



Election Anxiety

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As in 2016 and 2020, a presidential election will be held this November. Given the closeness of the race, uncertainty about the outcome can create a lot of suffering which can include frustration, disappointment, dissatisfaction, anger, and fear.

Harry Um, a therapist and Zen practitioner, gives a personal recollection:

“On November 8, 2016, I was at work, furiously refreshing my web browser for news about the U.S. presidential election. This was supposed to be a landslide, and although the day was still young, the initial returns were unbearably inconclusive. I could not tolerate the uncertainty, and I was acting as if my obsessive clicking would tilt the results. But if anything, it had the opposite effect, and my stomach tightened with each refresh.

A coworker walked over and tried to reassure me: “Stop it—go home. Whatever happens, we’ll get through this.”

So, I logged off, got in my car, and started driving. Along the way, I scanned the radio for news that would assuage my fears, but there was none. My stomach kept tightening.

Four years later, on November 7, 2020, I was going for a morning jog. Cars were honking everywhere, and a mob of marchers approached. At this point in my life, I had no idea what was going on in the world because I’d shut myself off from it. I was ignoring all news, social media, even my own friends and family, because I didn’t want to hear anything about politics. I didn’t think I could bear the heartache, so I was content to live in ignorance. When I finally realized who had won, I shrugged and thought, “Like it matters.”

“What can you do? What is your next step?”

It’s now 2024, and the next election is nigh. My anxiety rises with each moment. The knot in my stomach has returned.”¹

Harry discovered that neither engaging in politics or avoiding politics worked.

Regarding the Middle Way, the Buddha found that going to either the extreme of seeking sensual pleasure (desire) or being attached to self-affliction (ill-will) doesn’t resolve the stress.

The thoughts that arise in either extreme are troubling.

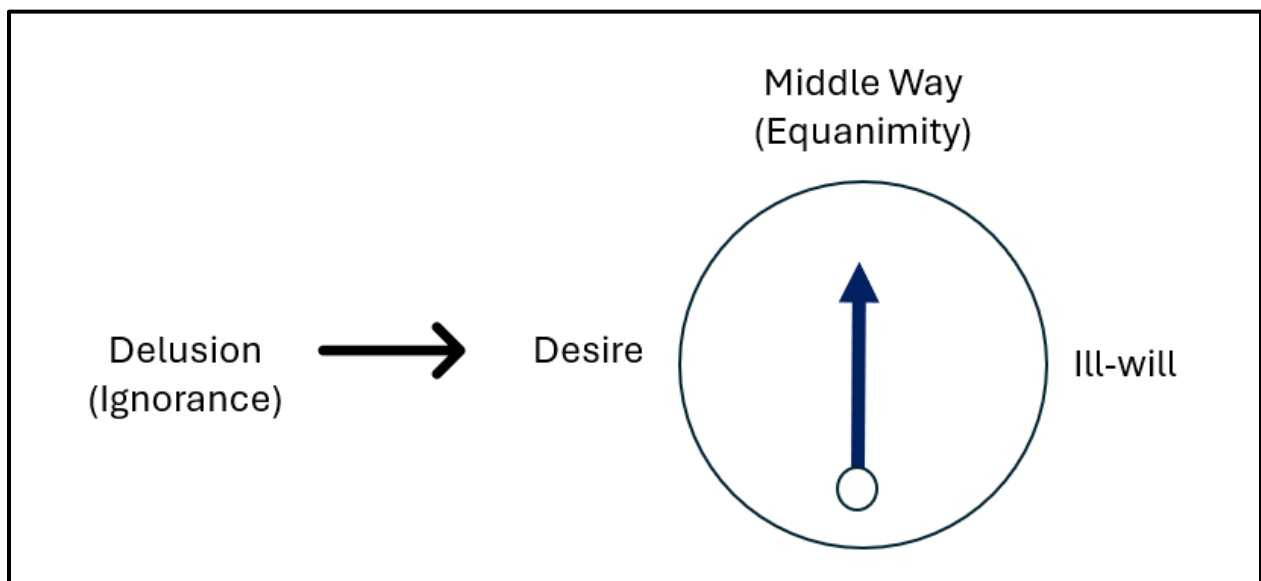
Harry gives three examples of types of thoughts:

“My person has to win. Everything would be better if my person won.” (extreme desire)

“People on the other side are so stupid.” They’re all evil. (extreme ill-will)

“Politicians are all the same. The system is rigged. It’s hopeless.” (delusion)

This diagram shows how we can either be in delusion, ignorant of how the mind works or in the two extremes of desire and ill-will. With the extremes, when we know the quality of our body senses and thoughts (pleasant, neutral, unpleasant) we can gauge where the arrow is pointing and determine if we are centered in the middle way or at one of the two extremes.



