

ALL THE RAGE

BUDDHIST WISDOM
ON ANGER AND
ACCEPTANCE

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Anger as a Sacred Practice

Joan Sutherland

The practice of anger is not a practice in response to anger, intended to manage or fix it, but a practice of anger itself, based on an understanding of anger as something sacred to be handled with care. Zen teacher Joan Sutherland teaches on practicing with anger using the tools of inquiry, discernment, and remorse.

Of the emotions we tend to think of as afflictive, anger seems to be in a category by itself. When a group prepares to take the bodhisattva vows together, no one ever tries to make a case for lying or stinginess, but someone always does for anger. "There are some things it's wrong to tolerate," they say. "Anger can be righteous. Anger is motivating." In contrast, pretty much everyone agrees that it's no treat to be on the receiving end of a blast of anger, however motivated and righteous.

The way the bodhisattva vows are formulated seems to reinforce anger's difference. We vow to take up the way of not indulging in anger rather than the way of not being angry; it's the only conduct we vow not to indulge in, as opposed to just not do. Does this imply that the problem is in the indulgence rather than the anger itself? Obviously there's a spectrum from chronic irritation to murderous rage that looks like anger indulgence, but isn't the repression or denial of anger just indulgence

with a different face? Is there ever a time when getting angry isn't breaking a vow?

In most Buddhist traditions, anger is pretty unequivocally a problem. The mildest judgment is that it's a form of immaturity. More severely, anger is seen as the most deadly barrier to enlightenment. Shantideva summed it up by saying, "There is no sense in which someone prone to anger is well off." By contrast, in recent times the repression of anger has sometimes been blamed for physical illness, psychological distress, and even interpersonal conflict. Forces this ambiguous, about which we're this ambivalent, have sometimes been called sacred, meaning entitled to a particularly strong form of respect, or taboo, and treated with extreme care because of their potential for danger.

If we look at anger as something sacred-taboo, we explore how anger usually works against the wholeness of things and how, instead, it might potentially serve that wholeness—within ourselves, in our relationships, and in the larger world. When the whole self is present and we are aware of the whole world in all of its complexity, we understand that we carry within us a fire called anger, capable of harming ourselves and others, yet also sometimes capable of illuminating or transforming things that would otherwise remain hidden and stuck. We are guardians of that fire, and there's a dignity in that, and a responsibility.

When we take on that responsibility, we open up the possibility of being tempered by the fire. The traditional image is of a lotus in the fire, a flower not consumed but refined by the flames. Let's call this a practice of anger. Not a practice in response to anger, intended to manage or fix it, but a practice of anger, based on an understanding of anger as sacred-taboo, to be handled with care and allowed to temper us. Most fundamentally and perhaps surprisingly, the experience of anger is transformed into a form of inquiry, compelling our attention toward things not being adequately attended to, within ourselves and in the world.

Strong feelings are inquiries the body makes of the mind. They ask: There's something happening we need to pay attention to. What's going on? And since their job is to get our attention, they do it in dramatic ways—the surge of adrenaline, the rush of blood, the clenched gut. Dramatic, but from an evolutionary perspective, probably helpful. Then things get a bit trickier, because the body's inquiry tends to be accompanied by a strong suggestion of how we should feel about what's happening, such as afraid, pained, angry. It's the voice of the organism, intent

on survival, and while it's good at letting us know that something's up, it's not always so accurate at telling us what that something is.

We have a choice. We can simply accept both the warning and the suggested interpretation: If I'm feeling this way, there must be something to be angry about. Or we can make a differentiation. Without automatically assuming that the appropriate reaction is anger, we can accept that the body perceives a threat. We can stay with the sensations—hot, electric, vertiginous—without jumping to the story about why we're feeling this way and without immediately spreading those sensations into the world around us through our words and actions. We can allow in a little spaciousness, moving from "I'm so angry" to "Anger seems to have arrived."

