

The background of the cover is a photograph of a small, dark wooden boat floating on a calm body of water. The sky is a clear, light blue, and a single bird is visible in flight in the upper left corner. The overall mood is peaceful and serene.

the
Anxious
Buddhist

AN EXPLORATION OF ANXIETY DISORDER
FROM A BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE

Stephen Sant

For my children, Kelli and Adam, my brother Adrian and his wife Debbie, and their children, my wonderful grand kids, Lilli-May and Georgia and nephew, Ben, and my Mom and Dad, without whom I would not be here. My deepest and most sincere thanks must go to my wife, Dawn, without who's patience and constant encouragement this book would not have been possible.

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The Anxious Buddhist - Contents

FOREWORD

1. INTRODUCTION

Through the looking glass.....	7
A brief history.....	11
The deluded Buddhist.....	13
The endless journey of awakening.....	15
The Five Aggregates.....	18
Ichinen Sanzen – Taming the chaos.....	24

2. THE NATURE OF ANXIETY DISORDER

A wild elephant.....	29
The many faces of anxiety.....	33
Physician, heal thyself.....	40
Genetics and the inheritance of suffering.....	48
Hotel California.....	50
Why Me?.....	53

3. THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

The many faces of suffering.....	56
Death by a thousand cuts.....	64
Cultivating faith with eyes open.....	70
The diamond blade.....	75

4. THE TRUTH OF THE CAUSES OF ANXIETY

Two Arrows.....	79
The birth of I.....	80
Self-cherishing and selfish concern.....	83

The perfect family workhorse.....	85
Sentimental compassion.....	89
Idiot compassion.....	90
5. THE END OF SUFFERING	
Seeds of change.....	94
Snakes and smoke.....	96
Impermanence.....	98
Emptiness and non-self.....	100
The tree of ignorance.....	105
Blamelessly taking responsibility.....	107
6. THE PATH TO THE CESSATION OF SUFFERING	
Orgasm, death and letting go.....	112
The leather planet.....	117
Healing through non-violence.....	118
7. LEARNING TO HEAL	
Three stages of learning.....	122
The doubtless refuge.....	124
Mindful breathing.....	128
The mindful fidget.....	132
Loving the dead.....	136
Compassion for ourselves.....	142
Healthy abstinence.....	145
Realising equality of self and other.....	150
The joy of aimlessness.....	154
Accepting others as they are.....	156
Exchange of self and other.....	161
Touching Nirvana.....	165

The Anxious Buddhist

An exploration of anxiety disorder from a Buddhist perspective.

The untrained mind is no more adept in the art of happiness than a dog is in the art of driving a car. Regardless, dogs will chase cars and we will pursue happiness without a clue.

Stephen Sant

Foreword

This book explores anxiety disorder from a Buddhist perspective. The teachings of Buddhism stem from the historical figure Shakyamuni Buddha (originally born as prince Siddhartha Gautama in India 563 BCE) who became the awakened one at the age of 35 while meditating under the Bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya, India.

In this book I sometimes refer to psychotherapeutic terms in order to help readers who might have knowledge of modern psychotherapy to relate more easily to Buddhist concepts and practices. While I hope this book will prove interesting and useful to practicing Buddhists it is aimed primarily at those who may only have a passing interest in Buddhism, as sufferers or therapists, who deal with anxiety on a daily basis.

Although strict definitions of such terms differ in nuance, I use Buddhahood, enlightenment and happiness interchangeably, because for the purpose of this book they all indicate a condition that is free of anxiety. This book is not written from the perspective of a single school of Buddhism but draws on a number of Buddhist concepts (mainly from Tibetan, and Zen) to help clarify how anxiety arises, how it is perpetuated and importantly, how it may be brought to an end.

I should first make clear that I am not a fully qualified psychologist. I have, however, for a good part of my adult life struggled with anxiety and its associated ugly bedfellows of fatigue and depression. I have therefore spent considerable time on the

receiving end of various flavours of talking therapy and an array of prescribed drugs with various and interesting results.

This book is for those who have suffered from an anxiety disorder of some form or care for someone else who does. Through care and precision, I hope to help the reader gain fresh insights into the causes of their suffering, to begin tackling those causes and find a lasting peace from disharmony.

We all suffer from anxiety every day – we call it stress. The Buddha gave humanity a prescription for living and thinking that minimises the causes and conditions that lead to our inevitable suffering. Through the cultivation of insight we create our own gateway to the cessation of suffering. A Buddhist practice provides the mental training required to help us deal with life's tribulations, and to experience them in a more skilful way. The general application of Buddhism to everyday living has been described by thousands of authors over the centuries. Anger, greed, jealousy, and foolishness are discussed at length within the texts because these are the emotional afflictions that have caused suffering since time without beginning.

The purpose of this book is not to convert people from their current spiritual path, if any, to Buddhism. The ideas and suggestions for meditation described in this book can be carried out by anyone. Neither is this book a “12 step” programme, full of false promises. I do promise, however, to provide a new and dynamic perspective on anxiety that will provide a solid foundation from which to build joy, peace and happiness.

1. Introduction

THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

Panic disorder is a common form of anxiety disorder. The most traumatic event for the anxiety sufferer is the panic attack; a full-on wide-awake nightmare of apocalyptic proportions! A feast of fear, a heart-thumping, air-gasping avalanche of anxiety that knows no bounds! Do we feel excited yet? Unless you have suffered from this condition, it's unlikely you can fully appreciate its horror.

If you have suffered from it, then you might recognise aspects of yourself in the following analysis of a typical panic attack. The attack described here is mediated through social anxiety, but there are likely to be aspects of our imaginary character's thought processes that strike remarkable similarity to the your own, regardless of your specific anxieties.

Let's suppose that someone (we'll call her Samantha) suffers from social anxiety. Without getting into Samantha's back story, let's consider what happens when she goes out for a meal with a date (we'll call him John). It's a cold night so she puts a jumper on and steps out into the cold night air. She's quite nervous about meeting her new boyfriend, and as she gets closer to the restaurant she notices her legs are feeling a bit wobbly – this is normal though, because she believes she has low blood sugar and just needs to eat. On arriving at the Indian restaurant, she finds John sat at a table in the middle of the room. Samantha sits down and they order their

meals. John starts busily chatting away about work. Samantha is conscious of people talking loudly behind her, when they suddenly go quiet, and then snigger. Samantha begins to imagine they are laughing at her.

Samantha's not really paying too much attention to John because she is already tense. She's aware that their table is surrounded by other diners, and then senses a bead of sweat on her scalp that has started to run down the side of her head. She scratches it away. She wonders why she is sweating and thinks, *is this place too warm, do I feel okay? Do I? I think I have a bit of indigestion? Maybe I should have brought some antacids with me.* While this is going on, she is trying to hold a conversation with John, and failing. *He won't stop talking, and I'm trying to determine if there's something wrong with my stomach!* The couple order their meal, and carry on talking.

The meal arrives, and Samantha hesitantly starts to eat her meal, still torn between paying attention to John and thinking about the sweat which is now trickling down the middle of her back, *I wonder if this sweat is showing through my shirt. I bet the people behind me can see it and think I'm a mess.* Suddenly, like a switch, the curry Samantha ordered doesn't seem so appetising. The food in her mouth seems heavy and the mere smell of the restaurant seems to choke her very senses.

This somatopsychic (body acting on the mind) activity initiates an unstoppable chain reaction. Her appetite quickly becomes suppressed, and she begins to check for signs of nausea. A thought flashes across Samantha's mind, *I have lost my appetite. Maybe I'm going to start feeling sick. Usually I feel sick when I lose my appetite – I feel uncomfortable, people are looking at me sweating – John is*

looking at me oddly. However, when Samantha is in the grips of such an experience, the last thing she needs to do is start theorising or intellectualising based on her subjective and rapidly deteriorating interpretation of the situation!

It's very difficult for Samantha to prevent these thoughts from occurring as they are being reinforced by the activity of one of the most primitive parts of her brain, the amygdala. This instinctive element of our brain is driven by our primal animality; at a neurological level, our higher reasoning is being completely overwhelmed by the activity of the amygdala and our behaviour reverts to that of our mammalian ancestors, dominated by the strong desire to escape from hunter/predators. In this situation, the only predators are a restaurant full of diners, and the steaming bowl of chicken curry on the table. John asks, "are you ok"? *That's it! John thinks I look ill. That person opposite us is also looking at me – I must look terrible! I feel faint.* That's all Samantha needs. External validation that she looks ill.

Now a psychosomatic (mind acting on the body) reaction takes place. Samantha thinks *I AM having a panic attack!* Her amygdala instructs the body to release cortisone and adrenaline, increasing her heart rate, and respiration. Due to the fear response her digestive system goes into overdrive – and here comes the diarrhoea! The feedback from the body which is now in a fully aroused state of anxiety causes more psychosomatic symptoms and Samantha begins to spiral out of control until she has to remove herself hurriedly from the situation with an implausible excuse – and heads for the nearest bathroom in a mix of terror and embarrassment.

Of course, Samantha's higher faculties are completely out of control once she surrenders to the belief that she is suffering a panic attack. Like the moments after we lose control of a car, we believe all we can do is watch in slow motion as the ensuing crash develops around us. Likewise, Samantha's consciousness still undergoes the awful experience of fear, panic, stomach acid etc. but decides at some level to "let go of the wheel" and become a spectator. After even a single humiliating experience like the one described above, her unconscious will form an association between restaurants and the panic. Her social-anxiety becomes more entrenched through a pre-conditioned response based on her own deluded imagination.

Restaurants in general could now become a phobia for Samantha. Samantha's karma, her historical storehouse of all previous thoughts and actions, has led to the feeling of being utterly separate from, and at odds with, everyone around her. Everyone is a threat to her sense of self – her ego is defenceless and is constantly overwhelmed by her surroundings.

Imagine how Samantha would have appeared to other people in the restaurant. As she walked in, nobody would have given her a second look. Anyone sat in the same room observing Samantha's odd turn of behaviour would probably have no idea that anything was wrong – but to have been privy to her internal dialogue would have bewildered the other diners. They might even have thought she was... you know... a bit odd!

A BRIEF HISTORY

Historically, mental difficulties have been treated with disdain and suspicion by society – the superstitious beliefs of the past served to stigmatise many conditions that today are recognised as simple maladjustments in cognitive behaviour. While Buddhism provides the tools to transform all suffering, anxiety disorder has only been recognised and classified by western medicine in recent decades. As such, there are few books aimed specifically at introducing sufferers of anxiety-disorder to the transformative psychology and practice of Buddhism. The core teachings of Buddhism are perfectly placed as both a preventative and curative approach to dealing with anxiety.

Buddhism offers an essential ally in defeating our evil friend, the fundamental darkness of the uncontrolled mind – the little voice which denies our potential and prevents us from becoming happy. Despite this, it is important that the reader does not interpret this book as an open recommendation to relinquish clinical treatment in favour of self-healing through a Buddhist practice.

While anxiety disorder is a 20th century label that describes the difficulty people find in coping with normal daily activity, it is not a 20th century phenomenon. Throughout recorded history people have displayed behaviour ranging from simple shyness to seriously debilitating and complex anxiety disorders.

In the ancient Indian epic *Shrimad Bhagavatam*¹, The demon King Kansha developed GAD-like (Generalised Anxiety Disorder) symptoms when Lord Krishna slay all his demons and threatened to kill him. Kansha's symptoms included excessive worry about

the attack from his arch foe Krishna, difficulty in concentration and difficulty in falling asleep. Certainly symptoms that fit a diagnosis of anxiety! It's not new.

While anxiety disorder has always been present, the rapid development of modern society has vastly increased the demands placed on our primitive primate brains. The increasing expectations, constant measurement of performance and decreasing tolerance of failure in the workplace has contributed to an increasing level of background fear. Our society is growing colder, and values such as empathy and compassion have come to be regarded by many as burdens to progress and economic growth.

This slow but gradual shift towards a more aggressive and materialistic culture has aggravated social tensions, making genuine happiness and joy seem increasingly out of reach for all but the wealthiest. When our livelihoods or very survival appears threatened then we forget who and what we really are. We lose the ability to manifest compassion toward one another or most importantly toward ourselves.

Our ego, driven by the desire to protect our sense of self-worth, is fed by the increasing fear that our frailties and failings will be exposed. We unknowingly spend much of our time worrying about our past, or strategising about our future in order to protect our fragile ego from loss. We lose touch with the wonderful experience of being in the here and now, breathing and alive. If our mind were a telephone extension, we would be permanently engaged, never available to truly connect with and feel compassion for ourselves. We spend much of our time meeting the needs and

expectations of others and not paying much regard to our own deepest requirement for happiness. This internal conflict inevitably leads to resentment, anger, suffering and anxiety.

Such patterns of thinking and behaviour become entrenched and accepted as ultimately “the way things are”; they become unquestioned and accepted as part of our normal existence. But, like the emperor's new clothes, anxiety can continue to exist only for as long as we continue deceiving ourselves. Everything is conceived through the mind, and therefore the mind should remain the seat of our analysis.

THE DELUDED BUDDHIST

I provisionally entitled this book *The Deluded Buddhist* but this title may not have attracted people suffering from anxiety; or ironically, may have attracted those looking for a book that attempted to criticise Buddhism. Therefore it was named *The Anxious Buddhist*, but it may help to offer some explanation of the provisional title.

What do we mean by an anxious Buddhist? After all, aren't Buddhists supposed to shuffle around in orange robes wearing the serene smiling face of someone who has life all worked out? A common view of Buddhism in the West is that of an insular religion requiring great commitment to private meditation, introspection and study; whose adherents are by and large withdrawn from the hustle and bustle of daily life.

While monastic Buddhism certainly involves a withdrawal from society and popular culture (like any monastic movement), there

are millions of lay Buddhists leading daily lives that on the face of it appear much like anyone else's. Many also eat meat. Lay Buddhists undergo the same struggles to make ends meet and experience the same hopes and fears as anyone else regardless of creed or geography. They can make the same errors in judgement as anyone else, and like members of any faith they aim to improve their state of life through their daily practice.

As of 2012 (according to Wikipedia), it is reported variably that around 6% of the population – or between 300 and 400 million – consider themselves Buddhist. This represents the fifth most popular religion (just after a group consisting collectively of atheists, agnostics, and the non-religious) on the planet, so it's fair to assume that at least some of those people are experiencing some form of anxiety right now.

Unlike the major theistic religions of the world, Buddhism does not teach that salvation from suffering is achieved through obedience to, love of, or prostration to an external god. Buddhism does not teach that a great omnipotent, omniscient being, through his or her grace and mercy will scoop us up from the dirt in return for worship and obedience. There is no heaven, and we will not be condemned to the fiery pits of hell in return for sinning. Buddhism teaches that salvation is achieved through awakening to enlightenment; the elimination of defilements and afflictions of the mind until we can see clearly our true nature. Our deluded desires, wrong views, and actions cause us to suffer both physically and mentally because the body and mind are related in ways only now being appreciated in the West. This correction of thinking might sound like just another intellectual exercise but in practice

it takes a degree of persistent and conscious effort to retrain our habitual mind.

THE ENDLESS JOURNEY OF AWAKENING

Buddhism is essentially a system of recognising and contemplating the relationship between our mind and the phenomenal world (including our body). Through study and meditation upon what we have learnt we gain insight and wisdom regarding that relationship. When we shine a light on our deepest most subtle desires we can begin dealing with our ignorance, and ego. We then open the way to re-organise our habitual self and begin the journey towards the elimination of our anxieties.

As already mentioned, there is no God in Buddhism. The historical Buddha stipulated quite clearly that he should not be worshipped in the same sense – and did not claim to be a messenger or prophet of a supreme being. He was above all a teacher, and any respect or veneration is shown to his teachings and not his person. There are fundamental differences between the Buddhist and Judeo-Christian view of birth and death, and as this book is likely being read in the West, a brief look at these differences might be helpful.

Buddhist scripture often mentions the cycle of birth, old age, sickness and death (Sanskrit samsara). Samsara is the cycle of being repeatedly born into the world to undergo the rigours of ageing, sickness and death. This is not the Buddha's doing; it is simply the way of things.

Early seekers of enlightenment believed that the only way to experience Nirvana was to eliminate all desire. Through extreme practices of renunciation and asceticism, the practitioner effectively put his karma on ice, and over many lifetimes of abstinence would “use up” the remaining bad karma until eventually, upon death, he would enter the Nirvana of no remainder. By anyone's measure, this didn't sound much fun, but it was required in order to reach Nirvana, which was believed to be somewhere nice and lovely, far part from this world – rather like heaven.

Mahayana, a later development in Buddhism, taught that Buddha did not dwell in a far off Nirvana, sipping cocktails with his other enlightened friends. Buddha represents universal compassionate wisdom, not selfish enlightenment. The Mahayana teachings thus revealed the Buddha to be almost infinitely old, and the emanation we know as the historical figure Siddhartha Gautama was just one of many embodiments of Buddha who manifested in order to save living beings by teaching the Dharma. He revealed that the way to awaken to Nirvana, far from denying our desires, is to accept and understand them and by doing so, to transform our suffering. The wisdom we gain from insight into our desires cultivates the compassion to lessen the suffering of all living beings, including ourselves. This is the Bodhisattva way – the path to Buddhahood, enlightenment and happiness. A Bodhisattva is an awakened being who's purpose is to lead others from suffering to awakening and happiness. In a religious context, Buddhas and bodhisattvas are often described as mystical beings, often with superhuman powers. However, it is also often described in scripture how these compassionate beings manifest physical bodies in order to help

those suffering samsara. The Dalai Lama, for example, is believed to be the human reincarnation of a bodhisattva named Avalokiteshvara (Bodhisattva hearer of the cries of the world). Like any spiritual scripture, the descriptions of events have to be taken with a pinch of salt. The rich imagery found in Buddhist literature, however, is often useful as an overlay for our real lives. It offers a way to visualise the psychological forces at play in our daily lives, and can guide us away from further suffering.

Undergoing samsara (the endless cycle of rebirth, old age, sickness and death) with the aim of final migration to Nirvana may sound a little like the Judeo-Christian concept of purgatory – an interstitial place we are sent for painful purification before being released into heaven. However, Buddhism teaches there is no separate heaven or hell – they both exist, here on earth and they will manifest freely subject to the correct causes and conditions. A key concept in Mahayana Buddhism teaches that Nirvana *is* samsara – the two exist like two sides to a piece of paper, and therefore neither can exist without the other. Rather than being some distant and difficult to reach realm, Nirvana is actually all around us. It is only due to our delusion and ignorance that we fail to experience it. Whether we experience life as hellish suffering or as Nirvana depends entirely upon our own mind, and our ability to master it; and we all can. The Buddha taught that we all possess the potential seed for attaining enlightenment in this very lifetime. A great influence upon many western philosophers and psychologists, the incredibly varied yet irrepressibly positive outlook of Buddhist philosophy is a wellspring of courageous compassion that offers every human being salvation from suffering.

When we understand the role compassion has to play in transforming ourselves, we become awakened to our potential for happiness and a renaissance of mind and body re-connects us with our fundamental nature. Understanding the interdependent matrix of cause and effect that governs life will end our clinging to dualistic thought – the idea of us and them, good and bad, suffering and joy. Like an enemy, our anxieties can only continue to exist while we remain at odds with them through anger and hatred. An enemy can only be transformed into a friend through deep listening and compassionate understanding. From a Buddhist perspective then, perhaps the reader can more appreciate the view that an anxious Buddhist is better described as a deluded Buddhist!

THE FIVE AGGREGATES

Twentieth century psychologists have formed various theories to explain the experience of consciousness and how the mind functions at the metaphysical level. Freud and Jung's models of consciousness were regarded for many years as the most satisfying explanation of the mind's function. In more recent times the global spread of eastern spiritual traditions such as Buddhism has led to the realisation in the West that this particular wheel was both invented and substantially developed long before Freud and Jung's more secular appraisal.

Buddhism provides an analysis of personal experience and cognition in the teaching known as *The Five Aggregates*, also known as *The Five Skandhas*. This important teaching also provides a logical and effective approach to breaking down our

selfish sense of “I” which creates so much of our anxiety. Skandha is a sanskrit word which can be read as meaning pile, heap or accumulation. The principle of the teaching is to show that there really is no place where “I” exists. “I” is really nothing more than a temporary arising phenomena, and is made of non-“I” components. You are made up of skin, bone, blood, muscle, bile, urine, excrement and so forth plus elements of your parents, and your experiences, but none of these things in and of itself constitutes “I”. This is a crucial principle that will be examined often.

We experience the sensation of “I” only when the Five Aggregates come together, and yet “I” can be found in none of them individually. Many westerners describe the Five Aggregates in a linear sense, with each one taking on a more important role, but I think this is mistaken and demonstrates an underlying materialistic view. There is no clear hierarchy among the Aggregates, as they are all equally involved in perpetuating our ignorance and delusion.

1. Form (Skt. Rupa). Rupa corresponds to our body's physical interface to the world, including the five sense organs; eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body (touch). It also refers to the external objects of those senses such as form (things we can see), sound, smells, tastes, and objects or phenomenon that we can sense upon our skin, such as the wind, heat, cold or tangible objects, for example. This is purely the sensory realm, and does not involve any awareness, thought or emotion.

2. Sensation (Skt. Vedana). This is where we sense the inputs from Rupa, so in some ways this skandha could also be translated

as perception, but in English this might indicate more mental activity than what is really being described. Sensation gives rise to our reflexive, or unconscious responses. Sensations can also be perceived as pleasant feelings, unpleasant feelings, or neutral feelings. For example, when we hold a tomato in our hands, this may produce a neutral feeling. We might taste the tomato and feel a pleasant feeling, or if the tomato is on a hot pizza and we burn our tongue, it will produce an unpleasant feeling. Vedana contains the potential seed for the cultivation of desires for pleasant feelings, and aversion to unpleasant ones. In terms of modern neuroscience Vedana is almost certainly tied to the sympathetic (flight and fight) and parasympathetic (restful housekeeping) nervous system. Even at this basic stage of awareness our experience is already subject to pre-conditioning. For example, when we take off our clothes and jump into a swimming pool we might be shocked by the cold water. However, if we were to take a cool shower beforehand, and then jump into the pool then we would not find it so unpleasantly cold. Thus our experiences may differ, despite the swimming pool remaining precisely the same. The same holds true for all of our senses.

3. Perception (Skt. Samjna). Samjna is a reflective element of our mind which informs our conscious experience. It is the component which records our personal sensations and collates them into defined “event memories” – a kind of blog in the ether of our mind. Of course, like any blog, what gets recorded is purely subjective and open to error. We use Samjna to catalogue and recall experiences in order to make decisions to satisfy our desires. Samjna is the stage of mind were the conditioned afflictions such as clinging, aversion (phobias) and craving (addictive behaviours)

are born. This is why one of the four pillars of mindfulness meditation focusses upon what is known as the body in the body – our perception of pleasant, unpleasant and neutral feelings. One of the key foundations of anxious behaviour is the distorted view of our physical feelings.

4. Conception (Skt. Samskara). This is arguably where our mind busily spends much of its time. This is the realm in which mental formations are born. Our emotional responses to our sensations and perceptions take up much of our waking life. Samskara is strongly influenced by, but also feeds back into our conditioned and habituated cognition and behaviour (Vijnana, below). On a spiritual level, Samskara is most directly coloured by our karma, the store consciousness where causes manufactured by our thoughts, speech and actions over this and many lifetimes are retained. Samskara is the seat of our volition, and perhaps most closely resembles Freud's ego, the “go to guy” whose sole job is to lessen our perceived suffering. Samskara is the lens of our consciousness and like any lens, unless we keep it clean and bright then everything we see through it will be blurred or distorted, creating confusion and anxiety.

5. Consciousness (Skt. Vijnana). In terms of Freud's thinking, Vijnana equates most closely to the super-ego. It is a difficult skandha to explain because it manifests both subtle and gross qualities and interpenetrates the other four skhandas.

On the subtle level, Vijnana is our store consciousness; the true essence of our true self. Thus, Vijnana relates most closely to what Buddhism calls the store consciousness. Where Vijnana touches our conscious mind, this point of interface gives rise to the illusion

of “I”. Our conscious mind's control over our voluntary motor actions, leads us into the belief that we are somehow in control of ourselves. This materialistic thinking is derived from an unconscious acceptance of the mind-body complex – we behave as though “I” is nothing more than our conscious *mind*; because we are in control of our body, we assume we are also in full control of the mind. The reality of course is somewhat different!

On the subtle level, our conscious mind is in constant dialogue with the store consciousness, and this relationship causes the seeds there to germinate and emerge into our waking thoughts. For example, when we see a spider (Rupa) our sensation (Vedana) should simply record “I see a spider”. However, due to our pre-conditioned aversion to spiders in our store consciousness (Vijnana) our perception (Samjna) probably recalls that last time we saw a spider we became upset. However, our Consciousness (Samskara) prevents us from running screaming from the office in front of everyone because it is also fearful that we will look weak or silly (destroying our self image) – therefore we feel trapped, and our head spins and possibly implodes (panic attack). When this happens, then our unpleasant feelings (Samjna) regarding arachnids reinforces the harmful seeds already in our store consciousness and subsequently our aversion to spiders grows.

