

Deconstructing Anger

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If you've ever watched a child learning how to walk, you've noticed that at the very beginning it doesn't really know which muscles to use and which ones not to use. So its steps are very jerky, very uncertain. But with time, it begins to get a sense of what's necessary and what's not, which muscles when you tense them up actually make it harder to walk, which ones make it easier. Gradually, the child gets more and more efficient until walking just seems the most natural thing to do—because the child has pared things down to what's really necessary.

It's the same sort of thing when you're meditating. In the very beginning you're not sure how to get the mind settled down, so you do all sorts of unnecessary things and sometimes miss some of the necessary ones. But over time, you begin to realize, okay, these are the things you have to do, and these are things you don't have to do, and these are things you have to do for a while and then you can stop doing them. It gets easier and easier for the mind to settle down, because you understand better what's going on, what goes into it.

What it comes down to eventually is contained in that list of three fabrications: bodily fabrication, verbal fabrication, and mental fabrication. Bodily fabrication is the breath. You use the breath to influence the way you experience your body. As you learn to get more and more in touch with the breath energies in the body, you can learn how to deal with them to calm the body and make it a good place to settle down.

This is where you bring in verbal fabrication: Think about the breath and evaluate the breath. You notice the pleasure that comes when the breath is smooth and easy, and then you evaluate what to do with the pleasure, how to spread it around. So that's bodily fabrication, verbal fabrication.

Finally there's mental fabrication. They're the feelings that we just talked about, and also the perceptions – the labels – you hold in mind. Those are an important part of the evaluation, because you learn to figure out different ways of visualizing the breath to yourself, perceiving how to have an influence on the breath without forcing it too much. Then you find out which perceptions are helpful and which ones are not. You get more and more experience in looking at your mind states as just these things: breath, directed thought and evaluation, feelings, and perceptions.

When you begin to recognize these things as you're dealing with them to get the mind in concentration, you begin to realize that your other mental states, outside of concentration practice, are made up of the same sort of things. This gives you a handle, especially on recognizing how to deal with unskillful mental states, like anger.

When anger comes in, it's going to have an impact on the way you breathe – bodily fabrication. And you find yourself talking to yourself. We don't tend to think in terms of “directed thought” and “evaluation,” but that's what's going on when we talk to ourselves about something. We focus on an idea, we focus on a topic, and then we comment on it: ask questions about it, make comments; ask more questions, make more comments. Have a little internal discussion there. And then there's feeling and there's perception. The perceptions underlie how you analyze and evaluate things. Sometimes the perceptions are obvious; sometimes they're more hidden.

But a state of anger is made up of the same kind of things that a state of concentration is made up of, so—if you want to get past the anger—you can learn how to take it apart and readjust the elements.

Years back we had a woman whose son was autistic and hyperactive. As he became a teenager, he found that his lust and anger became more and more difficult to control. She

brought him up here one night and asked if I would teach him how to bring more control to his anger. She kept saying to him, “You can’t be angry, you can’t be angry.” But I told her, “That doesn’t work. You have to tell him, “When anger comes, this is what you do.” In other words, if you say, “You can’t be angry,” then when the kid is angry, he’s gone beyond the pale and has no handle on what to do with it. Instead, you allow yourself to think: “Anger is going to come, this is how you deal with it.”

To begin with, you can do this on a quick, first-aid basis: Anger comes up; your first reaction should be, “How is the breath?” Step back, look at your breath, so that the sense of tightness in the breath doesn’t make you feel you’ve got to get something out of your system. Breathe through the tightness the same way you’d breathe through any blockage in meditation.

Then look at how you’re evaluating the situation. Are you evaluating it properly? Could you be thinking in other terms? How about your perceptions? How do you perceive what’s making you angry? How do you perceive your relationship to it, and to your anger? Can you change your perceptions?

This is a kind of first-aid way of getting past the anger, so that you’re not bottling it up or giving vent to your sense of frustration. You’re able to step back. This is one of *the* big skills in meditation—learning how to step out of things, to step out of your mental states, and see them as constructs. And then you can reconstruct them – deconstruct the bad ones, and reconstruct something better in their place.

The same analysis works when you’re meditating and you’re in a quieter place where you can look more deeply into the anger. This is where you bring in another framework that the Buddha provides: seeing things as arising and passing away, seeing their allure, seeing their drawbacks, and then seeing the escape from them. In this case, you want to be on top of the

anger. Notice when it actually comes; notice when it goes. You'll find that it comes at times when you didn't think it was coming, and it goes... Sometimes in the middle of a strong feeling of anger, suddenly the anger stops for a bit. But because the breath is still worked up, you think, "Oh, I am still angry." So you go back and you ride with it again. But if you can learn how to be more observant about things coming and going, you're also in a better place to figure out *why* you run with the anger when it comes.

This is where you get to see the allure. All too often, the allure of things, especially like anger, is very hidden. And when it suddenly comes out... We talked today about anger being scary. Well, this is what's scary: You suddenly find yourself enjoying the anger, even when you're angry at people whom you otherwise love very deeply. The sense that you can enjoy that is frightening. Well, you have to learn not to be frightened by it. This is the only reason why you're engaging in the anger to begin with. At least you're beginning to see that there is a sense of attraction there. And you want to see exactly what it is. One of the best times to see it is when the anger arises first, and then something in the mind says, "Let's go with this." And if you can say "No," you have a good chance of hearing the mind's argument as to why it doesn't want to hear the "No," why it just wants to push the "No" aside.

Because there's that element of energy that goes with anger – it's a sudden sense of release, freedom. You suddenly feel free to do what you want to do, and your sense of shame and compunction goes by the board. Your concerns about the results, the long term results, of what you're doing goes by the board. You feel free not to care. So you want to see why you're willing to throw those things away.

The same happens if you notice when the anger stops. Why did you suddenly lose interest in it? What was the end of the appeal? And then if it comes back again, why do you pick it up again? You've got to see anger arising and passing away like this.

Then you want to see the next step after understanding the allure, which is seeing the drawbacks. When the anger gets dropped, something in you realized, “Okay, the anger is not worth it,” and it dropped it for a minute. What was it that saw the drawbacks? This is the sort of thing that allows you to get past your passion for the anger. That’s when you find the escape.

So again, you look at those elements. There’s a certain way of breathing that goes with the anger: Do you enjoy that? A certain way of thinking that goes with the anger: Do you enjoy that? Do you enjoy the perceptions? What kick do you get out of the perceptions or the feelings that go with the anger? These are the things about which you’ve got to be very honest with yourself. At the same time, you can’t be afraid of these things. You have to admit that, Yes, you have a taste for anger. It may not be the sort of taste that you’d like other people to see you indulge in, but you have to admit that it’s there before you can get past it.

This is the skill of insight: to analyze your mental states first into the three kinds of fabrication and then to apply this other framework, which is the framework of watching things arise and pass away; looking for their allure, looking for their drawbacks, so that you can see the escape. You apply this framework to the fabrications that go into your anger or greed or lust or jealousy or any of the other unskillful emotions that you can think of. And you find that your hands-on experience with these different kinds of fabrication in the concentration gives you a leg up in taking unskillful emotions apart, deconstructing them, and understanding what was the allure that made you want to construct them to begin with. This is how we learn to get past these things.