

Analyzing Anger

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We spread thoughts of goodwill every day as a baseline to remind ourselves of what our motivation should be as we deal with other people, what our attitude should be toward them—what we want our actions and words to promote: happiness for ourselves, happiness for others.

So then when we see attitudes or actual words or actions that are not in line with that, we can realize we've gone off course.

And notice, the reflections end with, "All beings are the owners of their actions." That's supposed to remind us that when we're upset with other people, when we feel like saying something or doing something that might not be in our best interest or theirs, it's going to be our karma.

When we're upset with others, our mind tends to go out: It's like a bullet being shot out of a gun. It forgets the gun very quickly. You're just aimed at whatever you don't like. The purpose of all these reflections is to bring you back to the gun. What's doing the shooting? Why? What's the impulse?

We have lots of narratives and lots of reasons for them, and the Buddha says to take them apart. This is why we have the analysis in terms of the aggregates or the sense media—all the things that happen in the course of sensory perception: Where in the process did the narrative begin? Take it apart. When you take it apart, you find that there's not that much there. There are just lots of little bits and pieces. You were the one who stitched them together.

It went from a feeling to a perception. Or sometimes the perception came first then the feeling. Then there's the conversation and it turns into craving. And then on up. It causes a lot of problems.

So when you're sitting there with a narrative, ask yourself, "What is it made up out of?" Make it something you can take apart. Cut it into little pieces. Where is the feeling? Where is the perception? Where is the thought-construct? What was the sight, what was the sound, what was the thought that gave rise to all these things?

The problem is that once you're *in* the narrative, it's very hard to see these things. You've got to get a lot quicker about this. This is why we do concentration practice, so that we're right there with the gun before the bullet goes shooting out. We learn how to see our distractions as they come up and we can see that they're something we don't want to get involved with.

First you practice with things that are relatively innocent. A random thought

comes through and you say, “Nope. I’m not going to go there.” Occasionally you get something really strong that will come in from the day or the past week or whatever and it’ll shoot your concentration to smithereens.

You’ve got to stop and say, “Okay, what were the steps that led to that narrative?” And bit by bit, you get better and better at seeing the processes through which the mind goes.

This is an important part in what the Buddha says is the way you develop insight. There are five steps altogether. One is to see things arising and passing away. But it’s not just arising, it’s also origination: In other words, see where they came from. When that particular thought came up, what sparked it? Were you there or were you off someplace else? You want to be there so that you can see it.

This applies to all the different defilements: anger, lust, greed, delusion. Delusion’s the hardest to see because it’s kind of muddy. You work first with your desires and your angers because you can see them a lot more clearly.

You want to see what sparks them. Sometimes with lust it’s just a little tiny thing that you wouldn’t expect. But there it is: an assumption that has very little to do with the actual image in mind. There’s an assumption around it—that’s the problem. You won’t see that unless you watch the lust as it’s arising.

So you want to be quick to see these things coming. And you want to be quick to see them go away. That’s the second step. Because when they go away, what happened? What thought came in that put an end to the lust? Or what thought came in that put an end to the anger? We tend to blur these things together.

Sometimes there’ll be a moment of anger and then it’ll go, and then another moment of anger and then it’ll go. But we blur them together as one long anger spread, like one of those cheese spreads you put on bread. It all seems to be connected.

But if you can see it as individual moments, you begin to realize that the anger comes with a particular thought or a particular attitude or a particular perception or feeling or whatever. And then when that perception or whatever goes, the anger goes as well.

Now, the problem is there are hormones in the body that have been activated, and they’re not going to go away quickly. In fact, they’re the factors that convince you that you’re still angry. Or if there’s lust, they’re the ones that convince you that you’re still lustful.

So you want to watch the mind in particular to see how these things come and go.

Then the Buddha says to look for their allure and their drawbacks. What is it that you like about lust? What is it you like about anger? What is it that you like

about expressing your lust or your anger?

If you don't admit these things to yourself, you're never going to be able to dig them out. Your efforts to develop dispassion are going to be off the mark.

So you have to be very precise: What is it that sparked the anger? And what is it that you really like about it, that makes you want to go running with it? And when it's ended, why do you want to dig it up again?

The same with greed or lust: What is it that you like about that particular state of mind? What do you think you gain from it?

And the next thing you look for, of course, is the drawbacks. What do you lose?

We tend not to put the two of them together at the same time. We can be aware of the drawbacks of anger at some times. But then when the anger comes and we go for it, we forget about the drawbacks and we go with the allure. But you want to put them together, right next to each other. You want to see that the allure is not worth it. It's a lot of foolishness.

That's what you've got to see. As Ajaan Suwat used to say, "As you gain insight, what you see is how stupid you've been." He would sometimes translate *avijjā*, ignorance, as just that: stupidity. You see that you should have known better.

But the mind has this way of putting blinders on itself. It forgets its sense of shame and its sense of compunction, which are its protectors. And at the moment when you say, "I'm just going to go with this because I like it," there's part of the mind that'll just brush everything else away.

So you've got to take off the blinders. See all around: What are the drawbacks and what is the allure? Look until you see how miserable the allure is compared with the drawbacks. That's when you begin to develop dispassion.

Now, you're using the three characteristics or the three perceptions there. You may not be thinking about them explicitly. But the idea that the anger is coming and it's going: That's the inconstancy. And you see the drawbacks: That's the stress. And when you say, "I don't want that anymore": That's the not-self. It's a value judgment. You don't want to identify with those things anymore.

From there, you develop dispassion. The dispassion comes from this kind of analysis. We use the concentration as a basis, we use our thoughts of goodwill, as I said, as a baseline, and our concentration as a basis so that you can watch the mind carefully and see the subtle movements inside the mind.

For the time being, you don't turn this analysis on the concentration. In the Canon, the Buddha talks about seeing the five aggregates in these terms: i.e., origination, passing away, allure, drawbacks, and then the escape from them, dispassion. He also applies that analysis to the six sense spheres, to feelings, to

properties.

But there's one passage where he applies the same analysis to the five faculties. That's different. That's what you do when you've gotten rid of your really gross defilements and you realize that the elements of the path have their drawbacks as well.

Up to that point, you've had to go with them and you've had to actually work on *giving* them allure to begin with. That's part of what it means to take delight in developing in the customs of the noble ones. You take delight in developing your conviction, your persistence, your mindfulness, your concentration, and your discernment. But then when they've done their work, you have to see that they, too, are not the goal. They're the path.

So the very final step is to use this five-factor analysis and apply that to the path, too. That's when you're really free.

But in the meantime, you have to hold onto the path. It's like holding onto the raft as you go across the river.

You take this as your baseline: the state of mind when it's at normalcy—which is one of the meanings of *sīla*—the mind is normal in concentration and it sees things clearly. Then apply these five terms to whatever comes up and is creating a disturbance in the mind, always remembering that even though the bullet may be shooting out, you've got to keep your attention right at the gun, right at the trigger if you want to learn how to stop shooting.

And these are the five terms that you use in order to develop that ability to stop.

Always keep this framework in mind, that even though there may be problems out there in the world—and there are lots of problems out there in the world—the problem you're responsible for is what your mind is doing right now. So take care of that first.