

## The 10 Defenses Against Anxiety (and Why They Fail)

It's a joy to see all the bright-souled yogis again and to welcome a visitor. I hope the visitor will not be shy and will feel at home and part of this spiritual family and participate with an open mind and an open heart. And the same for all of those who are attending on the lovestream, wherever you may think you're physically located.

Actually I don't want anyone to participate in this retreat, so I'll take that back. What I would like though is that you *wholicipate*. We have to stop *participating* in events and recognize that we are not parts, but we are the whole. It's only when you attend with your whole being that you can take the whole of the teaching and allow it to transform your own sense of who you are from a part to the whole. This is actually essential to the goal of the retreat and to the fulfillment of your own life—to living in the wholeness of your being, not just in part of your consciousness. So I hope everyone is open to wholicipation.

This retreat is on the subject of anxiety. The reason is, I couldn't come up with a more practical thing that people are interested in overcoming, because anxiety is probably the universal plague that is now affecting every ego, at least—in fact every soul, I think. This retreat, I hope, will resolve that issue for you in a very practical way.

There are two mistakes in the title of the retreat that I have to correct before we go any further—typographical errors, no doubt. The title should be “Live Free *in* Anxiety,” not “Live Free *of* Anxiety.” The reason for that is, if you are not free while you're in anxiety, you can't be free to get out of anxiety. So first you have to realize your freedom and see that anxiety is just a choice. And the subtitle should be “An Invitation to *Abandon* Serenity.” Serenity is boring; who wants serenity? Egos don't want serenity. In fact, if anything, the problem with our ashram is that it's too serene here. Egos come here and they get cabin fever after a couple of weeks and they have to get out. There isn't enough anxiety to relate to here . . . you have to go out and create some, you know? Serenity is not very interesting, I don't think, to the ego.

But a deeper problem with it is that the ego lives in what we call the imaginary register of consciousness. I'm not going to go into the meaning of that term for newcomers right now, because it has too long a history and it would take up the whole retreat if we went into all the registers of consciousness. But let's put it this way very simply: The ego is very good at creating imaginary versions of anything it can imagine. So the ego is skilled at coming up with an imaginary version of serenity, and that will actually make things more difficult if you want to get out of real anxiety that isn't imaginary. There is no imaginary solution, but that's what the ego is looking for if it can get away with it. Right? How many can relate to that? A few are open to understanding the imaginary nature of the intentionality of the ego. We'll go into more depth as to why it's imaginary and what the implications of that are.

In this retreat, I want us to understand anxiety and why an ego will actually choose to stay in it. For some egos, it's even on a conscious level that if they get too peaceful, they suddenly are afraid they're going to lose their edge. They have to have anxiety to feel like they're in touch, because it makes them feel alive. Otherwise they'd be too dead and too dull-minded to be able to tackle the challenges that both create anxiety and at the same time help them deal with it. The

reason is that the ego is very good at creating defenses against anxiety that can discharge it but never get to the root of it. The energy can be discharged sufficiently for the ego to continue to function, but one has to keep (either—well, both—but one at a time, usually) a rajasic and then a tamasic defensive maneuver—either running away from the anxiety or spacing out, etc.

What I have learned from years of working with people who pretty much all had or have anxiety is that we need to understand it thoroughly in order to be free of it. So in this retreat I intend to offer you a kind of triple analysis—a dynamic analysis, a phenomenological analysis, and a structural analysis. I think if we have all three of those perspectives clear, we will be able to overcome the root of the problem.

But first we have to at least quickly look at what I will call the “Ten Major Defenses against Anxiety.” As you listen to these while you wholicipate, really feel within to see whether you use any of these defenses and whether they still actually work for you or whether they have become problematic—what we could call *ego dystonic* (in other words, they can actually increase your anxiety rather than defending against it).

The first defense (I have three different names for it, or four really, but the main item is denial). So **denial/attachment proliferation/ diversion/distraction**—all of which are similar but slightly different. The goal of someone who uses this defense in any of or all of its forms is making their life as superficial as possible, because that's the only way out of anxiety that is coming up from below the surface. If you keep your ego as a kind of cardboard figure, it can avoid feeling anxiety because it can deny that it's there. (“What, me worry?” Wasn't that the old *Mad Magazine* motto? Alfred E. Newman?)

