



Tricycle Teachings

ANGER

A TRICYCLE E-BOOK

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INTRODUCTION

Most of us would agree that anger is not a good thing. When we're angry, we often find ourselves slipping out of control: we tremble, we shout or grimace, we threaten others, we give in to thoughts and actions that we later regret. But what can we do about our anger? The Buddhist teachers and scholars featured in this e-book show how we can learn to work with our angry feelings so that the precious energy that fuels them can become a powerful tool for transformation.

—*The Tricycle editors*

1

PUTTING DOWN
THE ARROW

Dissolving our deeply ingrained habits

CHAGDUD TULKU RINPOCHE

Attachment and anger are two sides of the same coin. Because of ignorance, and the mind's split into object-subject duality, we grasp at or push away what we perceive as external to us. When we encounter something we want and can't get, or someone prevents us from achieving what we've told ourselves we must achieve, or something happens that doesn't accord with the way we want things to be, we experience anger, aversion, or hatred. But these responses serve no benefit. They only cause harm. From anger, along with attachment and ignorance, the Three Poisons of the mind, we generate endless karma, endless suffering.

It is said that there is no evil like anger: by its very nature, anger is destructive, an enemy. Since not a shred of happiness ever comes from it, anger is one of the most potent negative forces.

Anger and aversion can lead to aggression. When harmed, many people feel they should retaliate by taking an eye for an eye. It's a natural response. "If someone speaks harshly to me, then I'll speak harshly in return. If someone hits me, I'll hit him back. That's what he deserves." Or, more extreme: "This person is my enemy. If I kill him, I'll be happy!"

We don't realize that if we have a tendency toward aversion and aggression, enemies start appearing everywhere. We find less and less to

like about others, and more and more to hate. People begin to avoid us, and we become more isolated and lonely. Sometimes, enraged, we spit out rough, abusive language. The Tibetans have a saying: “Words may not carry weapons, but they wound the heart.” Our words can be extremely harmful both through the damage they do to others and the anger they evoke. Very often a cycle develops: one person feels aversion toward another and says something hurtful; the other person reacts by saying something out of line. The two start fueling each other until they’re waging a battle of angry words. This can be extended, of course, to the national and international levels, where groups of people get caught up in aggression toward other groups, and nations are pitted against nations.

When you give in to aversion and anger, it’s as though, having decided to kill someone by throwing him into a river, you wrap your arms around his neck, jump into the water with him, and you both drown. In destroying your enemy, you destroy yourself as well.

It is far better to defuse anger before it can lead to further conflict, by responding to it with patience. Understanding our own responsibility for what happens to us helps us to do so. Now we treat our connection with a perceived enemy as if it came out of nowhere. But in some previous existence, perhaps we spoke harshly to that person, physically abused him or harbored angry thoughts about him. Instead of finding fault with others, directing anger and aversion at situations and people we think are threatening us, we should address the true enemy. That enemy, which destroys our short-term happiness and prevents us, in the long term, from attaining enlightenment, is our own anger and aversion.

Then the confrontation comes to nothing. There is no fight, you no longer perceive the person you’ve been confronting as an enemy, and the true enemy has been vanquished—a great return for a little bit of effort. In the long run, both you and the other person are less likely to get

repeatedly into situations where conflict could develop. You both benefit.

Our habitual tendency is to contemplate in counterproductive ways. If someone insults us, we usually dwell on it, asking ourselves, “Why did he say that to me?” and on and on. It’s as if someone shoots an arrow at us, but it falls short. Focusing on the problem is like picking the arrow up and repeatedly stabbing ourselves with it, saying, “He hurt me so much. I can’t believe he did that.” Instead, we can use the method of contemplation to think things through differently, to change our habit of reacting with anger. Since it is difficult at first to think clearly in the midst of an altercation, we begin by practicing at home, alone, imagining confrontations and new ways of responding. Imagine, for example, that someone insults you. He’s disgusted with you, slaps you, or offends you in some way. You think, “What should I do? I’ll defend myself—I’ll retaliate. I’ll throw him out of my house.” Now try another approach. Say to yourself, “This person makes me angry. But what is anger? It is one of the poisons of the mind that generates negative karma, leading to intense suffering. Meeting anger with anger is like following a lunatic who jumps off a cliff. Do I have to do likewise? If it’s crazy for him to act the way he does, it’s even crazier for me to act the same way.”

Remember that those who are acting aggressively toward you are only buying their own suffering, creating their own worse predicament, through ignorance. They think that they’re doing what’s best for themselves, that they’re correcting something that’s wrong, or preventing something worse from happening. But the truth is that their behavior will be of no benefit. They are in many ways like a person with a headache beating his head with a hammer to try to stop the pain. In their unhappiness, they blame others, who in turn become angry and fight, only making matters worse. When we consider their predicament, we realize they should be the object of our compassion rather than our blame and

anger. Then we aspire to do what we can to protect them from further suffering, as we would a child who keeps misbehaving, running again and again into the road, hitting and scratching us as we attempt to bring her back. Instead of giving up on those who cause harm, we need to realize that they are seeking happiness but don't know how to find it.

The role of enemy isn't a permanent one. The person hurting you now might be a best friend later. Your enemy now could even, in a former lifetime, have been the one who gave birth to you, the mother who fed and took care of you. By contemplating again and again in this way, we learn to respond to aggression with compassion and answer anger with kindness.

Another approach we can use is to develop awareness of the illusory quality of our anger and the object of our anger. If, for example, someone says to you, "You're a bad person," ask yourself, "Does that make me bad? If I were a bad person and someone said I was good, would that make me good?" If someone says coal is gold, does it become gold? If someone says gold is coal, does it become coal? Things don't change just because someone says this or that. Why take such talk so seriously?

Sit in front of a mirror, look at your reflection, and insult it: "You're ugly. You're bad." Then praise it: "You're beautiful. You're good." Regardless of what you say, the image remains simply what it is. Praise and blame are not real in and of themselves. Like an echo, a shadow, a mere reflection, they hold no power to help or harm us.

As we practice in this way, we begin to realize that things lack solidity, like a dream or illusion. We develop a more spacious state of mind—one that isn't so reactive. Then when anger arises, instead of responding immediately, we can look back on it and ask: "What is this? What is making me turn red and shake? Where is it?" What we discover is that there is no substance to anger, no thing to find. Once we realize we can't find anger, we can let the mind be. We don't suppress

the anger, push it away, or engage it. We simply let the mind rest in the midst of it. We can stay with the energy itself—simply, naturally, remaining aware of it, without attachment, without aversion. Then we find that anger, like desire, isn't really what we thought it was. We begin to see its nature, to realize its essence, which is mirror-like wisdom.

It may sound easy to do this, but it's not. Anger stimulates us and we fly—one way or the other. We fly in our mind, we fly off to a judgment, we fly to a reaction, we fly to this or that, becoming involved with whatever has upset us. Our habit of lashing back in this way has been reinforced again and again, lifetime after lifetime. If our understanding of the essence of anger is only superficial, we'll find out that we aren't capable of applying it to real-life situations.

There is a famous Tibetan folk tale of a man meditating in retreat. Somebody came to see him and asked, "What are you meditating on?"

"Patience," he said.

"You're a fool!"

This made the meditator furious and he immediately started an argument—which proved exactly how much patience he had.

Only through continual, methodical application of these methods, day by day, month by month, year by year, will we dissolve our deeply ingrained habits. The process may take some time, but we will change. Look how quickly we change in negative ways. We're quite happy, and then somebody says or does something and we get irritated. Changing in a positive way requires discipline, exertion, and patience. The word for "meditation" in Tibetan is a cognate of the verb "to become familiar with" or "to acclimatize." Using a variety of methods, we become familiar with other ways of being.

There's an expression: "Even an elephant can be tamed in various ways." When goads or hooks are used skillfully, this enormous, power-

ful beast can be led along very gently. It is said that when elephants are decorated for festive occasions, they become docile, moving as though they were walking on eggshells. Or if they're in a large crowd of people, elephants are very easily controlled. So something that is big and unwieldy can actually be managed well with the proper means. In the same way, the mind, often unwieldy and wild, can be tamed with skillful methods.

The difference between a worldly person's approach to life and that of a spiritual practitioner is that the worldly person always looks at phenomena as if through a window, judging the outer experience, while the practitioner uses experience as a mirror to repeatedly examine his or her own mind in minute detail, to determine where the strengths and weaknesses lie, how to develop the one and eliminate the other.

We don't need a psychic to tell us what our future experience will be—we need only look at our own minds. If we have a good heart and helpful intentions toward others, we will continually find happiness. If instead, the mind is filled with ordinary self-centered thoughts, with anger and harmful intentions toward others, we will find only difficult experiences.

If we check the mind again and again, continuously applying antidotes to the poisons that arise, we will slowly see change. Only we ourselves can really know what is taking place in the mind. It's easy to lie to others. We can pretend that a thick leather bag is full, but as soon as someone sits on it, he'll know whether it's truly full. Similarly, we can sit for hours in meditation posture, but if poisonous thoughts circulate in the mind all the while, we're only pretending to do spiritual practice. Instead, we can be honest with ourselves, taking responsibility for what we see in our own minds instead of judging others, and apply the appropriate remedy for change.

Chagdud Tulku Rinpoche (1930–2002) was the spiritual director of the Chagdud Gonpa Foundation and author of *Life in Relation to Death* and other books. “Putting Down the Arrow” is adapted from *Gates to Buddhist Practice*.

2

THE DELUDING FORCE

Finding a middle path with anger

SHARON SALZBERG

I sometimes get angry when I feel I've been treated unjustly or when I feel others have been treated that way. I will get angry if I have worked very hard to complete a project and someone blames me if it doesn't work or assumes I didn't try hard. I try to wait for the feeling to wash through me. As empowering as it can be to feel anger sometimes, I find that I invariably regret acting from that feeling. Anger is an incredibly deluding force. It tends to give one tunnel vision and a very limited sense of options.

I try hard to remember the possibility of speaking the truth about unpleasant things, of breaking through complicit silence or denial without getting lost in anger. Many of us are trained to use anger to make sure that things don't remain unspoken or hidden, but there are other ways to maintain clarity without the personal stress and destructiveness of anger. One reason anger is so painful is that it constructs such a powerful sense of self and other. In this way, anger strongly resembles fear. In the Abhidhamma, anger and fear are considered the same mind state, one that involves a feeling of such intense separateness that the possibility for relief or change disappears.

The other thing in Buddhist psychology I find interesting is how

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anger transmutes into wisdom. Transmutation occurs because anger can involve the same kind of cutting through, not taking things for granted, being willing to speak unwelcome or unpleasant truths as wisdom. Mindfulness is taught as the key to that transmutation.

