
On Anxiety

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Excerpts on anxiety from teachings given at Kamalashila, Germany

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Excerpts

Recently I was watching a little video for children, about an elephant who wanted to fly. The elephant couldn't fly, but friends somehow managed to get him up a tree, and a friendly cloud came and floated underneath. The elephant jumped from the tree onto the cloud, and he fell right through it! In the same way, emptiness is like a cloud and we are like elephants. Until we become very light, we will keep falling through; we won't be able to stay in emptiness because we are too heavy.

...

Garab Dorje didn't say that what you find in samsara is horrible. He said that if we build up our life on comfort and nice things, then sooner or later when that vanishes, we will suffer. We have to recognise that since samsara is very familiar for us, leaving it will not be without anxiety, especially since we are leaving into a realm we don't know.

...

On this essential point of recognising our real nature, there is nothing to recognise. It's not a cognition. It's being at home in something which is familiar because it has always been there, yet strange, because we are not used to it. To be at home in oneself means to recognise how false you have become.

...

Samsara is a state of anxiety. In samsara subject and object are separated, and we find ourselves strongly identified with the subject. The subject needs something from the object and yet is fearful of the object. The object is not really separate from it—the object is not really other than it—and yet it can't relax. This is the fundamental structure.

Anxiety: samsara is a state of anxiety, because we are not at home

I will say a little bit about the nature of anxiety since it is common to us all and points to something important. There is outer and there is inner anxiety.

Outer anxiety is about particular problems and situations which are hard to deal with, and these include relations, money, housing and so on. Generally speaking, anxiety is a relationship to a situation in which we fear that the outcome won't be the one that we want, or that the outcome is unpredictable. We stay in a state of 'not knowing' for longer than we feel we can cope with. When we are anxious, we don't settle. Our energy is pulled up; we tend to be in the upper part of our body. As thinking gets more involved we often lose the support and sense of our breath. We are not centred in our energy chakra which is situated below the navel. This kind of anxiety is just situational, contingent, and will arise according to the various provocations of life. If we don't have a capacity to relax, there is not all much we can do about it. What we *can* do is to observe the way in which we feed the anxiety, by investing time and energy in thought and feeling about it.

One important thing is to observe our use of language. For example, if a small thing occurs and we say, *'I have a problem'* we have immediately concretised the situation. It may not be a problem, or if it *is* a problem that can be solved, it won't be helped by saying *'I have a problem,'* whereby there is an affective enrichment. It could be that we're making a simple description, that 'there is a problem', but if we say, *'I have a problem.'* there is a sense of being impacted quite firmly by that.

The use of language is often extremely provocative to the surrounding environment. Histrionic and anxious language use creates streams of upset and disturbance in the air around us, and these language uses are established in different ways in different cultures. You find extroverted anxiety a lot in Middle Eastern languages, and in Italian and so on. You find introverted anxiety in Celtic and Northern countries, where the person doesn't say anything but the silence is making you shake inside.

Whether it's enunciated or not enunciated, how we respond energetically is not something contained. Anxiety is always leaking into the world. Whatever we feel will impact other people and of course, if it impacts other people—"what comes around goes around"—their reaction will impact us so that you get an escalation of feeling.

As much as possible, we should attend to how we speak and not over-emphasise situations. Try to keep them very simple. We can support this by the practice of vipassana, which uses the simple naming of what is experienced to move away from affective, enriched description to a simple phenomenological description that helps us to get to an optimal distance from judgement. The problem about judgement is that it is prejudice dressed as truth, and so is very solid. The more you solidify the world, the more you entrap yourself and coerce other people who will feel a reaction coming.

Inner anxiety arises because we are not at home; because we are alienated, we are not at peace with ourselves. This is not some personal failing; this is the very nature of samsara itself. Samsara is a state of anxiety. In samsara subject and object are separated, and we find ourselves strongly identified with the subject. The subject needs something from the object and yet is fearful of the object. The object is not really separate from it—the object is not really other than it—and yet it can't relax. This is the fundamental structure.

Due to ignorance, we over-identify with our individual self and then look out at the world from within ourselves, towards something that is 'other than us'. We are drawn towards it by desire or

are fearful and distrustful of it, due to stupidity and anger. This is just a structure. As long as you are not integrated into the ground—the unborn openness—anxiety will be the case.

