

Anger: Wisdom for Cooling the Flames

A dharma talk presented to the CT sangha of the Dharma Teacher Order by Tom McNally on March 30, 2019.

Based mostly on the book of the same name, by Thich Nhat Hanh

Exercise / Meditation

I would like you to look deep into yourself and answer these questions. These are for you alone and you need not share the answers

Question 1, When was the last time you were angry?

Pause

Question 2. Why were you angry?

Pause

Question 3. How did you feel physically?

Pause

Question 4. What was your emotional reaction?

Pause

Question 5. How long this emotion last?

Pause

Question 6. How was this situation resolved?

Pause

In reading this book it is apparent that Thay is discussing anger among intimate parties, be they spouse, family members etc. Not all of Thay's suggestions would work in all situations

Anger is not strictly a psychological reality. Thay explains the non-duality that body and mind are as one. Anger not only effects the mind

but the body also.

Our physical appearance when we are angry changes us we become tense and appear as if we may explode at any minute. This can be a tipoff that we have to gain control.

Read Anger - how it affects people in [Reading #1](#) in the appendix.

Is this how you remember how you felt when you answered the question 3?

Living simply can be liberating

According to Buddha the most basic condition for happiness is freedom from mental formations such as despair, anger jealousy and delusions These mental formations according to the Buddha are poison. And he gives us instructions on how to transform craving anger and confusion

Chapter 1 – Consuming Anger

How do we manage our anger?

Taking care of the body can help us deal with our anger Thay tells us that our anger , frustration and despair has a lot to due with our food consumption. He tells us that our foods may contain anger and gives us the example of eating eggs raised on a modern large-scale farm where the chickens cannot move about and have their beaks clipped in order that they not peck other chickens. When consuming those eggs we are consuming anger.

Thay tells us when we eat the flesh or eggs we are eating anger. Our eating anger is not the only way we can consume anger, it is also present in the other senses such as watching toxic television, reading toxic materials and listening to persons contain a lot of anger.

When we recite the 5th precept we are in fact accepting mindful consumption by practicing mindful eating, drinking and consuming. If we want to take care of our anger we should live this mindfulness precept.

Chapter 2 – Putting Out the Fire of Anger

In chapter 2 Thayer tells us about suffering and anger and our responses to anger. Retaliation is the first response we have. If he/she makes me suffer then I will make him/her suffer more, then I will feel better. This attitude does nothing to alleviate the suffering on either part in fact it increases the suffering on both parties.

When we are angry we should take time and look into ourselves. Practice a few minutes of mindful breathing and do not respond in the heat of the moment, instead we should and start to take care of our anger. Buddha gives us some ways to cool the anger we are feeling and these include mindful breathing, mindful walking, embracing our anger and importantly, looking into the other person and realize that they are also suffering. If we can realize that, we can cool our anger.

In the 1970s it was accepted by some therapists that the release of anger was to “let it all hang out”. An example is punching a pillow and screaming. So as long as it remained verbal, this was supposed to provide release for anger's tension. In more recent years the accepted method is that healthy anger requires reflection. This position is right in line of the Buddhist teaching.

The Buddha tells that all mental formations are sensitive to mindfulness, anything embraced by mindfulness will undergo a transformation. By embracing our anger in a mindfulness manner, our anger can be transformed, and in accepting our anger it allows us to take care of it.

The techniques of mindful breathing, mindful walking and mindful sitting can generate positive energy and gives the opportunity to look deeply and to identify the source of anger.

Thay describes this as a twostep process. The first is embracing and recognizing your anger the second is to look deeply to discover how this anger came about. When we get angry we believe that this anger is caused by another and that is where we place the blame, on the other person. The anger that we are experiencing is because of the seed of anger within our consciousness. Thay goes on to say the seed of anger is bigger because we have not taken care of it. When we cultivate the energy of mindfulness, we realize that the cause of our suffering is not the other person but the seed of anger within us.

