

Unearthing Fear

The Methodology

The enemy is fear. We think it is hate, but it is fear.

Mahatma Gandhi

The sniggering gargoyle perched on my computer. It hissed when I attempted to elaborate beyond a title. While I had published tons of articles about therapeutic yoga, yoga philosophy, biomechanics, debunking myths, and a little bit of everything to do with yoga, the beast jeered, “but a book?”

Even though I’ve practiced Yoga Therapy with countless people suffering from physical and emotional trauma and been a part of medical and psychotherapy teams that assist people in some of the darkest times, this fear demon insisted that a Yoga Therapist was not up to the task of writing a book addressing fear, deriding the fact that I do not have a PhD in neuropsychology and perhaps it would be best to keep the practices that I use, teach, and have found beneficial sequestered in the therapy room. But, because of the reaction I receive when I talk to students, groups, and clients about finding a path to courage and how it can affect their healing, I know that addressing this topic is needed by clinicians, therapists, and individuals wanting to delve deeper into helping clients and students recover from trauma and phobia, and that applications of yogic techniques can help us to live fearlessly.

How Fear Changes Us

Fear invokes wars, elects tyrants to government offices, sells cosmetics and medications, belittles the human spirit, and tells us we are not enough. Think about it. According to studies involving fear and loneliness by John Cacioppo, PhD,¹ we choose fear over trust nearly every time.² Keeping ourselves safe is a priority. We listen when someone warns us of the dangers of terrorists or impending disaster and tend to tune out compliments, kindnesses, and the brighter positive angle of a situation. We choose the candidate, the minister, the news that tells us how desperately at risk we are, rather than trusting in a system or process we truly believe to be good, life-affirming, or right. We tend to act from our own set of fears, defenses, conclusions, and desires to survive. Often, our reactions to circumstances are related to our past experiences, and in particular to the first few times that we experienced a similar situation to the one we are currently reacting to (usually something that happened when we were young).

Fear is addictive in that we seek out news and social media stories to reinforce our fears. Some households keep fear-based television news forefront from the time they wake up until they go to bed. We see clickbait images on our computers that upset or frighten us, but we can't resist the temptation to take a peek. We even enjoy (or think we enjoy) Halloween scares and gory movies as entertainment. It's that misguided survival drive that pushes us toward intentionally seeing if we are threatened. Margee Kerr, PhD, sociologist and author of *SCREAM: Chilling Adventures in the Science of Fear*,³ states that "other 'feel good' chemicals can also come into play with fear, namely endorphins, dopamine, serotonin, and oxytocin: 'The neurotransmitters and hormones that are released are helping us prepare to fight or flee, at the same time our attention is shifting away from abstract thoughts and focusing on issues of survival.'"⁴ It's as though realizing we aren't going to die produces a "natural high" and we become hooked on the scare. But we may wonder why we are tired. Feeling afraid exhausts the nervous system.

When we are frightened, the threat is perceived by the thalamus;* the stimulus is then relayed to the adrenal glands perched atop the kidneys, which go into overdrive, sending the adrenaline signal back up to the amygdala† at the top of the brainstem that we need to react (often in ways that would not seem rational to us in a more tranquil or resilient state). Our breathing and heart rate speed up, preparing the body to run away or fight. Blood flow is directed away from digestion and toward the big muscles of the extremities, enabling faster movement or the ability to hit or throw harder. The pupils dilate so that we can better see what is lurking in the dark. We may also freeze—the most primitive response of all—or hide from danger even, with the heart beating wildly. In fear states the hairs on the back of the neck bristle—for our ancestors this may have made them appear larger or more aggressive.

While a scary movie may trigger a jump or shaky reaction, we don't run away or strike out, because the rational mind can differentiate between real and fabricated danger; but the body is still cranking adrenaline and affecting every organ as though the murderous clown was waiting in the lobby.

But not all fear displays itself so blatantly as jumping, screaming, or bristling neck hairs. Our daily, more mundane fears underlie the three most daunting words in our language, “blame, shame, and should,” and take their exhausting toll as well. These oppressive words can represent the fight, flight, or freeze response of the sympathetic nervous system and often on a less detectable, yet similarly exhausting and erosive way.

When we believe we are threatened, we blame others because we fear a differing opinion or can't bear to feel responsible for our own issues. If we can cast fault on another, there is some temporary relief from fear. Blaming is the “fight” response. We project the cause of our suffering and demonize “the other.”

