

PHILOSOPHICAL MEDITATION, A GUIDE



INTRODUCTION

Our minds are filled with out-of-focus feelings and ideas: we dimly experience a host of regrets, envious feelings, hurts, anxieties and excitements. And for the most part we never stop to analyse or make sense of them. It seems too painful and difficult, because there is always an extra anxiety that attends the process of thinking - whatever its eventual benefits. The weight of these unthought thoughts grows over time, they take their revenge out on us for not giving them the attention they deserve. They wake us up in the middle of the night demanding to be heard or they give us twitches, and perhaps one day illnesses. Yet they deserve to be unpacked and sorted out, because the unthought-thoughts contain clues as to our needs and our longer-term direction. They are not merely useless clutter (as they might seem under a Buddhist lens). They are fragments of a jigsaw of a future (and better) self.

1. Once a day, clear a 20 minute stretch of time. Sit comfortably with pen and paper. Ask yourself three initial questions:

- i: what am I currently upset about?
- ii. what am I currently anxious about?
- iii. what am I currently curious or excited about?

You're likely to be able to jot down a few things under each of these categories, but keep the answer deliberately unprocessed, just a word or so, as vague as it is likely to be in its raw form. Your list will be incomprehensible to anyone else. It might read: 'biscuits, Chinese woman, 10.30, TBOL, food' or 'Mother, invoice, Seoul, Luke, trees in wind'.

2. You're likely to have between two to three words under each of the three categories: Upset, Anxiety, Excitement (the mind can't properly hold too much at any one time, even in its darker reaches).

3. Drill systematically into each category (Upset, Anxiety, Excitement) using the questions below.

Direct the following questions/directions at each of your 'words' in turn:

There's no need to answer all the questions. They won't all be relevant. They are prompts and might prompt other questions in you.

QUESTIONS FOR UPSET:

[[By 'upset', one means: minor and major hurts from people or situations. An unkind word, a slight, a feeling of envy, a sense of abandonment. The theory is that we often don't allow ourselves to analyse our hurts from a misplaced sense of stoicism and bravery. We pay for this dearly, for undigested hurts generate bitterness, confusion and misdirected aggression]].

- Retell yourself the upsetting incident in great detail as if you were telling it to an extremely kind and patient friend.
- What scared you about the incident?
- You've been hurt. It's normal to be hurt. How have you been hurt?
- What good part of yourself feels in danger?
- How might a nice person have ended up doing what this person did to you? If they weren't actively mean, what other explanations could there be for the hurt they have caused?
- If this were to carry on, what might be the catastrophe?
- What are you afraid might happen if this were to continue?
- Have you been affected like this before?
- If you had to pin down an incident in the past that this somehow reminds you of, what would it be? Is there a pattern here?
- If this had happened to a friend, how would you advise them?
- What might you be able to learn from this upset?

QUESTIONS FOR ANXIETY:

[[Anxiety is a garbled signal about what a part of us perceives as a danger. It both asks for worry while not clearly revealing the roots of its concerns]].

- Tell the story of the coming anxious period in great detail and say exactly what you imagine might go wrong?
- What would happen to you if it all went wrong?
- If this thing were to keep getting worse, then...
- The danger here is that...
- How might you still be OK, even if it was all absolutely terrible?
- How would the person you'd like to be ideally deal with this situation?
- What previous situation does this remind you of? Have you been in something like this before?
- What happened in the past?
- What helped in the past?

QUESTIONS FOR EXCITEMENT:

[[By excitement is meant a range of positive emotions, tremors of interest, pleasing nostalgia, tentative enthusiasm, visual delight and so on]].

- Describe your excitement as if to a sympathetic, interested friend.
- You need to change your life in certain ways: what would it be to change your life in the light of this?
- What are the good things contained here?
- Humans have an impulse towards growth: what call to growth is here in a garbled form?
- This exciting thing holds a clue to what is missing in my life; what might be missing?
- When else have you felt something similar?
- If this thing could talk, what might it tell me?
- If this thing could try to change my life, what changes might it advise?
- If other parts of my life were more like this, what might they be like?

Answering these questions can't necessarily remove troubles but they start the work of decoding the scrambled messages. They reduce anxiety (rather than guarantee utter tranquility); they increase clarity rather than promise instant enlightenment.