Neither allowing ourselves to be possessed by anger nor trying to repress it—this is the first step of not indulging in anger. We've taken the role of host to the guest of anger, allowing it to have a seat on the sofa but not to light a fire in the middle of the living room carpet. We've created enough space and stability to begin a series of crucial discernments into the nature of our anger.

The first is whether we can be so certain about what we're feeling. When anger arises, we tend to assume it's justified. We think, if I'm angry, there must be a good reason. (Notice that we don't necessarily make the same assumption about someone else's anger.) Often when we're angry, that becomes the most important thing going on. In fact, anger tends to see things through its section of the emotional bandwidth, which leaves out a lot. Because anger tends to obliterate nuance and complexity, we have to consciously bring them back in, even against anger's seductive desire for what G. K. Chesterton called the clean, well-lighted prison of the one idea. Anger looks for justification, backup, evidence to support itself, and it usually doesn't take kindly to being contradicted. Are we comfortable with betting the farm on anger's interpretation of events?

My community, Awakened Life, used to gather during some retreats for a complaint circle, which we made into a kind of ceremony. Everyone had five minutes to write down something they were really angry about, their pet of all peeves. Everyone also had some kind of percussion instrument—rattles and drums and pot lids—which we'd play with vigor while each person read out their complaint with as much feeling as they could muster. It didn't take long for the entire circle to collapse into

laughter, as we experienced the surprising monotony of our cherished and surely unique complaints, and the emptiness of their drama. Afterward the mood was always lighter, more spacious, and kinder. We could see how, even when we weren't consciously gripped by anger, it maintained an invisible crust over our hearts.

Whether our anger is such that a complaint circle could transform it or whether it seems more serious, it's a vital signal that something has gotten out of balance and needs attending to. This shifts our focus from how we feel to what's been upset in the larger context. Instead of being possessed by anger, we receive it as a messenger, and the message can arrive from within ourselves, from someone else's words, or from the world in which we're standing. Even when the anger is very upsetting, we're still focused on decoding the message so that we can discern how we might respond rather than react. One of the differences between the two is that a response is capable of incorporating the new understanding of the state of things that anger has revealed, while reaction remains focused solely on how we feel.

The next discernment is about the source of the anger. Is it coming from a very personal place within us or is it a force of nature speaking through us? In Zen there's something called flavorless words, which is what is said when the vastness speaks through us without our putting any personal spin on it. When we're speaking flavorlessly, what gets said is called a complete presentation of the whole, a holographic moment in which the whole universe is present in the words we speak. When we're expressing anger, is it essentially as impersonal as an erupting volcano, or is it coming from some deeply personal and therefore flavored place in us, arising from the impulse to wound or discharge uncomfortable feelings at someone else's expense?

If we have gotten out of the way, and the anger is coming without any spin on our part, it can be like lightening on a dark night revealing what's been denied or hidden. And like a flash flood, it can reshape even very stuck things. But flavorless anger is a much rarer occurrence than we'd probably like to believe, which is why anger ought to remain sacred-taboo. Sometimes anger has both flavorless and flavorful—impersonal and personal—elements, and in this case what we're after is an honest understanding of the mixture. That's a good place from which to decide what to do next.

The next discernment is who or what is being spoken for. Who is

being offended and defended? Is it someone or something needing our help, or is our outrage actually personal even when it seems to be about something else? It's not wrong to act on someone's behalf because we find a situation personally unbearable; it's just good to recognize that that's part of what's happening so we can be more confident that our actions address what the person actually needs as well as what we do.

We don't make these discernments in order to judge our feelings and motivations, dividing them into piles of good and bad. Although the practice of anger asks us to explore and come to know ourselves very well, it isn't essentially about us but about the larger context when anger arises. We make this exploration because we want to get as close as we can to what's actually happening. In order to act in the most free and helpful way possible, we want to move closer to what's troubling, with less of our own stuff distorting our view.