When someone close to us becomes angry and the anger has taken hold of them we realize that person is suffering and causing the people around them to suffer as well. Punishment will not help this situation but by practicing the steps that the Buddha has giving us you can we help the suffering person get beyond the anger that they are experiencing.

Thay gives us an example of an incident that happened at Plum Village: A young boy's father would berate him if he fell or made a mistake. His father would shout at him and call him names. The boy didn't think much of his father and was determined not to be like him when he grew up. He told himself that he would be a loving father. The second year he came to Plum Village with his little sister. When his sister hurt herself by falling off a hammock his first reaction was to berate her and call her stupid, but because of his being at Plum Village for two years he caught himself and started practicing mindfulness. His first response was exactly like his fathers. The energy transmitted by his fathers' actions was stronger he almost replicated his father's response but his

training was enough to override his father's actions. The child came to the conclusion that his father was suffering. Thay tells us that the child was able to break the cycle and with practice and mindfulness he was also able to transform his father.

ESTABLISHING COMMUNICATION

Establishing communication is critical in defusing anger. Without communication, suffering will continue for each party. A person should not respond immediately to anger as that could escalate the situation. Walk away, practice walking meditation but as soon as possible after the cooling down and meditation go to the person and tell them of your suffering and your understanding of their suffering. If you cannot do this within the 24-hour period, write it down as a peace note letting the other person know you are suffering and wish to open communications.

Embracing your anger and looking deeply into yourself you may discover that you have misinterpreted what happened. You may be the victim of false perceptions. You may have been the one with the wrong perceptions and therefore communicating this to the other person would be crucial.

Chapter 3 – The Language of True Love

In this chapter Thay deals with changing anger with love and peace. The words he tells us to use with our significant other are these words: "Darling in the past we have made each other suffer so much. We made a hell for each other. Now I want to change. I want us to become allies, so that we can protect each other, practice together, and transform our anger together. Let us build a better life from now on based on practice of mindfulness. Darling I need your help. I need your support. I need your collaboration. I cannot succeed without you."

They say that we must say to your significant other, son or daughter. This they say, is love.

Communication is the key to success and happiness. To succeed anger must be replaced with compassion, tenderness and being non-judgmental.

Buddha never advised us to suppress our anger. Healthy anger can be obtained, according to the 8/17/2016 article in Psychology Today entitled "[What Constitutes "Healthy Anger"?](#)" by following this advice:

"...healthy anger" demands reflection. It requires that we take time and exert the effort to empower the rational mind to override the emotional mind. As such, it calls on us to more fully embrace a major aspect of our humanity – our capacities to reason and problem solve."

Basically what this is saying is that we must take care of our anger and go into ourselves and recognize it for what it is. This is the time to engage in sitting meditation or walking meditation. According to the above article, the definition of healthy anger is:

1. Healthy anger means observing and experiencing anger without being overwhelmed by it and not reacting to it.
2. Healthy anger means recognizing our anger as a signal to explore the feelings thoughts and bodily sensations that proceed it.
3. Healthy anger means viewing anger as a signal to direct our attention inward to identify our core desires, needs and values.
4. Healthy anger calls for developing self-compassion which includes skills to enhance our sense of safety and connection.
5. Healthy anger includes developing strategies to let go of anger which may include forgiving others and yourself.
6. Healthy anger encompasses compassionate practices that don't cause suffering for others or ourselves.

7. Healthy anger means learning how to communicate assertively with others
8. Healthy anger enhances our resilience and overall well-being

Thay tells us not to suppress our anger we must let the person know that we are angry but not in a way to punish them but to let them know that you suffer, you cannot pretend that you are not angry. You must make it known to the other person that you are angry but in a calm way, if you cannot do this right away come back and express this feeling in a calm way and if it is coming to the deadline (24 hours) write a peace note expressing your suffering do to the anger and deliver it to the person.

Chapter 4 – Transformation

In this chapter Thay talks about the energy of anger, anger being the negative energy and mindfulness the positive energy. In the Buddhist tradition anger does not mean to transform yourself into a battlefield of good fighting evil. This is wrong. The practice is to transform yourself. You need the suffering within you, and sense that it is organic so you can transform them and make good use of them.

