

# Anxiety Is Not a Punishment

*On the second layer we add on top of anxiety — the verdict that something is wrong with us — and why the shaking is so often the sound of growth.*

There are two things that happen when anxiety arrives. The first is the anxiety itself: the tight chest, the fluttering heart, the mind racing ahead into some other place and time. The second happens a half-second later, and it is the one I want to talk about. It is the verdict. *What is wrong with me. I should be past this by now. All this work, and I am still like this.*

Anxiety can be just another reason to dislike yourself. I have watched it happen in so many good, serious, sincere people, and I would like to fight that tooth and nail. Because the verdict is not a small thing. It takes an energy that was going to move through you and gives it a second job. Now it is not just a sensation. It is evidence in a trial, and you are the defendant.

So let me argue with the verdict directly.

When would you have no anxiety at all? When you have complete confidence and an unwillingness to change. If you have decided you have stopped growing, that you are settled, that this is where you will stay, then there is nothing to fear. Nothing is coming to shake your inner world, because you have closed every door it could come in through. That is a kind of peace. It is also a kind of death.

Now look at what you are actually doing. You sit in meditation. You put yourself in rooms with people you do not know and in work you are not yet good at. You have, on some level, asked to be shaken up so that you could learn to master your inner state. And then, when the disturbance comes, you treat it as proof that you failed.

I would put it very differently.

*“I don't think anxiety or fear is a punishment or a sense of our being broken.”*

TIM O. DAVIS, FRIDAY GROUP CALL

When we take on something new, we lose, for a while, the ground we were standing on. The habits that kept us steady, the limits we knew, the way we tracked ourselves so we could be ready for the day — all of that gets questioned.

Of course the body notices. Of course the heart speeds up. That is not a malfunction. That is what it feels like to expand past the edge of what you already knew how to do.

So I would like to offer anxiety a place of honor. Not because it is pleasant. It is often gut-wrenching. But because it is so frequently the signature of a person who is willing to go higher, and we should not add shame to that. It is not a problem we are escaping. It is an energy we are learning to have a better touch with.

What does better touch look like? For me it began with the breath. There were years when I had to take every breath consciously, manually, one at a time. That was not elegant, and it did not need to be.

The second piece is resistance. I strongly believe that resisting any feeling we don't like makes it far more difficult to be with. The pushing away is what turns a wave into a storm. So the practice is to reduce the resistance, a little at a time: see it, breathe with it, let the physical sensation be exactly as big as it is, and watch it move through.

And it does move through. Often not in the moment. Sometimes a day later, if I have stayed aware and kept breathing, I notice that something has shifted, that a real amount of energy has left. The anxiety was not the end of the story. It was the middle of a release.

None of this works while you are also prosecuting yourself. You cannot relax around something while you are calling it proof that you are broken. Drop the verdict first. Then there is room for everything else.

We are spiritual beings working very hard to go higher, and a lot of the time, this is simply what it feels like.

## THE PRACTICE

*The next time anxiety arrives, catch the verdict before it lands. Say quietly: this is not a punishment; this is what growing feels like. Then take five slow, deliberate breaths and let the sensation be exactly its size. Notice tomorrow whether something has moved.*