

Righteous Anger: Plain Anger

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Tips of the Day · 2 min read

There's no such thing as righteous anger in the Buddha's teaching. All anger is unwholesome and unskillful. You may get what you want, but there'll be a price to pay. We talk about assertiveness and aggression. This is such a useful distinction to make. Assertiveness arises out of equanimity, compassion - and righteousness. We seem to have forgotten the old maxim to count to ten before you do anything when angry. For anger will always distort in some way, mainly by exaggeration. Allowing the anger to calm, we get a balanced view. We can actually see the situation from the other's point of view. This means we are equanimous, that is, impartial. To see the other's point of view is an act of love, of compassion and it allows the other to be heard. When someone is heard, their anger usually subsides. And there is a right view about things. And we should stand by our understandings, but not in a tight way. It may be the other has something to say which modifies our view, if only a little. When we are angry, should we be mindful, we will feel the heat arise in the chest. We shall feel a tightness - the first signs of attack! We shall see the beginnings of angry intentions. At that point, relax the body. Breathe in deep and breathe out slowly. No need to make it obvious! If the situation is too much, it's often best to excuse oneself. But what if someone is angry with us? Before you react with anger, take your attention to what they are saying, not how they are saying it. Give them all the time they need. When they have finished, indicate that you have been listening. Then answer appropriately in a calm voice. 'You've got the wrong person.' 'Are you sure ...?' 'Sorry, I didn't realise ...'

My first job was as a rep for a company making audio-visuals for school. At one school a teacher came blazing at me, accusing us of illegal practices. I remember I quickly apologised if this were true. I asked to phone the boss who said there had been a misunderstanding or mistake and all monies would be repaid. The teacher went out of his way to introduce me to other members of staff. What if you work in an office and abuse spews down the phone? Same as above, but I hear so much about this, that maybe it's time for zero tolerance. Try this: let the person express their anger. Then remain silent. They should come back with something along the lines - 'Are you listening?' or 'Are you there?' Then to say calmly, 'I understand what you're saying. And I can understand why you are angry. But can I ask you to phone back when you are in a calmer mood so that we can talk about this rationally?' Or some such indication that you are not prepared to talk in the teeth of anger and put the phone down. (If you try this, tell me how it goes - thanks.)

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