

# 2016-06-05 Stopping And Looking At Anger

Fri, 9/25 3:46PM • 41:53

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

anger, angry, people, assessment, hostility, fear, situation, feel, stop, threatened, emotions, response, meditation, society, respectful, kinds, impact, person, life, assess

## SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

Good morning, everyone. When Buddhism went to China and Chinese were translating Buddhist texts into Chinese. They did some really wonderful things. And one of the wonderful things was to translate the two core aspects of meditation, to the core kind of processes involved in meditation into the very simple, grounded, ordinary Chinese words for stop, and look, stop and look. And that's their translation of Vipassana. And sammatta, usually translated as concentration and insight and concentration, or insight, and, and, and tranquility. And, but this idea of stopping to look, it's so basic. And sometimes it's really useful in our lives, to stop and look at what's going on. And so what I'd like to do today, is to stop and look at anger. Anger is a really important human emotion, it's kind of, we're kind of wired to become angry, just like we're wired to become afraid and wired to become compassionate and wired in all kinds of ways. And I think it's a task of any human being, to become wise, about the anger, their own anger and the anger around them, to understand it better, and importantly, to learn to stop and look when we're angry. I think it's one of the most useful times to stop and look is when there's anger, as opposed to just acting it out, impulsively. And as a society, it seems to me that it's getting to be particularly important for our society to look at a stop and look at anger as well. The amount of anger that's being fueled, and in our society and political, their presidential debates, these ads presidential campaigns these days, is more than I've ever seen in my lifetime. And so, you know, the when when we've been known for a long time that the political strategy has been to elicit fear and anger in people and anger seems to be particularly strong these days. And so to look at these dynamics, understand it better, I think, is important. I think that all societies and maybe all religions have emphasized teachings, but keeping anger in check, not to give free rein to anger to be careful with anger. One of the things that's changed in the modern world, I believe, is an understanding of the harmful effects of suppressing anger. And how that can build up a lot of pressure that can kind of spill out in unhealthy ways. And so to begin to understand all the dynamics and look deeply inside so that we don't suppress it. But we don't act on it. harmfully is a key thing. One of the first things to consider with anger, I think, didn't mean being careful with the word is that I think it's useful to look at the word as an umbrella word. It's a very broad kind of category or class of emotions. That includes more precise things like, you know, from mild irritation, annoyance, to full blown, full blown blown rage and wrath. And in between, there's all kinds of other kind of variations of this thing. Now, part of the reason to be careful is that many people are ready to have a manifesto of beliefs of opinions about anger very quickly, not taking care to realize that anger is a multifaceted phenomenon. And to have a simple opinion about anger, without looking at the different dimensions of it, I think, you know, it becomes too simplistic or reductionistic. In Buddhism itself, the word that's often translated into English as anger from Pali, literally means hostility. And you get a very different feel for the Buddhist discussions, if you understand they're talking about hostility as opposed to anger. Here in the West, there's often idea of justified anger. Often there's understanding of anchors and has an important role sometimes, and so people are often very quick to want to defend it.

