Relating Wisely With Anger

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 55:08

Anger is a very powerful force. It has a tremendous impact on our own bodies and minds, and it also has a tremendous impact in the world. Anger possesses an incredibly destructive power. We need only look at situations like Rwanda, Bosnia, Northern Ireland, and the Middle East to see the effects of anger that has been clung to and cultivated for generations upon generations of people and the tremendous destruction that follows.

In our own personal lives as well, anger is a force that has tremendous power and impact. We find evidence of this all the time in the daily newspaper. If you read the San Francisco Chronicle, every day there seem to be reports of homicides and assault and armed robbery and burglary, and it gets pretty depressing. That's why I like to pick up the Point Reyes Light, which is the newspaper of West Marin. It covers this valley and the towns like Point Reyes Station and Inverness, and I read about the kinds of things that anger leads people into here.

This is a report from the sheriff's calls in Dillon Beach. These are the kinds of things that the Marin County sheriffs get involved with: "A man returning to his home in Tomales got in a traffic dispute on Oceana Drive with another driver who flipped him the bird. A deputy was called and determined that no crime had occurred." This is one of the things I like about West Marin—the anger sort of seems manageable out here.

Just to give you another sense of what people get up to out in West Marin, this is from Marshall: "A citizen reported two men parked beside Highway 1, quote, 'snorting something into their noses,' unquote. They replied to him that they were merely picking their noses." And if you believe that, we have a bridge to sell you.

But anger is a tremendously powerful force. When it's present in our lives, when it's strong, it really forms a dark cloud in our mind. It can create difficulties in our relationships and in our personal life. It's a force that's really important to deal with.

Classically in Buddhism, anger is listed at the core of what are called the *kilesas*, or these fundamental distortions of mind, one of which is aversion or the sense of disliking or hating. Anger is really one of the key expressions of that mode—one of the *kilesas*. It's also listed in the hindrances, the classical five hindrances of meditation practice, also under aversion.

When the Buddha talked about ways of becoming free, he said that there are ten fetters that bind us as ordinary people in this world. The one who has come to full awakening has destroyed all of these ten

fetters, has slipped the noose, as it were, of these ten restrictions. One of the ten fetters is ill-will or anger. In traditional Buddhism there are said to be four stages of awakening, four levels or degrees of freedom. Only at the second stage does one start to really get some relief from anger, and only at the third stage—which is right before total freedom, which is the fourth stage—does one become free of anger.

I think it's important when we start to work with anger to have an attitude that's been described as a long-enduring mind, because anger has that quality. It is a long-enduring emotion. If we approach it with the attitude that it shouldn't be there or that we want to get rid of it, we're only going to get more frustrated and more angry with ourselves. We need to find a way in our practice to learn to relate to anger that is not coming from a place of wanting to be rid of it, because we are not going to be rid of anger, most of us, for quite a long time.

One of my friends went to a very highly regarded Tibetan teacher, one of the senior lamas who came over from Tibet in the late fifties and who's very well respected and teaches on the West Coast. He had sat a couple of retreats with this Rinpoche and developed a good connection with him. He went and formally requested if he could be this teacher's student. This is an old man in his sixties with a beard and all the respectful signs of age. This teacher thought for a minute, looked down at my friend, and said, "Okay. I'll be your teacher, but there's one thing you have to know about me first. I still get angry."

I thought that was really beautiful, actually, that he had the humility and courage, from the sort of revered position that he was in, to say that to someone who was coming as a new student. It just points to the fact that it's not an easy thing, even for those who have practiced many years, to be free from anger.

The Buddha talked about the importance of working with anger under the precepts of right speech—that not speaking harshly is an important part of the Buddhist path. When we speak harshly, we cause pain to others, and we end up causing pain to ourselves.

For many years in my practice, I thought there was one relationship that was exempt from the precepts, and that was the relationship with my partner, or my wife, or significant other. Growing up, I had a lot of stormy relationships. For those of you who are interested in astrology, my moon is in Scorpio, and when I tell that to people who are into astrology they sort of go, "Oh, you poor guy." I don't know that much about astrology, but it indicates that the emotions are not always the easiest place to hang out.

I've had a lot of stormy relationships in my past, and I always thought it was okay to get angry at my significant other. It took me a long time of practice to realize that the precepts actually do apply to our partners as well. I think that's why this relationship is such a fertile ground for practice.

There's always more to work with there.

