

Spirit Rock

Anxiety: It's Not All in Your Mind

With Jill Satterfield

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With Jill Satterfield — Spirit Rock Meditation Center

Course Overview

Anxiety is not a character flaw, a weakness of will, or a failure of practice. It's an automatic process — one the nervous system learned, often long before you had any say in the matter.

And because it was learned, it can change.

This 5-week course offers something genuinely different from most anxiety programs: it begins with the body not as a problem to be managed, but as the place where real change becomes possible. Not because embodiment comes naturally — for most people dealing with anxiety, it doesn't — but because the capacity to sense, inhabit, and befriend the body is itself a skill. One that can be developed, gradually and with care, even when it feels impossible.

What drives anxiety, at its root, is something both ancient teaching and contemporary neuroscience now agree on: the nervous system doesn't wait for experience to arrive before interpreting it. It predicts. It labels. Before a sensation fully registers in conscious awareness, the body-mind has already reached into its history of past experience and assigned a tone — pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral — and that assignment sets everything else in motion. Thought, emotion, the urge to flee or freeze or fight — all of it arises downstream of a moment so fast and automatic we rarely notice it happening.

The Buddha named this process *vedanā* — feeling tone — and placed it at the center of his teaching on how suffering arises and how it can cease. Modern neuroscience calls the same mechanism interoceptive prediction error: the gap

between what the nervous system expected and what it actually received.
Different languages, same territory.

What both traditions confirm is this: anxiety isn't located in your thoughts. It's not a cognitive problem that thinking harder will solve. It lives in the body — in the speed of the nervous system's automatic response — and that's precisely where it can be met.

This course offers practices drawn from over 35 years of clinical and contemplative experience — gentle breathing, somatic awareness, and the Body as House framework — that Jill developed specifically for people who don't yet feel at home in their bodies, people who've tried meditation and found it made things worse, and people who want to understand what's actually happening beneath the anxiety rather than simply managing its symptoms. Whether you come from a clinical background, a Dharma practice, a history of suffering, or simple curiosity, you'll find a way in.

Understanding Anxiety in a New Light

For over 2,600 years, Buddhist tradition has recognized that anxiety, an aspect of suffering arises from the complex interplay between mind and body—a wisdom now being validated by contemporary neuroscience. Recent research findings show that anxiety disorders affect approximately 33.7% of individuals during their lifetime (Kessler et al., 2012).

Buddhist psychology has long taught that by dwelling in the body with kind mindful awareness, we can interrupt the cycle of anxious thoughts before they overwhelm us. This ancient understanding of embodiment and the consciousness of the body aligns perfectly with contemporary research showing that interventions incorporating body awareness and mindfulness produce significant reductions in anxiety (Chin et al., 2024). The Buddha's emphasis on sustained attention to bodily experience (as taught in the Satipatthana Sutta) mirrors clinical observations showing that improved body awareness helps regulate anxiety symptoms before they escalate. The ability to pause.....

The traditional Buddhist practices of body scanning, breath awareness, and mindful movement—refined over millennia—complement modern therapeutic approaches, with studies demonstrating their increasing effectiveness over time (Blanck et al., 2018; Papola et al., 2023).

This integration of contemplative wisdom and scientific validation offers a profound framework for understanding anxiety not as a purely mental phenomenon to be conquered, but as a whole-body experience to be met with wisdom and compassion. As the Buddhist teacher Ajahn Amaro notes, we can cultivate insight that allows us to "like something without wanting it, and dislike something without hating it"—a balanced approach that research now shows creates lasting physiological changes in how we process anxiety.

Why This Approach Works

The Buddha's first Noble Truth acknowledged that life inherently contains stress and anxiety. Yet he didn't stop there—he offered a systematic path to freedom that has been refined over 2,600 years and is now being validated by neuroscience. Research shows that 82% of people start meditation specifically to help with anxiety (One Mind Dharma, 2023), instinctively seeking what Buddhist practitioners have long known: that embodied awareness offers a path to genuine peace. Recent systematic reviews demonstrate that embodied mindfulness practices produce moderate to large effects in reducing anxiety, with immediate benefits often seen after a single session (Chin et al., 2024)—confirming what monastics have taught for millennia.