There is no anxiety in openness because it has no position; it's not under attack. When we experience that the mind *is* infinite, then even when you *feel* that anxiety fills your whole world it will not be as big as the mind. Anxiety has the quality of being pervasive; it seems to stretch out in all directions. Intense anxiety is consuming, expansive and seems to affect everything in the world so that one feels overwhelmed. But when we stay with it, the anxiety vanishes. How do we stay with it? Just by following the instructions we've been looking at here. Relax into the open dimension of the mind; don't turn away from the object; don't fall into the object; just stay gently with whatever is arising and it will pass without you having to make effort. Indeed it is your own effort that maintains the chain of associations that sustains the anxiety. In experiencing the infinity of the mind we see that its empty nature is the ground of everything, including anxiety. Experiencing this frees us from being trapped within the anxiety.

The things that you don't like, which you think are a problem, which restrict and bind you, these things are also pure from the very beginning. What is anxiety? It's a particular kind of vibration, a sensation. It could be the skin is tingling, the nerves are twitching and the hairs are standing up in the pores. It could be dread, it could be angst, and it could be all sorts of things mixed in. What is this? This is a momentary sensation, subject and object arising together. What does it mean? Nothing much. What is it telling us about? Nothing much. What is its nature? It is the child of emptiness. What is its content? A message of doom. A message of doom about what? About illusion. This illusion will end; this illusion is uncertain. So, what's new? 'But it's my illusion!' The one who is being persecuted is the one who is taking it too seriously. This is always the case: we are persecuted by ourselves.

From the point of view of dzogchen, clarity is vital. If the manifestation is separated from the ground, the manifestation will attack you. If the manifestation is linked with the ground, you can enjoy the manifestation even when its formal content seems to be unpleasant. We have to practice this again, and again, and again, and again.

In the dzogchen texts, it's always saying, '*pang lang me pa*'. *Pang* means to push away, *lang* means to take up, *me pa* means without. Without pushing away, without taking things up. Without saying, '*I don't want this*', without saying, '*I need this*'. Without isolation or separation. Without fusion or confluence. Neither identifying nor dis-identifying, just being with. When you can just be with things, they are much easier.

When I was a teenage on holiday with my parents, I hated it. We would be in a hotel and I would have to sit at a table and I felt like having a little sign saying "I'm not with these people". My poor parents, they would say:

- Tonight, we are going to the theatre.*
- No, I don't want to go.*
- We have already bought the tickets.—Come to the theatre.*
- No, I don't want to go.*

I was identifying myself in opposition to them. I didn't get any benefit from doing this but I had two choices: either to be with them and like it, which I couldn't do; or be myself—relaxed, and at ease—which I couldn't do either. So I was stuck in the middle.

This is the nature of anxiety: we can't go forward and we can't go back. We can't just open to a situation, but neither can we free ourselves from it. When we are trapped as a separate self we have no freedom to move; we are always going to be constrained and bound into situations. The heart essence of dzogchen practice is 'Don't try to control the situation'. Don't try to establish a situation

that makes it easy for you because if you do that, even if you are efficient at doing it, all you will have done is establish the limit in yourself. This is particularly important as people get older. When you are young and you have energy, or maybe your career is going well and you have money, to a certain extent you can make the world dance to your tune. You can make things happen. As you get older that becomes much more difficult, so the success that you had in the middle period in your life can lead to suffering later.

To relax means to trust that everything is OK: to trust *Kuntuzangpo*. This is very important and is why in the practices we integrate with the situation. Sometimes we integrate with a deity or with the teacher but the essential thing is that it's OK how things are. Things are not as bad as we feel they are; things become bad because our mind does it.

The Buddha said that everything is created by the mind and this is completely true. If our mind observes the process of creation—if it sees that the openness is the ground—it is relaxed. If the mind sees itself as an isolated entity, it will suffer anxiety. In buddhism they give the example of a tree; if you try to pluck all the leaves off the tree you will have endless work since there are many, many leaves on a tree. If you cut the branches, there are quite a lot of branches but it will start to kill the tree. The best thing is to cut the root, because if you cut the root of the tree it will die. What is the root of anxiety? It's not recognising your own nature.