As a culture we swing from being afraid of anger to romanticizing it. I try to see anger for what it is, in myself, and neither fear it nor idealize it. We might romanticize the idea of being in touch with our anger, but in fact we don't really enjoy the effects of anger. If we are lost in perpetual guilt, which is anger at ourselves, we don't celebrate that. If we see someone hurting someone else, abusing them, beating them up, or screaming at them, we don't rejoice in it; we don't say, "Oh, wonderful, they're in touch with their anger!"

There is great potential for us to find a middle path with anger through mindfulness, not adding to our brutal self-judgments because of it, and not acting it out in ways that ultimately leave us isolated and regretful.

Sharon Salzberg is a founding teacher at the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts. Her latest book is *Real Happiness: The Power of Meditation*.

3

BE HERE ANGRY NOW

An interview with Mark Epstein

As practitioners, we sometimes feel as if we must behave as diplomats for Buddhism, always acting gentle and not getting angry. Do you think Buddhists have more trouble expressing their anger than non-Buddhists? People have one of two problems with anger, as they do with any emotion. Either they're indulgent in the expression of it, or they're afraid of it; either they're spilling the emotion, or it's there and it's affecting them but it's being pushed away. Many Buddhists get very skilled at pushing anger away, at sitting at a distance from their anger, but it's not extinguished. They need help bringing it back into the center of their awareness and owning it again. Of course, some Buddhists, like other people, are just spilling anger, self-indulgently, and then it's a problem of ego and of learning how to use some restraint.

How does the view of anger differ between Western psychotherapy and Buddhism? The Buddhist teachings suggest countering hatred with love. This takes anger pretty much at face value—as an unwholesome mental state, a kind of noxious emotion, like poison. That notion of anger is exemplified by one of the Buddha's first disciples, Angulimala, who murdered victim after victim. Run-of-the-mill late-20th-century anger is positioned a little differently. It's a little more perverted. In psy-

chotherapy, it's the disguised message of anger that is looked for—the attachment or love that's underneath the anger, or anger as a perverted form of aggression in psychotherapy. Aggression is seen as a good thing necessary to break through an obstacle. Frustrated aggression is a problem, but aggression itself is not a bad thing.

Tibetan Buddhism, in particular, pays a lot of attention to the transformation of anger, and to the idea that anger is a kind of energy that can be harnessed. In some of the teachings, anger is not even considered to be a negative thing. It's similar in psychotherapy. The crucial thing about anger is that it is a clue to where someone is blocked. And you have to salvage the energy. Otherwise, you might be wiping something out that's precious. When I'm working as a therapist and people come in with anger, I don't ordinarily try to counter it with love, as you would do in traditional Buddhist teachings. I see anger as connected to a kind of life energy. Whenever you're leaving some vital part of yourself off to one side, there's a kind of depletion of energy. That feeds into a willingness to let someone else lead you. It's a kind of sapping of the aggressive energy that's necessary for true involvement in the world. So I look for the aggressive life energy that's necessary for making contact. How is the person shutting him- or herself down?

Is there a difference between dissolving anger and transforming it? Creating a space in which anger can actually dissolve is the same as transformation. In Western psychotherapy, the thrust of the therapist's position is to not make judgments about material the client or patient presents. The analyst is supposed to be equidistant between id, ego, and superego: that means that the analyst sits in a position of neutrality and doesn't rush to judgment, even in the face of terrible expressions of rage.

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From a Buddhist point of view, one could say that the ideal stance, even in the face of overwhelming negative emotions, is the same—not to rush to judgment—and to make space for whatever is being presented. When I'm functioning as a therapist and someone comes in with their anger pushed off to the side, my impulse is to try to draw that anger back into them. Usually, they have a fundamental fear that if they truly express their anger, they will be disdained or rejected.

In the ideals both of a teacher and of a mother, there's the notion of creating a sphere of unconditional love in which you can reveal yourself, whether anger or anything else arises, without fear of rejection. As a therapist, can you provide this? I think this idea of unconditional love is a little dangerous, because the way most people try to provide it—whether mothers or therapists—is by being fake. Who can really love everyone all the time? So if you're trying to offer unconditional love and it's not real, then the other person experiences you as a fake, and it's no longer a safe environment. When it's real, it's very beneficial. But I find it more useful to talk about what Donald Winnicott calls being a “good enough” mother or a “good enough” therapist, which means that you don't have to be completely loving. We can be loving enough. And it's actually in the disappointments or failure of that less-than-perfect environment that a person evolves: if the mother or the therapist is good enough but not ideal, the person can develop his or her own capacity for tolerance.

What makes you angry? Being misunderstood.

What do you do when you're angry? I try to first feel the feeling, both in my mind and in my body, before I act. That's hard for me. I try to notice

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the impulse to act or to speak. Then I try to be judicious in my response. Sometimes that means going with the energy of the anger, and sometimes it's thinking better of my impulse. I don't know how I make that decision. What I really have to work on is when the anger percolates. I try not to be so judgmental about anger, to say, "Okay, I'm angry. It's not the end of the world." But when I see that I'm brooding, I have to be more meditative with it, to find it in my body and just be with it.

Mark Epstein is a psychiatrist and the author of *Thoughts Without a Thinker* and *Going to Pieces Without Falling Apart*.

4

AWAKENING TO ANGER

There's nothing to defend

KEN MCLEOD

Lojong is usually translated as “mind training,” but “mind refining” is also an accurate description. In the Mahayana tradition, mind training doesn't try to “deal” with the problem of anger. The whole Mahayana bent is on dealing with the present. Anger is the fastest and probably the most powerful reaction to the fear of not existing, of having your sense of self bashed by the opposition you're facing.

Mind training is about learning and knowing that you don't exist the way you think you do. Anger ceases to arise because there's nothing to defend. In anger, you destroy your relationship with whatever is threatening. But if you can stay present with the whole experience, you can circumvent anger.

Suppose you're at a meeting and you put forth your opinion on a subject and someone contradicts you. If you're identified with that opinion, you suddenly feel you don't exist—your identity, your sense of self, has been negated. If you're not able to stay in the present moment, anger takes over, that fast. What you do is destroy your relationship with being contradicted. It may mean leaving the meeting, or blasting the person who contradicted you, or shutting down your feelings. Those angry reactions destroy your relation-

ship with what you experience, and move you right out of the present.

How does mind training help? It works in two ways, which are the two components to Mahayana practice. One, they help cultivate compassion, and two, they help cultivate an understanding of emptiness.

The essential teaching in terms of compassion is that whatever you experience, if it provokes a reaction in you, you can open to that experience. One way to do that is to practice the mind training technique of *tonglen*, “taking and sending.” If you are getting angry, you imagine that you’re inviting the feeling from all sentient beings into you. If you feel anger coming up, you might practice saying, “May all the anger of all beings come into me.” It’s a way of staying with your own experience of what’s happening in the process of getting angry. You thereby transfer the reactive process into a positive attitude. Just that moment of presence can change everything. It’s a tool.

Of course, this doesn’t happen spontaneously. It takes a lot of practice and training. And this process is not exclusive to mind training—it happens as a natural result of other types of Buddhist meditative training, too. As you become intimately aware of your own reactive processes, then when somebody is angry with you, from your own experience you understand what’s going on with them. When someone gets angry with you, you don’t rush to defend yourself.

The second way mind training helps with anger is by cultivating an understanding of emptiness. This occurs at a little higher level of practice. Because of meditation practice, you can experience a situation in which you might get angry as simply movement—the movement of feelings and phenomena. It’s not something solid that has to be acted on.

Once I did a one-month retreat using just the introductory meditations on love and compassion from *The Great Path of Awakening*, the series of 59 lojong teachings by the 19th-century teacher Jamgon Kongtrul the Great. I did those solidly for a month, and then I did taking and sending. Everyone said my personality changed. I didn’t feel

there was a big difference, but I certainly got a tremendous amount out of it in terms of cultivating really deep feeling. I was known to be short-tempered, very arrogant, and so forth. I'm not sure any of that's really changed. But I do credit the practice of taking and sending with making a difference. Before that retreat I didn't have the time to listen to anybody. But now I'm regarded as a good listener.

What makes me angry is stupidity. It's something I'm still working with. But now when I encounter a person who isn't understanding what I say, or who is doing something that doesn't make any sense, even though I'm feeling angry I let myself experience that anger. I know it for what it is—a movement in me, a reactive process. I use taking and sending, and try to see the stuff that arises spontaneously. When I encounter stupidity, I go to the breath and do taking and sending. I look and see what's preventing this person from seeing what I'm saying, and then I see that there's nothing I can do. The next part of compassion is letting go. This is where the process clicks to nonexistence. When people are really getting angry and feel meaningless or ineffective, that links to notions of identity and self-image. If we let go of the idea that we are “solid,” then it becomes easy to let go of the anger.

If it gets to the point where I'm “dealing” with anger, it's too late. It's like the guy who's entered a golf tournament and he's practicing and the old pro comes along and says, “If you haven't got it by now, you're not going to get it before the tournament's over.” It's the same with getting angry. By the time the reactive process is underway, it's too late. By practicing meditation and doing mind training, we can avoid being caught up in the reactivity of anger and can stay present.

Ken McLeod is the founder of Unfettered Mind and the translator of many Tibetan texts including *The Great Path of Awakening*. He lives and teaches in Los Angeles.

5

ONE MOMENT OF ANGER

From A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life

SHANTIDEVA

Whatever wholesome deeds,
Such as venerating the Buddhas, and generosity,
That have been amassed over a thousand aeons
Will all be destroyed in one moment of anger.

There is no evil like hatred,
And no fortitude like patience.
Thus I should strive in various ways
To meditate on patience.

My mind will not experience peace
If it fosters painful thoughts of hatred.
I shall find no joy or happiness,
Unable to sleep, I shall feel unsettled.

A master who has hatred
Is in danger of being killed
Even by those who for their wealth and happiness
Depend upon his kindness.

...

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Hence the enemy, anger,
Creates sufferings such as these,
But whoever assiduously overcomes it
Finds happiness now and hereafter.

...

Therefore I should totally eradicate
The fuel of this enemy;
For this enemy has no other function
Than that of causing me harm.

Whatever befalls me
I shall not disturb my mental joy;
For having been made unhappy, I shall not accomplish what I wish
And my virtues will decline.

Why be unhappy about something
If it can be remedied?
And what is the use of being unhappy about something
If it cannot be remedied?

For myself and for my friends
I want no suffering, no disrespect,
No harsh words and nothing unpleasant;
But for my enemies it is the opposite.

The casues of happiness sometimes occur
But the causes for suffering are very many.

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Without suffering there is no renunciation.
Therefore, mind, you should stand firm.

...

There is nothing whatsoever
That is not made easier through acquaintance.
So through becoming acquainted with small harms
I should learn to patiently accept greater harms.