Even when faced with an injustice recognized by all, our anger cannot be the only or even the most important thing going on. As with any other intensely compelling feeling or thought, it's helpful if we can restore its true proportion in relation to the whole: our anger is one of many things rising and falling together in a given moment. Sometimes realizing this is all we need to break the spell and wholeheartedly shift our allegiance from our reactions to actually responding to the situation. This is a humbling practice because it's very challenging to work with anger from inside anger. It takes time and effort and the willingness to fail a lot, but it can't be beat as a small, local gesture of commitment toward the sacred work of mending what's broken in the world.

It's sometimes our own hearts that are broken. When confronted with the pains and injustices of the world, we can jump to anger rather than stay with the sorrow that is our deeper and more difficult response. I can't bear that the world is like this. I can't bear that you are like this. Say that with outrage, then say it with grief. When we feel helpless in the face of suffering, getting good and mad can be a relief. Part of the practice of anger is being willing to stay with the underlying sorrow rather than jumping to that release. Staying with it opens the possibility of transforming sorrow, a transformation that also pours a healing balm on anger.

Sorrow isn't directly transformed into happiness; what happens is that young sorrow is transformed into mature sorrow, which finds its own happiness. Young sorrow is what comes of not getting what we

want, things not turning out the way we wish they would, or the world not being the way we think the world ought to be. It's usually made of disappointment, frustration, despair, and anger as well as sadness. With mature sorrow we come to see the world as not-yet-completed, as full of poignant persistence even in the face of struggle and pain. The sun rises again, leaves unfurl again, people try and try and try again. There's something ineffably tender about how all things go on trying in an imperfect world—and this is something that doesn't need fixing, because it is in the trying that the possibility of awakening persists. Mature sorrow denies nothing; it just takes a long, un-self-centered view, and in that view it sees reason to open its heart to the terrible beauty of life. Much of anger's *raison d'être* falls away as that deeper sorrow matures. In a sense, the practice of anger is really one face of the practice of sorrow.

Which brings us to the question of motivation. People often see anger as a powerful spur to action and are worried that without it they'd become passive observers. The difficulty is that anger isn't a good long-haul motivator, since, like fire, it consumes all of its fuel, which is hard on the angry person and everything in the immediate vicinity. To the extent that anger is motivated by a desire to change something in order to relieve a discomfort inside ourselves, we're prone to disappointment and eventually despair, since the world is an unpredictable partner in that kind of project. In contrast, mature sorrow does have legs as a motivator. Mature sorrow takes a long view and puts itself in service to the possibility of awakening. The process might sometimes seem agonizingly slow, but fortunately our sense of satisfaction is linked to something more sustaining than individual events and our reactions to them. It's linked to the poignant beauty of the undeniable persistence of things, no matter what.

The final aspect of the practice of anger is remorse, which plays a key role in some expressions of Buddhist morality. Anger is such a powerful force that it's almost transpersonal in its heedlessness of the ordinary conventions of communication. It spurs us to say and do things we never would in any other context, and its effects can last a lifetime. This is why it is important to notice what happens when anger erupts. Do we ever feel better after an angry outburst? If so, is it because we're using anger to discharge our own discomfort? What's the effect on the other person? What's it like to harbor chronic forms of anger like judgment, or to be the target of chronic anger? Most important, what would you hope

never to do again? That's what remorse means: an unflinching exploration of the results of our actions, a willingness to take responsibility for them, and the changes we make as a result. We look at ourselves with mature sorrow and ask what we can change to better serve wholeness in ourselves and our world.

This is what it means to take the sacred-taboo nature of anger seriously: we contain something with great potential for destruction and a limited but powerful potential for good, and we treat it with the kind of respect we'd give a radioactive substance. Because we can get angry, we have the responsibility to be careful and to do the hard work of inquiry, discernment, and remorse. Anger asks a lot of us, and it gives us something precious in return—an intimate, daily way to participate in the awakening of the world.