When the needle is vertical, we are in the middle way, balanced in equanimity.

As Harry notes, our thoughts are like this:

My person will not end my suffering. The political pendulum has swung back and forth throughout time, and there’s much work to do no matter who wins.

No one is purely good or evil. We’re all a complicated mess, and we all want what we think is best. Judgment keeps me in a cycle of suffering.

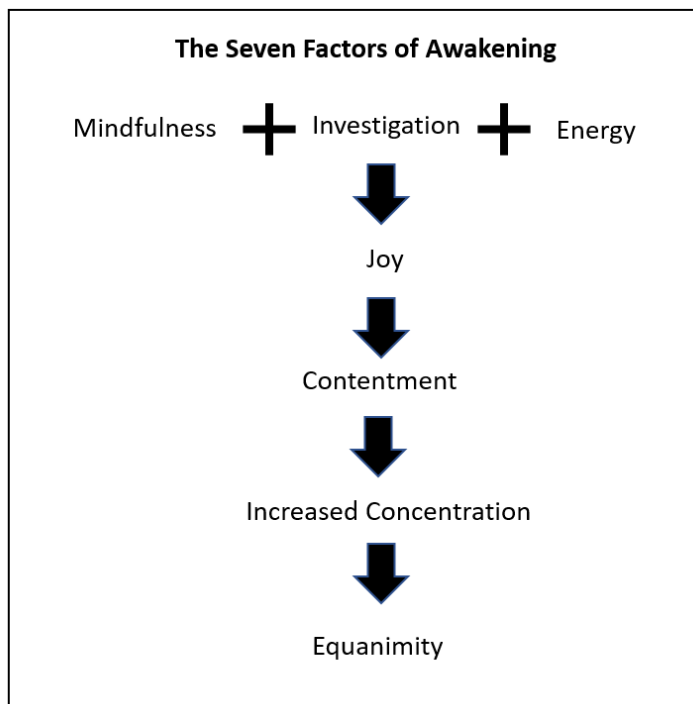
I can do what is within my control.

These thoughts can be called neutral thinking: non-judgmental, not two extreme, and clear.

So how do we deal with election anxiety?

Of course, the reason we are stressed is the we are attached to an outcome. How do we get unattached?

The Buddha in the Satipatthana Sutta² recommended contemplating the seven factors of awakening. Joseph Goldstein notes: “And, as we will see, these seven factors form a progression, each one leading to the next. So, if we prime the pump of the enlightened mind and practice the first of the awakening factors, all the rest follow along.”³



So, if we are mired in stress regarding the election, we can follow these steps.

Using **mindfulness**, we are aware that we are suffering (stressed).

We **investigate** with **energy** to be persistent.

We see that our bodily sensations and thoughts share the qualities of the three characteristics. They impermanent, unable to give lasting satisfaction or dissatisfaction and are not who we are but just fabrications.

Have realized that, we feel **joy**, just as we might feel joy at completing a task.

In feeling joy, we feel **contentment** that we know what is really going on, not what we would like it to be.

With contentment, we feel more focused (increased **concentration**).

Finally, we have **equanimity**, described as balance, peace, spaciousness, inclusiveness, stillness, having equal respect for all, appreciating the big picture, the manifestation of wisdom that arises from seeing things as they really are.

What we realize is that we can have a preference but what happens is out of our immediate control.

With an event coming up like an election, this is not a one and done solution. We have to apply this technique over and over again as extreme thoughts arise and try to move us out of the middle way. Yet, as we practice and practice, we find that our suffering attenuates over time.

We can welcome events like the election anxiety because it is good practice.

May you find peace in the Middle Way!

