

How to refrain from being angry or harboring ill will

Anger can be seriously harmful to our lives. How is it possible to free ourselves from being angry and harboring ill will? This is the same as asking: How can we wake up from our illusory and ignorant mental activity and learn to live for the welfare of all others?

1. SEE AND ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR ANGER AND ILL-WILL

First, we notice anger and anger like emotions when they arise. We also pay attention to ill will when it arises. Anger and ill will are not the same, so first we need to understand how anger and ill-will are different and how they are connected.

Like other emotion words, “anger” refers to complex patterns of mental activity. To simplify the task of analyzing and talking about our mental activity, we use a small number of emotion words such as “anger,” “fear,” “sadness” to group familiar patterns. These patterns include feelings, physical sensations, impulses to action called action tendencies, and appraisals. Anger consists of feelings that can range in intensity from mild such as annoyance, irritation, or frustration to intense such as fury or rage. The corresponding physical sensations, often described as a hot liquid under pressure, can vary in intensity from warm to simmering to boiling. These sensations are accompanied by measurable changes in blood pressure, heart rate, number of skin conductance responses indicating increased sweating and arousal of the sympathetic nervous system, tightening and stiffening of muscles, and facial warming. The action tendencies can include facial muscle movements, yelling, and jerky body movements such as hitting, kicking, or stomping. Increasingly drastic action often corresponds to increasingly intense feeling. The intensity of feelings and sensations usually rises rapidly and then falls gradually.

Appraisals are rapid mental assessments of the relations between perceived events and our motives. In other words, an appraisal is a quick interpretation or evaluation of what we perceive to be happening in comparison to our expectations, desires, and memories. Our appraisals change when our expectations, desires, and memories change. The appraisals usually involved in anger include a sense of certainty or confidence that our expectations or desires have been blocked or obstructed; that this obstruction is unpleasant; and that someone or something is to blame for this obstruction.

Any emotion episode involves ongoing interactions or feedback between appraisals, feelings and corresponding physical sensations, and action tendencies. For example, the more angry feelings we feel, then the more we appraise that someone should be blamed for an event perceived to be unpleasant; and the more we appraise that someone should be blamed for an event perceived to be unpleasant, then the more angry feelings we feel; and the more angry feelings we feel, then the more our facial muscles contort; and the more our facial muscles contort, then the more angry feelings we feel; and the more angry feelings we feel, then the louder we yell; and the louder we yell, then the more angry feelings we feel; and so on. Not only external events but also events inside our body can be appraised as unpleasant and blameworthy, evoking an anger episode: this is common when we don't want to feel pain or sadness, but then we do feel pain or sadness, and we appraise that someone or something is to blame for obstructing our desire not to feel pain or sadness. All of these interactions can occur extremely rapidly.

When we are young children, our tantrums are impressive examples of anger episodes; many or most two and three year olds intermittently shout, scream, throw things, hit, kick, and stomp. As we grow older and we interact with others, gradually we learn more sophisticated ways of appraising events, and we learn explicitly or

implicitly “display rules” about when, to whom, and how to display emotions such as anger. As our mental abilities and language skills grow, we no longer need to rely only on nonverbal actions such as facial muscle movements and body movements to communicate our expectations, desires, and memories; we learn to identify our emotions, to regulate our emotions according to display rules, and to negotiate our expectations and desires through language. However, these mental abilities and language skills can be reduced, both in children and in adults, when we are tired, hungry, intoxicated, or under other bodily stress stress which increases arousal of the sympathetic nervous system . Even on good days, any of us may reach a breaking point where a combination of causes and conditions including strong expectations, desires, or memories, and highly negative appraisals of what we perceive to be happening leads to an anger episode.

The word “ill will” refers to a complex pattern of mental activity that consists of many of the same feelings, physical sensations, action tendencies, and appraisals as anger but, in addition, ill will includes an attitude of antipathy or dislike toward whomever or whatever has been assessed as blameworthy, and a desire or intention either passively to refuse to help them, or actively to attempt to punish or harm them. Ill will can range in intensity from mild to intense. Some other words and phrases for harboring ill will include: animosity, antagonism, enmity, envy, hatred, holding a grudge, hostility, loathing, malice, meanness, resentment, and spitefulness. What anger and ill will share is certainty or confidence that our expectations or desires have been blocked or obstructed; that this obstruction is unpleasant; and that someone or something is to blame for the obstruction.

