, but in fact it’s the good news. Fear is like a dot that emerges in the space in front of us and captures our attention. It is like a doorway we could go through, but where that doorway leads is not predetermined. It is up to us. Usually when we’re afraid, it sets off a chain reaction. We go inward and start to armor ourselves, trying to protect ourselves from whatever we think is going to hurt us. But our attempts to protect ourselves do not lessen the fear. Quite the opposite—the fear is actually escalating. Rather than becoming free from fear, we become hardened. As our fear spreads within, it makes us harder and more set in our ways.

A lot of the most painful conditions in the world are initially motivated by fear. Fundamentalism, for example, comes about when we feel we need something definite and solid to protect ourselves from those who are different from us. That arises from the fear of losing control. Likewise, our addictions come from trying to assuage the discomfort we feel inside, the fear that things are out of our control and we have no secure ground under our feet. Whatever form fear hardens into, it continues to escalate and results in actions that can do great damage. It escalates into wars and riots. It escalates into violence and cruelty. It creates an ugly world, which breeds more fear.

Yet the raw fear initially emerges as a dot in space, as a doorway that can go either way. If we choose to take notice of the actual experience of fear, whether it’s just a queasy feeling in our stomach or actual terror, whether it’s a subtle level of discomfort or mind-numbing dramatic anxiety, we can smile at it, believe it or not. It could be a literal smile or a metaphor for coming to know fear, turning toward fear, touching fear. In that case, rather than fear setting off a chain reaction where you’re trying to protect yourself from it, it becomes a source of tenderness. We experience our vulnerability, but we don’t feel we have to harden ourselves in response. This makes it possible for us to help ourselves and to help others.

We’re all very familiar with the experience of fear escalating, or the experience of running away from fear. But have we ever taken the time to truly touch our fear, to be present with it and experience it fully? Do we know what it might mean to smile at fear?

About a year ago, I was traveling on an airplane and the man who was sitting next to me had just finished his copy of Time magazine and he asked me if I wanted to read it. I started leafing

Smile at croissant.
through it and stumbled upon an article on fear. It said that scientific tests have proved that people are more afraid of uncertainty than they are of physical pain. Wow, I thought, that gets right to what I’ve been saying about the basic queasiness that leads us to all kinds of self-destructive and other-destructive habits; about the whole chain of events that emerges from our fear of uncertainty, of not knowing what in the world is happening or what is going to happen. All this emerges from wanting to get it safe and secure and comfortable.

I’ve done a lot of observing of myself, my friends, and other people, trying to see how this nervousness about uncertainty happens to us and what it leads to. It’s interesting to explore what happens with our bodies, our speech, and our mind. I’ve come up with a very nice, little, secure, comfortable answer. I figured it all out and now I don’t have to be scared any more. That’s not how it works, of course. Noticing is not necessarily about finding security.

What I’ve noticed is that there are two main ways that fear of uncertainty affects us, at least initially. One is that we speed up and the other is that we get very lazy.

The basis of fear is not trusting yourself, not loving yourself. In a nutshell, you feel bad about who you are.

Through her powerful teachings, bestselling books, and retreats attended by thousands, PEMA CHÖDRÖN has become today’s most important American-born teacher of Buddhism. In The Wisdom of No Escape, The Places That Scare You, and other popular books, she has helped us discover how difficulty and uncertainty can become opportunities for awakening. Recently, she has given teachings based on the book Smile at Fear: Awakening the True Heart of Bravery, by her late root guru, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. This article is adapted from her talks to some 3,600 people in the Bay Area from October 15 to 17, with another 2,000 viewing the teachings online.
Once in my small retreat cabin, when I was feeling uncertain and anxious, I looked at the experience. I was like a ping-pong ball bouncing around. There are only two rooms in this cabin, but there I was bouncing around from one room to the other, starting something and then not even halfway through it, bouncing over to something else. I was all by myself in the wilderness and yet I was filling the space with all of this frantic activity. As I’ve talked about this experience with people, many of them share their experiences of how a basic level of nervousness causes them to speed around even in their own homes, bouncing from room to room and task to task and never quite finishing anything. People talk about going back and forth between one thing and another, emailing and calling people on the phone. They start projects that get half done at best, and they rush all over the place, complaining the whole time about how much they have to do. But, in fact, the most threatening thing would be having nothing to do.

