

Respecting Anger (4 of 5) Wise Speech When Angry

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Here we are at the fourth talk on anger. Today I want to talk about speaking when we are angry. It is one thing to be able to be by oneself, meditating and processing anger that way. It is another thing to manage our anger wisely when we are relating to people and need to talk, work, and do things with others.

Certainly, I hope the mindfulness approach with emotions and looking deeper at anger is supportive for engaging in the world when we are angry. The mindfulness approach to anger is an alternative to acting out or venting anger.

Catharsis or venting is usually not helpful. It may be helpful for people who have very deep repressed anger and never have a chance to let it come to the surface. They might go to a safe location, alone in their room or perhaps, a forest, and express their anger to a tree. To finally let their anger come to the surface so they can address it. But generally, venting or a cathartic expression of anger often tends to strengthen and grow the anger. Venting anger at people is counterproductive because it tends to fuel it.

The classic Buddhist teaching on anger is that anger is a fire that burns the person who has it. The externality of venting anger sometimes does not allow the venter to feel the cost and the burning. But in fact, it is tremendously costly for the person who is venting anger. It is not really a release of pressure. So, expressing or venting anger is usually not suggested.

Repressing anger is also not healthy. Repressing anger can create tremendous problems and usually is counterproductive. Sooner or later, there may be an explosion or the anger and resentment can seed out in unseen ways.

The alternative to expressing or repressing anger that I would like to suggest today is managing the anger. To know we are angry and find the tools for how to be with anger so it does not need to be expressed or

repressed. We can learn to interact with other people while having the anger somehow helpfully managed.

To manage anger is not to automatically give in to it, but to have an alternative way of being with anger. One way of being with anger is to be rooted, grounded, and stable in ourselves. To have cultivated a strong habit of being connected and grounded in the physical body. To take a stable posture in the physical body. To learn how to manage and hold agitation, restlessness, and emotional pressures that arise in the body. That is phenomenally useful.

We are learning through mindfulness practice to expand our capacity to experience difficult emotions. If our capacity is small, then the difficult emotions can spill over, explode, or become detrimental. We're learning steadily in this practice to expand our capacity for more and more difficult emotions, including anger. One of the ways to hold it, to be with it, is to drop into the body, feel stability in the body, and let the anger be felt as part of the body, instead of becoming the anger or identifying with the anger, which is a difficult state to be in. If anything, we identify with the body, and anger is a subset of it.

As we manage the anger, we may have some ability to investigate: to look inside and understand the characteristics of the anger. Is this anger unique to the

current incident? Or is there a long history or pattern of resentment, complaining, indignation, or stress connected to how we are feeling now? In fact, there might even be a continuous chronic feeling of irritation or annoyance that is there regardless of whether we are with others or not. This chronic annoyance may be like little waves that are always moving across the ocean, and now a big wave (anger) is forming.

If it is chronic, we might relate to it very differently than if it is just an incident in the moment. With an incident in the moment, there might be a real danger. If anger is a symptom of an immediate danger or problem and we recognize what the problem is, then maybe there will be less need to be angry. We can find ways to address the problem.

This is where learning how to speak mindfully is phenomenally useful. One of the ways to speak mindfully is, again, to be rooted and stable in the body as we speak so that we can track what we are saying. We might even be able to track what we are about to say. We are managing all this, not to repress anything, but so the best parts of ourselves come out. It is managing ourselves so we can stay free, not managing ourselves so we bottle ourselves up. We might feel like we are freer if we vent our anger and spew out what we were feeling. But that is not really freedom. That is a loss of freedom, even though there may be a release

and an ease in which things are spilling out of us. By managing the anger, we stay close to that place where there is deeper wisdom, deeper connectivity, and deeper choice and freedom.

So to learn to speak, connected to the body, being aware of what is happening here. As it becomes second nature to be mindful of speech and ourselves, there may be an opportunity to pay attention to *why* we are speaking. What is the motivation? What are we accomplishing with the speech? Some speech are only daggers we are throwing at other people to hurt them. Some speech is to try to solve the problem. Some speech is to tell someone that what they are doing is not acceptable. Letting them know in strong terms, “You cannot do this,” is very different from saying, “You’re a terrible person,” attacking them with horrible language or swear words. So what is the purpose of the language? Is it to hurt the person? Is it to problem solve? Is it to be able to let the person know what we are feeling?

The content of what we say is also important. One thing that can be helpful is learning the art of “I statements.” Many years ago, I was a TA (teaching assistant) in college for the department chair. He was treating me in some inappropriate way, like a servant. He was asking me to do all kinds of things, putting unreasonable pressure and demands on me. I got furious with him,

but I had enough sense to know this is not a person to yell at or be angry at. Yet, I also didn't want to repress the anger. I felt this needed to be addressed.

So, I went to him and I stood there. I was shaking because I was so angry. And I made "I statements." I said something like: "What I'm experiencing now, given what you said and what you're asking me to do, is I feel really hurt. I feel really upset." It was obvious that I was upset, but I wasn't saying anything about him and what he did. I was just saying the impact it had on me. And that was all I needed to do. He backed down. He understood the impact. He understood what he had done. Then the whole thing became a lot better.

So sometimes sharing the impact – it can be powerful to tell people, "When you do X, I feel afraid." Some people, when they realize the impact, will switch and change. But if we yell and they yell back, then the whole thing escalates.

The idea is to learn how to speak in ways where the speaking deescalates our own anger, where it diffuses it – settles it out, spreads it out, making it weaker or less concentrated. I also like the word "defuse," pronounced slightly differently, meaning to take the fuse out, like out of a bomb. So we are diffusing (or defusing) our anger.

We are tracking ourselves so we get the feedback that we may be speaking in a way that is increasing the level of anger rather than decreasing it. I was angry at someone some years ago, and I asked to meet with this person privately. So we did, and we talked. After a while, I could feel myself getting even more upset. I then asked if we could have a timeout, “Can we sit here quietly for a few minutes?” The person was a meditation practitioner so that was easy enough to agree to. After a few minutes of breathing and being present, I was ready to continue the conversation. I was not in a good place to have the conversation until I had a couple of minutes of silence.

So to track ourselves, to manage ourselves, to manage the conversation, and find the balance. Find how to speak and what to speak, how not to attack people when we speak, which is easy to do when we are angry. To speak in appropriate ways that try to get the job done. To be careful we are not spilling over with things that have nothing to do with them. Chronic resentments and chronic hurt that we are carrying with us can bring a lot of pressure along. When we express age-old resentment and frustration we are carrying, we are not really taking care of the situation at hand.

In these few minutes, I want to leave you with two primary ideas. One is to manage your anger and manage it by discovering some stability within. Always look for stability if you can. The other is to explore and be wise about how you speak because sometimes we have to speak when we are angry. Maybe today, if you have an occasion to be angry, irritated, annoyed, or want to complain – don't complain. Don't express annoyance. Don't send barbs out to people. Rather, consider what you can say – maybe an "I statement" that is supportive and appropriate for the situation, that takes care of you and the other person.

If the person has not done the dishes again, don't kind of yell at them. Just say: "Wow, here we are again. The dishes aren't being done. What's happening?" Or: "It's very discouraging. I feel discouraged to see the sink full of dishes again." Leave it at that and see what happens.

Find ways to speak when you are angry. Develop the skill and the wisdom to be able to do that so that your speech is healthy and wise in circumstances when you are angry.

Thank you. We will have one more talk on anger tomorrow.