It is obvious that ill will is a profound violation of the heart of **all our ethical principles**: our vow to act in every moment for the well being of all others, which includes, at the very least, to refrain from upsetting or harming others. Harboring thoughts of ill will, however

mild, toward anyone or anything, clearly drags us far away from the complete awakening that all our ethical principles embody. It is less obvious how anger is a violation of our ethical principles. Because it is subtle and not obvious, many people wrongly believe that being angry is skillful. To know why anger is unskillful, we have to further explore its causes, conditions, and consequences.

2. EXAMINE THE CAUSES, CONDITIONS, & CONSEQUENCES

Second, we explore the causes, conditions, and consequences of anger and ill will so that we come to know why anger and ill will are so extremely unskillful and so destructive of our vow to act always for the benefit of all others.

What makes anger so extremely unskillful is its effects. More than other emotions, anger narrows our attention. At the start of an anger episode, we may feel that our attention is sharp; in reality our attention has narrowed, a condition often called “tunnel vision.” Anger perpetuates itself: the angrier we are, the more our appraisals reinforce our anger, unless the interactions among appraisals, feelings, and action tendencies are somehow stopped. Since anger usually includes a rapid appraisal of certainty or confidence that our expectations or desires have been blocked or obstructed, this sense of certainty or confidence stops us from seeking information that would question or disconfirm our subsequent appraisals, leading to the mental distortion often called “confirmation bias.” Since anger usually includes a rapid appraisal that someone or something is to blame for the obstruction, our perception of subsequent events is biased by this appraisal: everything we see or hear becomes interpreted as evidence of blameworthiness, further intensifying feelings of anger. When we are angry, our decisions—even decisions that are unrelated to the perceived event that initially evoked the anger—are guided by sloppy, biased appraisals.

These biased appraisals are evident in the often heard claim that something “made” us angry or that someone “provoked” our anger; the idea that our anger episode was “made” or “provoked” by something outside us confuses the situation and the emotion response, as if the blameworthiness of another person or thing were to be measured by the intensity of our anger. This is an illusion: in reality, the intensity of our anger is only a measure of our own mental activity, not of another’s culpability. The more intense our angry feelings, the more likely we are to impute that the offending event was intentional and personal, even if it was not. If it is not clear who or what is to blame, we’re likely to blame whomever or whatever arouses the most angry feelings or confirms our most unfavorable expectations. “Because of these deep seated, non idiosyncratic reactions, we tend to alter our judgments of blameworthiness, generally assessing more blame on the putative wrongdoer than the context requires.” Anger distorts our appraisals in other ways too: It can make us too eager to take rash action. It can make us pay less attention to the substantive content of arguments and more attention to superficial persuasive cues or memories. It can make us more likely to interpret the anger of others as ill will and make us less likely to trust others. If anger becomes our predominant way of responding to events perceived to be unpleasant, our anger can preempt our ability to respond with other more beneficial emotions.

When angry feelings reach their greatest intensity, the feelings can overwhelm us and seem to be completely disconnected from any desires and expectations, so that we feel furious or enraged for no purpose at all: “I can’t remember why I’m angry but I am!” Initially we assessed something as blameworthy, but now our feelings are so intense and disorganized that we can’t remember what started it all. To restore some meaning to our feelings, we may fabricate an explanation for our anger that is only distantly related to the real

causes and conditions. This diffuse anger is especially likely when we are tired, hungry, intoxicated, or under other bodily stress. If such diffuse anger or irritability persists over many years, it can be damaging to our physical health.

Our anger strongly distorts not only our own appraisals, but also the appraisals of others who interact with us. First, our anger repels others, since they usually find it to be highly unpleasant or threatening. Second, when we are angry, others view us as more ugly and view our arguments as more irrational and we would likely agree with them, if we could see ourselves from their perspective. If others are anxious or mistrustful, they may even misinterpret our anger as evidence of insanity or some other essential fault.

If we speak to others when we are intensely angry, others may not be able to listen fully to the substantive content of what we are saying content which is likely to be biased by our anger anyway, since their attention is likely to be distracted by our angry demeanor. At the same time, we won't be able to listen fully to them, since our anger is biasing our appraisal of everything we hear them say. If we speak angrily to others, they too may become angry if they expect that others should not speak angrily to them, and if they blame us for violating that expectation.

And now that all of us are angry, we are likely to interpret each other's anger as ill will, instigating a reciprocal escalation of biased appraisals and self-justified retaliations as we shift back and forth between being offended and being the offender: when we feel angered by the offender, we find their "provocation" to be arbitrary or incomprehensible; when the offended feel angered by us, we find our action to be meaningful and comprehensible. "The remarkable thing about self-justification is that it allows us to shift from one role to the other and back again in the blink of an eye, without applying what we have learned from one role to the other."

