

Anger

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The Buddha's basic teaching on insight is the four noble truths. We tend to lose sight of that fact, thinking that insight means seeing the inconstancy, stress, and not-selfness of things. It does in part, but that insight has to take place in a larger context, which is of the four noble truths. These truths in turn come down to cause and effect, skillful and unskillful: the things you do that lead to suffering and the things you can do that lead to the end of suffering.

The *doing* there is important, because we shape our experience much more than we normally imagine. Insight lies in seeing precisely that fact: seeing what we're doing to shape our experience, even though we may think we're sitting here perfectly still doing nothing at all.

There's an undercurrent of *sankhara*, or fashioning, going on in the mind all the time, even now. Insight shows its usefulness in pointing out that we're doing this shaping, and also in showing us where we're doing it in unskillful ways so that we can learn to do it more skillfully. Essentially, insight consists of catching yourself creating trouble; catching yourself creating stress, creating unnecessary burdens for yourself; seeing what you're doing as you actually do it; realizing that you *chose* to do it, but you can change that choice.

Ajaan Fuang once said, "Insight comes down to seeing your own stupidity." You've been doing things that you don't have to do, that create suffering for you and the people around you. Yet even though these things cause suffering, you keep on doing them again and again and again. That's stupidity.

We don't like to think of ourselves as stupid but we are. When you finally develop the equanimity needed to admit your stupidity, when you can step back and learn how to unlearn all those stupid actions: That's where insight shows its benefits. It can teach you to fashion things in a new way, a better way, so that your participation in shaping your experience, your participation in the world around you, gets more and more skillful. If insight didn't help in these ways, it wouldn't really be worth much. There are lots of teachings about emptiness and inconstancy or impermanence that are wide of the mark. They may be interesting to reflect on, to speculate about, but if they don't make any difference in what you're actually doing from moment to moment, they're pretty useless.

This is why the Buddha avoided many of the issues that everyone else in his time was worked up about. Is everything a oneness? A plurality? Is the body the same as the life force? Is the body different from the life force? Is the world

eternal? Is it not eternal? Is it finite? Is it infinite? When people reach the end of the path do they exist? Not exist? Both? Neither? These were the hot philosophical issues of the day, but the Buddha refused to get involved in them because they didn't make any difference in terms of this one issue: What are you doing that's skillful and unskillful? Can you learn to act more skillfully than you've been doing?

A lay follower of the Buddha was once approached by a person who asked just these questions: "What does your teacher teach? Does he teach that the world is finite or infinite?" The lay follower replied, "Well, no." — "Eternal, not eternal?" — "No, he doesn't address that issue either," and so on down the list. The first person complained, "Well, your teacher doesn't seem to teach anything at all."

So the lay follower said, "That's not the case. He teaches what's skillful and what's unskillful." Remember that. That's the most basic issue the Buddha addresses, and he addresses it in a lot of detail. If meditation were simply a matter of learning how to get very still in the present moment, how do you think all of those different Dhamma teachings would have developed? All of what they call the 84,000 different division of the Dhamma in the Canon came from someone who was really focused on the issue of skill and lack of skill, trying to develop more skillful ways of approaching everything in life.

This is how your daily practice intersects with your meditation practice: Just try to be more skillful in what you say, more skillful in what you do. Develop that habit of being very clear about what your intentions are, very clear about what your actions are, and about their results. When you develop that attitude in your external actions and then bring it into your meditation, you get more skillful in what you think. You start seeing things you didn't see before. At the same time, as you develop in your meditation, you get more sensitive to your external actions as well. In this way, your practice of sitting still with your eyes closed and your practice of walking around with your eyes open, out dealing with people in the world, become more of a whole. You're tackling the issue of skillfulness on all fronts.

Make this the thread connecting everything you do as you practice. This is the thread that turns daily life into a genuine "practice of daily life." Your interaction with other people then actually does become part of your practice. The work you do becomes part of your practice. Everything you do and say and think can become part of your practice if you approach every activity with the question, "What's skillful here? What's not skillful here? What choices do I have?" Take advantage of the freedom that every moment offers to make the best choice

possible.

When issues come up in daily life, try to approach them as a challenge in this way. When issues like lust, anger, or fear arise in the mind, take the opportunity to approach them skillfully. All too often we're afraid of fear, angry about our anger, lustful for our lust. In other words, we approach these unskillful mental states in unskillful ways that simply compound the problem. So the issue lies in learning how not to be angry about your anger, how not to be lustful for your lust, how not to be afraid of your fear. That way you can deal with these issues in a more effective, more harmless way.