In any case, it's very easy to stay in denial if you have enough other attachment figures you can focus on (pets, humans, animals, plants)—whatever you could be attached to, which is probably a long list. Then what is needed, of course, are diversions, which are sometimes justified and other times (the term I've seen on the internet is doom scrolling. I assume that's when you're just constantly having to divert yourself into another video to get away from yourself, right?) . . . so you can distract yourself with the internet and cell phones and many activities that will divert you, all of which are constant defensive maneuvers.

How many can relate to that defense? Yeah? OK, good. I'm glad we have some honest people. The only way out of this is to first look at that and say, “Is that really how I want to live? Do I really want to keep doing that? There might be a better way. Maybe having a deeper sense of who I am is worth the price of what I'll have to face.” We'll see.

The second defense is **projection**, which just means that you assert and believe that others are the cause of the problem. “I wouldn't be anxious if they weren't doing what they're doing out there, or if these people weren't looking at me, or saying what they're saying, or asking me to do what I'm supposed to do,” or whatever it is. But it's always the other. “Why are they not getting it, and why are they causing me such difficulty?” If you can project it out, then you can imagine that all you need to do is get away from those beings or that situation and you'll be OK. But, of course, it never is coming from outside, right?

So how many use projection as a defense? OK, good. If some people go for all 10, then you'll get the prize. This is a kind of an Olympics of anxiety. I was at one point thinking of calling it the Ozempic Olympics, because that's one of the drugs that people are taking that will help you lose weight but you'll die doing it. (Hey, it's worth it, right? Have a good-looking corpse maybe.) So that's the Olympics that people are in—become as superficial as possible and as out of it.

The third defense is **somatization**. “I'm not anxious. The body might be; it has some symptoms, and I can focus on those. This migraine has nothing to do with anxiety. I just need to take some more Advil or whatever—nothing going on here, just something physical. I'll talk to the doctor about it and get some pills, and I'll be fine.” But, of course, it's rarely rooted in the body—rather, it's projected into it.

The fourth defense is what I'm labeling as **phobic scruples**. That's a term I've never heard before, so if you understand it, let me know. But here's what I imagine I must mean by that: People have certain things that they fear and avoid either because they have moral scruples about them that support a sense of disdain, or because they feel disgusted by them. By avoiding those things and behaviors that they have scruples about, they feel relatively good because they can say, “See what I'm not doing? Look at those people doing those disgusting things. But hey, I'm pure, I'm clear.” So there's a sense of getting away from an internal superego self-accusation of a state of identity that, when imagined to be one's own, can create kind of a chaotic agitation. (Can people relate to that one at all?) There are people who have scruples—like, for example, they'll say, “I'll never get divorced. Those people who get divorced are really bad, you know, so I won't get married and I won't be in a relationship, and I can avoid all of that. But I'm not going to deal with how I'm in evasion of what might otherwise have been important landmarks of my development. I'm doing it out of a moral scruple, but actually there's fear that I will not be able (let's say) to fulfill a role that requires a more mature and better-developed consciousness.”

The fifth defense is a combination of **rage, fury, and depression** (which is anger directed inward at one's ego) and the bipolarity of those. One can discharge a lot of anxiety through anger, but it never brings peace.

The sixth defense I would call **sabotage**. It's a more extreme behavioral defense, and it includes self- and other-sabotage, sometimes combined. That sabotage will change the focus of whatever is going on, discharging a lot of anxious energy and putting the focus not on oneself but on the behavior as, of course, an accident. Some people will choose to be spaced out (“What did she say? What was the instruction I got again?”). There will be no retention and a blanking out of information that could trigger anxiety. That's one way, and there are variations like the wacko strategy and just being a bumbling idiot. That's a great technique—nobody's going to ask you to do very much (“Oh, hey, I didn't know”). It creates scenes that can become the focus rather than, “Who, me?” . . . How many can relate to sabotage? Yeah? OK, that's good. This is a very honest group; I like that.

The seventh defense is **hallucination**. You don't have to be psychotic to do this, but people can hallucinate hearing voices. Now they can use cell phones, and they don't even need to. They can even hallucinate a message and pretend they're listening to somebody: “Oh, really? Yeah? Aha. Oh, I won that much money? Really? Bitcoin? Yeah. OK.” People can hallucinate all kinds of

voices and images and memories—all kinds of things that never happened. The mind is very agile in creating, veiling, and screening out hallucinatory images. How many can relate to that? It's definitely something to be aware of when it's happening and to be able to stop it or at least control it.

Defense number eight—that's easy, **drugs**. They're very common and there's a number of them that will probably work, although some may end up bringing about worse situations like overdoses and other consequences.

