



Anger Management: A Buddhist Perspective

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How could we forget those ancient myths that stand at the beginning of all races-- the myths about the dragons that are at the last moment transformed into a princess. Perhaps all the dragons in our lives are only princesses waiting for us to act, just once, with beauty and courage. Perhaps everything that frightens us is, in its deepest essence, something helpless that wants our love.



So you must not be frightened if a sadness rises before you larger than you've ever seen, if an anxiety like light and

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shadows moves over your hands and everything that you do. You must realize that something has happened to you; that life has not forgotten you; it holds you in your hands and not let you fall. Why do you want to shut out of your life any uneasiness, any miseries or depression? For after all, you do not know what work these conditions are doing inside you.

Rainer Maria Rilke, (1984)

Most people live, whether physically, intellectually or morally, in a very restricted circle of their potential being. They make use of a very small portion of their possible consciousness. We all have reservoirs of life to draw upon, of which we do not dream.

William James (1962, 51).

Nature of Anger and Pathways of Management: Introduction

A recent analysis of anger management observes:

All of us get angry- although some people might not believe this. Anger is an emotion that can occur when there is a threat to our self-esteem, our bodies, our property, our ways of seeing the world, or our desires. People differ in what makes them angry. Some people will perceive an event as threatening, while others see no threat in the same event. Our responses to anger differ greatly. Some people are able to experience angry feeling and use them as a way of solving problems rationally and effectively. Others turn their anger inward and engage in self-destructive behavior. Other people strike out when they feel angry. And some refuse to acknowledge their anger—or they confuse with other emotions such as vulnerability or fear.

(Lehmann, 2006)

There may be multi-faceted reasons for getting angry but anger is suffering (*dukkha*) and as a state of mind, anger can affect our health and well-being. Recent discoveries in medicine and health indicate that anger, hostility, anxiety, repression and denial





can affect the strength of the immune system and the robustness of our cardiovascular system, whereas calm, optimism, joy and loving kindness are beneficial to our well-being. At the ethical level, anger is a *kilesa* (defilement) and is a road block on the path to liberation and it emerges as *vyapada* (ill-will), one of the five hindrances. At the social level, anger generates conflicts and when this state deteriorates, there is confrontation and violence. Anger according to the *suttas* lie dormant—"the sleeping passions" (*patigha anusaya*) and this may emerge at the level of our thoughts or physical activity. Even a baby boy lying in the cot is attached to the body and has a proclivity to generate anger by sounds and physical expression.

We tend to ignore the simple fact that the origin of violence is in anger. The Buddha showed how anger can be very counter-productive, and he said getting angry with another person is like lighting a fire which burns within oneself and it harms oneself more than the other person. Repentance and guilt, as well as humiliation and punishment may follow what one does in an angry frame of mind. Anger also may be rooted in bias and prejudice and thus an inability to look at an issue with openness and impartiality. Though there may be a point in anger at an injustice (moral anger/righteous indignation), such anger rests on the fence between the wholesome and the unwholesome and at any time deteriorate into violence---history has proved this point in struggles against injustice. While moral silence at injustice, moral deafness at injustice (lack of sensitivity) are unwholesome, the response to injustice needs to take a positive and mature path

If anger is suffering, it is necessary to understand the causes of anger and the unhealthy and healthy ways of managing anger.

As I have mentioned in an earlier study, in the sermons of the Buddha, there are number of ways of dealing with negative emotions: Taking precautions through *restraint*; *abandoning* them once they have emerged, not leaving room for them to emerge in the future, develop positive emotions and stabilize the positive emotions once they have emerged; *remedying* them by *antidotes like loving kindness and forgiveness*; *transforming anger to endurance and understanding their true nature through insight* (de Silva, 2005).