I've seen myself and other Buddhist teachers give talks about anger. And, and, you know, you know, I don't know how often anger is useful to have. Sometimes it's useful, it's appropriate. But I don't know what percentage of times that people are angry, it's useful. I haven't done the statistics in the count. But I suspect it's a minority. I suspect it's a small minority. When I was in the Zen monastery, I was the kitchen manager. And the kitchens are, I think, historically, places where there's a lot of pressure cooker, you know, commercial or industrial kitchens. And so there was a in the monastery kitchen was, you know, hot house for all kinds of strong feelings. And the, and I was I was the manager at the managers team of people and, and back, I was a recipient of lots of anger, and I would feel anger and things. So I went to the teacher said, you know, is it ever appropriate to be angry. And he said, maybe, occasionally. But it's rare. So let's just set, let's just say, we just make up a figure. And you could argue this, you know, you know, just make it up. Let's say that 5% of the time that you're angry, angry, it's an appropriate response to the situation, let's just say five years, whatever, right? It's appropriate. If a Buddhist teacher gives a talk about anger, and the message seems to be Don't be angry in any kind of way. So some of that's more or less the emphasis, or already started nicely, they'll say, they said, anger is not useful. And they talked about working with anger and not being so angry. Inevitably, people will raise their hand, say, but it's useful has an important role. People are so quick to want to defend anger. It's really amazing to me. So I'm going to be very careful today. But I want to say in the outset that there is, whatever this broad category thing is of anger is, there are times when it's appropriate to have a strong emotional response, that sometimes is appropriate way of protecting ourselves or protecting things. And it's inappropriate when I think it contains hostility, hostility is harmful, the person who's hostile, and I think hostility is harmful to the people it's directed towards. So being able to distinguish between when it's useful, and when it's not useful, has a lot to do with the, whether there's hostility in it or not, to recognize what's there. So to stop and look at anger, I'd like to suggest that there are three different areas of anger that we can look at to understand what it is what's going on. And thinking about this, I made up an acronym thinking maybe acronyms might help people to remember. And so the acronym is air a ir. And it's kind of nice, because when people have a lot of anchors who talk about having hot air, or sometimes a lot of pressure, pressurized air, air, it gets all pressurized. So the first is to look at the assessment that's involved. I'll explain these things in the middle of a minute. The second is to look at the impact that the situation has the anger has. And the third is the response response that we want to make to the situation that elicited the anger. So the assessment is an interesting one. So yesterday, I got in my car to drive down here and there was the most humongous bird poop smack in the middle of the you know, of the pet of the driver side of the of the windshield. I mean, I'm sitting I sit down the car, like, it's like front and center. I can't dream I must have seen bigger splashes on the cars before but if I couldn't admit this was like big. And so you know, I was a kaleidoscope of motions came through there was a slight annoyance or not to deal with this. Slight humor and amusement. Maybe a teeny little flip through of maybe kind of little bit anxiety and something like you know, what are the neighbors gonna think of me driving around the car with poop on it, you know, just all kinds of things flitted through and now I've seen it never happened to me, but I've seen cars that were people have thrown eggs at them.

And it looks very similar to what I saw here on my windshield and And when someone throws an egg on your car, usually the emotional response is very different than just bird poop. There's indignation, there's self righteousness, there's often a sense of blame that's directed and I could blame the bird, but, you know, gonna find that bird. You know, and, and you know, and that, particularly if, you know, doesn't elicit the neighborhood fear now I'm afraid of the bird. But if but if I go, but if I but if egg hit my car, it elicits a lot stronger emotions and feelings. wrath, maybe indignation, maybe strong fear, who is my neighbors. And, you know, now I feel cautious around everyone around and all kinds of things happen. And so that, and with that could come in anger that anger might have with hostility in it. And anger might just be a sense of various strong aroused annoyance, this is wrong and something. But what I'm

hoping to do in that example, is to point out that there wasn't a there's a simple assessment that goes on. In those two situations, I recognize it as bird poop, I assess it a certain way. If I had somehow Miss assessed it, Miss, diagnose their situation. So that's an egg, someone threw in like, I would have evaluated in very different way. And in that evaluation, I would have had been had a different response. The anger that we have, often goes through an internal assessment, that happens very fast, sometimes, so fast, we don't even know we're doing it. It's just the truth that goes on. But it goes through here. So I'll kind of paraphrase a quote that I think is very provocative. And now you don't have to agree with it. 100%. Remember, the 5% times that's, so maybe it's maybe it's true enough times, it's a useful quote, to take into account before you protest. The paraphrase is something like this, that and only thing that an enemy can harm is your physical body. to harm your mind, you have to cooperate. You have to get involved in it, you have to react. And so, you know, someone can tell you something about, you know, men who wear blue shirts, or crummy. And I'm wearing a blue shirt. So I can say that maybe, I'm sorry, for those of you in blue. So I can say that, and my chances are that most of you who are wearing blue shirts, you know, like, especially because I'm wearing one. You know, just like, you know, just shrug your shoulders and I guess maybe this is Gil's making a silly, you know, teaching point, you know, let's get on with a point. And you know, it doesn't really have an impact on you just you know, but I could say something else about you. And you would probably get aroused and angry and how could you say that? In that anger you know, you might feel contracted, you might feel hot, you might, your heart rate might go up, your post might go up, your adrenaline gets activated, the fight and flight stimulus is you know, in full gear, and, and it's kind of stressful, it's a stressful thing on the system. So what why one situation, you know, that just I say something, it just goes right through and nothing. And the other situation, the whole big all the system gets gear to gear it up. So what's the assessment? What what assessment are you making? How are you looking at the situation? How are you evaluating and interpreting the situation? So there's a number of many different things to assess. But a very useful one is to assess what is the emotional precursor? For the anger often anger has is a step by step kind of process that involves an emotional precursor or something like that. And I find it very helpful to maybe to look and see, do I feel afraid when something's happened? Is it cause fear? And I have that sometimes anger arises as a reaction response to fear. Do I feel hurt?

