

Respecting Anger (5 of 5) MADLESS

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Good morning. This is the last talk about anger. Anger can arise out of a particular incident in the moment. But if it lasts, it has moved from the world of immediacy and aliveness into the world of memory, thoughts, and story-making in the mind. It turns out that much anger – anything that is chronic, like resentment and irritation – has to do with the world of aboutness: the world of thinking about things and story-making.

The more intense and involved we are with anger, the more we experience a diminishment or a loss. There is a kind of suffering, pain, and stress that comes with being angry. Also, the stronger the anger, the more we are preoccupied. This preoccupation means that we are not available for a wider range of our emotional and spiritual inner life or our outer life. When we are not caught up in anything, we are more available for a range of responses – a range of empathy, a range of perception of what's happening. That gets diminished the more we get preoccupied.

One area we get preoccupied with is anger. At times, anger gets quite intense, and it diminishes our capacity to feel, sense, experience, and perceive the world and ourselves. With anger, our world tends to get reduced more and more, often to a world of aboutness. An angry, irritated, or hostile mood is probably fueled by some background story, belief, or idea. It takes courage to drop the beliefs, preoccupations, and stories in order to be present more fully in our lives.

One of the things I hope that I've conveyed this week is that anger is a worthwhile subject for attention, mindfulness, and study, rather than having some blanket policy that anger is bad and we shouldn't be angry. We don't need that policy because we have a mindfulness practice that can help us find a way through the anger. We can understand what is dysfunctional about anger, how anger is causing us stress, how anger is unnecessary, and how it diminishes us. We can use anger as an object of mindfulness, to reclaim our freedom, our independence – our ability to not be caught by it.

In the process of doing that, we learn a lot. We use anger as a means of learning about our grievance, about the difficulty that's happening, about the challenge that is somehow or other represented by the anger. In studying it, we begin to distinguish the essential part of that study. Sometimes we have to study what is happening externally to understand the situation better. Sometimes we have to understand ourselves better because that is really the genesis or the active center of the anger, and that is where it is most productive to bring our attention.

As I bring the topic of anger to a conclusion, I would like to offer you an acronym: MADLESS – to be without mad (without anger.) The M stands for "motivation." The A is for "attention." D is to "diffuse", L is to "learn," E is for "empathy." And S is "story substitution": change the story. The second S is to "speak." We do not want to be mindful and resolve our anger, and then become silent when the world and the situation need us to speak about what's going on. We sometimes diffuse anger so that we can address a real-world need.

Think of anger as a motivational feeling. What does it want? What is it trying to do? What is really happening? Are we trying to get rid of something, to change something, or are we trying to get away from something? Are we trying to attack someone? Is there hostility, which is a motivation? Are we trying to harm or hurt someone with our words, to get back at them? Or are we trying to change a situation that needs to be changed? What change are we trying to evoke, trying to make happen with anger?

We study anger and ask: What is the anger about? What is its purpose? Is this a purpose we can stand behind? Is there another more valuable and more important motivation that comes to the surface when we spend time looking at the purpose and motivation of the anger?

“Attention” means to bring a lot of attention to the experience of anger. One of the fundamental aspects of mindfulness meditation is mindfulness of the body. So we bring attention to the body. If we really feel our body when we’re angry, the anger tends to dissipate. Feeling the body tends to create some space for anger. Doing this also teaches us a lot about our involvement with anger – for example, we see that we are contracted and tight, leaning forward, or pulling back. Maybe we notice our fists are clenched. We keep coming back to the body.

In the past, I’ve been angry and did not know what was going on with my body. Many years ago, I was angry with someone but didn’t know it. Then the person went away, and I noticed my body – I was leaning forward and tight. I came back into myself, and that made a huge difference. We use attention to notice what is happening here for us. All the different practices of MADLESS require some use of attention.

The next step is to diffuse the anger. I use this term meaning not so much to take the fuse away, but to dissipate or reduce the tension that is there. The less tension there is in anger, the wiser we will become and the less we will be under the influence of the anger. We develop and learn skills of diffusion – of relaxation: calming, breathing deeply, and relaxing the body. We take a posture that is stable and strong that allows a different kind of attention where we are more present, and where we are in charge and capable of making wise choices.

The next step is to learn. I think this is one of the great principles around anger. When we are angry, there is always something to learn, and we take the time to learn the lesson that is here. For many of us, I think, there is a huge lesson to be learned within ourselves. What attachment triggered the anger? What’s the place inside, the belief, the sense of self that got triggered? What is our history? What untended, unresolved wound carried within us has been touched by the incident around us?

We learn what is going on. Sometimes we learn externally. One thing to learn externally is what is going on with the other people – what is really happening. Many years ago, I read that in New York, as training for bus drivers, they showed them a video of people whose behavior was troublesome or difficult, who got on the bus and annoyed bus drivers. Then they interviewed these people and found out that they had all kinds of difficult personal circumstances – learning disabilities, and many other personal challenges that were not obvious on the surface. As soon as the bus drivers began looking at the personal challenges these people had, their anger and annoyance towards people who are difficult on the bus decreased dramatically.

If we take time to learn about who people are, there might be much fewer reasons to be angry, though there might be reasons for compassion and care or reasons to have a strong conversation.

The next step is to have empathy: to care about others – to have love, to have kindness, to try to really get to know people, and to understand more deeply what’s going on with them, even people who behave problematically. Not so much because they deserve it, but because it is a better medicine for us to have compassion, love, kindness, and empathy than it is to do the opposite, and to be closed. Something grows in us when we take the time to be empathic.

Then comes story substitution. Much anger has to do with some story we are telling ourselves. I’ve had anger with people where I had the wrong story. I had made up a story that was an interpretation and was not what really happened. So be very careful about the stories you tell yourself. They say the fish gets bigger the more you tell the story. What stories are you telling? Are they really accurate? Check out the story. Find out. Say: “This is what I understand happened.” But maybe it did not happen that way. Maybe there was more to it than met the eye.

The last step is to speak. As I said earlier, the Buddhist approach to anger with mindfulness meditation is not meant to make us passive, mute, silent, uninterested, or uninvolved with the world and other people. Most anger is social. Most anger has to do with people around us, especially if it is really intense, simmers, and lasts. Our anger about technology or the weather does not have the same power as our anger towards people in social circumstances. This implies that sometimes it is very important in the social world to speak. And what do we speak? How do we speak? How do we speak with kindness, clarity, and purpose for the welfare of everyone involved?

I think I’d like to end this discussion on anger with the principle that we live a life that looks for what is best for everyone involved in a situation. We don’t only look at what is best for us. We look at what is best for everyone, even for the people who have harmed us. What is best for them? Because what is best for us and best for others fits into what is best overall to create a better society.

I'd like to end with a quote from Mahaghosananda. He was like the Mahatma Gandhi of Cambodia. After the Khmer Rouge, the genocide there, he was the Buddhist leader of Cambodia, a Buddhist monk. I met him: a lovely man, very peaceful, very loving, and full of smiles. He wrote:

I do not question that loving one's oppressor may be the most difficult attitude to achieve. But it is the way of the universe that retaliation, hatred, and revenge only continue the cycle and never stop it. Reconciliation does not mean that we surrender rights and conditions, but rather that we use love in all of our negotiations. This requires great humility. We must see ourselves in the other. What is the opponent but a being in ignorance? We ourselves are also ignorant of many things...Only loving-kindness and right mindfulness can set us free.

May we practice bringing our anger under the purview of our practice, our mindfulness. Maybe we can negotiate with our enemies with love. So, speak. Thank you.