Who has not seen this to be so with trifling sufferings
Such as the bites of snakes and insects,
Feelings of hunger and thirst
And with such minor things as rashes?

I should not be impatient
With heat and cold, wind and rain,
Sickness, bondage and beatings;
For if I am, the harm they cause me will increase.

Excerpted from *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, translated
by Stephen Batchelor, published by the Library of Tibetan Works and
Archives, Dharamsala, 1979.

6

WHAT TO DO WHEN THE ANGER GETS HOT

An interview with Ngawang Gelek Demo Rimpoche

What makes me angry? That's an interesting question. I don't get angry. If you ask the monks and teachers who were with me in Tibet or India, I'm sort of known for not getting angry. I do get irritated sometimes. Especially being diabetic. If I explain something and people don't understand and then I try my best to talk to them and they still don't get it, then I get a nervousness within me, and I'm thinking, "What is the use of talking? I better shut up." Or physically, I start sweating. Is it a diabetic effect—when the sugar is low—or is this really irritation?

Honestly, I don't recall having hatred toward anybody. Anybody—including the people who have taken advantage of Tibet and have been mean to my mother. Somehow I could not develop hatred for them. When my brother came to visit me in the United States, he told me about people who did bad things to our mother. Then last year he came again and mentioned those people, and I said, "Who's that?" And he said, "Oh, you're so terrible—I told you what they did to Mother." "Oh," I said, "Oh, oh, yeah, yeah, I remember," but truly, I forgot. It's not that I have great patience or great compassion, but I

just don't get angry. Whether it's good or bad, who knows, but it's true.

If I hear a terrible story, I feel sad. I feel sour. It's almost like having an ulcer when you get a bitter taste. I'm never even upset with the Chinese. They took everything that I had in Tibet. They took the country and tortured people. I was not one of the poor people in Tibet. I'm one of those—what do you say—“born with a silver spoon”? I can say that I was born with a gold spoon in my mouth. When I hear about the children tortured and killed and the women being raped and even men getting raped, I get a bitter taste inside me, and I do get a stomach ache. But even this irritation doesn't last very long. Maybe I'm stupid. Maybe I'm what you call a very wimpy and weak person who gets scared and doesn't know how to get angry with anybody. Maybe I'm that. I don't know.

Some people are short-tempered. They yell and they scream. There's a person who lives in my house—a huge, big guy—and he was so upset one day. I don't know the reason. It was no big reason. He picked up a big bundle of clothes and threw it on the floor and shouted at the top of his voice, “Fuck you!” [*laughs.*] So I got pretty scared, because if he gets wild, he could beat me. I just sat there, and I pretended nothing happened. I thought, “Oh, my God, poor guy, I'm sorry he's so upset.”

Many students come to me who are very angry at someone. I ask, “How do you benefit from being angry? Can you undo things by getting angry? What are you going to gain?” And they all reply, “Nothing.” And then I say, “What do you lose by having anger?” And many of them say, “Nothing.” And then I say, “No. You lose your peace of mind and you lose your positive karma. You're creating negative karma. You're training your mind to develop hatred. You're opening the door for the ego to hate people.” And I keep on listing. Sometimes they get upset and straightaway change the conversation. But if they're willing to listen, I keep listing the countless faults of anger and hatred.

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Hatred is worse than anger. Anger, irritation, is not that bad. But it will definitely become hatred if you don't take care of it. Irritation is okay. Everybody has it, you know; even those people you might call enlightened beings, as human beings they may have some irritation.

Americans think it is beneficial to "get in touch with" their anger. That's just the first step—recognizing your anger. The second step is analyzing and meditating on your anger. The tradition to which I belong [Gelugpa] teaches that analytical meditation must be combined with concentration meditation. So analyzing your thoughts, your ideas, your emotions, is absolutely important. With this you recognize what is really hatred, what is really anger. You're going deeper and recognizing that "I am angry, I am hating."

This approach also depends on the mind. When the mind is at the bursting level, you don't do anything. Just let it be. For the time being, watch a movie, see a nice view, be on the beach or the bank of a river. Try to divert the attention, because when the anger is really strong you cannot challenge it. If you try, you may get defeated, and that's when people say, "That's it! I cannot take it anymore!" And they hit the ceiling. What you're really doing then is giving the okay to anger. My suggestion is never to give the okay to anger, and divert your attention when it's really hot. Divert. When the anger's not that hot, but still there, at that moment you can recognize it and the feelings that you get before and after. Then analyze. You'll see all the disadvantages see them; I'm not talking about in religious principles, but about simply seeing the disadvantages. Your peace of mind is lost. You can't do anything you want to do. You can't concentrate. You can't do your job. You can't talk to people straightforwardly. Or you have to cry. You have to do all these things, and you see all the consequences of that. You really see it. Then ask: Do I still want that? Then you make a decision:

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“I do not want it.” It will come back. But that doesn’t matter. Keep on repeating the process. That’s how you train your mind not to get angry.

Sometimes friends will try to arouse your anger to make you aware of a bad situation. They’ll point to how someone is treating you unfairly. I don’t buy that. I would say, “You cannot take that abuse anymore. Have compassion for yourself.” I would use compassion, not anger, to motivate you to protect yourself, and compassion toward the person who’s giving you the trouble. Compassion rather than hate is what helps. That’s not easy, because of our established patterns. But true dharma practice is to try to change that habit, change a pattern. It’s not easy, but if you constantly keep on doing it, one day you will do it without any difficulty. Compassion is much stronger than anger.

When I was working in India in radio, the director general of Indian Radio was once so furious with me, he was yelling and screaming. And I looked at his face, and it looked like the backside of a monkey. I couldn’t help but laugh. He was so upset, he kept screaming. And I couldn’t stop laughing. He finally shouted, “Get out of here!” Then he fired me.

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7

THE ENEMY WITHIN

Negative thoughts and emotions are the real enemy

H. H. THE DALAI LAMA

Our history abounds with stories of individuals perpetrating the most destructive and harmful acts: killing and torture, bringing misery and untold suffering to large numbers of people. These incidents in human history can be seen as reflecting the darker side of our common human heritage. These events occur only when there is hatred, anger, jealousy, and unbounded greed. World history is a record of the effects of the negative and positive thoughts of human beings. This, I think, is quite clear. By reflecting on these past occurrences, we can see that if we want to have a better and happier future, now is the time to examine the mindset of our present generation and to reflect on the way of life that it may bring about in the future. The pervasive power of these negative attitudes cannot be overstated.

Despite being a monk and a supposed practitioner of the Bodhicaryavatara [“The way of the bodhisattva”], I myself still occasionally become irritated and angry and, as a result, use harsh words toward others. Then, a few moments later when the anger has subsided, I feel embarrassed; the negative words are already spoken, and there

is truly no way to take them back. Although the words themselves are uttered, and the sound of the voice has ceased to exist, their impact still lives on. Hence, the only thing I can do is to go to the person and apologize, isn't that right? But in the meantime, one feels quite shy and embarrassed. This shows that even a short instance of anger and irritation creates a great amount of discomfort and disturbance to the agent, not to mention the harm caused to the person who is the target of that anger. So in reality, these negative states of mind obscure our intelligence and judgment and, in this way, cause great damage.

One of the best human qualities is our intelligence, which enables us to judge what is wholesome and what is unwholesome, what is beneficial and what is harmful. Negative thoughts, such as anger and strong attachment, destroy this special human quality; this is indeed very sad. When anger or attachment dominates the mind, a person becomes almost crazed, and I am certain that nobody wishes to be crazy. Under their power we commit all kinds of acts—often having far-reaching and destructive consequences. A person gripped by such states of mind and emotion is like a blind person, who cannot see where he is going. Yet we neglect to challenge these negative thoughts and emotions that lead to near insanity. On the contrary, we often nurture and reinforce them! By doing so we are, in fact, making ourselves prey to their destructive power. When you reflect along these lines, you will realize that our true enemy is not outside ourselves.

Let me give you another example. When your mind is trained in self-discipline, even if you are surrounded by hostile forces, your peace of mind will hardly be disturbed. On the other hand, your mental peace and calm can easily be disrupted by your own negative thoughts and emotions. So I repeat, the real enemy is within, not outside. Usually

we define our enemy as a person, an external agent, who we believe is causing harm to us or to someone we hold dear. But such an enemy is relative and impermanent. One moment, the person may act as an enemy; at yet another moment, he or she may become your best friend. This is a truth that we often experience in our own lives. But negative thoughts and emotions, the inner enemy, will always remain the enemy. They are your enemy today, they have been your enemy in the past, and they will remain your enemy in the future as long as they reside within your mental continuum. Therefore, Shantideva says that negative thoughts and emotions are the real enemy, and this enemy is within.

This inner enemy is extremely dangerous. The destructive potential of an external enemy is limited compared to that of its inner counterpart. Moreover, it is often possible to create a physical defense against an external enemy. In the past, for example, even though they had limited material resources and technological capabilities, people defended themselves by building fortresses and castles with many tiers and layers of walls. In today's nuclear age, such defenses as castles and fortresses are obsolete. In a time when every country is a potential target for the nuclear weapons of others, human beings still continue to develop defense systems of greater and greater sophistication. The strategic defense project initiated by the United States, widely known as "Star Wars," is a typical example of such a defense system. Underlying its development is still the old belief that we can eventually create a system that will provide us with the "ultimate" protection. I do not know if it will ever be possible to create a defense system capable of guaranteeing worldwide protection against all external forces of destruction. However, one thing is certain: as long as those destructive internal enemies are left to themselves, unchallenged, the threat of physical annihilation will always loom over us. In fact, the destructive power of an external enemy ultimately derives

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from the power of these internal forces. The inner enemy is the trigger that unleashes the destructive power of the external enemy.

His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama's is the author of *Essence of the Heart Sutra*. This article was excerpted from *From The World of Tibetan Buddhism*, © 1995 by Tenzin Gyatso, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama; English translation © 1995 by Geshe Thupten Jinpa. Reprinted with permission of Wisdom Publications.

8

RISING TO THE
CHALLENGE

We can get greater energy out of love and joy than out of hatred

ROBERT THURMAN

We all have the potential to be killers; realizing that is the key. Years ago, some academics and I did a study of religious violence. We found that the people who are the most violent are those who are incapable of embracing their own potential for evil. By projecting their shadow, their evil, onto the other, they justify their violence. They think they're emphasizing their purity, or restoring their purity, by destroying someone else.