Anxious thinking is cultivated and reinforced every time we create an attachment or aversion to our feelings. This may sound complex, but we do it automatically without any conscious effort. Imagine someone (we'll call him John) who wants to buy some milk, but because he associates the supermarket checkout with his last panic attack he doesn't go and instead drinks something else.

This sets up a feeling of despair, or maybe he becomes angry and frustrated at himself, reinforcing the feeling that he is useless. Perhaps he makes a dash for milk just when the store closes so he can avoid long queues. He finds this works for him, and so he associates the empty supermarket with a positive feeling. Over time John begins to avoid any situation where there are crowds of people. This in turn begins to make John fearful of leaving the house, and he goes on to develop agoraphobia (from the Greek *agora*, fear of the market place, or crowds). These are coping strategies to protect us from our aversion to our perceived unpleasant feelings. We create many of the unpleasant feelings from our own defiled senses, and because of our ignorance we unconsciously accept them to be external realities and absolute. How do we know our unconscious has been deceived? If John were to think about it carefully, he would know that his fears are irrational. His conscious mind wishes he could go to the supermarket and enjoy it, but he believes his body will react negatively, as though his mind plays no part. This is a misconception. The body cannot exist without the mind, and the mind depends upon the senses in order to influence the body.

The mind is the source of our suffering and joy. Everything we experience is a product of the mind. This doesn't mean that the world is an illusion, or that it doesn't exist, because clearly it does, at least in a conventional sense. However, the world does not exist in the way that we mistakenly perceive. If one were to open a box containing a flat-packed item of furniture then at first we cannot recognise it. When it is assembled we recognise it as a table. However, the table is made of non-table elements – it is still merely a flat surface and four legs. Our discriminating mind labels

it as a table, because of its function. Anyone who then entered the room would also discriminate the object as a table. While you might understand the table deeply, knowing where each screw and bracket is, to the casual observer it is only a table. A complete and solid single item. A cat might see it as a scratch post. The table, however, remains what it is. Our casual observation of it changes because our view is relative, not absolute, and this is true of all phenomena.

Our consciousness is the gateway to awakening the mind to the true nature of phenomena and the true nature of our anxiety. By cultivating the desire to live mindfully, in control of our conscious mind, we can transform the way we view the world and open the path to awakening. It requires a conscious and persistent effort to eliminate our ignorance and purify our five skandhas, and it can take some time to transform our anxious thoughts into joy and happiness, but like any great journey it begins with a single footstep.

ICHINEN SANZEN – TAMING THE CHAOS

The famous psychoanalyst, Carl Jung once wrote:

there exists a second psychic system of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals. This collective unconscious does not develop individually but is inherited.

Whatever Jung's influences were for developing a more collective view of the human psyche, his ideas broadened the individualistic

analysis of Freud to incorporate a handful of characteristic archetypes that we all share.

In some ways, this could be compared to the Buddhist concept of the Ten Worlds (or Ten Dharma realms). This doesn't refer to ten physically different places, but to ten fundamental types of seed within us. At any moment our predominant life state reflects the flowering of one of these ten seeds. We all intrinsically possess these ten fundamental life states ranging from the lowest – Hell, through Hunger, Animality, Anger, Humanity, Rapture, Learning, Realisation, Bodhisattva (an awakened state where we have cultivated the desire to save all beings from suffering) to the highest life state of Buddhahood.

In some ways, these life states and the way they manifest through our thoughts and cognition could be loosely compared with Jung's collective unconscious – archetypal traits within our psyche; internal potentials to be later awakened when we are subject to various causes and conditions.

The lower six states (from hell up to and including rapture) are dominated by harmful attitudes, or views founded in ignorance. Nobody whose life is dominated by hellish despair can experience happiness. People who constantly hunger and desire for external satisfaction are never happy. People who are angry and go into blind rage at the slightest thing are certainly never happy. People who behave in an animal fashion; i.e. believing in survival of the fittest, fearing those stronger, and praying on those weaker than themselves – such people are never happy. The idle, who never show compassion for others, and dwell in limbo are like the living dead – they confuse contentment with happiness. The rapturous,

seeking pleasure where they can will enjoy passing excitement or arousal, but never a lasting happiness.

Our minds are constantly changing from moment to moment in ways that appear chaotic and unpredictable. It is impossible to establish what you are thinking about at any particular moment, because, as soon as you observe your mind it changes. This paradox entertained the minds of Chinese Buddhists such as T'ien-t'ai Chih-i who dedicated much of their lives to understanding how the mind operates from moment to moment.

T'ien-t'ai developed a system of thought known as Ichinen Sanzen. This theory forms a central pillar in Japanese Buddhism. T'ien-t'ai theorised that each of the ten life states mentioned above could exist within each of the others. This mutual possession results in one hundred life states. He added to this theory a further ten factors, that attempt to describe how these hundred states manifest or interact both objectively, and subjectively with our minds. This produced a thousand states of mind.

As if this were not enough, he further saw that these states could be applied to three interactions with self, environment and society, ultimately deriving a theory of three thousand possible realms or states of mind.

While we are not going to carry out a detailed study of Ichinen Sanzen, the point of this exercise is to ponder T'ien-t'ai's proposal that we experience all three thousand realms in the blink of an eye (often described as a single life-moment) – constantly, throughout every second of our lives. In fact, Ichinen Sanzen translates from the Japanese as *a single life moment enfolds three thousand realms*.

This theory explains beautifully not only the transient and fleeting nature of the mind from millisecond to millisecond, but also the futility of attempting to predict where it will be a month, week, hour, or minute, or even second from now. It also highlights the limited benefit of exhaustively analysing the past through intellectual means.

Many counsellors might feel a sense of achievement when they help a client gain insight into initial causes of their suffering. The results of such detective work should, however, be treated with great caution. It is crucial to focus on the transformation of the client himself in order to avoid the possibility of the client forming further mental formations regarding those insights, such as blaming those they feel might be responsible.

Like any person who later discovers the culprit for his loss or suffering, the natural tendency for retribution and hatred is very strong. People often call for justice, but the term is often little more than a conveniently civilised veneer for ugly revenge. Therefore insights into our past when unaccompanied by the cultivation of mindful compassion and inner peace can easily serve to frustrate or complicate the healing process.

The untrained mind remains at the mercy of our rivers of sensation, emotions and ideas. When new experiences impact our consciousness the mind tends to cling to those that evoke pleasant feelings, and avoids those that evoke unpleasant feelings. Training ourselves in mindfulness is made easier through following monastic precepts and taking retreats away from the distractions of everyday life, but for ordinary lay men and women with careers and families this is often impossible.

Despite this, ordinary men and women can still learn the discipline of mindfulness through meditation and become happier and more joyful in their lives. Through a simple daily meditation practice our habitual patterns of thinking like “that will give me a panic attack” and other harmful mental formations can be transformed.

In psychological terms, our mental formations form a canker upon the ego, a hard crust intended to protect the self from harm. Although initially we cannot prevent these sorts of thoughts from arising, with the practice of mindfulness we can learn to regard them with a degree of impartiality, allowing us to look deeply into them and gain insight into their causes. When we can regard our feelings without attachment or aversion then we can break down this canker around our ego and make it easier to connect with our heart and the hearts of others.

Consider the icebergs that drift from the polar regions into the atlantic ocean. By racing through the ocean of life, our mind must constantly form strategies to navigate around these threats and obstacles. We perceive the icebergs as solid, immovable and able to sink our vessel, and the constant threat of danger creates anxiety. With the practice of mindfulness, we can slow the ship of the mind, and in doing so, we can draw up very closely to an iceberg without fear or danger. We can observe it closely, and gain insight into its impermanent nature and observe as it melts back into the sea. When we cultivate the desire to calm the mind in order to gain insight into the true impermanent nature of our anxieties then we are set upon the path of transformation.

2. The nature of anxiety disorder

A WILD ELEPHANT

The 8th century Indian Buddhist scholar, Shantideva writes about the power of the mind to lay us low:

Wondering where it will, the elephant of the mind,
Will bring us down to torment in the hell of unrelenting pain.
No worldly beast, however wild and crazed,
Could bring upon us such calamities.

In other words, for all afflictions of the flesh, none can bring about the wretchedness or misery that our mind so blithely conjures. Our truest enemy, the destroyer of our happiness is not without, but within. Our own mind is the unwitting architect of our own suffering.

For the sufferer of anxiety disorder, this passage from Shantideva's beautiful work, *Bodhicharyavatara* (the Way of the Bodhisattva) must certainly ring true. The sufferer of anxiety is utterly at the mercy of her uncontrolled mind. Like being locked in a room with a wild elephant, not knowing which way it will lurch next while all the time feeling utterly powerless to escape.

Suffering from intense anxiety is like being a rabbit frozen in fear of an oncoming vehicle's headlights. We can often feel impotent to deal with our suffering. The oncoming vehicle, like our old age and death draw ever closer and the dazzling headlights, like our insurmountable indecision, cripples our ability to feel confident in taking positive action; As a result we find our lives bound to the

spot in fearful torment. *What if, should I, maybe if I, but what if I?* we think, while all the time doing nothing to change our destiny. Time ticks by until old age, sickness and death is all that remains leaving only regret and self hatred for a life not truly lived.

If you found yourself nodding to the preceding paragraph, then you can recognise how damaging this pattern of anxious thinking and behaviour has become. Emotions such as fear, jealousy, anger and hatred arise easily in an anxious mind. Chronic anxiety makes it easy to develop a fatalistic viewpoint and give up on the idea of ever being happy. Not knowing which way to turn or what to believe we become frustrated with our lack of progress and berate ourselves. Perhaps we look for hope for a better future in things like astrology and fortune telling, but doing so is wrong thinking – it denies the potential for self determination, transformation and happiness we all possess.

Fatalistic thinking is just another form of self punishment. In truth we are never powerless to influence our lives, but when we are overwhelmed by our problems it can seem this way. When you cross a road, you certainly don't just leave it to fate – you look left and right before stepping out (unless you are reading this from your hospital bed!). Our most basic instinct is to survive – life has been around for billions of years so it's reasonable to deduct this instinct is pretty well developed.

In contrast, the ability of the human mind to experience joy and happiness is in evolutionary terms relatively new. Also relatively new is the ability to think in abstract and imaginative ways. It could be argued that the growth and development of our modern brain has out paced our ability to exploit its full potential. While

our desire to experience happiness remains constant, the same conscious mind struggles to find ways to experience it. Our unskilful attempts at experiencing happiness usually result only in usually short term pleasure or excitement, and our deluded actions invariably lead to further suffering.

When things don't go well for us, all kinds of harmful information gets fed to our unconscious. The conscious mind misreads the inputs from our senses, and recalls distorted memories of past experiences. These feelings trigger anxiety symptoms and our body then suffers. Without the practice of mindfulness to cut through our ignorance, we automatically and arbitrarily attach these unpleasant feelings to the events that have taken place, further reinforcing our harmful tendencies and behaviour.

Imagine a nuclear power station. It requires a great many computerised and automated systems to ensure its critical systems continue to operate smoothly and safely. Cooling systems, water treatment, fuel management, security, and energy output are all closely managed by experts. Likewise our body's internal systems, such as heart, digestive system, kidneys, and adrenal system are all managed by the oldest and most evolved part of our brain.

If a new untrained employee was to enter the control room of the power station, knowing little of the power station's operations, then even with the best of intentions it is likely that a disaster would ensue before long. The most recently developed parts of our brains are like the new employee – having the ability to seriously interfere with the smooth running of our bodies yet utterly incapable of running our body on its own. When we do not live

mindfully we forget ourselves and let our new employee run around our control room, pressing buttons and causing trouble.

We persist in delving into the past to predict the future without ever really living in the present moment. Our conscious mind meanders this way and that, looking for reasons to explain how we came to feel as we do. It meanders into the past, clinging to blame, regret or guilt. It meanders into the future, trying to predict how we will feel if we do A, B or C. Our unconscious mind is always watching and listening to our conscious thoughts, and our constant worrying and fretting rubs off on it – further reinforcing our tendency towards anxious thinking and behaviour. This constant strategising and focussing on the self is very destructive. Sadly, it is often only when we explode with panic that we truly experience the “now”. Panic attacks are very harmful because they can easily form an incorrect and intense aversion to something that is not harmful at all.

Thinking that life is about us versus the world allows anxiety to become entrenched in our lives and we become deadlocked. We can never win in this scenario – although we try to obtain respite, it is never lasting. And while we are scheming and planning, our mind is fundamentally out of touch with our body. We become a stranger to ourselves, unable to display the tenderness or genuine compassion that would enable our recovery. Because we are not present in the moment, we also cannot give our love to those who are dear to us.

THE MANY FACES OF ANXIETY

Anxiety manifests in several ways and can include:

- Phobia based anxiety disorders such as social anxiety or agoraphobia.
- Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD).
- Eating Disorders (while not classified as an anxiety disorder, many clinical studies indicate that over half of those with an eating disorder also diagnose for anxiety disorder.)²
- Post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).
- Generalised anxiety disorder.
- Panic disorder.
- Reactive anxiety (divorce, bereavement, job loss, major illness or other major life event) which can manifest weeks or months later.

Anxieties are formed when we develop an unhealthy attachment or aversion to pleasant or unpleasant feelings and then lose control of the ability to repeat or avoid those feelings. Even this opening statement is fraught with misunderstanding. What is a pleasant or unpleasant feeling? To a masochist, a pleasant feeling might mean being physically harmed. To a social-phobic person, a birthday celebration might be very unpleasant. Therefore it is important to understand that from the very outset our understanding of what is pleasant and what is unpleasant is undeniably relative and not absolute. It is tainted by our store consciousness and our habitual

energy – therefore what we often see as absolute fact is often nothing more than our own ignorant point of view.

We experience the world and our physical existence through what Buddhism calls our sense impressions (Skt. Sparsa). There are six classes of sense impression – sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, and mind. Each sense impression relies upon three aspects in order to derive a pleasant or unpleasant feeling. These are our physical sensory faculties (sight, hearing, smell etc.), the object being sensed, and our cognitive process. If we take away one or more of these three contributing factors then we lose the sense impression and cannot create mental formations. For example, if someone who is afraid of spiders is blindfolded (loss of sight) then they cannot know a spider is directly in front of them. A person who is unconscious (loss of mind) is unable to feel afraid of being put on an aeroplane. A person who eats too much meat will lose his appetite when a severe cold takes away his sense of taste. All of the attachments and aversions listed above, whatever initially caused them, are maintained because we have formed wrong views.

We can suffer both chronic and acute forms of anxiety concurrently, experiencing terrible debility. We even anticipate or predict states of anxiety before they occur. In fact, the words *expect or anticipate* should more accurately be replaced with *cause*, because without the mind's intervention, the symptoms could not occur. Our mind causes our anxiety. Of course, this is incredibly hard to accept. These feelings have become so natural we accept them as normal bodily reactions. Someone suffering a phobia could no more deliberately encounter the object of their fear than

hold their hand over a burning candle. The emotions can be very deep.

Other people suffer continual or latent anxious states throughout the day, very often without being fully aware of it. How often do we notice a tight chest, aching shoulders or neck muscles after a busy day at work or in the home? People who notice body tension usually only do so when it becomes intensely uncomfortable, at which point they often turn to lunchtime or after-work drinking or smoking to gain some immediate relief. Rather than fix the source of their suffering, these behaviours form further harmful attachments. When anxiety becomes part of everyday life, it limits our freedom and freshness, leading to physiological and psychological illness. We look for ways to avoid our unpleasant feelings but in doing so we lose touch with ourselves in the here and now, preventing healing.

Acute anxiety manifests as the sensation of panic – a short, yet explosively unpleasant event that overwhelms us with fear and foreboding. Panic attacks often arise in situations where we are exposed directly to the object of a phobia. All kinds of phobia can arise based on our sense organs. Most of us associate the sight sense with the most common phobias. When someone sees a spider, snake or needle, for example, they might feel the onset of unpleasant feelings. People can form aversions to any and all of the sense impressions. For example, following a serious accident a good friend of mine developed a phobia of sudden loud noises (sonophobia), making his work and many daily activities difficult to cope with. Phobias can also arise from combinations of sense impressions. For example, someone might be able to tolerate

seeing a horse standing still, or hearing the distant clip clop of horses hooves, but to experience both together will trigger an intense reaction.

The sixth type of sense impression, that of mind itself, can also form the basis of phobia. Without any help from our physical senses the mind draws upon our past experiences in order to create new mental formations, including feelings towards various aspects of life. Our mental record of past experience is tainted by our store consciousness, and that of our ancestors and community, and is therefore based in ignorance. The mind relies upon this deluded information to form views and opinions regarding the world we experience. This in turn creates mental formations and feelings which can be powerful and harmful to our happiness. Some people, when they consider homosexuality, or people of another skin colour, can experience unpleasant feelings that lead toward aversion, hatred, and phobia. These feelings are internally manufactured without any direct experience of the object of their feelings. They are based on preconceived ideas and tendencies derived from the seeds in our store consciousness, or inherited from parents, and peers.

Aversion to unpleasant feelings sits at the root of many anxieties and phobias. People often try to deal with phobias by eliminating one of the three factors of their sense impressions – the sense object itself. This is wrong thinking because in trying to remove the sense object, we are attempting to control something other than our own mind. We might think that squashing a spider, or storming out of the house after an argument is harmless. Some might think dissuading someone of a different skin colour from

sitting next to them is equally harmless. However, these behaviours form part of a spectrum of violent acts which culminate in atrocities like the holocaust. All such acts are driven by feelings of aversion. When we try to relieve our suffering by exerting control over the outside world then we are destined to continue suffering. Whether we try to eliminate spiders, needles, snakes, people who are homosexual or of a different colour or culture, we are thinking violently and we will continue to suffer. On a practical level – there's simply more spiders, needles, snakes etc., in the world than we could possibly eliminate, and on the spiritual level the world would be a pretty miserable place if everyone exerted their deluded wishes upon everyone else.

Likewise, if we have formed an unhealthy attachment to pleasant feelings we can fall into the trap of manipulating our environment in order to repeat the experience – usually to distract us from what we perceive as our suffering. The irony here is that what we perceive as our suffering is rarely intrinsically harmful, but the experiences we seek in order to escape that suffering are indeed harmful and are often the real cause of our suffering. The husband or wife who says they have been driven to drink by their partner, often goes on to suffer alcoholism, for example. Driven by a deluded aversion to their spouse, this person forms an attachment to a harmful intoxicant instead of using compassionate speech to heal the rift in their relationship.

Whenever we try to satisfy our aversions or attachments by exerting control over our environment we will experience anxiety. If our aversions or attachments are not satisfied then we suffer further unpleasant feelings. Even the prospect of future

dissatisfaction causes us to feel anxious. Therefore this is not the path to happiness.

Another alternative might be to remove our sense organs altogether but this would require radical surgery, and would undoubtedly inflict terrible psychological harm. There are stories of people suffering from psychosis who have tried to dig their own eyes out, and indeed some non Buddhist texts even suggest removing an eye, should it cause offence, in order to gain salvation. Buddhism would regard this as wrong thinking, as it is based upon extreme violence – the forceful manipulation of matter (in this case our eyeballs) in order to deal with our deluded desires.

It should now be clear to us we can't control the external objects of our senses, nor can we realistically remove our sense organs themselves. Therefore, the only remaining factor of our sense impressions is our cognition – the way we perceive and react to the manifest world. In order to tackle clinging to feelings of aversion and attachment we must work to transform the cognitive processes that give rise to them. This is achieved through the practice of mindfulness, an awareness of the mind and body that brings us into the present moment, away from the guilt or regret of the past, and away from fear or anxiety of the future.

We must take comfort in the knowledge that we can overcome our anxiety through the internal transformation of our perception and cognition. Any clinical or spiritual help we receive along the way, including this book, will provide only signposts towards a deeper wisdom regarding our condition. It is we who must walk the path illuminated by the practice of mindfulness – no one else can do

this for us. By practicing the the way of compassion and mindfulness within our daily life, in spite of how painful it might feel at the time, we will make steady progress towards equanimity and peace of mind. There will be times when we fail to win a particular struggle with our habitual mind, but failure itself should be regarded as another opportunity for learning. We must not berate or become angry with ourselves. We would not become angry with a friend who suffered anxiety disorder, so why become angry with ourselves? Be compassionate with yourself. Take note of failure, but do not judge it, or predict what might happen in future. Acknowledge it as a courageous step in transforming our suffering into happiness. Failure is only a passing landmark – a temporary slip upon the shale during our steady climb toward awakening.

Using the philosophy of Buddhism to explain the nature of anxiety, and by providing some basic daily practices that enable us to challenge these negative feelings, we can tackle anxiety, overcome personal challenges and improve our quality of life. To reconnect with our true nature in a controlled and caring way is a beautiful journey. Like meeting a long lost friend whom we love dearly, when we can embrace ourselves in the here and now, truly aware of our mind and body, we can heal our anxiety. We can feel happiness. When we cultivate a deep connection with the present moment and maintain it through mindful vigilance, the shroud of ignorance is lifted and we can enjoy being alive.

The most important factor of all in overcoming anxiety is hope. Hopelessness enslaves us to continued suffering – it destroys courage, and dulls the heart. If we were at sea, surrounded by a

fog, then we might give up hope of reaching land, although it may be less than a hundred yards away. This is why it is useful to find a friend or a group of friends to practice with. Such a group is called a sangha, and can be a tremendous benefit to our developing practice. When we give up hope, we become the living dead. So, always remain hopeful. Nobody likes a zombie!

PHYSICIAN, HEAL THYSELF

Receiving therapy from others is helpful in many ways – after all, we get to tell the therapist about our perceived problems, and have a good old whinge! While a cathartic outburst in front of a therapist or friend is sometimes unavoidable and often beneficial, we must be careful to avoid becoming an habitual complainer. Most of us have known someone who complains constantly about aches and pains, money, their workplace, or their family. Such people rarely experience a lasting happiness, and often suffer from anxiety. Such attitudes usually create an air of defeat and pessimism.

There is an apocryphal tale of a strict Zen monastery. Every ten years, the monks were permitted to utter just two words. After ten years, one monk said to the head monk “Bed, hard!”. “I see”, replied the head monk. Ten years later, the monk returned to the head monk and said, “Food stinks!”. “I See”, replied the head monk. After a further ten years the same monk entered the head monk's hermitage and said “I quit!”. The head monk replied “I'm not surprised, all you ever do is complain.”

While this story could be interpreted in various ways, it can be used to demonstrate the situation that many of us find ourselves

in. Like the monk, who became a monastic in order to realise happiness and awakening, we too wish to become happy. However, if we spend thirty years complaining about not being happy, then we can guarantee that will be thirty years spent being unhappy – and our tendency at the end of the experience will be to give up hope.

Therefore, when we engage with a therapist, real progress is often impossible until a counselling relationship can mature and deepen beyond our initial complaints. When we let go of our complaining nature a good therapist can guide us towards understanding anxiety from a different perspective, or allow us to gain a more rational theory from our existing perspective. Whichever type of psychotherapy we receive, its intent is to illuminate our areas of difficulty so as to identify harmful thinking and behaviour.

While every therapist aims to facilitate a permanent improvement in their client, this is not always achieved. Sometimes the therapist may believe the client has come to terms with a particular situation, and that all underlying causes of anxiety have been uncovered and examined. In short, a therapist might mistake short term improvements in mood and outlook, often based on placebo effect, for the client having undergone sufficient internal reorganisation to avoid a complete relapse.

However, months later the same client may walk back into the consulting room with a similar problem, or the same problem. This may happen repeatedly until the therapist can help the client to discover the true (rather than apparent) root of their suffering. Unfortunately, financial restrictions often prevent this discovery from being made in time to ensure a permanent recovery.

Turning away from talking therapies for a moment, there are also a broad array of drug related therapies indicated for the treatment of anxiety disorders. Antidepressant and anxiolytic drugs, for example, attempt to address anxiety disorders by correcting various chemical imbalances in the physical brain, or by enhancing or diminishing the effect of existing neurotransmitters.

Modern anti-depressants of the SSRI (Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitor) family are often prescribed for their secondary anxiolytic (to reduce the symptoms of anxiety) effect. While such drugs can effect a subtle change in our sleep patterns and make us feel more “together”, they can also have undesirable side effects. Regardless of their primary or secondary physiological effect, they cannot fundamentally change the way we think about the world. They won't, for example, change the way we feel about someone or something in a direct sense. It is unlikely, for example, that someone will suddenly let go of deeply held prejudices, or become friends with someone else whom [they believe] has been causing them misery. While we continue to create the causes for anxiety in our lives through clinging to attachments and aversions, we are unlikely to find any lasting relief from pharmaceuticals.

Older tricyclic antidepressants and tranquillisers such as Valium, while delivering short term relief carry a great risk of the patient becoming tolerant. Once this occurs the dosage may sometimes be increased, and the ensuing physical dependency can cause further problems of withdrawal when a treatment protocol terminates and the drugs are reduced or stopped. Even if the medicine is deemed to have done its job then psychological dependency can ensue.