This is important to remember because so much of our time is wasted in anxious thinking and in worry. We think about the past with regret and remorse, and plan for the future with doubt and uncertainty. These thoughts bring their emotions and emotions impact the body. Months and years go by, and still we have no clarity.

Are there any questions?

Question about anxiety

Response: I get the feeling that the mind is everywhere and everywhere is the mind and I am part of the mind... Then I started to panic and sweat and I thought that I had better come back from my meditation!

James: Yes, it's a scary thing to do. After all you are leaving home and leaving home is very hard because you can't leave until you have resources. This is why studying and understanding the view is very important.

This anxiety keeps us safe, on one level. If we think something is dangerous then we protect and comfort ourselves. But anxiety can also be a limit. Some people take too many risks in life and some people don't take enough risks. Finding the right balance between risk and comfort is difficult. It's the same in the meditation. If we are going to leave one country and go to another, we should know what is the advantage. This is why studying the dharma is very important, because we get a sense of *'Well, the mind may be empty, but I don't think I'm empty. Do I even want to be empty? No, I want to be me. Why can't I just be me?'* But there is a big wall called death, and if I am 'me' I am going to bang into that wall.

It's not about *wanting* to get enlightened but getting enlightened is a good way to stop suffering, which was the Buddha's first teaching. He didn't say that what you find in samsara is horrible. He said that if we build up our life on comfort and nice things, then sooner or later when that structure vanishes, we will suffer. We have to recognise that since samsara is very familiar for us, leaving it will not be without anxiety, especially because we are leaving into a realm we don't know.

There is a double move here. If we find this kind of anxiety in our meditation, we have to consider that *'maybe I am too heavy'*. It's a bit like skating on a frozen pond in the winter and suddenly hearing the ice cracking. Then you think, 'I have to move away quickly. This is thin ice and I'm too heavy'. This is what happens in the meditation: *'I am too heavy, I have too much attachment, too many thoughts and feelings.'* If I take myself identified with this into the area of emptiness, then anxiety arises because emptiness won't support me. I was looking at a little video for children, and it was about an elephant who wanted to fly. The elephant couldn't fly, but some friends managed to get him up a tree, whereupon a friendly cloud came and floated underneath. The elephant jumped from the tree onto the cloud, and he fell right through it! In the same way, emptiness is like a cloud and we are like elephants. Until we become very light, we will keep falling through, we won't be able to stay in emptiness because we are too heavy.

This is why we take refuge and do prostrations. *Ngöndro* and *yidam* practices and so on make us more light. This anxiety has arisen because of the circumstances, and therefore it is a reasonable anxiety but it can become like a wall that we can't break through. But what is the nature of the anxiety? It's empty, although of course when it comes it's very strong, very real.

Some people are frightened of going to the dentist. The dentist's is not the sweetest place on earth but generally speaking, dentists are not torturers. How can you sit in the chair with somebody who is going to cause you pain and not feel frightened? When you know that you are here because you have a pain in your tooth. Then when the pain comes I try to stay in relation to the pain. If I'm just *in* the pain and say, *'Hey, leave me alone! Don't hurt me!'* then the dentist will say, *'OK, just go away now.'* I will still have the pain in my tooth; so I have to let the dentist deal with the pain. I feel the pain but I have to be able to see that the pain is a means to an end.

Leaving what is familiar and entering something unfamiliar is bound to bring anxiety and that is why reading books and learning about the view is helpful. Then when things come we won't be so surprised. Inside the dharma everything is familiar and well known; the buddhas have described all the things which can arise, and if we get some sense of what they are, we can free ourselves from them.

If anxiety arises during your meditation try relaxing into the out breath, just releasing the tension from the body and staying. If it becomes too much you can just swivel around a bit on your hips loosening up this central area, look around you a little bit, and then come back into the breath.

The main thing is that it is not helpful to struggle because if you do that, all that you do is affirm to yourself that: *'I can't get out of this; this is more powerful than me.'*

Question about meditating and daily life

Question: I have another question, about how we practice the view and how we practice the meditation. I sometimes use the meditation to beat myself up, thinking that I don't do enough. I would actually like to do more but at home this doesn't happen very much. Have you got some advice on how we should integrate formal sitting practice with the practice of integrating the view in everyday life?

