

What is Anger?

By Ven. Robina Courtin

A perfect question. And the perfect answer, which I heard from a lama, is: “Anger is the response when attachment doesn’t get what it wants.”

But how to get to the bottom of this? How to go beyond its being a cute saying? Lama Yeshe is not kidding when he says that we need to be our own psychologists. You could argue that we’re not really Buddhists until we work on our minds.

This is logical. In the second of the Four Noble Truths, Buddha asserts that the two main causes of our suffering are our past negative actions and our deluded states of mind. These two subsume into one, the delusions. Because of these negative states of mind, we act inappropriately by harming others, thus sowing the seeds of our future suffering.

Given, as Buddha points out in the third Noble Truth, that we can be free of suffering – thank goodness! – we need to cut this cycle of madness. In relation to the two main causes, there are two main practices to be done.

The most urgent, as Lama Zopa Rinpoche points out, relates to the delusions: Initially, at the very least, don’t respond with negativity. (The second is to stop the seeds we’ve already planted from ripening as suffering; this is called purification.) But the real practice begins when we learn to identify the neuroses and remove them.

All states of mind fall into three categories: positive, negative, and neutral, but how to distinguish them? It’s not easy.

First of all, we’re not educated to look into our minds.

Second, we only notice we’re angry when the words vomit out of the mouth; or that we’re depressed when we can’t get out of bed one morning.

Third, even if we do look at our feelings, often we can’t tell the difference between the positive and the negative: they’re mixed together in a big soup of emotions – and a puréed soup at that.

Fourth, we don’t think we can change them: they’re so concrete, so real; we even think they’re physical.

And anyway, fifth, who *wants* to look into their mind? It’s not my fault, is it? I didn’t ask to get born! This is how we all

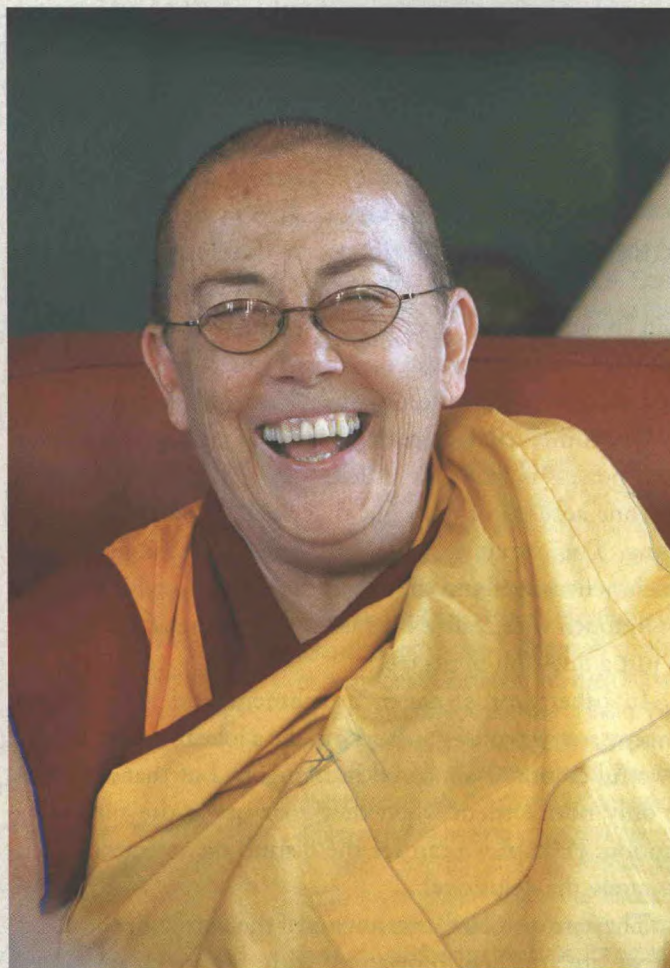


Photo: Karen Longwell

are! What am *I* supposed to do about it? Everything conspires against our doing this job that Buddha recommends.