Lazy is the other way to go. It is the opposite of speed, and yet these two seeming opposites are both about the same thing: avoiding being present with our fear of uncertainty. In the case of laziness, you become completely paralyzed. You can’t get yourself to do anything because the underlying uncertainty and nervousness is so great. You procrastinate. You feel unworthy. The laziness has a frozen quality. You don’t move. You become a couch potato, or you spend hour after hour on the computer, not as a form of speediness but just distracting yourself, trying not to feel what’s underneath what you’re feeling, trying to avoid touching the uncertainty and uneasiness. And yet in the background, it dominates your life.

What Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche taught about the underlying, fundamental uncertainty—which scientific tests now prove is more frightening to us than physical pain—is that the very basis of the fear itself is doubting ourselves, not trusting ourselves. You could also say it is not loving ourselves, not respecting ourselves. In a nutshell, you feel bad about who you are.

So the very first step, and perhaps the hardest, is developing an unconditional friendship with oneself.

Developing unconditional friendship means taking the very scary step of getting to know yourself. It means being willing to look at yourself clearly and to stay with yourself when you want to shut down. It means keeping your heart open when you feel that what you see in yourself is just too embarrassing, too painful, too unpleasant, too hateful.

The hallmark of this training in spiritual warriorship, in the bodhisattva path, is cultivating bravery. With such bravery you could go anywhere on the earth and be of help to other people because you wouldn’t shut down on them. You would be right there with them for whatever they were going through. But the first step along this path is looking at yourself with a feeling of gentleness and kindness, and it takes a lot of guts to do this. If you’ve tried it, you know how difficult it can be to stay present when you begin to fear what you see.

If you do stay present with what you see when you look at yourself again and again, you begin to develop a deeper friendship with yourself. It’s a complete friendship, because you are not leaving out the parts that are painful to be with. It’s the same way you would develop a complete friendship with another person. You include all that they are. When you develop this complete friendship with yourself, the parts you’re embarrassed about—as well as the parts you’re proud of—manifest as genuineness. A genuine person is a person who is not hiding anything, who is not concealing themselves. A genuine person doesn’t put up masks and shields.

We know what it’s like to look at someone and feel we are just seeing their mask, that we’re not really seeing their genuine heart, their genuine mind. Their speed or their laziness, their fear, takes the form of a mask. They hide behind their roadrunner or couch potato persona. But when someone is present for all of their uncertainties, for the scary places within, they become genuine, and
The Tender Heart of the Warrior

The ground of fearlessness, says CHÖGYAM TRUNGPA RINPOCHE, is renouncing hard-heartedness and allowing ourselves to be tender, sad, and fully present.

THE GROUND OF FEARLESSNESS, which is the basis for overcoming doubt and wrong belief, is the development of renunciation. Renunciation here means overcoming that very hard and tough, aggressive mentality which wards off any gentleness that might come into our hearts. Fear does not allow fundamental tenderness to enter into us. When tenderness tinged by sadness touches our heart, we know that we are in contact with reality. We feel it. That contact is genuine, fresh, and quite raw. That sensitivity is the basic experience of warriorship, and it is the key to developing fearless renunciation.

Sometimes people find that being tender and raw is threatening and seemingly exhausting. Openness seems demanding and energy-consumbing, so they prefer to cover up their tender heart. Vulnerability can sometimes make you nervous. It is uncomfortable to feel so real, so you want to numb yourself. You look for some kind of anesthetic, anything that will provide you with entertainment. Then you can forget the discomfort of reality. People don’t want to live with their basic rawness for even fifteen minutes.

For the warrior, fearlessness is the opposite of that approach. Fearlessness is a question of learning how to be there all along: that is the message. That is quite challenging in what we call the setting-sun world, the world of neurotic comfort where we use everything to fill up the space. On the other hand, if we are in touch with basic goodness, we are always relating to the world directly, choicelessly, whether the energy of the situation demands a destructive or a constructive response. The idea of renunciation is to relate with whatever arises with a sense of sadness and tenderness. We reject the aggressive, hard-core street-fighter mentality. The neurotic upheavals created by overcoming conflicting emotions, or the kleshas, arise from ignorance, or avidya. This is fundamental ignorance that underlies all ego-oriented activity. Ignorance is very harsh and willing to stick with its own version of things. Therefore, it feels very righteous. Overcoming that is the essence of renunciation: we have no hard edges.

Warriorship is so tender, without skin, without tissue, naked and raw. It is soft and gentle. You have renounced putting on a new suit of armor. You have renounced growing a thick, hard skin. You are willing to expose naked flesh, bone, and marrow to the world.

