

Respecting Anger (2 of 5) Anger as a Signal

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We are continuing this series on respecting and being wise with anger. I think there is a lot of wisdom in seeing anger as a signal or message – as a messenger. To see anger as a signal means that we slow down to see what the message is about. What is it a signal of? What is it a symptom of? In mindfulness practice, rather than giving free rein to anger, giving into it without deeper reflection, you want to stop for anger (like a bumper sticker might say, “I stop for anger”) in order to attend to it and see what is going on.

There is a lot of energy in anger. We want to be able to use our energy in a healthy and appropriate way. It is not always appropriate or healthy for us to follow and give in to anger, allowing the anger to express itself as it

wants to, without a deeper respect for and attention to what is going on.

I think it is a good policy to think of anger as an invitation to stop and take a deeper look: “What’s really going on here?”

I feel there are two very interesting aspects of anger. First, in terms of what else is going on, anger can be a reaction to something we are feeling inside. In fact, it might be useful to assume it is always a reaction to something we’re feeling inside, even though on the surface, we might think we’re feeling angry at something outside of us.

For instance, we might get angry at technology: it is technology’s fault that I’m angry. (I’m just making this up – it didn’t happen this morning.) The technology is not working, and that not working encounters my desire for it to work – to have everything go smoothly. I have a certain desire, and that desire is frustrated. That frustration is uncomfortable. That discomfort is something I don’t like to feel. Now I react to the discomfort of the frustration. I want to fix something in the world, and the discomfort of that frustrated desire gives birth to anger towards the technology.

It could also be that our technology is very important to us, so when it is not working properly, what arises inside

is fear. The fear is uncomfortable. Anger might arise because we don't like to be uncomfortable. It is not so much that we don't like to be afraid – we simply do not like to be uncomfortable. Or maybe we don't like being afraid, so we blame something or attack something. We direct our anger in some direction, externally or internally.

There are many different difficult emotions we can feel inside that are too uncomfortable for our system to feel, so we want to blame. The outrage and strength of anger can arise out of an inability to stay present for something inside that is uncomfortable. In that case, the message of anger is just that: something is happening here that I'm too uncomfortable to feel. Don't be sidetracked by the issue of technology, which is external. Whatever is happening externally goes through a few different steps inside of you before it becomes anger.

Over many years of being a Buddhist teacher, I've noticed that people are very quick to justify anger. When I give a talk on anger, inevitably it seems like someone always wants to justify anger: in certain circumstances, isn't it okay to be angry? Yes – depending on how we define anger. It is never okay to be hostile. But when we justify even justifiable anger, we miss an opportunity to understand ourselves better. That is what we want to do with mindfulness practice.

As we understand better the internal steps that happen before anger occurs, then it is also possible to stop earlier. If there is fear, we can stop and experience the fear, and discern if there is another response to fear, another way of going forward that does not require anger. If there is frustrated desire, when we recognize that, is there a different way to go forward, rather than getting angry at technology? Can we reassess the desire? Can we have a different relationship to frustration? Maybe one possibility is to just let ourselves be frustrated, and not allow that to expand or grow into what we would call anger.

Sometimes anger is a message about what is going on more deeply within us. Sometimes anger is a sign that we should look and see what is happening in the world – that the world does need our attention, that something in the world *is* the source of the anger and has to be taken into account. Maybe that external source can be seen, understood, and responded to better when we have relaxed around the anger and looked at the fear, discomfort, loneliness, or despair – all the uncomfortable emotions that might be the trigger for anger.

If we can learn how to breathe with and rest with those feelings, then we can look out towards what is happening in the world, rather than acting

unconsciously or unwisely out of anger. I like to use anger as a reminder to study the situation. Study what is happening here. Study what is happening inside me. Study what is happening externally.

I want to say a few more words about the inner study of oneself. I said anger is often a result of difficult emotions that precede it in a sequence of steps. Sometimes anger is the preceding step for other emotions. For example, when we feel angry, our reaction to that might be to shut it down – to feel ashamed, embarrassed, afraid, or angry towards the anger. We can have reactions to anger that are not so healthy.

Many years ago, I read that someone claimed that the most common cause for psychosomatic illnesses is repressed anger or even just anger by itself. If people get angry enough, they can have a heart attack. Sometimes depression is a symptom of repressed anger. For some people, giving a certain degree of freedom to anger that has been repressed is really important: discovering their anger is necessary.

As I mentioned earlier, many years ago someone taught me that we experience our strength in anger, and if we let go of anger too quickly, we might let go of our strength as well. We want to keep the strength, so if we

are too quick to let go of anger, we might be throwing out the baby with the bathwater.

There are two things I find invaluable to do for myself when I feel angry. One is to sit and meditate – really take the anger into account and stay present for it. The other is to go for a long walk. There is something about the long walk that gives the anger a different kind of freedom than when I'm meditating. It courses through me. I stay in my body and keep paying attention, staying here for the anger until something deeper about it is revealed – until I understand the trigger or the key aspect that is holding it in place.

Anger is to be respected as a messenger, a signal. If we repress and hide our anger, we just get bottled up. This can be very unhealthy psychologically and physically. For some people, it is very important to allow them some expression and space to feel anger and be angry, so they can study the anger, stop and look at it more deeply, and see what is going on.

To sum up, we see anger as a signal, and as a messenger. Anger is always a secondary phenomenon, a secondary response to something – often a secondary response to some kind of discomfort that we're experiencing inside. Anger towards things in the world, and even anger towards ourselves, has probably gone through some steps before anger actually arises.

Some other emotions, attitudes, or beliefs happen in sequence before it becomes anger.

If you end up feeling angry today, you might take some time to study it. Look at it and see what might be underneath it, or what might be the trigger for the anger internally – not an external trigger in the world. See what other emotions are connected to it. If you end the day without any anger whatsoever, but you're not feeling well – if you feel depressed, sad, or despairing in some way – you might want to take a little peek underneath that. See if some anger might be there. You won't necessarily see it there – it is not necessarily there. But sometimes anger is a key that can unlock some forms of depression and despair when people are stuck in them.

There is so much to be said about anger. Hopefully, these simple words give you something to look at and study. We will continue tomorrow. Thank you.