Where Ancient Wisdom Meets Modern Science

- Traditional Buddhist practices of body scanning, sustained attention and breath awareness are now validated by studies showing moderate to large effects for embodiment practices in anxiety reduction.¹
- The Buddha's teachings on "mindfulness of the body" (*kayanupassanā*) and Vedana (feeling tone) align with research demonstrating how embodied awareness directly impacts anxiety regulation.
- Ancient understanding that "the body knows before the mind" is confirmed by studies showing anxiety manifests in physical symptoms before conscious awareness.³
- Traditional practices of "skilled means" complement modern clinical applications, proven effective in hospitals, trauma centers, and addiction institutes over 35 years.
- The Buddhist emphasis on gradual training parallels research showing lasting improvements through consistent practice.⁴

Unique Benefits

- Develops lasting self-regulation skills rather than temporary coping mechanisms
- Builds capacity to recognize and respond to anxiety before it becomes overwhelming

- Creates sustainable change through embodied practice complimenting intellectual understanding alone
- Empowers students with a toolkit of techniques that can be customized to individual needs

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

- De-escalate anxiety symptoms through embodied mindfulness practices
- Regulate their nervous system using breath, body awareness, and visualization techniques
- Recognize early warning signs of anxiety in physical sensations and thought patterns
- Understand the relationship between thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations
- Apply self-compassion and mindfulness to manage anxiety
- Utilize various skillful means to return to present moment awareness
- Recognize and work with thought patterns that contribute to anxiety
- Develop a personalized toolkit of practices for ongoing anxiety management

Detailed Course Structure

Module 1: Understanding Anxiety

- The nature and physiology of anxiety
- Understanding the nervous system's role
- The body-mind connection in anxiety
- Why anxiety isn't "all in your mind"
- Physical manifestations and early warning signs
- Practical exercises:
 - Coming into sensory and somatic awareness
 - Restorative practices to balance the nervous system
 - Unique, gentle breathing practices

Module 2: Embodiment Practices

- Softening the body for deep relaxation and release of conditioned contractions
- Targeted relaxation for anxiety-prone areas
 - Body scan meditation—consciously moving awareness to release tension and to get to know the landscape of the body
- Developing systematic body awareness
 - Being with and opening the window of tolerance to physical sensations
- Somatic awareness exercises
 - Cultivating embodiment and understanding of its patterns
- Practicing presence in the body, anytime, and anywhere
- Using visualization to create physiological change

- Movement practices
 - Gentle mindful stretching for track awareness in the body

Module 3: Breath Practices

- Unique four-part breath practice for deep rest and balance
 - Sensing and knowing the natural 4-part breath cycle as it organically occurs
 - Allowing a lengthening of both inhale and exhale to increase at your own pace
 - Cultivating gentleness while lightly increasing breath retentions/pauses
 - Listening to the body and hearing the mind; discerning the two tales to override fear through breath practices
- Alternate nostril breathing
 - Balancing the nervous system at your own pace
 - Imagining alternate nostril breath to access it at anytime and anywhere
 - Utilizing imagery to reduce effort
- Deep relaxation breathing
 - Moving the breath anywhere in the body to support calm and present moment awareness
- Breath visualization
 - Using imagery for deeper relaxation, agency and physiological change
 - Creating personal breathing practices for different circumstances

Module 4: Mind-Body Integration

- Sensing thought patterns somatically
 - Recognizing anxiety-producing thoughts cognitively
 - Noticing whichever comes first: sensations or thoughts, and see their correlation
 - Becoming more aware of the body's signals before they are mentally cognized
 - Working with mental and physical habits as works-in-progress
 - Being kind to yourself in this process
- Understanding the body's language
 - Deeply sensing your body to interrupt and mitigate fear and anxiety
 - Understanding and sensing the emotional body, feeling into it with care
 - Cultivating emotional resilience and opening the window of tolerance
 - Present-moment awareness practices
 - Developing witness consciousness
- Integration practices
 - Combining breath, body, and heart/mind awareness through mindfulness of the body

Module 5: Building Resilience

- Self-compassion practices supported by mindfulness
 - Developing kind self-talk

- Dissuading the inner critic
- Being with fear and uncertainty
 - Sensing fear patterns and tending to them
 - Building tolerance for uncertainty
- Creating your own sustainable practice
 - Creating personalized practice sequences
 - Developing several short daily routines
 - Creating long-term support systems

Practice Suggestions

Daily Practice

- 10-20 minutes of formal practice daily
- Brief check-ins throughout the day
- Weekly reflection journaling
- Integration exercises in daily life

Course Participation

- Attendance at weekly sessions
- Engagement in group discussions
- Completion of home practice assignments
- Regular self-reflection and progress tracking
- Optional group weekly Q & A

Class Logistics

Online Only: We are offering this program online via Zoom.