James: It depends on how much time you have and what you have to do. Generally speaking, it's very useful at first to try to put aside maybe half-an-hour every day and just sit and do the *Three Aa* practice and be present. It could also be helpful to spend half-an-hour or so reading some texts about the view, either before or after the practice depending on which works best for you.

In any situation, the main thing is to observe yourself, without judging. Before you can do this you have to understand the nature of judgement. One thing you could do is to get some dough, and make a model of the judge in your head, then paint it very nicely and put it in a little corner in your house. Then every morning when you get up, you give him a little cup of tea, and you say, *'Judge, you've had your breakfast so now sit quiet. I will see you again tomorrow.'* Then you always know where the judge is, and if the judge comes into your head, you can say, *'Oy! You! Get back into your kennel!'* Tibetan buddhism is full of techniques like this.

If you can't separate from the judge, you may feel you are observing yourself, but you are not. What you will be doing is developing a further self-narrative which will bind you into limitation, even while you think you are freeing it. Dzogchen meditation texts often point this out as a, big fault wherein we are misunderstand the meditation. It goes back to this most basic, fundamental decision. Each person has to decide, firstly on a cognitive level, am I OK? If you basically think you are not OK, maybe you need to do some therapy because a useful function of therapy is to separate people from the belief that they are shit.

If you are aware that you sometimes fall victim to the belief that 'I am shit', you now have a relationship with that belief, and you might write about it in a notebook and keep it someplace. It's by separating ourselves off from an investment in these ideas that you start to have some freedom, but you have to disinvest from the idea first.

When you can really believe that your nature is pure, that means every judgement on yourself, every attack on yourself, is a lie. In tantra this could then be approached like a battle, a final battle, an Armageddon, and you can have Dorje Drolo riding out like the Lord of the Rings. The idea of a final battle is key to the Manichaeism religion which was present in India at the time of Buddhism and influenced Buddhism a lot. This final battle is very real: either I am shit or I am OK. The idea that I am shit, that I am no good, that I am stupid, I am lazy and whatever else— these ideas have to be killed. You can kill them with believing that Jesus saves, you can kill them with *Phat!*, you can kill them with all sorts of things... You can also do Dorje Sempa and wash them out, but one way or another, you have to be able to separate OK from not-OK.

Once you do that, then you can start to enter the practice. But if you try to do the practice still believing you are a bad person, you will be like a cowboy decorator who, knowing that you have a damp problem on your walls, just puts on a coat of gloss paint to cover up the damp. If you cover up your faults, they won't go away; they just intensify under the surface. We have to look at ourselves. We have to think, *'Who am I? Dharma says that this is my nature but it doesn't feel like that to me. I would like to believe that, but it doesn't feel like that.'*

In the two scales, which is going to have the most weight? This is why we take refuge in the Buddha. We are trying to say, the 'scale' of dharma—the scale of the Buddha—should be heavier, so that when we weigh these two things, our dharma belief is strong enough to tilt us towards letting go of our negative beliefs.

[Re-sourcing ourselves, taking refuge in dharma brings us back to our source](#)

The word *dharma* refers to the Buddha's teaching, but it also means *how things are*. It's the Buddha's teachings about how to find yourself, it's a way of resourcing yourself. In English, resourcing is '*re-sourcing*': bringing yourself back again to the source. The source is what is actually there. Of course all our lives we need to be resourced, we are resourced by our friends; we can be resourced by our books; we can be resourced by clothes when it's cold; by medicines and so on. But all of these outer resources are impermanent and will fall away.

The dharma resource is something which if you keep massaging it into your heart will give you a warmth and security which will be present day-by-day. It will be enduring in any situation. You may find yourself making mistakes, or being very angry and you will remember, *'Oh yes, Buddha taught about anger. Anger is one of the five poisons. Anger arises from attachment; it's aversion; it is wanting to get rid of things I don't like. The reason I feel angry is because I am identified with this small sense of myself.'* Then you no longer feel bad that you have anger. You start to examine that this anger is very useful and is showing me the structure of myself. The anger is like an x-ray: it reveals that which is hidden. It can be the same with envy, with depression, with sadness and other emotions.

