

# Respecting Anger (1 of 5) Practicing with Anger

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

hostility, ferocious, displeasure, emotions, repress, unrestrained, kitchen, harm, protective, boundary, consuming, volcanic, messenger, directionality, violence, explosive, repressed, life force, values, wounds, fears, loves, constellation, self-centeredness, compost, fuel, attachments, clinging, triggered

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Hello on this Monday morning. Last week, I offered five different perspectives on emotions as support for practicing with them. This week, I want to use specific emotions as case studies and explore them. I decided to start with anger, and when I considered anger, I realized that there is a lot to say. Maybe it is more useful to spend five days rather than one day on anger. The title for this week can be “Respecting Anger.”

Of course, anger is a very important emotion and a motivating force in our society. A tremendous amount of harm gets caused through anger. I do not know if any one particular result of anger is worse than others, but what comes to mind at this moment is its tremendous influence on young children, when they grow up with anger or grow up afraid of unexpected anger coming at them.

Anger is also a protective device. Motivated by anger, some people protect others – their children or society. Sometimes people protect themselves with their anger and set up strong boundaries – a strong “No” – and that protective movement can be ferocious.

Some people use their anger to put a tremendous amount of energy into a good cause because the energy of anger is driving them.

Anger has many different expressions in our society. This can be confusing because sometimes anger is treated as something that is wrong, bad, or painful, and sometimes it is treated as something necessary, important, and justified.

In Buddhism, any English-speaking discussion about anger has the implication that anger includes hostility. If that is how we see it, then we have to come up with another word for anger without hostility. This could be a very strong expression of displeasure that looks like anger but has no hostility. Or it could be a very strong ferocious movement of protection – a strong “No,” but having no hostility and no desire to harm anyone. This protective movement makes a very strong statement of negation and asserts a certain ferocity of purpose.

A very useful way of looking at our anger is to ask, “Is there any hostility in it?” If there is, be careful. I would like to suggest that hostility is never necessary or appropriate. But ferocious boundary-setting, ferocious standing in front and saying, “Stop,” and a ferocious sense of displeasure: “This is not right” – I think these can all be very healthy for ourselves and others.

The first time I saw this was when I was working as a kitchen manager at the Zen monastery. The kitchen was kind of a pressure cooker. While we were standing next to each other at the big table, an older man stood up straight, turned to me, and with ferocity said to me, “Don’t ever say that to me again.” It was quite ferocious. What amazed me was that the moment he said it, he turned it off. He went back to being clean and clear, just present, doing his work.

I was surprised because previously I had only experienced that people stayed angry. When people were upset, they would stay upset, and there would be conflict and fighting. He had completely clean anger, simply: “Don’t do this again.” He said what had to be said, and he was not carrying it. He was not continuing with it. It was not like I was forgiven – I did not need to be forgiven. I got the message, and he did not hold on to it. He simply said what had to be done. I was amazed that we can take care of ourselves this way.

Regardless of whether anger is only defined as having hostility, or if anger is a kind of ferocious boundary-setting or displeasure, it is always helpful to see anger as a messenger: something to study and get to know better. Anger is the tip of an iceberg of something deeper inside of us that would probably be useful to get to know and understand well.

Part of the challenge of any kind of anger is that it tends to be directed towards something with such strong directionality – even if it is towards something inside of ourselves – that we do not see the bigger picture. We do not see where the anger is coming from. It is directed outwards, so we do not look backward to see what is happening there.

That turning around to look inside is what the practice with anger is about. Very broadly, in Buddhism, there are four stages around anger. One is unrestrained anger. You see it sometimes in young children, where they are just completely consumed by their anger. I have seen it with my child when he was a toddler having a temper tantrum as I was carrying him through the supermarket aisles. I assumed that people in the store thought that I was a horrible father. I know that other parents have had this experience too, where the child expresses unrepressed, pure, volcanic anger. Maybe they saw a toy they wanted, but it was not the right time to buy it for them.

The first stage is unrestrained anger, where it is explosive, freely expressed, and felt to be completely justified. Very broadly, the next stage is holding anger in check – sometimes repressing it, denying it, hiding it – because it is dangerous to express the anger. Some people learned that growing up. Sometimes they learn that through the violence done to them. If they expressed anger and were hit or attacked, they learned that they cannot express any anger. They bottle it up or turn it off.

The third stage is what we do in this practice. We respect the anger. We attend to it. We study it. We get to know it better. We get to know it without shame and without further anger towards the anger. We get to know it because it is an expression of our life force. It is an expression of what it means to be alive. It is not only anger that is happening. In that anger there is something deeper and fuller about who we are: our values, emotions, fears, desires, loves, past sufferings, pains, and wounds.

In anger, a whole constellation of things comes together. Some of them are part of our beauty and wonderfulness, and some of them we are trying to let go of in practice. For example, we let go of conceit and self-centeredness. Intense self-centeredness is often a recipe for intense anger and hostility. We do not want to give free rein to that kind of anger, but we do not want to repress it either. What we want to do is turn around to look deeply at it: “What’s going on here?”

Meditation is one of the best places for this. In meditation, you are committed to being still, not moving your body, so you are not going to punch anyone out or scream at anyone.

You might even try this: when you find you are angry, sit down to meditate. Let the anger be a volcano. Let the anger course through you. Just feel it. Make room for it. Keep letting go of the thoughts and stories and let the body compost the anger. Let the body hold and process the anger. Sit there, allowing it and being present for it, and feel it in the body. See what happens. This is very respectful of anger. We allow it to be there, but we do not fuel and feed it with more activity and stories. This is a good place to really get to know anger.

The fourth stage of Buddhist practice with anger is that anger does not get triggered. This is partly because we have learned other ways of responding – other ways of boundary-setting or protecting, and other motivations that get done what needs to be done. It is partly because our attachments – the clinging and conceits that are some of the triggers for anger – are no longer there. There might be strong displeasure, but no hostility at all.

That is an introduction for this week. We will spend a week looking at anger.

As a homework assignment for today, see if you can learn to be comfortable or empty (non-reactive) towards other people who are angry at you. This does not mean that they are justified in their anger or they should be angry. Hopefully, your practice is a safe context for this to happen. Do not do anything unsafe. If you can learn to be present, stay relaxed, and breathe when other people are angry, this will go a long way toward strengthening your ability to do it for yourself. Whether you are angry or you are the recipient of anger, see if you can practice mindfulness in the middle of it. This practice is invaluable.

Anger is a difficult topic. I hope to teach it in a way that is respectful of all the different ways that people have experienced anger, been angry, and been harmed by anger. I hope that each of you will find something useful in what is said this week. Thank you.