



April 2001 Contemplation Theme

Anxiety

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Anxiety is nothing but a pretty word for fear, which I call the “four-letter f-word.” We avoid the “f-word” by using synonyms for it: anxiety, worry, nervousness, edginess, jumpiness, apprehension, dread, impatience, frustration. Instead of being afraid, you say you are “concerned” about something, or you have the “jitters.” Still, fear keeps you tied up in knots. It shows up in your body, and even worse, in your relationships, your work, your life.

It is an epidemic. You are living with this constant low-grade level of anxiety in the background because everybody else does, too. It is as if a radio was stuck between stations, subjecting you to a constant background noise of static. If you turn the sound down really low, you could learn to live with it. But it would still affect you. It would wear you out. Anxiety does this, but you cannot blame the radio or anyone else for it. You have to look at yourself to find the cause, and to find the cure.

Fear is *abhinivesha*, one of the five *kleshas*, which are the “afflictions” that circumscribe the life of the ordinary human being. Fear arises from two prior *kleshas*, aversion and attraction. These arise from two deeper level constrictions, the superficial sense of self and the not-knowing of your own Self as Consciousness-Itself. The Yoga Sutras tell you to unravel each one and dissolve it into the preceding one, until you unravel the deepest level and realize the truth of your own being as “Beingness-Itself.” Let’s look at this more fully.

Whenever you feel anxiety, it is because of one of two things —either you fear some painful thing might happen or you fear that something you really want will not happen. This is called aversion or attraction. Your idea that something might be painful or that you really want a particular thing is based on one of two things: your memory of how it worked in the past or other people’s stories of their experiences.

If you really liked a particular vacation spot last time you went, you don’t have anxiety about visiting it again. However, if the weather was bad, you may never want to go again. A friend told me vivid stories about her vacation in the Caribbean during hurricane season. The weather took over and she was lucky to escape with her life. Others in our conversation vowed they would never try to go to the Caribbean. She laughed and said she was planning to go back, but at a better time of year.

You only feel fear when it is something central to your sense of self. If you identify yourself as a traveler, this story can create anxiety. If you know that your vacation will be at your mountain cabin and you are comfortable during all the seasons there, then no anxiety arises. Fear only gets you if it strikes close to home. One man described how he drove all day, planning an idyllic week in his mountain cabin. He arrived to discover that it had been broken into and systematically looted over a period of weeks. Everything was gone, including some family heirlooms of little financial value, but priceless to him.

Are you feeling any anxiety yet? It arises when something is key to your sense of self. You feel no anxiety if you think that something might happen to a stranger. Anxiety does not arise if you planned to discard something, and it is damaged or stolen before you can. Fear only gets you if it is about something that is key to your sense of self.

It works the same way with attraction, also known as desire. If your dog does not win the blue ribbon in the neighborhood dog show, you can laugh. But if you have been training and grooming this dog for the big show over the last six months, you can have a lot of anxiety while you wait for the judges to announce their decision. Maybe you don't have a dog — but how about your son or daughter playing soccer or taking an important exam?

Your anxiety level is related to how deep this particular item cuts into you. If your sense of self depends on who keeps their job during the downsizing, your anxiety level will be high. If your sense of self is based in something else, you'll sail through without even a catch in your breath. Maybe you were planning to leave that job anyway, and are glad that you can get a nice severance package.

It all depends upon what you use to on where you are construct your superficial sense of self. You build it through looking at your activities, your relationships, your memories, and your hopes for the future. When something threatens one of these things, you feel tremendous anxiety. However, you must recognize that you have already survived many such threats. You have made it through the loss of things that you used to rely on, many times before. Your sense of self did have to change as you let go of the old and moved on to something new. The superficial sense of self is always changing and adapting. It is always looking for things to hang onto, yet it is one of the most resilient aspects of your existence.

This superficial sense of self is always looking for things to hang onto because it feels incomplete. At this level inside, you feel bored and lonely. You hit this level inside and you rent a video, go for a walk on the beach, or take a yoga class. You call a friend and arrange to meet at the local coffee house for a pastry. Any of these things are fine, but recognize what is happening. It is very difficult to sit with yourself at this level of internal constriction because it arises from the deepest klesha of all, the not-knowing of your own Self as Consciousness-Itself.

When you sit with yourself, and carefully avoid grabbing for any of the familiar security blankets, you can find a deep inner feeling of inadequacy. That underlying wordless sense is, "I'm not enough." It is *avidyaa*, the ignorance or not-knowing. If you go just underneath this constriction, you experience the ever-swelling current of inner bliss that is your own Self as Consciousness-Itself. Because of the not-knowing of this Reality within, you chase after things in the world to distract you or to give you a sense of completion. You construct a superficial sense of self that depends on certain external things to happen. Then you live in constant anxiety, because you have no control — you cannot make certain things happen and you cannot prevent certain other things from happening. The simple fact is that you live in constant anxiety when you do not know your own Self as Consciousness-Itself.

As a yogi, you have a number of tools to help you deal with anxiety. First, recognize that fear can only happen when you are projecting yourself into the future. The thing that you are anxious about is not happening right now. It is intelligent to make plans to avoid painful or dangerous situations, but it is stupid to live in anxiety. So, make your plans and take care of things in an appropriate way, and then get back into the “here-and-now.” As soon as you become present, the anxiety melts away. You cannot maintain your fear and also be in the present moment. Look around the room or take a few long breaths. Feel your body or even go through each of the areas in your body like you were lying in Shavasana — it will only take a minute or two!

Next, use the fear to recognize that you are looking at a key item in your life. Your whole (superficial) sense self is dependent on what happens in this situation. Pause and consider if this is really so important. Do you want to give this situation so much power over you? You may find that your sense of self is much larger than this specific item seems to imply. Broaden your horizons. See yourself in a grander view — you have friends and other family members, you have other activities and other skills and talents. No one thing can define you. Stay in the present moment and recognize that this item is critical for you, or maybe it is not. Even if you decide that it is not so important, you can still work toward the desired outcome, but then fear is not your motivation. You are actually more likely to succeed when your motivation is not arising from fear.

Yoga’s best recommendation is to look for that deeper inner sense of your own Self as Consciousness-Itself. Use those few long breaths or the quickie Shavasana-tour of your body to find that deeper dimension inside, or simply remember when you have experienced it before, in your yoga or meditation practice. Carry your Self with you everywhere you go! Then, nothing is ever a threat, because your sense of Self is greater. You have found that deeper Reality which is constant, unchanging, ever reliable, ever arising bliss. And you can laugh. Even while you rise to the challenge, you know that it will not make or break you. It does not define you. You are so much more. When you do yoga to find this, it is not merely a distraction from the underlying sense of being “not enough.” It is the cure. Do more yoga.

Namaste,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rama". Above the signature, there is a small heart symbol containing the Sanskrit character "Om".