If there were a really bad person who was about to launch nuclear weapons or engage in germ warfare, the most compassionate thing would be to have somebody take him out without hurting innocent people. In the Theravada ethic, you say, "We don't know the real story here. I don't know whose karma is what, so I can't get involved." But in the bodhisattva ethic, if you see someone about to kill a bunch of people, you have to stop him or you're an accomplice. If you don't stop him, not only are you letting others lose their lives, but you're also harming the killer because he's going to have very bad karmic effects. You try to stop him without killing, but if you have to kill, you do. You get bad karma, too, but because you're acting out

of compassion, not hatred, the good karma will outweigh the bad.

Surgical violence—killing the one to save the many—is part of the bodhisattva ethic. The problem with American-style warfare since World War II is that we've relied on carpet bombing—civilian bombing. Civilian bombing is a kind of terrorism in itself, and there's nothing surgical about it. It's just blanket annihilative violence. And that produces this terrible blowback of terrorism and people filled with revenge and hatred. It incites more violence, whereas surgical violence had better be *surgical*—aiming to heal.

So our outer work is to resist and protest and try to maintain clarity and speak out forcefully against the kind of violence that kills so many innocent people. Our speaking out forcefully will be more effective because we won't really be angry, we'll be fierce. We'll realize that we can get greater energy out of love and joy than out of hatred. Hatred is so off balance. You blow your adrenals in one minute, then you're shaky and weak. But if you're joyful, you'll get an endless source of energy.

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9

PRACTICING WITH THE FIVE HINDRANCES

Q & A with Lama Palden Drolma on the Second Hindrance: anger

I often find myself torn between lashing out at someone and trying to remain equanimous. I know it's ideal not to explode in anger, but sometimes it still seems like the right thing to do—or like it would be “good” for me to express how I feel, directly. Is it ever right to let anger show? When we are angry, it may be important for us to communicate what we feel. But *how* we do this is critical. Simply blasting other people with our anger is not skillful or kind. We may think, “Well, they’re so thick-headed, I need to yell in order to get through to them.” But it’s difficult for people to take in what another is saying if they are being yelled at, because their defenses are instantly mobilized. They’re just as distracted by the reaction going through their heads as we are by the force of our anger.

If we allow ourselves to calm down before addressing the situation, we can let go of our own defensiveness and anger. As we all have experienced, it is not possible to think objectively when we are in the throes of strong emotion. We need space to think clearly, to see what is really bothering us, and then to decide what it is that we *actually* want—and need—to communicate. We should take the opportunity to think through what is going on within ourselves, and to imagine what the other person might be feeling as well. After we’ve given ourselves this

critical distance from the situation, it's possible to articulate what we want to say much more accurately and effectively. It is also more likely that we will be heard if we can deliver our message without triggering the other person's defenses—or our own.

It's understandable to feel better immediately after an initial catharsis: we've dumped our painful feelings onto another. But it's not long before we feel worse, as our minds and bodies fill with the poison of anger, resentment, and possibly guilt or regret. We may try to cope with this miasma of feelings by going over the whole story in our minds again and again, talking about it with our friends, justifying our position and securing their support, planning our next attack, but these defensive strategies ultimately bind us further to suffering. When we feel that someone “deserves” our angry attack, we are indulging in hurting them in order to eradicate our own hurt—and hurting to get rid of hurt never works.

We suffer because we do not understand the openness of our true nature. This is the ignorance that the Buddha taught is the root of all suffering. The radiance of true nature is generated by compassion. The fortresses we construct around ourselves to ratify our position not only separate us from the person we're angry with—they also separate us from ourselves. The more we are cut off from our true nature, the more we suffer, and the less likely it is that others will listen to us. If we take the time to shift to a place where we can actually rest in openness and lovingkindness, our suffering diminishes. Anything that we feel needs to be communicated will naturally be articulated more effectively from this place.

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10

CALM IN THE FACE OF
ANGER

A parable of practical advice for responding to attack

ANDREW OLENDZKI

In the *Sakka* chapter of the *Samyutta Nikaya* (11.4), the Buddha teaches, as he often did, by means of a parable, and this one remains as relevant today as it was in ancient India. The story addresses the issue of what a strong person is to do if insulted, attacked, or otherwise provoked by someone weaker. It could, however, just as easily pertain to how a mighty nation might respond to the provocations of a smaller nation or the threats of a criminal.

The Buddha tells of a great battle set in mythological time between the gods and the demons. In the end, the demons were defeated and their leader, Vepacitti, was bound by his four limbs and neck and brought before Sakka, lord of the gods. There, we are told, Vepacitti “abused and reviled [Sakka] with rude, harsh words.” (The commentary elaborates upon these insults, and this makes for some very entertaining reading.) Yet Sakka remained calm, regarding his prisoner with mindful compassion. Sakka’s charioteer, Matali, was puzzled by this response, and a

poetic debate ensued. Let's listen in:

Matali: Could it be you're afraid, Sakka, / Or weak, that you forbear
like this, / Though hearing such insulting words / From the mouth
of Vepacitti?

Sakka: I am neither afraid nor weak, / Yet I forbear Vepacitti. / How
is it one who knows, like me, / Would get provoked by such a fool?

Matali: More angry will a fool become / If no one puts a stop to him.
So let the wise restrain the fool / By the use of a mighty stick.

Sakka: This is the only thing, I deem, / That will put a stop to the fool:
Knowing well the other's anger, / One is mindful and remains calm.

Matali: This very forbearance of yours, / Sakka, I see as a mistake.
For when a fool reckons like this: / "From fear of me he does forbear,"
The dolt will come on stronger still—/ Like a bull the more that one
flees.

Sakka: Let him think whatever he wants: / "From fear of me he does
forbear." / Among ideals and highest goods / None better than pa-
tience is found.

At issue in this discussion are two opposing models of human nature, as well as two correspondingly different strategies for responding to attack. Matali's approach relies upon the exercise of power to restrain and punish. To act otherwise can only be an indication of fear or weakness. If an adversary senses a hint of either, the argument goes, it will only make him bolder and more aggressive.

Sakka takes a broader view, one grounded in wisdom, patience, and calm. In his first verse he points out that his forbearance is an expression of his understanding. Knowing how the causes of anger and hatred are rooted in toxic underlying dispositions, and knowing the unwholesome

effects these have on mental states when unleashed, he is able to see clearly both the sources of Vepacitti's anger and the harm that comes with venting it. Would one who understands these things allow himself to be diminished by being pulled off-center and goaded into a comparable expression of anger? The wise bull does not chase after waving red cloaks.

Freedom means being able to choose how we respond to things. When wisdom is not well developed, it can be easily obscured by the provocations of others. In such cases we may as well be animals or robots. If there is no space between an insulting stimulus and its immediate conditioned response—anger—then we are in fact under the control of others. Mindfulness opens up such a space, and when wisdom is there to fill it one is capable of responding with forbearance. It's not that anger is repressed; anger never arises in the first place.

In his second verse, Sakka makes the further point that absorbing someone's anger without pushing back on it will eventually exhaust the anger. We all know from personal experience how the fire of anger can be fueled as it is hurled back and forth between people, growing in intensity and in its potential for doing harm. This will happen when there is a strong attachment to the sense of self, when there is *someone who* is insulted and feels wounded, or *someone who* launches their own attack in response. Once again, Sakka points out the importance of "knowing" the anger of the other rather than discounting or ignoring it. But this knowing needs to be accompanied by mindfulness (*sati*) and calm (*upasama*) if it is to siphon off and dissipate the anger. If there is no one to accept the anger that is offered, as, for example, from the person who truly shares the nonself insights of the Buddha, it will find no place to land and will gain no footing.

The final verse has Sakka reiterating the importance of patience (*khanti*), and the value of adhering to what one knows to be beneficial. According to Buddhist teaching, each of us constructs a virtual world of local phenomenal experience, moment to moment, as the mind and the body process sense data. The quality of intention manifesting in this

field of experience is a matter of great importance, for it shapes who we are and who we become. From this perspective the views and opinions of Vepacitti are of no consequence to Sakka, whose well-being—that is, his higher good—is better served by maintaining the wholesome influence of patience during all the moments when Vepacitti might be hurling abuse at him.

Such inspiring behavior is also rooted in compassion. As the final verses of this exchange attest, calm in the face of anger is motivated as much by concern for the other person as for oneself. Since anger is harmful, helping others let go of their anger by not responding in kind contributes to their healing. What would it take for us, individually or collectively, to exemplify the wisdom of forbearance? As Sakka explains:

It is indeed a fault for one
Who returns anger for anger.
Not giving anger for anger,
One wins a double victory.

He behaves for the good of both:
Himself and the other person.
Knowing well the other's anger,
He is mindful and remains calm.

In this way he is healing both:
Himself and the other person.
The people who think "He's a fool,"
Just don't understand the dhamma.

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11

DON'T GET MAD, DON'T
GET EVEN

Even a moment of anger can be terribly damaging.

MASTER HSING YUN

“To bear disgrace and insult” is the most important virtue a person can possibly cultivate, because the ability to forbear is enormously powerful, since a moment of anger can destroy an entire lifetime of merits.

In today's society, people often mistake forbearance for cowardice. Therefore, the inability or unwillingness to forbear anger has become a source of social and family violence. Spousal abuse, child abuse, and drive-by shootings result from the inability of people to control their emotions. If we want to have peace and order in our lives, reason must prevail over negative emotions.

What does it mean to forbear? It is not very difficult for most of us to endure a moment of hunger or thirst. It is not very hard for most of us to bear the heat of summer or the cold of winter. However, it is very difficult for most of us to forbear anger. Even great men and women of history have succumbed to such a fate. By losing control of their emotions, many lost their ability to perceive things clearly and made irreversible mistakes that changed the course of history and profoundly impacted

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the lives of many generations. Therefore, the decision to forbear or not to forbear is a determining factor in one's ultimate success or failure. If we wish to be successful in our undertakings, we must learn to hold back our emotions and be as thoughtful as possible in our actions and reactions.

To forbear is indeed an act of courage and not a symbol of cowardice. It takes great effort and resolution to endure pain and hardship. It requires tremendous confidence to bear insult and disgrace without a hint of retaliation or self-doubt.

In order for us to practice the virtue of forbearance, we must have strength, wisdom, and compassion. We must be willing to settle differences or disputes by means of reason and kindness. We must believe in tolerance and restraint as signs of goodness and bravery. Therefore, if we want to succeed in life and bring about a more peaceful world, we must learn to control our emotions and not to be affected by a moment of anger.

