

## Becoming Wise about Anger and Frustration

**Gil Fronsdal**

**May 24, 2020**

**Keywords:** meditation, insight, reactivity, anger, hostility, messenger, subjective experience, attachment, aversion, Buddha

---

So for today's Sunday morning talk, I'm very conscious of the idea that we've been—many of us have been—doing shelter in place now for over two months, and it's a long time, and there are plenty of people for whom this time is starting to wear them down. There's starting to be being tired of it. Maybe some degree of frustration with it. Maybe even a degree of anger. Because life has been limited, some of the more fundamental activities of our life have been curtailed. Contact with people we love has been limited.

Contact with our friends in all kinds of ways, and the activities we do in the world, have been severely limited. And it's, you know, it's been long enough now that there's, I think I've noticed in people, some people, greater irritation, frustration, even anger. And certainly we read, I read about the news, a lot of people are angry about the restrictions that they still have, that they feel they want to finally break loose of and have some sense of freedom. One of the principles, I guess, or understandings that we have—and people who do insight meditation—is that the stronger the inner reactivity is, the stronger the emotional reaction we have to the world or the activity is. What's going on, the more likely it represents something very deep inside of us that's been touched, that's been activated. And if we remain focused on the externals and what we're frustrated with or upset with or activated by, we're missing at least half the picture.

We're missing the opportunity to go in and connect deeply with what's inside, to find out what is it that was touched? And sometimes what's been touched is very important to attend to, because it's a valuable thing in itself. And sometimes what's been touched is what's been unresolved in our life. What's really some deeper place that needs attention, needs care, needs to be worked out, needs to be resolved within us and without. And if we just touch this place of discomfort, we might have external events to touch this unresolved place inside, and

we keep focusing outwards with our anger or frustration or irritation. We don't then really use the opportunity to have insight, really go deep, to dive deep inside and see: what is this inside?

What's the attachment? What's the wound? What's the pain? What's the beliefs? What are the values that I'm operating under that are the source of this reactivity that I have? So I can well understand that. I can well understand that the, you know, the sense of frustration that people have these days, and one of the opportunities in this practice is to turn around and have insight, really go into the subjective experience and what's really going on here for me.

And there's a number of things that can happen. One is to understand it, resolve something that needs to be resolved, or to get a different perspective on what's happening so we can operate more from wisdom. It's often been said that for whatever reason we're angry, whether it's justified or not, it's often our best not to act from the act of anger, not to speak from the anger if possible, because generally when people are angry or frustrated or irritated, they don't have access to the most wisdom that's within them. And so to wait, if possible, until the anger has dissipated, and then address the issue. Not ignore the issue, but then maybe you're in a better place to reflect and think and do. And this is one of the great things about meditation practice, that we do turn into the subjective experience and settle things down so that the way we're activated, over-activated, over-involved with thoughts in such a way that we're actually disconnected with ourselves, or over kind of riding the, you know, the edge of the wave of some of our difficult emotions being pushed along by them.

I can imagine you are being on a surfboard and having caught a wave, a wave of anger, and it's pushing us along, and we're kind of into the being angry or justified. Feel justified when I act on it, and we're just allowing yourself to be pushed, push, push, pushed by the anger. And you know, watch out for whatever is in front of us. Meditation is a time to let yourself settle back and come to the back side of the wave, to let it all settle down and relax into where it's more peaceful and quiet. So that we can have more wisdom. We can have more clarity.

And so some of the frustration and irritation and weariness, maybe boredom, that comes with a shelter in place being so long is, in fact, an activity of the mind. It's boredom, weariness. This kind of tiredness with life, these limitations, oddly enough, is a doing of the mind. Just take boredom for example. We're not bored unless the mind is activated, evaluating, thinking about things, comparing it to different ways of being. Boredom is an action of the mind.