To give ourselves the confidence to even start, we need to think about how the negative states of mind are not at the core of our being, they do not define us, they are not innate, and thus can be removed. This flies in the face of our deeply held assumption – one that’s reinforced by all materialist models of the mind – that the positive and negative have equal status; that they’re natural; they are just who we are. If you ask your therapist for methods to get rid of all anger, jealousy, attachment and the rest, they’ll think you’re insane!

Negative States of Mind are Disturbing and Delusional

So, what are negative states of mind? They have two main characteristics (which the positive ones necessarily lack) and these are indicated by two commonly used synonyms: “disturbing emotions” and “delusions.”

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Even though we can see that anger is disturbing to oneself – just look at an angry person: they're out of their mind! – we fiercely live in denial of it. My friends on death row in Kentucky told me that they receive visits

from an old Catholic man who, after thirty years of grief and rage after his daughter was murdered, finally realized that the *main* reason for his suffering was his rage, his anger.

The other characteristic that these unhappy states of mind possess is that they're delusional. We'd be offended if someone accused of that, but that's exactly what Buddha is saying. The extent to which our minds are caught up in attachment, anger and the rest is the extent to which we are not in touch with reality. He's saying that we're all delusional, it's just a question of degree.

In other words, anger, attachment and the rest are concepts, *wrong* concepts. It seems like a joke to say that these powerful emotions are based in thoughts, but that's because we only notice them when they roar up to the surface as emotion. Perhaps we can see the disturbing aspect of them, but rarely the delusional.

They are distorted assessments of the person or the event that we are attached to or angry with; they're elaborations, exaggerated stories, lies, misconceptions, fantasies, conceptual constructions, superstitions. As Lama Zopa Rinpoche puts it, they "decorate on top of what is already there" layers upon layers of characteristics that are not there. Bad enough, Rinpoche says, that we see things this way; the worst part is that we *believe* that they're true. This is what keeps us locked inside our own personal insane asylum.

Understanding this is the key to understanding our negative states of mind and, therefore, how to get rid of them.

Attachment and Anger Come Together

The delusion that runs our lives is attachment. It's a profound dissatisfaction, neediness; a primordial sense that something is missing, of being bereft, lonely, cut off. It's just there, *all the time*, in the bones of our being.

And this is where aversion, the exact opposite of attachment, comes into play. The split second that attachment is thwarted, doesn't get what it wants – and that's a thousand times a day – aversion arises. Attachment and anger are utterly linked.

Being a fantasy, attachment is not sustainable; the bubble has to burst, and it has nowhere to go but aversion (or ignorance, which manifests as boredom, indifference, uncaring).

Beneath all of this, of course, is the root delusion, the root lie: that I'm self-existent – and its nature is fear. When we've ripped that lie forever from our minds, there is no fear, as Rinpoche points out.

In our never-ending efforts to keep the panic at bay, we hungrily seek the right sounds, smells, tastes, feelings, thoughts, words, but the split second we don't get them, aversion arises, exploding outwards as anger or imploding inwards as depression, guilt, hopelessness, self-hate.

How to Get Rid of Anger?

The very first, baby steps in the process of getting rid of anger – even before we begin to control our minds – involve controlling our behavior. The Kadampa masters advise: "When you're with others, watch your body and speech. When you're on your own, watch your mind." As our grandmothers told us: "Behave yourself!" At least then we don't harm others.

But at these first stages of practice, what we need to be enthusiastic about is the benefit to ourselves: We become happier, more content, our friends find us a pleasure to be around, and we don't sow seeds for future suffering.

Another, amazing, practice is, as Rinpoche advises, "Don't believe in your karmic appearances." Right now, everything is seen through the looking glass of our own distorted emotions. As Pabongka Rinpoche says, even if you don't know what emptiness means, just think, "Maybe things don't exist the way they appear." This pulls the rug from under our samsara.