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Transformation of negative emotions like anger into positive insights and positive personality qualities is what Carl Jung called ‘emotional alchemy’, converting brass into gold. In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition this process is described through the metaphor of the peacock, though she eats poison, it is transformed into a spectacle of varied colourful feathers.. In Buddhism, though we consider anger as a defilement (*kilesa*) at the level of the *sila*, at the level of insight meditation, anger is considered as just phenomena or *dhamma* that ‘emerge, stay for a while and pass away’. At this level it is neither good nor bad, neither yours nor mine, it is an impersonal process. At the meditative level whether it is *samatha* or *vipassana*, anger emerges as *vyapada*. It can emerge in a subtle way, when one reacts to the fact that “today the meditation is not working well”. One should shift gears into the impersonal mood (without personalizing), develop patience and persistence, generate energy but just let the process develop with its own momentum. Even in the emergence of boredom in meditation, there is a subtle form of anger. Anger in such contexts is a form of ‘reactivity’. Refraining from identifying oneself with anger is referred to as de-centering in mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (de Silva, 2008).

Thus we do not throw away the anger, jealousy and remorse but convert them into positives without being imprisoned in negativities. The Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh has captured this transformation in a beautiful phrase: “No lotus without cow dung”!

A technique, I used in my clinical practice is based on the use of the “componential theory” of emotions, breaking an emotion like anger, fear and sadness into different facets and taking these aspects one by one: **the body, feelings, thoughts, desires and social contexts**. I also use the framework of the *satipatthana* in working on emotions. The initial obstructions come from those who refuse to acknowledge the presence of anger, those who repress **them**, find escape routes, react to them without knowing that this is occurring and use various types of ‘defence mechanisms’ (a concept introduced by Sigmund Freud). Those who are subject to moral anger and describe it as ‘righteous indignation’ add another layer to the negativities of anger, as they have found a way of justifying anger. Freud would refer to this feature as ‘rationalisation’. Other relevant defence mechanism linked



to anger are repression, identification, reaction formation, projection (of responsibility on others), while sublimation may take a wholesome turn, converting the energy of anger to a positive turn: a boy who is angry at the extremely unexpected failure at an examination may take to music or sports, like channelling a river that floods for cultivation.

Acceptance and seeing their anger with clarity is the first step in a sound therapeutic approach. Self-deceptions, facades, rationalizations and worst of all denying responsibility are the initial targets of awareness on the road toward recovery. Such deceptions prevent one from seeing one's true nature, and this condition is described as a state of self-alienation and lack of authenticity or sincerity in one's being. The Buddha advised Rahula to consider his mind as a mirror, and that is the path to self-knowledge.

The Emotion Profile of Anger

First let us look at the emotion profile of anger and then explore ways of managing anger. Simple anger is a reflex of reacting when something obstructs our plans; for example we kick the ground in a mood of frustration. Anger proper is based on a belief that there is an offence committed to oneself and the desire to set the offence right or retaliate. Indignation is the anger over a moral principle we cherish, like not keeping to a promise and violating the essential ingredient of a good friendship or on a more objective scale, seeing the injustice done to an innocent man, whose cheap labour is exploited. If you look at the range of angry feelings, there is a whole range from slight annoyance to rage; sulking is passive anger; exasperation is outliving one's patience. Revenge takes time for reflection and holding a grudge is long-standing resentment.

Hatred compared with anger is an enduring, and intense feeling. It is also a cumulative condition, and also may go underground till it comes out or becomes distorted into forms like sarcasm and cynicism. Anger may take a superiority stance, feelings like disgust and contempt towards the hated person. Hatred is more a disposition or an emotional attitude than a moving emotion. Anger also becomes blended with other emotions like fear and suspiciousness.

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Envy and jealousy are blend emotions but depending for their existence on anger. Malicious envy is unjustified hatred directed towards some one's good fortune, and also to pray that this good fortune collapses, even if one does not get it. Admiration envy is different—it is the desire to emulate others. Jealousy is a blend emotion with the flavour of anger: fear of losing something one cherishes, like one's girl friend; shame, as one's self-image is being threatened by a third party; sadness, as we are loosing something closer to our heart; ambivalence-love and hatred towards your girl friend or beloved. Another subtle inroad of anger into an emotion is in boredom. It is because of this all pervading quality of anger, that some one compared anger to the quality of salt while cooking a curry, as almost all negative emotions have the flavour of anger or a more subtle form of aversion. Aversion (*dosa*) is found in boredom, pathological sadness/depression, and is a quiet partner in the pathologies of greed and of course in sadism and masochism.

