

Hi Robert,

I am no expert, but this is my understanding.

It seems to be around the third or fourth stage of shamatha that anxiety is strongest. We are no longer distracted so much by our thoughts, and thus we are left with this pent up raw mental energy that previously we were turning into a storyline. That is basically all anxiety is, just mental excitement without a storyline. In the fourth stage of shamatha the main obstacles are excitement and dullness; anxiety followed by mental torpor. The stronger one is, the stronger is the other. Over the next few stages of shamatha anxiety and mental torpor are gradually tamed and a cool boredom is developed until the eighth stage is reached and anxiety and mental torpor no longer arise.

Anxiety itself occurs because we are holding the mind too tightly, but holding the mind a little too tightly was necessary for us to get this far. As we progress it will become more subtle and relaxed. Dissolve into space on the outbreath.

As our aversion to this energy decreases, we no longer have to give it the negative label of anxiety. It is just mental excitement, a texture with the same taste as any other.

Greg Houston

Hi, Robert-

Yes, it sounds very familiar, and in my experience what it means is that all those years of practice are finally getting around to their real purpose, which is to uncover the baggage we've got on board so we can unpack it and sail more lightly through the world.

This is real warrior's work, not for the faint-hearted, and not quick. I know from personal experience since five years ago on retreat, after 28 years of practicing and more than 25 of teaching Shambhala Training, I recovered memories that had been totally repressed for more than fifty years. The excavation and reclamation project is ongoing but feels nearly done; glad to report basic goodness is irrepressible. The short version, suitable for email, is that you have to treat the anxiety with inquisitiveness and relentless attention, going toward it rather than trying to escape it or make it go away. Ask what it is trying to tell you. It's an elaboration on our Shambhala practice of fearlessness; instead of just facing the fear, staying with it, one cultivates friendliness and curiosity about it. There's a book by Anne Weiser Comell, called "The Power of Focusing," that I found helpful.

The longer version would have to be an oral transmission, by phone or in person sometime when you come to KCL. Don't suppose you want to staff a Level I-III beginning at the end of this month?

yours in warriorship,  
Carol

Possibly various sources, Robert. Each one of our paths is so personal and individual.

I've been around since 1974. On retreat in 2006, I experienced emptiness in a much more direct way than ever before. Since then there have been some experiences of anxiety that have been both intense, and odd. I think it's been the anxiety of my ego really knowing, at certain points, that there's no bottom to the whole thing, no ground, no big payoff for "me" because there is no "me". I sorta stand around and say, "So now what am I supposed to do?" Having been motivated so much by the carrot-and-stick approach, and by some payoff "for me", I'm at times dumfounded. Even if I'm doing something for the benefit of others, in the past it has still been translated into "me", somehow.

Really contemplating the Four Reminders, especially impermanence and death can, at times, produce anxiety in me.

I think sometimes as more senior students, the experience of emptiness gets "vaster" (sorry - the best word I could think of), deeper, more real and less conceptual, like all the walls suddenly falling away. So perhaps scarier because it's simply a more profound experience of something only partially experienced.

I'm also a 1984 Naropa Psych Program graduate. In general, the Western psychological conception of anxiety is that it's displaced feelings of any kind (anger, sexuality, fear, etc.), from any source, that we've stored and don't want to face. So if our personal tendency is to warehouse our own personal emotional energy of any kind, increasing anxiety could just be some of this stored energy beginning to emerge as the karma of our life unfolds.

I've also heard Judith Simmer-Brown talk about anxiety as the result of having a body, of being human and so vulnerable to every little change that happens in our lives. Needing to be or to feel "in control", and the reality is, we can't be in control of life.

I hope this is helpful. Tom

Robert, In my remarks about Acharya Judith, I forgot to mention another point she made about anxiety - that we are depressed and anxious precisely because we are by nature so open, so vulnerable to everything that comes along, and we want to deny impermanence at the same time, so we find a way of shutting down. Tom

Yeah,

I think it is not unusual. I don't know about later stages of the Path. I am still well on the path years after anxiety attacks!!!

however, to be a little more detailed: at one point I was practicing vajrayogini and Werma on alternate days and got into brilliant blind panic. I began to be quite scared about even beginning practice each day and finally just backed off for a while - maybe a mistake. Maybe I should have toughed it out. Don't know.

The traditional Buddhist explanation for this kind of experience is that it is the recourse of ego when emptiness or the possibility of giving up on a habitual pattern of mind begins to dawn and the psyche(?) heart(?) is not prepared or strong enough to go there fearlessly. In which case it is likely good to battle on thru, giving oneself a great deal of maitri etc. However that decision is up to the individual practitioner. You can, without enough insight or capacity to let go go over some edge and end up damaging yourself, or unbalancing to such a degree that it is tough to recover. I suppose that is the result of some unacknowledged internal conflict - between ego' conventional view and the spaciousness of simply letting go.