And sometimes anger is a response to feeling hurt or do I feel threatened and sometimes anger is a response to feeling a threat so and I find that when I'm have a really good bout of anger going, one of the most useful things I've learned to do is for myself is to go for a walk. And I just love walking, you know, just go for a walk. And so a way of kind of being with the anger, allowing it to be there, and allowing it of course through me, I don't try to inhibit it, I don't try to, you know, say that it's wrong to have it, I just give it I find it going for a good walk is a good place to give an in hindered freedom to the anger, just the feelings, the emotions, the energy in the body. Sometimes I walk fast, because seems to hold it better. And there's let my mind kind of think what it wants to think. But gently move my mind to try to keep keep asking the question, what is this coming out of which is arising out of what is triggering me? What's going on there. And I'll walk until I see if one of those three things were triggered in me was fear hurt, or a sense of threat. And threat too often comes with fear, and a fear of something bad's gonna happen. Once I've discovered one of those three that are there, they don't go, then I'll go, then I'll stop my walk. And often, you know, in my adult life, it's often and then it's time to have a conversation with someone. And then I find the conversations are so much more open to possibilities, so much more cooperatively done. If I go back to the person and say, when you said x, I felt hurt. When you said why I got scared. Right now I feel scared. You know what's going on? And because most people are willing to have a different kind of conversation. If you say I felt hurt, then if you say, You screwed up. No, you're bad. Because then they're defended. They're they're kind of being threatened. And so this assessment thing, what's going on for me what's happening here, I find this very, very important to do takes a while sometimes to get under the under the you know, under the surface of anger to see what's going on. The big aha moment for me in my life, where I kind of began seeing this

was many, over 20 years ago, I was living up on skyline. And I've come home go home at night. And inevitably, someone had their high beams on and the stark mountain road up there. And I'd be angry. So I got curious, stop and look right, get curious. That's kind of the hallmark of insight, practice mindfulness, get curious. So whatever is going on, you know, what's gonna look more carefully? What's it What is this, I got curious, but this anchor, and had enough occurrences, it happened over and over again. And so, and then one day, because I had was training myself to look at it. One day, I saw there was a flash, just before I got angry at the other driver. And that flash that went through was fear. Because that's driving, you know, it's dangerous, you know, to be blinded. And once I saw that flash, then I stopped being angry in future high beams, then I then I stayed with a fear, and then try to figure out how to drive more cautiously and carefully. That I didn't do if I got angry. And the nice. So that was nice. So then I kind of learned to kind of look more deeply at it. Another assessment that's can be related to this is what's your need, you have an underlying need that's being touched trigger that comes into play in a situation where you feel angry. And certainly the need for safety, the need for respect, need for integrity, are all pieces of it need for security that we have needs. But some of those some of the things that are the need, we think is a need. Maybe isn't the need. So for example, maybe what's being threatened is our our unnecessary self aggrandizement, we might have, you know, certain ideas of who we supposed to be who we have to be and that and that's when that gets threatened. We can get angry. So you know, if I think that really hot shot Dharma teachers were blue shirts. And one of you say, you know, Dharma teachers wear blue shirts are kind of crummy.

