

## *Streams of Anger*

*July 11, 2022*

There's a saying in Thailand that "The tongue is close to the teeth, so it's likely to get bitten." They're talking about people who live in close proximity. In a family, in a monastery, it's very easy to get irritated with one another.

This evening the question was raised, "When you're spreading thoughts of goodwill, you start out with people who are close to you." The person asking the question understood that as meaning people who were *physically* close to you. And as I told him: You're trying to start out with people who are emotionally close to you, who are easy to feel goodwill toward.

Sometimes the people who are physically closest to you are the ones that are hardest to feel goodwill for when you get irritated by their behavior. Yet it's very important that you treat them with goodwill and treat them with respect. One of the worst things for a community is where people lose respect for one another and start treating one another with disdain. That's murder for any community.

So, the first thing we have to think about is that we're here practicing, and that that in and of itself is something worthy of respect. But we're all coming from different places, different levels of skill in our practice, so just because someone doesn't live up to your standard doesn't mean they're not trying. You have to take that into consideration.

After all, none of us have been established to be the National Board of Standards. We're here to look after ourselves. That means learning to be skillful in our thoughts, in our words, in our deeds. And part of skill, especially in words and thoughts, is thinking in ways that lead to harmony.

We've heard many, many times that the antidote for anger and irritation is goodwill combined with equanimity. But just thinking thoughts of goodwill and equanimity won't be enough. You have to learn how to think more precisely when you're feeling irritated, feeling angry: You've got something you've got to take apart—the feeling of anger itself.

The Buddha recommends that you think of anger and other unskillful emotions as a stream. There's a current to the stream and it's flowing out. The first thing you've got to do is stop the flow.

He says you do that with mindfulness—you hold it in check. If anger arises in the mind, you tell yourself, "I'm not going to act or speak on this anger." Part of the mind will say, "But that other person really did something wrong." The reason you're holding things in check is to remind yourself that you're actually suffering from the anger because of things in your own mind. That other person's behavior may be an excuse, but you have to ask yourself if you've been primed for anger, and you're looking for something to set you off. Which means you've

got to turn and look at that stream flowing out of the mind and hold it in check. The more quickly you can hold it in check, the better you can see it.

Because it will complain. It'll give its reasons. If you flow along with it, it never has to give reasons, never has to justify itself. Its reasons can be perfectly bad, but the fact that you're willing to give in right away means that you're never going to find out what those reasons are.

That's the first thing—hold your tongue, hold back in your actions. And keep reminding yourself: When you act on anger, act on irritation you tend to do things that you're later going to regret, so why do them?

At the moment of anger, you can say, "Well, I'm justified by what this person did." But if you have to justify your behavior, there's usually something wrong with it. It's not just, which is why you have to justify it. Sometimes we feel that other people's misbehavior gives us extraordinary rights to misbehave, but then it becomes our karma.

So, these are things you keep in mind to restrain yourself, but the actual solution is not in the mindfulness, it's going to be in the discernment. One of the reasons we practice concentration is to get to know how the mind fabricates its experiences. We all know what the three fabrications are: The in-and-out breath is *bodily fabrication*; directed thought and evaluation, the way you talk to yourself, are *verbal fabrications*; the perceptions you hold in mind and the feelings that you focus on are *mental fabrications*. We engage in these fabrications in the meditation to create a state of concentration so that we can become more and more sensitive to how the mind puts things together. Then you take that knowledge and try to apply it to the rest of your life.

Ajaan Fuang had a student once whose powers of concentration were very strong, but she complained it wasn't making any difference in her life. In fact, it seemed that the stronger her concentration got, the stronger her anger was when it came out. As Ajaan Fuang pointed out to her, you can't just depend on your concentration to calm things down like this. You've got to take what you've learned from your concentration and consciously apply it.

So, you analyze the anger in the same three ways: How are you breathing when you're angry? How are you breathing when you're irritated? How are you talking to yourself? What are the things you chose to focus on, and what do you say about them? And then, what are the perceptions you hold in mind?