So, it's really important to take some care with anger, but at the same time, we don't want to get too uptight or judgmental about it. If we develop a really condemning attitude toward anger or a judgmental attitude, we end up trying to repress it or make it go away. And that simply doesn't work. So it's a very

delicate balance and a delicate dance that we need to find out how to do with anger.

When I was thinking about how to sum up the dharmic perspective on anger, this is the kind of summary that I came to in my own mind: embrace the feeling and guard the action.

What we want to do with the experience of anger is to really open fully to the experience of it, to our feeling. That means, as we discussed in the meditation tonight, becoming really clear on what the feelings are in the body that anger brings up within us, what the mental tone is in the mind, what kind of thoughts go along with anger, and how it makes us want to react—to unsheathe the claws, or to go on the attack, that urgency of action that anger seems to propel us into. And as far as possible, not to act through our speech and through our physical actions in such a way that we give unrestrained vent to that feeling.

So this is our koan of anger: to embrace the feeling and guard the action.

Because if we simply blindly react from the feeling of anger, all we're doing is strengthening that conditioning. Every time we give expression through our speech or through our physical acts to a feeling that's in our mind, we are deepening that karmic groove. Karma and volitional action are really synonymous—they mean one and the same thing. When we do an action from a wholesome motivation like generosity, kindness, or compassion, we deepen that groove. When we do an action from an angry place, we deepen the groove of anger.

So in addition to deepening the groove of anger, we also put it out into the universe in a way that the universe will eventually reflect back to us. The skill around working with anger is to allow ourselves to feel the feeling very fully, but learn to develop this really spacious container for it through our meditation practice so that it doesn't dominate our behavior. That's essentially the direction we want to take with anger, and that's really why I think it's a lifetime of practice.

In this we have to come to what's at the heart of the paradox, at the heart of spiritual practice: this combination of complete surrender to the feeling and a very careful vigilance around the actions. There's this balance of letting go and control that we have to find with anger. It's like walking the edge of a razor.

Padmasambhava, who brought Buddhism into Tibet, put it this way: "Although my view or my understanding is as expansive as the sky, my actions as regards cause and effect are as fine as grains of barley flour." That's the kind of approach we need in our meditation. We need to develop this vastness of view, a meditation that can hold everything that arises within ourselves and within the world. And then from that vastness of view, we need to take really great care with our actions, not to hurt others and not to hurt ourselves.

This kind of approach, as it's practiced within a community, creates a safe kind of space where each of us can really flower. That's why the practice of the precepts within a community like the sangha, within a spiritual community, really creates the ground from which each of us can open and flower, because they create a space of safety.

Recognizing that it's not easy to do, even for practitioners of a long time and even for teachers of this stuff—because, of course, the only thing we're doing in the teaching role is reminding us of what we all know and all have heard—I do want to tell you a funny story from a retreat that I was on with Sasaki Roshi. He was one of the great Zen masters of our time, who lives in America in a place called Mount Baldy in Southern California. This was in the late seventies.

One of the healthy things about our community is that we're very open to practicing with other teachers, other Buddhist teachers and non-Buddhist teachers alike. At this time, I was living at a meditation center in Massachusetts. About ten of us from this meditation center went to sit a retreat, a seven-day retreat with Sasaki Roshi, in a very strict Zen style.

He worked in the koan method, and he would give us these baby koans because we were beginning students. We would have to go to him four times a day—he saw every person four times a day to give him our answer to the koan. The grown-up koans are questions like, "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" Our baby koans were much simpler. Nonetheless, those of us from a vipassana background did not have any foot up in this particular practice. Our mindfulness practice didn't give us any clue about how to answer a koan.

So we were just, most of us, going crazy trying to deal with this question. My question was, "How do you realize Buddha when you hear this sound?" And I had to go in four times a day to present my answer. I have never felt like such a fool in all my life. I didn't have a clue what I was doing.

Well, there were not only senior vipassana students on that retreat, but some of my vipassana teachers were on that retreat. I'm not going to name names, but I know that they were even more frustrated than I was. So one of them, after several days of just being humiliated in this practice, got so fed up and so frustrated...

Can I ask first, are there any children under sixteen here tonight?

This Vipassana teacher was so upset at this point—so frustrated and so angry. He didn't know what else to do. He picked up the bell that was sitting in front of the Roshi, rang it in front of his face, blew out the candle and said, "Fuck this!"

