

Out of Fear

Meditation wasn't the great panacea Susan Piver had hoped for, because fear and the other negative emotions didn't just go away. But it did lead her to a surprising discovery—to fear less you've got to open more.



WHEN I BEGAN PRACTICING BUDDHISM in 1995, I hoped it would help me cope with depression, make me more loving, and, mainly, decrease the level of fear that seemed to always accompany me—fear of financial ruin, war, my own unlovability, and who could be calling me on the phone. And it really helped with these things; I calmed down a lot. But it also happened that even deeper fears and unresolved pain surfaced, presenting themselves for consideration. The more I meditated, the shakier I felt. Was this what was supposed to happen? Anything could make me fall apart. Suddenly it was like I had PMS all the time. Was I going crazy? Where was the famous equanimity alleged to be associated with Buddhism?

In the meditation tradition it's said that when one begins to practice, it's like all the dead fish at the bottom of the harbor suddenly float to the top, bloated and stinky. It seemed like this was what was happening to me. The more I practiced, the harder everything hit me and the more afraid I became. The barriers that had kept emotion at a comfortable distance were coming down. No longer pinned

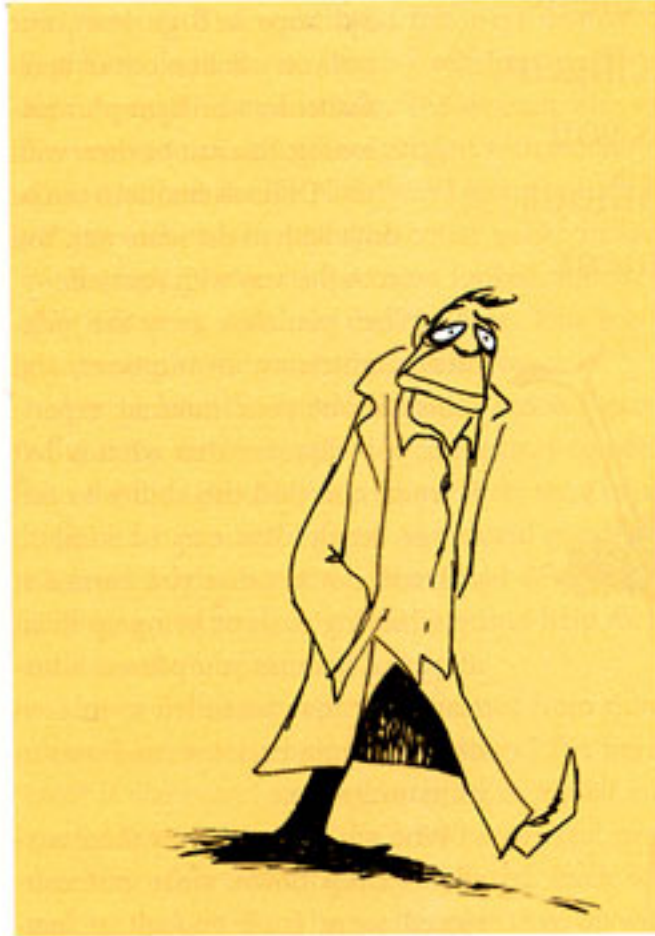
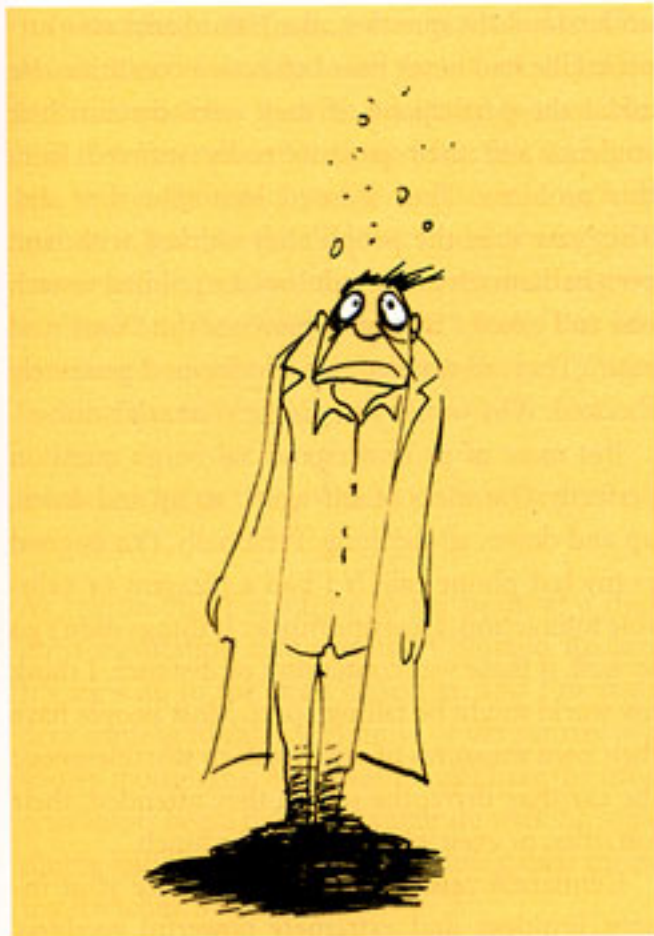
by the weight of complete ignorance, fear bobbed up. There was no choice but to look at it.