* A small structure within the brain located just above the brainstem between the cerebral cortex and the midbrain that has extensive nerve connections to both. The main function of the thalamus is to relay motor and sensory signals to the cerebral cortex.

† The tiny primitive amygdala is located in the temporal lobe of the brain and is the reason we are afraid of things outside our control.

Shaming ourselves and others is injurious to all involved and is a way of running away from our self-worth, fleeing from remembering who we are and honoring those in our lives. Shame keeps us small and binds us to repeating behaviors that seem safe but are actually harmful. Addiction is a prime shame response.

“Should” is the bondage we cast on ourselves or others to restrict and control. “Shoulding” is a freeze response: we hold our ground and disassociate from the present; we project an imaginary scenario on what has been done or what we believe must be done, from a place of inactivity. The “should” holds us hostage and in a place of judgment. In that land of “should,” we see ourselves no longer in the place of fear, but somehow standing above or below it, stating how things might be done from a distance.

We avoid situations of uncertainty or present ourselves in costumes of habit to feel safe, but it’s the experience of taking the job, risking the failure in a social situation, or standing our ground in the face of injustice that may be the greatest catalyst to our growth. What is it we are afraid of losing? The yogic sages had answers that ring true on a deep level. In Swami Madhavananda’s translation of the *Vairagya Shataka (The Hundred Verses on the Renunciation)*,⁵ Bhartrihari describes how fear is associated with everything in the world:

In enjoyment there is the fear of disease; in social position, the fear of falling off; in wealth, the fear of hostile kings; in honor, the fear of humiliation; in power, the fear of enemies; in beauty, the fear of old age; in scholarship, the fear of opponents; in virtue, the fear of calumny; and in the body, the fear of death. Everything in this world is fraught with fear. Renunciation alone stands for fearlessness. (Verse 31)

Author of “The 4-hour work week”⁶ Tim Ferriss said, “What we fear most is usually what we most need to be doing.” And unless that is standing in front of an oncoming train, it may be true.

Bhaya (fear) is considered by yogic sages to be a primary obstacle on the spiritual journey, though you will more often come across its more positive antonym in the ancient texts: *abhaya* (fearlessness).

Our path—physically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually, and in time—is ultimately determined by whether we continue in habit patterns of fear, or challenge those habits by forming new ones.

One might argue that normal instinctual fear is necessary to our very survival, as jumping from rooftops or eating poisonous plants is not a good idea for our species, and having rational fear is essential to achieve adulthood. But, some fears aren't supporting our survival. Phobias and aversions, such as fear of public speaking, feeling unattractive or an aversion to meeting new people, simply chain us to old *samskaras* (repetitive tendencies) and keep us wading through the same tired *karmas* again and again, and (according to the yoga tradition) likely lifetime after lifetime.

But if fear is the deepest of the deep in terms of being human, how does one root out such elemental stuff and maintain a strong survival instinct?

Yoga/anatomy teacher Leslie Kaminoff was asked in a classroom lecture, “How do you shift a *samskara* [deep habit pattern] that is generated from a bad childhood experience?”

Kaminoff replied:

Make another *samskara*, a positive one that affirms your relationship to a universe that really wants to fill you with your next breath. *Abhyasa* and *vairagya* (consistent practice and non-attachment) is the advice in the [*Yoga*] *Sutras*. Connecting with the positive, disconnecting with the negative—they go hand in hand.⁷

But finding something that connects deeply enough to outweigh our negative tendencies may be a challenge since fear stems from something quite primal.

Neuroscientists have said for decades, “Neurons that fire together wire together.” This means that while practice may not make perfect, regularly doing something helps strengthen the connections in the brain for that skill, and skills such as learning an instrument, speaking a new language, or establishing regular yoga and meditation practices are positive *samskaras*. Mindfulness, too, is a learned skill.

A very practical way to reinforce the brain's rewiring is by literally sleeping on it. If we are poking about on our cell phones (like we do) or watching irritating newscasts before sleep (yep, we do that, too), we reinforce the brain's connection to those activities. If, on the other hand, we listen to Brahms or read a book by Rumi or Eckhart Tolle, we enhance the importance of those activities and memories in our thinking. The reason is something called glial cells⁸ which garden and prune, especially during sleep, the least reinforced synaptic brain connections as though clearing shelf space for what we need. (This is also why that 10–20-minute power nap can make such a big difference in a muddy mind—we prune clutter during even short periods of sleep.)