This is where an unconscious attachment to the medicine is formed – that the medicine is crucial to one's continued wellbeing, and if withdrawn will cause the individual to slip back into illness.

Importantly, the prescribing habits of general practitioners differ substantially from those of psychiatrists. It is fair to say that GPs rely more heavily upon official data (university, hospital and established formularies) whereas psychiatrists place more emphasis on working dynamically with the patient, and colleagues' review/opinion. Therefore a prescription for antidepressants from a GP based on a short five or ten minute consultation is arguably less optimal than one from a psychiatrist that may also be accompanied by supporting one-to-one therapy. Like being prescribed methadone to escape an addiction to heroine, GPs who blithely prescribe psychiatric drugs without psychotherapeutic support potentially place individuals into a state of spiritual limbo – often safe from the abyssal trenches of despair, but equally impeded from self actualisation. Rather than tackling the causes of our anxiety, such treatment protocols merely support an economic strategy to keep human resources in work. Provided we can be kept at work, or prevented from requiring hospitalisation, governments do not really pay much attention to our suffering.

As already mentioned, anxiolytics and antipsychotics are often used in tandem with some formulation of psychoanalysis or psychodynamic counselling such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), client-centred therapy, gestalt, rational therapy and so on. Arguably the most popular front-line therapy employed today is CBT. Arguable rooted philosophically in Stoicism, a school within

3rd century Athens which taught errors in judgement would inevitably lead to the creation of destructive thoughts and emotions. The way to end the suffering of destructive thinking and behaviour, Stoics believed, was in attaining moral and intellectual perfection. It would be fascinating to know if the Stoics would have considered Buddha a person of moral and intellectual perfection – hopefully they would. Buddha would have agreed with much of Stoic thought – after all, Buddha himself taught that the removal of wrong views (errors in judgement) allows one's awakening to enlightenment (i.e. a life free of destructive emotion), leading the individual to happiness and liberation from suffering.

Despite CBT becoming a panacea of sorts in recent times it has proved unsatisfactory in a significant proportion of cases. For example, a 2005 study carried out by the University of Dundee³ showed that over half of the recipients of CBT for anxiety disorders had “at least one diagnosis at long term follow-up”. The study also concluded that clinicians who go beyond 10 sessions over a 6-month period are unlikely to bring about greater improvement. While talking therapies clearly have a limited window of opportunity within which to effect positive and lasting change, it would be wrong to dismiss CBT as an effective therapeutic approach. Addressing and eliminating harmful cognitive (beliefs and views) and behavioural (avoidance, rationalised safety seeking etc.) traits is very much in line with the teachings of Buddha. It is primarily the time and cost limitations of drug and talking therapies which remain an obstacle in preventing such approaches from addressing anxiety disorder with more satisfying long-term outcomes.

These observations may appear negative, but are based on personal experience in addition to anecdotal feedback from dozens of other anxiety sufferers either known to or specifically interviewed prior to the writing of this book. Any approach in which therapies are applied only *to* the sufferer, and not also consistently *by* the sufferer to himself should be considered inherently incomplete. It is the lack of a complete and effective formulation of ongoing self-treatment that too often allows sufferers to decline once more into an anxious state once conventional treatments have run their course. While a therapist might teach a basic practice of breath control and relaxation, the necessarily secular approach to these practices do not provide the client with a context within which he can explore other techniques and teachings that promote self healing.

The general attitude of many clinicians towards anxiety disorder and other mental health issues is that there will come a stage in an individual's recovery where, like learning to ride a bicycle, the stabilisers can be taken off and the client will safely peddle off into the sunset never to return. To continue the metaphor, however, if one does not regard the rules of the road, then an accident will likely ensue. These "rules of the road" are essential if we are stay out of trouble on life's highway. In terms of anxiety disorder, these rules of the road are analogous to the practice of remaining mindful in our daily lives. If we do not remain mindful and allow our habitual energies to overwhelm us once more, then we will forget ourselves and soon be in danger of falling off our bike!

The anxious mind is a dependant and needy one. It constantly wanders here and there becoming attached to environmental

factors (people, places, things or substances) that bring us pleasure or running away from things that appear to make us suffer. Buddhism regards this “clinging” to attachment and aversion as a symptom of our ignorance – our inability to see things in their true light. The role of Buddhism, like psychotherapy, is to assist us in reappraising and reorganising our sense of self so that our clinging to damaging desires and feelings is gradually eliminated. This “letting go” of harmful ideas and feelings leads the individual from a confused and anxious state to a calmer one where the mind is free to enjoy the experience of being alive in the present moment.

Imagine a polar bear who cannot swim. He spends his time clinging onto chunks of ice to keep him afloat. However, the ice keeps melting and he is always looking for another chunk of ice to survive. He is a very anxious bear, and as a result is very unhappy. When we learn the practice of mindfulness, then we are like the polar bear learning to swim. As he becomes more proficient, he can let go of his chunks of ice and swim freely in the ocean. He becomes a liberated and happy bear. When we become more aware of our mental formations and feelings, and look after them through compassion for ourselves, then we can also become happy bears!

This journey from dependance towards independence and liberation from suffering results in the cultivation of deep compassion for ourselves and others. If we understand the suffering of others – for example, if we have suffered chicken pox – then we are more disposed to showing real compassion for someone else who is suffering from the same illness. Likewise,

when we can understand the sources of our own suffering, and have experienced first hand its transformation into happiness, then we can act out of compassion for ourselves and for everyone else without exception.

The spiritual path of the Bodhisattva (enlightened being) does not stop with having awakened to one's own personal liberation. Genuine compassion is not conditional, and once cultivated it naturally gives rise to the desire to liberate others, so that they may too become happy. The realisation of inter-being and interdependency that comes with awakening simply does not allow the selfish attainment of awakening for oneself.

Personal liberation and compassion for all living beings are two sides of the same coin, you simply cannot experience one without the other. Imagine if all of the properties in your neighbourhood were on fire. There is no wisdom in simply extinguishing the flames of your own home while those that surround you continue to burn. Put another way, even a cold-blooded hit man believes he loves his own family, but that love is not compassion.

In the past century a number of humanistic psychologists have promoted the idea of positive psychology – that is, a framework of theories and practices that scientifically evaluates and promotes not just the elimination of suffering or unhappiness, but the positive reinforcement of happiness and wellbeing. Western medicine, for the longest time, treated wellness as nothing more than the mere absence of illness, stress or anxiety. Positive psychology on the other hand has a great deal in common with the psychology of Buddhism. It proactively and dynamically

drives forward, aiming for individuals to fulfil their potential and shine as beacons of human happiness, courage and wisdom.

If Buddhism can help someone suffering from anxiety why isn't it used openly by health professionals? It is used in the health service, but not overtly. Because Buddhism is a religion, it is seen as a threat by secular authorities, and therefore it cannot be openly recommended by therapists because it would be unacceptable to anyone who did not accept the lack of a creator God. This is a pity, because the great core of buddhist practice can quite easily be seen not as religious but as simple pragmatic humanism. The term “psycho-spiritual” has been used to describe the application of religious principles in a therapeutic setting, but I think it would be shortsighted to regard Buddhism in this way. Buddhism does not require blind faith to achieve results – the Buddha did not promote himself as a deity or supreme being. First and foremost he was a teacher. Buddhism does not rely on an external agency or blind adherence to strange or bizarre practices to save people from suffering. The Buddha simply taught the truth of suffering, why it comes about, the fact that it can cease, and how we can practice the path to cessation. The empirical proof from thousands of years of Buddhist practice means that for us to benefit also, we require little more than a degree of faith in our ability to cultivate a sense of mindfulness in our daily lives.

GENETICS AND THE INHERITANCE OF SUFFERING

While our genes are responsible for many neurological illnesses, research into anxiety has thus far failed to prove that genetic factors alone are sufficient to condemn someone to a life of

anxiety disorder. Research into genetic factors affecting our susceptibility to anxiety disorder are in the public domain, and research papers abound with exotic names like *Glo1*, *SLC6A4* and so forth. While this research is important, it is still largely speculative and certainly limited to diagnostic applications.

In a 1999 paper entitled *Early Childhood Predictors of Adult Anxiety Disorders*, Professor Jerome Kagan of Harvard University showed how differential excitability of particular brain structures in young babies in their second year can predict higher than normal risks in later development of anxious behaviour and disorders. Such babies were significantly more distressed when confronted with new or novel experiences. Professor Kagan concluded, however, that while it was clear that biological and environmental factors played a part in an individual's manifestation of disorders later in life, the contribution of either factor could not be measured independently of the other. That is to say, genetic and behavioural factors are inextricably linked when considering the overall risk of an individual developing anxiety disorder. Someone with a physiological pre-disposition will not necessarily suffer from anxiety disorder, and someone without such pre-dispositions will not necessarily remain free from anxiety-disorder.

So, while there may be further success in searching for the pathologies of anxiety, it's the sufferer's attitude to living with and overcoming the condition that remains pivotal in influencing longer term outcomes. We all genetically differ – Darwin worked out long ago that these variations account for the process of

evolution and natural selection; without our differences we would not have survived as a species.

Despite the fortunate or unfortunate reality of our physical births, it is our attitude and overall frame of mind that has greatest influence in whether we will lead a life filled with hope, optimism and compassion, or one of despair, anger and selfishness. It is the only way to explain why someone with no physical ailments or material needs might jump off an office block to their death, whereas someone born blind and deaf like Helen Keller could go on to help found the American Civil Liberties Union, and become a shining example of the human spirit.

Like flowers, our anxieties grow from seeds, or causes, we make while ignorant to the true nature of reality. This ignorance is a state of life in which our five physical senses, coupled with our mind consciousness, conspire like a bad set of beer goggles to distort the way we view reality. Each time we form a wrong view or opinion, think a wrong thought, speak a wrong word or perform an wrong action based on this distorted sense of reality, we create a fresh seed of suffering in our store consciousness. These seeds lie in wait until at some point in future we allow them to be watered, allowing sprouts of fear, anger, hatred or greed to emerge into our conscious mind.

HOTEL CALIFORNIA

The idea that we create our own anxiety is so utterly repugnant that we naturally try to blame something or someone else for doing this to us or potentially much worse, we become angry and blame ourselves. Self loathing is common place among those

suffering from anxiety disorders. We cling to the idea that our anxiety is something other people or our body did to us; that there must be something physically wrong with us. Perhaps it is a degenerative neural disease making our legs unsteady, a brain tumour giving us headaches or blurred vision, a heart abnormality giving us chest pain or palpitations, or some form of cancer eating away at our digestive system. GPs have heard it all for decades, yet we wonder why we are confronted with professional indifference when we present our radical theories to them.

While such professional indifference is utterly inexcusable it is perhaps understandable given the symptoms of hypochondria many of us display to our medical practitioners. Of course, it is exceptionally sad when further diagnosis is appropriate yet overlooked because the doctor thinks we are once again “crying wolf”, but it has and will continue to happen for as long as anxiety sufferers are regarded as malingering neurotics. This repeated rejection by healthcare professionals can engender feelings of isolation, and hopelessness. Ultimately, people can become so depressed and desperate to escape the daily torment of their condition, they might consider the ultimate escape through taking their own life.

Buddhism's concept of rebirth dictates a radically different consequence to suicide than the eternal hellfire waiting for followers of the Judeo-Christian God who attempt a hasty escape. Buddhism posits the notion of karma, a store consciousness that remains with us throughout eternity from lifetime to lifetime. Often confused with the idea of a soul, our karma is perhaps better described as a storehouse of all the seeds we have created

throughout our life. It is a ledger of sorts, that records our habits, attitudes and binds us to our past actions, both harmful and beneficial. Therefore we are constantly reborn (not reincarnated – this is different) to endure our karma. Reincarnation suggests the assumption of another body by a permanent, eternal self.

Karma, or store consciousness is an important concept within Buddhism. To explain why this is so, consider Pascal's wager – a philosophical argument put forward originally to suggest that any rational person should believe in God on the basis of “what's there to lose.” I think Pascal's wager could equally be applied to karma. There are two possible outcomes when we die. The first view, governed by a materialistic outlook is that we die and pass into oblivion for all time. The second is that we do not become nothing, and we continue in some format. It is utterly impossible to prove that we pass into nothing (nobody has ever discovered nothing, ask a quantum physicist), and highly improbable that we will ever prove our karma exists after we die. However, if we were to bet on these two unprovable outcomes, annihilation, or karma/rebirth, it would be wiser to bet on the latter, and strive to improve our lives with every breath in our lungs. We lose nothing in doing so, enjoy the best life we can, and potentially enjoy better lives in future. If on the other hand we cling to materialism and selfishness and live a life that we might regret in the final analysis, then we have suffered terribly only to be annihilated, or worse, to be reborn back into that hellish existence. So, whether you believe in karma or not, it makes sense to persevere in the struggle to seek happiness in this life.

Of course, we do not experience our karma when we die – as we have no brain to experience consciousness. However, at some point in time and space, our karma reconnects with another emerging life-form and we essentially pick up from where we left off. So, if we committed suicide to escape a hellish life, then we are just going to be reborn into the same situation again – and again. Like *The Eagles'* song *Hotel California*, you can check out, but you can never leave!

While this might sound disturbing, it is not a punishment. There is always hope because the seeds we have stored in our karma, although eternal, are dynamic and impermanent. We can transform them throughout our lives by striving to develop our compassion and wisdom and by weakening other, less beneficial qualities. It is an incredibly positive outlook, because you can start improving things in this very moment.

WHY ME?

The idea of karma gives rise to some questions that are traditionally quite awkward. We might ask ourselves, what did we ever do to deserve this life? Because there is no continuation of an identifiable soul, we are usually unable to remember previous lives. *Very convenient*, I hear the atheists in the room declare. Well, yes it is, but then it doesn't have to be a scientifically proven fact in order to benefit humanity. The proof of karma is in the benefit it brings.

As we have read, understanding our own karma, the seeds in our store consciousness, gives rise to compassion and hope for ourselves. Likewise, understanding another's karma gives rise to

compassion for them. A baby who is born disabled is a source of concern for all of us. It is unthinkable that this baby deserved to be born with an affliction – this kind of thing is very difficult for those who believe in an omnipotent God. Karma can appear equally cruel, but this is to mistakenly think of karma as a conscious force, like God, and to think of the baby as an individual and separate thing from everything else. Karma can be considered more like a law of nature.

It is also mistaken to become caught in the trap of appearances – every tyrant that lived was once a beautiful baby. This does not mean that all disabled babies were tyrants in previous lives, however, it simply highlights another form of attachment.

We experience our karma, and we are utterly unable to fathom it. The important thing to remember is that we are not simply trying to transform suffering from our past life – we are transforming suffering from countless past lives. The canker which has built up over countless lifetimes may present itself in large chunks (thus we are afflicted from birth). We can either work to clean it off in this life, or we can go on adding to it through bitterness, resentment and resignation.

When we see someone who suffers, rather than offer sympathy and feel sorry for them, our understanding of karma allows us to enjoin them compassionately in their great and timeless struggle to overcome and transform their suffering into joy and happiness. Regardless of someone's predicament, we should feel compassion for them.

To be saddled with suffering that is unavoidable; poor health or disability due to infection or genetic factors, or to be born into a violent society is the raw material for awakening. If there was no suffering, there could be no enlightenment. Likewise, the suffering we create for ourselves in this life, once it is seen as such, and we can equip ourselves with the tools of concentration and insight, becomes the fuel for our own transformation.

We might wear the most beautiful white suite, or dress, but it takes only a finger tip dipped in ink to stain it terribly. A pure karma, or store consciousness, that is free of ignorance is like the pure white suit. Every time we engage in harmful behaviour, however slight, we place a stain upon it, so it is important to spend our time working to undo the damage we have already done.

3. The four noble truths

THE MANY FACES OF SUFFERING

To core teaching of the Buddha was the revelation of The Four Noble Truths – so called because they are undisputed and clearly demonstrable through the human experience:

1. The truth that life is suffering – we all suffer whether we are consciously aware of it or not. When we are not simply existing in the moment, and worrying about the future, or regretting the past, then we are suffering.
2. The truth of the causes of suffering – in order to arise, everything depends on other factors. This includes physical and mental formations.
3. The truth of the cessation of suffering – because suffering depends on other factors to arise, it must be possible to bring about its cessation.
4. The truth of the path to the cessation of suffering – The Buddha taught the cessation of suffering in the Noble Eightfold Path; right view, right thinking, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right diligence, right mindfulness and right concentration.

These truths apply to all suffering, and therefore to anxiety too.

Now, as someone who experiences anxiety or panic attacks you probably don't need to be told that life is suffering. After all, it's no fun being reduced to a blubbering wreck while those around you

appear to cope with life's ups and downs. And that's why your anxiety gets you down. You feel that your life sucks more than everyone else's. Therefore it's worth taking some time to consider anxiety in a broader sense, to see how it affects everyone.

Everyone alive suffers anxiety to some extent. We can't help it. We hurt ourselves physically and worry about healing, we contract illness and disease and worry about dying, we mourn the loss of loved ones and worry about how we will cope when we die, we feel anxious when we park illegally to quickly buy some milk from the shops, or when someone smelly sits next to us on the bus we worry that other people might think it's us. Anxieties arise whenever we experience a loss of control over the ability to satisfy our many attachments or aversions.

When we don't get the recognition our ego yearns (because of our attachment to our idealised self image), we become anxious regarding our performance or even feel despair. Even opening the mail to find another bill can make us anxious. Anxiety exists in so many ways it would take lifetimes to describe. The anxious mind is an expert in magnifying suffering and turning a drama into a crisis, so it's worth looking at the different kinds of suffering by breaking them down into three main categories.

The suffering of suffering

The first is the simple physical suffering that we experience through our sense organs. Injuries, illness, loud noise, bright light etc. This kind of suffering is largely unavoidable – after all, we exist in a conventional sense and come into contact with the manifest world, so sometimes that interaction will be a painful one. Whilst

some individuals (after a great deal of preparation) have been able to undergo painful surgery without anaesthetic, it's fair to say that a self-induced state of the deepest meditation is not possible 24hrs a day, so by and large we do suffer physically.

The suffering of change

The second kind of suffering occurs because something we had become accustomed to has changed. This is the suffering of conditioned being. The fact that everything is conditioned – interdependent – means that nothing remains the same, including us. Even things which appear not to change for one person, can appear to change greatly for another. The suffering of change is constantly ongoing. This change may be short term and sudden. For example, our hunger may drive us to binge on fast food, which is great to begin with, but after our third portion of fries we might start to feel sick and regret the whole venture. The mere smell of fat and salt becomes repulsive. We might even become ill. While the thought of another gherkin laden mega-cheeseburger might cause us to throw up, someone who is homeless and hungry would gratefully receive and deeply enjoy it. In this case, the absolute reality of the food hasn't changed, but our relative perception of it has. This is an important concept, and also demonstrates that our views are relative and not absolute. We will return to this later.

The suffering of change can occur over longer time periods. We suffer from these longer term subtle changes when, for example, our new TV, or other acquisition, although the source of great joy to begin with, soon starts to lose its magic. Perhaps the person you moved in with or married no longer seems to please you because their behaviour or appearance has changed. Someone people work

hard for years in order to afford the sports car they always wanted. The initial thrill of adulation from friends and family soon subsides though, and before long nobody pays much attention. The owner soon finds himself feeling unfulfilled once more. The car hasn't changed, only the owner's perceptions have.

Change can also catch us out, for example, when a partner leaves us, we lose a job, we have something valuable stolen or someone close to us dies. We easily become entrenched in the status quo, and the thought of change becomes a source of fear. There is a Buddhist tale of the cold-suffering bird. Having endured the bitter night alone, the bird determines to build a nice cosy nest at daybreak. However, the following morning it instead sleeps on through the morning in the warmth of the sunlight forgetting entirely about building a nest. When night inevitably draws in, the bird suffers again. Although this tale is aimed at the need to maintain a Buddhist practice through good and bad times, it also demonstrates quite well the trap of complacency we fall into when things appear to be going well for us.

Our ego constantly works to reinforce its defences and once it feels safe it likes to stay put. Anything that threatens this safety gives rise to anger, hatred, or depression and despair. Like a baby clutching its mothers breast, the ego has no interest in anything else while its immediate needs are being met. As adults, we are much the same. Spencer Johnson's book "Who Moved My Cheese" looks at these attitudes to change and loss in quite a charming way through the story of two mice and two "little" people. It reflects a good many Buddhist teachings. It is also a good example of how good teachings can be misunderstood and

abused. Aimed at the business world, the book has been handed out to employees of companies undergoing structural upheaval in an attempt to manipulate employees into seeing more demanding working conditions as an opportunity for self-development.

The all pervasive suffering of conditioning

The third kind of suffering is due to our own muddled view of existence – our ignorance, and our stupidity. This third kind of suffering is perhaps unique to humanity as it requires a certain degree of abstract thought, and imagination. If the second kind of suffering is where anxieties are born, then the third kind of suffering is where those anxieties are ruminated upon, magnified and potentially become disorders.

We constantly make plans based on our obsession with “I”, creating a cycle of greed (to maintain “I”), anger (to enhance the value of “I”) or foolishness (diversions to sooth the sufferings of “I”) or all three. So what's so bad about being greedy, angry or foolish? Greedy people don't seem all that anxious when they're busy makings lots of money, or buying their next expensive toy. As for angry people – well, they are the strongest, right? Pushing people around in meetings, or on the road – they don't seem overtly anxious. And foolish people, the ones who endlessly entertain themselves with TV, music, computer games, porn, drugs and things conjured by others – they don't seem anxious, do they? Maybe not while they are enjoying their distractions, but when these people are pulled away from their comfort activities their suffering soon becomes apparent. Perhaps the most tragic thing is that people who are caught in this pattern of behaviour do not even recognise it as suffering.

Consider the corporate tycoon lying awake at night tossing and turning wondering how he is going to save his failing empire from a hostile financial takeover – how is he going to maintain his yacht, and apartment in Monte Carlo? Or consider the bully, knowing that bigger fish are onto him, constantly looking over his shoulder, viewing everyone as a potential threat and having to hide in his own home behind bolted doors. Or what about the teenager worrying that his exam results will be dismal, knowing full well he spent too much time playing video games, or drinking and partying. It's actually not so hard to appreciate these people also suffer anxiety – it's why many such people have to find comfort in alcohol, nicotine, drugs and sex.

But none of this seems to apply to you, though, right? You like to think of yourself as neither greedy, angry, or foolish. Maybe you get upset now and again, but you don't set out in the morning to dominate and suck the life out of those around you. Regardless, we all experience greed, anger and foolishness every day at the subtle level. When was the last time you convinced yourself that you needed something, when perhaps you just wanted it? When did you last feel affronted when someone broke one of your possessions, or when someone didn't agree with your point of view? You might not have expressed anger at the time, but perhaps you muttered something under your breath afterwards, or spoke poorly of them to your friends. When did you last engage in a non-productive activity to avoid boredom like watching TV, smoking, drinking or taking drugs, playing video games or gossiping etc. These are all acts designed to satisfy our harmful desires. Sit in any doctor's waiting room and observe the way people fidget. Many people appear totally ill-at-ease, engrossing

themselves with their personal stereos or mobile phones in an attempt to escape the present moment which they see as suffering.

Every time these desires to escape suffering are not met, our ego rebels – like the infant kicking and screaming when he fails to get his way. We can all recognise gross levels of suffering when we experience physical discomfort or become sad or depressed. However, there are subtle levels of suffering that we experience constantly throughout the day. Arriving at a red traffic signal when we are late for work, or perhaps someone laughed at us because of our weight when we are swimming, or finding our office colleague has failed to wash up the coffee cups again. All of these incidents offend our ego – our idealised self-image – and therefore we create mental formations (what psychologists term mental projections) onto the places, times, people or things we interact with. These mental formations modify our behaviour, and we form attachments or aversions as a strategy to avoid future suffering.

We might in future decide to drive faster towards green lights, or even jump red lights in order to save time and please our boss. We might stop swimming to avoid humiliation. We might start to bring our coffee to the office in a flask and as a result harbour resentment toward our office colleague. All of these strategies are designed to serve the desires of the ego. By keeping the ego happy, we automatically assume that we avoid suffering. However, when we look more closely, we see that our desires gradually become distorted based upon our previous failure to find a lasting happiness.

The person rushing to work may have a serious accident, which could then lead to an aversion of rush hour traffic, or driving altogether. The overweight person, by withdrawing from activities where they may be humiliated, could become prone to further weight gain and loss of self esteem. The resentment of office colleagues often escalates to animosity or bullying, resulting in one or both employees becoming ill or getting fired.

The more we build upon misconceptions and distorted views, the more obstacles we place within our mental landscape. It becomes harder for our ego to protect our self-image. We might want to go out tonight but because this means touching door handles and things we feel are contaminated and will make us ill, we deny our desires. We go on holiday but our fear of flying means that we return feeling more exhausted than when we left. We are asked to go for a walk with friends, but our fear of fatigue means that we make excuses which we know are unconvincing, and as a result we feel shame and embarrassment, cultivating further anxiety. When we cannot accept ourselves as we are, then we project an idealised image, and live in constant fear of being found out.

