Kill Your Anger

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The Buddha lists roots of unskillful behavior as three–greed, aversion, and delusion. But there’s no clear line between those three. In particular, greed and aversion owe an awful lot to delusion. This is particularly true in the case of aversion or anger. We may see something very clearly, but we don’t see the whole picture. It’s like trying to look at a landscape through a little tube or small telescope. You get some very sharp details for a few details, but there’s a lot of the picture that you’re missing. It’s hard to say that you have a blind spot. It’s more like there’s a whole blind horizon. This is why we can do so much damage to ourselves when we’re angry. That’s why it’s so sad that you hear modern Dharma teachers telling us that maybe it’s the time for Buddhism to have a positive take on anger. Buddhism has done perfectly well without taking a positive take on anger for all these many centuries. It’s not like there are suddenly new situations in life, new injustices, that they didn’t have in the time of the Buddha. It was unthinkable in the time of the Buddha. You can do and say and think things that are going to be really harmful, and actually get in the way of solving the problem. So the first step in dealing with anger is to realize, yes, this is something based on delusion. There’s delusion around the allure, delusion around the drawbacks, delusion about where it comes from. All those four main steps in how you deal with something unskillful get obscured. And so this is why you have to fight against the anger so resolutely. Keep in mind the Buddha’s instructions that this is nothing you want to go with. The first thing that goes with anger is a sense of shame and a sense of compunction, the filters that you place on your mind. And everything comes in so quickly. The anger itself is quick. It can go from zero to outrage in just one sixtieth of a second. And that’s a lot of its allure. There’s a sense of rush of power and a rush of energy. But because our sense of shame and compunction have been impaired, we can start thinking about saying things and doing things that at the moment seem like just the right thing to say, just the right thing to do. But then when you reflect on it over time, you realize, “This is really dumb.” Sometimes worse than dumb. Very harmful. And you can do things that you’re going to regret for a long time. So you need some breaks, just as the Buddha has. You think about breaks for your speech. In other words, “Is this true? Is this beneficial? Is this the right time and place for that?” You have to ask the same questions of your anger. This thing that you see as wrong, is it really, truly wrong? And is it beneficial to get angry about it? The Buddha says there is no benefit to anger at all. There is a benefit to seeing wrong, but you’ve got to learn how to clear the anger away. There’s the state of anger in the mind, and then there’s a physical manifestation, the way it feels in the body when you’re angry, and how you feel. You’ve got to get it out of your system. This is one of the reasons why we meditate so much on the breath, learning how to deal with tension in the breath, blockages in the breath. Because it gives us an alternative. All too often we see the only alternative to anger is that you either get it out of your system by saying something or doing something under the force of anger, or you bottle it up. And then you create a lot of tension in the body. Most people, when they see that those are the two options, they’ll go for the getting out of their system. The Buddha says there’s a third alternative. Look at the way you breathe around the anger. See if you can change it, breathe in a way that’s more soothing, breathe in a way that allows the breath energies in the body to flow. So when there’s a sense of tightness or tension in the stomach or in the chest, you can release that. It doesn’t have to be released through your words or through actions that are harmful. It’s released through allowing the energy to flow out. Because all too often that’s why we feel we have to get the anger out of our system, because it has gotten into the body. So learn how to release it from the body. In Thailand they talk about negative energies going at the palms of your hands, the soles of your feet. So think of it flowing down in those directions. And then when the physical side has been taken care of, then you can look at the actual anger in your mind. And you can look at the object of your anger. See, one, is the object really worth all the anger? And look at what the mind is telling itself. This is where you get into the area of verbal fabrication and mental fabrication. How are you talking to yourself about this situation? Is it really true? Is it really beneficial to talk about it in that way? When you think about something that someone has done, and they’ve done it again and again and again and again, just thinking about that, that it’s been again and again, you’re just piling up more and more tension, piling up more and more things that you find it hard to take. But who’s actually doing the piling on? That person did that action. The action is gone. Even if the results of that action are still hanging around a little bit, you’re the one who’s carrying it around. You’re the one who’s bringing it back. Can you think of the good things that person has done? That helps to bring some balance. And if there’s nothing at all that’s good about that person, you really have to have a lot of compassion for that person. That person is really digging himself a hole. And what are the images you hold in mind that go together with the anger? The perceptions you hold in mind. A lot of it has to do with just how outrageous something is. But the Buddha has true compassion. Remember, people do displeasing things, say displeasing things, or think displeasing things, all over the world, all the time. And this doesn’t excuse people from doing that. But it does mean that when you run across something that’s really bad, it’s not that unusual. Which means that you don’t get unusual rights to say and do and think things that would be horrible. So look at how you talk to yourself. Look at the images you hold in mind. Work through the patterns of tension and heaviness in the body. You’ve taken care of all the three fabrications that go into the anger. You’ll notice when the Buddha analyzes something, first he analyzes it into its component parts, and then how they interact. Once you see the component parts, you can ask, “Well, where are these things going?” And sometimes you say, “Well, when I’m angry, I get to do and say things that are effective, which I wouldn’t dare do. I wouldn’t have the energy to do if I didn’t have the energy of the anger to move me.” The energy of anger wears you out. That’s why people burn out so quickly. You’re going to bring peace to the world, bring justice to the world. You have to be a peaceful person. We tend to think of peaceful people as being people who don’t do much, whereas the angry people are the movers and shakers. Well, they move and shake things a lot. Like that company whose slogan is “Move fast and break things.” Well, it’s often we break our friendships, we break our possessions. For what purpose? What gets accomplished? There are so many more skillful ways of dealing with the world. If you really want to solve a problem, you have to solve it in such a way that it stays solved. And if you come at it with your anger, there’s going to be a pushback. This is especially true if, as you’re angry, you think of clever things to say. In the moment of the anger, they seem very clever, but then there can be a payback for years afterwards. Always remember that when anger comes up, you’re deluded. You may not be deluded about the fact that something is wrong, but you’re deluded about the fact that anger is going to be an appropriate response. You’re going to have warning signs all around. When the mind is angry, you can’t trust it. Your mind is lying to you. If the storm is coming on really strong, you hide out for a bit. But if you learn how to take the anger apart, then you can look at the situation a lot more calmly. More of the mind is engaged. You’re not looking at things in tunnel vision. You’re taking a larger perspective. You get a better idea of what needs to be done and when it needs to be done. Some things need to be done right away. Other things you may have to wait. But if you just go for the rush, you know what happens if someone steps on the accelerator and just goes really fast without thinking? They can do a lot of damage, both to themselves and to others. So when you keep in mind the fact that when you’re angry, you’re deluded, and you can’t trust what the mind is telling you, that’s when you have to trust what the Buddha tells you. That Japanese saying that when you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha. This is one of those cases where you don’t want to kill the Buddha. Remember, the Buddha was right. You have to kill your anger. It’s only then that you’ll be safe.

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