Refuge is intentionality. Intentionality means that I am attending to bring my attention, my consciousness, my focussed awareness into a situation to understand it. I am not just going to sink into it. If I feel sad, just being sad won't change anything. What I have to do is to understand why I am sad. That means looking at what are the *causes* of sadness, meaning not just the external event that made me sad.

My partner no longer likes me: that's a very common reason for feeling sad. Why would that make me sad? If they like me what will that add to my life? It will add some moments of happiness. Will these moments last? No. The most they can offer me is a remoulding of the contours of my experience. I make myself feel profoundly sad because of feeling an infinite loss from something which is quite finite. Who has turned this other person into an infinite, wonderful person? *"If only they still loved me, I would be so happy."* Who is doing that? We, ourselves, are doing that. If you meet the person again and you get back with them, within a few months you're thinking, *'Oh my goodness, what have I gone and done?'* Because they are finite, they are limited. They have some good qualities and some bad qualities. People are only perfect in our mind, in our dreams and fantasies. In their day-to-day reality they are always slightly problematic.

Taking refuge in the dharma means taking these buddhist ideas and having them as extensions to our fingers, to our eyes, to our ears. We hear better, we hear from a dharma point of view. We see better, we see from a dharma point of view. We engage with the world from a dharma point of view. We are actively bringing dharma understanding into every experience we have. Everything is meaningful. If we do that, we will never be bored. We will be able to make sense of every difficult situation, and through that we have a grounding and a completion which no object can give to us. .

To use dharma means to struggle; it means to work hard. In the history of buddhism, be it Indian, Japanese, Chinese or Tibetan, the stories of the great sages and yogis are stories of endless struggle. Working, and working, and working; relating dharma to life and finding life impinging on dharma. Collapsing into ordinary life and then struggling to re-understand it from a dharma point of view. This is what's involved, it's about struggle; it's not going to be immediately easy.

Of course, our karmic impulse would prefer to have a good, bright, shiny object to give us what we want because it's quick and easy. But the easy path will always be the path of stupidity; it will be the path of habit. Habits are things we have developed, that we know how to do, a kind of automatic pilot. When you take them up and you operate from them there's a kind of ease, but it's a stupid ease. It's an ease that only takes you back yet again to the same place. If somebody is a drinker and they stop drinking, then they start drinking again, they are back to where they were before, because drinking is drinking. If you use drugs and you stop, then you start using drugs again, you are back in the same place. The problems are always the same. They are not very interesting problems, but they are reassuring because they are always the same.

People in samsara have wonderful qualities! They have courage, endurance, a huge amount of willpower, dedication and mobilisation but they are turned towards nonsense. They are turned

towards things that will always cheat them, that are going nowhere. It looks like it's going somewhere but like a boomerang, it comes back. It doesn't escape the gravitational pull of the ego self. This is why a refuge is very important, because it's an insistence.

Generally speaking, from the Tibetan point of view, refuge is linked with with the idea of renunciation of samsara and so with the hinayana or theravadan path. When we say, *'This world and the way I am in this world is so enmeshed, so sticky, so automatic, that I have to 'cut'.* I have to say, *"No, I want to get out of here. I don't want this stuff anymore."* How I am and what I normally believe in comes to be recognised as poisonous and dangerous.

Taking refuge in this way is a move, a gesture, which brings about a bit of space. It's very important to be able to practice like this, powerfully and with dedication, to renounce and give up some of the things which bind us.

Anxiety is the vibration of duality

The things that bind us are both external and internal. Sometimes giving up external things is useful but, there is no higher renunciation than letting our thoughts go free. In dzogchen it's called, *rang drol*, self liberation. Let your thoughts go. Don't hang on to your thoughts. There is no better renunciation than that.

This is very difficult to achieve, so on an ordinary level we start with external things, because when you start to renounce the internal tendencies which structure your life, this increases your anxiety. Most of us follow particular kinds of behaviours in order to feel safe. If we stop these familiar patterns, the anxiety which was being contained by the ritual behaviour will start to manifest. Anxiety is very important because anxiety is the vibration of duality, of subject and object. Yes/No. Good/bad. Shall I?/Shan't I? I want to/I don't want to... This is the nature of anxiety, not being able to relax and be fully open into a situation.