For example, anger: Frequently we've heard, and it's constantly repeated, that the antidote for anger is *metta*, or goodwill. In the Canon, though, the Buddha actually offers a wide range of approaches for dealing with anger. In a few cases he advocates developing metta for people who are harming you, but more generally he cites all four sublime attitudes as antidotes to anger. In other words, the antidote includes metta but not just metta. You want to develop the other sublime attitudes, too. And the attitude the Buddha recommends most is equanimity: equanimity in the sense of stepping back from the situation and seeing it as part of a universal pattern, not just as something personal between you and the person you're angry with.

One of the traditional ways to develop equanimity is to contemplate the principle of karma: that what you do is important. Particularly, in the situation in which you find yourself, what's important is not so much what the other person is doing as it is what *you're* doing. Focus on that. If you let yourself get worked up about what the other person is doing, how often he's done it, and how he's come back with it again and again and again and again: If you carry those thoughts around, you make it more and more difficult to deal with *your* response in the present moment. So, drop any thinking about what the other person has been doing and turn around to look at what you've been doing and are about to do.

To do this, it's useful to divide the anger into three parts: one, the object of the anger; two, the anger itself as a mental state; and three, the physical manifestations of the anger. When you can separate them out in this way, anger becomes a lot easier to deal with.

To separate the anger itself from the object of the anger, you step back and think in terms of equanimity. Here the Buddha recommends looking at the universality of your problem. In one sutta he divides up the reasons for being angry and sets them out in kind of a chart. One reason for being angry is that this person has done something harmful to me. Or this person has done something harmful to people I love, or this person has done something helpful to people I

don't like at all. In each case you're supposed to reflect, "Well, what should I expect? It's the way of the world." That question—*What should I expect?*—asked with a cynical tone of voice, is meant to pull you back a little bit, to get you to see the situation in a larger context. Then you go on to: This person is doing something harmful to me, this person is doing something harmful to people I like, or this person is doing something helpful to people I don't like. In other words, you bring the whole set from the past into the present tense, and again the question is: *What should I expect?* The next set of three puts all three variables into the future: This person is going to do something harmful to me, and on down the line.

When you stop to think like that, the simple act of stepping back from the situation and putting it into a larger framework can provide you with some perspective. In other words, you reflect on the ways of the world. This is a world of friends and enemies, where any action is bound to displease *somebody*. This is the kind of world you were born into—and you were the one who wanted to be born here. This is the way things are everywhere in this world. A lot of wisdom lies in being able to step back and remember that fact. Look at the situation in terms of a larger framework, so that your thoughts aren't focused with such narrow intensity on the person or the activity you don't like.

When they're narrowly focused like that, the huge blind spots around them make us lose our perspective—not only about what's happening but also about what we should be doing. Often what gets shunted off to the side when we're angry is the sense of shame and the sense of fear for the consequences of our actions. People can get extremely courageous in dumb ways when they're angry, because their fear of consequences gets shoved off to the side, like a poor relative or an unwanted child.

So the first step is to take that larger viewpoint, to see the situation in a larger framework, so as to eliminate the blind spots. Within that framework, your anger becomes something you obviously don't want to follow through with. You don't want it to influence your actions. If you know that you're the heir of your actions, you don't want to inherit any actions done with an unskillful state of mind. The function of equanimity is to remind you of that fact. That's when you can drop your focus on the object of the anger and turn to look at the anger itself in the mind.

Here the problem is complicated by the fact that anger is usually accompanied by a physical reaction. When a flash of anger bursts into the mind, it really sets our bloodstream churning. All sorts of hormones come roaring out, our heart beats wildly, we breathe in a different way, and an oppressive sense of tension or

discomfort develops in the body. Our immediate reaction is that we'd like to get that discomfort out of our system. But if we try to get it out of our system in the usual way, which is speaking or acting under the force of the anger, that just compounds the problem.

Also, the physical reaction confuses us. Sometimes we can actually think ourselves into a better perspective about the anger, but the bloodstream is still churning and it makes us think we must still be angry. That churning of the bloodstream can last a long time. After all, our bodies are built for the fight-or-flight response, and we normally need more than just a few seconds if we're going to fight, more than a few seconds if we're going to flee. In cases like that, those long-lasting hormones are useful.

But when you're trying to overcome the anger in the mind, the lastingness of those hormones isn't helpful at all. So make sure to see the thoughts and the physical symptoms as two separate things. The mind itself may have calmed down somewhat from the anger, but the physical manifestations are still present, obstructing your view of the mind, so you want to deal with them. Breathe through the tension. Breathe in a way that gets your heartbeat back to normal. Breathe in a way that gets the level of tension in your body back to normal.

You might want to think of the tension in your body as flowing out your feet, out your hands, all through the in-breath, all through the out-. Open up those energy channels so that you're not carrying the sense of oppression around. That makes the anger a lot easier to deal with, because you feel less burdened, less irritated, less constricted physically.