Class dates:

September 11

September 18

September 25

October 2

October 9

all classes are held on Fridays from 10:00am – 1:00pm US Pacific Time.

***Recording Note:** *If you would like access to the recordings, you must register by the deadline above. You will have lifetime access from the original program date to view the recordings of this program.*

Your Teacher

Jill Satterfield has been a quiet pioneer in the integration of embodied awareness practices and Buddhist teachings for over 30 years.

Her heart/mind and body approach developed from somatic and contemplative psychology, 35 years of Buddhist study, extensive meditation retreat time and decades of living with chronic pain.

At the invitation of her primary teacher, Ajahn Amaro, Jill was the first to offer mindful movement and somatic practices on silent retreats first at Spirit Rock Meditation Center and then the Insight Meditation Society 30 years ago. She has since developed teacher trainings and mentoring programs that integrate embodied awareness with Dharma ever since.

In addition to teaching embodiment and Dharma with Ajahn Amaro, she was also invited to teach on Tsoknyi Rinpoche's retreats in the US and Nepal. It was at his urging that she teach subtle body practices to his students. She contributed movement practices to his brother Mingyur Rinpoche's retreats and was a consultant for his 2 best-selling books.

Jill's Applied Embodied Mindfulness Trainings were part of UCLA's Mindful Awareness Research Center. She was on the faculty for Spirit Rock's Mindful Yoga and Meditation Training, and was a mentor for Jack Kornfield and Tara Brach's Mindfulness Teacher Training, was the scholar and teacher in residence at Kripalu Center in 2003 and is a graduate of the Sati Center's Buddhist Chaplaincy Training.

Her organization School for Compassionate Action was a training and service organization that taught mindfulness and somatic practices for chronic pain, illness and post 9/11 trauma in NYC hospitals and at-risk facilities for over ten years.

She has been featured in and has written for numerous publications such as Tricycle, Lion's Roar (who named her one of the 4 leading mindful movement teachers in the country) and the NY Times. She contributed to the book *Freeing the Body: Freeing the Mind* by Michael Stone.

Her less visible but very active and passionate self is a visual artist and writer. Her visual work was represented by the Archetype Gallery in NYC, in Lord and Taylor windows on 5th Avenue in NYC, in sets and costumes for dance companies, and in off Broadway productions and magazines.

References and Scientific Support

Key Research Studies

1. Chin, P., Gorman, F., Beck, F., Russell, B. R., Stephan, K. E., & Harrison, O. K. (2024). A systematic review of brief respiratory, embodiment, cognitive, and mindfulness interventions to reduce state anxiety. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 15, 1412928.

2. Harrison, O. K., Köchli, L., Marino, S., Luechinger, R., Hennel, F., Brand, K., et al. (2021). Interoception of breathing and its relationship with anxiety. *Neuron*, 109, 4080-4093.
3. Gasteiger, N., Vedhara, K., Massey, A., Jia, R., Ayling, K., Chalder, T., et al. (2021). Depression, anxiety and stress during the COVID-19 pandemic: results from a New Zealand cohort study on mental well-being. *BMJ Open*, 11, e045325.
4. Kessler, R. C., Petukhova, M., Sampson, N. A., Zaslavsky, A. M., & Wittchen, H. U. (2012). Twelve-month and lifetime prevalence and lifetime morbid risk of anxiety and mood disorders in the United States. *International Journal of Methods in Psychiatric Research*, 21, 169-184.
5. Lackner, R. J., & Fresco, D. M. (2016). Interaction effect of brooding rumination and interoceptive awareness on depression and anxiety symptoms. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 85, 43-52.
6. Kessler, R.C., et al. (2012). "Twelve-month and lifetime prevalence and lifetime morbid risk of anxiety and mood disorders in the United States." *International Journal of Methods in Psychiatric Research*.
7. Harrison, O.K., et al. (2021). "Interoception of breathing and its relationship with anxiety." *Neuron*.
8. Lackner, R.J., & Fresco, D.M. (2016). "Interaction effect of brooding rumination and interoceptive awareness on depression and anxiety symptoms." *Behaviour Research and Therapy*.
9. Blanck, P., et al. (2018). "Effects of mindfulness exercises as stand-alone intervention on symptoms of anxiety and depression: Systematic review and meta-analysis." *Behaviour Research and Therapy*.
10. Papola, D., et al. (2023). "Psychotherapies for generalized anxiety disorder in adults: A systematic review and network meta-analysis." *JAMA Psychiatry*.

Thank you for being part of the Spirit Rock community. Please reach out if you have any questions at courses@spiritrock.org.

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