As long as our lives are comfortable in a bourgeois sense, we won't experience that kind of anxiety. If we always have food to eat, if we always have a comfortable bed to sleep in, we don't face anxiety. That's why it's quite good to travel to other places and sleep in strange beds. You may not sleep so well as at home, and in the middle of the night all kinds of strange thoughts might come into your head so that you don't feel quite at ease. You might think this is simply caused by the fact you are away from home and that when you get home you won't feel this way anymore, telling yourself, *'Once I get home, everything will be just the way I like it.'* 'Home' then becomes like a steel safe that locks out anxiety. Actually the anxiety is always there and can't be locked out so it is important for us to investigate it. Do we think that anxiety is some external impingement? Do we think that if only we had more power and control, we could stop it? Or do we understand that anxiety is part of who we are and that control is just not going to work because control will always fail?

At the moment, quite a few of my friends have parents in their eighties and older. What strikes me is how the person's personality pattern seems to be intensified as they get older. People who have been anxious become more anxious as they get weaker and more dependent. The way they try to deal with it is to be controlling but because they don't have any power or any force, this doesn't work. It can be very sad to get old like that and be unable to learn new ways. An example like this shows us that these problems don't resolve themselves. We might have had a fantasy when we were younger that as we got older somehow life would get easier, we would understand what to do and everything would make sense, but of course that's not the case. As we get older we feel we have less time ahead of us, so we can have less hope. We have to face the fact that this is me and things are just how they are for me. It may not be like this for other people, but I can only live *my* life. So I

have to make friends with myself; I have to know how I am and find a way of being at peace with myself.

That is difficult to do if you don't have a refuge or some spiritual belief and practice. Part of refuge is to say that real meaning and value is centred in awakening, in enlightenment, rather than in worldly success. *"I am going to shift the centre of my identity from pride and confidence in my learning, my health, my house, my money, my family, my attractiveness, whatever qualities I have. I recognise all of these arise from causes and conditions and will not endure for very long through time. I am going to re-centre myself, out of myself, and into myself."* It says in the Bible, *"You have to lose yourself to find yourself"*. This is not so much renunciation of external things by pushing them away or becoming a wandering yogi or a monk or a nun. It is a renunciation though recognising that we are attached to the object, that the object has become a ground on which we stand.

'I feel I have been a good mother because my children have grown up and done well. They are the living proof that my life has not been in vain.' Maybe, but lots of people have children who get completely lost and they too have done their best to be good parents. We have to investigate what little stories we tell ourselves to soothe ourselves and give ourselves a sense of importance. If you were able to be a good parent or if you have been successful in your career, when you look back you will see how that arose due to causes and circumstances. Somebody was lucky enough to be born intelligent; was lucky enough to go to a school that developed them; was lucky enough to find a place in a university; was lucky enough to start their career at a time when things opened... *"I realise that due to many circumstances, my life came out in this way."* It doesn't tell me anything about *who* I really am, it tells me about the pattern of circumstances of my existence; that's what it tells me.

So, in order to meditate, we have to be able to relax. To be relaxed means allowing impulses and tensions to arise, without reacting to them. You may think that relaxation is the absolute absence of tension, but that is very rare. Most peoples' bodies have quite a lot of tension. Even people who spend all their life doing relaxation practices will find that tension flows back into the body. Tension is just part of the bodily arousal.

Relaxation, from the dzogchen point of view, is the relaxation which *integrates* anxiety, which *integrates* arousal, which gives space to the build-up of charge that arises. Without pushing it away, without identifying with it, there is a relaxation present at the same time as the anxiety.

OK, so now we'll do the Three Aa practice.

[Three Aa practice]

GE WA DI YI NYUR DU DAG
OR GYAN LA MA DRUB GYU NAE
DRO WA CHIG KYANG MA LU PA
DE YI SA LA GO PAR SHO

By this virtue may I quickly attain the glorious Guru's stage, then may I put all beings without even one exception, on that same stage!

We are very lucky to be able to meet together and to do some practice, and to think about these things. All over the world, many people have such stark problems of hunger and physical difficulty that they have no space in their mind or their heart to think of anything, so we are very lucky.

Response: Thank you very much.

James: My pleasure.