Deconstructing Anger

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There’s a tendency to reduce the Buddha’s teachings to just a word or two. One principle like acceptance, non-reactivity, or letting go. But the Buddha himself, when he gave the shortest explanation of what the Dharma is about, was the distinction between what’s skillful and what’s not skillful. These two words are pretty complex, because it requires that you look at each situation as it comes up and try to figure out what’s the skillful thing to do here. What kind of unskillful thoughts are coming to the mind that you’ve got to let go of? And how do you generate skillful ones in their place? That requires a lot more sensitivity than just telling yourself, “Just accept, accept, accept,” or “Let go, let go.” That’s one of the reasons why it’s a middle way. It avoids two extremes, both of which are very simplistic. There’s the extreme of indulgence, sensual indulgence, and then there’s the extreme of self-torture. And what we’ve got to do is find the right way in between, the way where we use pleasure and use pain. Which pains should be developed and which pleasures should be abandoned? Which pains should be developed and which pains should be abandoned for a higher goal? For example, when you’re faced with a situation that’s hard to accept, it’s very easy to get angry. What are you going to do? Are you just going to accept the situation, or are you going to accept the anger? If you try to accept both, you create a lot of tension. But you’re not necessarily very skillful, because anger can make you do all kinds of stupid things. So here’s where it’s important to understand how the Buddha analyzes the way the mind works, and the way we give rise to suffering. He starts out with ignorance and goes immediately to what he calls sankhara, or fabrication. He says there are three kinds: bodily, verbal, and mental. Bodily fabrication is the way you breathe in and out. Verbal is how you talk to yourself. He calls it directed thought and evaluation, where you choose a topic and then you make comments on it. And mental is composed of perceptions and feelings. The perceptions are the labels you apply to things, the images you hold in mind, or the single words that you hold in mind. Whereas directed thought and evaluation is more like sentences, and then the feelings are feeling tones, feelings of pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain. Instead, when anger comes up, it’s easy to see how it’s composed of those three things. The real causes are in the mind. But often, one of the first things you want to tackle is the way you’re breathing. When anger comes up, it’s very easy to breathe in ways that aggravate the anger. And it’s often because of the way you breathe. It makes you very uncomfortable. It makes you feel you’ve got to get it out of your system. Which is why sometimes it’s the best thing to do first, is to focus on the breath. How are you breathing right now? Can you breathe in a calm way? This, of course, requires that you talk to yourself. You want to remind yourself that anger is something you want to get past. Because there are two things you talk to yourself about. One is the situation, and two is the anger itself. What are you telling yourself about the situation? That’s aggravating the anger. And what are you telling yourself about anger that makes you feel that anger is a good thing? Because even though we may tell ourselves that we don’t like anger, there is a part of the mind that likes it. Maybe from the sense of power that comes, where you often tell yourself you see things really clearly when you get angry. You’re not being a wimp. You see things clearly. You have to ask yourself, if you’re really a warrior, a warrior has to choose his or her battles. You don’t just jump into everything. Some battles are worth fighting, some are not. And as for seeing things clearly, it’s kind of like someone who’s suffered from a brain injury. They’ll tell you they’re perfectly fine, their brain is functioning fine, but that’s because their powers of judgment are impaired. And this part of the mind says, well, it’s only natural. People do horrible things out in the world. It’s only natural that you get angry. This is where you have to remind yourself, the word only natural is used as an excuse. But you can also use it as a value judgment. You want to do something more than natural. The path to the end of suffering is not necessarily natural. If it were natural, a lot more people would have gone there than have gone there. You want to lift your mind, lift your ways of doing things. Remind yourself that under the power of anger, you will do and say things that you often will later regret. So you have to talk to yourself in a new way. And then you ask yourself, what are the perceptions you’re holding in mind? What are the images you have in mind? Here again, there’s the image about the situation. The situation may be reminding you of some situation where you suffered as a child, where you felt powerless, and then you want to fight. Or you may simply have the idea that your passing judgment on the other person has no effect on you. But here again, think of the Buddha’s perceptions