Animals don't suffer from ego in the way we do – they don't worry about what other animals think of them. They don't resent other animals. They don't worry about their health the way we do – hypochondria, for example, is a uniquely human experience! Importantly, animals don't agonise over their limitations, and they don't lie awake at night worrying about what might happen tomorrow, or what could have but didn't happen today.

Animals and humans experience basic stress in the same way, but our primate monkey brain gives rise to a whole new theatre of

stress and anxiety unique to humans. For most animals, stress is an immediate response to a stimulus, but for a human being stress is something that can last for as long as we can stay awake. Humans usually experience anxiety not based on immediate and real threats, but on feelings and mental projections that over time we have convinced ourselves to be absolute and real. Because we have the capacity of imagination, we can spend our time visualising and worrying about negative scenarios that could happen 10 minutes, an hour, a day, or a year or more in the future.

Robert Sapolsky, an associate professor of biology and neuroscience at Stanford University, in his book “Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers” observed that Zebras, grazing the African planes are far better at managing stress than most human beings – despite being in an environment populated by lions.

Sapolsky observes that when the need arises to escape being eaten, the Zebra's fight or flight response triggers and it is able to sprint from danger – but as soon as the danger has passed, within minutes you will find the Zebra calmly munching on the scrub once more as his adrenaline is rapidly metabolised and his brain returns to idle. He won't spend the rest of the day imagining what could happen if another Lion comes, lose his appetite, or begin to feel hopeless and victimised. Despite leading a perilous life, the Zebra will not become neurotic. In a sense, a Zebra suffers less than most westerners.

DEATH BY A THOUSAND CUTS

When we become anxious, our body becomes physically aroused – we produce, amongst other things, increased amounts of the

stress hormones cortisol and adrenaline. The effects of these hormones prepare us for the fight or flight response – charging our muscles with sugars making them tremble, increasing our blood pressure and reducing blood flow to many internal organs in favour of our skeletal muscles. These profound physiological changes can cause digestive discomfort, dizzy spells, sweating, muscle tremors, tinnitus, chest pain, pins and needles and more, which all serve to intensify our psychological response to the event. Our caveman genes are preparing us to fight or run for our very survival – something that we, as modern human beings, rarely if ever need to do. Short term after effects of an anxiety or panic attack, can include tiredness, and the flaring up of any number of digestive complaints commonly including irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) with the associated diarrhoea or constipation.

We may experience and put up with anxiety disorder for years, allowing it to slowly wear down our health. We can feel helpless because panic attacks are by their nature traumatic and their effects are always overwhelming. By their very nature, they represent the complete break down of our ego to cope with a situation rationally. A panic attack occurs when a feedback cycle is established between our bodily sensations and the mind. Our prime tendency when we perceive anxiety arising is removing ourselves from the stimulus. However, sometimes we find ourselves reacting to a stimulus that cannot be removed, for example, a fear of something that is going to happen in future. When this happens, our sensation of fear and foreboding can spiral out of control, triggering an intense bodily reaction. This physical reaction reaches our consciousness, creating more fear.

The body continues to release more adrenaline, worsening our physical symptoms, until we find it difficult to think rationally at all. For some people, this downward spiral of fear ends up in accident and emergency. Victims of panic attacks claiming to be suffering a heart attack are no strangers to medics.

When we suffer sustained high levels of anxiety then our brain chemistry can change, reducing serotonin levels and affecting our sleeping patterns. Ultimately our adrenal function can become exhausted. The result is that we feel chronically run down and weak – in extreme cases even getting out of bed risks physical collapse. In time this state of health begins to affect our cardiovascular function and immune system making us more susceptible to infection, disease and other complaints.

Subjecting our bodies to this kind of stress over long periods can give rise to depression and other physical conditions like Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS), Myalgic Encephalitis (ME) or Fibromyalgia (FM). Sufferers of these conditions can suffer great cognitive impairment – so called *foggy headedness*.

The study of these recently recognised illnesses is gathering pace and opinions as to their nature are hotly debated. Some view these conditions as physiological or neurological in nature, whereas others see them simply as psychosomatic symptoms of a chronic psychological problem. I suspect there is an element of truth in both arguments.

I suffered for many years with chronic fatigue which started after a viral infection in my twenties. Since then I have gone through a number of remissions and relapses that seem to have declined in

severity as I have aged. Throughout my early experience of the condition, the attitude and unskillfulness of many general practitioners caused me a lot of distress, anguish and not a little anger. Unskilled in the art of compassionate listening, many general practitioners are simply unqualified to deal with these new and complex conditions.

Whatever science determines to be the cause of ME, CFS or FM, many who suffer these awful conditions also experience anxiety and depression. Whether we suffer these conditions because of anxiety and depression or whether anxiety and depression is caused by the conditions is intellectually fascinating but largely irrelevant when determining how best to eliminate the anxiety and depression these conditions so clearly promote.

There is a tale that one day while walking in the deer park the Buddha happened upon a wounded deer lying on the ground with a hunter's arrow piercing its side. Two Brahmans (holy men) stood by debating the exact time the deer's life would leave its body, and subsequently asked the Buddha for his opinion. Ignoring them, Buddha immediately approached the deer and removed the arrow, saving the animal's life. This story represents the triumph of wisdom and compassion over our conscious intellect. In the same way, medics who gain more self satisfaction from reaching a conventional diagnosis rather than genuinely fighting to “pull the arrow”, are no less detached from the sufferers plight than the Brahmans were from that of the deer.

The dispassionate and unhelpful approach of many GPs to patients who present with symptoms of ME, CFS or FM is highly relevant in the struggle of such people to overcome their suffering. Instead

of dismissing ME, CFS or FM as little more than hypochondria and referring patients for a standard course of CBT or other talking therapy, the focus should be on helping the patient accept their condition without fear or anxiety. When this is done, and done well, then the sufferer eliminates any psychosomatic complication of the disease. This clears the haze of symptoms allowing the study and treatment of any underlying physiological causes.

Anxiety does indeed create many of the symptoms associated with ME, and CFS. It is fascinating to learn how many sufferers are prepared to perceive their symptoms to be the *cause* of anxiety and depression, rather than the *effect* of it. Wobbly legs, light headedness, sweating, palpitations, tight chest, headaches, nausea, digestive discomfort, blurred vision, foggy head, muscle and joint pain and lack of concentration – the list is long and notorious – can all be *symptoms* of a prolonged and chronic anxiety disorder too. I think it is important for anyone suffering from these conditions to at least accept that their anxiety or depression, regardless of its causal relationship with their entire symptomatology, may very well be contributing to the harmful cycle of suffering.

This was one of the hardest things I had to accept when I began practicing Buddhism. Like many people suffering ME, CFS or FM I had been expending huge amounts of time and energy demanding this test, and that test, trying this herb, and that tincture, this therapy, and that technique – all focussing to the greatest extent on the physical body, and not on the mind. This betrays our unconscious belief that the body is more

transformable than the mind. Of the many pop-psychology cures available many are based on simple diversion and distraction – offering only temporary relief until the next major relapse.

It's difficult to accept that our repeated anxiety may actually be causing our longer term physical symptoms. Even when we open our mind to the idea, our unconscious mind still clings vigorously to the theory that our symptoms *preceded* the onset of anxiety. Our gut feeling continues to suggest that our wobbly legs, for example, are an intrinsic feature of our physical makeup, or are due to a degenerative nerve disease, or other physiological ailment. This is because we have no awareness of the most subtle precursors of an anxiety attack. These precursors are not physical, but hidden deeply in our habitual behaviour. These precursors do not hurt, they produce no physical symptom, they are quite silent and stealthy. Like a sleeping tiger in the long grasses of our mind, they are undetectable to the unwary.

And so it goes on. Each time we experience anxiety in this way, believing that “this is the way it is” – that we are powerless to change the regular course of events – then we reinforce the harmful seeds in our store consciousness. When we are swept along by our desire to protect the ego from threat it is like making cut after painful cut into our flesh. Saltwater is good for wounds of the flesh, but when we are so badly wounded we could not swim in the sea for the pain would be unbearable. And so it is with our coping strategies and delusions. To remove them all at once – to try and return at once to doing everything we would like – would be like jumping into the sea while covered in open cuts and sores. When a doctor tells us to “pull yourself together”, or “you just

need to get out more”, it feels like we are being told to go jump in the sea. It feels overwhelming and impossible. This is because we are taking a violent aversive approach to our difficulties by denying their existence. Meditation offers a way to heal these cuts non-violently and permanently through gradual and compassion loving kindness. We might heal just one or two cuts at a time and at first it may hardly seem to make a difference. But, over time, as we learn to cut ourselves less and heal ourselves more, we soon find we can take a short paddle. Then, slowly but surely, we can learn to swim in life's ocean without suffering.

CULTIVATING FAITH WITH EYES OPEN

The Buddhist approach to anxiety is correctly described as holistic because it embraces psychological, physiological and spiritual aspects of wellness and happiness. Buddhism has a rich history of philosophy, psychology and spiritual practice which combine to provide the individual with a consistent approach to understanding the inter-relationship between the mind-body complex, the notion of self, and the environment. Suffering arises from the mind only, and therefore control of the mind is key in understanding and overcoming our anxiety. When we experience a deep dreamless sleep we do not suffer, even if someone entered the room, stole our possessions and said hurtful things to us we would remain unperturbed. If we could be transported into our most feared environment with the people and things that would normally cause us to break down, we would still remain unperturbed.

Alternatively, we could be in a very comfortable bed without any reason to be fearful, but through our dreams our mind conjures images that cause us to suffer greatly.

Our experience of anxiety relies on our five physical consciousnesses (the senses), our mind consciousness, and our store consciousness (karma) working interactively. These factors were described previously through The Five Aggregates. When we sleep, our mind consciousness can interact with our store consciousness to perceive images that do not exist at all. As always these images, and our mental formations regarding them are recorded in our store consciousness as seeds. When we awake from a bad nightmare we can continue to experience real emotional distress which can last long into our day. These events serve to further reinforce negative seeds in our store consciousness and we can find ourselves in torment. This is why it is so important that we spend every waking moment living mindfully, watering seeds of joy and happiness, and not encouraging our negative seeds.

The teachings of Buddhism aim to guide the practitioner to tackle her negative seeds and free herself from the sufferings of everyday life through the elimination of wrong views and ignorance. To do this we should cultivate the virtues of patience and compassion. This might sound lofty and idealistic, and if it is treated as a goal or destination, then it may feel that way. The blossoming of an individual's happiness is a never ending journey, and not something we "attain" like a degree or diploma. Transforming our life requires us to study and practice each day, even if only for a short time. When we do this, and begin to experience the

transformation of our suffering, then faith in our practice will naturally arise. Our practice should not have to be difficult or burdensome; quite the opposite. We can practice for a few minutes in our lunch break simply by sitting and observing a daisy or a leaf on a tree, breathing mindfully, and being completely there, in the moment, free of past and future concerns. We can practice while we are walking to a meeting, doing the shopping, or driving a car. All it requires is to return to the moment and to focus fully on what we are doing – car accidents, for example, are almost always the result of being *somewhere else* in our mind. Whenever we are somewhere else we cause accidental harm, either to ourselves or others, through thinking, speaking, or acting out of ignorance.

Faith is a loaded word, and puts many people off a spiritual practice because of its association with blind adherence and dogmatism that seems prevalent in some religions. Faith is merely a label, like trust. Faith in the Buddhist context is not blind or arbitrary and does not require submission or subjugation. A faith based upon reason and personal experience means building conviction in a way of living which is free from harmful influences. Generating this faith requires a degree of courage because we can only grow only through overcoming the obstacles that most challenge our happiness. The more one practices mindfulness and experiences joy and happiness, the greater one's faith will become. It could be compared to the kind of faith a pilot has in his aircraft. A pilot understands the principles of flight and therefore does not require blind faith that the whole enterprise won't come crashing down from the sky. Each flight a new pilot makes serves to reinforce his faith in his aircraft, in much the same way that faith in our daily practice is strengthened each time

we put it to the test and emerge happier, wiser and more free than before. Faith is only built through putting what we have learned into practice.

The belief that we can develop faith in a way of life through written knowledge alone demonstrates a conceit typical of materialist thinking. Such faith is an illusion, and would dissolve like a mirage when put to the acid test in daily life. No matter how much we think we understand impermanence, for example, most of us will never truly know the depth of our faith or understanding until we are diagnosed with a life threatening illness.

When we make breakthroughs in understanding it may reveal aspects of ourselves that we don't like any more. There may certainly be days when you feel you are deconstructing yourself for no good reason. At times like this, it may be helpful to have a close friend or a counsellor to help you cope with the conflicting feelings that will inevitably emerge. When we tackle our deeply held self-image we will undergo periods of disillusionment as chunks of canker are prised loose from our ego. These adjustments can be upsetting because we are letting go of aspects of our idealised self – the image that our ego protects so strongly.

Before we can cultivate faith, we have to practice, and before we can practice, we have to study at least to some small degree. Study is exactly what it says on the tin – there are far greater works than this meagre tome to broaden and deepen one's understanding of Buddhism. While this book may set the reader on the path to overcoming anxiety disorder, it is by no means a comprehensive guide – the important thing is to keep learning.

The third essential for transforming suffering is practice. Buddhist practice usually involves chanting or silent meditation, either sitting, standing or walking. Chanting meditation usually involves a mantra or the recitation of Sutra passages. It can be in your own language, or in another. Buddhists often chant the Sanskrit *Om Mani Padme Hum*. *Om* represents the practitioner's body, *Mani* represents the jewel of compassion, *Padme* (literally Lotus in Sanskrit) represents wisdom, and *Hum* (usually pronounced 'hoong') represents indivisibility. The meaning summates as *the manifest body and mind are transformed through the indivisibility of wisdom and compassion*.

For some time I practiced within a Japanese tradition, known as Nichiren Buddhism. Nichiren Daishonin, a very 13c Japanese priest of the Tendai school, created a calligraphic representation of an important gathering depicted in the Lotus Sutra. The practice of Nichiren Buddhism mainly involves sitting in front of a scroll, called the *Gohonzon*, and chanting the Great Invocation (Jpn. *Daimoku*) of *Namu Myoho Renge Kyo* repeatedly to gain, through esoteric means, insight into the ultimate nature of the universe. Again, it can be considered a kind of meditation.

Most forms of meditation are designed to combine a number of factors. *Smrti* – stopping of the mind and its incessant rambling (remembering, and coming back to the body and mind in the here and now), leading to *Samatha* – concentration and focus upon a single object, leading to *Vipassana*, clear insight into the object and its fundamental nature. When we can stop the mind, and concentrate single pointedly upon an object (a physical thing,

feeling, or mental formation – beliefs and so forth), then we will gain insight into it, and see through it for what it really is.

THE DIAMOND BLADE

Meditation in its varied forms offers a means to calm, see into, and understand our unruly mind. Meditation, however, is only the means to an end, namely awakening, and should not become an end in itself. It is a mistake to treat meditation as an escape from the reality of our daily life. When we experience disharmony we might tend to run to our meditation room, or to block out the world and begin counting breaths or chanting. While this may be necessary in the early stages of recovery from anxiety we should remain mindful not to abuse it as an avoidance behaviour. The aim of meditation is to connect with our deepest consciousness and transform our harmful habitual tendencies and feelings. Some describe the process like polishing a mirror or diamond, so that we see reality more clearly. It may also be likened to sharpening a knife. If the mind were a knife then meditation is the act of sharpening the blade.

Any chef will warn against allowing knives to become dull. A dull knife must be put under greater pressure to work, and therefore increases the risk of injury if one slips. Likewise, a dull mind will likely fail to penetrate the true nature of something, and we will likely end up harming ourselves through wrong perception. In contrast, a sharp mind cuts easily through superficial and surface appearances allowing us to see deeply into the nature of things. Theorising, hypothesising and reading books will bring us knowledge and perhaps some limited insight into our suffering,

but only regular meditation allows us to realise those insights and to manifest their benefits through our unconscious. The mind is malleable, but it takes time to transform its most deeply rooted patterns.

If study and meditation serve to sharpen the blade of our mind, then it is our daily lives that represent the fruit and vegetables we slice. That's not suggesting the people we deal with are all fruits or vegetables! But let's use the metaphor. Wisdom and happiness are gained through practical application of the sharpened mind to our daily life. When we test our practice in daily life, then we have the opportunity to grow. Everyone we meet represents a potential chance for learning if we can just open our hearts to connect with them. When we argue with someone, or someone makes us angry, we have the opportunity to slice through the feelings that arise within us, removing our mental projections regarding the other person.

When we do this all we are left with is insight into the other person's suffering – the reason for their anger. Anyone who gets angry is clearly suffering because they feel we have threatened their happiness. If we can “let go” of our own ego then there is little left for us to feel angry about, and we can connect with the other person while respecting their humanity, regardless of their behaviour. In dealing with relationships this way we are being compassionate to ourselves because we have removed our own causes for unhappiness. In letting go of our ego, we naturally develop compassion for others because we see clearly their nature. Consequently, we should feel grateful for people we feel are difficult because they they can help us develop and strengthen our

practice. As we break down our ego we find that our behaviour is less self deceptive, and we feel more free to speak without having to guard our words. This releases a great deal of anxiety.

There is no quick fix for this kind of learning, it takes time and patience, and even wishing for a quick fix should be regarded with caution. The goal of achieving a lasting happiness as quickly and easily as we can is itself a self-centred approach. We fall into the trap of asking how “I” can become happy quickly and easily; as though the task were just another intellectual acquisition like passing an exam. To put it another way, we are asking “how can I possess happiness with the minimum inconvenience to me.” When put in this way, we can appreciate how narcissistic it sounds and, paradoxically, that it represents the very part of us that obstructs our happiness.

When we can recognise this narcissism, then we take a step toward happiness. As we have learnt, only when we recognise our suffering as suffering can we awaken to happiness. Like two sides of a coin, happiness and suffering are non-dual – they are merely two subjective experiences of the same objective reality. How we perceive that reality – how we view the coin – depends on whether we see it as suffering or happiness. The only way to transform our experience of reality is through faith, practice and study.

An athlete trains to attain supreme fitness. He cannot expect to become fit without a great deal of work, and he will not remain fit if he stops training – no pain, no gain, as some people like to say. No pain, no gain characterises perfectly the universal wisdom of the Buddha. Like an athlete at the top of his game, once we attain a certain level of happiness and wisdom we must continue our

training if we are to avoid slipping back. It is important to keep in mind that once we set foot on the path we have opened a door to transforming our lives that will never close. Each small step we take has a lasting effect. Like when we stand at the foot of a mountain, each small step provides only a small change in our view, but the effect is cumulative until we can eventually scale the summit.

The popular US author Daniel Smith, in his book “Monkey Mind: A Memoir of Anxiety” asserts that Buddhism was made for the anxious the same way Christianity was made for the downtrodden or A.A. for the addicted.

It's no coincidence that the West has experienced an explosive growth of interest in Buddhist thought and practice. People in the west, despite their relative wealth and material facility are amongst the most anxious, angry and selfish on the planet – of course, most westerners would deny this applies to them (and many would be right), but spend a day in one of our large cities and judge for yourself the underlying attitude towards the “self” and “other”.

4. The truth of the causes of anxiety

TWO ARROWS

The Buddha gave the teaching of the two arrows⁴ to explain how we make our own suffering much worse. Imagine the intense pain of being shot in your side with a hunters arrow. After a few moments imagine a second arrow hitting you in precisely the same spot. The pain of the second arrow is far worse than the first. It strikes what is already an open wound.

In this story, the first arrow is likened to our initial perception of suffering. When these perceptions reach our conception and consciousness then mental formations occur. These mental formations are likened to the second arrow. When we receive an insult, we first hear the other person's voice, and regard their demeanour. This causes us some degree of pain, but then we might become afraid, or seek revenge and become blind with rage. When we feel a physical discomfort, such as indigestion or trapped wind, then this is like the first arrow. Shortly after, though, as our consciousness begins to work with our cognition, then other feelings and mental formations arise. We might begin to think we are suffering from stomach cancer or a heart problem. These subsequent reactions represent the second arrow hitting home. This second arrow is fired by our turbulent mind and causes us far more suffering than the original event.

When we practice mindfulness in our everyday life we will become more aware when our mind draws the second arrow into

the bow and prepares to fire it. When we can remain mindful in stressful situations, then we can observe these arising feelings. We can say hello to our anger or fear, and tend to it before we become agitated or disturbed. If we are not mindful, then we can easily fire further arrows of anger, resentment, fear or anxiety, creating a festering wound that prevents us from thinking of anything else. Anyone who has dealt with dogs will know that to approach an injured dog is particularly dangerous. Likewise, when we have the arrows of anger, hatred or jealousy lodged in our side, we are liable to be ill tempered and violent in our thoughts and actions.

The way we consciously and unconsciously deal with feelings of anxiety is important if we are to retain a calm mind and gain insight into our emotions. It is easy to blame our body for our anxiety, but this is misguided. While it is true we are subject to pre-conditioned and habitual responses, it is only our conscious mind that has reinforced these responses over many years. It is our conscious mind that has allowed the build up of negative seeds in our store consciousness. The practice of mindful living can help us to see each situation more clearly, and over time this will nourish our seeds of happiness, leaving the seeds of anger, hatred and jealousy to decay and no longer manifest in our conscious mind.

THE BIRTH OF I

This sense of “I” is arguably born when we first become aware that our natural desire for warmth and mother's milk is not being met. Unable to meet our unconscious desire in that instant the ego fails and we begin to scream and kick as frustration and rage make

their grand entrance. As we grow older we learn to hide our emotions with more skill (I say hide, as we become far better at hiding than controlling them.) We begin to transfer our desire for mother and comfort onto teddy bears or comfort blankets and the like – it's normal and healthy for the ego to experience the suffering of change and to develop adaptation skills.

In a healthy childhood the blanket and teddy are eventually replaced by growing self confidence and the person becomes an individual capable of emotional independence. The relationship with our parents matures, becoming increasingly mutual and balanced. This kind of relationship with our parents is regarded in psychological terms as a healthy attachment. It should be noted, *attachment* theory in psychology refers to the study of human relationships and how they change throughout our lives – quite different from the Buddhist definition of attachment which refers to an *unhealthy* association with a deluded view.

An emotionally unhealthy upbringing in which the child is not properly encouraged or shown loving kindness will likely result in a lack of self esteem. Lacking the confidence to exist without our safety blanket, we can undergo transference of the feelings we once had for our blanket with another object, person, or activity. This can lead to obsessions and compulsions which often appear quite harmless, or they can lead to overtly unhealthy ones. Whenever we experience unpleasant emotions regarding ourselves we naturally tend to distract ourselves. This is what the comfort blanket used to do. When we are grown up we might distract ourselves with alcohol, consumerism, sex etc. We begin to rely on unhealthy relationships, possessions or behaviours to distract us

from the simple fact that we are uncomfortable in our own skin. Parents can find their children remain emotionally dependant well into adulthood. In this case the child has simply failed to individuate, remaining unsure of themselves. Such children, well into adulthood continually seek approval from the parent before making major decisions. They can repeatedly require assistance in dealing with matters they could probably tackling alone. This kind of behaviour can arise in children of parents who are “too good” – children of such parents often become overwhelmed by the attention of their parents, and as a result do not become aware of their own potential. Although such parents may feel they are flooding their children with compassion, they are often (through their own insecurity) seeking demonstrable love from the child in order to validate their own success as parents, thus encouraging dependancy of the child. This tendency for a parent's codependent behaviour can be an important factor in child development. We will study this again in later chapters.

Regardless of parenting, people who suffer from anxiety disorder often develop obsessive preoccupations with distractive activities. These activities are often unproductive or harmful, fulfilling only a singular need to distract us from our unhappiness, frustration or self loathing. Going to sleep with an alcoholic drink, sleeping pills, with a light on, radio or TV are all attempts to protect ourselves from our anxieties – our fundamental discomfort with ourselves. In this state of mind it is impossible to experience compassion, either for ourselves or for anyone else. We are too easily overwhelmed by our own and others' suffering, and as a result we worry unduly about our emotional defences rather than forming genuine connections of the heart.

SELF-CHERISHING AND SELFISH CONCERN

When I began studying Buddhism and heard the Dalai Lama speak in negative terms about self-cherishing I wasn't sure what he meant. At first I thought he was suggesting it was wrong to look after our physical and mental wellbeing. As I learned more, I came to understand that he was referring to selfish concern and narcissism. When most of us begin to practice a spiritual path, we soon come to realise that the image we project into the world is not always in alignment with our heart – our true self.

The “self” referred to in self-cherishing is our idealised image. The “cherishing” is our pre-occupation with elevating our sense of importance in relation to others. It represents an unhealthy clinging to an idea or concept. This doesn't necessarily mean we believe we are better than everyone else; we can also cherish a negative self-image, believing we are useless or pathetic. When we cherish something in our life, we elevate it in our mind and work to convince ourselves and others of the importance of the same regardless of other factors. Wanting our children to have a good education is a correct view, but if we turn this into cherishing then we might fight for an education system that only few can afford, or we might send our children to a boarding school and cause them to become unhappy. Wanting to maintain a healthy diet and lifestyle is another correct view, but if we go around hectoring friends and family about their eating habits, then we have been caught up in our own dogma and we will cause suffering.