This may not be the greatest time in history to begin reckoning with fear. Forget about being afraid of too much debt or of not finding true love. Now you can fear meeting a terrorist on the subway or that one of us will eat the last fish in the sea. It's unbearable, isn't it? Yet my Buddhist training tells me to be a warrior, and that's something I desperately want to be. But I don't know how.

Oh wait, I do. I do know how. I've been instructed to allow my heart to break in the exact way it already does, for those who suffer in war, for the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, for everyone who believes they're right and someone else is wrong, and for the devastating vulnerability of those I love and those I don't. This vulnerability is real, and with its recognition comes an equally unbearable sense of preciousness and gratitude.

At a certain point of immersion in the spiritual path, you can no longer pretend that everything is going to turn out OK, nor can this hope be tolerated. You can't step back into false security or go for-

ILLUSTRATIONS
BY ANDRÉ SLOB



ward onto ground that won't also give way. All you can do is run as fast as you can off the edge of the cliff into space and, like Wile E. Coyote, notice how your legs keep pumping furiously—even though there is no longer any surface to tread upon.

As it turns out, this state of not-here-not-there creates tremendous fear and discomfort, and there is only one quality that can help: gentleness. The very first person to whom this quality could be extended is yourself. No matter how hard you push you're not going to find solid ground, so the only choice is to relax. Gentleness is allowing what you honestly feel to arise without ignoring it, obsessing over it, cataloging it, or getting freaked out by it. "What is left?" you may be asking. As you discover in meditation, what is left is the present moment and the willingness to try to come back to it, no matter how intense or boring things get.

HOW NOT TO BE AFRAID OF YOURSELF: GENTLENESS

I once ran into a friend and fellow practitioner as I was exiting a contentious business meeting. He

could see that I was upset. (My sobbing must have given me away.) I explained what had happened at the meeting and then expressed dismay at the weakness of my Buddhist practice: "I must be a very poor practitioner if one jerk can throw me so completely into hysterics." He said, "So you think that not getting upset is a sign of progress?" I realized that I had been hoping it was. "No," he said. "Progress is how quickly you can stabilize your attention on what you're feeling. Progress is how quickly you can come back."

The only way to come back to the present moment is to soften and let go, to accept what you're feeling even if it is completely unfair and uncomfortable. And then you sit with it as you would sit with a sad child. When a child is sad, you don't shake him and say, "What is your problem?" You don't ignore him

SUSAN PIVER is the author of How Not to Be Afraid of Your Own Life (St. Martin's Press), a book about Buddhist principles in everyday life. She regularly appears on TV and in print discussing spiritual ideas.