



## CENTER FOR INNER INITIATIVE

a school for inner, spiritual development

### Anxiety and the Spiritual Life

from a class at the Center for Inner Initiative

One difficulty of modern life that many people feel more intensely these days, is the problem of anxiety. Although anxiety is not exclusively modern, it seems to be increasing today. Our impersonal modes of interaction—the phone, the fax, the web—increase our sense of isolation. We are left without the consolation of human contact that could potentially relieve some of the anxiety we feel. And the pressure of the very fast pace of modern life also leaves us without time to interact with other people, or even with ourselves. We are too busy. We have long lists of things to accomplish, both at work and at home. These are difficulties that seem specific to our modern times, and anxiety seems to be the result.

From the spiritual perspective, the root of anxiety is a lack of peace, a lack of assurance that I am part of a whole that doesn't threaten me, but which is fulfilling. The heart of all spiritual wisdom, both traditional and modern, is the attaining of the consciousness of integration and completeness which would minimize, if not eliminate, the feeling of anxiety.

The ancient Greek schools approached this problem through training the mind to use reason to establish a perspective that can bring about an invulnerability to all the sources of anxiety. Reason is the youngest part of the human constitution; the instincts and the emotions are much older. So to train the faculty of reason requires considerable effort.

The Greek school of Stoicism attempted to guide the student in that direction.

Epictetus was a slave in the 1st century, and he was beaten by his master until he was crippled. Apparently this harsh and unrelenting treatment led him to ask where he could find peace in the face of external assaults. He rebelled against the premise that said: "Because painful and unpleasant things are occurring in my life, I must feel anxious and fearful; I must suffer in my emotional life." He sought instead for a missing link in the cause and effect relationship. Because, if the things which happen to us absolutely determine our inner state, then what hope have we? Who can absolutely control external life?

Even Kings and Pharaohs, to say nothing of rich and powerful people today, are unable to control and determine the course of external events. Epictetus realized this. What he discovered was a deep spiritual truth regarding the *potential* of our consciousness—when it is activated so that it

acts consciously, guided by reason:

“It is not the things that happen to me, but my reaction to those things, which determine the quality of my inner life.”

The pathway of spiritual wisdom coming down to us from the Greeks is the technique of working with our mind to transform our inner life. Because, what difference do outer events really make if they don't produce fear and anxiety in our inner life?

The technique of reason begins with an inner questioning: Is it the outer event that causes my anxiety, or is it my belief concerning that event?

Take a simple example. Your neighbor makes a lot of noise, and your reaction is to become furious. Without questioning it, you say that your neighbor's action causes your fury. Epictetus says, “Not so fast.” What is your *belief* concerning this event? If your belief is that your neighbor has no right to do this to you personally, to be so totally devoid of consideration, or that your neighbor really has it in for you—then you will feel angry, nervous, and even anxious and threatened. But if your belief is that your neighbor is really crazy and doesn't know what he's doing, or that he is sick and suffering from a trauma in his life, then you may feel very sorry for him. In this case, while the noise is inconvenient, it doesn't arouse feelings of fury, and the noise recedes into the background.

The way our beliefs operate in us is usually totally unconscious. We arrive at a feeling without consciousness of the real cause of our feelings, which is not the outer event, but what we have made out of it through our beliefs.

The development of reasoning, as taught by the Greeks, is a spiritual pathway because it deals with what is invisible in us: our premises, our beliefs—which, by the way, we did not choose! But they are in us as a causative factor, and they will remain there unchanged until they are challenged by a developed faculty of reason.

The world of our unconscious and subconscious beliefs is vast, and our discovery of our beliefs is quite an adventure—but not for the faint-hearted! These beliefs always involve a picture of ourself—who I think I am—and who other people should think I am. But where did these beliefs come from? Do they really represent our real Identity? Are they the authentic sign of our own soul? These are questions that the process of Initiation deals with, as the student becomes interested and ready to find the answers, within herself and himself.

And as for the pain of anxiety—it can be the starting point.