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12

P R E C I O U S E N E R G Y

The Ninth Zen Precept: Not Being Angry

N A N C Y B A K E R

Anger is a natural human emotion; it lasts only 15 seconds. So said the grief expert Elizabeth Kübler-Ross in an interview I once read. Unfortunately, when the human ego is involved, anger tends to last far longer. One of the most famous examples is the “wrath of Achilles,” the mega-anger that begins Homer’s *Iliad* and remains a theme throughout the epic. A recent translation calls Achilles’ anger “sustained rage.” It’s the sustained part that’s the problem. But shouldn’t we also avoid, or control, or suppress even the natural, 15-second variety? It all depends. Aristotle tells us that “he who cannot be angry when he should, at whom he should, and how much he should, is a dolt.” This suggests that in certain circumstances, anger is appropriate, justifiable—even necessary. But before we look at what those circumstances might be, it would be good to consider how our cultural and psychological prohibitions against anger can cause us to misuse the ninth precept.

Working with any of the precepts is not about engaging the super-ego. The Zen precepts *are* moral principles in a sense, but they aren’t “out there,” separate from us, to be held up as standards with which to criticize ourselves when we fall short or, even worse, to criticize others

when they fall short. Nor are the precepts moral straitjackets for controlling our own behavior or anyone else's. Instead, they express what the realized person does naturally. As Bodhidharma puts it, "Self-nature is inconceivably wondrous. In the dharma of no self, not postulating self is called the Precept of Refraining from Anger." Self with a capital S, the Self of Self-nature, is in reality "no self"—buddhanature, the realm of no separation. But until we reach that stage of realization (if there is such a thing as reaching it once and for all), how do we work with the ninth precept? As with all the precepts, we need to work with it in a way that liberates rather than confines us. And that means not using the precept to reject any part of ourselves. Because anger is so universal, frequent, and varied, it serves as a particularly useful model for this.

First of all, it's important to move beyond an oversimplified picture of what anger is. Anger takes many forms, and it's good to explore its subtle and not-so-subtle variations so that ultimately each of us can find out precisely what works for us as a practice. Think of all the words there are for anger: nouns like *rage*, *outrage*, *wrath*, *fury*, *resentment*, *annoyance*, *irritation*, *displeasure*, *indignation*; modifiers like *ticked off*, *pissed off*, *boiling mad*, *stewing*, *annoyed*, *simmering*; verbs like *blow up*, *snap at*, *hit the ceiling*, *see red*, *get under someone's skin*, *lose it*. In addition to all the different kinds of anger are all the different things we do with anger. Some of us suppress it, some of us act it out, some of us disguise it as something else. Some of us get very angry, even at ourselves, and some of us haven't the vaguest idea that we are ever angry. Some of us even get angry at things. How could one get angry at *things*, you may wonder. Well, try the computer. Some of us get angry at computers and other objects much more often than we get angry at people. I once had a boyfriend who during a particularly difficult week became so angry on discovering that money had fallen out of his back pocket that he ripped

the pocket right off his pants—while he was wearing them! I’ll never forget how angry he was. Actually, “enraged” is a better word for his state.

Because we imagine that anger is never a good thing, it is easy to think we should practice simply not being angry. But that approach is too general and abstract. It’s important for each of us to be precise, to be real, to be personal and honest, to find out exactly what *my* anger is. To do that we need to ask ourselves lots of questions about its actual nature. [See “Practice: Working with Anger,” at the end of this article.]

The first step, then, in working with the ninth precept is to discover my own particular version of anger. Once I’ve seen the quality of my anger, the next step is to get to know it intimately. Like many emotions, anger has both a cause and an object. Its cause might be that my best vase was broken through carelessness, but the object of my anger is you, the one who broke it. Getting to know my anger means turning my attention away from its cause and its object, and all my stories about it, to the anger itself. Getting to know my anger means not having any judgments about it, compassionately allowing it, and being curious about it. Suppressing anger is one obvious way of avoiding getting to know it, but so too is acting it out. In the latter case the anger is like a hot potato—I can’t get rid of it fast enough.

What makes us avoid getting to know anger itself, rather than focusing on its object? In some cases it is fear. Once, in a conversation about psychoanalysis, I asked an old friend what her analysis had been about. She thought carefully and said, “Not being afraid of my anger.” I then asked what she was afraid of. After a few moments, she replied: “Blowing up.” She wasn’t speaking metaphorically about having a burst of anger; she meant literally blowing up, in the sense of being annihilated. It was an existential fear. Another fear that can prevent us from expressing or even feeling our anger is fear of being rejected by the one with whom

we're angry. Then, too, some of us are ashamed of being angry and can't face it or admit it. Others of us may have such a powerful self-image of not being the angry type that we deny having any anger to get to know.

Why is it important to know all this about my anger? Why not just *not* be angry? For one thing just not being angry is easier said than done. For another, there is no freedom in avoiding or suppressing it. Again, the precepts are about not rejecting any part of myself—in this case, the one who gets angry—but rather getting to know that part of myself and accepting it without any judgment. This is a very important step in working with any precept. The more we can truly accept who we are, all the way to the point of becoming one with it, the more we give the precept a chance to manifest naturally. Some of us need to practice not acting out our anger, and knowing when and how it shows up can be an enormous help in that regard. Others of us need to get in touch with our anger and not be so afraid or ashamed of it: here too, getting to know the anger, even welcoming it, is an enormous help, especially when we have the courage to admit to others that we're angry. For those with a self-image of never being angry, it's important to realize that a never-angry self-image postulates a self just as much as being angry does.

Thich Nhat Hanh has a very beautiful thing to say about getting to know our anger:

Treat your anger with the utmost respect and tenderness, for it is no other than yourself. Do not suppress it—simply be aware of it. Awareness is like the sun. When it shines on things, they are transformed. When you are aware that you are angry, your anger is transformed. If you destroy anger, you destroy the Buddha, for Buddha and Mara are of the same essence. Mindfully dealing with anger is like taking the hand of a little brother.

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Perhaps the most important reason for getting to know our anger is that anger is actually a precious energy that becomes anger only when it is caught up in complex egoic patterns. As we've seen, those patterns include my stories about anger's cause and object—the broken vase and the one who broke it, for example—as well as many deluded beliefs, not the least of which is the delusion of separation. This energy needs to be freed and transformed rather than distorted or destroyed. When we are unable to feel our anger, depression, collapse, loss of aliveness, dependence, and inability to be autonomous are likely to result. Years ago I was at a small party of dharma friends, and one of the hosts mentioned that he and his partner had very different ways of getting angry. Immediately, everyone was interested, and before we knew it, someone proposed that we go around the room and each say how we got angry or how we would get angry were we to really let loose. I sat there dreading the whole exercise, but when my turn came, I found myself happily announcing that I would be like Dr. Strangelove riding the bomb, ready to blow up the world! That I could even have such a destructive thought was a surprise to me, but incredibly freeing. Several years later, our small New York Zen group tried the same exercise. Given the age and rather staid nature of most of us, the images were hilarious—an ex-husband being shot in a restaurant; a huge flood drowning everyone; stabbings, suffocations, and, of course, Dr. Strangelove blowing up the world. What was fascinating was the effect this exercise had on us: our cheeks were beautifully flushed, our bodies were full of energy, and a wonderful vitality filled the room. We had released a life force simply by letting go of our shame and denial.

To deepen this practice even more, we can try, in a spirit of simple curiosity, to get so close to our anger that we no longer know or feel it

as anger. Cause and object, the self being angry, and the anger itself all drop away, and all that remains is the precious energy, freed at last.

Again, we have Bodhidharma's version of the ninth precept: "Self-nature is inconceivably wondrous. In the dharma of no self, not postulating self is called the Precept of Refraining from Anger." What he is saying is that when there is no self, no selfterritory to defend or construct, and hence, there is oneness—no separation—then there is no anger. But what about Aristotle's remark that an inability to be angry is actually a failing? Can we reconcile that with the Zen version? In other words, can there be anger that does not come from a postulated self, anger that is not defensive and based on the delusion of separation? The answer is yes. There is anger at a child who rushes into the street, endangering his or her life. There is anger at cruelty, and at carelessness that endangers others. My teacher once got angry at me when he realized that I had not thoroughly condemned the behavior of a fellow student who was making money by delivering drugs. These are the quick, 15-second kinds of anger. When the 15 seconds are up, it's over. There is a kind of cleanness, clarity, and purity to this kind of anger because there is no territory of self. But there is also an anger that stays longer than 15 seconds—stays cleanly, clearly, and purely until something that needs to be remedied is taken care of. We all know stories about heroic whistle-blowers who were angry about chemicals being dumped in a river, or angry that information concerning the side effects of a drug had been withheld. We are grateful that these people persisted in their clean, pure anger. That kind of anger is not about defending the territory of self; it is for the good of all.

The kind of anger we're used to, the kind that isn't pure, can be a great teacher, as Bodhidharma's version of the precept indicates. Since anger by definition involves separation, it makes no sense to imag-

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ine it arising in a universe of oneness. Thus when it does arise, it instantly reveals to us the delusive creation of “me” and “not me.” Anger shows us just how fast self can arise, especially when we least expect it. It can happen whether we react to someone or something with a flash of temper, or some ancient buried anger wakes up and slowly takes us over. In either case, the self is born again. But when the precious energy is released from the entrapment of self and our actions arise from Self-nature, it is then that we experience the oneness of self and other, and the arising of compassion. Rumi’s poem “Ali in Battle,” says it all:

Learn from Ali how to fight
without your ego participating.

God’s Lion did nothing
that didn’t originate
from his deep center.

Once in battle he got the best of a certain knight
and quickly drew his sword. The man,
helpless on the ground, spat
in Ali’s face. Ali dropped his sword,
relaxed, and helped the man to his feet.

“Why have you spared me?
How has lightning contracted back
into its cloud? Speak, my prince,
so that my soul can begin to stir
in me like an embryo.”

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Ali was quiet and then finally answered,
“I am God’s Lion, not the lion of passion.
The sun is my lord. I have no longing
except for the One.
When a wind of personal reaction comes,
I do not go along with it.

There are many winds full of anger,
and lust and greed. They move the rubbish
around, but the solid mountain of our true nature
stays where it’s always been.

There’s nothing now
except the divine qualities.
Come through the opening into me.

Your impudence was better than any reverence,
because in this moment I am you and you are me.

I give you this opened heart as God gives gifts:
the poison of your spit has become
the honey of friendship.”

This is the precept of not being angry.

PRACTICE: WORKING WITH ANGER

To make the practice of working with anger personal and precise, it is

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useful to explore the following kinds of questions. (This can be done as a solo inquiry, or with another person asking you the questions, then silently holding the space while you answer.)

First, find out on what kinds of occasions you get angry:

- When do I get angry?
- What makes me angry?
- Do I get angry when I'm criticized? Ignored? Not getting my way? Do I get angry at someone who treats others badly?
- Do I ever displace my anger onto the wrong person, or take anger at myself out on someone else?
- What happens when I get angry? Does angry language pop out of me?

Next, inquire into the flavor of your anger:

- How do I typically get angry? Is my anger hot or cold? Is it quickly discharged or a slow burn?
- Is my anger suppressed, denied, or hidden?
- Do I walk around with simmering resentments day after day?
- How is my private anger different from my anger at public figures or institutions?