Since you are asking on line, I take it you do not have a close relationship with a meditation instructor??? And not knowing you it is difficult to give advice. However I would examine that anxiety as it arises - if you use the analogy of travelling a rocky, muddy, snowy path - each step becomes something to take carefully. You cannot just try to fly over the obstacles - so when anxiety arises meet it fully in the moment it arises, resolve it within the context of the visualisation. Where are you hanging on to boundaries? What does it actually feel like?? if you fully examine it can you make friends with it? - see what it is fundamentally?

I wish you well in your practice,

Cicely Berghund.

Dear Robert,

We have practiced together a number over the last 5 years or so. I think the first time at the first dathun with the Sakyong. I have a strong affinity for your question, as my path altogether has been propelled into being by my experience of anxiety. I am also currently practicing Werma.

There are a few things that I have mapped for myself, and one is that as I am approaching a practice transition, my experience of anxiety (in my case, feelings of panic, racing heart, shaking and shivering etc.) increases. I have been sustained by observing that fact. However, it doesn't necessarily decrease the intensity. Sometimes, I have simply had to relax and shake and shiver until I am done. A psychotherapist I worked with shared that her shaman said that is fear leaving the body. Kinda like the Marines and pain. :-)

I have a few stories and quotes I remember, which are also helpful to me. One, from Georgia O'Keefe, seems the epitome of fearlessness. She said, "I have been absolutely terrified every day of my life, and it never kept me from doing a single thing I wanted to do." Another is a dream I had with Trungpa Rinpoche appearing. In the dream, I am in a state of this anxious fearfulness, curled almost fetal as he is approaching a shrine room door to give a teaching. I am outside the room in the entry hall. He sees me in my wretched state and says very matter-of-factly, "You're okay." I also remember the Sakyong saying at my seminary, "Rerax." When we laughed at him quizzically, he said, "Well sometimes if you say it with an accent it sounds better."

I have noticed since Rigden abisheka (this past September) a stronger dance with my friend anxiety. I imagine we are like a couple who have tried fighting, ignoring and now, maybe we could approach joining. But it will mean giving something up. That is my koan. What is it that I try to abandon my own energetic information? When all else fails, I try to experience humor. See a funny movie, talk with friends who don't take things too seriously, go dancing, let my children remind me of no big deal.

I send good wishes to you on your journey, and I hope this can be of some help. Let me know if you find some nuggets of wisdom to send my way.

Yours in the Vision of the Great Eastern Sun,

Dear Robert,

I'm a retired clinical psychologist. Am also currently doing WERMA as my main practice. Did Vajrayana seminary in 2005, so I'm still pretty new at Vajrayana view & practices.

I have experienced lots of anxiety and/or depression since seminary. From talking with local vajrayana sangha, senior students at practice centers, teachers & Acharyas, I understand a practitioner's increased feelings of emotional openness and rawness are normal, and often useful as one more fully understands "great perfection and great equanimity". I just did a week long solitary Werma retreat and had a "full monty" emotional drama... along with insights, bliss, equanimity, laughter, humor, playfulness

My primary face to face teacher is an Acharya. She suggests gently leaning into the emotion and reactivity, and being fully willing to give myself loving kindness as needed. Notion is finding balance. Her perspective is that the path gets more interesting as we allow the dharma to soften us up, as our ego begins to loosen up, as habitual defensive patterns relax. Seems to fit!

If the emotions become debilitating in terms of being able to minimally do your livelihood and domestic situation, you could consider getting a consult for appropriate meds. When I was still doing clinical psychology, I found the right med often helped clients get going again. Trial and error seems to be helpful in determining, which med, if any, to use. A specific med might seem indicated, but often it can take experimenting with two or three before one finds the med that has a desirable primary effect without debilitating undesirable side effects. I am currently using a moderate amount of the anti-depressant Cymbalta, which also has some anti-anxiety effects for me. Again, each person has to find what works best for them. Sometimes a little chemical crutch can be useful, and also you need to know when to let go of the crutch.

You'll probably get a few replies to your question. Some practitioners and teachers can be rigid about not using meds, only promoting use of "natural" approaches. I think this can be too extreme, like any fundamentalist position. But, like any other useful or powerful practice, it's advisable to use discriminating wisdom.

Be happy to continue this discussion if it's helpful.

Dear Robert,

I am not sure exactly what kind of information you are looking for about practice and anxiety however, I will share a bit of my experience.