But Sasaki Roshi was not a great Zen master for nothing. He simply sat there in his imperturbable way, picked up his bell—which he rings when he signals the interview is over—rang the bell and said, "Not the answer."

The dance of anger, even for Vipassana teachers. And names shall go unnamed here. This is all confidential.

So, working with anger in our own life. I wanted to go through the exercise with you of actually calling forth an experience of anger so that we could really take a close and kind of analytical look at our

experience of anger.

In our life, usually something happens quite abruptly that throws us into this state of anger. Something arises that we weren't expecting. Someone says something unkind to us. Someone cuts in front of a line at the supermarket. Our partner criticizes us in a way that we don't think is fair. Our boss lays some expectation on us that doesn't seem appropriate to us. And immediately, almost without noticing what has happened, we find ourselves sometimes in this very intense state of anger.

I want to just look for the time being at personal anger or self-centered anger. We'll come back a little later to anger on behalf of others—anger based on injustice. But I want to just look right now at our self-centered anger that often comes up so quickly.

The first thing I want to ask is, when you take a close look at what has happened in that moment before the anger gets full-blown, is there any feeling before the anger comes? Someone tonight mentioned hurt, and I think that's a very good observation. Often there's a sense that we've been hurt by someone's not considering us, not being thoughtful, not being kind to us. And that causes a hurt. Very often it's as though we can't let ourselves feel that hurt because it makes us too vulnerable. It's too close to the quick. And we often move into anger as an escape from feeling the hurt.

Sometimes it's just useful in the middle of anger to reflect: Is there some hurt underneath this that I need to go back and get in touch with? I think that's one answer that's very, very close to the heart of things—that often anger is a refuge from hurt.

The other thing I'd say is that I notice for myself that even before the hurt, there's a fear that is associated with anger. And for me it has to do with the fear of not being seen. I find I get angry when somebody does something like cutting in front of me at a line or not acknowledging some piece of work I've done—I feel they haven't seen me. And in some ways, particularly with things like being cut in front of, it's as though I question for a moment whether I'm there or not. Have I just become invisible? Couldn't they see I was standing in that line?

I think there's something very real in that fear of not existing. Because, you know, in a way, we don't exist. We don't exist in the way that we take ourselves to—as a solid, separate individual. There is a body. That's true. But when you look within the whole mind-body process for something solid, there isn't anything there.

There's just the flow of changing phenomena—thoughts and feelings and sensations. So I think in some way we all know that this breeds insecurity. We don't really have any solid core to hold onto as a human being. That's the way it is for us as human beings. And so this not being seen reignites that kind of existential fear of not being.

Anyway, that's something I tap into and that I get in touch with when I feel that I've been overlooked. That's also another seed for me of anger. So it's useful to tap in with those to know that anger is not always

the bottom line, that sometimes it's a reaction to something else.

When the anger comes, normally I find that it starts as quite a swirl. And a couple people mentioned tonight delusion, confusion, losing our sense of ourselves in their experience of anger. And it's important to recognize that there's often a real confused quality in the experience of anger.

I'd like to break that down a little bit. Because I think that there are—what's confusing is that there are several things going on in anger on a few different levels. And we get confused because we aren't clear in our intention which one we're going to relate to first and which one we should relate to first.

So just in the discussion tonight, people reported body sensations of constriction, of tightness in the chest, the throat, the hands, the gut. Those are certainly there. People reported emotions of a feeling of wanting to attack or aggressiveness. People reported lots of different thoughts coming in, running through the mind—she did this and they said this to me, and then what am I going to say to them next time I see them? So there are these three levels of the sensations, the feeling, and the thoughts that are all going on at the same time.

If we can develop a real interest in this whole phenomenon and realize that this play of anger is just a part of human nature, then maybe we can start to look at it with the eye of a naturalist and really want to understand how it works. Because once we understand its mechanism, it takes a lot of the power out of anger.

Nisargadatta Maharaj, this great Indian teacher, said, "Of what we understand, we are the masters. Of what we do not understand, we are the slaves." So if we can bring that kind of understanding into anger, we can find some clarity and find our own power within it.

What I'd like to talk about are what I see as three phases that we get into with anger. These are the phases, first, that we run over and over the original incident—as to why they did that and what could they possibly have been thinking of and they shouldn't have done that and I was right and they were wrong. We run over the original incident again and again.

The second thing is we've got a very intense experience going on in the mind and body. It's intense emotionally. It's intense physically. And we need to relate to that in a very direct way.

