

Anxiety

By Vidhi
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On 13 November 2015, a normal Friday evening, I am relaxing with my husband on the sofa watching TV; suddenly a breaking news story appears on BBC news covering the terror attacks in Paris. Immediately I feel tension building, notice my breath getting short and experience a mild headache, which later that night resulted in very poor sleep. I am experiencing classic symptoms of anxiety.

I am worrying over the welfare of one of my dearest friends, a fellow yogi who lives in France (albeit not in Paris). As soon as the news story breaks I send her a message to find out if all is well and if all her family and friends are safe. But there is no reply. All night and the next day I do not hear from her, which creates a greater feeling of despair, uneasiness and negative thinking and I experience further discomfort in my breath.

Patanjali in the Yoga sutra-s describes this state of mind as *citta viksēpa*, and modern medicine calls it anxiety.

Physiologically perhaps my system sensed danger (in the region of welfare of my friend) and resulted in my primordial response of fight or flight – the stress response. Back when humans roamed the savannah in small groups, the stress response was life saving: chasing prey and escaping threats - large carnivorous ones - ensured survival. At the same time these bursts of frantic activity burned off the stress hormones, sugars and fats, and discharged the tensions built up in the heart, gut, lungs and muscles.

Having escaped or triumphed, these stress responses needed to be followed by relaxation responses. They still do, because this to-ing and fro-ing of sympathetic

and parasympathetic systems is the foundation for the mind-body connection. Nowadays though, there is no running away from the everyday 'threats' we face. Yet tricky bosses, overdrawn bank accounts, work-life imbalances and problem relationships tend to hijack the same ancient emergency reactions. And when modern life's demands and conflicts start piling up, the mind-body accelerator pedal can get stuck down, so the all-important relaxation response is unable to kick in. This constant low-grade stress response initially undermines comfort and creativity, then whittles away at productivity and happiness. Eventually – when it hinders repair and rebuilding – it will harm health too resulting in the symptoms, amongst many others, described by Patañjali above, some of which I experienced on that Friday night.

Possible Causes of Anxiety

As I analyzed my state, it panned out that the root of my anxiety was fear, also described as *abhineveśā* in the Yoga Sutra of Patañjali. I was afraid for the safety of my friend and her family and friends. I wanted to investigate this further. What is this fear that every human being has, and has always had, for millennia and sometimes a very necessary response? What are the origins of this fear that results in the symptoms of anxiety through the activation of the sympathetic nervous system that makes us 'switch-on' more often than 'switch-off' in our personal and work lives?

I wanted to know because the resulting psycho-physiological symptoms interfere with daily living and thus affect productivity and well-being.

In the book *Reflections on Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* Mr TKV Desikachar says that *abhineveśa* or fear/insecurity is the inborn feeling of anxiety about what is to come and has a base in past experiences. I analyzed this reflection further:

- fear is born out of Thought; thinking about tomorrow and what might happen, thus thinking in terms not of present but of future or past. Our thought is nothing but our memories.
- fear is born out of Time; which is nothing but a series of movements. I might lose my job or not be successful, so tomorrow (which is only a calibration of time) becomes ever more important which causes fear and in turn leads to the symptoms associated with anxiety.
- fear is born out of Desire or Dislikes; our minds are conditioned to receive gratification and desire comes when we see something stimulating, this leads to pleasure. Pleasure is sustained by thought. Thought is the response of a memory and that memory is based on our experiences of desire, pleasure and pain. Thought provides us with the sustenance, the pursuit of desire or avoidance of dislikes. Thought demands the continuity or avoidance of yesterdays' delights and dislikes, and expects tomorrow's pleasure or continuation of dislikes. It also expects to repeat experiences in this dynamic world where the only constant is change.

So the whole pathway of anxiety starts with a thought, which is a response of memory; and memory is not only remembrance of things in the past but also projects itself as hope in the future. So:

thought (time, pleasure/aversion) - FEAR - Anxiety

Possible Solutions for Anxiety

Yoga prescribes four major approaches to a healthy living:

- Ahara: a healthy diet,
- Vihara: a healthy and spiritually conscious lifestyle,
- Bhavana: healthy and positive attitudes towards oneself and the world, and
- Sādhana or abhyasa: practices which include engaging the body, breath, and mind. In sādhana we have tools such as āsana, prāṇāyāma and mudra.

