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The Only Thing We Have to Fear is Fear Itself

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On March 4, 1933, the newly elected president of the United States of America, Franklin D. Roosevelt has famously quoted in the very beginning of his speech: “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself” (Roosevelt). Roosevelt later proceeds to say: “nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.” (Roosevelt) After the First World War, came the Great Depression, where there were banks became bankrupt and world economy collapsing and imploding into pieces. For them, for the US, “fear” was thought of the world collapsing with current economic crisis. However, in this currently tumbling situation, what Roosevelt is trying to offer to the people of the United States is hope, and the tables can be turned: It can be used towards their advantage to make “retreat” into “advance”, making fear turn on itself. This concept of fear varies in whatever situation that you are in. While fear can come in ways of worry, anxiety, phobias and concern, overarching in both various time periods and regions of this world, the explanation, interpretation, and the philosophy behind the concept of fear differentiates in many ways. Throughout the course of reading and perceiving the thoughts behind many

different philosophers, there are many ways fear is dealt with, specifically compared in the *Heart Sutra* and *The Bible*, two famous ancient texts that created the pillars of two of the biggest religions all around the globe. This essay deals with what each text and belief think about the concept of fear, from how different texts identify them, to how people who believe in those texts wrap their heads around the concept to overcome fear.

Among numerous Asian philosophy and their texts, one of them stands out most from many that places their focuses and prioritizes in the conditions of one's inner peace and happiness, is Buddhism's the *Heart Sutra*. With the *Heart Sutra* being the primary teachings of Buddha and his beliefs, it focuses on individuals being "empty" and achieving a certain point to where we are internally "peaceful" and how its "Final Goal of Buddhism" for all people to truly achieve *nirvana*, a transcendent state where there is no suffering, greed, nor sense of self, where one has nothing to fear about. The thing an individual must fear about, is well described in the 16th chapter of the *Heart Sutra*, "No Longer Afraid". The introduction of this chapter reads: "and because there are no more obstacles in their mind, they can overcome all fear, destroy all wrong perceptions, and realize Perfect Nirvana." (Hanh 176) Within this chapter, fear is explained as living the life with "wrong perceptions" that causes all the fear, anxiety and suffering. These "wrong perceptions" include: imagining what is impermanent is permanent, misinterpreting something that is causing us suffering for something that will bring us happiness, what is actually taking away our freedom is giving us freedom, and what is impure is pure. These four misconceptions of life are known to be creating the fear and the anxiety that is putting through our world into pain and fear, thus corrupting our lives. Just like how the *Bible* acknowledges Satan to be the axis of evil,

fear and anxiety in the *Heart Sutra*, the main axis of evil that is driving the people into inner corruption with fear, is the mindset of materialism, due to having the wrong point of view towards them. As the *Heart Sutra* explains, “the truth is that those with great power and wealth are the people with the greatest fear, jealousy, and anxiety.” (Hạnh 177). When the people with authorities and wealth hold power, they always tend to desire to hold onto those “values” and “privileges” they have for a very long time, while in the *Heart Sutra*, it is not a privilege but rather the primary reason of the phenomenon of being afraid. Those kinds of individuals with excessive monetary value and forceful authority are afraid to lose the possession which gives them in the delusion of thinking that “they are happy and safe”, whilst they are suffering and struggling to keep it by their dear side. According to the Buddhist value, the way to truly be happy, have no more fear, and to reach nirvana is to simply let go of those materialistic occupation of their position and possession. This point of fact is directly covered in the story of Bhaddiya, a monk who had been a state governor. In the text, it states: “During [a meditation Bhaddiya was in] he was so happy that he exclaimed, ‘Oh my happiness! Oh my happiness!’ Another monk . . . thought that [he] regretted having given up his status as governor.” (Hạnh 178) The reason why Bhaddiya was so happy is unlike his past, where he had had lots of power, guards, possessions and such that he was afraid to lose, now he “no longer ha[s] any of those things[,] even the title ‘governor’.” (Hạnh 178). He has clearly achieved the understanding of the point of his actions, that he was truly free, and that by doing such a simple action of letting go, he has overcome fear. The logic behind this text and teaching is that according to the *Heart Sutra*, you cannot simply overcome fear due to the actions which you are taking. What truly matters is understanding the reasoning

and the logic that you are taking behind the action. Not only you have to simply let go of the materials that you are holding in possession, but also the feelings, the reluctance to let go of them must also be conquered. Nirvana cannot be reached simply by showing off, but you also need to truly feel that you are reaching that stage. As the *Heart Sutra* claims, Nirvana isn't a "place you can go" (Hanh 179), but an "extinction" and "empty of separate self, empty of weightiness, empty of burden, [and] empty of boundary" (Lion's Roar Staff). Not only the extinction of the actions taken, but also the reasoning and logic behind. Anyone can let go of their title, their wealth, but it takes tremendous time of thinking, training and meditating in the mental, Buddhist way to truly let go of those and overcome the fear the *Heart Sutra* suggests us, just like Bhaddiya and his actions.