When we self-cherish we are prevented from fully experiencing compassion. Self-cherishing can apply equally to cases of low self

esteem. A wealthy businessman might cling to the idea that everybody loves him, whereas someone suffering from low self esteem will cling to the idea that people dislike or don't value them, thus experiencing anxiety. Many young women fall into the trap of self-cherishing a hopeless and desperate image of themselves, and suffer terrible anxiety as a result. Cherishing a poor self image often results in habitual complaining about life's challenges. This behaviour cultivates an unconscious anxiety that others may grow weary of hearing the complaints, leading to sentimental affection for others in the hope of gaining sympathy. It can be very painful to recognise this in ourselves, and difficult to overcome, but just as with other harmful emotions the basic requirement to "let go" of our established ego is principal. We do not require other people in order to touch the seed of happiness we already possess.

Anxiety-disorders result from developing too solid a sense of "self" or "I". Of course, we all need a sense of "I" to survive. The only thing we can ever be sure of is that "I am me". You exist, right? Beyond this, we really can't be sure of anything. This is where many people misunderstand Buddhism as somehow requiring the negation of everything as real – that we are living in a dream world of the mind, as portrayed in films like *The Matrix*. Buddhism doesn't suggest this is merely a dream world without any physical aspect, but does teach us that the world exists in a way different to what we conventionally believe. Because the world is such a large and uncontrollable thing, our unconscious tends to focus on "I" because that's all it can be sure of. Everything else is a secondary concern.

We therefore become strongly attached to our idea of “I”. We protect our body from harm, keep it warm, fed, and protected from the elements. We become so attached to the self that we deny others warmth, food, or even their lives (particularly animals) to protect “I”. We do not experience the suffering or pain of others and so therefore how can we truly care deeply about others?

When we follow this path, our sense of a distinct “I” becomes ever stronger, over-riding any consideration for others. In reality, our “I” is becoming smaller and smaller. Like a tiny cup our shrinking life becomes unable to handle very much at all, losing the ability to demonstrate generosity and patience, and feeling increasingly anxious about our future. Conversely, when we can break down our sense “I”, and see that we are essentially the same as everyone else – that it is only our respective delusions that make us appear to be different, then our hearts can grow as vast as the ocean. When our life grows to embrace the universe, then we simply act from the heart without trying to maintain false roles for anyone, including ourselves.

THE PERFECT FAMILY WORKHORSE

Family life is an area where narcissistic or false compassion is easily cultivated. While a family may become quite extended, there are invariably those who become the “general cook and bottle washers” as some would say. While they may not see it as such, often it is those who take on this emotionally dominant role within the family unit that suffer most from anxiety. That is not to say such people are weak. Far from it, such people often function effectively at levels of stress that would have many people

throwing plates, punches, or reaching for palliatives such as alcohol, nicotine or tranquillisers. Indeed, to be the family caretaker is an incredibly demanding role which often drives individuals to sacrifice their own happiness for those around them.

To single handedly take on the burdens of running a family is quite noble, but alas, no matter how strong a person may be in resolve, the human body is what it is, and physical wellbeing will be eroded daily through the struggle to meet everyone's often foolish desires. Such family caretakers are often burdened with low self esteem, and seek acceptance from family members by fulfilling an idealised role rather than being true to themselves. Ignoring their own emotional needs, these internal conflicts provide a perfect breeding ground for anxiety. Perfectionism was long thought of as a virtue, but it is now broadly accepted as a harmful quality. Constantly struggling to aspire to meet everyone's expectations or beating ourselves up when we fail is a recipe for unhappiness and anxiety.

Perfectionists are regular visitors to the psychologist's couch. Perhaps driven by critical parenting in early years, such people grow intolerant of failure, especially their own. Perfectionism is often accompanied by the burden of self loathing which can develop into a sense of desperation as our unrealistic goals slip our grasp. Conversely, some of the happiest people are those who accept failure as an inevitable part of being human. Failing is simply a lesson to be learned in cultivating humility and genuine compassion for ourselves. Of course, this is not to say that we should celebrate failure as a desirable outcome – we should always

strive to be “as good as we can”, but this doesn't mean “as good as we think everyone else thinks we are”. It is generally accepted by western psychologists that striving to be just good enough is beneficial not just for the individual but also for those they care for, especially children. The happiest people are those who courageously yet patiently strive for success in their chosen fields, and who accept the occasional defeat as part of the journey.

Our patriarchal society is especially unkind to women. This undoubtedly contributes to the disproportionately higher number of women than men that are diagnosed with anxiety disorder and low self confidence. Women of all classes still struggle against a tide of inequality and lack of respect in their work and home life. Being able to bare young they are clearly more biologically predisposed to compassion and warm heartedness – which makes sense, otherwise the human race would not have survived. Compared to men, women have far fewer emotional outlets to deal with stress. Women tend to be more critical of each other's appearance (although men are rapidly catching up), and take off hand criticisms more to heart than men tend to. Outside of the professional classes it is still largely women who run the home and provide the emotional sustenance for their families. It is therefore understandable why more women than men have traditionally suffered from anxiety disorders and feelings of worthlessness arising from the expectations placed upon them in the home. The combination of low self esteem, and the “perfect homemaker” image many women aspire to leads them into self destructive patterns of harmful self-sacrifice which give rise to anxiety, resentment and despair.

Being the person who acts as the glue holding the family together often leads to being treated (knowingly or not) as a “soft touch”, the dumping ground for the family emotional baggage. This person is also the first port of call when someone needs a favour, or a quick financial handout. Of course, this person is only too willing to try and help, while at the same time fighting their own emotional exhaustion. Ultimately, they become unable to physically maintain the role they have assumed, and the looking threat of not being able to cope cultivates anxiety. While I have referred to the female gender in the previous paragraphs, this situation could just as easily apply to males. Regardless of gender, what these caretaker figures fail to recognise is that they are not showing themselves any real compassion. Instead, they are self-cherishing their idealised role as the person who never lets people down, and everyone loves – they find it difficult to say “no” due to fear of rejection by those close to them. They are not being themselves.

Generosity is often confused with blind self sacrifice. If we sacrifice our own happiness, then how can our feigned generosity become a cause for happiness? If we give from a sense of duty or obligation, then we are being violent toward ourselves. We are forcing ourselves to do something we will probably begrudge. Generosity is not the act of giving everything, it is the desire to give what we can. If we give everything and become ill, how is the recipient going to feel? We feel joy when we receive something freely given. If we felt the gift or favour had resulted in dire hardship or suffering, then no matter how wonderful, it will not bring us joy or lasting happiness.

SENTIMENTAL COMPASSION

Neil Kinnock, Welsh Labour politician in his maiden speech in 1970 said:

Compassion is not a sloppy sentimental feeling for people who are underprivileged or sick; it is an absolutely practical belief that regardless of a person's background, ability, or ability to pay, he should be provided with the best that society has to offer.

Imagine you have been badly injured in a motorway car accident, and a friend comes to visit you in hospital. Instead of "being there" for you, and encouraging you, this person displays their grief and bemoans how they are "sorry" for you, or they might relate how they hate driving on the motorways themselves – or that they had an accident previously which was as bad or worse than yours. The visitor feels a compulsion to demonstrate *their* grief and *their* feelings, maybe even crying. At first glance this might seem quite nice, but the visitor is really just recalling their own sense of unhappiness.

This kind of compassion is hopeless and destructive. It drains the visitor's energy because they focus on their own negative emotions and feelings. It also drains you because what little energy you may have for healing may perversely be required to console your visitor! Ultimately, their compassion is focussed on their own feelings, and not on yours. On the contrary, you would prefer your visitor to ask how you are feeling, and to encourage you perhaps by reminding you of your strengths and how they are sure you will soon be feeling better.

Sentimentality is a good description of this kind of compassion. The word *sentimental* derives from mediaeval latin *sentimentum* meaning feeling, affection, opinion. When one projects his own feelings or opinion onto others who are suffering, then he is incapable of providing any universal compassion or assistance.

It's incredibly difficult not to avoid this kind of compassion without great care. Imagine you have a friend who is about to do something incredible for charity, like a parachute jump or something else that you would personally find challenging or impossible. Imagine how the conversation would go when your friend announces her plans. How many times would you say "I" or "me"? *Wow, I could never do that. I can't swim more than a block. Heights terrify me.* As an exercise, imagine what you could say to encourage your friend and to praise her actions without once referring to your own feelings of superiority or inferiority. While it is perhaps natural to refer to our own experiences when talking to someone, we should practice deep compassion and dwell on their feelings, and not our own. When we can do this, then we are truly helping to encourage our friend. Sentimental compassion is a useful indicator of self-cherishing, so recognising this tendency in ourselves is important. Any reinforcement of our perceived inferiority or superiority to others inevitably cultivates anxiety.

IDIOT COMPASSION

Also termed foolish compassion by some Buddhist authors, this kind of compassion involves the giver becoming ensnared in thinking or behaviour that serves to perpetuate or worsen the

harmful behaviour of others. This kind of compassion is again selfish because it is being given on the basis of reciprocation.

As of the time of writing, there is a thriving video game industry that pumps out material that is often violent and especially harmful to impressionable minds. The fast paced action, sounds and interconnectivity of players via the internet has produced a seductive and addictive environment for the minds of children. Without delving into the possible psychological consequences of such games, parents continue to purchase the equipment for their children even (or especially) when their children are withdrawn or anxious about socialising. Such parents are not demonstrating compassion but the selfish desire for a quiet life, possibly intended to maintain a good relationship with a child that is already poorly behaved.

Consider someone coming back from holiday abroad, loaded with duty free cigarettes. I think regardless of how addicted one is to cigarettes, it is impossible to remain ignorant of the damaging effect they have on health. The holiday makers return, believing they are going to receive praise and thanks from their smoking friends in return for loading them up with more cigarettes. The smokers in turn deepen their addiction and dependency. Having nursed my mother-in-law through the final stages of lung cancer, I can't imagine how wretched I would have felt had I supported her addiction and purchased her cigarettes.

The list of possibilities would appear endless. The box of chocolates for Christmas, despite the recipient clearly struggling with being overweight. The bottle of single malt whiskey for the aunt who already drinks too much. Constantly bailing out our

financially inept kids from debt. All of these acts of “kindness” really only serve to assuage our guilt, elicit approval or praise from the recipients, and provide temporary distraction from the real causes of their suffering.

It's another emotional double whammy. In the first place, we are assisting people in doing something that is harmful to them, so there is the guilt associated with that. Secondly, in order to gain their continued affection and approval, we feel compelled to continue offering assistance for fear of rejection, thus cultivating anxiety of failure.

The old adage “give a man a fish and he'll eat for a day; teach him to fish and he'll eat for a lifetime” shows the stark difference between short term idiot compassion and truly enabling compassion. We can become locked into the habit of providing the daily fish for those around us partly because we cherish our idealised role as a provider of happiness, and partly because those around us have chosen not to learn, instead becoming dependant on us or more specifically on the role we play for them.

There is a more sinister side to manufacturing this kind of dependancy, and it's exploited unconsciously or consciously by individuals and equally by economic powers. Codependency is a term that describes an unhealthy dependancy between two parties. Codependency emerges when the simple desire to help others becomes twisted in the desire for others to become dependant on us.

Codependency is a state where our ultimate goal is to prove ourselves indispensable to others. It is the desire to manipulate a

situation so that the primary carer becomes a martyr, the real target of affection, sympathy and admiration. Just as the submissive person in the codependent relationship is manipulated into becoming dependent on the dominant person, so the dominant person is unconsciously dependant upon the submissive person to make them “feel good”; to give them a reason for being. In extreme cases, codependency can escalate into very dangerous situations.

Munchausen-by-proxy is a condition where parents or carers have been known to deliberately harm their children or relatives in order to elevate and promote their “Florence Nightingale” image. The extra attention and praise the carer receives when the person being cared for suffers more is like gasoline being poured over a flame. Sadly cases of Munchausen-by-proxy have led to the deaths of many people.

It is therefore fair to say that to be on the giving or receiving side of idiot compassion is insidiously harmful to our sense of independence and freedom. Parties on both sides of the relationship feel trapped and powerless to affect change due to their dependance on the other. They become habituated to their respective roles, always anxious of change.

5. The end of suffering

SEEDS OF CHANGE

Popular within Buddhism is the notion that all human beings have the potential for awakening to enlightenment, or freedom from suffering. Often described as the seed of Buddhahood, the idea of originally inherent enlightenment has formed part of Buddhist thought since the 4th century CE when the Indian scholar Vasubhandhu wrote of it. This thinking grew from the Lotus Sutra and has developed over the centuries becoming a central theme in Mahayana Buddhism. We possess many seeds in our store consciousness (karma) and with the right cultivation any of them can grow and manifest in our lives. These seeds can either grow into harmful things like anger, jealousy and greed, or they can grow into love, joy, compassion and happiness.

In order for us to deal with our harmful seeds we need to become fully aware of our mind and our desires from moment to moment. This full awareness goes beyond the superficial desire we create consciously like the desire, for example, to wash our hands again, or the desire to get out of a crowded room or to switch on the TV. Full awareness, or mindfulness, of our desires means looking deeply into them so that we can gain insight and see through their impermanent and subjective nature. While someone with OCD is aware of a conscious desire to wash their hands, they are probably not paying attention to the feelings and emotions that lead to that desire, and as a consequence they wash their hands and reinforce their habit energy without a thought. When we are mindful of our

thoughts and actions we will naturally come to see that our desire to wash our hands is a conditioned and habituated fear of contamination, which is in turn the product of an obsession with health. We might still be unable to stop the habitual desire to wash our hands, but we have taken the first step in gaining insight into the seeds of our suffering.

Our store consciousness is full of such seeds, many of which we inherit via our ancestors and the society in which we live. We also create new seeds constantly through our thoughts, words and actions. Every time we think something, say something, or do something, we water and cultivate various seeds. The seeds, if allowed to grow, will bloom into our conscious mind as a flower. It may be a pleasant flower, in which case the flower produces beneficial seeds in our life that will bring joy and happiness. It may be an unpleasant flower, in which case anger, hatred, jealousy and anxiety will arise. Therefore it is important to know which seeds we are watering with our views, thoughts words and actions. Each flower produces many seeds, so we want to ensure we only water the ones that bring peace, joy and happiness.

When children are born into communities dominated by fear and hatred, such as those in Northern Ireland, or on the Israeli Palestinian borders, then they take on that community's karma and pretty soon they have all the seeds necessary for committing the worst atrocities. If the minds of such people were a garden, there would be few patches of soil one could water without encouraging poisonous weeds to grow. And once the poisonous plants flower and spread their harmful seeds far and wide, it can take extraordinary effort to overcome their effects. It is not

difficult to find people who's gardens are full of harmful seeds. No matter what people say or do to them, they become angry or find reasons to complain.

Therefore by looking deeply into ourselves and determining our true nature we can learn to recognise our harmful seeds, and thereby avoid nurturing them until eventually they will rot and perish. Like any garden, our store consciousness is not fixed. Even a garden completely overgrown with poisonous weeds and thorns can be gradually transformed into a blissful paradise. Nothing is fixed.

SNAKES AND SMOKE

We have touched on the fact that our experience of reality is conditioned. That is to say, our view or opinion of the world including the people and things in it, plus our feelings and mental formations are based not in absolute truths, but are always relative. The way our conscious mind perceives the world is clouded by our seeds of prejudice, pride, arrogance and so forth. Like looking at the moon reflected in a tarnished mirror, the harmful seeds in our store consciousness flower in our waking mind and distort reality to fit our preconceptions.

The Buddha told an ancient tale of the blind men and an elephant. A king had the blind men bought to the palace where they were each presented before the same elephant and asked to describe it. One man felt the foot and told the king it was a pillar. Another felt the tail, and insisted it was a piece of rope. Another felt its trunk and insisted it was a large snake. Yet another felt the tusk and said it was a pipe. The Buddha compared the behaviour of the blind

men to the way we automatically assume our point of view is absolute and then argue with others over who is right. This tendency not only leads to conflict between people, but it also causes a great deal of conflict within our own mind.

Vasubandhu, a fourth century Buddhist scholar, produced a work of fifty verses on the nature of consciousness which provides an important treatise on Buddhist psychology. In it he describes three fields of perception. These three fields are seeing things-in-themselves, representations and mere images.

When we perceive things-in-themselves we see them in their true light, without being distorted by additional mental formations. When we are living mindfully, we are more likely to perceive things in this mode. When we feel a pain in our body, we think to ourselves only “I am aware of a pain in my body”. We do not jump to conclusions, or become anxious. When we see another person, we notice their appearance and demeanour, but we do not allow prejudices to colour the way we feel about them.

When we allow our direct perception to be tainted by our seeds of ignorance, fear or anger, then we experience the mode of perception known as representation. When we feel a pain in our belly and believe we have a stomach ulcer, this is the mode of representation. At the time of writing, there is a great fear in the West of Islamic extremism. Due to social influences many people harbour severe prejudice against Muslims. When such people view others in Islamic dress they become caught up in a *sign*. They see a representation of an image they hold dear in their store consciousness – the image of religious extremists and suicide bombers.

If we are in a dimly lit room and our eyes fall upon a coil of rope in a corner, we may perceive it as a snake. The seeds of fear in our store consciousness are watered and give rise to mental formations based on an error in perception, and thus we suffer. This is an example of perception in the mode of mere images. Although we have not even seen a snake, we convince ourselves the coil of rope has a head and is looking at us, waiting to strike. Our imagination drives our perception from beginning to end. This is the field of perception of mere images. It is also the field of perception we experience when we dream. The things we dream about do not exist, and are merely fabrications of the mind despite their power to fill us with painful feelings that linger upon waking.

Our anxiety disorder is perpetuated by an over-reliance on the field of perception of representation and mere images – more heavily on the latter. Our store consciousness records everything we perceive regardless of the field of perception involved. Therefore the more we imagine scenarios based on wrong perception or wrong view, the more we will reinforce and strengthen our seeds of fear, anxiety and despair. This is why it is so important that we live in each moment in mindfulness, fully aware of the causes for happiness that we enjoy yet take for granted every day. As we cultivate our seeds of joy and happiness, they will eventually overtake the destructive seeds that cause us to experience fear, anxiety, despair and nightmares.

IMPERMANENCE

Buddhism teaches that all physical and mental phenomena are impermanent and undergo constant change. Being ignorant of this

at an unconscious or even conscious level is a key factor in our suffering. Any physicist will confirm that impermanence is an unavoidable feature of what we understand as conventional existence. The second law of thermodynamics states that in any system, over time, entropy (chaos or disorganisation) will increase. For example, food rots, batteries go flat, ice sculptures melt.

While it is not impossible that rotten food will transform into a fresh tomato, or a battery will recharge itself, it is almost infinitely improbable. The same is true of everything we experience. None of the phenomena or thoughts we experience lasts forever – people, possessions, countries, empires, planets, stars – everything has a beginning, and everything comes to an end in the conventional sense – cars rust, people die, food rots, empires crumble, stars explode and so on. Feelings and emotions also follow this pattern. Hatred, pain, joy, ecstasy, including our feelings of anxiety as they fluctuate from moment to moment are all impermanent.

We often wish that things were permanent, like money, ecstasy, power, wellbeing and so on. Therefore we might think that change and impermanence is what makes us suffer, but this is not so. We only suffer because we perceive things to be permanent when they are not. Like ocean waves, we see things as appearing to arise independently, peak, and then dissipate into nothing. It is as though they have a definite beginning, middle and end – a birth and a death. Our anxieties can also be seen as terrifying waves. If we allow the waves of anxiety to pass under us instead of trying to swim away from them, then we can ride them out. By observing

their rising and falling without struggling or fear, we will see that the wave depends on the wind's action on the surface of the ocean. The wave is nothing but water – it is not born, and it does not die. It simply returns to being a non-wave. Existence is like this.

When I walk my dog in the forest she loves to eat horse manure. Of course, you may find this disgusting. If you were a keen gardner, then you would know that horse manure is good for growing roses. So what is the true nature of the horse manure? A yummy snack, a disgusting pile of excrement, or effective fertiliser? All are relatively true, and yet none are absolutely true. The true nature of horse manure is horse manure. The “wave” of horse manure came into being due to causes and conditions, it may sit there and steam for a while, and then it will degenerate into nutrients and dust.

The wise gardner, if he looks deeply into the nature of a flower, will see the horse manure transformed into a beautiful soft bloom and fragrance. He will know that one day this flower “wave” will also die and the flower will return to the ground to rot. With a little help from the rain those nutrients might become part of a blade of grass that a horse could eat, producing more manure and so on. Everything that we experience in the world exists as a kind of “wave”, appearing to undergo birth, maturation, decline, and death, but in fact all phenomena are interdependent and interpenetrate one another, like water in the ocean.

EMPTINESS AND NON-SELF

Buddhism teaches that nothing exists separately from everything else. Everything is interdependent on other causes and conditions.

Nothing exists in isolation as an unconditioned and independent reality. Everything you are looking at has always existed, but not in its current form. This book, or computer did not simply come into being by itself. It required the desire for action, and natural resources. It represents nothing more than the re-ordering and transformation of what was already there. Everything is impermanent and in a constant state of change because everything is interdependent on everything else. Mountains, clothes, teeth, glass, diamond; everything came into conventional being, and everything can just as easily be transformed into non-mountain, non-clothes, non-teeth, non-glass, and non-diamond.

In Buddhism, this concept is known as emptiness (Skt. Sunyata) or suchness – Emptiness is a way of explaining the interdependent nature of everything. Nothing exists as a concrete, eternal reality. Everything is interdependent, and devoid of its own intrinsic and absolute (unchanging) existence. Everything is an effect of a previous cause.

What is a cup exactly? A vessel to put your tea in? Mud that has been fired in a kiln? Atoms of various elements? Protons, neutrons and electrons? quarks? How do the quarks in a cup differ from the quarks that make up the table, or make up you? And what are you exactly? Ask yourself, where am “I”? When you walked into this room and sat down to read this book, have you changed at all since then? In every second, over three million cells die in our bodies. We are constantly changing. Observe a candle in a still room – the flame can appear to be fixed, without flickering or wavering in the slightest. It appears constant and unchanging, and yet the flame is completely renewed dozens of times a second as

new wax evaporates from the wick and burns with the surrounding oxygen. We are like candles, appearing fixed and solid, and yet one day we too will burn out.

I apologise to the squeamish for the following exercise in combatting our sense of self-cherishing – our selfish view that we are somehow a real solid entity that endures from moment to moment. Imagine yourself in a morgue with two tables. Imagine removing one of your toes, and placing it on the second table. Where are you? On the first table still? Move the rest of your leg to the second table, then your other leg. Where are you now? Because your torso, arms and head are still on the first table, you probably still view that as you. Now move everything except your head to the second table – where are you now? On the first table? Or are you the headless corpse on the second table? If you keep breaking this exercise down in your mind, you will soon come to realise that there is no part of you that is really you. “I” is simply a label for a collection of factors that must come together in order to create the illusion of “I”.

“I” is an illusion that we perpetuate because we experience “feelings”. “I” cannot exist without harmonious co-existence and interdependence of all of our component parts. Likewise, a happy family and society depends upon the harmonious co-existence of people. If our toe is sore, then we feel pain. We wish to nurse our poor toe, and treat it with loving kindness. I heard Thich Nhat Hanh compare the harmony within our body to the disharmony within humankind through an example to which many could relate. When the right hand is holding a hammer, and the left is holding a nail, imagine the right hand accidentally missing the

nail and striking the left hand. The right hand instantly caresses the left, caring for it unconditionally. The left hand does not take up the hammer, and seek revenge! This is because our component parts do not discriminate each other in the way that we discriminate between ourselves and others in society.

We delude ourselves when we think of ourselves as white, British, European, educated, famous or whatever. Emptiness is the mind of non-discrimination – that everything is composite and interdependent – cups, tables, you, me, society etc. It also teaches that nothing can come into being from nothing, and nothing can vanish into nothing. Emptiness dissolves our conventional understanding of birth and death, and reveals that we exist in a continuum of non-birth and non-death.

The labels we apply to things are really only required for the sake of conventional reality. Experiencing the world in terms of emptiness does not often arise naturally and so labels come to be accepted as absolute realities, setting things and people apart. Emptiness doesn't deny reality, it is simply the insight to experience and understand it at a deeper, more profound level. When we experience life through our habit mind then it is like a distorted reflection in a mirror, and our responses to this distorted reality make us suffer. What we conventionally see as a fly is nothing more than the consequential coming together of a corpse and a maggot. We get annoyed at the fly, and jump about the room trying to rid ourselves of it by spraying it with carcinogenic aerosols, but why be annoyed at the fly when the fly was caused by something else? Why not be annoyed at the rotting corpse or the maggot? By drilling through reality in this way we quickly find

that we have become angry at a situation that is simply a passing phenomenon. We might as well become angry with a passing cloud. The Buddha said that a dog, when a rock is thrown at it, will bark at the rock, completely oblivious to the person who threw it. This is because the dog sees the rock as an absolute reality – he has no insight into cause and effect.