There is a subtle form of anger which lies at the bottom of general depressive moods, strange enough among affluent people and this theme is the subject of a lively television drama by Alan de Bottom, *Status Anxiety*: it is a restlessness in the midst of plenty, and emerges specially in a society that overvalues external goods that generates envy and competition rather than compassion. He observes, “it is a strange melancholy often haunting inhabitants of democracies in the midst of abundance”. (Botton, 2004, 52-53). Studies of the politics of emotion indicate that such emotions like envy coupled with pathological greed generate an epidemiology, that needs treatment observed the philosopher Ameli Rorty

One of the most powerful causes of immediate anger release is physical interference, and here the role of the body in anger is crucial but psychological insults of a denigrating nature may have a greater hold of the mind. We need some restraint at the level of verbal expression, as this is an immediate route for anger behaviour. Thoughts are more tangible and therapies like cognitive therapy focus on the thoughts. During recent times many therapeutic traditions in the west have integrated the contemplative approach to therapy focused on mindfulness. Mindfulness techniques may be focused on the body, specially breathing patterns, feelings, thoughts and desires.



Paul Ekman, world's foremost exponent of emotion studies says that it is harder to be attentive and mindful when one is angry, but if we have cultivated mindfulness, it is possible to step back, and then it is possible exercise a choice as to how you may respond; for instance you may try to understand why and excuse the person who provoked you due to some stress of the person (Ekman, 2003, 73)

Also, we can be aware of negative techniques like stonewalling: "More often shown by men than women, in whom the stonewaller won't respond to his partner's emotions". Not communicating and registering silence may turn out to be a form of anger.

One of the western traditions using mindfulness techniques defines their practice: "Consciously bringing awareness to you here-and-now experience with openness, interest and receptiveness" (Harris, 2006). The facets of mindfulness include:

Living in the present; engaging fully in what you are doing rather than getting lost in thoughts; allowing your feelings to be what they are, letting them come and go rather than trying to control them. When we observe our private experiences in this manner even painful feelings appear to be less threatening and such practice may transform our relationship with painful feelings and thoughts. This is a transformative education of the emotions. The following verse has been displayed in the office room/living room of some of my clients who came for counseling:

The Guest House

This human being is a guesthouse
Every morning is a new arrival
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
Some momentary awareness comes
As an unexpected visitor
Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they are're a crowd of sorrows,
Who violently sweeps your house
Empty of it's furniture
Still treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
For some new delight.





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The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
 Meet them at the door laughing,
 And invite them in.
 Be grateful whoever comes, because each has been sent
 As a guide from beyond

(Rumi)

There is a kind of clarity that is precise and the direct experience of what comes and goes in our minds, our feelings, thoughts and also to some extent our bodily experience. We have a habit of pushing out of awareness what we dislike and repressing them or finding escape routes. There is also a method Krishnamurti used called “choiceless awareness”, as described in the poem, “The Guest House”, where the mind is able to open itself, and instantly know and recognize what is arising, and incessantly discern its true nature, non-conceptually by the mind., observe the flow of mental images and sensations just as they arise, without engaging in criticism or praise.

Also compassion, forgiveness, acceptance and openness add a new sense of space to the mind. This process frees us from constantly judging others and oneself, with a whole range of categoricals, of what people ought and should do.

Buddhism & Anger Management: The Subtle Inroads of Aversion

The Buddhist discourses have a whole range of anger words: some of these terms are ill will (*vyāpāda*) which is one of the hindrances, *kodha* (anger), annoyance (*upaghāta*), malice (*upanāha*) and fret (*parilāha*). But *dosa* is one of the roots of all unwholesome states along with *lobha* (greed) and delusion (*moha*), and *dosa* refers to all states of aversion. It may be observed that fear, judgment and boredom are also forms of aversion: although we generally don't think of them as such, fear and judgment are all forms of aversion. When we examine them, we see that they are based on our dislike of some aspects of experience. With the mind full of dislike, full of wanting to separate or withdraw from our experience, it is difficult to explore the present moment in a state of discovery. Just as we react to physical pain we react to unpleasant psychological feelings and emotions. Thus it appears that anger or reactivity colours almost all negative emotions. But one of the problems as Joseph