And in meditation, all the active ways in which the mind is spinning and churning away have a chance to settle and quiet, and then we see with fresh eyes. And some of the artful experi-

ence of meditation is to no longer be defined or be pushed around by the waves of particular states that we're in, the activated states, and be able to come, be renewed. It's hard for me to imagine someone doing well in challenging times without a daily meditation practice to really be able to some degree, and maybe not renewed, completely renewed, but somehow start—we have the capacity to renew each day through meditation, so that when we go into life, we're not carrying with us the baggage of yesterday, or the momentum of yesterday, or the past month or two months. We're not carrying with us our preoccupations, our concerns, attentions, that we're building up. We can kind of start fresh and over. And this ability to start fresh and over, and see fresh, and put down the activity of the mind, surprisingly, can put down some of the built up weariness, the built up irritation, the built up frustration that we've had.

And so this insight to look in to the subjective experience and see what is going on there to settle it. So some of what goes on at some point is anger. That there's anger in all directions in our society, maybe enough. More so now than usual, there are people who are angry because other people are angry. There are people who are angry because of their limitations, their life is under—there are people who are angry with themselves because they're angry. There are people who feel like things are not fair.

And so there are some people taking advantage of the situation, what's going on, and not cooperating with our societal efforts to try to, you know, limit the transmission of this virus, and feeling indignant or feeling upset or feeling, you know, fear about what's going on. And so how do we live wisely with anger and frustration? If certainly the idea of renewing ourselves every day through meditation can certainly help, but that also doesn't necessarily give us the wisdom of how to be wisely with things like anger, what is a wise way? How can we be with anger in a good, wise way? There's a variety of other good things to think about or consider in this whole field of anger. And the, you know, first denotes interesting to kind and go through a whole list of words, concepts, that forms of anger.

If anger is kind of the umbrella term, what are all the manifestations, the subcategories, that fit under this general term, anger? I have this list here: indignation, annoyance, rage, fury, anger, wrath, hate, irritation, sulking, grumpy, grouchy, resentment, aversion, hostility. There's probably a lot more words as well, but this word hostility is interesting, because the primary word in Buddhism that's sometimes translated as anger, but is not really anger, is the word hostility. And it's interesting to distinguish between when anger or frustration might be a form of hostility and when it is. There's no hostility in that strong, powerful—it may be a passionate sense of no, or feeling something's not right, or there's injustice, or something.

Ways in which we get kind of activated, sometimes fiery.

Is there hostility or not? If there's hostility, then—and certainly in Buddhism, it is never considered to be a useful thing to be hostile. And that is our responsibility to really look deeply and settle the hostility, find out what's going on, what are attachments going on, what's happening there, and to find other ways to take care of ourselves. Besides being hostile, if the anger has no hostility to it, then hopefully the people around us can see that and feel that. And I've certainly had the experience of someone angry with me. I called it a clean anger or white clean anger, very clear and clean.

And it was that I said something, and someone that I think was maybe disrespectful, and the person said, right, came back right away and said, Gil, never say that again. And it was quite intense. But as soon as it had been said, it was clear, crystal clear. The person had dropped it completely. There was nothing left over. And I said, Wow, that was so impressive. I got the message, and there was nothing more that, you know, no social friction or tension or problem at all. The person just put it down and was—or disappeared or was finished with it. And I felt, Boy, that person had no hostility. It was no hate. There was no judgment of me. It was really about what I said. And that was kind. I thought I was really inspired by how clean it was.

There's an interesting quote from one of the desert fathers. So, a Christian quote that's kind of provocative around anger:

We need to reclaim anger for its proper purpose. Isn't that great? The proper purpose of anger. So that's certainly not a dismissal of anger or a suppression of it, but rather a reclaiming of it for its proper purpose. It is always a waste of good anger to get annoyed with other human beings. It's always a waste of good anger, good anger to get annoyed with other human beings. What the contemplative needs to do is to focus attention on the fact that they are annoyed. Instead of seeing some other human being angrily, the contemplative tries to see their own anger. They can then begin to overcome it.

