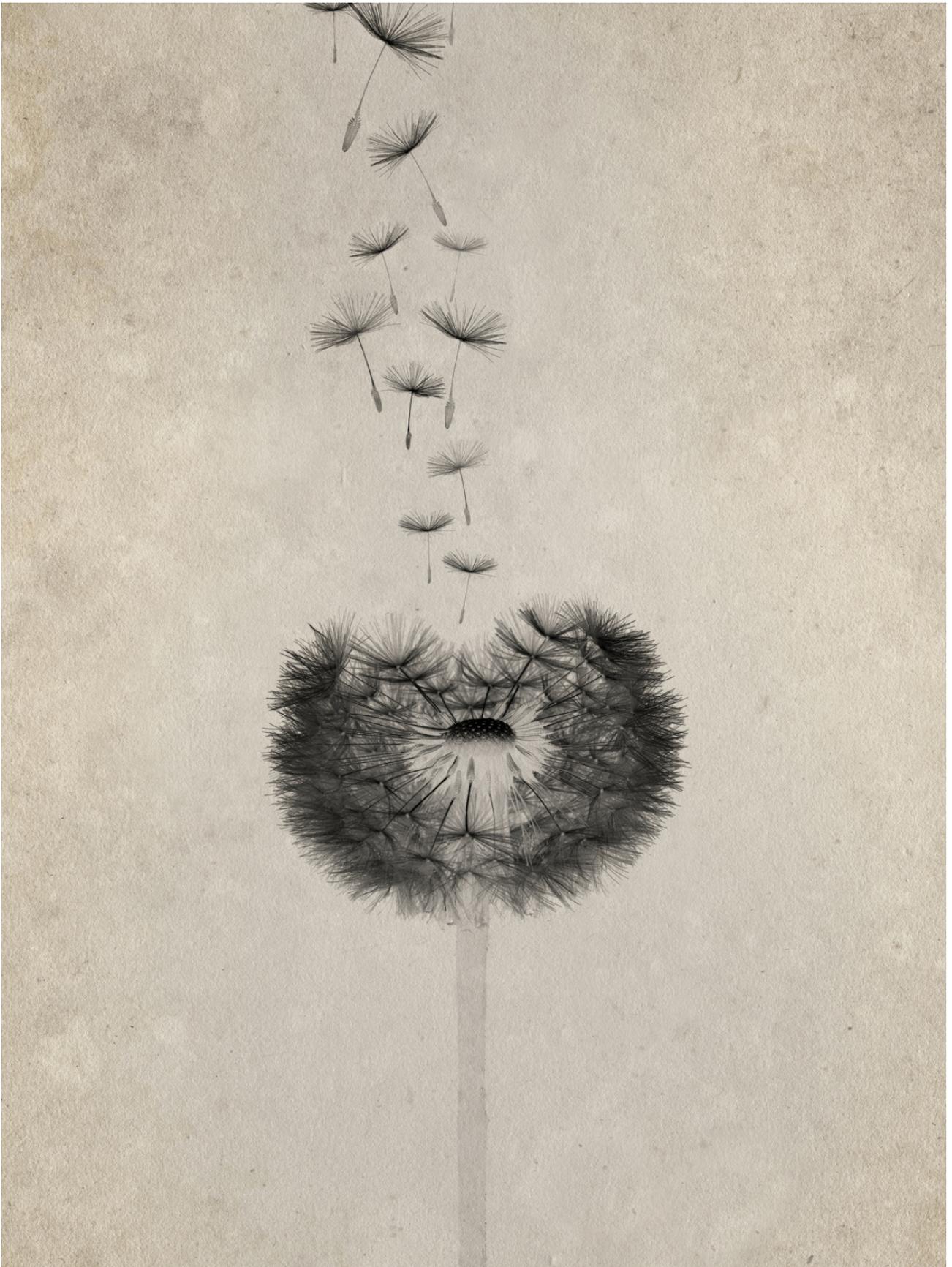


No Beginning, No Ending, No Fear

When you're afraid of what might happen,
remember that all you have is now.

