

## ■ Taking Care of the SELF

# Anger Always Hurts Me

By Jan Willis

Of all the harmful, negative emotions we have, anger is by far the most dangerous for it not only causes much harm to others; it is perhaps most harmful to us, ourselves. Early Buddhism tells us that in order to become a true warrior, a conqueror (*jina*) we must overcome this enemy in particular. It teaches us that an *arhat* is one who has completely destroyed (*han*), his enemies (*ari-s*) of greed, hatred and delusion (or desire, anger and ignorance) and who has – by so doing – crushed asunder the very hub and root of samsara, the world of misery. Why such violent language? Because, of all the things in the world of samsara, only anger has the sole intention of causing us and others harm. That is its essence and its *raison d'être*. The great eighth century poet, Shantideva, understood this well. Writing in his masterful

*Bodhicaryavatara (Way of the Bodhisattva)*, in its famed sixth chapter – “Patience” – verses 7 and 8, Shantideva penned:

Getting what I do not want,  
And all that hinders my desire –  
In discontent my anger finds its fuel.  
From this it grows and beats me down.

Therefore I will utterly destroy  
The sustenance of this my enemy,  
My foe who has no other purpose  
But to hurt and injure me.

Anger has *no other purpose* than to hurt and injure *me*.



Jan Willis in Nepal

Negative emotions like anger, enmity, jealousy, arrogance and so forth are referred to as *klesha*-s, that is, as emotions which “strike, or inflict harm” to oneself and to others. There are no mild-mannered *klesha*-s. Not one of them is non-violent. All wish to hurt and to harm, and the worst culprit among them is anger. So, what do we, or can we, make of so-called “righteous anger”? This question is one that is often posed to me. It is intended, I believe, to assert strongly that there must be exceptions to the notion that anger is always harmful; to suggest that it may, in fact, under certain conditions, be helpful, even empowering. I can understand whence such a sentiment arises. One wishes, for example, not to allow, passively, an abusive situation to continue. But here I try to stress that not striking back does not, or at least need not necessarily, mean being passive or submissive. Pacifism does not mean being passive. We can be non-violent and still resist. Indeed, we must be in order to work effectively for our own and other beings’ welfare. We must be clear, creative and innovative in order to create change. But, in the mental confusion that anger and hatred create, there is no clarity. Hence, our attempts, over and over again, end in failure. I know these things sound like old clichés and platitudes. However, I am speaking here from some experience.

As a teenager, I marched with the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. during the 1963 Birmingham Civil Rights Campaign. I was sometimes afraid of Commissioner Bull Connor’s German shepherds but mostly I was exhilarated by the chance to participate in such a morally and spiritually triumphant movement. Of course, non-violence and love were the very heart of this movement. Our goal was a dual one, since we sought victory for ourselves as well as for those who stood against us. And that peaceful, non-violent, resistance was ultimately successful when, in the following year, the Civil Rights Act was signed into law. But the fuel for the movement was non-violence and compassion. It was love, not hate.

Some years later, I became embroiled in a situation which proved to me the difficulty of maintaining patience. I became really angry. I was feverish. I saw red. I completely lost it, and I seethed, literally, for days, unable to sleep or think clearly. Now, the reasons for my anger are not important, though one might – and I did at the time – call my anger “righteous.” What I know, however, from my own experience, is how very *painful* – physically as well as mentally – those days of anger were. All of this on account of anger, *my foe who has no other purpose but to hurt and*

*injure me.* Whatever happens to the object of your anger, you suffer, because anger always hurts.

But, how do we destroy anger? How do we let it – even “righteous” it – go? How do we end the vicious cycle of hate? Fortunately, many Buddhist teachings and for me, a Baptist-Buddhist, many of the sermons of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. have offered effective methods for this, methods that recognize that there are no quick-fixes for such age-old habits, and that change takes time.

In Shantideva’s *Way of the Bodhisattva*, the whole of the chapter on “Patience” is devoted to offering various and diverse methods for dealing with and pacifying our anger. Some involve “exchanging self with others,” or contemplating oneself in another’s shoes. Others ask us to consider that things come about owing to causes and conditions and to recognize how one’s own past actions have resulted in this current circumstance. Still others have us pondering the benefit of petty emotions now when all of us are headed for death; and others, envisioning the joys that come from creating happiness for beings rather than sorrow. It is a richly moving poetic masterpiece.

Dr. King once gave a sermon expressly focused on “loving your enemies.” He began, “Probably no admonition of Jesus has been more difficult to follow than the command to ‘love your enemies.’” Yet, calling Jesus “a practical realist,” King went on to say that “our responsibility as Christians is to discover the meaning of this command and seek passionately to live it out in our daily lives.” King then laid out three steps to the practical method of loving one’s enemy. First, he said “we must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive.” Second, “we must recognize that the evil deed of the enemy . . . never quite expresses all that he is,” and third, we must seek reconciliation and “to win [our enemy’s] friendship and understanding.” So simple and yet so challenging.

What is, I believe, so crucially important about both approaches is the understanding that while it is our wild, rampaging emotions that get us into trouble and suffering, the only way to conquer them is with a type of open, spacious, sustained and loving rational analysis. The heart and mind must work together. ♦

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