So here is his idea that one of the important—that anger is a very important messenger or important place in our lives. And this particular desert father talks about the need to really use it to go deeply inside, to understand ourselves. Sometimes I think it's often useful to see anger as always a messenger, and don't kill the messenger. Anger is always something that needs our attention. And this desert father says what's important is to go inside. Sometimes it's a message of something in the world that needs attention and focus on and be with, but does it need one? Then the messenger doesn't have to be the general. The messenger

doesn't have to be the person who is in charge of how we respond. The messenger stays the messenger. And so then to be able to thank the messenger, and then to figure out, What is it that needs attention here? Where do I need to look at? Sometimes inside, sometimes we need to see what's going on around us better. Sometimes we need to do both. Sometimes we can see better what's in the world if we settle the agitation of the anger so that we can see more clearly. Perhaps sometimes if we need to act because there's something that's not right in the world, my idea is that more often than not we can act more effectively when we don't act from the anger.

Now, one of the most common protests I think I've heard in my thirty years of being a Buddhist teacher are people who are very quick to protest any discussion of anger that seems to put a limit on the expression of it. There seems to be a very powerful desire to justify anger, and I find it very curious if that's the case now. Some of it is, I think, as comes for good reason, there is a very painful, very heartbreaking kind of social situation. Not in all societies, but certainly you see it in the United States that the people who are oppressed are not allowed to express their anger, not allowed to be angry by the people who are not the dominant. The oppressors, the dominant class of people—often white and white males—will feel like it's fine for them to be angry, but it's not okay for other people to be angry, and then the other women or people of colour who are angry are seen somehow as being—let's be suppressed. That's not allowed. That just proves that they are somehow, you know, wrong or something. And this is, you know, a story. This is a culture, you know, many, many cultures, this phenomenon that people who are the subordinates in society are not allowed to have their anger or express their anger. So they have to bottle it up, or create it even worse because of it being ignored. And the people who are the dominant often feel like they can express it freely. It's the most natural thing in the world and so for them, and so creates a very terrible, ugly social situation. The people who have the most cause to be angry have the least ability to express it. It gets suppressed, it gets frozen. It gets built up as a kind of resentment and all these things.

So we want to be very careful not to limit or repress or deny the existence of anger. Anger in other people is also a messenger. It's also a message. There's something that needs attention. Whenever anybody is angry, something is not right. Exactly what is not right is the art of what we have to discover and where the attention needs to go. Does it need to go into looking at ourselves and the others, into the social situation, what needs our care and our attention?

So I think the good approach with anger, with annoyance, with frustration, irritation is to see it as a messenger, and to always respect it, and to have the capacity to turn inwards to see

what we're doing with the anger. It's interesting that there is a common idea that other people can hurt us physically, can harm our physical body. But in order for other people to harm our hearts, our minds, our inner life, we have to cooperate—that somehow our inner reactivity is, we contribute to the way in which our heart responds, reacts to what's happening around us. And this is one of the great values, something like meditation practice, to really begin understanding how our inner life operates, what our reactivity is, what we pick up, what we get involved in, what we react and push away with all that inner movement that gets all snarled up and caught up, and to understand it in some very deep way, because we keep coming to sit, keep meditating, keep looking, seeing the whole inner subjective experience in a deep way, and learning how not to pick anything up.

So we might be angry by what someone does, and it's not necessary to pick up the anger. The anger can be there as its own thing, and we don't have to become the angry person—there's just anger. We don't pick it up. And this ability to make room for our inner life, the different dimensions, aspects of our inner life that comes up, and let it be there—anger, sadness, joy, love, all these things, resentment. All these things can bubble up. And the ability to have learned in meditation, for example, for these things to surface in meditation, and to let go of the thoughts, let go of the involvement, let go of the reactivity to it, let go of being for or against it, is such a powerful skill, because then when we're out in the world, in our social world, and people say things and do things that really touch something deep inside, and we are angry or irritated or upset or sad, we don't have to disrespect how we're feeling, but we also don't want to pick it up. We can be bigger than what we're feeling. We can get more spacious than we're feeling. And if we're not—if we react, if we pick up the anger, then we're hurting ourselves.

