

Working with Anger

By Pierre Zimmerman

The emotion of anger plagues us on a personal, national and international level. When it manifests in the mind of one of us, it affects several people. It can destroy long standing relationships and keep our minds tangled in spirals of misery. Within groups or communities it splits people into factions who dig in their heels into solid ground. It is a disturbing and often destructive emotion with its unrealistic projections, judgmental attitudes, attachments and aversions to things or sentient beings. Often it is misplaced anger at ourselves.

Anger covers a range of emotions, including annoyance, irritation, frustration, spite, belligerence, resentment, bitterness, hatred and rage. We experience the feeling, the physiological activation of particular areas of the reptilian and limbic components of the brain and behavioral aspects, such as shouting, sulking and destructive speech. What we label body and mind are constantly in a state of change. Physically, the subatomic particles of our body are in flux, and mentally, our perceptions, moods, thoughts, and emotions are changing all the time. They are not the nature of our mind or an inherent part of the mind.

We can distance ourselves from any emotion by not owning it, nor suppressing, repressing or expressing it. We replace it with wholesome and beneficial states of mind and heart: patience, tolerance, forgiveness, loving kindness and compassion. We want to shorten the refractory period; some people hold on to anger for years through attention. We want to make sure not to let it consume or burn us. The causes of anger could be illness, self-centeredness, holding grudges, feeding resentment, being unable to let go of betrayals of trust, envy, and often self-blame.

How do we reduce and handle this mostly destructive emotion that might wipe out years of practice? We look at antidotes: using awareness to notice when our body informs us of being dis-regulated, remaining calm and assessing where the suffering stems from, while remaining humble in the face of volatile and harmful energy. Anger usually hurts the person who is invested in being critical of others or right at any cost. I don't think anyone gets up in the morning and decides to say: "I feel so happy today, I think I am going to go out and hurt someone." Working with anger requires us to reframe what is happening and contemplate peace of mind and harmony, again and again.

PZ-10/25/20