

## A Meditator's Toolkit for Anxiety and Sadness

Tonight's topic is techniques or tools we might use when we find ourselves in situations of anxiety or sadness or depression. We'll start with a few minutes of a kind of Metta meditation, which we will say is tool number one, then I'll share some ideas on additional tools, and then go into some discussion questions. I have experience with some level of depression, so that is more what you might call my specialty. I've been reluctant to ever label it depression, though. I've always just called them moods. When I read accounts of severely depressed people, what life is like for them, I know there are vast hells I've definitely not even glimpsed. I don't have as much experience with anxiety. So one thing to think about for the discussion, is: are there specialized tools you use or can think of that are good for anxiety but not as useful for depression?

Let's start with a brief period of Metta or kindness meditation.

*Start by watching your breath, letting yourself become calm and relaxed.*

*Let your mind become clean and free from impurities; free from lust, hatred and ignorance; free from all evil thoughts.*

*Fill your heart and mind with peaceful and sublime thoughts of boundless love, overflowing compassion, sympathetic joy, and perfect equanimity.*

*I release from my mind and heart all anger, ill will, cruelty, violence, jealousy, envy, passion, and aversion.*

*May I be well and happy!*

*Now think of a child, or maybe a pet, innocent and vulnerable, who needs kindness and care. Maybe your child, your child at a younger age, a grandchild, or you might recall a photograph of yourself at a young age. Bring this image into your mind and heart. Let yourself feel tenderness and compassion for this innocent being. Watch that feeling of tenderness for a few moments.*

*You right now are also innocent and vulnerable, and you deserve that care and compassion.*

*May I be well and happy!*

*May I be free from suffering, unease, grief, worry, and anger!*

*May I see humor and lightness in everyday situations.*

*May I be strong, self-confident, healthy, and peaceful!*

*Usually in a metta meditation we then expand these feelings we've cultivated, extending our kindness out in expanding circles.*

- near and loved ones*
- family and friends*
- out to all beings everywhere.*

*What I have gained I now give to others. "May all beings be well and happy!"*

*Think that all are your brothers and sisters, fellow-beings in the ocean of life. Identify yourself with all of them. You are one with all.*

*For this meditation, let's end by coming back to that image of ourselves, innocent, vulnerable, needing and deserving compassion.*

*May I be well and happy!*

<bell>

Our topic is a meditator's toolkit for anxiety and sadness. This kind of loving-kindness meditation is tool number one. A good, general purpose tool, like pliers. Useful for many situations. First we give ourselves metta or loving-kindness like we just did, then we extend it to others and in doing so we use it to recognize our connection with them. I think a lot of the time we skip over ourselves kind of quickly, thinking that developing metta for others is the important part. And sometimes we may question whether we deserve the love and caring we're willing to direct out to others. I know if I look at all deeply I can find a heavy dose of feeling unworthy behind my "moods". If we are hurting with sadness or anxiety, we are especially needing this kindness from ourselves.

Andrew Solomon wrote in '[Anatomy of Melancholy](#)':

"When you are depressed, the past and the future are absorbed entirely by the present, as in the world of a three-year-old. You can neither remember feeling better nor imagine that you will feel better. Being upset, even profoundly upset, is a temporal experience, whereas depression is atemporal. Depression means that you have no point of view."

Professor Maurice Schweitzer, University of Pennsylvania:

<http://onthejob.45things.com/2013/01/why-anxiety-may-prompt-you-to-take-bad.html> :  
"Anxiety increases the cognitive load so you may be unable to think about much else besides what's making you anxious."

You can see in those descriptions where the ability to break through, if possible, with some self-metta would be quite helpful. (Kind of interesting, though, that Solomon describes being "absorbed entirely by the present" as part of a problem, when that is a good part of what we're trying to do in meditation! I think there is a good discussion to be had in that dilemma, but it isn't for now.)

As for connection: There is the well-known story of the grieving mother who repeatedly begged the Buddha to bring her child back to life. He finally said that she would have to bring him a single mustard seed from a house that had not experienced grief. She went house to house searching, hearing the stories of the loss that has been experienced at each house, and finally realizing how her pain connected her with everyone else's. It didn't diminish her sadness. It didn't bring back her child. It probably did great things for her compassion, though. Sadness or depression can be extremely isolating. Feeling it shared may help keep us going. Maybe feeling compassion for others is an easier place to start, and then we can open to giving it to ourselves, too.

Connection can also come from meditating with a group, being part of a community. Do you think you could find your mustard seed in this room?

Then there is also the story in the suttas with the metaphor of multiple arrows—where the pain you feel (physical or emotional) is the first arrow, and then as you layer on more suffering it is as if you are stabbing yourself with additional arrows. It seems to that depression may epitomize those multiple arrows more than any other suffering we experience. We may feel low, maybe through brain chemistry, maybe through hearing the news or an injury or a loss. Arrow one. Then the guilt, the reliving the event, the imaginings, the stories, the unworthiness, the growing monster we construct of a bleak and meaningless existence and no future. Arrows, arrows, arrows.

If in the midst of that construction of a mood, we can notice that we're stabbing ourselves, and just note it the way we note experiences in meditation, we can break some of the momentum. I sometimes can catch myself building a mood that way. I use the one-word question, “Really?” It kind of shines a light on the fabricating that I'm doing.

The tools of the Buddha's Right Effort, which was the subject of Ajahn Geoff's recent weekend with us, can help stop the arrows.