My poor You know, my poor self image is threatened. So with that kind of threat, I could then, you know, get really riled up and get angry. And I'll tell you something, I'll tell you where the real Dharma shorts are. You know, so, you know, so because my self image that I have is threatened. But I use that as an example, because I hope you understand that's completely ridiculous example, that the, you know, my, my whole sense of self is tied up with the color of my shirt, you know, and all that. So, but it's that happens a lot in our society that we have variety of self images, we build up about ourselves how we want to present ourselves to the world status, that we want to have power, we're going to have other people different things. And so when that gets threatened sometimes, so to look underneath, What's the need, and there's a need a healthy need need for it to be, you know, hotshot Dharma teachers, not a healthy need. So what's the what's going on underneath this is all the assessment. This takes time. And so in some situations, we don't have time, things have to happen so quickly. But to learn to stop, and look, stop and reflect. And a wise, mindful life includes includes the capacity to reflect and contemplate and think about what's going on. So I do that sometimes we get my anger when I go for walks, some people use other times. And I think, a way of being very respectful of the whole experience of anger. So stop and, and evaluated, look at it, think about it, journal about it, talk to friends about it. And it takes a while to get the hang of it. And to learn about it, you can't just expect you know, you can in one moment, you suddenly become wise about it. It's a whole ecology. Anger is tied to whole inner psychological, and also social ecology, that's can be very complex. And so if you want to become wise and personally and socially about this, we want to take time to explore and get to know it and assess it. This is the second area is the impact of the situation that that causes the anger, the impact on us ourselves, or the impact of our of our reactivity to the situation. Remember, if if anger goes through an assessment, then that assessment is part of the impact the security event event has happened in us. So what's the impact on us here. And what I find helpful here, where's the assessment is cognitive. Reflecting and thinking about it, the impact is, I think, is very helpful to experience it, physically, in the body. So the first is the mind, the second is really the maybe the body because they're, you know, they, the anger itself has certain physical characteristics and expressions in the body, manifestations get hot, get tight, constricted, all the blood can go in certain directions from certain parts of the body, they say that the blood flows into the hands when people get angry, and so that we can better strike someone. And guess the old days, that was a useful strategy. And so you know, sometimes the head, all kinds of



things, you know, so what's the physical impact of anger on you. And then if there's underlying, or other emotions that are part of this complex, like fear, where's that felt in the body. And this is where the basic mindfulness practice is so helpful, because the most basic aspect of mindfulness is to not evaluate, not be involved in cognitive thinking about things, but just stop and just have very simple awareness, where we allow the emotion to be there, and to feel it. And it's one of the things especially like, in meditation, meditation is like a really special place. To be emotional. I think it's like one of the best places to be emotional on the planet. You know, as a, you know, it's for all kinds of emotions, because it's safe. Like, especially like something like anger is no need when you meditate, to suppress anger. There's no need to judge it negatively. There's no need to judge it at all. There's no need to figure it out. There's no need, you know, and so you can just let the rage, you know, just rage through. Because you're committed for the duration of meditation, to sit still.

You're not going to punch the person out. Initially, you're not going to say something you shouldn't say. You sit there, and so you give freedom to it. That is I think it's very respectful, to give freedom to it, provided. We don't get into involved cognitively in it. We don't get involved in the stories because As we keep retelling the stories, which means in the language I used earlier, keep assessing it, keep evaluating and keep telling the stories over and over again, then we It's like putting gasoline on the fire. So the basic that learning the art of mindfulness is to learn how to be present for something. Without telling stories, without judging, without criticizing, it is basic, simple ability to be aware, and nothing else. So when we can be mindful that way, in meditation, for anger and rage, then we can it can it can flow and move through us freely. And why that's helpful is that our inner life, our physical inner life, has a lot of I like to call it wisdom. It has a way of processing these things. It has a way of discharging, emptying, transforming, moving things through in helpful ways. If we get out of the way, and I've seen over and over again, emotions like anger and fear, sadness and grief, when we respect them, and allow them to be there in a simple ordinary way, feel them in our body, feel the impact on our body, and make space for them to kind of do what they need to do. They tend to move towards equilibrium, they move towards health. And so some people will protest that it feels wrong to give free rein to anger in meditation, because they have all kinds of ideas that anger is wrong or bad. In Buddhism, that there is no emotions, which is wrong to have, when you meditate. It's only can be harmful, if you feel it. But if you don't feel it with stories and more desire, but just kind of feel it, and be with it, it's remarkable what can happen. So for example, there might be anger. And so you feel the anger is a lot of heat, contraction in the belly perhaps. And so you go feel the belly that's so hot and so angry. And so you'll I just feel like let it to be there, bring your attention, give it permission to be there might be uncomfortable. But through mindfulness, we learn how to be okay with discomfort, so we can just feel and be present with it. And then as and kind of giving space to these emotions in our body as how they feel physically, is kind of like giving breathing room for it to kind of unwind or unfold, evolve, do what it needs to do. And so maybe the anger begins to dissipate, that's one direction, you could go soften. And in the cracks of the anger, we see fear, and the fear and might be felt as a constriction, a heaviness in the chest. And so then the task is to do the same thing with that. And the image I like is that of cupping your hands together. Gently, lovingly, and, and to come up from underneath and hold the fear. like you'd hold like something very careful and tender. You have your awareness be like that. And then you might feel the fear for a while and get permission for the fear to be there. And then no story. Just you've done the story, you've done the evaluation before Maybe another time, just be presence, very simple presence, very patient breeze with it. And then the fear might begin to shift and change.