Optional Readings

The neuroscience of worry

In a recent article, Navigating Election Anxiety: How Worry Affects the Brain,⁴ Michael Merzenich, PhD, a noted neuroscientist, explains:

“Worry stems from the brain's rather remarkable ability to foresee and reflexively respond to threat. Our "fight or flight" brain machinery probably arose in our vertebrate ancestors more than 300 million years ago. The fact that we have machinery akin to that possessed by lizards or tigers or shrews is testimony to its crucial contribution to our species survival.

As the phrase "fight or flight" suggests, a brain that senses trouble immediately biases certain body and brain functions. As it shifts into a higher-alert mode, it increases the energy supplies in our blood and supports other changes that facilitate faster and stronger reactions, while it shuts down less essential processes which do not contribute to hiding, fighting, or running like hell.

This hyperreactive response is initiated in the amygdala in the anterior brain, which identifies "what's happening" as immediately or potentially threatening. The now-activated amygdala generates a response in the hypothalamus that provokes an immediate increase of adrenaline and cortisol in the body, and cortisol and noradrenaline, in the brain. Both sharply speed up our physical and neurologic reactivity. In the brain, that is achieved by increasing the level of excitability of neurons across the forebrain. Depending on the perceived level of threat, an excitable brain will be just a little or a lot more "on alert," just a little or a lot faster to respond, and just a little or a lot better at remembering the specific "warning" events that trigger this lizard-brain response.

Alas, this machinery was designed to be engaged every so often when a potentially dangerous surprise arises in life. When the worry and stress are persistent, the brain experiences a kind of neurologic "burn-out" of its fight vs flight machinery.”

Dr. Merzenich offers four strategies to Address Neurologic Changes Arising From Chronic Stress
Strategies

1. Engage in a "reset" strategy several times a day to bring your amygdala and locus coeruleus back under control. It takes a minute (or five) of calm, positive meditation to take your brain to a happy, optimistic place. Or use a mindfulness exercise to quiet down that overactive amygdala.
2. Talk to people. Keeping your worries to yourself can compound them. Hashing through your concerns with a family member, friend, professional coach, or therapist can help put them in perspective and may allow you to come up with strategies to identify and neurologically respond to your sources of stress.
3. Exercise, both physically and mentally. Do what works for you, whether it's a run, a long walk, pumping iron, playing racquetball — anything that promotes physical release. Exercise your brain too. Engage in a project or activity that is mentally demanding. Personally, I like to garden and do online brain exercises. There's nothing quite like yanking out weeds or hitting a new personal best at a cognitive exercise for me to notch a sense of accomplishment to counterbalance the unresolved issues driving my worry.
4. Accept the uncertainty. Life is full of uncertainty. To paraphrase from Yale theologian Reinhold Niebuhr's "Serenity Prayer": Have the serenity to accept what you cannot help, the courage to change what you can, and the wisdom to recognize one from the other.

Judging Others

Christopher Rivas notes: "When we examine the "bad" behavior or thoughts of others, it's really just bad according to our narrative of the world—it's pitting us against them. It is only increasing the story that we are different and separate.

But we are closer than we think.

In [Thich Nhat Hanh's](#) stunning and timeless poem "Call Me By My True Names⁵," the late teacher writes:

I am the twelve-year-old girl,
refugee on a small boat,
who throws herself into the ocean
after being raped by a sea pirate.
And I am also the pirate,
my heart not yet capable
of seeing and loving."⁶

¹ Relieving Anxiety in [Buddhist Advice for Election Anxiety](#): Are you experiencing strong, difficult emotions due to the upcoming election? Four Buddhists offer advice for dealing with despair, anger, grief, and anxiety.

² The Establishing of Mindfulness Discourse [Satipatthāna Sutta](#) (MN 10)

³ Goldstein, Joseph *Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Awakening* p, 226

⁴ Merzenich, Michael [Navigating Election Anxiety: How Worry Affects the Brain](#) Medscape Internal Medicine 8-7-2024

⁵ <https://plumvillage.org/articles/please-call-me-by-my-true-names-song-poem>

⁶ Rivas, Christopher [I Am This Chaos](#) : Ahead of the 2024 presidential election, a practitioner finds insight in shadowboxing with the far right