

Respecting Anger (3 of 5) Diffusing Anger and Its Expression

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

diffuse, settle, motivation, irritation, relax, grounded, chronic, attuned, motivation, hostility, sign, rebirth, hell, persistent, hindrance

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Good morning, good day, good evening. We are continuing with the discussion of anger. I said that anger is a sign or a message. One way of understanding this is that somewhere or other, something is wrong. Some wisdom is needed in order not to assume automatically that what is wrong is out in the world or within oneself. But it is a sign that something is off: something needs attention.

One of the first things to do is to learn from anger. Find out what it is. Stop and take a good look at what is really going on. Meditation is an especially great place to observe anger because we (hopefully) don't have to say anything to anyone or do anything in the world. We can just be present and feel it.

We want to learn from anger. One thing to learn is how strongly anger motivates us – that is part of the danger of anger. Sometimes anger comes with a very strong impulse that motivates us to do something: to speak very forcefully to someone or to act forcefully. That motivation sometimes has the upper hand. For example, that is why people lose touch with themselves when they speak angrily. The motivation is so strong, so powerful, that they do not really know what is happening in their body, heart, and mind. In extreme versions, they can be as if possessed by anger. They are not really in touch with what is happening inside.

Losing touch with ourselves when we're angry is a great hindrance, a great shortcoming. Wisdom, clarity, and the ability to act and speak wisely in the world are the result of being grounded in one's body and present here. That can happen even when we're angry, and then we don't lose ourselves in the anger. So we are training ourselves to stay present in the body.

It helps to think about the motivation behind anger. Ask yourself: What is the motivation here? What is the desire? What do you wish to see happen? Regardless of what the degree of anger might be – it could be irritation or relatively mild annoyance – we ask: What is that?

Asking this question becomes particularly important when anger, annoyance, irritation, or hostility has become low-key and chronic, having nothing to do with any particular incident that has happened. Rather it has become a way of living – an attitude that we have. The assessment of chronic anger and hostility is very different from the analysis of incident-specific anger, where something is happening right in front of us.

Chronic anger that goes on for a long time is particularly debilitating. It tends to be a powerful force that prevents people from being in touch with themselves. They might feel pleasure in the anger because the energy of anger is so strong that they feel themselves humming with it. Actually, there is a big cost to enjoying anger – we lose something important.

The Buddha gave a list of the downsides of anger, especially a chronic persistent stream of it. Maybe he gave the list to people to motivate them to do something about their anger and not live in anger. He said that the ill effects of anger include looking ugly, being in pain, making mistakes, the loss of property, falling into disputes and disgrace, loss of friends, and rebirth in hell. Maybe seeing all the things on that list motivates some of you.

I believe that one of the ways to respect anger is not to give into it as a motivation to act, but rather to take the

time to feel and know it in the body. The body can process this. The body knows how to unfold, relax, open up, and reveal. When we take the time to sit down and feel anger in the body, sometimes it gets stronger. Murderous rage can arise. When we are sitting still, the force of anger can be very powerful, as if something is erupting inside of us. But we do not act on it or express it. Meditation is about letting that eruption happen or letting the whole thing dissipate and dissolve.

Sometimes what keeps anger going is telling ourselves stories, repeating to ourselves the injury that has been done. It is the repetition of certain trains of thought that keep the anger, annoyance, or irritation going. To sit quietly and feel it in the body is an alternative to all those stories.

You can allow the body to do the deeper process of what it wants to do. It might be an eruption or it might be a dissolving. It is not your job to choose which it is, but to really attune to see what needs to happen. Hopefully, you can be quiet and still enough, or go for a long enough walk, that you allow the whole process to come to some completion.

In ordinary life, especially with incident-specific anger, where we have to act, it is very useful to learn how to diffuse anger. We learn how to be with the anger so that it does not automatically trigger actions. Here again, we

train ourselves, until it is second nature, to be mindful of the body, so we can feel what is happening.

The body can be a source of stability: come back to the body, just sit or stand, and feel your feet on the ground. The body can also be the means by which we diffuse some of the energy, tension, and motivational force of anger that interfere with our ability to be attuned more deeply to what is happening. We can attune to the deeper emotions that might be the bigger issue. We can attune to the situation we are in and take a closer look at what is happening. We can attune to ourselves: if anger arises because of a story we're telling ourselves, we question the story. Do we have the right perspective?

We tune into the body and find ways to diffuse some of the energy of anger by breathing deeply and relaxing. We relax on the exhale and breathe in and feel the expansion of the ribcage on the inhale, as a way of grounding ourselves in the body and in feeling the primary experience of breathing.

Notice your posture when you're angry. Maybe the posture doesn't lend itself to diffusion, to settling. If both hands are in a fist, it may not be difficult to relax the fist and open the hand. Doing that is part of the diffusion process: we are calming and quieting down.

Diffusion is not the same thing as repression, denial, or escaping. The purpose of diffusion is to relax or settle some of the ways in which we get disconnected from ourselves, so we can feel more deeply what's happening and be more present. We relax the motivational triggers that might come with anger so that we are not speaking or acting from anger. Then we can feel and sense what's going on.

Each of us probably has our own special place in the body where anger is most expressed. This might be tension and tightness in the belly. It might be in the chest. It might be in the face or jaws. It might be in the hands. Sometimes it is in the eyes. I've seen angry people whose eyes feel tense, fixed, and locked in. It might be in the forehead, where we get headaches because of all the tension associated with irritation and anger.

Wherever your place is, get to know it. When you go about your life and there is an incident of anger, you will know to go to that place and relax and settle. Learn skills of diffusion. Learn the skill of being grounded in the present so that anger doesn't get the upper hand, and so that you can learn from the anger, rather than act on the anger.

Expressing anger is not something we want to do very often. I once asked one of my Buddhist teachers if it

was ever appropriate to express anger. The teacher said, “Yes, once in a blue moon, once in a great while, maybe once every five years.” It was fascinating to me that there might be a time – but not that often.

We want to have the ability to step back. The advantage of that is if anger involves something that needs to be addressed in our life, it is often more usefully addressed when motivated by emotions and ideas other than those coming from anger itself. In this stepping back, we do not deny that the incident was anger-producing. We do not deny the difficulty of anger, but we question the motivational value of anger. Anger is rarely useful as a motivational force.

Some people are quick to defend anger because a lot of good gets done in the world with anger when people are motivated for justice and fight for it. Maybe that is good, but it is not so healthy for the angry person. I feel a little sad when people justify anger for that reason. I wish that instead, they would find an equal or even stronger motivation arising from compassion. Don't justify anger if there are better motivations to get the job done.

Diffusing anger. Today, if you find yourself irritated, annoyed, angry, rageful, simmering, resentful – whatever you might feel – see what you can do by tuning into your body. Tune into what is going on in the body and see what the body wants to do. See if the

body wants to relax. See if the body wants to be energized. If you do this during a walk (as I've said before, I process strong anger with walks), does the body want to walk faster or slower? What does the body want to do? Also, explore where you can relax. What helps you settle the emotion? Relaxing (or settling) is a personal skill that each person needs to learn in their own way. How do you diffuse anger? Thank you.