One of the teachings of the Buddha is that anger or hostility that's expressed is like a fire that's burning its own fuel. So the fire of anger is burning its own fuel. We're the fuel—who we are. And hostile anger or strong irritation, strong frustration harms ourselves. And it's possible to feel that, to really recognize that when people do not have us, you know, living a subjective life, don't really know themselves well, feel themselves well, understand what's happening, there can be pleasure in being angry. There can be such an outward movement of expressing the powerful kind of anger, spite, frustration going outwards. And it can feel like a wonderful release of energy, and a sense of efficacy and a strong sense of self. That's just a certain kind of pleasure in asserting oneself and being. But if that person really feels what's going on deeply inside, doesn't only be outward directed, it's really damaging. It's very painful to feel with inside how anger lives in us. It's very rare that it's a clean anger. Certainly if it's hostility,

it's not. So we learn to sit and turn our attention and to settle our reactivity.

But the important thing is to understand that settling our activity is not meant to be a repression of ourselves. It's not meant to belittle ourselves or to deny what's happening. But if we can lose things like anger, frustration, weariness, we use fear and sadness. Sometimes what's most useful is to see it as a messenger. And as a messenger, we want to respect the message. We want to hear the message. We want to ask, What is the message here that's really needed? And perhaps we can't really hear the message well until we've settled down, until we've relaxed, until we've learned not to be entangled or caught up in the experience.

So I find it useful that if I get angry is to not speak and not act if I can, if the situation allows for that, and to do my inner work first. Find a way that I'm no longer caught in the grip of it, no longer being pushed by the wave of it. And then consider, What is the wise thing to do? Do I speak up now? Do I point out the issues? Do I come back to someone and say, You know, I'd like to have a conversation with you about something that's difficult for me? And the chances are I've seen over and over again that then the conversation tends to go much more productively, that people generally don't respond well to receiving anger. People get defensive, they get reactive, they get angry themselves. And you know, and sometimes if you are strong enough with your anger, powerful enough with it, people will back down. Maybe sometimes you can get your way with strong enough anger, but it's really not a useful way of doing things. It's usually counterproductive. It'll come back and bite us. It'll create—it may be useful in a moment, but not useful over a long period of time, a long period of time.

I think we want to figure out: what is it? How is it that we can cooperate with others? How can we create a cooperative world? How can we create a collaborative situation in this world where we learn how to talk with each other, learn how to be together, learn how to respect each other for all the feelings we have, learn how we respect other people's anger? If other people know we respect their anger and we're not angry, in return, or frittered in return, then they can relax. And then they might feel that it's easier to speak up and say what needs to be said, because we're not, you know, reacting to their anger. We're holding their anger, willing to feel it and be with it in a respectful, kind way.

So sometimes I think that one of the most important things that this country could use is a lot of wisdom about anger, that as a society it's a societal issue. And so to really kind of do our personal work to become wise and skilful in our dealing with all the different forms of anger from the mildest irritations to the strongest forms of wrath, to really understand how to be with it and be wise with it. We don't just do that for ourselves. It's a contribution to our society. With society, wise, we have to learn to become wise. And if we're wise about it, then

be wise. It's easier to do. It's easier to do what is wise. It's easier to live from our care, our concern, our love, our compassion for others, we're less likely to be selfish. And what is it if we're not selfish? But instead, we are wish, meaning that we take all of us into account. Who we are is a society as a globe. We are in this together, and so may we all be wish, cooperatively living together, wise about each other's feelings, wise about the messengers. Let us listen to each other all carefully. Let's be wise and let's figure out. Let's meditate every day so that we can start fresh. Each day we can have fresh eyes, new eyes to engage in the world as if it's each day is new, and so we're not building up the frustration, building up tension. Day after day, but we've put it down every day and we can start fresh. And then, no matter how limited your life is, it can be glorious. That can be a treasure just to be in your home or in your neighborhood. May this practice of ours help you to live a rich, valuable, meaningful, caring life that has very few needs, that can be frustrated. Thank you all, and I look forward to being here with you again next Sunday.