Next, we may complain about the other person's supposed ill will to our friends, and then we misinterpret our friends' empathic support (which they would have provided unconditionally no matter what we chose to say) as agreement and confirmation that the other is malicious and deserving of our reciprocal ill will. In the end, even one flash of anger can damage the mutual trust between people, and when anger escalates into ill will, mutual trust is obliterated.

It is wise to keep track of our anger episodes in a log or journal so that we can see the patterns of causes and conditions that contribute to our anger. We can monitor any and every episode of anger and rate each on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is mild annoyance and 10 is intense fury. We can take note of the different components of each episode: feelings, physical sensations, action tendencies, and appraisals. As we transform our mental activity through practice, we should see a decrease in scores. "Studying our anger shows us those places where we are brittle and defended, where we are weakest and most need to grow." When anger arises, it is not a sign that we need to take action quickly against someone or something; it is a sign that we need to stay still and examine our own mental activity—especially our expectations, desires, and memories.

"If your house is on fire, the most urgent thing to do is to go back and try to put out the fire, not to run after the person you believe to be the arsonist. If you run after the person you suspect has burned your house, your house will burn down while you are chasing him or her. That is not wise. You must go back and put out the fire. So when you are angry, if you continue to interact with or argue with the other person, if you try to punish her, you are acting exactly like someone who runs after the arsonist while everything goes up in flames."

When we are angry and we do not carefully examine the causes and conditions of our anger, there will be harmful consequences because we are perpetuating our own illusory and ignorant mental activity.

3. CULTIVATE THE FOUR IMMEASURABLE ATTITUDES

Third, having noticed our anger and ill will, and having explored their causes, conditions, and consequences, we “let the flower of compassion blossom in the soil of love and tend it with the pure water of equanimity in the cool shade of joyfulness.” Loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity are the four immeasurable attitudes or emotions that always support the well being of all others. They are called “immeasurable” because they unconditionally embrace immeasurable numbers of living beings without limit and without discrimination.

Like other emotion words, the immeasurable attitudes refer to complex patterns of mental activity that include feelings, physical sensations, action tendencies, and appraisals. But unlike some emotions and attitudes such as anger and ill will, the immeasurable attitudes, when well practiced, are free of the unskillful confusion that creates harmful consequences.

We can practice the four immeasurable attitudes in any sequence, but if we are beginners or if we need help transforming our anger, we should practice equanimity first; otherwise, the other three attitudes will be partial and will not extend equally to all living beings. If we are to free ourselves from anger and anger like emotions, we have to use appropriate methods and actually practice the immeasurable attitudes every day; it is not enough just to read about them. If we use appropriate methods and learn to take good care of our emotions, then we can help others do the same.

Immeasurable equanimity is the attitude that regards all others and all events equally. Some words that describe the feeling of equanimity are: balance, calmness, evenness, peacefulness, restfulness, serenity, and tranquility. If the physical sensations of anger are described as a hot liquid under pressure, in contrast the physical sensations of

equanimity could be described as a pleasantly warm breeze. These sensations are accompanied by reduced blood pressure and heart rate, reduced arousal of the sympathetic nervous system, loosening and softening of muscles, and cooling of the face. The action tendencies include deliberate slowing of body movements and quieting of the voice. Increasing stillness of the body facilitates increasing equanimity.

To practice equanimity, first we distance ourselves from any situations that we perceive to be disturbing, and then we calm down the feelings and physical sensations that accompany disturbing emotions such as anger. Sometimes distancing ourselves requires walking away from a situation that we feel has evoked our anger; at other times, our only option is to create a mental boundary that gives us a sense of a calm, protected space where we can focus on steadying our body and calming our mental activity, instead of focusing on whatever we think has evoked our anger. We assume a neutral, relaxed position and we mentally check our body for signs of muscle tension, tightness, stiffness, racing heart, or agitation; this mental “body scan” will give us a better sense of the intensity of our anger. We bring attention to our breath, noticing how our body feels as we inhale and exhale, gradually breathing in and breathing out more deeply and slowly. We let go of any vivid emotional memories of the past that have arisen, as well as any brooding or ruminative thoughts, and we return to our present moment body awareness. We make sure we give our body what it needs so that it is not too tired, hungry, intoxicated, or under other bodily stress. We practice using whatever relaxation techniques we have learned until our feelings, physical sensations, and action tendencies have calmed in every aspect.