And then the third thing that's going on is we have to figure out what in the world we're going to say to that person the next time we meet them.

So we run back and forth between these three phases of the incident—the past, the present, and the future of the whole chain of anger. And what I think is really important to do is to look at each of these three times separately. Because they each need to be related to in a different way.

The first thing we do typically, if we're not coming from a very conscious place, is to say, "That person made me angry." And we assign all the responsibility for our anger to their action. And I wonder if that's

really an honest and accurate appraisal. I wonder if it's really accurate to say, "They made me angry." We certainly tell ourselves that. We're often very fond of telling the other person that. But I wonder if it's really true.

Just to cast a little question: in remembering a time when—as you looked back on the meditation tonight—an incident that made you angry, let me ask, was there ever a time that somebody did a similar thing and you didn't get angry? Can you ever remember a time that something like that happened and you didn't get angry?

If it doesn't work for that particular incident, maybe on your way home, think about another incident where you reacted with anger and you blamed the other person and see if in that case there was another incident where you didn't get angry.

I think that probably all of us, if we look at it, can see that sometimes we get angry and sometimes we don't. Sometimes we're feeling very spacious and contented and happy and mellow. And we can just see—we may see really clearly—oh, that person did something inconsiderate. They were rude. They were thoughtless. They may even have been cruel. But I don't have to get angry because of it. I don't have to take up anger because of what they did.

So I think it's really important to question that assertion that the other person made me angry and see if perhaps that action, unskillful though it may have been, thoughtless, impolite, inconsiderate, is not the sole cause of my anger. That was a contributing factor, but my own state of heart and mind is another contributing factor. And if we start to see in that way, maybe we can find that we have some freedom in relation to anger.

Maybe we can find that somebody can do something thoughtless. It's not to deny that people do thoughtless things to us, but that there might be another response possible, another response available to us than anger.

The Tibetans say that if we want to walk on this earth, there are lots of sharp points—thorns, rocks, gravel, bees. We have two possibilities of walking on this earth without getting hurt: We can cover the whole earth with shoe leather, or we can put shoes on our own two feet.

The stance of expecting that the rest of the world is going to become perfect so that I'm not irritated is like trying to put shoe leather on the earth. But if we find a way in our practice to deal with our own anger, to accommodate our own responsive anger and to take responsibility, that's a way of putting shoe leather on our own two feet and has a much better long-term prospect for success.

So one of the things I would distinguish between is the unskillful action that someone else has done and our response to it. And see that those two aren't necessarily so tightly coupled.

I'll give you an example of the extreme of the Buddha's teachings in this area. This is from a sutta called

The Simile of the Saw. The Buddha said, "Even if bandits were to meet you on the road, hold you down, and sever you limb by limb with a two-handled saw, one who gave rise to a heart of hatred towards them would not be carrying out my teaching. Now this is how you should train yourself: We shall abide compassionate for their welfare, with a mind imbued with loving-kindness, abundant, exalted, without hostility or ill will, extending over the all-encompassing world."

This is serious practice. And it's not to say that we're going to be there. But you can imagine in the situation where Jesus was being nailed on the cross, that Jesus might have had that kind of attitude to the men who were driving the nails into his hands and legs: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." That is a possibility within our human potential.

Ajahn Jumnian, who is coming here in July—a Thai teacher who's a lot of fun—said the last time he was here, "I haven't had anger for 25 years." That's a wonderful testament to his practice. He's done a lot of metta practice.

So phase one relates to the source of the incident: Can we decouple the person's action from our response of anger?

Phase two concerns the present: How do we relate to the experience of anger in the here and now? We want to get in touch with how it feels in the body and take those body sensations, unpleasant as they are. Everyone who talked described senses of constriction, tension, stiffness, tightness, closing, contracting. This is not a pleasant state of mind. But take those sensations themselves for the focus of the meditation. Go right into that feeling.

If you're getting angry in your daily life situation—at work, with your partner, with your children, wherever it happens—see if you can just take a minute's breather and go right into those very sensations. Ground the awareness in the body. This is the very best place to ground the attention in daily life mindfulness practice. Connect directly with those sensations. See if you can bring that sense of open, accepting, allowing softness into the meditation at that point. If we can open to those feelings, then they stand the possibility of flowing through, of passing through.

Get in touch with what that tone is in the mind. What's the feeling of anger as a mental state, as a mood? Somebody mentioned a fiery kind of quality. There's a sort of burning that goes along with anger.