Buddhism teaches that because our suffering is based on our attachment to illusions like permanence, then suffering too is ultimately an illusion – it is only real because the mind makes it so. But, if the things we attach to (beer, cars, sex, drugs, rock and roll) are an illusion, and our suffering is an illusion, then wouldn't any teaching that tries to alleviate such suffering also be an illusion? Perhaps so, but we know our suffering is real in the sense that we really experience it, and we know we don't like it – it makes us unhappy. And so, the Buddha's pragmatic wisdom was to free us from our delusions by teaching the truths of impermanence, emptiness (non-self), and Nirvana.

When we experience anxiety, it is not because our environment, things, or people radiate it like heat. Nor is the anxiety an inherent and unchanging property of our own minds, otherwise we would never be able to change it. It is merely the convergence of various causes and conditions that give our anxiety its power to manifest and make us suffer. Anxiety is an illusion. It has no identifiable location in space – like our consciousness and sense of “I”, it is entirely fabricated by the mind, and therefore insubstantial. It cannot last indefinitely, and like all phenomena it grows, endures for a while, and if not constantly maintained will degenerate back into dormancy.

THE TREE OF IGNORANCE

A Buddha's wisdom and compassion for all living beings is infinite. Buddhism teaches that underneath all the apparently chaotic and unpredictable phenomena there lies a universal and absolute truth that only Buddhas can understand. This truth is impossible for us to grasp with our conscious mind, and can only be approached through concentrative insight and meditation.

If we could freely grasp it with our waking consciousness then we would be able to understand the nature of everything and everyone in the universe, instantly. We could write it down and teach it in schools, and ensure that humanity evolved towards a sustainable and happy future free from anxiety, greed, foolishness, violence and war. This, apparently, hasn't happened yet.

For this reason the Buddha preached eighty four thousand teachings to address the sufferings of the people using his skilful means (Skt. *upaya*, also called expedient means). There were so many teachings because the Buddha recognised the huge variance both in the way people suffer and in their capacity for understanding. Therefore some teachings are short and simple, almost like children's fables, while others involve thousands of lines of philosophically and spiritually challenging prose. In general, the Sutras provide a guide to living a happy and peaceful life. Each of them directs the reader toward a more awakened state of being. Even Sutras such as the Heart and Lotus Sutras while illuminating perfect enlightenment, are still conditioned by the limitations of language and writing, so therefore it is important to

understand that we will not find release from anxiety through knowledge of these teachings alone.

If all human suffering was represented by a tree, then one could imagine the base of the trunk representing our fundamental ignorance from which all other sufferings grow. Further up the trunk branches fork off, each representing classifications of ignorance – such as greed, foolishness, anger and so on. Upon each branch there are many twigs – each representing a more specific behaviour that is a cause of suffering.

For example, on the branch that represents the ignorance of greed there would be a twig representing all bodily desires. Twigs, being easy for an individual to remove from a tree, can be pruned by understanding the Buddha's most provisional teachings – delivered skilfully to take account of his audience's capacity for understanding.

Most of the Buddha's eighty four thousand teachings were aimed at removing these various twigs of delusion. For example, in the case of lust, he taught to meditate on the vileness of the body, and in thus doing, the individual would come to accept that the body was in fact no more than a collection of bones and smelly, slimy bits and pieces that didn't look much fun without the skin to cover it all up!

Such teachings do not operate at the base level but are expedients, pruning a twig of ignorance at a time. Although they may offer more immediate relief, because they do not address the deeper causes of suffering, the relief they offer is only limited. To lop off an entire branch from the tree of ignorance would require a sturdy

hand saw. Buddhist teachings such as the *Prajna Paramita Sutras* offer such a hand saw, and require a greater capacity for understanding and discipline of the practitioner before insight and wisdom can follow. The removal of a branch from the tree of ignorance could be likened to attainment of one of the so called six *Paramitas*, also known as the six perfections. These are generosity, ethics, patience, perseverance, concentration and wisdom. It is said that when we can remove all six branches from the tree of ignorance, there is no tree to speak of, and we can experience existence as Nirvana. This is a much deeper level of awakening than we require to gain relief from our daily experience of anxiety-disorder, but even so these are themes in which this book hopes to help cultivate your interest.

If we are to bring an end to suffering the same woes over and over, we must look more deeply into ourselves and gain insight into our ignorance. When we do so our behaviour will naturally change. Many things which used to cause us suffering will either cease to occur, or will no longer give rise to harmful thoughts and emotions.

BLAMELESSLY TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

To be awakened to happiness requires we let go of clinging to the notion of self as distinct from environment and others. Just as a caged animal becomes disturbed, when confined to considering only the self our mind also becomes disturbed. Once liberated from selfish desire the mind and heart are empowered to explore the joy and great fortune of being alive.

Regardless of who we would like to blame for our situation, only our unskilful handling and perception of our challenges led us to our present outlook. While we may not be able to control much in the world, we can control how we feel about it. In fact, it's not so much the challenges and obstacles that are our problem, it's that we can't stop thinking about them in harmful ways. Blame is an attachment to self-righteousness. Blaming others makes us feel better about ourselves because it relieves us of responsibility and protects our idealised self-image.

Clinging to blame is harmful because to do so denies the interdependent nature of all things. This can be hard to swallow as feelings can be very strong when we believe someone was wronged us. When we feel this way we must ask ourselves if the person concerned was 100% in control of the situation that involved our perceived suffering. We were there too, and of course the other person's behaviour is only the result of incalculable causes and conditions from their own past. Most of us have done something that unintentionally hurt somebody. Maybe that person has harboured a grudge against us ever since.

Rather than that person hating us, wouldn't we rather they compassionately forgave us, and took into account all of the reasons that led to our error in judgement? If someone treated us this way would we not think them wise and gracious and more likely become their friend?

In the same way, the fact that nobody makes us anxious but ourselves seems unfair, especially for those who are suffering from post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). When we are bullied, abused, neglected, or exposed to the full horror of violent conflict

then it is hard to view our anxiety as our own doing. We firmly believe if the initial events didn't take place, then we wouldn't be anxious; and we would probably be correct – our lives would have unfolded differently. A lifetime spent experiencing minor harmful events may allow us to conquer their effects before they overwhelm us, but powerfully negative life events like those experienced by PTSD sufferers deliver tsunami-like waves of suffering that can easily overwhelm the mind and lay down powerful seeds deep in our store consciousness. Regardless of how we got here, if we dwell on the idea of blame or even revenge, then we can pretty much guarantee that we will continue to experience life in the way we have been doing so. Therefore we must work hard to change our understanding and let go of our attachment to blame.

For those who have denied their suffering for many years, the realisation that they *are* suffering, and that there are *causes* to their suffering is deeply profound and empowering. Only when we become aware of the causes of suffering can we do anything about it. Like any circular phenomenon, there is no clear beginning, and no apparent end to anxiety. To believe we can break this cycle is deeply profound and difficult to accept; but accept it we must. The causes of anxiety exist within our own mind and when we can accept this we take a major step towards recovery. When we commit to breaking the cycle of anxiety then we demonstrate a powerful determination to transform our lives, and the lives of those we touch.

If the mind got us into this mess, then the mind can get us out of it! This is not such a radical idea. The practice of brain washing

and mental conditioning has been exploited by espionage and military organisations for decades. A scientist could argue with some degree of success that self imposed mental conditioning forms an important part of any spiritual practice. Until recently, it was not understood which parts of the brain are responsible for fear, or reward based conditioning, but in recent times new scanning technology such as Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) and Positron Emission Tomography (PET), coupled with Electro Encephalograph (EEG) techniques have started to open up the mysterious workings of the brain.

For example, in 2004, research at Cambridge University⁵ into an area of the brain known as the ventral prefrontal cortex determined that it appears to share neural circuitry with another part of the brain, the amygdala, which has long been held responsible for our fight or flight responses. The ventral prefrontal cortex has also been shown to be influential in decision making and reversal learning (undoing previous patterns of cognition). This area of the brain becomes more responsive through the practice of meditation. As a result, this ventral prefrontal cortex becomes more active when we encounter emotional situations that would normally cause greater activity in the amygdala – thus reducing or actually reversing negatively reinforced patterns of behaviour and thinking.

In 2006, a different study into the long term effects of Tibetan Buddhist and Transcendental Meditation⁶ was published. The study revealed considerably enhanced EEG results in the brains of experienced meditators that indicate improved cognitive performance, processing capacity and a quicker return to deeper

relaxed brain states. PET scans showed increased blood flow through the brain, and indicated improved interconnectivity between various regions of the brain. This is thought to enhance the individual's ability to assimilate new information more accurately, therefore avoiding dysfunctional traits. While the subjects had been meditating for many years (some over decades), the advantages of improved wakefulness, improved mental capacity and the associated benefits to all round health were undeniable.

Therefore no matter what situation we find ourselves in, by consistently spending just a few minutes every day meditating and applying what insights we gain in our daily lives, we can improve our mental health.

6. The path to the cessation of suffering

ORGASM, DEATH AND LETTING GO

Awakening, or enlightenment, might seem an unattainable goal, especially when we try to compare our life with that of the Buddha, for example. After all, a state of unbounded compassion would seem difficult to imagine when most of us would try to avoid at least one person by crossing the road! Totally letting go of the “self”, and increasing our field of compassion to embrace all living beings is no small thing, and something I constantly struggle with.

Despite this, there *is* a moment when most of us experience a little Nirvana, and it is women who perhaps because of their genetic predisposition to compassion appear able to experience it more often! Of course, we are talking about the human orgasm. It is ironic that the French refer to orgasm as *La Petit Mort*, literally meaning *the little death*. This description refers to the temporary spiritual release that comes with orgasm – a complete letting go of all selfish concerns.

Even those who suffer from anxiety will notice that orgasm provides a short respite from the usual negative patterns of thinking that dominate our waking mind. When we make love with someone we care deeply for, at the point of orgasm our sense of “I” is temporarily suspended. For a moment we experience boundless equanimity with the universe. In those moments, our solid sense of self dissolves into and interpenetrates with our

partner – we truly understand what it means to inter-be with them in seamless union.

When we think about making love and orgasm we tend to focus on the physical and sensational pleasure, but the most important experience is what goes on in the *mind*. Tantric practices harness this effect of sexual intercourse on the mind by drawing this sublime energy up from the genital region through the central channel to facilitate a Nirvana-like bliss without actually crossing the line of orgasm; maintaining a bliss state indefinitely – a state of aimless happiness where the ego is transcended. If you can't ignore a ringing phone when you are making love, then you really aren't making love! If you are lucky enough to share this experience of deep union with someone you love, then take the opportunity to concentrate on your state of mind during your next orgasm – it really is a taste of nirvana.

This feeling of joyous co-existence with another is also shared by a mother when first holding her newly born baby. It is a profound, selfless and unconditional feeling of loving kindness that dissolves all other concerns. Imagine what it would be like to feel this way about every human being. This vast and expansive state of compassion is what the Buddha felt when he became awakened to the true nature of reality. To have this much compassion for other humans would seem far fetched, but the more we practice the art of compassion the less radical this idea will seem.

The role of the ego is fundamental to our suffering because it stands in the way of our compassion and loving kindness for others. A constant companion to our experience of consciousness, our ego is derived from both conscious and unconscious aspects

of the mind. Because of this, there will be areas of our ego that we can more easily recognise and challenge than others. While today we might consciously decide not to act on our desire to drink alcohol, wash our hands, or run away from a situation, we cannot switch off the underlying unconscious desires so easily. To do so requires that we become more aware of our mental formations from moment to moment.

At first, this might seem counter productive. After all, as someone who suffers from anxiety, you've probably been told many times not to focus on your feelings. For anyone with tendencies to hypochondria, constantly checking our physical feelings is probably not a good idea. However, maintaining an awareness of our mental formations – our emotional feelings – is essential if we are to understand ourselves and heal our anxiety.

Some anxiety “cures” insist on diversionary tactics while immersing ourselves in situations that invoke fear and anxiety. This might include a physical diversion like touching or tapping part of your body, or repeating a phrase over and over, like a mantra. While such practices can provide some temporary relief, they are really only alternative strategies of running away from those feelings that challenge us. Like sleeping tablets are used to effectively knock us out at night, these practices don't deal with the true causes of our suffering.

The true causes of our anxiety exist in the here and now. While we may think that the causes for today's anxiety exist in the past, this is mistaken. The intellectual and conscious analysis of our past cannot help us change the way we unconsciously interact with the world today. While it may be true that a past event was the catalyst

for our anxiety, it was and always has been our reaction to that event that caused and maintains our anxiety today. Historically, many psychoanalysts have entertained a macabre and detached fascination regarding our past, whereas a more contemporary approach is to focus on the present circumstances, and for good reason. It is how we think today, in this very moment that affects our future. Only by focussing on this moment, on every moment, can we observe our feelings and mental formations, and in doing so gain insight into our anxiety.

To transform our conscious and unconscious mind we must remain mindful of how we are feeling, and what we are thinking. This does not mean that we must avoid or attempt somehow to keep our negative patterns of thought at bay. On the contrary, we must treat them compassionately without clinging to or rejecting them. Through the recognition of our feelings as they arise and decline we can regard them impartially, without discrimination and without acting upon them. As we gain insight into them, we consciously become aware of their causes, seeing them as impermanent and insubstantial. In doing so we transform these feelings into neutrality, making it easy to let go of them. This awareness and active observation of the mind is commonly referred to as the practice of mindfulness and represents an important foundation for the Buddhist psychology of transformation.

For someone suffering from an eating disorder, such as anorexia, the short term decision to consume food while incredibly courageous can often fail. This kind of dietary modification requires will power and conscious effort to fight against our

unconscious desire to lose weight, or make ourselves sick. We are essentially battling a violent war with our unconscious desires because we have not established an internal peace. Our enemy remains our enemy. Once our guard is lowered, like any enemy, our harmful eating habits can return and overwhelm us once more. The only way to overcome such a disorder in a sustainable manner is to transform our unconscious relationship with our body and our food. Instead of rejecting or denying our desires, we should take care of them, look deeply into them with loving kindness in order to see through them. When we understand our suffering, we open the way to transform it into awakened happiness. The beauty in transforming our suffering this way is that we become happier than if we hadn't encountered the suffering at all. Therefore, as the result of overcoming our difficulties, we often go on to lead happier, healthier and longer lives than we might otherwise have done so. I know many ex-smokers, for example, who have become fitter than many non smokers and also try to help others quit.

This transformative view of suffering and enlightenment is at the very core of Buddhism. Buddha himself revealed that the sufferings of samsara, our never ending cycle of birth, sickness, old age and death, are nothing other than the fuel for enlightenment. In the same way, by suffering anxiety and learning to let go of our selfish ego, we can overcome it and help others do the same. By overcoming it, we free ourselves from that suffering in the future. When we see others who are suffering anxiety, we can feel joy because we know they they too can overcome it. Our approach to them will naturally change from one of commiseration (sentimental compassion) to true encouragement

and empowerment; not in a “I did it, and so can you” kind of way, but with the application of the profound wisdom and compassion of the Buddha within us.

THE LEATHER PLANET

Shantideva once wrote that the surface of the earth is covered in painful rocks and sharp objects. To try covering the whole world in soft leather would be futile, but by simply covering the soles of your own feet you can enjoy freedom from suffering. We cannot possibly hope to stop the suffering that fills the world by pacifying each and every external negative force we encounter. Instead, through the elimination of self-cherishing and the practice of compassion we can protect our own mind against suffering whilst cultivating a strong desire to liberate the minds of others.

Shantideva provided a profound teaching for anyone wishing to free themselves from anxiety. We spend so much time and energy trying to control the world to suit ourselves. We might get away with it for a short time, now and then, but trying to maintain control over anything outside our mind is wrong thinking and lies at the heart of all anxiety. When we try to control other people or material factors for our own comfort, then we are likely to become frustrated. When we base our happiness on this ability to control things outside of our own mind, then we are likely to experience anxiety.

Some people appear to go through life apparently breaking all of the above rules, without experiencing any ill effects. Such people might not outwardly appear anxious, but they are seldom truly happy. They are also intrinsically less able to cope with any failure

to meet their desires – perhaps because they are so used to having them met by other people who they have little compunction in hurting along the way. When things do go wrong for these people, their world can come crashing down around them.

The daily interaction between billions of human beings means that meeting all of our individual desires is neither possible nor desirable – not least on ecological grounds. When we can condition our mind to perceive things with clarity and precision then no matter how rough our day turns out to be, we will be able to feel gratitude for each second of it, because we have lived it in the here and now. So, if the elimination of self-cherishing, clinging to desires and the cultivation of compassion are key to ridding ourselves of anxiety, how do we go about it?

HEALING THROUGH NON-VIOLENCE

While there are many schools of Buddhism, all advocate non-violence as a core precept for both the monastic and for the lay practitioner. Non-violence is often misunderstood as pacifism and non-action in the West, but this is not strictly correct. Violence is the practice of hatred – the act of doing harm for the gratification of one's selfish desires. Therefore, non-violent actions are without malice, or the intention to do harm. The motivation for a non-violent act is the alleviation of suffering.

A little boy runs towards a hot stove. His mother calls to him and tells him not to touch the stove. The boy ignores his mother and continues to approach the oven and reaches for the handle of a pot of boiling soup. Hoping to shock him, his mother shouts loudly at the little boy, but he still ignores her. In the end, she pulls him

away just in time to prevent him being scalded and smacks his hand, making him cry.

Was this a violent act, or an act of loving kindness? It is a huge philosophical problem knowing when it is justified to forcefully manipulate our environment to prevent a greater suffering. Mohandas Ghandi struggled with proponents of military action when he peacefully and successfully opposed the British in India, alternatively, Chamberlain's government in 1939 declared war on Germany.

When we place our own personal importance above the environment (animals, plants or minerals) or above another person, whether that is to use them for something, make them do something, or to take something from them, including their life, then we are committing violence. This is why a lot of Buddhists are vegetarian – if their situation allows it.

Of course, we have to eat in order to live but with a growing population we need to find ways of lessening starvation and famine. Perversely, our society seems bent on the desire to multiply and to seek ever greater material facility. This foolishness is at the heart of our suffering. Human beings are either starving, or becoming fat on unwholesome foods, and growing crops to make fuel for their cars.

The way to end this cycle is education, loving kindness and compassion on a global scale. We also have a burgeoning responsibility to educate our young in non-violence. Humanity's rapid growth is an act of violence against the natural environment. This requires action – not to destroy, but to transform our way of

life through peaceful but dynamic resistance to the status quo. We might feel helpless as individuals to pursue such an idealistic goal, but collectively humanity has the power to consume less violently. A good friend of mine likes to quote the 1st century Jewish scholar, Hillel, “If not you, then who? If not now, then when?. Ironically, if the young Germans of the 1930s had understood non-violence and taken Hillel’s quote to heart, then the Nazi movement may never have flourished to the point where a world war became inevitable.

So, how does this talk of non-violence relate to anxiety disorder? We view “our” anxiety as a source of suffering. If we cultivate hatred for it, then we are really only hating ourselves. By hating our anxiety we are clinging to an aversion of ourselves. Thoughts of destroying our anxiety, or crushing it into oblivion arise. We try to pretend our anxiety is somehow separate, as if we could shake it off and detach it – this creates confusion and internal conflict because when we experience anxiety, we become the object of our own hatred.

Before realising enlightenment the Buddha experimented with various methods to forcefully suppress or control his mind with his mind, without success. In the Mahasaccaka Sutra he likened trying to forcefully restrain the mind to the act of wrestling someone to the ground and having to hold them there constantly. While one may grit their teeth and continue to wrestle with their mind, they will eventually break a sweat and wear themselves out. The austerity of the struggle becomes more unbearable than the object of mind being restrained. Therefore, the way we should

approach our anxiety is not through aversion or rejection, but through embracing it with loving kindness.

Our anxiety is a part of us, like our own child that doesn't understand why they are upset. When we notice our anxiety entering the living room of our consciousness, we lose our joy and happiness as we regard our unhappy little child. We should imagine saying to her, "hello, my little anxiety. Come closer so I can hold you." This can be difficult as our natural reaction may be to look away, but when we bring our anxiety closer we are able to observe her deeply as further feelings arise. If we are able to connect with these arising feelings, then our mindfulness will illuminate the causes of our anxiety.

When our body begins to feel agitated then we stop what we are doing and return to our body through our breathing. In fact, this is something we must do, because otherwise our unpleasant feelings of anxiety may overwhelm us, giving rise to further aversion and frustration with ourselves. This doesn't always mean we must remove ourselves from a situation – indeed, it is often not possible. Simply accept the feelings, and look into them while breathing in and out. If they become overwhelming, then let them come and do your best to observe their passing and gradual decline. They will pass, and they will decline.

When we are patient with ourselves in this way, we do not add to our suffering. Our anxiety can no longer grow because we have taken away its source energy – our self doubt and hatred. The seeds of our anxiety will gradually return to our unconscious because we are no longer watering them with anger and fear.

7. Learning to heal

THREE STAGES OF LEARNING

In this final section of the book, I am going to try and provide a few ideas for meditation, and some slightly more advanced concepts to help us become more mindful of our anxious behaviour.

Buddhism is not based on a blind faith in the power of something outside of us. It does not ask the practitioner to worship the Buddha or expect him to intervene in our suffering. Indeed the Buddha actively spoke against this kind of attitude, and encouraged his followers to gain wisdom through critical insight, and faith through the proof of daily practice – it is more accurately described as a dialectical tradition.

Wisdom in Buddhism comes from three stages of learning. The first stage is that of intellectual knowledge; the simple act of listening to dharma talks (either on the internet, or finding a local buddhist group) or reading books, like this one. While this stage of learning will provide us with an essential understanding, or limited insight into the reasons for our suffering, it is not adequate alone to save us from suffering because at this stage our understanding is only intellectual.

The second stage of learning is contemplative, and could be described as critical reflection. This involves the application of logic and reason to what we have learned in order to gain a deeper understanding of it. We consider the teachings of Buddhism in

relation to our existing views and understanding, and begin to evaluate what we think of as ultimately real, and begin to appreciate that our existing view of reality is based to some degree on ignorance.

Consider someone suffering from OCD who habitually washes their hands every time they touch something. Because their behaviour may have started after suffering food poisoning they regard their activity as being based on solid reason. This person may begin to realise, however, that even when sat perfectly still in meditation, not touching anything, that their mind remains constantly engaged in thoughts of hygiene. At this stage, one realises some level of doubt in their own thoughts and the process of critical reflection begins. They come to see their obsessive washing is based upon a deluded view that everything is contaminated, when in fact the behaviour has become a comfort tool. This process of realisation slowly creates the desire to challenge the delusion. At this stage, the compulsion to wash their hands remains, because we have only thus far gained a *conscious* understanding.

The third stage of learning is that of concentration and insight, leading ultimately to a new wisdom – This is our internal revolution. We gain this wisdom through meditation during which our existing habitual tendencies are pressed together with the knowledge that we have critically reflected upon through. By meditating single pointedly on what we have learned we cultivate mindfulness energy to overwhelm and transform our harmful habit energy. We then repeatedly practice our new skills in daily

life, and go back to meditate until we transform our ignorance into enlightenment.

Meditation requires the mind to be clear of conscious thoughts. It may involve focussing single pointedly, reciting sutra passages or chanting mantras, or it may utilise visualisations – there is no hard and fast rule as to what will benefit any one individual most effectively, but meditation is a skill that requires dedicated and persistent practice in order to experience transformation.

During and after meditating it will be normal to continue confronting our habitual patterns of thought. In some cases we gain insight into ourselves and see things which we may not like, and this can be disturbing. This process of breaking down our ego little by little takes time but the rewards are enormous. Only through repeatedly meditating on the knowledge we have gained through critical reflection, can that knowledge gradually transform our gut feeling, and therefore influence our cognition, our experience of daily life. If it took us ten years or more to program our minds to behave anxiously, then we aren't going to fix it overnight, but within a few days and certainly weeks we should be feeling much more stable, solid and mentally consistent.

THE DOUBTLESS REFUGE

It will have become apparent by now that it is mistaken to rely on external factors to end our suffering. One of the fundamental principles of Buddhism is that of taking refuge in ourselves. In the Pali Mahaparinibbana (Nirvana) Sutra, the final teachings of the Buddha, he says to his disciple, Ananda:

Therefore, Ananda, be islands unto yourselves, refuges unto yourselves, seeking no external refuge; with the Dharma as your island, the Dharma as your refuge, seeking no other refuge.

The translations of the Sutras into English is not an exact science. There are many words in Pali or Sanskrit for which there are no direct English equivalents. Ananda is not being told to go live on a desert island in isolation. He is being told to rely only upon himself and the Dharma (the unconditioned truth within him) in order to seek liberation from suffering.