Our practice should be nonviolent. That's a given for the followers of the Buddha. Doing violence to others is doing violence to ourselves. Non violence can only be born through our insight of non-duality of inter-being. Without this insight that everything is connected, you will still have violence.

We can express anger and as been described before but not in the immediate moment. But we cannot let the anger fester and as the Buddha cautioned a monk has the right to be angry, but not for more than one night. One way Thay advises us to make known our anger is

to set up a time for open communication. At this time the conflict can be examined. Thay recommends a Friday as that way you both can enjoy the weekend.

One who gets angry often has watered the seed of anger. My grandfather was always angry and at times violent so much so that his children avoided him. Fortunately for the family, he worked many days and many nights a week so their interaction was minimal but it did not make for a pleasant environment and the entire family was suffering including him. He did mellow out by the time I knew him but his anger was transferred to his children. Fortunately my father was not violent.

Wrong perceptions are a constant theme in Thay's book. Are we sure what is really going on, or are we misinterpreting a situation. This brings me in mind of Shakespeare's Othello when Desdemona tells Othello "I hear a fury in your words but I do not understand your words" this is a double problem, wrong perceptions, and lack of communication. Unfortunately it did not work out for any of them.

We have to be very careful of our perceptions. They can become a deal breaker for any relationship. I know in my life, I have been the person who read a situation the wrong way. Fortunately with open communications it did not rise to a long term of anger. The passive aggressive behavior method of responding to anger such as "the silent treatment" is not going to help anyone and will just deepen the suffering. This is where the meeting with open communication is essential. At the meeting the communication must be open, holding something back will not resolve the issue. Each side must be able to express openly the problem even if it is a wrong perception.

Chapter 5- Compassionate Communication

In our society today communication consist of sound bites twitter or text messages and email. Face to face communication has taken a back seat to technology. Deep listening is a skill. You can not be listening unless you give the speaker your undivided attention. You cannot have your mind somewhere else and listen at the same time nor can you be thinking how you can fix what the speaker says may be a problem. Often times a person just wants someone just to listen to what they have to say. When I worked as a case manager at a soup kitchen, often times when a person came to me, it wasn't always that they wanted me to fix something for them but just to listen to them. Many times they were lonely and had no one to unburden there cares or their situation. They tells us that mindful breathing generates mindfulness and mindful breathing keeps our desire, the desire to let the other speak out. And when the person speaks out it may be full of bitterness condemnation and judgement. These words may cause suffering in you but with compassion and mindful breathing, you will be able to listen without suffering.

Chapter 6 The Heart sutra

They tell us that when we experience times when we are truly grateful for the other person in our lives we should savor the moment. At that time we should go where we can be alone and be by ourselves. Immerse ourselves in that feeling of gratitude. We have to be alone to appreciate the other person's presence. Being together all the time can lead to taken each other for granted. They suggest every now and then taken some time away in order to appreciate the other person more.

Who do you think we are? We are our father our sons our ancestors we all belong to the same stream of life. When I look in the mirror each morning I see my father. I find myself having the same habits that he

had that use to annoy me. I find myself thinking the same way he did. We are all each other.

Chapter 7 - No enemies

The self is made of non-self elements, therefore understanding ourselves is our practice. Our father is a non-self element - we say that our father is not us but without him we would not exist, so he is totally present in our body, he is fully present in our mind. He is us. If we understand ourselves, we understand our father. He is not outside of us. Other elements with us are our ancestors, sun, water, food, and much more. These are not separate from us and without them we could not live.

I think this paragraph is very important.

Suppose two warring parties want to negotiate and both sides do not know enough about themselves. You have to really know yourself, your country, your party, your situation in order to understand the other's party, the others nation, the other's people. Self and others are not two separate things, because the suffering, hope, and anger of both sides are very much the same. Understanding ourselves and understanding the other, but everything must begin with us.