And in the cracks of the fear, you see that there's a feeling of being insecure, feel different than fears it's developing, feeling insecure, and feels more tender. So you bring and feel that carefully. And then with time in the cracks of the fear. You see there's a desire for safety. And desire for safety is a nice thing to have, we think isn't this ordinary basic human instinct. And if you come down to there to the desire for safety, then perhaps it's closely connected to love caring for yourself, having care

compassion, well being for yourself. And then you can make that at that point, it might be a time to go back up into your evaluation. And consider now given that that's what I want, I want to be safe, what is the wisest way to approach this and you might make very different decision coming from that source inside of you than if you came from the rage that it all started with. So this ability, the mindful ability to feel the impact and give yourself time stop and look, stop and be aware of stopping field without any suppression resistance without it impatience, just let it be, and let your inner life take its time to unwind the way it needs to unwind or do what it needs to do. So very, very, I think, respectful thing for ourselves for our inner life to do. So first there's assessment, then there's a being present for the impact. And then there's the response. And the response, we come back to the world of cognition to the world, the cognitive world of thinking, reflection, contemplation, because if we don't take time to actively reflect and think about what a good response is, to a situation is invoked anger. And you say, Well, I don't want to reflect, you know, or something, it's too to take too much work. your minds doing the reflection for you, anyway? And who do you want to have in charge? You or, you know, or the reptilian brain? So to do some, so then to spend some time considering what the response can be, instead of what the reaction would be. And that's one of the advantages of stop and look, that then there's a chance to not react, to pause before we react impulsively. And then to have time to reflect what is what's the wise way to respond to the situation. And I think a nice rule, or no kind of policy, I know what to call it. A nice suggestion, that wouldn't say it has to be this way. But my suggestion is, anytime that anger has been evoked, it's a sign that something needs attention. It's actually to see it as an, you know, you can actually see anger, the evoking of anger, as a good thing, in and of itself, because an indication that something needs your attention, something needs deeper looking at. And maybe it's something needs a response. To just simply turn our back on the situation, ignore it, suppress it under Express, it can be harmful. I've seen that. That would at times in my life, where I was going to be a good Buddhist practitioner, just let go and not react not react just like go and kind of pretend I wasn't angry. or believe I wasn't angry and pretend believe I was an angry that that the pressure would build. And remember, many years ago, people would, but other people could tell. You're so angry. And no, I'm not. I'm not. And then sometimes, you know, it lends itself to being explosive, you know, who builds that way? So rather than kind of turning away from it, kind of a kind of a good suggestion, or a good kind of policy is, if you get angry, it means something is something is needed, some responses needed. The question is, where's that response needed? Sometimes is needed in the world. Some kind of response? Well, maybe not blame, and maybe maybe not hostility, but maybe sit down with someone and have a conversation. Sometimes what's needed is a strong No, no, I'm not gonna do that. Oh, you can't do that.