This is a method of “making a new *samskara*,” as Kaminoff recommends. Finding uplifting and positive input, such as reading, meditating, or using a *mantra* (a sacred phrase or syllable) before sleep. You can encourage your yoga students or clients to practice it, especially before they go to bed, and reinforce its importance during the day through words and actions, so these new skills don't get pruned. Taking breathing or *mantra* breaks or walks during the day, or picking up an inspirational read, can help with that behavior reinforcement and especially consciously reinforce what you want to retain before sleeping.

The process of changing old patterns of fear and addiction may take more than sleeping on it, though. It may take breathing through it.

To paraphrase a talk on fear and addiction by author/yoga teacher Rolf Gates, in an *asana*, or physical postures, class or Yoga Therapy session we can start addressing our fears as they come up via the breath, and rather than going back to old habit patterns, create new habits. He explains:

Your first time in yoga class, when someone tells you to relax, you don't know what they're talking about, but you hear that 10 or 20 times and you finally take a breath and realize you can be in the same pose without holding the same tension... [You think]...I can start dealing with my fear as my fear and not your problem.⁹

But Gates says that dealing with fear is not an intellectual process. Our loops and patterns of fear are neurologically based. He affirms that they are most effectively dealt with via the breath and movement—our primary connections to the nervous system—and, according to author/researcher and psychiatrist Stephen Porges,¹⁰ they are the main route to stimulating the vagus nerve, which we'll address later in more depth. When we take this route, over time, finally, the mind gets the memo.

It seems as though building these new patterns or positive *samskaras* should be straightforward: We see the good of it and getting better at life is the goal, right? Harvard psychiatrist Dr. Srin Pillay's study may indicate this to be a circuitous route. Pillay watched babies who were given a toy toss the object away time and again, only to cry at their loss until it was returned, then (you guessed it) throw it down once more. Researchers assessed this was a lifelong pattern. Humans are hardwired toward negative thinking and we notice the negative such a high percentage of the time, so we are more alert to danger. "We would rather master disappointment, than seek fulfillment," according to Pillay in a 2016 interview with Jon Assaraf.¹¹ This same rule applies to allowing fear to determine our choices and future.

Reprogramming the neural pathways of the mind toward fearless fulfillment, rather than seeking to master disappointment, is not something that happens to us or for us; it happens through us, and it requires a good deal of surrender—what the *Yoga Sutras* refer to as *Ishwara Pranidhana*. In that surrender comes the remembering of who we are: spiritual beings having a human journey (which we'll look at in Chapter 10).

Vedic scholars see the mother root of all fear as *abhinivesha* (fear of death). But why would standing before a podium, or requesting that a botched order in a restaurant be corrected, cause the gut clench of fear, as there is no risk to life there? What is threatened is the life of the ego. We fear humiliation because we identify more with the ego than our higher self, *Atman*.

The ego is perpetually afraid of its own extinction and will do most anything to stay untouched by change. It also has no

room for love, because true selfless love overrides fear of death and has a drastic impact on ego. The parent or lover will not think twice about putting their own life in peril for the one they love. When I was sick as a child, I can remember my mother or father wishing aloud that they could take my illness and suffer themselves rather than see me with a high fever or a brutal cough. A comrade in battle will go back into the line of fire many times to rescue injured friends.

We may not even recognize fear in ourselves and others because it expresses itself so differently in individuals. The ancient science of *Ayurveda* has categories that help us make sense of why some might cower at a personal threat, while another despairs, and a third will resort to retaliation and violence. But they are all faces of fear, and whether life is threatened or our opinions are threatened, the brain reacts in the same way (more about that in a moment).

In an interesting study conducted by neuroscientists at the University of Southern California,¹² an MRI was used to see what area of the brain was affected by having one's political beliefs questioned. Researchers found that the affected areas were the insular cortex, which helps in decision-making and processing feelings, and the amygdala, largely considered "fear central" for the brain's activity. The study showed that when our beliefs and opinions are questioned, we feel threatened. Science has begun to investigate how meditation can positively affect these areas of the brain helping us find calm in the storm.¹³

Yoga asks us to let go of the idea that we are our physical bodies, our emotional states and, yes, even our tightly reinforced and guarded ideas about how the world works, as well as to let go of prickly notions about who we are based on a stance that may or may not be true; the reason being, it does not serve our path to become more self-absorbed, and we can be more effective as catalysts for good when we are practicing *vairagya* (non-attachment).

Now let us explore some therapeutic models for evaluating *dosha*, *kosha*, *vayu*, psychological condition, and stage in the healing process.