If you have difficulty expressing anger or even recognizing that you're angry, ask yourself:

- When do I have difficulty expressing anger?
- With which sorts of people am I reluctant to express anger? Family members? Friends? Men? Women? Employers? Authority figures?

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ures?

Finally, ask yourself about any old angers you've been carrying around for a long time. (Sometimes we have to dig deep to uncover them.)

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U P R O O T I N G T H E S E E D S
O F A N G E R

Anger has something to teach us. Can we listen?

SENSEI JULES SHUZEN HARRIS

We operate under a common illusion that the things that make us angry lie outside of ourselves, that they are external to us. Something out there is in opposition to our need for safety and security; it threatens our comfort or position. We feel a need to defend our vulnerable selves. Anger limits us. But if we have the courage to look at our anger and its causes and to learn from it, we can develop an open heart—a heart of genuine compassion.

My own journey in dealing with anger has included work with several systems of martial arts. Initially I studied the martial arts to learn how to defend against the enemy outside myself, which I thought was the reason for my anger. After some time, I was drawn to iaido, the art of drawing, cutting with, and sheathing a Samurai sword. Loosely translated, the term *iaido* means being able to fit into any situation harmoniously. Unlike many other martial art forms, iaido is noncombative, which was key: to create a harmonious relationship with myself, I had to confront the enemy within—and the enemy was my own anger.

I have often observed that while we each experience anger in our own way, a more general sense of anger pervades our society. That is, as a culture, we are angry. Our sense of humor is very sarcastic. A lot of what we find entertaining involves putting someone down. We have slapstick comedy: people running around doing mean, spiteful things that we are supposed to find funny. Whether it is a television show or a new viral Internet video, we find humor in mocking, or putting others down, or insults that allow us to watch from the outside as someone else is subjected to some form of humiliation. We might ask ourselves, “What’s funny about that?” Not much. Laughing at others’ misfortune is a kind of expression of our own anger.

Have we ever said to someone, “You’re lazy,” or “You’re a bitch” or “You’re an insufferable bastard”? Of course. We’ve all done that in one way or another. Or maybe we have said, “If it wasn’t for you, I would be better off,” or “It’s because of you that I am suffering.” It is as if we believe that by putting others down, by placing the blame or responsibility for our unhappiness on others, we can make ourselves better or relieve our own feelings of inadequacy. But anger doesn’t make us feel better. As Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche said, “You cannot really eliminate pain through aggression. The more you kill, the more you strengthen the killer, who will create new things to be killed. The aggression grows until finally, there is no space; the whole environment has been solidified.”

Among the Three Poisons we find the Pali term *dosa*, “anger.” The Three Poisons of anger, greed, and delusion keep us in bondage and control us—they overwhelm our best intentions and cause us to do harm to others. We may even cause the greatest hurt to the people we most care about. We don’t want to hurt them, or ourselves, but we are driven by our anger.

Many times we find that a feeling that arises in us is the outward

manifestation of a deeper underlying emotion or experience. We might explore this possibility by asking ourselves about where our anger really comes from. What is the other side of anger? Fear. We can't free ourselves until we work through both our anger and our fear. And what is the cause of fear? Ultimately, it is the fear of nonexistence, death, the fear of losing ourselves and being forgotten. But a fear of death translates into a fear of living, because impermanence is itself a fundamental condition of our lives. In this fear lie the seeds of anger.

How do we break the cycle of anger? We all know anger from experience, but when we are asked to pause and consider, "What is this anger?" it's not always so easy to see what it is. Yet when we approach our feelings of anger with awareness, with mindfulness, it becomes a productive part of our practice. We find, after all, that anger has something to teach us.

Anger is what Thich Nhat Hanh calls "habit energy." Like most habits, it takes just one particular event or word or incident to trigger us, as quick as a snap of the finger. Just because we have a *kensho* experience and see into our true nature and maybe for a second or two experience some sense of bliss, that doesn't mean that we won't return to habit energy five minutes or an hour later. If someone does something that irritates you, ask yourself the question, "Who is it that is ticked off? Who is it that's angry?" We'll find that there is no self to get angry or to defend.

And yet there may be something that sets us off again and again, as reliably as an alarm clock. Maybe we know what some of those things are. Often other people can tell us what brings out our flashes of anger even if we are not ourselves aware of them. But these habitual flash-points offer us an opportunity to see ourselves more deeply, with a fuller understanding and with greater compassion, to look at what incited our angry reaction, and to follow the thread within ourselves. All we need is

the space between trigger and reaction to mindfully look within.

So where do we find this space to separate ourselves from our anger? Many Buddhist traditions teach that all things are insubstantial. When we see this, we see that the support for anger and hate is eroded and eventually destroyed. This speaks to one of the three marks of existence—impermanence. We have all found ourselves in situations that illustrate the transitory nature of events. Something happens to us that makes us angry; perhaps we get into an argument at home with a partner at the very start of the day. A couple of hours later, we're at work and we're still thinking about the incident. More time goes by, and we continue to stew over it at lunchtime, and by the time we get home, we're still holding onto it. But where is it? Where is the incident? It's like last night's supper—it doesn't exist.

Over and over again, I tell students dealing with anger, "This practice is about being mindful!" While that may sound simple, it is in fact a very, very difficult practice because it goes against a lot of what we hold sacred. Many of us have a particular group of gods that we worship. It's not God, Jesus, or Buddha. We worship pleasure, comfort, and security. Despite knowing that everything is impermanent, we still hold onto objects that we think will bring us security. We cling to what we believe will spare us from discomfort, and when these things slip out of our grasp, fear and anger arise. Part of mindfulness is looking at our reactions and perceptions—if we are all truly one body, why are we cutting off the relationship with our partner, our coworker, or our friend? If my hand is in pain, do I cut it off? Of course not. I take care of it. I take some Tylenol. I look more carefully into what might be causing the pain—maybe it's an injury, or it could be that I'm developing arthritis and need to think of some therapies. But when it comes to anger, we cut ourselves off because we have an investment in maintaining who we

think we are. Anger limits our expression of seeing our whole self. As a divisive force, it prevents us from living a fully rich life of connectedness. Instead of experiencing the one body that pervades everywhere, anger isolates us and reinforces the sense of a separate self, preventing us from identifying with and feeling compassion for others.

Mindfulness is cultivated through meditation practice. That is one of the reasons why I like the focused practice period of *sesshin*, several days of intensive sitting. It is amazing how much stuff surfaces in *sesshin*. In my first few years practicing Zen, I thought of myself as a pretty laid-back, easygoing guy. But then during these intensive meditation periods, I couldn't believe the amount of anger and rage that came up. I was ready to kill the teacher, kill the monks, and burn down the monastery! It stood in stark contrast to my ideas of who I thought I was. My anger was exacerbated by having the duty of scrubbing the toilets with a toothbrush. But all along the way, I continued meditating. And at some point, scrubbing the toilet with a toothbrush became a practice of mindfulness for me.

When we work with anger in Buddhist practice, we work with it a little differently than you would in psychotherapy. We don't ask you to beat a pillow, open the window, and scream. When I was a psychotherapist, I had a Bozo the Clown bop bag in my office; you could hit it and it would just bounce back. And I would say, "Just keep pounding it, get it all out!" But that's not our approach. In Buddhism, we work to illuminate the fundamental truth of our self-nature. When anger arises, it is pointing to something. Our anger is a clue to our underlying beliefs about ourselves. It can help to reveal our constructed sense of self-identity.

Today many psychotherapists embrace Buddhist practice as a way of looking at ourselves in relationship to others. The Identity System developed by Stanley Block, M.D., involves two processes called "mind-body

mapping” and “bridging.” Mind-body mapping as a part of Buddhist practice requires an openness to adapting the dharma for a particular time, place, and person—in this case for the Western psyche. You begin mind-body mapping by paying attention to a particular thought that is on your mind, perhaps one that is connected to strong feelings. Then, using this first thought as a focal point, you trace the paths of further thoughts and ideas that are generated out of the initial thought. At the same time, we give attention to how our thoughts feel in relationship to the body. We all have personal requirements, thoughts, or rules about how we—and the world—should be. While they may remain hidden from our conscious awareness, we can recognize them by our anger, which arises when our requirements are broken. By deepening our ability to be fully present, we have a better chance of seeing our requirements and letting them go, uprooting the seeds that sprout into anger.

This exploration, together with an approach called “bridging,” has proven to be a valuable tool. Bridging is akin to mindfulness. When you are washing the dishes, you are focused on touch, the place, the water on your hands, the feel of the sponge; or when you are driving your car, you listen to the hum of the engine, the vibration of your hands on the steering wheel. Bridging and mind-body mapping help us deal with the shadow beliefs we carry with us: “I’m not good enough,” “I’m undeserving,” which create negative story lines. Our anger can be seen as a defense against these vulnerable feelings and negative self-beliefs. The deep-seated fear and anger we harbor has to do with our feelings of a damaged self. Mind-body mapping and bridging enable practitioners to see how they create their suffering in relationship to the body rather than a situation outside themselves. From a Buddhist perspective, we are trying to reach the place where there is no separation, no subject, no object. Bringing our mind back again and again to a place of present-

moment awareness, we create a space where we let go of our habitual reaction patterns and our recurring negative feelings. We then open the opportunity to view ourselves—and others—with real compassion.

Our meditation practice is also a place where we can work directly with our experience of anger by becoming the anger. To “become the anger” does not mean to act it out. It means we stop separating ourselves from it; we experience it fully so that we can experience what’s behind it. In sitting zazen, we can encourage the anger to come up. We become intimate with anger, and in doing so, we watch it dissipate.

We have to look deeply into the cause of our suffering. Our anger not only creates suffering for others, but it also creates more suffering for us. We might take a mind-body perspective that what we think affects every cell in our body. Neuroscientists suggest that our neurons are affected by our immediate environment. If we are in a hostile, argumentative, negative environment, then that affects our neural networks and neurochemistry, and our nervous system becomes conditioned to react every time we go into that environment. So we could say that very environment becomes toxic. We’ve all had the experience of walking into a certain space and feeling at home, and going into a different space and becoming very agitated or depressed, because of the subtle energy or our unconscious relationship to the place.

We must remember that we create our own anger. No one makes it for us. If we move from a particular event directly to our reaction, we are skipping a crucial awareness, a higher perspective on our own reactivity. What is that middle step, that deeper awareness? It is mindfulness about our own beliefs, our attitude, our understanding or lack of understanding about what has really happened. We notice that a given situation reliably provokes our anger, and yet somebody else can be exposed to the very same situation and not react angrily. Why is that? No one can tell

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us: we each have to find the answer ourselves, and to do that, we need to give ourselves the space to reflect mindfully.