By Norman Fischer



Photograph by PlainPicture

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The Buddha has many epithets. He's called the Enlightened One, the One Who Thus Comes and Goes, the Conqueror, the Noblest of All Humans Who Walk on Two Legs. He is also called the Fearless One because he has seen through all the causes of fear. His awakening moment, coming suddenly after six years of intense meditation, shows him that there is actually nothing to fear. Fear—convincing as it may seem—is actually a conceptual mistake.

What is there to be afraid of anyway? Fear is always future-based. We fear what might happen later. The past is gone, so there's no point in being afraid of it. If past traumas cause fear in us, it is only because we fear that the traumatic event will reoccur. That's what trauma is—wounding caused by a past event that makes us chronically fearful about the future and so queasy in the present. But the future doesn't exist now, in the present, the only moment in which we are ever alive. So though our fear may be visceral, it is based on a misconception, that the future is somehow now. It's not. The present might be unpleasant and even dangerous, but it is never fearful. In the full intensity of the present moment there is never anything to fear—there is only something to deal with. It is a subtle point but it is absolutely true: the fear I experience now is not really present-moment based: I am afraid of what is going to happen. This is what the Buddha realised. If you could be in the radical present moment, not lost in the past, not anxious about the future, you could be fearless.

If you are suddenly threatened by an intense-looking guy pointing a gun at your head, you will likely be frozen with

fear. But even then, it isn't the appearance of the man and the gun that you are afraid of. It's what is going to happen next. It is true, though, that in that moment you are not thinking about the future. Your experience is immediate, body-altering fear. Your reaction is biological; you can't help it. As an animal, you have survival instinct, so when your life is threatened your reaction is automatic and strong. But you are a human animal with human consciousness—a problematic condition, but one with possibilities. It is possible that you could overcome your animal fear.

There are many recorded instances in the scriptures of the Buddha's life being threatened. In all such cases the Buddha remains calm and subdues the threat. Though the stories may or may not be mythical, they certainly intend to tell us that we are capable of overcoming the survival instinct and remaining calm even in the face of grave danger. The truth is, in many dangerous situations the ability to stay calm will keep you safer than your gut reaction of fight or flight.

But what if your life weren't actually being threatened? What if the only thing actually happening to you was insult, disrespect, frustration, or betrayal, but you reacted with the alarm and urgency of someone whose life was at stake? And continued, long after the event, to harbour feelings of anger and revenge? In that case, your reaction would be out of scale with the event, your animal instinct for survival quite misplaced. You would have taken a relatively small matter and made it into something much more unpleasant, and even more harmful, than it needed to be.

Impermanence is the basic Buddhist concept. Nothing lasts. Our life begins, it ends, and every moment that occurs between this beginning and ending is another beginning and ending. In other words, every moment we are disappearing a little. Life doesn't end suddenly at death. It is ending all the time. Impermanence is constant.

Although we all understand this when we think about it, we seem not to be capable of really taking it in.

Buddhism teaches that behind all our fears is our inability to actually appreciate, on a visceral level, this truth of impermanence. Unable to accept that we are fading away all the time, we are fearful about the future, as if somehow if everything went exactly right we could be preserved for all time. To put this another way, all our fears are actually displacements of the one great fear, the fear of death.

These days we have fears that seem to go beyond our personal fear of death. Climate change is a catastrophe. In the fall of 2018 we had terrible forest fires in California. Even as far away from the fires as the San Francisco Bay Area, where I live, you could smell the smoke. You couldn't go outside, the air was so bad. But even worse than the experience was the thought that this is the future, this is how it is going to be from now on. There are going to be more and more fires, hurricanes, typhoons; the ice caps are melting, sea levels and summer temperatures are rising, the planet is slowly becoming uninhabitable. This may or may not be true, but there are good reasons to fear that it is true. So we feel afraid not for our own death but also for our children

and grandchildren and their children and grandchildren. What will happen to them in the future?

I have a friend who is a great outdoorsman and environmental activist. Some years ago, when the US government was just beginning to become active in denying climate change, my friend got really upset. He was upset about climate change realities but even more upset that people weren't paying attention to them, were denying or ignoring climate change, because the government was casting doubt. Here we were in a desperate situation, something needed to be done right away, and people were going on with their ordinary business as though everything were fine.