I have practiced for more than 30 years. Not a day has gone by that I did not experience my limit of anxiety. Practice has made the anxiety more vivid and less solid. If a particular practice is invoking anxiety you might want to look at what it is about the practice that is troubling you. If it's just you, just your anxiety, being uncovered, that is something to be thankful for. Let the bugs out from under the carpet

Best Wishes,  
Charles Burnell,  
Gainesville, FL

Robert, Hi, yes I have struggled with this myself, and Tsoknyi Rinpoche talks about how many westerners have a culturally incurred subtle body (lung) imbalance due to excessive fear and how vase breathing can help to ground here:

<http://buddhistmala.com/store/Lung.doc>

One time on retreat I suddenly started having a particularly hard time and I simply did not know what to do. I felt frozen, like I was suffocating, from fear I guess, and unable to connect with anything. I tried everything I knew and I lit an extra offering candle on my practice table each day. On the 3rd day of this, when I was feeling really desperate, and crying on my cushion, the Vidhadhara appeared to me, just his head bouncing in front of me, with a big grin saying, "You can do it sweetheart." I melted and the rest of the retreat went well.

I wonder if we were really awake if it would be something like free fall all the time, but there would be no problem; we'd be completely relaxed.

*"I want to start by making a confession, which may sound strange coming from someone regarded as a reincarnate lama who is supposed to have done all sorts of wonderful things in previous lifetimes. From earliest childhood, I was haunted by feelings of fear and anxiety. My heart raced and I often broke out in a sweat whenever I was around people I didn't know. There wasn't any reason for the discomfort I experienced. I lived in a beautiful valley, surrounded by a loving family and scores of monks, nuns, and others who were deeply engaged in learning how to awaken inner peace and happiness. Nevertheless, anxiety accompanied me like a shadow. . . .*

*(As time went on) I actually found myself growing more distracted than before. All sorts of things annoyed me; physical discomfort, background noises, conflicts with other people. Years later I would come to realize I wasn't actually getting worse; I was simply becoming more aware of the constant stream of thoughts and sensations I'd never recognized before. Having watched other people go through the same process, I realize now that this is a common experience for people who are just learning to examine their mind through meditation. . . .*

*In hindsight, I can say that what I was actually going through was what I like to call a "nervous breakthrough". . . . With each passing week it seemed that the mental and emotional landscape I was looking at grew more and more frightening. . .*

*Gradually I began to recognize how feeble and transitory the thoughts and emotions that had troubled me for years actually were, and how fixating on small problems had turned them into big ones. Just by sitting quietly and observing how rapidly, and in many ways illogically, my thoughts and emotions came and went, I began to recognize in a direct way that they weren't nearly as solid or real as they appeared to be."*

Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche; *The Joy of Living*

*“Most of us are afraid all the time. All the time there is this underlying fear. So, it is very helpful to realize that this is not going to go away particularly - but how we can relate to it can be quite different.”*

*“Its not even a fear of something. Usually fear, at the most basic level, comes up from a loss of reference point. We would love to understand, but we don't understand, and that scares the hell out of us”*

*Acharya John Rockwell*

*“What is this fear? What is this fear that has been black-mailing me all my life?”*

*Who is holding the cards?*


*Our fear is a deep hesitation about who and what we are. How we relate to our fear is very important. Generally, we only experience watered down fear that has been processed and labeled and packaged according to the habitual patterns of our cocoon. We have a factory which makes conceptual fright masks, and, as fear arises, we dress what was pure and powerful fear in all sorts of outfits. When we do this our fear is not experienced directly - it is experienced circumstantially according to our habituation. For many lifetimes we have developed elaborate stories around our fear*

*Real fear is the gift of the Rigdens. Basic anxiety has its roots in the vastness of the cosmic mirror. If we don't package our fear with a storyline it goes all the way down to the surface of awake, all the way to East.*

*It turns out that our shyness is not really about our weight, our intelligence, or what people think about us. It is about the fact that we are the Rigden, that we are already awake. We are tremendously shy about that.*

*Therefore it is said that in the path of warriorship that it is necessary to develop fear and fearlessness at the same time. Without experiencing real fear it is impossible to discover fearlessness. Generally, we think fear is in the way of our warriorship; but at its root, our fear is our warriorship. It is the skate blade itself, cutting into the profound and brilliant ice of nowness.*

**Dan Hessey**



BY THE GOLDEN SUN OF THE GREAT EAST  
MAY THE LOTUS GARDEN  
OF THE RIGDEN'S WISDOM BLOOM

MAY THE DARK IGNORANCE  
OF SENTIENT BEINGS BE DISPELLED  
MAY ALL BEINGS ENJOY PROFOUND BRILLENT  
GLORY