We're going to keep getting angry. It's going to come up. It has come up in our lives before, and it will come up again. This practice is about becoming more mindful, becoming aware of how we are getting stuck. With care and work, we find ways to get unstuck. But we also know that the moment we get unstuck, we're going to get stuck again. That's why it is called a practice—we never arrive. So when you find yourself upset or angry, use the moment as a part of your practice, as an opportunity to notice and uproot the seeds of anger and move into the heart of genuine compassion.

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IS ANGER EVER A GOOD
THING?

An interview with Buddhist scholar John Makransky

In May 2011, at the Newark Peace Education Summit in New Jersey, the Dalai Lama and Jody Williams—both Nobel Peace Prize winners—debated the role of anger in social action work. The Dalai Lama held that people must have inner peace in order to promote peace in the world. “Too much emotion, attachment, anger, or fear, that kind of mental state, you can’t investigate objectively,” he said. Williams respectfully disagreed, “It’s anger at injustice which fires many of us,” she argued.

As Buddhists, we may tend to agree with the Dalai Lama. But after listening to Williams, a powerful activist for social change, a compelling question emerged: is anger ever a good thing?

Tricycle decided to ask John Makransky (“Lama John” to his friends and students; he was in fact installed in 2000 by Lama Surya Das), a professor of Buddhism at Boston College who regularly leads social justice retreats that often deal with anger. Before talking about anger at injustice, Dr. Makransky says, we need to understand what we normally identify as anger. It is only when we recognize that the source of ordinary anger is delusion and self-centeredness that we can begin to use anger’s powerful energy and wisdom for the benefit of all beings.

What is anger? As Tulku Urgyen taught, a deluded emotion like anger is a movement of the mind not knowing its own nature. Anger is a strong aversion in the mind, reacting to a negative image that the mind has constructed of someone or something, unaware that it is reacting to its own image. We may get slightly or more intensely angry every day, in many little moments.

What are anger's roots? Anger as we normally experience it occurs when our sense of self and its world feel threatened. Someone does something that makes it hard for one's mind to maintain its concept of self and its world, triggering a painful mental feeling. With that arises an image of the other person as loathsome, not fully human. The mind then blames the other person for its painful feeling.

It's important to note that anger is a form of fear. Someone does something, and suddenly the mind feels ungrounded and reacts with anger, trying to reestablish a firm ground by reaffirming one's narrow sense of self. Anger's aim is to establish safety in that deluded way.

The problem is that real safety is not found within such self-centered fear and anger. Real safety is available only in the depth of our being, our underlying buddhanature. Love and compassion are, among others, fundamental qualities of the deepest nature of mind. In those unchanging qualities is the actual source of safety for self and others. To realize this is to recognize our own deep worthiness and potential for inner freedom and goodness, and to recognize the very same in all other persons.

Can there be anger that doesn't come from the idea of self, that comes from this deeper nature? I think I would ask: Can there be something like what we call anger that is not the expression of a defensive self-pro-

tectiveness? I would say yes, absolutely. Authentic compassion may take confrontational forms that can seem like anger but are not.

What about the feeling that arises when we experience or witness injustice in the world? Would you call that anger or compassion? It could be ordinary anger, or it could be wrathful compassion. But let me say a bit more that will tie back to this question.

Even though anger's aim is to establish a zone of safety, since anger mistakes persons for its own distorted projections of them, it is out of touch with the fuller reality of everyone, making it unstable and dangerous. Buddhist traditions provide antidotes to anger to remove this danger. These include ways of cultivating love and ways to look past the reified self that drives anger, in order to uncover a safer "ground" in the depth of our being beyond anger's projections. Such methods help the mind find its way back to the actual ground of safety, which is the unconditioned nature of our mind, our buddhanature.

In many Buddhist traditions, practitioners learn to experience themselves as the object of the unconditional love and compassion of the buddhas. For example, in Tibetan traditions there are practices of refuge, offering, and guru yoga. In Japanese Shin Buddhism, people entrust themselves to the unconditional compassion of Amida Buddha. In such practices, the practitioner is totally embraced by the unchanging love, compassion, and wisdom of those who have previously awakened to the nature of their minds. This helps the practitioner's mind feel safe enough to relax its grip on the concept of self to which anger fearfully clings. Then the mind doesn't feel the need to be so angry.

Love and compassion make us feel safe because they express the safety of their source—the deep buddhanature within us, the unchanging inner space of primal awareness that cannot be harmed. By receiv-

ing unconditional love and compassion from those who've awakened before us, we sense that we too can relax into the very source of such love in the unconditioned nature of our minds, our buddhanature.

How do you tell the difference between anger and wrathful compassion? Wise compassion for others and the courage to confront them in their harmful thoughts and actions may look like anger from the outside, but is quite different. If someone becomes receptive to the deep nature of her mind with its latent capacities of goodness, she starts to sense others similarly in their very being as intrinsically worthy and good. Then her vision of others cannot be reduced to the caricatures of self-protective anger. Her vision of persons becomes more like how a loving mother sees her child, even when he misbehaves, as intrinsically worthy, someone she would never abandon. To forcefully challenge someone for their own sake takes a much stronger, more authentic love than going along with others no matter what they do.

To relate this back to Buddhist practice: to open to our deepest nature, our buddhanature, is to access a power of loving compassion that has the courage to challenge oneself and others on whatever ways we may hide from our fuller potential.

Does this have anything to do with anger at injustice and unjust systems? It's exactly like that. When people undergo great suffering under oppressive social systems, we may feel strongly connected to those suffering most intensely—for example, those who lack access to resources in countries where a tiny percentage of people control virtually everything. For most people, it seems normal to hate those in charge of such a system. But as we've been saying, we must acknowledge that those who maintain such systems do so from their own inner patterns of fear, from

their own attempts to establish safe ground for themselves.

The unconditional compassion in the inmost nature of our minds can recognize that everyone involved in such oppressive systems—those most oppressed by them and those ferociously defending it—have the same underlying capacity of goodness, which is distorted by their self-protective attempts to find safety. Authentic compassion may forcefully challenge the system. Sometimes such compassion can take a powerful confrontational form, as occurred with Gandhi, Martin Luther King, the Dalai Lama, or Aung San Suu Kyi. But this differs from anger, because instead of aiming to protect oneself or one's own position against others, it aims to protect all others, by challenging all in different ways. It can challenge those who cling to a bad system to give others greater freedom. It can challenge those who have been abused to rediscover their great worth and power for good. Unlike self-righteous anger, which hates the “bad ones” on behalf of the “good ones,” confrontational compassion protects all by challenging all differently—those suffering in injustices and those inflicting them. It upholds all in their fuller humanity and potential for greater freedom from fear, hatred, and suffering.

Many activists see anger as a necessary and motivating force. Is there anything positive about anger? Most who attend my social justice retreats are social justice activists, including teachers, social workers, and health-care givers who see a need for systemic change. Many say, “My anger at injustice is what motivates me to work for change. So it doesn't make sense to me to reject my anger.” Actually, given what we've discussed so far, I think there is truth in that. They are saying that anger is not just deluded, that they sense some wisdom in it, and I think that is true. For example, in trying to make oneself feel safe, anger knows that a ground of safety must be findable somehow. That's true—there is a

ground of safety here within the depth of our being, the deep nature of our minds, which we should try to find. Anger also knows there is something terribly wrong that must be destroyed to make things safe. It's just wrong about all the details. Anger thinks that what's wrong is another person or group that must be defeated or destroyed to establish dependable safety. That's a big mistake. What's wrong is how out of touch we all are from our fuller humanity and underlying potential of goodness. To correct that wrong, something does need to be destroyed, but it's not other people; it's the self-centered fixation that has everyone in its grip, which generates individual and social reactions that make things unsafe for all. So I think some social justice activists want to defend their anger because it indeed contains some wisdom, but it is a distorted form of wisdom. If the wisdom in anger could be liberated from its distorted projections, its intense energy could clarify into wrathful compassion.

It seems to me that that's not what usually happens! Anger usually backfires.

That's if we maintain anger as our primary motivation. When we do that, delusions of anger hinder and eventually destroy our work. Anger projects images of others that are merely partial, preventing us from knowing more of their humanity and potential. Then we can't listen deeply to others. We become too defensive, turning people off, so we can't get enough help, which makes us even angrier. With anger and hatred as motivation, we drive people away instead of inspiring and attracting them to our cause; those who do work with us burn out, and we eventually burn out and wind up hating ourselves.

So it sounds like the long and short of it is that anger is not a sustainable motivating force for social action. We need to go beyond the

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brittle self-centeredness of anger and take the power and energy driving anger to its truer objects. Instead of hating other persons as objects to be defeated or destroyed, we can let our wrathful energy target all patterns of greed, prejudice, hatred, fear and self-protectiveness that have been operative in every one of us, starting with ourselves. To do this is to be given over to the underlying energy of impartial compassion in the nature of our minds. This energy can become ferocious in upholding everyone in their essential dignity and potential.

When Martin Luther King demonstrated against social institutions of racism and economic inequality, his opponents used attack dogs and whips on him and his followers. Yet King repeatedly taught that unconditional love is the key to foundational social change. He taught that we must confront social structures of racism on behalf of *everyone*, including those supporting such structures. It was never only for the oppressed people. It was also on behalf of the racists, and he made that clear.

This is the essential difference between ordinary anger and wrathful compassion. Ordinary anger is motivated by fear and aversion; wrathful compassion is motivated by love that has the courage to confront people for their own sake. Anger seeks to protect the self, or one's own self-righteousness. Wrathful compassion seeks to protect all others, by challenging what harms them. The difference is quite clear.

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TAMING DESTRUCTIVE
EMOTIONS

Can meditation change the brain? Daniel Goleman,
the best-selling author of *Emotional Intelligence*,
offered *Tricycle* some surprising answers.

DANIEL GOLEMAN

In your book *Destructive Emotions* you write that “recognizing and transforming destructive emotions is the heart of spiritual practice.” Can you tell us what you mean by “destructive emotions”? There are two perspectives, one from the East and the other from the West. The Western view of destructive emotions—the modern philosophical and scientific view—is that they are emotions that result in harm to oneself or to others. And “harm” here is meant in the most obvious sense: physical harm, affective harm, social harm. The view from the East is subtler. The Buddhist view, as it emerged in conversations with the Dalai Lama at the Mind and Life conference in March 2000, is that destructive emotions are those that disturb one’s internal equilibrium, while healthy ones foster equilibrium of the mind. In this sense, “harmful” emotions are essentially what Buddhists call the kleshas, or defilements, which are enumerated in the classical texts. The kleshas operate on a gross level—

in the form of hatred, craving, jealousy, and so on—and also more subtly, mingling with our thoughts to disturb equilibrium internally.

