

~ Seven Steps to Overcome Anxiety ~

Mingyur Rinpoche

Seven steps to work with panic attacks. This is especially for panic attacks, looking at them on a holistic level, and in the end, how to make friends with panic attacks — how to transform panic as your friend or support for your spiritual journey.

At the beginning, the first step for me was going to the doctor, because at the beginning, my heart was in pain. The speed of my heartbeat was very, very fast, and then pain came. Then I could not breathe, and it was kind of like heat came into my body. I sweated sometimes. And I felt like something was wrong with my body, like I was having a heart attack, or like maybe I had some serious disease or health issue. As long as you believe that, it will help a little bit if you work with panic attacks, but not a lot.

So I asked my mom to take me to different hospitals, especially for the heart. In those days, there was a machine, and some kind of paper came out of it. And all the doctors said, “Your heart is wonderful.” At the beginning, I did not believe it and thought, “Bad doctor. Not a good doctor.” I asked my mom to go to a more expensive hospital, and in the end my mom took me to a civil clinic. It is kind of like the foreign-run hospital in Kathmandu. All the doctors were from America, England, etc. It was a very good hospital in Kathmandu, and I checked with them. Some of them were students of my father. And they said, “Your heart is perfect!” So I went to all these doctors, and finally I believed maybe there was nothing wrong with my heart! This is very important. And of course you can check with a psychotherapist and all. That is also very important. That is the first step.

The second step is deep breathing. Just slowly breathe in, and maybe hold the breath inside a little bit. [Mingyur Rinpoche inhales and exhales slowly.] And again, full, deep breathing, like this. [Mingyur Rinpoche demonstrates again.] When we do deep breathing, it really

helps. Our mind is also being with the breath, so it becomes like breathing meditation. And it will really help the oxygen in the entire body. The heart speeds up sometimes when you have less oxygen. When you have more oxygen, the heart rate comes down. So deep breathing is really beneficial. That is step two.

Step three. Now you need to work with the behavioral level, so do physical exercise. That is really beneficial for panic attacks. Especially aerobic exercise. Exercise that will make you sweat and make your heart jump a little. Do physical exercise, and then take care with your diet. Do not drink high levels of caffeine, like in coffee, too much. If you can stop, that is very good. Alcohol also. Try to avoid too much alcohol, smoking, and all these things. Protein-based food is also very good, like lentil soup. In Nepal, we have this *dal*, or lentil soup, and we also have *tsampa*, barley flour. You can have barley flour with *ghee* — which is kind of like butter, but pure butter — and with cheese. I eat that, and it helps. You can see. Maybe tofu or something. And in the morning, do not keep [your belly] empty for too long. These are important. Also, do not do something with a lot of concentration. If you watch television too much, then your energy will go up. Then you will feel panic more. Or if you look at your phone too much. So do exercise, take care with your diet, and if you can sleep well, that is very good. But sometimes you cannot sleep well. So what you do is feel the gravity in your body as you are lying down, and keep the room temperature cool, because sometimes panic makes your body hot, then you cannot sleep, and then your heart speeds up. All of these are step three, working with the behavioral level.

And number four. Now you begin to learn meditation. If you have gone through all these things, by now you might have become a little bit calmer, so you can practice meditation. Sometimes, at the beginning, you cannot even think about meditation. Maybe the first meditation could be listening to sounds — music or natural sounds. If you cannot sit up straight, you can lie down also. To keep your spine loosely straight, you can adjust your pillow — not too high, and not too low. Or you can lie down facing up. And listen to music, or the sound of a river, or birds. Just listen. That is sound meditation. Or maybe watch your breathing, which is breathing meditation. Some people do mental recitation. Come up with a phrase for yourself, for example,

“Everything is fine. I am fine. Everything is fine. I am fine.” Recite that silently in your mind, without using your lips. Or some people use mantras. It is up to you which one of those three things you do. When you feel panic, you go back to these meditation techniques. These are your safe place. For me, one of the first was breathing meditation. My father taught me breathing meditation, but I felt like it was stupid. “Every day. Today is breathing, tomorrow is breathing . . .” But actually, eventually it helped. These practices are number four.

Number five is to do journaling. Write down when you experience panic attacks, what the sensations are in your body, what the images are, what the conversations are (we have a lot of unconscious conversations happening), and what the beliefs are. Also the time (morning, evening), and the triggers. You can just bring more and deeper awareness to the panic attacks.

If you are new to meditation, you should do step four — sound, breathing, or mental recitation — every day for around five minutes, regularly, for thirty days. Then also do journaling, and meanwhile do physical exercise, watch your diet, and all these things.

Then, number six is that now the panic can be a support for your meditation. How to do that? We need to begin by watching physical sensations. When the panic comes, there might be tight or unpleasant sensations around your heart or chest, and you cannot breathe. Then there is overthinking. Our minds have a lot of images, and so many thoughts, voices [inner dialogue], and beliefs. You just watch those.

At the beginning, we feel like it is getting worse. Actually, it is not getting worse. We say that “when the river is muddy, you cannot see the fish, but when the river becomes calm and clear, you see the fish.” That does not mean the river has more fish in it than before — it is not like that. It is part of the process of your mind becoming calmer and more clear. If it feels like too much, do not watch the panic. Listen to sound, watch your breathing, or do mental recitation. Something like that.

Number seven is that maybe you can do something for others. Maybe help your friends or family, or do some social work. And try to practice

loving-kindness and compassion. “I have these panic attacks, but it is not only me. I am not alone. Many people are facing these panic attacks.” Wish that they all be free from panic attacks and have happiness and peace, and that they all develop awareness, love and compassion, and wisdom. You can do loving-kindness and compassion meditation, and you can also bring loving-kindness and compassion into action for others.

If you do all of these things, it really helps with panic attacks. And in the end, panic may become your teacher and your friend.