By practising all the four we use a holistic approach to regain holistic health. The greatness of yoga is

that it offers a multidimensional approach to healthy living with a multitude of tools. It understands that our body, breath, mind, emotions and behavior are all interconnected. When there is a change in one, it can be felt in one or all of the other aspects of our system. It also teaches us that we have to find tools that are appropriate for us through the help of a guide or a teacher that considers different parameters such as our age, our stage in life, our capacities, the seasons of the year and other such individual centric parameters.¹

When we use yoga as a solution for anxiety all four approaches can be used, but for me, and for the purpose of this article, the Bhāvana approach or healthy and positive attitude towards oneself and Sādhana approach or using tools such as āsana, prāṇāyāma are paramount. These two approaches are very important in managing our thoughts (occurring in the mind domain) and changing the state of our system, thereby affecting the pathway that leads to the symptoms of anxiety (occurring in the body, breath, emotion and behaviour domain). The process of this management as presented by Patañjali in chapter II begins with:

- Svadhyāya; Observe and self-reflection/ awareness – the idea of stopping thought is impossible. However, observation of thought is possible and we can make such observation as an action in itself. Observe with all our senses, all our mind and heart by being fully awake. Our lives are a culmination of memory, our personality is a culmination of ego, the 'me' is altogether a memory (smṛti) of past experiences; impressions created by past experiences (vāsana) and associated patterns developed (saṃskara). Our whole existence is entirely a memory; a remembrance and we function from that memory. It is to that memory we are attached – my relationship, my office, my house, and my friend in France. I am all that, and to that the thought is attached. And clutched within this attachment with all its problems is fear that leads to anxiety. However, there is something that is uncontaminated within you that is not tainted and that can observe, but it observes through the lens of the mind where the thought is contained! It notices from the state that the mind is already in. Becoming cognizant of this is the first and a very important step. To change our state of the mind so that we do not act out of fear and further ensure the ripples of that thought process do not affect body, breath, emotion and behavior resulting in symptoms of anxiety, Patañjali suggests Tapah.
- Tapah; Diligent practices – this is the Sādhana

approach. Through certain practices such as āsana and prāṇāyāma, we are able to support ourselves. When we move the body intelligently using the tool of breath, and when we indulge in certain breathing techniques, there is a shift in the state of our system. As the body and breath moves towards peace and calm, other domains change as well and respond similarly. There is a shift towards balance and harmony of the whole system. We can enter into a state where we can be fully present and where the 'Observer' can see without any attachments or fear and the mind becomes more directable to accept the next three approaches that are presented in the yoga sutra-s.

- Īśvara Praṇḍhānā; I may not have all the answers – if we choose to accept that we may not have all the answers and that we might not need them anyway, and that there may not be a reason behind everything, we'll be better equipped to accept and trust ourselves and life as a whole.
- Vairāgyam; Letting go – to trust the hand at the tiller and the ocean's tide. To allow life to take me on a natural path by being present and being in the now. Since time is nothing but a thought, allow intuition to lead. This approach, while seemingly flighty, can have unexpected benefits; think of how much easier it is to be a passenger rather than a pilot, it's less stressful being on life's journey if you don't have to navigate. Lower stress levels mean better health.
- Śraddha; Trust in myself – it is important to trust yourself, to believe in yourself to have the answers and to tend to the needs of the moments when you are truly present. So many people place their confidence in preconceived notions or in societal norms, whereas if you have more faith in your naturally positive thoughts and trust life you'll find yourself feeling far more in control without having to actually be in control.

Frequently we fight against the natural progression of life by exercising what we think of as control over our

destinies; we navigate stormy seas by sailing against the tide. And sometimes it's the right thing to do. Often, however, control leads to angst, which leads to stress and ultimately results in the onset of anxiety. Although what happened in Paris initially left me with a feeling of sadness, to know that my friend and her family were safe and sound was a relief and thankfully the teachings and my practices allowed me to not prolong the symptoms of anxiety for too long. Needless to say, I still feel devastated by the dreadful loss of life and the suffering so many faced in those dreadful attacks.

This article can be summed-up and the answers to anxiety explained in the words of Louise L Hay:

"We trust that our next breath is there. Let's begin to trust that other things will be there for us, also. The world is a work of art, and so am I. For me to contribute positively to this ongoing creation, it is necessary that I trust the process of life. If things get difficult, I confidently go within and anchor my thoughts in truth and love. I ask for the guidance of the Universe as I make my way safely through stormy seas and calm, blissful weather. My job is to stay in the present moment and to choose clear, simple, positive thoughts and words. I know it is not necessary or even possible to have a reason for everything. I do know that I was born a beautiful and trusting soul. I take a moment now to treasure the mysterious and invisible process of life that I am"

References

1. Centre for resilience, University of Westminster.
2. WHAT IS HEALTH ACCORDING TO... YOGA? An interview with Dr. Kausthub Desikachar by Evelyn Einhaeuser
3. J. Krishnamurti - Amsterdam 1981 - Public Talk 1 - Thought and time are the root of fear
4. Krishnamurti, Jiddu - Freedom From Fear
5. Conversations with Dr A.W Anderson 20th Feb 1974 San Diego, Krishnamurti Foundation Trust

Endnotes

1. WHAT IS HEALTH ACCORDING TO ... YOGA? An interview with Dr. Kausthub Desikachar by Evelyn Einhaeuser

"Fear is born out of Thought; thinking about tomorrow and what might happen, thus thinking in terms not of present but of future or past. Our thought is nothing but our memories."