And then, what is the impact on our thinking? There's a certain kind of thought that tends to come up with anger. Somebody mentioned earlier feeling righteous. Don't we think thoughts about how they were wrong and I was right? The more we think those thoughts, they're actually quite addictive, aren't they? People mentioned also—and I really appreciated this—it's fun to be angry. So really, if you really want to be free of anger, start to tune into how enjoyable it is to be right. Because that's what sustains our anger.

When we put those thoughts of blaming the other and making ourselves right, we add that to the anger, and each thought is like a log that we toss on the fire. Want to stoke the burning? Keep fueling it. Think

more about them being wrong and me being right. So that increases the burning, it increases the pain, it increases the conflagration. The more we keep thinking, the more we burn and the more we suffer.

In that state of anger, we may want to hurt the other person, but take a close look. Who's suffering in the moment?

We are, because the state of anger is a painful state. It's a state of contraction, of suffering, and we're suffering with it. So we start to realize that we're actually caught in a bind. We enjoy the pleasure of being right and making the other person wrong, but we're perpetuating our suffering at the same time. And so we start to see that we're in deep conflict with ourselves at that point.

It's only the sensing of that pain that we cause ourselves that gives us the trust or courage to let go. It's as though we've grabbed hold of a stick that's on fire and we're holding on to it for dear life—the torch of our self-righteousness. And the only thing that will make us let go of it is when we realize we're burning our own hands. Then maybe we're willing to put it down.

So it's important to be with our anger that clearly, that we can see that conflict within ourselves, that we can sense the pleasure of the anger and also sense the pain. Sensing the pain is what encourages us to let go.

Then the third thing that we need to give some reflection to is what do we say to the person when we meet them next? And this is sometimes the most difficult area. Finding skillful means to communicate about anger is really, really hard. We've run the whole gamut in our experience of not saying anything, and that didn't feel so good, of just blasting the other person with our anger, and that usually doesn't work so well.

So how do we find a way to be honest about our anger and to do it in a way that really works to create a win-win situation where we feel better after the communication and the other person does too? The Buddha's main guideline for right speech is to say what's true and what's useful. We really need to look at our communications about anger in that light.

In my experience, it's generally not so useful just to blast the other person with the full force of our anger. Number one, they can't hear it. They become defensive. They close or they get angry back. And the communication gets really deadlocked. But it's often really important to communicate that we are angry, that we feel anger, and that it had to do, at least in part, with something that they did. Sometimes it's really important for that to be said and heard.

So the art, then, is to communicate the fact of our anger in a spirit that doesn't communicate the harshness of the anger. I think I mentioned this a few weeks ago—Suzuki Roshi said that if you're angry with somebody, what you should say is, "Oh, I'm so sorry, but I'm angry with you." That's great. That's beautiful, if you can do that. But for us mere mortals... not always possible.

So we do the best we can. That's the important thing. Our good intention is what's really important in our

communication with anger. If we come from a place that's as good an intention as we can bring to that moment—I want to communicate because I care about this relationship. I want to clear up something that is a barrier between us. I want to keep our relationship clean and clear and straightforward. I want to clear what's happened. I need to tell you that I feel angry about something—we communicate with as good an intention as we can bring into that moment. And that's the best that we can do.

And we trust in the practice that as time goes by, as we work with this practice of anger and become clear in ourselves, our intention will also clarify. As time goes by, we find we can bring more and more skill into that communication, more and more clarity, more and more kindness. We can actually bring the spirit of metta into the communication about anger. And that's really a transformative intention.

Again, one of the Buddha's guidelines: "One who is about to admonish another must realize within themselves five qualities before doing so. In due season will I speak, not out of season"—that is, at the right time and place. "In truth will I speak, not in falsehood. Gently will I speak, not harshly. To their profit will I speak, not to their loss. And with kindly intent will I speak, not in anger."

This again is a high standard for communication, and it's also to acknowledge we're not going to be there right away—but to realize that our intention is to move in that direction and to get more and more skillful in that kind of communication.

Okay, so that's some of the difficulties with anger. When is it useful?

When is anger useful?

In confronting injustice, anger can be a terrific motivator. It can really lend that energy of determination to take action through political channels, social action, environmental action. So very, very helpful energy, again, if we can learn to bring the spirit of metta into the actual work.