My friend was in despair over this, and he would tell me about it. As the years went on his despair and upset grew and grew.

One day when he was telling me about it, I thought, It isn't climate change he's upset about. I said this to him, and he got really mad at me. I didn't really know what he was upset about. But it seemed to me that although he believed it was climate change he was upset about, actually it was something else. He stayed for a while and eventually he said, You were right. So, what is it you are upset about? I asked him. He said, Yes, I am upset about climate change, but I didn't realise until you brought it up that there is something else I am upset about: I am getting old, I can't climb mountains like I used to. Who knows how long I will be able to ride my bike for hundreds of miles or do all the things I love to do. I am upset about the climate, but what makes me feel this

anguish is that I am scared of my ageing and dying. The planet really is under threat. And so am I.

So it may be true that the power of our fear always comes from our fear of endings—our own ending being the closest and most immediate of all endings. When we think of the world of the future, we can feel sorrow, grief, and disappointment that we human beings cannot reverse course and do better, that we seem to be unable to solve a problem we ourselves have caused.

But fear is different, fear is desolation, desperation, anguish, despair, and sometimes anger. Grief, sorrow, disappointment are quiet feelings we can live with. They can be peaceful and poignant, they can be motivating.

When we feel these feelings, we can be more compassionate, kinder to one another, we can be patiently active in promoting solutions.

When we understand the real basis of our fear, we can see through it. Will our lives end, will the world end? Yes. But this was always going to be the case. All difficult moments occur in the present, and the present moment, no matter what it brings, is always completely different from our projections about the future. Even if what we fear about the future actually comes to pass, the present moment in which it occurs won't be anything like the moment we projected in the past. Fear is always fantastic, always fake. What we fear never happens in the way we fear it.



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There's a traditional Buddhist practice to contemplate beginnings and endings, called the five reflections. The reflections gently guide the practitioner in meditating on the fact that old age, sickness, and death are built-in

features of the human body and mind, that no one can avoid them. Life begins, therefore it has to end. And being subject to beginning and ending, life is inherently vulnerable.

The point of this meditation isn't to frighten; quite the opposite: the way to overcome fear is to face it and become familiar with it. Since fear is always fear about the future, to face the present fear, and see that it is misplaced, is to reduce it. When I give myself over, for a period of time, or perhaps on a regular basis, to the contemplation of the realities of my ageing and dying, I become used to them. I begin to see them differently. Little by little I come to see that I am living and dying all the time, changing all the time, and that this is what makes life possible and precious. In fact, a life without impermanence is not only impossible, it is entirely undesirable. Everything we prize in living comes from the fact of impermanence. Beauty. Love. My fear of the ending of my life is a future projection that doesn't take into account what my life actually is and has always been. The integration of impermanence into my sense of identity little by little makes me less fearful.

The reflection on beginnings and endings is taken still further in Buddhist teachings. The closer you contemplate beginnings and endings, the more you begin to see that they are impossible. They can't exist. There are no beginnings and endings. The *Heart Sutra*, chanted every day in Zen temples around the world, says that there is no birth and so there is no death either. What does this mean? We are actually not born. We know this from science, there is nothing that is created

out of nothing—everything comes from something, is a continuation and a transformation of something that already exists. When a woman gives birth, she does not really give birth, she simply opens her body to a continuation of herself and the father of the child, to their parents and their parents before them, to the whole human and nonhuman family of life and nonlife that has contributed to the coming together of preexisting elements that we will see as a newborn child. So there really is no birth. This is not a metaphorical truth. If no beginning, then no ending. There is no death. In what we call death the body does not disappear. It continues its journey forth. Not a single element is lost. The body simply transforms into air and water and earth and sky. Our mind travels on too, its passions, fears, loves, and energies continue on throughout this universe. Because we have lived, the world is otherwise than it would have been, and the energy of our life's activity travels onward, circulates, joins and rejoins others to make the world of the future. There is no death, there is only continuation. There is nothing to be afraid of.



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