This is an incredibly important lesson. Many of us have concluded at some time in our lives – “if you want a job doing well, do it yourself.” This applies equally to making ourselves happier. We cannot and should not rely on people or things for happiness. Japanese Buddhism terms these sources of power as *Jiriki* (self-power) and *Tariki* (other-power). Some schools of Buddhism rely upon an external agency, such as the Buddha, or a scripture or scroll, in order to gain emancipation. This is *Tariki* in much the same way that the Abrahamic religions rely upon God to deliver them from suffering. This differs from the core teaching of Buddhism.

Teachings, and teachers can become a source of *Tariki*, but must be tempered if they are not to become dogmas that we cling to and force upon others. When we place too much emphasis in things outside of ourselves to fix our anxiety, then we introduce doubt in our own innate potential for happiness. This self-doubt creates more anxiety. Therefore any doubt that we have in our ability to

become a refuge for our own recovery from anxiety should be treated very carefully.

Doubt in ourselves is a fundamental obstacle and prevents us from opening the doors to awakening. Doubt can operate at gross and subtle levels in the mind. When we are awake, our doubts manifest in our thoughts, speech and actions. However, when we are meditating, living mindfully, or dreaming we can become aware of doubt at a more subtle level.

In the past I have dreamt that I was flying – like superman. For a while I would swoop around the sky with absolute confidence, but then something would change. Instead of just enjoying flying, I began to doubt it was real and then I would begin to fall and no matter how much I willed myself to fly again I could not stop falling. Such dreams have been analysed repeatedly throughout history, but I believe they ultimately represent the defeat of our spiritual heart by our own materialistic tendencies. In the case of the flying/falling dream, we succumb to our unconscious belief that we are no more than a sack of water and minerals at the beck and call of gravity. We doubt that we have the power to change.

Dogen, a thirteenth century Japanese Zen Buddhist teacher, has some interesting things to say about doubt, and the doubt of doubt! It is true to say that we do not understand things absolutely, especially our anxiety. However, isn't it odd that we place more store in the the reasons for our anxiety than in our power to overcome them? We take our record of the past for granted, but how do we know we are correct? How do we know that our memory of past experiences is true, when the only thing we can verify with absolute veracity is this precise moment that we

experience right here and now? Babies are not born with deep anxieties because they have no record.

Your doubt, like everything, is both impermanent in time, and empty of a self-imposed existence. Like everything else it is conditioned, changeable, and cannot be relied upon. Norman Fischer⁷ paraphrases Dogen:

So though people commonly have doubts about things that they can't be entirely sure of, in fact, they can't even tell whether a doubt that they had in the past, or even a doubt that they had a moment ago, is the same as the doubt that they have now. And so, they should be doubtful about their doubting – not as certain of it as they so often seem to be. Doubt is doubt for the time being. Nothing more. Doubt itself is time.

Before we tie ourselves up in philosophical knots, what Dogen is saying is that we can only ever be certain of the immediate moment we experience.

Lack of doubt, however, should not necessarily lead to absolute certainty. If we apply what we have already seen through the study of emptiness and non-self, then we will discover the truth that transcends ideas of doubt or certainty. Both doubt and certainty are simply mental formations that depend on other causes and conditions. If we are to truly become a refuge for ourselves – to let go of our fears, then we should regard our self-doubt as we would any other mental formation. Say hello to it, care for it, and look deeply into it and see that it is just another form of delusion that contributes to our anxiety.

MINDFUL BREATHING

If we were to try and read a large newspaper in a hurricane, then the only thing we will learn is the futility of the exercise. Likewise, if we wish to observe something with care and precision then we must ensure that the environment is calm. When we can accurately and calmly observe things then discovery and insight take place. The practice of mindfulness, and particularly mindfulness of breathing offers an accessible method for calming the mind. Mindful breathing, because it achieves a number of physiological benefits that make meditation more effective, is practiced not just within Buddhism. These benefits include slowing and deepening the breath, stimulating the parasympathetic nervous system which in turn reduces adrenaline and cortisol and therefore also lowers blood pressure. Breathing mindfully is simple, but can take practice and perseverance in the early stages.

As the name suggests, we are essentially doing no more than breathing in, breathing out – being aware of our in breath as it enters our body, and our out breath as it leaves our body. This is the practice of *Smrti* (Sanskrit), the practice of stopping the mind and becoming aware of the object of concentration (the body, or specifically in this case, the breath). Clearly, the mind does not stop completely. The aim is to subdue the usual maelstrom of thoughts, feelings and emotions that continually distract us while we are awake. By removing these distractions we come home to our body, and reconnect with ourselves in the present moment. We free ourselves from past and future concerns, and dwell in the here and now, just focussing on the feeling of our breath entering,

and leaving our body. It is deceptively simple, and yet presents us with the gateway to concentration and insight. When we can practice mindful breathing then we can begin to make friends with ourselves and transform our suffering.

Mindfulness has become something of a phenomenon in the West since the turn of the millennium. Although the de facto source of mindfulness is often seen as Buddhism, its roots can be found in Vedic (Hindu) scripture. There is a wealth of information available on performing mindful breathing, and perhaps one of the most popular and well respected teachers today is Thich Nhat Hanh, the vietnamese born Zen master. However, for completeness, I will briefly describe the basic practice.

It is useful to create a space where you can take refuge in your own home without your senses being invaded by bright light, loud sounds, or strong smells. It may be an entire room, or just a small corner. Alternatively you may know some local woodland, pond or lake where you can be away from distractions. After practicing for a while you will be able to achieve concentration with minor distractions going on around you, but in the early stages it is useful to remove as many as possible.

To begin with, find somewhere comfortable, and quiet. While it is not necessary to sit in the lotus or half lotus position (I can't), it is helpful to sit cross legged with our bottom on a stout cushion (also called a *zafu* in Japanese) so that your pelvis is tilted slightly forward. This helps to ensure that your spine is upright, and not hunched. If you are unable to sit on the floor cross legged, you can kneel with your bum perched on the *zafu*, or using a simple wooden meditation stool. Again, this will ensure a straight spine.

Allow your head to tilt forward slightly so that your gaze naturally falls a few feet in front of you – this will ensure you are not straining your neck one way or the other. You can relax your eyelids but try not to close your eyes fully, as we are not aiming to fall asleep. If you are unable to sit in this way, then a low bench, or failing that, a chair that does not cut into the back of your legs will suffice. Your hands can rest just above the knees or you can place your left hand on the upturned palm of the right in your lap – the important thing is that you are not unduly distracted by any discomfort.

Once your posture is settled, focus your mind on the breath as it enters and leaves your body. Don't try to force deep breaths, or restrict your throat in any way to make a rushing sound. Just breathe naturally and quietly, feeling the breath going in and coming out of your lungs. It can aid concentration if you count your in breaths as you go. If you notice that your breathing is erratic, fast or shallow, then simply go with it, counting the breaths as you go. If you become distracted by something outside of your body, like a sound or other event, that's ok too. Simply return your focus to your breathing, observing its rhythm, depth and quality.

If you are particularly anxious when you begin this exercise you may find you quickly lose count of your breaths and become distracted by unpleasant thoughts or feelings of panic. This is understandable because we have removed all the usual distractions from our conscious mind. Whatever thoughts or feelings enter your mind, treat them with caution and remain aware of them, neither trying to reject them nor feel attracted to them. Remember at all times, all you are doing is sitting and

breathing – a process that cannot harm you, so persist in returning to your breath. If you focus only on your breath and do not cling to the feelings of anxiety, anger, or hatred then over time your breathing will become more steady, deeper and slower. As you breathe, try repeating something like this in your head:

*breathing in, I am aware of my in breath,
breathing out, I am aware of my out breath,
breathing in, I feel happiness,
breathing out, I am smiling,
happiness,
smiling.*

By concentrating on our breath, and refusing to think about anything else other than our body, we will naturally promote the actions of the parasympathetic nervous system. In turn, this will begin to calm our respiration, and our organs, so that the normal, relaxed functioning of our body can return. As the body begins to calm, so the mind will follow, and mindful breathing will become easier.

At first don't attempt to sit for hours on end, as this would probably be counter productive. Initially, a period of 5 minutes will probably suffice, but over a period of days you will find this will naturally increase. While the exact times we meditate are not rigid, it can be helpful to meditate for a period when we awake. This can help to dispel negativity spilt over from a disturbed night, and sets up the mind in a positive way before starting a busy day. In the morning recite this simple gatha to yourself, taking a steady breath with each line :

*Waking up this morning, I smile,
Twenty four brand new hours are before me,
I vow to live fully in each moment,
and to look at all beings with the eyes of love,
smiling,
each moment,
before me,
eyes of love,*

Although very short, this basic meditation provides a solid starting point for a day of living mindfully.

Meditation can help us look deeply into and through our anxiety. A number of suggested topics for meditation will follow, and each will assume that the meditator begins with mindful breathing to calm the body and still the mind. We will also consider how the energy of mindfulness can be practically applied in our daily life, transforming behaviours and patterns of thinking that have held us captive to fear for so long.

THE MINDFUL FIDGET

Mindfulness is a feature of both Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism, although the focus differs slightly. The popular Mahayana school, known as Zen, practices mindfulness based on four principles, called establishments, which together help the practitioner to maintain a conscious awareness of being alive. This might seem un-necessary – after all, we know we are live, so what are we being mindful of? Mindfulness is the practice of cultivating a deep connection with our body and mind so that we experience

greater harmony with ourselves and others. This isn't a vague, fluffy statement.

Mindfulness practice is based upon the Sutra on the Four Establishments of Mindfulness (*Theravadan Satipatthana Sutta*). In this teaching, the Buddha explained the way to overcome suffering, including anxiety, and to move toward nirvana, is to practice the Four Establishments. In the most brief of summaries, these are:

The body in the body: To maintain full awareness of what we are doing with our body at any moment; sitting, walking, frowning, fidgeting but particularly our breathing. To be fully aware of the body in all its actions and functions and to understand its impermanent and composite nature.

The feelings in the feelings: To maintain full awareness of feelings within the body (physical sensations), whether pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. To observe these feelings without becoming caught up in attraction or revulsion to them.

The mind in the mind: To maintain full awareness of our mental formations, such as desire, anger, hatred. Also, to be aware when our mind is narrow, broad, focussed, diluted, anxious and so forth. Also to be aware when our mind is not these things is equally significant.

Objects of the mind in the objects of the mind: To maintain full awareness of the objects of our mental formations (above). To know the source of our mental formations and which senses give rise to them. What do we hate, what do we desire, what are we anxious about and so forth. To become fully aware of our

suffering, the source of it, the cessations of it, and the path to letting go of suffering.

When we suffer from anxiety we fidget, often compulsively. This can include the knee bounce (bouncing a leg up and down when sitting), hand wringing, skin picking, ear rubbing, twiddling of hair and so forth. These habitually reinforced diversions have become associated with our anxious thoughts. Even smoking cigarettes is (for more than would admit), another compulsive habit concealing bubbling anxiety beneath.

If you do any of these or similar things, just try stopping it consciously. You will find it's incredibly difficult, because your habit energy is strong and stealthy. Sometimes you might find yourself doing whatever it is you do without even knowing you are doing it! This is forgetfulness – the opposite to mindfulness. When we read books and try to correct our behaviour through knowledge alone, we will find it difficult to succeed. Mindfulness energy directly opposes our forgetfulness in a non-violent way. It naturally transforms our habit energy so that we become fully connected with the present moment. When we are fully in the present moment and not worrying about tomorrow, then should the mental formation arise that creates the desire to fidget, we will say to ourselves “I am aware of the desire to fidget”. We will gain insight into our anxiety, its causes, and open the way to ending our suffering.

The statement earlier about experiencing greater harmony with ourselves and others holds true when we imbue each moment of our lives with subtle mindfulness. Gross mindfulness is like learning to ride a bicycle – consciously correcting each and every

wobble. Of course, you might say to yourself “I can ride a bicycle”, but it takes great conscious effort, and you will regularly encounter danger. Once we can incorporate mindfulness energy into our daily routine, it will become a more subtle energy. Like riding a bicycle without wobbling, deep looking, compassionate listening and warm heartedness become our new habits. When the causes for anxiety are removed, anxiety can no longer manifest.

One of the naturally arising side effects of meditating and practicing The Four Establishments of Mindfulness is that we cultivate a deep sense of compassion for ourselves and for others. This is most advantageous, because while meditating on the breath allows us to regain control over acute states of anxiety, the cultivation of compassion begins to tackle the causes of our anxiety at a level closer to the root. Compassion for ourselves is not the same thing as selfish concern or self-cherishing. Compassion for ourselves requires that we recognise our suffering, and genuinely care for and encourage ourselves to transform it into joy and happiness. Only when we can look deeply into our suffering do we feel real compassion for ourselves, and only then can we freely give it to others.

The cultivation of compassion and patience transcends not only the various schools of Buddhism, but all major spiritual paths, inclusively binding us as brothers and sisters. Mindfulness provides a most effective means of cultivating our seeds of compassion, joy and happiness and lies at the heart of a peaceful and non-violent way of life. Even the most minor of daily mindfulness practices goes a long way toward transforming our predisposition to states of anxiety.

LOVING THE DEAD

The westernised world has become obsessed with materialism, dominated by a desire for measurable growth and economic success. Everything that can be counted, weighed and traded is protected and valued. To callously pursue material wealth without regard to ourselves and others is regarded today as a sign of strength. On the other hand, anything that eludes a reliable method of measurement, that does not directly represent or lead to material wealth is seen as worthless. Compassion, non-violence and patience are seen as signs of weakness. For this reason, faith is often viewed within capitalist societies as an insipid bastion of backwardness and weakness.

Materialism views the self as solid, immutable and separate from everyone else. Everyone wants to be respected, well regarded and viewed as unique and special. We can't bear the thought of being "less than" anyone else. Our idea of faith in ourselves is often limited to our power to forcibly achieve or obtain our goals. It has little to do with our ability to realise happiness, patience or compassion – the virtues required to overcome anxiety.

Opposing this concrete idea of self, science provides the path of nihilism – the view that we are little more than a sack of water and chemicals, molecules, atoms, protons, neutrons, electrons, quarks and so on. Modern quantum physics provides plenty of opportunities for nihilistic thinking. It is the juxtaposition of these two opposing realities – the permanently enduring self, and the nihilism of modern science – that has left a spiritual conundrum.

These two realities (nihilism and an enduring, solid self) are diametrically opposed to one another, and without understanding their non-duality at an unconscious level, we succumb to confusion and fear – especially of death.

On one hand, we behave as though this life will never end. We spend much of our lives trying to make more material wealth for ourselves than we could ever need, all the time reinforcing the seeds of ignorance – our inability to come to terms with death. On the other hand, intellectually we know that one day we will die, either peacefully in our sleep, in an accident, or from sickness and disease. We never know when we will die, and we hate to think about it, but we do know it will happen. But, because death creates an unpleasant feeling, we don't think about it. We don't think about it so much that our store consciousness becomes full of seeds of ignorance. We might “know” we are going to die, but we behave habitually as though we will never die. Why else do we waste our lives doing some of the most pointless things?

How many times in your life have you said “When I got up this morning, I never imagined I'd be doing this?” Four years before writing this book I was driving along a country road with my wife when we came across a fatal car accident that had occurred only moments beforehand. A young man in his twenties lay motionless on the road some distance from his destroyed car. I had never witnessed head injuries of this type, and it was clear he had already died. A few yards from his body there was a keyring, the fob on which contained a photograph of a young family, possibly his wife and children.

Even now, recalling the event brings back terrible feelings of grief. It turned out the young man was driving to a wedding and had apparently lost control of his car on the wet bend. It's hard to imagine how anyone's expectations of their day ahead could be dashed so dramatically. We never know when death will come for us, and yet living as though it will never happen to us is to become like the living dead. Many of us live in this way – not living a life of happiness, but instead chasing after an impossibly perfect self image, and suffering as a result. The only logical explanation is that our unconscious mind simply can't accept that the body will eventually die.

Driven by this unconscious notion, our conscious mind tries to obscure our fear of death through attachments and aversion to things. But, because things are impermanent, and we behave as though they were permanent, we suffer. We are unaccustomed to dealing with death, and few people in their lives see dead bodies. Those that do are seldom exposed to the full reality of death. Western funeral rituals involve making corpses look quite alive through artificial means such as powder and makeup. Our society's detachment from death is a contributory factor to the fact that so many westerners suffer from anxiety. When we remain fundamentally out of touch with our humanity, we suffer.

This struggle for material facility, praise and recognition inevitably causes difficulty in our personal relationships. If we behave cruelly in order to get ahead at work, then it is impossible to demonstrate compassion at home. We might feel this is possible, but it is not, because true compassion does not discriminate, it is not self-

cherishing, and it is infinite – there is no such thing as *mostly* compassionate. Even a murderer might say he loves his own family, but still so many people are murdered by members of their own family.

When we take our selfish ego home with us, believing we are being compassionate, we engage in behaviours designed to bring the ego a sense of reward. An amorous husband may bring home chocolates and wine in order to seduce his wife. These egotistical desires masquerading as compassion lead to anxiety because any happiness they might bring us is conditional on external factors. If the husband wins his wife's affections, soon she may become bored with chocolates, so he has to find something better, like jewellery, or a new car. Relationships where participants engage in activities designed to bring each other happiness yet only bring them temporary pleasure are not at all uncommon. Such relationships exist between people, corporations and countries in all manner of combinations, and in all cases there is anxiety because happiness is entirely dependant upon external factors.

We can prove this to ourselves when we lose someone dear to us. When alive, our feelings for this person are complicated by our desires. Our feelings fluctuate from day to day. They might do something that creates a pleasant feeling within us and we feel attracted to them. Or they might forget our birthday, or disagree with us over something, and we suddenly feel aversion or anger. This is inevitable, and depends on how that person satisfies our ego. It's hard to accept that we behave in this way with our nearest and dearest but I suspect we can all recognise this behaviour in

ourselves. We all began this way as children but as we grew we learned to mask our feelings with variable levels of success. When we talk about childish behaviour, we refer exactly to the unhealthy attraction or aversion people display when they succeed or fail in getting their way. This kind of unhealthy love or hatred is referred to in Buddhism as attachment and aversion. They are behaviours we cling to because we convince ourselves they will make us happy.

When someone close to us dies, then our ego has to adjust to the loss. Unless we are seriously disturbed we don't get angry with that person for dying! That person can no longer fulfil our selfish requirements, and so our feelings about them change. Instead of dwelling on the temporary ups and downs of our relationship, all that is left are our true feelings of affection. This remnant is our true compassion for that person. This accounts, I think, for the bizarre change in opinion at funerals where someone who may have been regarded as grumpy in life is given a glowing eulogy. How many times have relatives fallen out over something relatively trivial, only for one of them to die? The remaining relative bemoans how they wish they had ended the feud long ago. While the kind of anxiety we experience as a result of such relationships is likely to be generalised, the general increase in agitation it causes can lead quickly to anger and resentment. Therefore it is important to look deeply into the nature of our relationships with others, learning to value them as if each day would be their last.

People who suffer from anxiety often depend on the people around them for support. This can make the anxiety sufferer feel

dependant and weak, and this can lead to resentment. Perversely, it can often be the people who care most for us that receive some of our worst behaviour. This can create additional anxieties regarding the consequences of losing our friends, so it would seem sensible to tackle the source of such anxieties before they can manifest.

Therefore, a useful meditation would be to consider someone who has played an important and beneficial role in your life who you also sometimes resent and dislike, perhaps because they have highlighted something within you that you don't like. Regardless of their intentions, it is important that this relationship is not the catalyst for further anxiety.

Visualise and imagine how your life would be affected should this person suddenly died. Consider how you would feel about them, and how your life would change without them. Spend time developing gratitude for their presence in your life and how they have given their time for you. Would you want to live your life without them altogether? Sometimes we become most frustrated with the people we depend on the most because we are afraid at the prospect of life without them. What we fail to realise is that much of our relationship anxiety is caused by our unconscious awareness of the strains placed on our relationships by our selfishness.

When this person next upsets your ego by failing to fulfil your desires, return to the insights you gained through meditation and your reaction to them will be illuminated. Take time to reflect upon life without this person, and how you would miss them terribly. When we can create loving kindness from a position of

strong compassion rather than weak dependence, we can increase our sense of self confidence, making our relationships more mutually fulfilling and less one-sided.

COMPASSION FOR OURSELVES

We think we are compassionate to ourselves, but if we strip away how we pamper ourselves materially (shopping, food, holidays etc), then what feelings remain for us as a person? Imagine being trapped on a desert island with your double, without any props, coping devices or additional distractions. Would you be able to get on with your double? Would you accept that person's behaviour, or would they irritate you? Can you imagine sitting on a rock together with your arms around each other's shoulders watching the sunset, laughing and reminiscing, or would you find your own company tiresome?

One of the greatest gifts we can give to our loved ones is our undivided attention. How often do we have conversations with our loved ones that are almost one sided because we are partly listening to something on the radio, watching TV or fiddling with our mobile phones? How often have we been worrying about something else, and as a result forgotten what a loved one has told us? Before we can learn to practice deep listening and compassion for our loved ones, we must first develop this skill within ourselves.

If we are unable to cultivate compassion for ourselves, then how can we possibly give it to another? When we hear on the news that someone has been killed we may briefly sigh, and comment on how awful it is, but we soon get on with washing the dishes; we're

hardly likely to fall to our knees and sob uncontrollably. Yet when someone criticises us, even only slightly, we do the angry red-faced dance, get agitated and think of ways to return fire. This violent reaction is due to the other person finding a chink in the armour of our ego, threatening our narcissistic and idealised view that we are somehow better.

Because we fear what others will do when they discover our imperfections, we create strategies to hide them from others – we build defences against the outside world to ensure that only our approved “I” is projected. If a theatre were an individual, then the actors, stage, orchestra and backdrop would be the projection of our idealised and perfect sense of “I” whereas our true self, with all of its inconsistencies is hiding in the dressing room! This unconscious deceit is one of the greatest sources of anxiety.

When we start believing our own internal PR department then we are in trouble. When we are confronted with someone who holds a differing view that threatens our perfect “I” (who is, after all, always right), then our ego steps in like a clumsy bodyguard. Later, we think about the event at length, pondering why did this happen to me? Why did that person do or say that? What if! What if! Our own little drama seems to take on huge proportions – as though it is the only important thing in a world that is otherwise filled with suffering the likes of which makes our pale in comparison. Our narcissism becomes habitual – even comfortable. In the absence of discipline, our mind will wonder the perimeter fences of “I”, looking for the slightest excuse for selfish concern; and where none are to be found, its gaze turns to the distance, perceiving uncertainly and doubt; the possibility of threats just over the

horizon. The result is that our mind gradually builds harsh defences around our vulnerabilities, like barnacles on the hull of a ship causing more drag, we become less able to move freely through life's ocean. We find it harder to form meaningful and loving relationships.

A good way to tell how much we self-cherish is our reaction to receiving compliments from others. Accepting a compliment is actually an act of great generosity. First of all, we have to accept that we have made someone happy in some measure. By denying this achievement we are engaging in a double whammy of self-punishment and also rejection of compassion from others. An awareness of our weaknesses and failings leads us to feel we don't deserve to be happy. Withholding this joy from ourselves is driven by an unconscious desire to maintain an image of martyrdom and self sacrifice – the person who gives up everything for others. In this way we maintain an image of selflessness which serves our unconscious and narcissistic desire to be loved and appreciated or to attract sympathy. By rejecting the person's compliment, we also deny them the chance to feel joy in bringing us pleasure. The other person will feel rejected at some level, and our relationship with them will deteriorate.

Next time someone pays you a compliment, accept it, and thank them for their kindness. The praise should be accepted in the spirit of gratitude. This other person has let you know you have brought pleasure to them. This is a cause for happiness and should be a joyful experience.

HEALTHY ABSTINENCE

Buddhism's original scriptures describe many numbered lists of one factor or another. This is probably because it aided memorising what was at one time only orally transmitted from teacher to student. One such list is the Seven Latent Tendencies (Skt. *Anusaya*). At the subtle level, our tendencies for attachment and aversion can be very hard to touch and to change. Deep seated feelings of frustration with life can take a long time to fully understand and dismantle. In the meantime, our meditation is more likely to uncover and reveal traits which influence our daily activities on a gross and clearly apparent level.

When we talk about abstinence, we should not confuse it with aversion. Aversion is a trait whereby we justify behaviours to help us avoid engaging in normal activities, for example meeting friends, shopping, socialising or going to work. All too often we fool ourselves that the things we avoid are bad for us. In my thirties I suffered with terrible chronic fatigue and would struggle to walk more than a few minutes a day. On the odd occasion I tried to walk much further I invariably began to feel unsteady, and on more than one occasion I barely got home only to collapse into bed for days.

These events grew into a fear of exercise, so that when my health eventually began to improve I found I was avoiding exercise on the basis that it would make me ill. This took me years to overcome. I accept that I still overdo things sometimes and I might suffer as a result, but such events no longer taint my view of exercise and do not cause me to avoid it in an unhealthy fashion.

Abstinence, on the other hand, requires that we learn to recognise activities which really do have a negative impact on our life, and that their subsequent cessation will make us happier. This can be difficult because these activities usually represent our “happy place”. In fact, the very activities we usually need to abstain from are those that form part of an avoidance behaviour.