Buddhist teachings tell us that meditation can train the mind to replace destructive emotions with positive states, like equanimity. How does this hold up to scientific scrutiny? As I reported in *Destructive Emotions*, we now have extremely compelling evidence showing that yes, dharma practice does alleviate destructive emotions and that it does so by profoundly altering the way the brain functions. The work of Richard Davidson at the University of Wisconsin-Madison has been key in discovering this. Davidson has been involved in research on meditation on and off for 40 years.

When he and I were graduate students at Harvard together in the 1970s, we both did research on meditation. He looked at the attentional training effects; I looked at the stress-alleviation effects. But the methodologies back then were so primitive compared to what we have now that we didn't get very far. Now he works in a field called affective neuroscience, which looks at emotions and the brain, and he has returned to the study of meditation with state-of-the-art methods that have yielded quite compelling results on meditation's benefits.

Can you say something about those results? Yes, but first some background: Davidson's research found that when people are in the grip of a strong disturbing emotion—anger, paralyzing fear, depression—there's an unusually high amount of activity in the amygdala, an almond-shaped structure deep in the emotional centers of the brain. Along with this heightened activity, there's an unusually high level of activity in the right prefrontal cortex, the brain's executive center, situated just behind the forehead. It seems that the amygdala is driving this area of the pre-

frontal cortex when we're in the grip of destructive emotional states. When destructive emotions take over, our thoughts, our memories, and our perceptions are skewed accordingly, and they have a cascading effect. For instance, when we're angry, we more easily remember things that make us angry. In other words, anger feeds itself, and we are more likely to act in a way that expresses that anger. That's a description, then, of the brain caught in a destructive emotion. By contrast, when the opposite range manifests—positive states like optimism, hope, buoyancy—the amygdala and the right side are quiet, whereas the area on the left in the prefrontal area is active.

As we go through our day, each of us has a distinct ratio of prefrontal activity on the right and the left. Surprisingly, Davidson found that that ratio will predict the typical range of our moods day-to-day. So people who tend to have much more right prefrontal activity are much more prone to bad moods. People who have much more left prefrontal activity are more likely to experience very good moods, and if they get a very bad mood, it won't be very strong or it won't last very long.

Can meditation change this ratio for the better? What you're asking is whether the brain is plastic—that is, can it be shaped and changed? And the good news is, the brain is extremely plastic if we undergo systematic, repeated experiences. The problem is, we almost never try to train the brain unless we are in the course of acquiring a skill. If you learn to play the piano, for instance, you are reshaping the cortical area that controls fine finger movements, and further developing parts of the auditory cortex. If you start to drive a cab in London, within six months the part of your brain that is operating when you are interpreting a map—in other words, your visual-spatial memory—starts to expand and become stronger. This has been demonstrated using functional MRIs, the gold stan-

dard now for assessing brain function. The good news for practitioners is that meditation practice seems to be one of those systematic trainings of the brain that yields quite beneficial effects, even from the beginning.

Davidson and Jon Kabat-Zinn—who has been so important in bringing mindfulness into the mainstream of medicine and culture—teamed up to do a study to appear in a scientific journal, in which they taught stressed-out research scientists at a biotech firm to do mindfulness meditation. The subjects practiced about three hours a week for eight weeks. Davidson did brain assessments both before and after, and he found that in the before state, these guys—and they were mostly men—tended to have a right prefrontal tilt: they felt hassled, pressured, stressed-out, didn't enjoy their work anymore. But after the mindfulness training, Davidson found there was a significant shift from right prefrontal activity to the left. The subjects started to love their work again; they felt it was a challenge instead of a hassle; their moods were much, much better. It's clear that simply beginning meditation can bring about a significant shift in the brain.

Now, the question is, how far can you push it? One of the first practitioners Davidson studied is the head of a monastery in Southern India. They brought him into the lab and tried to get his baseline for right-left ratio. The rightleft ratio, by the way, is a bell curve. Most people tend to be in the middle, with very few people far to the right or left. This particular subject had the highest value for a leftward tilt that had ever been seen in his lab. Davidson also found—and this I find quite significant—that when he asked another highly experienced practitioner to do a meditation on compassion, his brain went into an extreme value toward the left, too, again in the highest range seen thus far. These and other early results were so compelling that Davidson, along with other scientists, began an ongoing program to study very highly experienced

practitioners, people who have done three years or more of intensive retreat.

What does this suggest? If these findings remain consistent as Davidson progresses with more studies, this suggests that in terms of neuroplasticity, dharma practice may push the brain toward the upper registers of positivity in moods. If you look at classical Abhidharma—the Buddhist psychology—and the traditional texts, it says that the more you practice, the less you should experience the kleshas, or destructive emotions, and the more you should experience the positive ones. Lo and behold, 2,500 years later science is saying, Hey, it looks like that’s what happens!

In your book, Davidson refers to what he calls “altered traits of consciousness.” What does he mean? Well, an altered trait of consciousness is in contrast to an altered state. In meditation practice, with time, you may have occasional experiences of bliss or of rapture or have visions; all kinds of pleasant things can happen. Those are temporary altered states, and they fade; virtually every tradition in Buddhism refers to them as epiphenomena rather than goals in themselves. The standard advice is, just do the practice, don’t make a big deal of it. One of the biggest confusions of Western culture has been to misinterpret such temporary states—to mistake momentary bliss experiences for actual realization. But realization has to do with stabilizing the underlying abilities of insight that generate those experiences—not the blissful states themselves. In such stabilization, you are altering your mind—or “brain,” as we in the West would say. To achieve some stability would be to acquire what Davidson calls an “altered trait”—in other words, something that endures. Long-term meditation, science is now discovering, moves us toward enduring changes in brain activity.

Given the fact that the negative emotions seem to have been built into us over millennia of evolutionary development, does that set up a rather bleak picture for countering them with meditation practice? I think that recent discoveries pointing in favor of neuroplasticity offer great hope. I've been a strong advocate of what's called social-emotional learning programs in school for kids. Because if we can help kids acquire the everyday skills, like self-awareness, self-control, and empathy, that allow you to manage anger, fear, and depression—and these skills can be taught more easily to children—then we will help them shape their brains in a more optimal way for the rest of their lives. But as adults we need a little remedial work. And it looks like meditation is good for that task.

Have you studied the effects of meditation in children? No. But we know that meditation shapes the brain, and you can conjecture that it gives people quite an advantage if they do it earlier in life, when the brain is being formed, rather than later. That's the case, for instance, with tulkus, or for people who have been monks or nuns as children. What the effect of that is we don't know, because we've never studied it, but you can see that it might give children a great advantage through life in how, for example, they relate to their negative emotions. It may be that they have much stronger neural circuitry from childhood onward in, say, inhibiting negative emotions, because they've had the right kind of mental training. It makes you wonder about what's happening to the brain of someone who does a three-year retreat from the age of twelve or thirteen.

What implications does all of this have for the field of psychology? The deep assumptions that underlie psychology look rather culture-bound

now, particularly when it comes to what the upper limits of human potential might be. Freud said that the best psychoanalysis can do is bring people from neurosis to ordinary unhappiness. It's only been within the last five years or so that psychologists have started to think about a positive psychology, that is, the positive range of moods. Most of the studies have focused on the negative range of emotion. Now there are psychologists who are looking at optimism and equanimity and happiness as areas in which people can develop. But what the upper limits of happiness might be is still relatively circumscribed; there's nothing in psychology, for example, to approximate the Buddhist idea of *sukkha*, of a happiness beyond circumstances, beyond conditions of life, of an ongoing internal state wherein one is replete no matter what else might be going on. That's just not in the vision of modern psychology.

Were any of the results of your collective studies particularly surprising? One unexpected discovery was that meditation training may make you a keener observer of other people's emotional states—I found it surprising, as did the Dalai Lama, when he heard about it. Paul Ekman, another of the scientists involved in the Mind and Life discussions, is a world expert on the facial expression of emotion. He discovered what are called “microexpressions,” fleeting facial expressions that last a twentieth of a second or less. They're completely automatic and unconscious, revealing your true feelings at a particular moment. Ekman developed a test of people's ability to detect microexpressions accurately. Curiously, he found that most people who might want to be good at it, like judges or police or psychotherapists, aren't any better than the average person. I think the group that tested best were secret service agents. But when Ekman brought in seasoned practitioners, he discovered that they had an accuracy rating in the 99th percentile for many of the emotions—

but not for all of them. Interestingly, exactly which emotions they were so good at detecting, differed from one person to another. But Ekman had virtually never seen such accuracy. And this was an unanticipated benefit of meditation. It may be because of a general perceptual sharpening, or because of some kind of enhanced empathy. A central tenet of Buddhism is compassion, and although it would be unscientific to draw any conclusion at this point, Ekman's findings are certainly consistent with cultivating compassion. In fact, I think empathy is a prerequisite for compassion, so in that sense it's completely in accord with the Buddhist teachings.

In your book, the Dalai Lama was very clear about the fact that concentration by itself is not spiritual practice, it merely sharpens the brain's ability to focus. That's a key point. Not all meditation that changes the brain is necessarily spiritually beneficial. Meditative abilities such as simply strengthening one's ability to concentrate can be quite worldly in and of themselves. Meditative states start to have spiritual benefits when they're used for developing insight and compassion. So if you strengthen your concentration and then use it in support of cultivating insight—for looking into the mind—that's good, and if you use it as a support for cultivating compassion, that has genuine spiritual benefit, too. But if you use it just to become a better martial arts practitioner, I don't think it has any particular spiritual benefits. In other words, it can be used to any human end, bad or good, but without the spiritual element of cultivating insight and compassion, it's a different goal altogether.

Can science aid in the process of overcoming afflictive emotions? I don't think that science can come up with some gadget that gives us a new way of practicing; I'm skeptical of that. I think that ultimately each

of us has to do that work ourselves, internally. But I think that in our culture science can be of enormous help in establishing that the methodologies we've been using in dharma practice for millennia actually are effective on scientific grounds. The scientific findings that establish the efficacy of dharma practice in helping to alleviate disturbing emotions might remove some doubts that get in the way of a commitment to practice the dharma. And they might motivate and inspire people to work harder in their practice. So in that sense, science can be of aid to dharma practice. And it can do more than alleviate dharma practitioners' doubts; it can interest people who haven't been practitioners in starting meditation practice.

I think one of the most significant developments is that very high-level scientists in the West are now using state-of-the-art measures with highly experienced dharma practitioners. This has become a major research focus in itself and many developments have been the direct result of the Dalai Lama's explicit urging.

So what is the bottom line on the mind's potential for transformation and liberation from afflictive emotions? Well, it's beginning to look like the Buddha just might have had it right.