Practicing equanimity also requires learning to make more skillful appraisals. First, we practice seeing self and others, close and distant, pleasant and unpleasant, allies and adversaries and strangers, as all

being equal. Next, we practice seeing how whatever happens is vast inconceivable activity beyond all individual perspectives, boundless like the spacious sky. We imagine being in this open space where everything is equal and inseparable, without any bias or partiality. In this space we notice the gap between our expectations, desires, and memories on the one hand, and what actually has occurred on the other hand. A principal cause of anger is the misguided appraisal that this gap is an obstruction that could have been avoided, and that someone or something is to blame for the obstruction. We see that in reality, given past causes and conditions, whatever happened was unavoidable; therefore, there was no obstruction. Once we carefully examine the causes and conditions of what happened, there is nothing left to be angry about; we see the unavoidability of what happened. Then we need to learn to change our expectations, desires, memories, and actions; but if we attempt to create change through anger, we will almost certainly cause more harm. For example, if we don't want to feel pain or sadness, and if we appraise that someone or something is to blame for obstructing our desire not to feel pain or sadness, then we may become angry; when we see the unavoidability of our pain and sadness, we can let go of anger and find more beneficial ways to take care of our pain and sadness with patience and compassion. Furthermore, whatever happens is always to some degree unpredictable and unknowable, and it will never match our expectations, desires, and memories. When we practice seeing how past events were uncertain, unpredictable, and unavoidable, much of the fuel for our anger will disappear. "As there is no certainty as to prosperity or harm, attachment and hatred are unreasonable."

Immeasurable loving kindness is the attitude that wishes for all others to be happy and for all others to realize unsurpassable complete awakening. Some words and phrases that describe the feeling of loving kindness are: conviviality, friendliness, geniality, good will,

helpfulness, intimacy, and unconditional love. Like equanimity, the physical sensation is pleasant warmth. We begin practicing immeasurable loving kindness by thinking of the happiness and awakening that we wish to give to whichever living beings we most admire and love. Then we slowly extend that wish outward to more and more living beings until we can imagine our all embracing love extending everywhere throughout space and time. Finally, we rest in this open space where loving kindness extends equally everywhere. In our actions we seek to help others to be happy in any way we can, especially by helping others to appreciate and embrace themselves as much as we appreciate and embrace them: “I know you are there, and I am very happy you are there. May everyone love and accept you just as I love and accept you, and may everyone help you to be your best.”

Immediately after we have surrounded all living beings in immeasurable loving kindness, we should practice the next two immeasurable attitudes, both of which are forms of empathy. Empathy, like equanimity, is an essential antidote to anger because if we can feel what it is like to be someone else from the inside it is impossible to see him or her only as a blameworthy offender. Often when we are angry we ask questions such as: “Why would you do that?” “What were you thinking?” “What has gotten into you?” Increasing our empathy for the mental activity of others allows us to discover more accurate, less biased, answers to those questions.

Immeasurable compassion is the attitude that empathizes with the suffering of all others and that wishes for all others to be free from suffering. The feelings that accompany compassion will sympathetically mirror what we perceive that others are feeling, such as distress, pain, sadness, fear, or confusion. Since immeasurable compassion is accompanied by equanimity, these sympathetic feelings are not overwhelmingly intense and never include anger or ill will. But the feelings are intense enough to motivate our aspiration

and commitment to relieve all others' suffering as if it were our own suffering or our beloved parents' suffering. We visualize (that is, imagine) offering to others all our happiness of the past, present, and future, as well as all our possessions, and even our body, to help free them from their afflictions. Then we rest in the open space where suffering is relieved everywhere. In our actions we shouldn't overreach ourselves but do what is within our capacity to relieve all the suffering others that we meet.

Immeasurable sympathetic joy is the attitude that empathizes with the joyfulness of others and that wishes for all others never to be parted from their innate potential for realizing joyfulness. Sympathetic joy consists of feelings of joy whenever others are joyful, gratitude whenever others find well-being and good fortune, and satisfaction in providing for such well being and good fortune. Since immeasurable sympathetic joy is accompanied by equanimity, these feelings of joy are not so intense as to disturb and distort our mental activity. When we rest in the open space where such sympathetic joy, gratitude, and satisfaction extend everywhere, it is impossible to feel any anger or ill will.

Just as we can keep a journal of our anger episodes, we can also keep a journal about what happens when we practice the four immeasurable attitudes every day. Recording our positive experiences helps to permanently transform our mental activity "from a sea of fire into a refreshing lake."

The light of **all our ethical principles** illuminates the way to unsurpassable complete awakening, but anger and ill will obscure the light. "Our vanity would have us believe that we are naturally mean. But the truth is much worse: we become mean without knowing it, without even realizing it." When we acknowledge our anger and become intimate with our mental activity, not turning away from it but instead closely studying its causes and conditions with the help

of all others, the light returns. What is the light? It is to refrain from all unskillful action that increases ill being, to engage in all skillful action that increases well-being, and to act always for the benefit of all others.

SOURCES

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