In my twenties I suffered on and off from anxiety and depression. During one episode I became fascinated with computer gaming. Due to its anti-social nature, I allowed gaming to feed my illness as it helped justify being shut in my bedroom for hours on end. The games I played were those that involved running around a fast paced 3D environment killing various enemies as I went. This only served to release more adrenalin, and worsen a crippling hyper-awareness problem. It is remarkable how little time someone can put into tackling the obstacles to their happiness, whereas they will spend whole days playing computer games. Gladly I overcame this fascination, and now avoid pointless stimulating mental activities – particularly those that promote any form of violence.

Many of our so called leisure activities have a harmful impact on our minds. TV and violent video games are especially damaging because they constantly reinforce formations of negative thought. Popular TV is full of episodic violence, anger, intolerance and hatred. It is sold to us under the guise of social education – the producers of such material claim to offer educational themes in a realistic social context. On the contrary, it is plain to see that the characters portrayed in today's diet of soaps and reality TV rather than demonstrate any form of loving kindness, usually portray the lower life states of hell, hunger, animality, anger and ecstasy. Worse

still, the protagonists and their behaviour are often depicted as successful and powerful, drawing the viewer further into the delusion that a strong sense of “I” brings reward. Some estimates have shown that Britons spend on average more than two hours a week watching this kind of material.

TV and video games offer the perfect platforms for the passive reinforcement of negative thinking. It is truly mind altering, and is arguably a kind of meditation in itself, but one that slowly gnaws away our humanity, constantly reinforcing wrong views, and thoughts. The repeated reinforcement of A vs B – that B must be destroyed in order for A to become happy – is fundamentally responsible for human-kinds long history of mass murder and war.

While passive activities such as TV can damage us, so can things we actively do to avoid unpleasant feelings and emotions. If we think carefully for a while most of us engage in certain activities when we feel stressed out. Maybe we go to the gym, enjoy a few glasses of beer, wine, or spirits, tobacco, drugs or maybe we binge eat, or binge and then make ourselves sick, or maybe we intentionally harm ourselves by cutting our skin – perhaps we watch pornography, or go shopping and spend money for no good reason on things we don't need. The list is pretty extensive but all of these acts are performed to distract us because they place us back in a position, albeit temporarily, of relative control. It is an environment in which we feel safe and comforted – but at some level we know this is an illusion, which is why we suffer anxiety.

Coping strategies, whilst useful in dealing with a crisis, can become ultimately unsatisfying when over-used. Firstly they

reinforce the illusion that we can somehow avoid our suffering through running away (aversion) or the exploitation of impermanent phenomena (sex, drugs, rock and roll). Whatever we do to feel better, it will be temporary and cannot provide lasting relief. Secondly, we will adjust to whatever we are doing to sooth ourselves, thus requiring more intensive experiences in future to retain the same effect. Thirdly, the behaviour itself is usually harmful to our physical or mental health – alcohol, food, drugs, gambling, video games, pornography might all provide distractions but their effects on ourselves and those we interact with are rarely something to feel good about. Working out at the gym might sounds like a great idea, but if it is only done to vent our frustrations, then it is likely we will follow up our visit with a reward drink or meal.

Fourthly, by partaking in any of these activities we are avoiding the elephant in the room (or elephant in the *mind*) – instead of tackling the root causes of our suffering. Because the causes of our suffering are possibly very painful we try to distract ourselves, but this temporary relief is soon overwhelmed by our original problem.

As always, the idea of abstinence can be taken too far. This is also misguided, and is not what the Buddha taught. Before the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Guatama, awakened to enlightenment he practiced asceticism. The ascetics believed the rich and privileged classes to be incapable of experiencing enlightenment due to their pre-occupation with money, power and greed. Therefore Siddhartha hoped to experience enlightenment by eliminating all desires of the flesh and

undergoing the most terrible self torture as an ascetic. He practiced sleeping on thorns, ate and drank very little and became dangerously underweight and almost died as a result. Then, one day he regarded a musician tuning the strings of his sitar. Siddhartha realised that if the strings were too loose then any amount of effort would not create a pleasant sound, and if the strings were too tight then they will most likely snap when played. He realised that neither his position as a prince nor his lifestyle as an ascetic would help him awaken to enlightenment and that a middle way was required. Siddhartha subsequently gave up the ascetic lifestyle, began to lead a modest life and soon after during a forty day meditation under the Bodhi tree he attained awakening as a Buddha.

So, what can we take from this? Just as we have the seeds within us ranging from those which can grow into anger and violence to those which can develop into loving kindness, so too do all physical phenomena possess the same range of seeds. Just as alcohol, computers, or sex have a harmful aspect, they also have beneficial aspects. For example, when we eat a meal with our lover, we might enjoy a small glass of wine together. We might use a computer game to help someone develop language skills. When we enjoy sex with our partner, it can be a deeply spiritual experience. Drugs save people's lives every day. Happiness, therefore, is not derived from the dogmatic denial of things which *might* possibly harm us – if we take this argument to it's logical conclusion then everything could potentially harm us and we would not get of our bed! Therefore true wisdom comes from knowing deeply our reasons for everything we think, say and do, and the true nature of our relationship with other people and our

environment. Rigid self denial is no less deluded than ignorant hedonism, so *unhealthy* abstinence is no less harmful than the things we wish to abstain from.

REALISING EQUALITY OF SELF AND OTHER

Understanding the true nature of our relationships with other people is an important step in quelling our anxiety. Perceived inequality between ourselves and others cannot possibly produce harmony in our families or society. Keeping up with the Jones' is hard to resist for anyone with a materially inclined world view. The pursuit of material, or knowledge for the purpose of self-aggrandisement is a path to anxiety and unhappiness. Nobody, through selfish motivation has ever remained top dog indefinitely – and to fall from such a position is often painful. Constantly trying to stay on top fills our lives with fear, anger and anxiety. From the other extreme, people also suffer anxiety because they feel inferior to others. An inferiority complex can make social situations very difficult. Acute blushing, sweating, stammering, nervous ticks and plain panic beset many people to such a degree they develop chronic social anxiety and become unable to cope with many everyday situations.

Anxiety is caused when we project an image of ourselves that is inconsistent with our true nature. When we feel inferior to people, whether we know them or they are complete strangers, we tend to seek ways in which to hide our perceived failings. This idealised image is projected through our behaviour, the way we dress, decorate our body, the car we drive, the dog we own, and so on. Of

course, we don't want our unconscious deceit to be found out and this naturally creates a tension. By hiding this reality from the world we experience an unpleasant feeling of anxiety. We often experience this anxiety as a sense of fear, or threat, which is why people who have something to hide often become angry without much effort.

To counter this tendency in ourselves we must deal with the illusion that our "I" is wholly separate from other. We all depend on one another for survival. In the microcosm of the family or a small group of friends this interdependence is more easily recognised. The truth that we rely broadly on *all* human beings for our happiness is harder to perceive. When the rest of humanity is fighting or destroying the environment, it's certainly difficult to see why we should treat them with any respect, but this is the error of generalisation. For example, if everybody who worked within our infrastructure industries stayed at home tomorrow, we would be in dire straits within hours of no having no electricity, water or gas. All human beings interdepend on one another's inherent goodness to survive every day, but all we focus on are stories of war, hatred and anger. If human beings were born inherently evil, wishing others harm, then the human race would simply not be around today. Hiding things from others, anxiety and fear are behaviours we learn and habituate through our own ignorance.

Years ago, I received a dressing down from my boss for refusing to work any more overtime on a job that was already keeping me away from my family nearly 6 days a week. I really didn't like the

man, and hated the fact that he seemed to control my destiny at that time. Before I went into his office a friend said to me “look, no matter how hard a time he gives you, just imagine he's sat there on the toilet with his trousers around his ankles”. It was certainly an odd piece of advice. Unfortunately for me, this image caused me to smile during the meeting, and my boss became even more angry than he already was, and my tenure there soon came to an end.

Looking back, I see my friend's advice was well intentioned. The visualisation was a tool to cut through the appearances of my boss's sharp suit and status within the company, to allow me to regard my boss as a human being – someone who was born, suffers the delusions of ego, and, like anyone else, goes to the loo!

Perhaps another way to visualise someone who makes you feel particularly uncomfortable is to imagine that they are suffering terrible pain inside. We have nearly all experienced physical or mental suffering at some point in our lives. The reason they are so gruff or abrupt with you is because they are suffering. Perhaps they are experiencing a physical discomfort, or maybe they are experiencing unhappiness in their private life. Regardless of the reality of their suffering, it is being looked after by their ego which hides it behind a tough exterior. They are angry with you because they believe making you to meet their desires will make them happy. How deluded and pitiful! This person deserves to be treated with loving kindness. Like a petulant child who always wants his own way, he has no way to prevent his suffering, and no sense of how others feel.

When we compare ourselves to other people, we are in danger of experiencing feelings of superiority or inferiority. When do do have these feelings we try to rationalise them by saying to ourselves things like “he’s a stronger man than me, I can’t lift this log” or “I’ve got a degree so I should get the job instead of her”. When we verbalise these ideas with people we are careful to qualify our statements (he’s stronger, I’ve got a degree) to avoid sounding too wretched or conceited, but our true feelings are often shamefully overblown. When a man who cannot lift a log asks for assistance from a stronger man he does not simply think his arms may be weak. A inferiority complex causes the weaker man to alter his entire self view – he will feel that what he has to say, what he does, and his life in general has become less important and he will suffer anxiety for it. Likewise, when someone has a higher qualification than someone else, a superiority complex can take hold whereby they don’t just feel more knowledgeable, they actually feel more worthy as a *human being*, looking down upon others. Not having a single degree to my name, I have experienced such people throughout my life.

People should be regarded first and foremost as human beings – with the same needs for warmth, food, shelter, love and happiness. When we regard people in this way, without the complications of wealth, social status, physical or intellectual ability then we free ourselves from a great deal of anxiety. When we are born, we are all vulnerable and equal, so we should not delude ourselves that the temporary additions we make to ourselves creates a superior or inferior human being. We all have the same capacity for joy,

whether rich or poor, educated or not, weak or strong, black or white, male or female.

THE JOY OF AIMLESSNESS

Anxiety often stems from trying to maintain an idealised image of ourselves that does not match what we feel in our heart. Our unconscious desire to maintain this “I” is deep rooted and can be very destructive.

When we get up in the morning, our minds are often pre-occupied with our plans, projects and goals. We climb out of bed, wash, get dressed and possibly eat something before going to work without so much as a thought about how precious our life is. Our entire day becomes a means to an end we may never accomplish. What we forget is that each moment of life can be both the means and the ends in achieving peace and happiness. When we forget this, we cannot give ourselves or others the stability required for happiness.

In common language, to say someone is aimless is normally to imply the person is lazy, idle or unfocussed. This arises due to a materialistic tendency to place value only on activities that produce economic growth, or personal notoriety. It is our attachment to these things which forces us to act in ways that are not aligned with our heart.

Next time you wake up, look out of the window, and regard what you see. Are the trees trying to be something they are not? Does the blackbird do something that contradicts its nature? The purpose of a tree is to be. The purpose of the blackbird is to be.

Your purpose, too, is simply to be. While this doesn't necessarily mean you should resign from work to sit on a hilltop and count daisies, it does mean that you should ask yourself carefully if your current daily routine is preventing you from realising peace and happiness. We have so many causes for happiness in our lives, and yet we derive no joy from them. Only when we suffer illness do we suddenly realise all that we have taken for granted every day.

When we rush off to work every day how much time do we spend enjoying the fact that we have two legs with good knees to support us, two clear eyes to see with, a clear nose to breath through and no headache? Only when we have suffered illness for a short while and then recover do we briefly feel genuine joy and happiness in being free of physical suffering. Imagine if you could feel that joy every day – it's not so hard to do and all it requires is to be in the moment. Whether we are sitting in a garden, at our desk, waiting for a bus or train, or driving a car, we can return to our bodies and feel joy for all the causes of happiness that permeate our lives. Even when we are suffering from an illness, we still have so many reasons to be joyful. While writing this chapter I suffered from a nasty cold, and for a few days I could not taste or smell anything, I went deaf in one ear, and my eyes became cloudy. However, while sitting mindfully in the morning I felt the warmth of the sunshine on my face, and was aware of my whole body busy repairing itself while I rested. It was wonderful.

Happiness does not depend on the acquisition of anything or doing anything. A promotion at work, the next mobile phone upgrade, shaking off an illness – if we forget our lives while we

strive and struggle for these things to happen then our minds will suffer the cycle of anxiety forever.

There is a saying which was made popular by Paul Tsongas, a US senator who was diagnosed with cancer. “No man ever said on his deathbed, ‘I wish I had spent more time in the office’”. This is an important quote, but should be treated with caution. We all have to survive, and a livelihood is very important. What Mr Tsongas was trying to say, I think, is that he wanted to spend more time with his family. He had gained the insight to see that his career as a politician has not bought him happiness. However, this need not be true for everyone. Perhaps another way of saying it would be “Nobody ever said on their deathbed, ‘I wish I had spent more time suffering’”. Some people are driven to accomplish great things for the benefit of humanity – scientists, doctors, teachers, artists and writers and so on. Even when we commit our lives to a cause or ambition, it is always possible to “stop and smell the roses” at any point in our day and still experience the joy of living.

Happiness is available always in the here and now, whether we are peeling potatoes or waiting in traffic or working on a high energy physics experiment. When we can return to the present moment and be ourselves without any pretence, then we can benefit those we love and our community as a whole.

ACCEPTING OTHERS AS THEY ARE

Many buddhists believe that we all live infinite lives in infinite universes, and in those lives we will encounter all the people we have ever known in infinitely varied relationships. Think of someone who you particularly dislike. Buddhism teaches that you

have previously known this person as your son, daughter, mother or father, brother, horrible boss, a dog that bit you – it doesn't matter. In this life, or in future, you are going to continue encountering this person's reborn entity again and again. Isn't it better to make good rather than to continue through eternity being at odds with everyone? To understand that humanity lives interdependently naturally causes us to stop hating and begin cultivating compassion. When we stop seeing life as *us versus them* then our anxieties can be transformed.

Imagine being trapped in a large house with a dozen people. Now imagine that you were going to be trapped there for the rest of eternity. At first you might dislike the people there. You might even argue and fight with them. Pretty soon, though, it will dawn on you that life is going to be pretty unpleasant if everyone kept fighting and shouting and complaining and so forth. Eventually, you will realise that you need each other in order to lead happy lives. You will begin to take genuine interest in one another. Your differences will become less important, as you begin to feel the necessity of experiencing happiness together. Of course, there's always going to be the occasional nut who makes everybody miserable for a few years, but eventually even they will mellow. Desires such as being right, being the best, or being the strongest are gradually replaced with the idea of simply *being*.

When we view others we make the mistake of seeing them as separate and apart from us in a way that exaggerates the mere physical separation. We perceive others in such a way that we feel different or more special. “*Nobody understands me*” is a common feeling among anxious and depressed people. Just because another

person is not privy to your innermost thoughts does not render them a threat or source of animosity. Next time you meet a stranger, ask yourself, “*do I understand this person in front of me?*” The answer would have to be a resounding *no*. Do you harbour ill-will toward them? No. Should that person fear or suspect you of harbouring ill-will toward them because you don't understand them either? Of course not. Just because we don't know about their suffering in detail, we still know they are a fellow human being who also experiences suffering. When we regard people in this way, they become less threatening because we sense our interconnection with them. This is the seed of compassion growing within us.

Our sense of “I”, like anyone else's, appears to arise in unity with the mind-body complex – the illusion that we think our consciousness is the sum of mind, and that it alone controls the body – but this is a misconception. We often have a clear sense that this is *my* body, or that *my* mind is failing *me* today. But if “I” and the body-mind complex are synonymous, then how can we assert that “I” exists separately in this way, or that body or mind could belong to it? There is no specific place within our body or mind which can be identified as a permanent source of “I”. Our physical senses are derived from our sense organs, and our consciousness arises from mind, so where does “I” exist if not simply a fleeting phenomenon arising from moment to moment like the flame of a candle?

What if we try to consider “I” as different from the mind-body complex? What if “I” exists independently and outside of our mind and body? This would appear to be illogical for if we destroy

the mind and body, then what could remain of “I”? Would “I” remain permanently and independently of the mind and body? Of course not. So, if neither argument withstands scrutiny, then we could easily come to the conclusion that “I” does not really exist at all, and that both body and mind is a dream-like illusion.

Buddhism teaches that “I” is simply a phenomena that arises out of dependance on the mind-body complex. On the gross level, this might seem obvious – most people find it easy to accept that “I” depends on the mind and body. On the subtle level, however, we have to consider who we are dealing with when we interact with others. When we view someone else, we form a view of them based on their appearance, their speech and so forth. We tend to believe at an unconscious level that they are fundamentally different to us and that they have a fixed character.

The aggressive looking skinhead on the bus with tattoos and piercings, or the wealthy businessman who is interviewing us for a job – no matter who makes us feel uncomfortable, they are all human beings. Like us, they were born, they want to lead a happy life, they will become old and sick, and they will die.

Their “I” is not their physical appearance, or even their attitude towards us. The real *other* is no different from us, and behaves as it does out of the same delusions and ignorance that causes us to suffer from our anxiety. Like the pure light of candles we are all akin to one another, but our layers of ignorance and delusion, like the glass of a filthy lamp, obscure that clarity and project disturbing patterns onto the world.

A useful meditation is to focus on a place or situation where you become anxious around other people. It may be a supermarket checkout, an airport checkin desk, a doctor's waiting room or a classroom – it is only important that the familiar unpleasant emotions arise. As always, try not to generate further emotions (such as hopelessness, or self hatred) regarding the initial feeling – just accept that the unpleasant feeling is there, and look into it without prejudice. If you find other emotions arising uncontrollably, then return to your breath, and bring the mind back to a state of calm abiding before trying again.

Once we can observe the onset of the anxious feeling, and hold it firmly before our mind, then we can begin to analyse exactly what it is we are afraid of. The people in our imagined situation may all appear, behave, and speak differently but if we can apprehend their true nature, the pure light of their humanity, then we can begin to break down the barriers of fear that cause us to suffer. Each of these people underwent birth, they became upset when first separated from their mother, and since then have been subject to a maelstrom of experiences and emotions that led them to appear and behave as they do today.

Consider two people who are both normally quite pleasant. If one of them has a physical injury then he will be experiencing pain, while the other will not. This might make him gruff or unduly harsh when his way to visit the doctor is impeded. We are the same. We are all possessed of Buddha nature – the pure light of joy and happiness, but due to our mental afflictions and desires, we can become gruff and harsh with others when we feel our desires are threatened.

One day they will become old, sick, and die. We are all on the same conveyor belt, and nobody can help us at the end of our life – the time when, sadly, our ignorance becomes most apparent. If we can focus on what binds us to others, rather than what separates us from them, then we will naturally become less fearful of them.

EXCHANGE OF SELF AND OTHER

The Buddhist practice of exchanging self and other is a particularly powerful way to promote compassion and understanding not only for others, but also of oneself. The Indian scholar Shantideva writes:

Do not be downcast, but marshall all your powers; Make an effort; be the master of yourself! Practice the equality of self and other; Practice the exchange of self and other.

And:

Those desiring speedily to be a refuge for themselves and others should make the interchange of self and other, and thus embrace a sacred mystery.

We have already looked at perceiving the equality of self and other in order to lessen tension and anxiety in certain situations. In this section we will look at the goal of breaking down the final barriers between ourselves and others – to dissolve our gross sense of “I”, and to view life as a continuum, without the barriers and blockages contrived through our ignorance. When we perceive the

world as being self versus everything else, then we're definitely going to lose the fight and suffer as a result.

The exchange of self and other is described by Shantideva as a sacred mystery because it is difficult to realise by those who have not overcome self-cherishing. It is relatively easy to gain an intellectual understanding of our impermanence and interdependence, but until we apprehend our most subtle ignorance of them we can never fully let go of “I” and gain insight, wisdom and liberation from suffering.

To become a refuge for yourself means to strengthen your own sense of inner happiness and calmness and to come to realise that these properties are available to you at any time through the practice of meditation and living mindfully. When we can recognise the universal seeds of joy, happiness and liberation within us, then we become a refuge for ourselves. When we see that our reality interpenetrates everything and everyone else, then a state of equanimity arises and we cease to be affronted by “other” because there is no longer an other to be affronted by.

In the field of client-centred therapy, the influential American psychologist Carl Rogers writes extensively of the need for the successful counsellor to master the difficult practice of relegating his own views and habits to adopt the client's own frame of reference. In other words, the counsellor's skills are most efficiently applied when he can exchange his “self” with the client – when he can truly put himself in the client's shoes, through the practice of deep listening and compassion.

To help us see if we are still clinging to self-cherishing, I will paraphrase Tsongkhapa, a 14th century Tibetan Buddhist teacher. He asked us to consider how we feel when we see an enemy fail in an endeavour, or become injured. Not only do you feel no suffering, you might actually take delight. Now consider how you feel when someone who you neither love nor despise is seen to suffer – a stranger on the news, perhaps. You will in most cases not pay any real attention to the event. Finally, consider how you should feel if your friend or loved one were to suffer. The closer they are to you, the greater your desperate desire to do something to help relieve their suffering. You feel their pain as though it were your very own!

If we think deeply about the above statements with total honesty, then it is likely that we can identify with them. This doesn't mean you should abandon your children and go help make your enemy's life more pleasant, but you can certainly consider the benefits of universal compassion. The more we can deflate "I", our sense of self-cherishing, then the more we open our hearts to other people and the less threatened and anxious we will be when dealing with them.

Exchange of self and other is difficult to accomplish at the subtle level, but at the gross level it can be a useful practice in the very early stages of an anxiety attack. The emphasis here is on *early stages* as it is perhaps less likely to work once you have crumbled into a full-on panic attack (in which case, returning to steady breathing is the best approach).

Next time you begin feeling a little self conscious in the company of others and you sense the initial signs of discomfort, focus your mind on one of the people who are making you feel uneasy. Try to imagine how that person is feeling. Regard their appearance, if they are relaxed or tense, and observe their speech and body language. Consider why they appear and behave the way that they do? Sense that persons awareness of their own fears and shortcomings – after all, nobody is perfect. This is not designed to make you feel good in comparison – it is designed to engender feelings of loving kindness for them, and to break down the sense of separation.

Remember earlier when we considered the ramifications of infinite rebirths? Everyone, at some point, must have been your mother, and at some point, you must have been theirs. This is a useful aid in this exercise. Imagine if the person before you is actually a long lost relative. If we were to trace our genetic history back just two thousand years, then it is highly likely that you will be related to most of the people you meet every day. Imagine if that person was your long lost relative; picture a photograph of you both standing with your arms around each others shoulders laughing in friendship.

If you become aware of body sensations – sweating, palpitations etc., simply accept them, knowing they are a product of your mind's habitual energy. Return to the other person while maintaining a steady breath. It might be a struggle to remain focused on the other person and you may find yourself fighting to take the focus off yourself and your own feelings of anxiety.

Just remain aware of your breathing, keeping it steady without letting it become rapid and shallow or artificially slow and deep, and focus on the other person while reaching out with a genuine desire to experience their reality. Know that this other person has experienced suffering, and imagine how awful that would have felt for them.

Consider how they, too, just want to be happy but are thwarted constantly by their own uniquely personal delusions. Make a commitment that should this person interact with you, that you will smile, and treat them as though they were a dear friend.

TOUCHING NIRVANA

Whatever our spiritual beliefs are, we have them because of our desire to find peace and happiness in our lives. The practice of mindfulness does not mean you have to become a Buddhist to benefit. Anyone can stop their mind and take refuge in themselves at any time of day. All we need to do is simply breath quietly while looking deeply without prejudice or judgement, seeing everything in the object of our concentration, and the object of our concentration in everything else. When we do this we can touch the Kingdom of God, or the Buddha within ourselves. When we gain insight into the divine that interpenetrates all we experience, then our worries and anxieties will evaporate like the morning dew.

It gives rise to boundless patience with our cognitive dissonance. We no longer create future suffering to hide from past or present suffering. We gain a deeper understanding and acceptance of the

nature of existence. Beyond the desire to end suffering, no single view can be absolutely correct, or absolutely wrong. We let go of our dogmatic ideologies and prejudices.

When we occupy ourselves with thoughts of blame, revenge and punishment then we will continue to suffer. When we look deeply into ourselves to determine how we can transform our suffering, then we find salvation. Look deeply into your relationships, both with yourself and with others to see the seeds of suffering being watered. Use your mindfulness to instead water the seeds of happiness in you and your loved ones and those relationships will flourish.

Practice alone if you must, but better still with a friend or your family. Find a local sangha if you can. If you can build or become part a sangha then this is a wonderful benefit and will increase the power of mindfulness amongst the members. Always practice mindfulness in your daily life, listening deeply, looking deeply, looking beyond superficial appearances to form connections of the heart. Have faith in your seeds of joy and happiness – you can touch them in every moment of every day. When you practice like this with, be confident that your anxiety will be transformed at the base.

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