

Thoughts on meditation for anxiety relief

Many people turn to meditation to relieve anxiety and stress, to build our capacity for resilience.

There are, however, two distinct approaches to anxiety in mindfulness meditation. And they lead to different kinds of results.

The first approach is by far the most common: meditation helps you calm down. We calm and steady the mind by sustaining the attention on a single “anchor” such as the breath, or a phrase or mantra, or the sensations of the body. Gradually, thoughts begin to thin out and a greater degree of spaciousness is available. Doing this brings about a kind of inner peacefulness.

Yet the second, perhaps less common way of working with anxiety in meditation actually has more lasting benefits to the practitioner. And that is to look at our experience and learn from it. We still cultivate calm and inner silence, but we use this to prepare for inquiry.

For example, looking directly at anxiety, we begin to see its impermanent and impersonal nature; it is just a transitory experience, not “me” or “mine.” We see that awareness of anxiety is separate from the experience of anxiety. We see that anxiety is present because of the want or need to control that which is uncontrollable.

This kind of wisdom, not passing experiences of calm, is what brings lasting peace and inner freedom.

Now, sometimes it’s still best to focus on calm. For example, trying to fall asleep at night when anxiety is keeping us awake is usually not the time to look directly at the anxiety. It is usually much better to bring the attention to an object such as the breathing, and relax into sleep.

But when it is possible to look directly at anxiety, the results can be fruitful and liberating. To try it, think of this process as having three steps.

First, to inquire in this way means to open to many experiences, instead of sustaining attention only on the anchor. Instead of isolating the attention on one object, such as the breathing, we broaden the field of awareness to include whatever is happening in the present moment. What is being felt? What is being thought?

Simply knowing that a mental state is a mental state – *aha, this is anxiety* – is a huge leap of consciousness. With this conscious knowing of our experience, we can make different choices

in our lives rather than have our actions and thoughts by dictated by our conditioning.

The second step is opening, allowing, and accepting whatever is coming up. We accept what is, even if it is difficult (as anxiety generally is). We get close to it in order to discern for ourselves what will perpetuate misery and what will bring greater peace. Can I simply be with this?

After that, the third step is one of discernment. We look at what has been accepted, to see whether it is to be encouraged or let go of. Is it true? Is this helpful or hurtful?

In this way, we cultivate an openness to learn from experiences, to bring a sense of curiosity to the experiences that occur in our lives. This seeing is known as insight: seeing into how things are, so that we can live in harmony instead of in struggle.

This kind of insight is beyond intellect. If we just know intellectually, we won't be able to live what we know. To know in our hearts and in our bodies allows us to be in alignment with nature instead.

Then insight becomes possible—the kind of liberating insight necessary to know peace of mind. Anxiety decreases not because we become better at banishing it once it arises, but because we have learned to coexist with it, to learn from it, and to not be captured by it. Gradually, it stops arising so much.

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