In the Middle Ages, everyone believed what they saw with their eyes, and the Church upheld it as God's truth: that the earth stood still and the sun moved around it. Galileo was called a heretic for explaining how what appeared to our eyes was simply not true.

Finally, of course, we need to start to notice what on earth is going on in this mind of ours so that we can untangle the mess, distinguish the good from the bad, and gradually deconstruct the nonsense that the delusions tell us.

Working on our minds is the heart job of a Buddhist. The multitude of practices that are recommended, such as concentration meditation, purification, prostrations, making offerings, reciting mantras, praying to the Buddhas, guru

devotion, working for the Dharma centers, helping others, etc., give a rocket boost to this job. Without them, our mind doesn't have enough power to change.

What is Anger Not?

Anger is not physical. Anger is part of our mind, and our mind is not physical. It exists in dependence upon the brain, the genes, the chemical reactions, but is not these things.

When anger's strong, it triggers huge physical symptoms: the blood boils, the heart beats fast, the spit comes out the mouth, the eyes open wide in panic, the voice shouts. Or if we experience aversion as depression, the body feels like a lead weight; there's no energy, a terrible inertia. And then, when we boost our serotonin, the body feels good again.

But these are just gross expressions of what, finally, is purely thought: a story made up by our conceptual mind that exaggerates the ugly aspects of the person or event or oneself.

Recent findings prove what is explained in Tibetan Medicine: that what goes on in the mind affects the body.

Anger is not someone else's fault. This doesn't mean that the person didn't punch me; sure they did. And it doesn't mean that punching me is not bad; sure it is. But the person didn't make me angry. The punch is merely the catalyst for my own anger, a tendency in my mind. If there were no anger, all I'd get is a broken nose.

Anger does not come from our parents. We love to blame our parents! Actually, if Buddha is wrong in his assertion that our mind comes from previous lives and is propelled by the force of our own past actions into our mother's womb; and if the materialists are right in asserting that our parents created us, then we *should* blame them. How dare they create me, like Frankenstein and his monster, giving me anger and jealousy and the rest! But they didn't, Buddha says. (Nor did a superior being – but we dare not blame him!) They gave us a body; the rest is ours (including our good qualities).

Anger isn't only the shouting. Just because a person doesn't shout and yell doesn't mean they're not angry. When we understand that anger is based on the thought called aversion, then we can see we are all angry. Of course, if we never look inside, we won't notice the aversion; that's why people who don't express anger experience it as depression or guilt.

Anger is not necessary for compassionate action. His Holiness the Dalai Lama responded to an interviewer who suggested that anger seems to act as a motivator for action:

"I know what you mean. But with anger, your wish to help doesn't last. With compassion, you never give up."

We need to discriminate between good and bad, but Buddha says that we should criticize the action, not the person. As Martin Luther King said, it's okay to find fault – but then we should think, "What can I do about it?"

It's exactly the same with seeing our own faults, but instead of feeling guilty we should think, "What can I do about it?" Then we can change. Anger and guilt are paralyzed, impotent, useless.

Anger is not natural. Often we think we need anger in order to be a reasonable human being; that it's unnatural not to have it; that it gives perspective to life. It's a bit like thinking that in order to appreciate pleasure we need to know pain. But that's obviously ridiculous: for me to appreciate your kindness, you first need to punch me in the nose?

Anger is not at the core of our being. Being a delusional state of mind, a lie, a misconception, it's logical that anger can be eliminated. If I think there are two cups on my table, whereas there is only one, that's a misconception. What to do with the thought "there are two cups on my table"? Remove it from my mind! Recognize that there is one cup and stop believing the lie. Simple.

Of course, the lies that believe that I'm self-existent, that delicious objects make me happy, that ugly ones make me suffer, that my mind is my brain, that someone else created me – *these* lies have been in my mind since beginningless time. But the method for getting rid of them is the same.

What's left when we've removed the lies, the delusions, is the truth of our own innate goodness, fully perfected. That is what's natural. ☸

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