Compassion is intelligence; it is the opposite of stupidity and passivity. Acting with compassion requires strength. Compassionate people do not resist challenges or injustice. They give us the example of Mahatma Gandhi standing up to a strong nation without guns or bombs and succeeding by acting simply on the strength of compassion and the insight of non-duality. Being compassionate does not mean allowing other people to do violence to you themselves or others.

An example of searching for answers:

They tell us how the French government is trying hard to take care of youth that are violent. They do have some insights and understand that the violence and suffering of these youth are caused by society. The roots of this violence are found in the family and the roots of the violence are found in the consumerism of society. Locking up the youth does not stop the violence. Understanding and acting upon the cause of the violence is necessary.

Chapter 8 – The Habit Energy of Anger

I like the way Thay gets his point across by using stories. I especially liked the story of Angelina and David. David was a totally disagreeable person who did not get along with anyone. David met what he felt was his perfect match, Angelina. But with David being so disagreeable, she could not stand him for more than four months, so she left. David contemplated suicide but at the last minute he remembered his visit to the temple where he learned that the true offering of incense is the incense of the heart which is offered with mindfulness, concentration, and insight.

Thay likens this story to people in our lives “Who is our Angelina, Who is our David, and who are we pushing away”. What can we do to change this situation?

Chapter 9 - Embracing Anger With Mindfulness

Here we come full circle on how we manage anger. Mindfulness is being in the present moment and being aware if what is going on. Once we recognize our anger we embrace it with tenderness and

awareness. Then we are able to see what is really is and deal with it through meditation

The Buddha said that all of us have the seed of fear, but most of us suppress it and keep it in the dark. The Buddha offered us the practice of the Five Remembrances.

1. I am subject to aging. There is no way to avoid aging.
2. I am subject to ill health. There is no way to avoid illness.
3. I am going to die. There is no way to avoid death.
4. Everyone and everything that I love will change, and I will be separated from them.
5. My only true possessions are my actions, and I cannot escape their consequences.

Reciting these 5 remembrances daily allows us to be better equipped to take care of our anger.

Chapter 10 – Mindful Breathing

In this chapter Thay gives us strategies to take care of our anger using mindful breathing. Anger is a strong emotion and he suggests using belly breathing bringing the attention down to the abdomen. When we let our feelings overwhelm us we have to bring our attention downward. When we have tried but failed to resolve the anger, or there isn't a solution to the problem - that is the time that we need to have compassion for ourselves. We have tried our best but nothing seemed to work so we must use our self-compassion and walk away

Summary.

Thay talks about writing a letter to the significant other when we are angry to let them know how we are suffering and that we also know that they are also suffering. He also talks about having close relationship with those that are in our sphere of life, be it a spouse parents, etc. He also mentions that some people lavish their love on a pet as there are not any one intimately close to them. I fall somewhere in that category I have a dog because living alone. I want someone to greet me when I come home. I have had my new dog for 4 months so we are still in the getting acquainted phase and since he came to me as a rescue he has some behaviors that are not compatible with a functioning household. However, we are working on them. We are enrolled in private training. I would like to read a letter that I think he would write to me on how anger affects him. This letter almost wrote itself as it came off my computer very quickly without need of corrections. *Read A letter from Gizmo in [Reading #2](#) in the appendix.*

In closing I would like to talk a little bit about hate and anger. Hate is a belief, a state of mind. Anger is an emotion. Both to these can cross over. You can hate but not be angry unless something triggers the anger, such as what happened in the civil rights movement. You can also be angry and couple that with hate as in the interview with Liam Neeson when he talked about wanting to go out and beat up any African American because his friend was raped by an African American. I bring this up because we are living in a polarized world.

Please read the article in the appendix, [Reading #3](#) - 'Each of Us Can Break Cycle of Hatred' by the Dalai Lama and Arthur C. Brooks.

Conclusion

Please read Recommendation, a poem by Thich Nhat Hanh. It is in the appendix as [Reading #4](#).

Thinking of what Thay has taught us about anger, how would you change the response to anger that you thought about at the beginning?