You'll notice that these are more specialized tools. We don't saw a board in two with a screwdriver, but in the right situation a screwdriver is good to have.

Recall that there are 4 Great Efforts in the Buddha's Right Effort:

1. Avoid the arising of unwholesome behavior or situations.
2. Dispel harmful behavior that has already arisen.
3. Develop beneficial behavior.
4. Nurture, cultivate wholesome behavior that we already have.

So for the first two, think of smoking: 1. If you don't smoke, don't start. 2. If you do smoke, stop. For numbers 3 and 4, think of exercising: 3. If you don't exercise, start. 4. If you do exercise, keep it up.

So where preventing the multiple arrows is concerned, it is the 2nd Great Effort where we look for tools. If you smoke, stop. How do we stop? The sadness or anxiety have arisen. We want to dispel them, and we certainly don't want to feed them. But it may not be easy. Many times no matter how much it hurts it seems there is an attractiveness to wallowing in those old familiar emotions awhile. I've watched myself do that as a mood is coming on, and it's like standing at the counter when you promised you quit smoking that morning, and you know it's the wrong thing to do, but you hear yourself saying “Give me a pack of L&M's, please.”

There are some techniques Ajahn Geoff suggested might be applied to anxiety or sadness. I want to acknowledge John Fries for assembling the items in this list for us, in a talk he prepared for the teacher corps last year. John pointed out that western psychologists call these interventions.

**1. The Different Object:** Replace the anxious or depressed thoughts with the opposite wholesome thought

- with restlessness & anxiety John recommends meditation on a simple object that leads to calm, especially the breath
- I suppose for depression it could be finding some image that brings joy to your heart. A child or grandchild or pet.

**2. Disadvantages:** Reflect on the undesirable consequences ("drawbacks") of uncontrolled anxiety or depression.

- stress, high blood pressure, compromised immunity
- difficulty sleeping
- robs us of pleasure in the moment
- can lead to unskillful speech and action & the consequences of such unwholesome karma
- it's a hindrance to meditation
  - by reflecting on these dangers, we can sometimes set aside our anxiety with the thought that the pernicious effects of such intense anxiety are certainly more dangerous and certain than the possible future event that we are anxious about
    - if we can really trust that most of our fears are unwarranted, it becomes possible to set aside much of our anxiety as simply a waste of mental energy.

(This seems a difficult one to me. To me it doesn't seem to be a state that is very susceptible to reasoned argument. Does considering the disadvantages of staying anxious or depressed help you?)

**3. Non-Attention & Non-Reflection:** Redirect attention elsewhere. This is another subtle one, because it isn't ignoring or turning away from the impulse, but skillfully noting it and moving on. That's how I interpret it.

- This is really just another application of noting this thought or this mood as a mental perception, nothing more, and returning to breath. Over and over.
- The commentaries suggest additional ways to redirect the mind: reading the Dharma, reciting a sutta aloud, saying out loud or mentally noting the names of objects in view, or simply doing some skillful physical activity. It might be a place to use a mantra meditation.
- Barbara Fredrickson in her book Positivity calls these "healthy distractions" that we can use to break the dangerous spiral of proliferation that is feeding the mood. Her examples include taking a walk, playing music, cooking a meal, etc.

**4. Searching the Cause:** Confront the anxiety directly as an object of meditation, scrutinize its features, and investigate its cause.

- Use the felt sense of anxiety or sadness (in the body) as an object of meditation. These are the Sense Doors that were the subject of last week's program. Turn to face the sensations, and examine them. Watch it moment to moment.
- Observe the thoughts themselves as they arise and pass, so as not to get carried away in the stream of thoughts or build on them.
- Bhikku Bodhi suggests we ask "Why am I thinking this? And why am I feeling that?" Investigate the source of the thoughts and feelings. It has the benefit of keeping us occupied with something other than the thoughts, as well as giving us insights into their cause.

**5. Restraining:** Vigorously suppress the thought with your will.

- For example, firmly saying to yourself "Stop! Just stop all this fussing and fretting. Remember the irrefutable logic of the ancient Stoics:<sup>1</sup> *If you can do something about a situation, take concrete action. Worrying serves no purpose. If the situation is beyond your control, becoming*

<sup>1</sup>

See, for example, Irvine, William B. A Guide to the Good Life: The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy.

[http://bellingham.bibliocommons.com/item/show/902357044\\_a\\_guide\\_to\\_the\\_good\\_life](http://bellingham.bibliocommons.com/item/show/902357044_a_guide_to_the_good_life)

Epictetus & Lebell, Sharon. *The Art of Living: The Classical Manual on Virtue, Happiness, and Effectiveness*:  
[http://bellingham.bibliocommons.com/item/show/873649044\\_the\\_art\\_of\\_living](http://bellingham.bibliocommons.com/item/show/873649044_the_art_of_living)

*anxious will not change that. Again, worrying serves no purpose. See the sense of this reasoning and just stop worrying!"*

I'll stop there with ideas of tools. In the discussion we'll ask you to consider these and maybe add techniques that work for you.

Discussion Questions:

1. What tools do you use for these difficult emotional states? Have you ever used any that we've mentioned? If so, what worked and what didn't?
2. Are there other techniques you use with troubled emotional states?
3. For brevity we've lumped sadness, depression, anxiety together. Are there techniques we've mentioned you think are better suited for anxiety than for depression, or vice versa?