

Anger

September 29, 2021

There's a passage where the Buddha recommends ways of overcoming anger. It starts out by saying: "This person has done something bad to me that I don't like, but what should I expect? This person is doing something bad to me now, what should I expect? This person will do something bad to me, but what should I expect? This person has harmed people that I love, but what should I expect?" You get the message. These people have harmed, or are harming, or will harm people you love. They are doing nice things to people you don't like. They have done that in the past and they will do in the future. In every case: "What should you expect?" This is the way it is with the human world. It's not designed to appeal to our likes and dislikes, or to go the way we want it to. We live in a world where there's a lot of stuff going in ways we don't want it to.

So we have to look at our anger. Anger often presents itself as being justified, that someone has done something outrageous or said something outrageous. It's beyond the pale. It can't be. You can't stand it—and that right there is the crux of the problem: your own lack of endurance, your inability to see the larger picture: Given that people will do things you don't like, how can you live in this world in a skillful way, not letting your anger to take over?

Seeing the issue that way is half the battle right there, because a lot of people really like their anger. They feel that this is how you get things done in the world—by getting angry. This is how you protect yourself, they say—by getting angry. But it's a very weak protection, because you end up saying a lot of things and doing a lot of things that you're going to later regret. So it's only a short stopgap measure.

You have to learn to look at your anger, as the Buddha said, as something separate, something you can stand apart from. Learn to understand it. It's one of the reasons why we meditate. We get used to looking at things in the mind in terms of the different kinds of fabrication: bodily fabrication, verbal, mental. Bodily fabrication being the in-and-out breath; verbal being directed thought and evaluation being the way you talk to yourself; and mental fabrication being

perceptions, mental labels, acts of recognition, acts of imaging things to yourself, along with feelings.

You use these things to create a state of concentration. But then as you go through the day, you begin to notice that you're using these same three things to create states of becoming in the mind, and a state of anger is a very particular kind of becoming. It gives you a sense of freedom from certain constraints. Things you would never in your right mind think of doing or saying, you suddenly feel that you have the right to do or say them. You feel released from constraints. What's happened, though, is that you've got blinders on. Your sense of shame is blinded. Your sense of compunction, thinking about the consequences of your action: That gets blinded too.

It's like a drug. It impairs your faculties when you think it's actually expanding them. So you've got to realize that it's like a straitjacket. You breathe in a certain way that makes you feel really uncomfortable, so you've got to do something to get that feeling out of your system. You talk to yourself in ways that justify again and again and again why you should be angry about that person. After all, they did say these things. It's true. And then the perceptions you hold in mind, the big one being that you can't stand it, and there are good reasons why you can't stand it. You add up all the reasons and all the little frustrations and other things that have gone into the day, the past week, or whatever. They all come piling on at the same time.

So of course there's going to be pain in the body, pain in the mind, and you lash out. Even if you don't lash out physically, there can be some verbal exchanges.

But then you've got karma: You've got to keep thinking about that all the time. What kind of life are you creating for yourself if you keep acting on anger? The Buddha said, for one thing, that you make yourself ugly. You end up destroying things that have value. You can destroy friendships very easily. You can destroy things physically and you say and do things that, in the moment, you think are really clever. But when you reflect on them later, you realize you've done a lot of harm.

So as I said, the first order of business to see anger as something really harmful. As for the voice that says, "Well, how are you going to get things done in the world? How are you going to change things that need to be changed?" there are

lots of ways you can make change without having to be angry about it. In fact, when you can think more calmly and clearly about things, you're more likely to come up with an effective idea of what should be done.

So look at your anger in terms of those three kinds of fabrication and replace them. Breathe in new ways, breathe in a calm way, calm yourself down. This way you avoid bottling the anger up. Many people are afraid of not expressing their anger because they think it'll make them sick. That's because they don't know how to release the energy of the anger in a skillful way. Actually, you can breathe right through it. Notice where there's the tightness in your stomach, the tightness in your chest, the tightness in your hands and feet. Relax it, breathe through it, breathe through it. That clears a lot of the oppressiveness of the anger away.

Then ask yourself: How are you talking to yourself about this? Think of that passage from the Buddha: "What should I expect?" After all, this is the human realm. People do all kinds of things in the human realm, and anger is not going to solve the problem. Clarity is going to solve the problem, and that doesn't come with anger. You want to maintain your sense of shame and compunction, that you wouldn't do things that you'd be ashamed to reflect on afterwards, and you wouldn't do things that would cause harm down the line. That means you've got to talk to yourself in a new way.

The Buddha has you reflect on the fact that the people who make you angry may have done good things in the past. If they have, think about that. Think about their virtues, think about their generosity, think about their good side so that your response isn't one-sided. That's the problem with anger: It looks at things from one side. It's like a one-eyed beast. It has no perspective. When you bring in two eyes, you can look at the good side and the bad side of the person. Then it's a lot easier to think of what would be the right way to respond.

If you can't find anything good in that person at all, then you have to feel compassion for this person who is really digging a hole for himself or herself. The Buddha says to regard that person as someone who's sick, lying out in the desert with no help at all. No matter who it is, stranger or whatever, you've got to feel some compassion. That's the right attitude.

That then sloughs over into the mental fabrication of what perceptions you're holding about that person. Is the person a beast? Really? And then there's your

perception about what you can stand and cannot stand. You've got to change that perception. If you can't stand it when people say things about you that are insulting and that seem to be pulling you down, remind yourself: You're not pulled up or down by people's words. You're pulled up or down by your own actions.

The Buddha sometimes has you think about the different parts of the body: Which part of the body is being insulted? How does it feel? How do your bones feel about this? The bones don't care. You need to tell yourself, "If they don't care, why should I?"

Then remember Ven. Sariputta's instructions that when people say something really insulting, just tell yourself: "An unpleasant sound has made contact at the ear," and drop it there. Usually we don't drop it. We're the ones who pull it in and it reverberates in the mind. We embroider it: "Why does that person think this about me? How can that person say these things about me?" It goes on and on and on. You're suffering not from the person's words, but from what you're thinking to yourself.

So think in new ways. Let the sound stop at the ear. When you approach anger in this way—taking it apart—then you can reassemble a better state of the mind, a state of mind that's clearer, much more able to think about what would be the right thing to do. Remember, even in war, it's the people who can keep their heads who can strategize properly. That's when people are being killed and things are being destroyed horribly. So how much more should you keep your head when it's simply a matter of people doing things that you feel are wrong. It hasn't gotten to the state of warfare yet. You still want to keep your head so that you can figure out what would be the best thing to do. If you do unskillful things, it gets thrown right back at you.

So learn how to take your anger apart and you'll find that it doesn't have the power over you that it has had in the past. You're actually relieved to be free of that power. You're strong as a result. You're not being a wimp; you're not being weak. You're showing forbearance, you're showing equanimity, you're showing patience, all of which are strengths. It's when you have these virtues that you can see clearly what does and doesn't need to be said or done. The more clarity you can bring to situations like that, the better it is for everyone around.