Then you can look at the mind in and of itself. What is this state of anger in and of itself? As I said, it's often a blinding of the mind, putting blinders on the sides of your mental eyes, so you can see only certain things and focus only on certain details. The state of being constricted mentally like this is really unpleasant. Just stepping back to look at it helps take off some of those blinders. You don't have to be afraid of the anger, or angry about the anger. Just ask: What is this state, to be angry? Taking a look at it begins to open things up inside.

But again, your looking has to come from the larger perspective that helps you see through the anger, helps you dis-identify with the anger. The anger may still be there in the mind, but you don't have to identify with it. You can see it as a separate mental event. That's important because you then realize that there are parts of the mind that really aren't angry, that aren't involved in the anger at all. The anger seemed to consume the mind, but that's just because it narrowed your perception of the mind's full range.

So as you open things up like this, you can help weaken the anger, weaken the

hold of the anger on your mind. When you develop a larger perspective, you can step back and see what really should be done. “What’s the most skillful thing to say here? What are my opportunities? What are the choices available to me?” If you have a broader viewpoint, *then* it’s easier to see the choices than you could have when the blinders were on. *Then* you can see what really would be appropriate. You can see: If you were to say what you feel so much like saying, what would the results really be? As the Buddha points out, many of the things we want to do under the force of anger are precisely the things our enemies would like to see us do: destroying our good looks, destroying our property, destroying our friendships, doing things that will get us punished. Do you want to please your enemy that way?

If you look dispassionately at the actions you wanted to do and can see that the results wouldn’t be good, remind yourself, “I don’t really want that. Maybe this is not the best time or place to say anything at all. Maybe I should wait for circumstances to change.” Because you’ve breathed through the physical side of the anger, you find it a lot easier to delay your actions to a more appropriate time, because you don’t feel the compulsion of bottled-up frustration. Or, if it so happens that something *should* be done right away, the fact that you’ve broadened your perspective helps you to see better alternatives: better things to do, better things to say right away.

So remember this as an appropriate antidote to the normal way of reacting to anger. Too often when we’re angry about what someone has done, we’re either angry at the person or we turn around and get angry at ourselves for the anger, neither of which really is very helpful. Instead, we should step back to see the actions of that other person in context: “After all, this is the way the world is.” That helps you to react in a more skillful way.

When we talk about the limitations of the world, it sometimes seems very confining and depressing but it’s not. Actually, to think about these things is a very liberating teaching. There’s no way you’re going to make the world perfect, so you don’t *have* to make the world perfect. That takes a huge burden off the mind right there. You simply think of what should be done right now in this particular set of circumstances, given the larger perspective, looking at the world as a whole, looking at human nature, looking at the whole human enterprise. You view your interaction with other people within the context of a much larger perspective. These are the ways of the world. Of course it’s going to be imperfect. What did you expect, given the fact that the world is imperfect? Given the reality of the situation, what are you going to do right now to respond in the most skillful way?

This way you find that, of the lessons from the meditation, this quest for

skillfulness is precisely the lesson that translates best into daily life as you deal with lust, anger, fear—as you deal with all of the imperfect situations in the world. You can see that they're imperfect and yet you try to find a skillful response.

This quest for skillfulness requires that you use your imagination. That's what the larger perspective is for. It opens up more possibilities to your imagination so that your old habits don't form ruts that you can never get out of. You think of new ways of responding, unexpected ways of responding. This is where insight really opens up new possibilities in your life, where it shows its true worth.

The ability to see the movements of the mind minutely is an important insight only if it makes you more skillful in the way you act and speak and think. So keep that perspective in mind. Keep that quest for skillfulness in mind as well, so that your actions really do fall into the path that leads to the end of suffering and don't keep falling into the path that leads to more and more compounded suffering again and again and again.

This is where the meditation shows its true value in our lives, even if we don't get all the way to the ultimate skill of reaching the deathless. The fact that we've trained ourselves to be more and more skillful leads the mind in the direction of less and less suffering. It inclines the mind in that direction. If you don't make it all the way to the deathless in this lifetime, your quest for skillfulness insures that your next lifetime will keep heading in that direction. You build up a momentum.

So do your best to head your mind in that direction, because otherwise this *samsara*, this wandering around that we keep doing, is pretty aimless. The image the Buddha gives is of throwing a stick up in the air. Sometimes it falls on this end, sometimes it falls on the other end, sometimes it falls flat on its side: all pretty random, aimless. Try to turn your life from a stick thrown up into the air into an arrow flying straight in a particular direction, toward more and more skillfulness. Ultimately, someday, whether in this lifetime or the next, that arrow will reach its target—but only if you focus on this issue of skillfulness right here and right now. *And keep it right here right now, every right here and right now.* That's what builds up the momentum. That's what gives direction and meaning to life.