The ninth defense is **sexual acting out** (porn addiction and obsessive erotic thoughts). That'll distract the attention pretty well. I won't ask anyone who uses that one. It's probably better to leave that in the privacy of your own ego.

And the tenth defense is a kind of sadomasochistic relationality pattern, let's put it that way (**S and M relationality**). It doesn't necessarily mean you're actually in an S and M relationship in the full sense that Michel Foucault used to go for (if you know that French philosopher). It's a kind of enjoyment of bickering, being one-up and one-down, getting out your aggression at the person who you know cannot fight back, and maybe enjoying a moral superiority because you're allowing yourself to be the underdog. There are all kinds of unhappy relationships based on the need to have this kind of a defense. Can anyone relate to this one? OK.

Good, well, at least we have probably hit most of the defenses that people use. If there are more and anyone wants to contribute any that you're using that I haven't mentioned that might be helpful for others, please do feel free. So, the problem is: If the defenses are working, then you may not be so interested in getting to the root of the anxiety. But I think a time inevitably comes in life when none of them do work.

The way out of using those ten defenses that will work most effectively for you—at least in the beginning of the journey toward that state that is beyond anxiety (whatever you are looking for beyond that)—the safest and most helpful way is probably to use the sublimation channels. I think the people who are most successful in overcoming anxiety are those who channel it into art, for example. I think many artists (if not all of them) are motivated to put that energy and its underlying subconscious thoughts and information content into artwork. Others will put it into philosophy. I think many philosophers are writing in order to get to the core of anxiety and beyond it. And fiction writers, in particular, will put it into their characters and then have the characters killed off or transformed in some way that then brings about a shift in the author.

So writing can help—and painting, acting, singing, playing music . . . all kinds of artistic and other aesthetic modes of development—as well as ethical development of virtue, purity of heart, generosity, and altruistic behavior that goes against the security fears of the ego in letting go of what it's hoarding and trying to stay in control of. And of course, there's the religious sublimation channel. The more you can develop real devotion for God, the more you're going to get out of anxiety because, to get out of anxiety, the ego has to be humbled. That's one of the reasons we have anxiety, because it humbles us—that's perhaps its main function.

So let's go further into the dynamic analysis of anxiety. Let me give you first a definition of the dynamic in which anxiety tends to flare up. I think we can map it as the moment that the tension (I would even say in your soul, but in your consciousness) . . . the tension between the need to grow (to expand your consciousness to a higher level of psychological maturity and spiritual awareness and openness) . . . the tension between that need and the resistance of the ego (which will be heightened by the very effort to transcend into those sublimation channels) . . . that tension will bring the anxiety into your consciousness. Even if it may have been there below the surface, it will flare up in a way that you won't be able to avoid and that will probably overwhelm you and create a crisis in your life. That's really what those crises are for, because they raise the heat of the anxiety and thus humble the ego that can't really deal with it in any typical way, forcing the kind of growth, expansion, and development into the superconscious that has been avoided at all costs by the ego. So it's that kind of an issue that cannot be resolved with one's current psychological capacities that brings one to that point where one must go through a rite of passage—let's just put it that way. We'll talk more about that, obviously, as we go.

Let me now define anxiety as a fever in the soul. The fever is not in the ego, it's in the soul. But because the soul is still asleep and identified with the ego, the function of that fever is to awaken the soul. And, like any fever, it has that function of increasing the capacity of your immune system and eliminating the impurities (bacteria, viruses, whatever you might think they are, though we're really dealing with thought forms here). That fever, if it's strong enough, will actually create what's called a healing effect—if you can endure it.

So, for one who wants to overcome anxiety, the problem is that we have to increase that fever to the maximum, while most people want to get rid of a fever. They want to deal with the symptom, not with the cause. But it's only when you're willing to confront the cause that the issue will be resolved. This soul fever, I think, is what Ramana refers to when he says he really can't help anyone who doesn't come to the ashram with their hair on fire. To me, the hair on fire is that anxious state that has to be extinguished. You don't really have a choice anymore. This has become the highest priority in your life because you can't function until you have put out that fire. Most people won't take any action toward inner development until they reach that point of no return—that point at which they have to do what they have been avoiding all their lives. Then it may actually happen.

These days more people go to therapists for help with this, but traditionally it was the job of a guru. It's a spiritual, not just a psychological, issue because we're dealing with the soul—we're not just dealing with the ego mind. The function of the guru was to help you contain it (so you could process it and neither die from it nor have to run away), but also to help you transform it into an alchemical fire. It's a fire that will actually burn the ego itself and free the soul to rise to its full stature in union with the Self from which the soul has derived its being, the Infinite . . . to reach that state that is total freedom (that's always there but not always accessible). So the path to freedom leads through this heightened anxiety.