Goldstein points out is that often we are not aware as to what emotion is present and whether it is wholesome or unwholesome. In his book, *Insight Meditation* (Goldstein, 1993), he mentions a number of steps in the right direction: as the emotions that appear in the mind have no clear boundaries and no definite sense of beginnings and endings, it is necessary to take care to recognize each emotion as it arises and to learn to distinguish among subtle differences; secondly, as the negative emotions are unpleasant we do not acknowledge them, and clear recognition has to be followed by acceptance, as the emotions often do not emerge as a single emotion but in constellation, both of these skills are necessary. Thirdly, the most difficult thing to learn is to open ourselves to the whole range of feelings/emotions without identifying with them. Thus there is a point of paradox that a collection of negative emotions provide raw material for insight meditation. Important thing first is to take responsibility for what emerges in the mind and body, change perspectives and as you move into deep meditation to cut through the chains of identification. The change from accepting responsibility for one's emotions and then shift to a process of disengaging from mechanisms of identification is one of the deepest shifts in the practice of insight meditation. In concluding this most insightful description and analysis of the transition from emotional bondage to emotional liberation, Goldstein says that the practice of *vipassana* can be a wonderful experience, as this gives us the power to observe our own mind.

Ven.Nyanaponika discussing the value of bare attention says that, “The greater part of man-made suffering in the world comes not from deliberate wickedness as from ignorance, heedlessness, thoughtlessness, rashness and lack of self-control. Very often a single moment of mindfulness or wise reflection would have prevented a far-reaching sequence of misery or guilt” (Nyanaponika, 1975, 39). Exercising the inner breaks of self-control and slowing help us to free ourselves from our constant reactivity to unpleasant situations and experiences.

Meditation Techniques

The term *samatha* refers to a state of mind which has been brought to a rest and is focused for instance on breathing and limited to that without allowing it to wander. It is a state of calm and clarity,

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which prepares the ground for gaining insight (*vipassana*). The insight meditator uses his concentration as a tool to deal with the encountering of illusory constructs, which prevent him from seeing reality. With the practice of insight meditation you gradually move away from thoughts of “me” and “mine”, and see anger as an experience that emerge and cease. It is a process, which does not belong to you or me. This helps us to refrain from concealing anger, get obsessed with, rationalize it or for that matter even to escape. As venerable Nyanaponika points out, there is a twilight world of frustrated desires, suppressed resentments, vacillations, ambivalence—all drawing nourishment from subliminal tendencies described by the pali term *anusaya*: at the level of negative emotions *patigha* (aversion), *rāga* (lust) and *māna* (conceit) are important character traits out of seven *anusayas*. (Nyanaponika, 1986, 7). Techniques of insight at a deeper level make us see anger as ‘construction’.

During regular meditation sittings, if these disturbing thoughts and feelings intrude, the method of naming and identifying negative feelings and emotions is a useful technique. We can also make them objects of meditation. The *Satipatthāna* (Fourfold Mindfulness Practice) offers number of entry points to deal with anger: Body and breath; feelings; thoughts. Anger as a negative emotion first manifest via the body and breathing patterns, then as painful feelings, and then with the admixture of thoughts, desires, memory etc we see a full-blown emotion. It is fed by the subliminal proclivity of aversion (*patigha anusaya*).

Body and Breathing in Anger

Breathing is controlled by the autonomic nervous system and so generally does not come within average consciousness, unless we develop awareness of the breath as a special exercise. The central nervous system functions when we receive and process messages and makes conscious choices. When we are stressed or experience sudden anger, breathing patterns change. Evolution has developed ways to manage ‘emergency reactions’ of flight (fear) and fight (anger), which may convey useful messages. But when the alarm bells ring, a celebrated boxer, and I think is supposed to have bitten his rival’s ear! Joseph Ledoux a neuroscientist working on such emergency reactions says that at that time the emotional brain hijacks the rational



brain. According to him in impulsive reactions, the part of the brain called the *amygdala* is active begin to respond before the *neocortex* processes the information and makes a finely tailored response.