Thank you

Appendix

Reading #1

Anger - how it affects people

(Summarized from <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/anger-how-it-affects-people>)

Summary

- The long-term physical effects of uncontrolled anger include increased anxiety, high blood pressure and headache.
- Anger can be a positive and useful emotion, if it is expressed appropriately.
- Long-term strategies for anger management include regular exercise, learning relaxation techniques and counselling.

Well-managed anger can be a useful emotion that motivates you to make positive changes. On the other hand, anger is a powerful emotion and if it isn't handled appropriately, it may have destructive results for you and those closest to you. Uncontrolled anger can lead to arguments, physical fights, physical abuse, assault and self-harm.

Physical effects of anger

Anger triggers the body's 'fight or flight' response. Other emotions that trigger this response include fear, excitement and anxiety. The adrenal glands flood the body with stress hormones, such as adrenaline and cortisol.

The brain shunts blood away from the gut and towards the muscles, in preparation for physical exertion. Heart rate, blood pressure and respiration increase, the body temperature rises and the skin perspires. The mind is sharpened and focused.

Health problems with anger

The constant flood of stress chemicals and associated metabolic changes that go with ongoing unmanaged anger can eventually cause harm to many different systems of the body.

Some of the short and long-term health problems that have been linked to unmanaged anger include:

- headache

- digestion problems, such as abdominal pain
- insomnia
- increased anxiety
- depression
- high blood pressure
- skin problems, such as eczema
- heart attack
- stroke.

Expressing anger in healthy ways

Suggestions on how to express your anger in healthy ways include:

- If you feel out of control, walk away from the situation temporarily, until you cool down.
- Recognise and accept the emotion as normal and part of life.
- Try to pinpoint the exact reasons why you feel angry.
- Once you have identified the problem, consider coming up with different strategies for how to remedy the situation.
- Do something physical, such as going for a run or playing sport.
- Talk to someone you trust about how you're feeling.

Unhelpful ways to deal with anger

Many people express their anger in inappropriate and harmful ways, including:

- **anger explosions** – some people have very little control over their anger and tend to explode in rages. Raging anger may lead to physical abuse or violence. A person who doesn't control their temper can isolate themselves from family and friends. Some people who fly into rages have low self-esteem, and use their anger as a way to manipulate others and feel powerful.
- **anger repression** – some people consider that anger is an inappropriate or 'bad' emotion and choose to suppress it. However, bottled anger often turns into depression and anxiety. Some people vent their bottled anger at innocent parties, such as children or pets.

Benefits of regular exercise in mood management

People who are stressed are more likely to experience anger. Numerous worldwide studies have documented that regular exercise can improve mood and reduce stress levels. This may be because physical exertion burns up stress chemicals, and it also boosts production of mood-regulating neurotransmitters in the brain, including endorphins and catecholamines.

Reading #2

A Letter From Gizmo

March 4, 2019

Dear Dad (owner)

I know that we have not been together to long and we have grown to love each other. I appreciate our being together. I love you but when you are angry with me and yell at me, I become afraid and upset. I do want to learn the things that you are trying to teach me and the things that you are sending me to school for, but remember it takes me awhile to learn these things and remember we have to practice these lessons every day if not more often. As you can see I have picked up a lot of things the teacher has showed us and I really want to learn more. Remember I had a life before I came to you and unfortunately I cannot describe it to you.

Remember I love you and want to do what you want me to do but take into consideration, I am a dog and as such I have some built in behaviors that are not pleasant to humans. Please help me to overcome these behaviors and we can enjoy a great relationship together.

Your loyal canine

Gizmo

Reading #3

How each of us can break the cycle of hatred

Human beings have a deep longing to live together in harmony. People only feel completely alive when experiencing loving bonds with one another.

Everyone, of all faiths and no faith, knows this truth, and most profess it openly.

And yet people fight incessantly. Even though war is blessedly absent in most countries today, these are deeply polarized times. Words too often are delivered with contempt; philosophical differences are likened to warfare; those who simply disagree with another are deemed "enemies."

Often it is on the internet — which was launched as a forum for unity — where people attack one another, under the cloak of anonymity.