Ultimately, because it's between the upper death drive and the lower death drive, we could say that the tension really comes when your sublimation has been successful enough to touch the next two assemblage points beyond the ego. The first three assemblage points are the ego's habitat of security, neediness, and anger/the need to control/the need to dominate situations/the

need to feel productive (and able to turn a profit, let's say) in its life. When you go to the next two assemblage points, you find yourself touching into very strange feelings like love, but love that doesn't have an object—love that is the feeling of your heart in itself . . . and the wisdom that then opens up of contact with a different level of your consciousness that is usually beyond the ability to receive into one's ego mind. The superconscious wisdom bleeds through into the mind and there is suddenly inspiration, aspiration, and a love of life that becomes strong enough to want to overcome the death drive that anxiety embodies.

How many can relate to that? OK, so that's what we have to do if we want to break through in a true sense.

Now, the last problem that arises is when you do touch into these higher assemblage points and the ego gets the message. The ego is a model of who you are—it's a model of yourself that you created in infancy, it was the model you used through childhood. That model of who you are is now obsolete and no longer serves you as an adult. But as soon as the ego realizes that there's actually a higher model of yourself ready to come in and replace the current model, it gets very anxious and upset that it is about to be replaced. It feels, "Oh no, I'm going to die. I'm going to be dropped into the abyss and some unknown self will take over." It fights at all cost to prevent that, with anxiety as one of the great weapons that can divert attention to the rajasic and the tamasic defenses again. So the soul must awaken to the extent that it doesn't permit enough identification with the ego that it can resist the upgrading of your operating system.

In biological metaphors, it's very similar to the caterpillar that goes into the cocoon. It knows it's going to be replaced by a different model of itself. It doesn't know the butterfly, but it knows it's dissolving in there—just going back into formless protoplasm. Then some other power takes over and turns it into something completely different. So does the butterfly still identify with the caterpillar? Does it have no recognition that that's what it used to be? Does it live in the present and recognize it was always a potential butterfly—it was never really a caterpillar; it was just carrying that potential to the point where it was time to activate it?

So the Greeks named your mind after a particular butterfly. *Psyche* is the Greek word for a butterfly that goes through three moltings before its final ascension into butterflydom. The Greeks recognized that there were four yugas, four ages that we would have to go through in which a different model of who we are developed in each age. Now, at the end of Kali Yuga, we have this postmodern model that is more prone to anxiety and crashing, more fragile, more superficial, and more troubled than any previous ego models that were on sale.

That's the kind of ego that this culture (I wouldn't even call it a culture anymore)—that this collapsing civilization is producing. All of us have been affected by that loss of the human ability to manufacture healthy egos, at the very least—let alone egos that actually are loyal servers of the God-Self, which is the traditional status of one in India who would become a yogi and change their name to something like Ram Dass or Krishna Das, meaning a server of God in whatever form or name or archetypal image one wanted to give that. But it was always that the ego had been humbly reduced to being a receiver of God-Consciousness, not a doer of its own will. So the will of God would take over, and the will of God is free of anxiety. But these days, who can do that with an atheistic, materialistic, cynical ego that can't really even imagine that

possibility as being actualizable. That's the next thing that would have to be developed, but I think it can only be developed when, as I say, there is complete understanding.

So let's take the conclusion of the dynamic analysis to be: "You have to drop the Xanax and pick up the Zen axe." If you're not willing to pick up the Zen axe and cut the anxiety at its root, you won't get out of it. So the first step to getting out is having the courage to pick up that axe and use it. If there isn't that courage, you can forget about it. You might as well go home; you might as well go back to Xanax or whatever method you've been using, because it will take courage. One of my favorite sutras in the Kashmir Shaivite Wisdom School is one that I've read to you before, the *Vatula Natha Sutra*. It's very badly translated, so I don't suggest people go out and try to read it. There's one slightly better version than the first early one by Swami Lakshmanju, but it's still very stilted language that I think is difficult to relate to. I'll give a kind of a modern-day summary of it as we go forward in the retreat, but the first sutra says that you have to have great courage to embark on this and that itself will be an act of grace. Without that courage to chop the root that connects you to the anxious ego, the soul will not be free.

So how many are willing to pick up the axe and use it? Yeah? OK. If that's true, then by the end of the weekend you should be liberated.

Maybe I should stop there for the evening and open the floor for questions.

Namaste,  
Shunyamurti