Fear – The Attachment to Time

by Peter Shepherd

All fear is, in essence, fear of the future. We are afraid of the things that have not yet happened, but which if they did might bring us pain, suffering or some other discomfort – or stand in the way of some future contentment. And we are afraid that circumstances that are already causing us displeasure may continue in the future.

We may fear losing our jobs and the resulting drop in living standards. We may fear failure for the disapproval it might bring. We may fear having nothing to do because we might get bored. We may fear telling the truth because others may not like us for it. We fear the unknown for the dangers it may bring. We fear uncertainty, not knowing whether or not we will find what we are after.

Here lies a sad irony.

We want to be happy and at peace with ourselves. Yet the very nature of fear makes us anxious in the present and not at peace.

Many of our fears are not so strong that we would label them as fears. They may be just concerns, little niggles we have about how things may turn out. They may not even be conscious concerns – in many cases they surface only in our dreams, in conversation with a friend, or after a couple of drinks. Nevertheless they fill our minds with thoughts.

This is the voice within our heads that comments, often critically, on everything we do. It thinks, “I did that well, people

will approve of me", or "If only I had said it differently she would not have got upset". It is the voice that speculates on the future, "Should I make that telephone call... what if...?" It wonders what other people are thinking and how they will react. It is the voice of fear, the voice of the ego-mind – the part of us that believes that only through what happens to us in the world around can we be at peace within. But filling our minds with worry over what people might or might not think is not the most constructive use we can make of our imagination.

This internal dialogue keeps us trapped in time – it dwells on the past or the future. As long as our attention is in the past or future, we are not experiencing things as they are, we are seeing them through the judgments of the past and our fears for the future. At times we can be so caught up in our self-talk that we do not even notice the present. We ignore what is going on around us, do not really hear what people are saying, do not appreciate how we really feel. So engrossed are we in our concerns that we never seem to pause to let things be. We have lost the present moment – lost the NOW.

This moment is all that exists. This fleeting instant is the only reality. The past is gone forever. The future is not yet born.

Your body is in the NOW. But if you're like most people, your mind is in the past or in the future. You grieve or glory over events of long ago. You harbor resentments and guilt and shame – hangovers from the past. You think of what you should have said or might have been. You fear and fantasize over the future, you worry about every moment of wasted time. You worry about death, not having enough time to achieve your ambitions, the end of your ego. All of which cuts you off from the present like a dark screen.

If you bring the mind from miles away to the activity of the moment, if you abate the clatter in your head to focus on the physical reality surrounding your body, and the sensations from within it, you'll gradually experience a surprising sense of well-being. Indeed, tuning in to the NOW is one gateway to perceiving eternity.

The philosopher Wittgenstein observed: "If we take eternity to mean not infinite temporal duration but timelessness, the eternal life belongs to those who live in the present". By experiencing a moment for itself, you stop time. Time is defined as the interval between two events. When you are in the NOW there is no interval, only the event alone.

The concept of the NOW has great validity when dealing with emotions and the senses. NOW is a point at which you are in touch with the ongoing process. Past and future take their bearings continuously from the present and must be related to it. Without reference to the present, they become meaningless.