This state of constant conflict is a major source of stress and unhappiness for millions of people. Is there a solution?

We believe that the answer is yes. Further, as is the case with all big problems, within this crisis lies an opportunity. Polarization contains the seeds for personal excellence and spiritual advancement.

To begin with, the solution is not for people simply to agree with each other, or to prevent disagreements from occurring. There is nothing wrong or inherently destructive about having ideas that differ from those of others.

On the contrary, disagreement is necessary in a pluralistic society to find the best solutions to problems. The ability to disagree freely is one of the great blessings of modern democracy.

The solution — and the opportunity for each of us — lies not in disagreeing less, but in understanding the appropriate way to disagree with others, even when we are treated with hatred.

A valuable clue can be found in the words of the 8th-century Indian Buddhist master Shantideva in his text "A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life": "Unruly beings are as unlimited as space / They cannot possibly all be overcome, / But if I overcome thoughts of anger alone / This will be equivalent to vanquishing all foes."

At first, his words sound somewhat ironic, as if Shantideva were dispensing strategic advice on how to win an argument. It is a little like Abraham Lincoln's rhetorical question, "Do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?"

That is a misunderstanding, however. In these quotations, to vanquish foes and destroy enemies does not mean to ill-treat others in any way, or even to seek victory over them in a traditional sense.

The objective is not to vanquish a person I considered my enemy; it is to destroy the illusion that he or she was my enemy in the first place. And the way to do this is by overcoming my own negative emotions.

Perhaps taking that approach seems unrealistic to you, like a kind of discipline only a monk could achieve through years of concentrated meditation. But that isn't true. You can do it, too, regardless of your belief system.

The secret is to express warmheartedness, kindness and generosity, even in disagreement — and especially when others show you contempt or hatred.

What if you don't feel warmhearted, kind and generous? Here's the good news: It doesn't matter.

To begin with, there is a space for all of us between stimulus and response; to master yourself means to choose your response to stimuli. When someone treats you with contempt, you are not forced to respond in kind; you are a human being who can make conscious choices. You can choose to behave ethically.

Furthermore, these ethical choices improve your emotions. A great deal of modern science shows that this is the case. When we smile, we feel happier. When we express gratitude, we feel more grateful. When we show love, we feel more loving.

Each of us can break the cycle of hatred, starting today. Do you feel that you've been attacked on social media? Respond with warmth, disarming your attacker with forbearance.

Overhear someone make a snide remark about people who think as you do? Respond with kindness. Want to say something insulting about people who disagree with you? Take a breath and show generosity, instead.

Jesus taught, "Love your enemies." You have the power to do this, because love is an attitude you can choose. By choosing it, you will generally find that the person wasn't your enemy after all.

How would that help counter the widespread crisis of contempt? Warmth is contagious. Just as people mimic bad behavior, they mimic good behavior. We all want to be happier and better people.

The best way for each of us to improve society is to model behavior that offers a way forward. Others will follow. It may take a long time to change society, but it won't come sooner than our own individual actions.

Your golden opportunity to start the cultural healing — and to improve your own life — will come as soon as the next confrontation. Will you take that opportunity?

Reading #4

Recommendation, a poem by Thich Nhat Hanh

Promise me,
promise me this day,
promise me now,
while the sun is overhead
exactly at the zenith,
promise me:

Even as they
strike you down
with a mountain of hatred and violence;
even as they step on you and crush you
like a worm,
even as they dismember and disembowel you,
remember, brother,
remember:
man is not our enemy.

The only thing worthy of you is compassion –
invincible, limitless, unconditional.
Hatred will never let you face
the beast in man.

One day, when you face this beast alone,
with your courage intact, your eyes kind,
untroubled
(even as no one sees them),
out of your smile
will bloom a flower.
And those who love you
will behold you
across ten thousand worlds of birth and dying.

Alone again,
I will go on with bent head,
knowing that love has become eternal.
On the long, rough road,
the sun and the moon

will continue to shine.

recommendation - thich nhat hanh – 1965