that he would have you think about. A person who’s hot, tired, trembling with thirst, going through a desert, comes across a little bit of water in a cow’s footprint. Now you know that if you scoop it up with your hand, you make the water muddy. So what do you have to do? You have to squat down, get on all fours, and slurp it up. This is not very dignified. You wouldn’t want anybody to come along and take a picture and put it out on Instagram. But you realize this is what you have to do. In other words, you need to focus on other people’s good qualities. That’s the water. And even though you may feel it’s beneath you to focus on somebody’s good qualities when they’re doing a lot of horrible things, still, if you’re going to behave in a skillful way toward that person, this is one of the ways in which you nurture your skillful qualities through that water. And you keep talking to yourself about how horrible that person is. It’s very easy for you to feel that you’re justified in doing something horrible in return. But you have to remember, bad behavior is nothing unusual in the world. There’s nothing extraordinary about it. And so if someone is behaving in a bad way, it doesn’t give you extraordinary rights to respond with anger or to respond in an unskillful way. You have to let the verbal fabrication and the mental fabrication feed off each other. And if you’re breathing in a way that gives rise to feelings of ease in the body, it makes it a lot easier to tell yourself, “Okay, wait until the anger has subsided.” And then you’ll be able to see clearly what really would be a skillful thing to do. But here again, you have to talk to yourself, because there will be the effect of the hormones. When they’re released into the blood, it’s not that as the mind calms down the hormones go away. They’re still there in the blood. And so there still will be the physical reactions that go along with the anger. So here again, you have to talk to yourself, remind yourself. Just because there are physical manifestations of anger going on, the heart is still beating fast, there may still be a sense of tightness in the stomach no matter how you breathe. And that doesn’t necessarily mean that the anger is still there in the mind. You just have to endure some of the physical ramifications or the physical results. And after a while, they will go away. So this is how you take the Buddha’s teachings on fabrication, and you apply them to deconstructing your anger. You don’t want to act on anger, because you will end up doing things you regret. In fact, this is one of the ways the Buddha has you contemplate if you have trouble having goodwill for the other person. Remember, when you’re angry, you tend to do stupid things. That would satisfy an enemy. You’ll destroy your friendships. That would satisfy an enemy. You will look ugly. That would satisfy your enemy. You will look ugly to that person. That’s using spite to overcome the anger. Spite is not necessarily a skillful mental state, but it’s better than the anger. In this case, you’re going to behave out of spite. It’s like that bumper sticker in a cartoon I saw. Enlightenment is the best revenge. In other words, you can use somewhat unskillful mental states to overcome ones that are more unskillful. Then we can calm down, get a calmer perspective on things. Then you can think in ways that are even more unskillful. You can actually feel goodwill for yourself, feel goodwill for the other person. That lifts you above the situation. I had a student one time who was going through a divorce, and she asked me once, if I have goodwill from the person I’m divorcing, doesn’t that give them energy? I said, well, it actually lifts you. So you’re not down there in the mud, fighting over things. So these are some ways to think about anger. Think about it beforehand. This is one aspect of right effort that we tend to neglect, which is that you can prevent unskillful qualities from arising by thinking about them ahead of time. Or if they have arisen, thinking about them ahead of time and about how you can take them apart makes it a lot easier to abandon unskillful qualities that have arisen. So learn to use the Buddha’s teachings on sankhanas or fabrications. This way you know what to accept, what not to accept. You know what’s skillful and what’s not skillful. You get a better and better sense of that. That can take you all the way. After all, the Buddha, during his search for awakening, portrayed it as the search for what is skillful. It’s really skillful to gain awakening. It’s really skillful to follow the path that leads you there. And as you get used to dealing with issues of what’s skillful and what’s not skillful on your everyday level, it primes you to think in the same way as you look deeper and deeper into your mind. In this way, this particular teaching can be used all the way. As a John Sowatt used to say, if you want to see ignorance, you want to do something about it, look at the way the mind is fabricating things. Because right there, it’s right next to the fabrication that you find ignorance. And of course, if you do the fabrication with knowledge, that wipes the ignorance away.

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