

Natural Bravery

Fear and fearlessness as a path to awakening

By [Gaylon Ferguson](#)

This morning I started to list some things I'm afraid of. Like many people, I'm [afraid of dying](#). I'm also afraid of the deaths of my family, friends, loved ones. I fear the loss of loved ones, and I fear the loss of love, being left alone. I have fears related to my ageing body. (Am I exercising enough? Taking the right supplements? What about dodging the bullet of inherited, genetically encoded illness?) As a practitioner journeying on the [Buddhist path](#) to awakening, I've learned to fear the power of my own deeply ingrained habits of ignoring, reacting defensively, distracting myself day and night from the reality of my experience—including the reality of anxiety.

The retreat I call “Natural Bravery”—based on ancient wisdom traditions of [bravery](#) and compassion that are now more valuable than ever—outlines a step-by-step approach to engaging fear as a direct path to transforming ourselves and our world. The aim of this path is wise and joyful living in deep harmony with others and the natural world.

Genuine spiritual practice offers a way to face both our inner and outer worlds and to bring these two related realms into living, loving dialogue. Making friends with our fear—tasting it, chewing it, becoming intimately familiar with it—opens a doorway. We can develop an inner strength and confidence not based on the ups and downs of our contemporary world with its 24/7 rhythm of getting and spending. In the midst of outer and inner famine, violence, intolerance, and cowardice, the Natural Bravery approach invites you to walk the path of courage along with our spiritual ancestors, the brave women and men throughout history who have manifested fearlessness in everyday life.

Natural Bravery begins with discovering courage as our basic nature. This fundamental or original nature manifests as the confidence we demonstrate every day in facing the challenges of relationships, family, work, money, and health. The approach here affirms that we already *are* brave—and that we can strengthen and ripen this innate seed of fearlessness through

mindfulness-awareness meditation practice. As Suzuki Roshi advised his students: “You’re perfect as you are, *and* you could use some improvement.” The journey outlined here proceeds from a glimpse of innate courage through a guided experiential sequence of facing four main fears: the fear of ourselves, the fear of others, the fear of space, and the fear of manifesting.

Making friends with ourselves—with our bodies, emotions, varying states of mind—is the basis of this entire journey into courage. As Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche summarises: “Ultimately, that is the definition of bravery: not being afraid of yourself.” Some of our avoidance of others stems from a lack of confidence in ourselves, in our own capacity for kindness, strength, and resilience. Therefore, a deepening friendship with our own being opens up the possibility of **compassionate engagement with others**. Thus, in a naturally unfolding, organic development, we will learn to extend the same empathy we’ve cultivated toward ourselves to other beings: family, friends, even the animals in our homes and the surrounding natural world. This means transforming the habitual attitude of fearing others to limitless lovingkindness and compassion as our basic way of being alive.

This path toward fully awakened fearlessness continues as we learn to **open into the space around us**: let go of anxiously measuring whether and how we are progressing or regressing on this journey. We discover that the inner voice of judgment is “over monitoring” our progress. Ironically, this hyper busy inner critic sputters and backfires inefficiently. Believing the seemingly nonstop, discursive commentary that courses through our heads simply interferes with letting ourselves be the brave beings we actually are. Such hyper vigilance stems from fear, of course: “If I don’t check myself constantly, won’t I make a mistake?” Letting go of incessantly measuring and comparing ourselves to others leads to spontaneous acts of courage and compassion. It’s like learning a dance step well enough that we no longer need to keep looking down at our feet. Eventually we *feel* the music and the movement, and that’s enough to be perfectly in tune with our partner and right on the beat.

Finally, our main challenge on the path becomes **entering into creative action to face our fear of manifesting**. By now, many of us are quite familiar with spending time sitting on meditation cushions as a mindful expression of lovingkindness and bravery in facing ourselves. But at a certain point, the crucial next step on the spiritual path is *meditation in action*: “Don’t just sit there, *do* something!” As the problems facing our world and the threats to our collective survival on this planet loom ever larger, we cannot separate our inner journey from its natural fulfilment in outer manifestation. The most pressing question for us as spiritual practitioners becomes this: in our homes and workplaces, our neighbourhoods and bioregions, are we expressing wakefulness or weakness, cowardice or courage?

Redefining “art” as any activity proceeding from nonaggressive gentleness and appreciation, my teacher [Trungpa Rinpoche](#) called this the practice of “art in everyday life.” Cooking a meal and cleaning up afterward can be done with the mindfulness and care of artful living. We are, then, the artists of our lives and of our collective destiny, co-creating a disastrous or healthy future: it’s up to us. May all our innate seeds of natural bravery flower as communities of compassionate courage.

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