Adapted from Smile at Fear: Awakening the True Heart of Bravery, by Chögyam Trungpa. © 2009 by Diana J. Mukpo. Excerpted with permission from Shambhala Publications.
But becoming a spiritual warrior does not start there. It must begin with the determination that you want to really know yourself completely and utterly, so that you don't have any private rooms and nooks and crannies that you're concealing. You can't become a warrior who helps others to find themselves if you are not making that journey yourself. The journey needn't be completed, but you must have started down the road of encountering your fear.

Once I was staying in close quarters with a friend who was really angry at me. It was the equivalent of being trapped on a Greyhound bus for a couple of months together—me, my friend, her anger, and my feelings of inadequacy. I tried everything to get her to like me again, but she just became angrier and angrier until she refused to talk altogether. That's one of the most uncomfortable places to end up in with someone you are trying to get to like you again, because you're getting nothing back. This situation intensified to the point where I realized that my whole personality, everything I did, the whole way I related to people was based entirely on avoiding feeling bad about myself. I strove to live behind a mask that others would love and would therefore cause me to love myself. That plan did not work.

It was a powerful revelation to see that all my habits and approaches to life were coming from this deep hiding and avoidance. It was exhilarating in some way, but then I realized that my friend and I were still on the bus together, and work remained to be done. Life is like that. You have your insights, but the challenge remains.

I had heard the phrases "unconditional friendship" and "genuine hear of sadness" before, but at that point the began to make real sense to me. What produces a genuine person, I realized, is being open to not feeling okay. It means to be open to everything—to all the horrors as well as the beauties of life, to the whole extraordinary variety of life. I began to realize that this whole mess the human race is in—the fact that we don't take care of the planet and we don't take care of each other: the wars, the hatred, the fundamentalism—all actually come from running away. Individually, collectively, we are trying to avoid feeling bad about ourselves.

Once you start to look at it this way, to smile a bit about the fear instead of letting it escalate, you realize that going about this way is a bunch of bullshit. Wait a minute here, you might think, what's going on? Seemingly, it's just me. But it seems to be being pretty hard on me. What's up with that? When I was stuck with my friend, I started to see behind it all. A smile crossed my face. If I allow myself to look at what hurts, I find genuine, open heart. The business of avoiding who we are is game that never needed to begin in the first place. That's worth smile. It was a very fortunate bus ride.
Smile at Fear continued from page 52

My companion never did really like me, but in that situation she became my teacher. When none of my cute words and jokes and compliments worked, I had to deal with what was under all of that—someone being harsh with themselves for no good reason. It takes guts to get to that place. I can’t say that I did it willingly, and I’m not sure that anyone would do it willingly, but situations like that can help us to see why we need to look into our fear.

It’s not so easy to do, but fortunately we have a method that can help us discover the courage to smile at fear. Meditation practice is a method for being with ourselves fully and completely, allowing the time and space to see it all with gentleness, kindness, and dead honesty. It is the safest environment within which to undertake this mission impossible. And when meditation practice has helped us to be honest and courageous enough to know ourselves in a deep way, we can begin to extend out and help others, because the things outside of us that appear threatening seem that way because of the fear within, the fear we have been reluctant to look at. The things that unnerve us, that trigger feelings of inadequacy, that make us feel that we can’t handle it, that we are not good enough, lose their power over us when we learn to smile at fear.

It’s not a one-shot deal, as Trungpa Rinpoche was fond of saying. There are many reruns. We go through it again and again. We feel uncertain, we busy ourselves, we become frozen, we are lazy, our fear escalates. But our practice also makes it possible for us to notice it happening again and again, and to allow fearlessness and genuineness to emerge from the very act of going into our fear.

While fearlessness may be our goal, so to speak, the basis of fearlessness is knowing fear, and that knowing takes place over and over again. Fearlessness and the compassion that arises from it are not solid and permanent. They emerge when your fears are triggered. I’m sure that if I had to go on the bus with that same lady tomorrow, it would be a very different experience, yet I would still be uncomfortable. But when my fear was inevitably triggered, warriorship would be triggered as well. And a smile might more easily cross my face.

If you touch the fear instead of running from it, you find tenderness, vulnerability, and sometimes a sense of sadness. This tender-heartedness happens naturally when you start to be brave enough to stay present, because instead of armorring yourself, instead of turning to anger, self-denigration, and iron-heartedness, you keep your eyes open and you begin, as Trungpa Rinpoche said, to see the blueness of an iris, the wetness of water, the movement of the wind. Becoming more in touch with ourselves gives birth to enormous appreciation for the world and for other people. It can sound corny, but you feel grateful for the beauty of the world. It’s a very special way to live. Your heart is filled with gratitude, appreciation, compassion, and caring for other people. And it all comes from touching that shakiness within and being willing to be present with it. ♦