Very clear. No setting boundaries. Sometimes what's inside no without hostility, just no. Or maybe sometimes what's needed is nothing in the world out there. Because you after you've done your inner practice, and looked at it all, you'll realize that the 99.999% of where it's really the issue is in yourself. And so you really need to kind of spend some time with yourself and really get to the roots of what's happening in some deeper way. But I think that anger is something that should be respected a lot. Our society gives many people good cause to be angry. Whether it's justified, you know, exactly, I think probably we should consider justified. There's tremendous injustice that goes on in our society, there are people who, who are, you know, treated really badly and poorly and suppressed in our societies in many ways. And one of the very sad things is that when the people who are subjugated at any career are received the bulk of prejudice when they get angry They're blamed for being the problem. And I mean, many, many social situations, this idea of blaming the person who is the victim, because they get angry, you're not supposed to be angry. And, you know, I think that part of the reason why part of the reason why this current Republican presidential candidate is being so successful is because he's tapping into he's, he's expressing anger. And that anger is a very, very evocative and powerful people for some people to, to, to approve off and get behind. And when the current Democratic presidential

candidate is gets has anything that looks like being anger, angry, be maybe because she was a woman, somehow, she's not supposed to be that way. So this idea that our society is very unkind and various, you know about this whole idea of anger. So I think for all of us to be respectful of it, when other people are angry, to be respectful of it, not so much it means not doesn't mean we respect doesn't mean that we approve it. We might strongly disapprove of it in some situations, but to be respectful of it means to literally means that we're Latin, meaning for respect means to look, again, respect to stop and look. And I think that even if you're horrified by some other things go on or society that and under the name of anger through the vehicle of anger, I think it's always a good sign time to stop and look, what's really going on. What's the assessment? And when it's a social situation, need to take more of a social assessment? What's the impact? What's the impact on us? What's the impact on them? What's the input, the real, visceral, immediate impact of it? And how can we be with it and be present for it? The way I described it earlier about being present for the impact on us, and learning that ability, the powerful ability to have this just being hold something in awareness without reacting. And judging is a tremendous gift to the world itself to other people, to have the ability to offer that to others. I've offered that to people who've been angry, and I think it was a gift. Very few, there are people who have never had the experience of being angry. And the person that they really angry with, just to help make space for it and didn't respond to react. And I've had people come back to me and said, Gil, I'll tell you a story I've told us before. So I was teaching a retreat many years ago, 20 years ago. And I'd set up a time to have an interview with a person. And, but I was also giving the Dharma talk that day that evening. So I was busy preparing my talk. And I forgot about the meeting. Now is this person on meditation retreat, nothing happens on retreats. You sit near walk, you're silent. And there's lots of time and we could have easily set up another time but, but I missed interviews as soon as I realized I missed that I went to find her to apologize and set up another time. She was furious, absolutely furious.

So I said, Okay, I guess we should sit down and talk. And so we went back to this room and sat down and I sat this way cross legged on the floor and I don't know if he was sitting that way to or to cheer I don't know where what I was talking about today, sitting opposite each other and she proceeded to be angry at me. I mean, not just angry, but like, furious, he kind of almost yelling at me for an hour. And I just got more and more curious. I did this is really something this is an opportunity for me. This is like and I like what he knows like What's this? What's this about was like for me sit here I'll just sit here and like, what what happens to me how do I be with this was a great practice opportunity. For me it's like learn how to be present for anger and not get caught in it and you know, and when I was curious about her, you know, what's How long can a person go on with a monologue anger so I was I was I was kind of fascinated. And but then after an hour, the lunch the dinner bell rang. So we have a saying in Buddhism Saved by the Bell.

So I said, so I said, Oh, I have to go. And that seems reasonable to her so. So that was it. So the next day she came back to me and said Gil, that was so helpful for me. In the past, everyone just runs away from me when I'm angry. And I think she got to see herself in a new way, she got to be experienced herself and really kind of take ownership of her anger in a way that she couldn't before when people had other responses to her. So I've been done other other situations like that, where I feel like it's been a little bit of a gift that I've had that to be able to offer my no safe person to people be angry with. And all of us can sit and be with it and find a more wise response. So to assess the assessment, the impact and the response, to reflect on the assessment, the evaluation, to feel and be mindful of the impact. And then to be wise about the response to anger. And then what I didn't do today that I was hoping to do a better job at which is say more about the distinction between anger and hostility. But he's want to emphasize that as the ending that this is really important to tease apart those two. And because was anger might have its place in our societies might have its role in our lives. Sometimes. I would like to believe that hostility never does. And that we want to be able to come with response, ultimately,

respectful, open to the whole gamut of life, in that respect, be able to have come from a place of compassion and caring for all beings. May our practice practicing with anger, stopping and looking at anger, before the safety, happiness and well being of all beings without exception. Thank you.