The practice of regular mindfulness, observing the breath in quiet moments of meditation, helps the breathing patterns to get habituated into a rhythmical, quiet and steady flow, a pattern that is both healthy and wholesome. Thus instead of engaging in ‘damage control’ after developing a violent character, it is better to take preventive remedies by developing mindfulness as a routine activity in one’s daily agenda. *Ānāpānasati* when blended with compassion helps to reduce blood pressure, stress and tension, minimize the adrenal release, the dilation of the pupils, sweating, rapid respiration and in general irregular breathing patterns. Thus regular mindfulness practice is able to restore the even rhythms of our lives as a whole. As the breath stands at the threshold between voluntary and involuntary bodily functions, this practice helps us to be mindfulness of lot of our mechanical and automatic acts. The recent discoveries in *psychoneuro-immunology*: that the body is a second brain has added a new dimension to mindfulness of the body meditation. (Work of Candace Pert, *Molecules of Emotion*); Joseph Ledoux, *The Emotional Brain*).

Feelings

As we are dealing with anger, I wish to direct attention to the role of feelings in emotional experience, for mindfulness of feelings (*vedanānupassanā*) provides a basic key to unravel crucial emotional issues:

This therefore, is a crucial point in the conditioned origin of Suffering, because it is at this point that **Feeling may give rise to passionate emotion of varying types**, and it is, therefore, here that one may be able to break that fatuous concatenation. If in receiving a sense impression, one is able to pause and stop at the phase of Feeling, and make it, in its first stage of manifestation, the object of Bare Attention, feeling will not be able to originate Craving or other passions. (Nyanaponika, 1975, 69, Heart of Buddhist Meditation).

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The germinal sate of what later develops into an emotion with great speed is found in pleasurable, painful or neutral feelings.

When experiencing a pleasurable feeling, the monk knows: “I experience a pleasurable feeling”, when experiencing a painful feeling, he knows “I experience a painful feeling”, and when experiencing a neutral feeling, he knows “I experience a neutral feeling”

Pleasurable feelings have a tendency to rouse subliminal lust, and painful feelings to rouse subliminal aversion. So, if you just notice a pleasurable or a painful feeling without attachment or aversion you prevent them from getting converted into lust, anger, fear etc. Three very important and interesting suttas shed further light on this issue: *Culavedalla-sutta*, *Bahuvedaniya-sutta* and the *Salāyatana vibhanga-sutta* (Middle Length Sayings, 44, 59, 137).

Pleasurable feeling is pleasant when it persists and painful when it changes; painful feeling is painful when it persists but pleasurable when it changes. *Bahuvedaniya sutta* analyses 108 types of feelings; *Salāyatana vibhanga* 36 kinds of feeling; six kinds of joy based on household life; six kinds of joy based on renunciation; six kinds of grief based on household life and six kinds of grief based on renunciation; six kinds of equanimity based on household life and six kinds of equanimity based on renunciation.

Thoughts

“Herein a monk knows the mind with lust (*rāga*), as with lust; the mind without lust (*vitarāga*) as without lust; the mind with hate (*dosa*) as with hate; the mind without hate (*sadosa*) as without hate; the mind with delusion (*moha*) as with delusion, the mind without delusion (*samoha*) as without delusion, and ...the shrunken mind, distracted mind, undeveloped etc

Contemplation of Mind Objects

When anger is present, he knows, anger is present. He knows how the arisen of non-arisen comes to be; he knows how the rejection of non-arisen anger comes to be, and he knows how the non-arising in the future of the rejected anger comes to be.



Anger Management and EQ

Today, exponents of emotional intelligence (EQ) point out that the way we handle emotions need a special kind of intelligence. Daniel Goleman in his work, the best seller, *Emotional Intelligence* outlines the nature of the concept, and below is a Buddhist adaptation of his criteria.

1. The ability to access one's own emotions, discriminate different emotions, and understand their nature.
2. Empathise and understand the emotions of others.
3. The ability to distinguish between morally wholesome and unwholesome emotions in one self and others.
4. The ability to regulate one's emotions.
5. The ability to be motivated by healthy emotions.

In Buddhism emotional intelligence is supplemented by contemplative intelligence.

Though 'emotional intelligence' is now recommended for training professionals, as well as being incorporated in a school curriculum, twenty six centuries back, the Buddha has provided a comprehensive theory and practice for the education of emotions, in life, liberation and therapy. Anger management is only one area of his skills in managing emotions without repression, deception and disguise (*vancaka dhamma*), escape and avoidance.

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