A lot of these things go into what's called the *allure* of the anger: why you feel justified, why you *like* the anger. The breathing itself may be unpleasant, and that's what gives you the sense that "I've got to get this out of my system." Sometimes you can stir things up pretty badly in the body by the way you breathe. It gives you more and more a sense that you've just got to get it out.

Then there's the way you talk to yourself about it, about how this person behaves this way—*always* behaves this way—and it's unbearable. Something's got to be done. Well, learn how to question that. We do have the choice of how we talk about our experiences as we go

through the day. And the way we talk about our experiences is not just a reaction to what we've already experienced, it shapes what we're going to experience, too.

So while you're engaging in the kind of inner conversation that aggravates these things, a lot of that has to do with your perceptions. When you're irritated, when you're angry, sometimes there's a very strong sense of self operating there, a sense of your power, your ability to see what's wrong and say what's wrong and be a straight speaker... get it out. But is that the most effective way of dealing with the problem?

I noticed in Thailand there were occasions when people were upset with Ajaan Fuang, and he never used his power or authority to counter their criticism. In fact, there were times when he was very meek when people were criticizing him, and the fact that he was meek made you sympathize with him. So just because you have the power of anger doesn't mean that you're going to win the battle. Sometimes a meek approach is the most effective—it dis-arms other people.

But, because you have this perception of yourself as being powerful when you're angry, it gets in the way of actually seeing what is the most effective thing to do. The question should be: If there really is misbehavior, what is the most effective way of dealing with it to stop it?

We had an old monk at the monastery who'd ordained during his retirement, and he'd basically come to the monastery to live out his last years without doing much—he wasn't much of a meditator. He liked to brag about how he was beyond sensual desire, but he was the one who would talk about his old exploits with women—and it got to me. One day I lashed out at him when he was bragging about how he was beyond sensual desire. I said, "You're the only one who's talking about this kind of stuff around here. It's obvious that it's a big issue for you."

Well, he blew up. Word of this got to Ajaan Fuang, he said, "That's not the most effective way of dealing with that. You should say, 'You may be beyond sensual desire, but when you talk about things like this, it affects me, affects the rest of us. Could you please not do that?'" In other words, you take a more meek approach. I tried it, and it was more effective.

So, learn how to question your perceptions that say, "Now that I'm fired up I have the right to exert my power. I can show some of my power to myself and to other people." You begin to realize that the anger has very little to do with clearing up a situation, and has more to do with your self-image.

So you've got to look into that. This is what the dynamic of the four noble truths is all about—wherever there's suffering, turn around and look inside. Things outside may really be bad, but the suffering is not caused by the things outside.

Look at dependent co-arising: Suffering doesn't begin with unpleasant sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. Those come in the middle of the sequence. It's what you *bring* to those sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations that determines whether you're going

to suffer from them or not. It's your choice of the things you pay attention to—your intentions, your perceptions, your feelings: That's what's causing the problem.

The problem starts inside. The outside aggravation is just an excuse. So learn to look *inside*, and see what you can do to take apart this mass of emotion you develop through the way you breathe, through the way you talk to yourself, through the perceptions you hold in mind.

Because you do have the choice: You can talk to yourself about other aspects of what's going on. This is why the Buddha has you think about times when the person you're angry at has actually done good things. It changes the story. Because when you're angry at somebody for some habit that drives you crazy, you tend to say, "Why are you always doing that?" But do they *always* do that? Well, no, if they were always doing that, they'd be insane. They may do it frequently, but there are other times when they do perfectly skillful things. Why are you stitching together the bad things? Because it makes it easier to get angry.

So look at how you talk to yourself about the situation. Remind yourself: You can talk about it in a different way. What are the perceptions you hold in mind? How true are those perceptions?

And again, the best way to see these things is to put the dam of mindfulness across the stream. In other words, you're not going to act on the anger, you're not going to act on the irritation—and then see how the mind complains. That's when you get to see its reasons.

So, when the streams of anger are flowing out, put up the dam—and then watch how the currents fight against the dam. You learn a lot about the fluid dynamics of your defilements, and you can divert the energy behind them to flow in a better direction.