Anger is a really helpful movement coming out of oppression. Whether one has been oppressed because of social conditions such as racism or sexism, or personal conditions such as an oppressive relationship, or whether the oppression is internal, coming out of one's own tendencies toward fear and depression, anger is a very useful breaking through of oppression. So it's highly valuable for people who are suffering either inner or outer oppression. It's only an interim step—not to get stuck in that feeling of anger, but to realize that it's a very valuable breaking through because it breaks up that oppressive pattern.

It's probably really useful also in parenting teenagers. I haven't been a parent, but I used to teach teenagers, and I just know that sometimes one had to pump up the volume to get the attention. It just happens. One time Ram Dass asked his guru, Neem Karoli Baba, if it was ever appropriate to use anger in teaching the dharma. And Neem Karoli roared at him, "No!" Make of that what you will.

In terms of our practice, mindfulness is a great ally in dealing with anger, becoming mindful of the sensations, of the mental tone, and of thoughts. It's really our first line of alliance. But metta is also a

terrific practice, the practice of loving-kindness. It's an excellent practice if you're one who is of an angry temperament, an angry or aversive or critical temperament. Metta is an excellent practice for softening that kind of personality, and I speak from experience with this.

I'll close with a quote from Milarepa, who was doing a lot of solitary practice and dealing with his demons like anger and fear and pride and so forth. He said, "After battling with these demons for many years, I developed a great heart of compassion for them. I decided to offer them my body, which I had learned by then not to cherish so very greatly. Finally, I put my head in the mouth of the demons, and when I did, they all turned into rainbows."

May all your demons turn into rainbows.

Now let me open it up if anybody has comments, anything you'd like to share, or anything you'd like to ask.

Yes, please.

[A participant asks about the expression of anger, noting that sometimes meditation feels like holding it or releasing it, and wondering about how to verbally express anger.]

Yes, the question is about the expression of anger. The comment is that sometimes she feels she has to sit with the anger for some time before actually verbalizing it. And I think actually there's a lot of wisdom in that. I think sometimes if you feel that you're in a real state of confusion with anger, sometimes the wisest thing is not to act then and there, but to actually take it home and live with it for some time. It may be a few hours, sometimes for me it's been days, until I really become clear what action I want to take to express it.

And the expression can take many forms. Sometimes it can be writing a letter. Sometimes it can be as simple as a phone call. Sometimes you really need to meet with the person and say it face to face. Sometimes, despite all our good intention, there's still quite a lot of charge that comes when we communicate the fact that we're angry, and we really have to not be judgmental about ourselves about that. Realize that we're in a learning process. We're practicing how to express it cleanly. And realize that the anger may come across as well, the force. But it's really important to express clearly at times to the other person that you're angry and that you feel that they acted in an inappropriate way.

[The participant clarifies that she's asking about expressing anger to get it out of the body.]

Ah, in expressing to get it out of the body, sometimes that can be helpful to scream or shout or stamp around or shake. Sometimes just rocking with the force of anger can be really helpful.

So if any of those approaches prove helpful for you to let the energy flow through, by all means, embrace them as part of your meditation practice. Sometimes it's not necessary with anger, but if you feel that physical expression gives you space or relief from holding too tightly, feel free to stomp around the house

or shout or scream—whatever needs to happen. The purpose is to let the energy flow through and clear.

Donna offered a beautiful parallel: "It's like when you feel deep pain and hurt and let yourself cry—just letting it move through you instead of holding on to it or trying to make yourself big enough to contain it."

Marshall shared an insightful observation about using anger to intimidate, particularly when avoiding something another person is saying or bringing to his attention. "I use it to intimidate," he said, "and it's always to cover up a hurt." This reveals how anger sometimes serves as our best defense—a good offense protecting us from a sense of vulnerability.

Chris raised an important concern about physical expression potentially deepening grooves of anger rather than creating space around it. He had observed people in workshops who beat pillows and engaged in similar practices, only to find their anger patterns seemingly reinforced rather than released.

This touches on a crucial understanding. I don't believe that purely physical expression—pounding pillows, stomping, or shouting—is what ultimately frees us from anger. While these practices can serve as skillful means to let energy move through, what truly liberates us is that movement of heart that opens to the anger itself.

If we regard expression merely as another technique to eliminate anger, it won't lead to genuine freedom. Approaching it as just another method to "get rid of" our emotions misses the deeper point. What actually frees us is understanding anger so completely, developing such a spacious and accommodating quality of mind, that we simply allow anger to arise and pass away naturally, as all emotions do.