If Eastern philosophy provides the concept of overcoming fear in the *Heart Sutra*, then western philosophy provides explanation and the conception of fear in one of the best steady sellers in the world, the *Bible*. There is a song by a thrash metal group Metallica called *Fight Fire with Fire*. Just like an eye for an eye, according to the Bible and its teachings, fear from the Satan and the evil should be fought through the fear of God. According to *Huffpost*, "[t]he phrase 'fear not' is used at least 80 times in the Bible." (Kastner) However, the biggest "fear" that needs to be acknowledged in the Christianity is the "Fear of the Lord", where "God is to be feared because of who He is" (Riddlebarger), even though it does not necessarily mean to be afraid of God. It means to show "reverential fear [and awe] of the Lord," (Revival Ministries International) and respect to his wrath. It is a form of acknowledging for the Christians to show that God is great, greater than any being in the world. The "Fear of God" brings many benefits towards the believers, which starts with the blessing of fearing

God. According to the Proverbs, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Prov 1:7). God teaches to fear him, which is to have a “biblical fear of God, a wonderful thing, and a doorway to life and blessing” (Altrogge) for the believers. What the Christians believe in the sense of fear is that with Jesus has taken all the punishment of the people, when the people sin, God is not meant to punish them, but is meant to discipline them, let them acknowledge the fear of God and what he is capable of accomplishing. To the teachings of the *Bible*, to fear God means to live up to God’s glorious holiness, the exact opposite of sin and evil. It is to deeply respect and admire God that he loves us so much that he makes the believers turn away from fear and sin, through the fear of God, and the respect of his divine. This phenomenon makes us repel from the real evils and fears of Satan. The *Bible* is full of many different hardships to the people following the voices of God and is afraid of God. However, they are meant to make use of this fear, to stiffen their beliefs in Christ and to go through all the fears and the tests with horror and the sins Satan creates for them. According to the Psalms of the *Bible*: “In God I trust, and I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?” (Psalm 56:11), the testimony of praising God grants the ability of him leading the correct way out of the evil fear, being the pillars of fire and clouds as God has granted Moses and his people out of the way from the fear and the wrath of the great Egyptian Empire. To the people, the “Lord is [their] rock, [their] fortress and [their] deliverer.” (Psalm 18:2). The fear of God makes him the divine hiding place, and a source of redemption of “limp[ing] through life riddled with fear and anxiety” (Kastner). For their concern, they will no longer be afraid of the opposing things against them. An eye for an eye, fear for a fear.

As in matters of psychology comes to mind, fear is obviously an inevitable emotion. There cannot be a life where no one is not afraid of a single object, nor have any kind of emotions that relates to situations such as being anxious or nervous. However, that does not make the emotion undefeatable. Both texts, the *Heart Sutra* and the *Bible*, strictly stick and are loyal to their philosophical beliefs in ways of overcoming a certain type of fear of their own. Although they may have their own differences in where the *Heart Sutra* has lots of inner mind situations to deal with, while there is a religious “one above all” being in the *Bible* that will guide them towards overcoming the hate; the fact that they are using themselves and their own willpower to overcome any kind of hardship and fear in their way does not change. Overcoming the fears that you face in life gets you unstuck in any kinds of situation and is certainly a material that will lead to fueling for your success and happiness. By trying to fight the fear of losing your desired values or strictly by believing in the fear of God, it will fight the fear itself and at the end, lead to happiness and spiritual emptiness and peace. After all, the only thing fear has to fear is fear itself.

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Teacher’s comment:

JEON attempts to show the commensurability between the *Heart Sutra* and the *Bible* through the notion of fear. What makes the article interesting is that he discusses that notion at a meta-level, that is, fear itself. As the

title suggests, “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” This essay shows JEON’s deep understanding of fear that lies in ourselves rather than other objects. In reading his work we are told that the possible solution of fear also lies in self-determination that we either empty ourselves or devote ourselves to God, which reminds us the close relationship between happiness and our way of thinking. (LOWE Chun Yip)