Within Western psychology, we often trap ourselves between two alternatives: repression or expression. We feel we must either hold emotions down or let them out—these seem like our only choices. The meditative path offers a middle way between repressing and expressing. It allows us to contact emotion directly with awareness and mindfulness.

Ultimately, it's this contact between emotion and clear seeing that liberates. This is what allows emotion to reveal its inherent impermanence. All emotions naturally want to dissolve and pass away. We simply need to offer them full, undistorted attention. Nothing can cling in the light of complete mindfulness. When we bring that quality of awareness to bear, emotion naturally dissolves back into the emptiness from which it arose.

This is the heart of the meditative approach to anger. Physical expression can be helpful if it opens up the energy, making it easier to bring clear mindfulness to what we're experiencing. But the real transformation happens through that direct, intimate contact with whatever arises in consciousness.

Barbara shared another layer of complexity: during a period of great sorrow in her life, she found it much easier to be angry than to cry. This speaks to how emotions can mask one another, how sometimes we unconsciously choose the more familiar or seemingly manageable feeling over what lies beneath.

Yes, that element of shock and disbelief is quite common. It can indeed shut down our thinking processes and leave us operating from pure reactivity. Often that reaction of shock or disbelief does come in and then plunges us into a state of confusion. I think it is very helpful to take a breather before responding, if you have the luxury to do that, and kind of let some of those cycles move through. It's usually not that easy to bring clarity into the first few minutes—sometimes the first few hours—of anger. But if you have the ability to just step back a bit and get in touch with your own feelings and what's going on, then often it's easier to respond later.

One thing about that element of shock and disbelief that I often reflect on is how closely anger can be linked with humor. Because anger comes about because somebody's doing something that's not appropriate, and humor comes about because somebody's doing something that's incongruous or not appropriate. And if you can ever look at an angry situation and see the incongruity in a funny way, it's tremendously powerful for defusing the situation.

Kelly?

"I found that metta practice is very useful in terms of lowering my level of anger. But the way you describe this meditation—that all emotions want to pass—don't you find that metta, loving-kindness, is one that doesn't pass? It seems to not pass. It seems to build."

Well, that's beautiful. The comment was that most emotions seem to pass, but metta seems to build. I think looked over a long period of time, metta does build if we practice it. But if you look at closer periods of time, I think you'll see that metta has its cycles like all the other emotions. There will be times when it's strong in the day, and then there will be times when it's weak. Some days it'll be strong, and some days it'll be weak. So I think metta does have the property of coming and going like all the emotions do, but we do strengthen it over practice.

But there's one other thing I'll say. Someone who is very clear and well-developed, like for instance the Dalai Lama, seems to have an almost perpetual metta presence about them. The way that I understand this is that metta is actually part of our deepest nature. To me, the two fundamental aspects of this true nature, which we talked about last week, are wisdom and love—or sometimes it's called intelligence and compassion. I think that's part of the deepest aspect of us as human beings. I think it's part of that in us which is indestructible.

So the more the other stuff gets cleared out and that light shines, that light doesn't have comings and goings. It's indestructible, and the coming and going is not part of its property. What tends to happen is that clouds drift over and obscure the wisdom and love. So we experience metta coming and going because the clouds are still drifting in front of us.

But I think you're right that for somebody who is very, very clear, metta can be an almost constant companion because it's part of our deepest nature.

When we have cleared away the obscurations—those clouds of confusion, fear, and reactivity that drift across the sky of consciousness—what remains is this fundamental goodness. The love and wisdom that constitute our true nature are not things we have to manufacture or create. They are what we discover when we stop covering them up.

This is why the practice of loving-kindness is not about forcing ourselves to feel something artificial or imposed from outside. Rather, it's about removing the barriers that prevent our natural love from flowing freely. It's about recognizing what has always been there, waiting to be uncovered.

For those who have done the deep work of clearing away these obscurations, metta becomes less of a practice and more of a way of being. It arises naturally from the space of clarity and openness that has been revealed. This doesn't mean such practitioners never experience difficulty or challenge, but rather that their fundamental orientation remains rooted in love and wisdom.

This understanding can be both inspiring and relieving for us as practitioners. We don't have to create love; we simply need to discover it. We don't have to become someone else; we need to uncover who we truly are. The path of dharma is ultimately a path of revelation—revealing the light that has never actually been extinguished, only temporarily obscured.

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