

Thich Nhat Hahn on Anger
Dharma Talk 3/25/2018
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A Typical Question

Dear Emily,

How do you stop your emotions from shifting into “fight” mode and verbal violence I only become aware that I am in “violence” well into the conversation—when my own emotions are already heated and boiling over. The wisest choice at that point seems to be to get out of the space and conversation where I can get my emotions under control, but, by then, the damage is usually done. While I have greatly improved over the years and am far more aware of my own bullying nature (intellectual or otherwise), I still struggle to change.

Signed,

Upset & Unaware

(From Crucial Skills - Emily Hoffman)

Thich Nhat Hahn on Anger

Reference: Anger: Wisdom for Cooling the Flames Riverhead Books 2001

Chapters One Consuming Anger and Two Putting Out the Fire of Anger

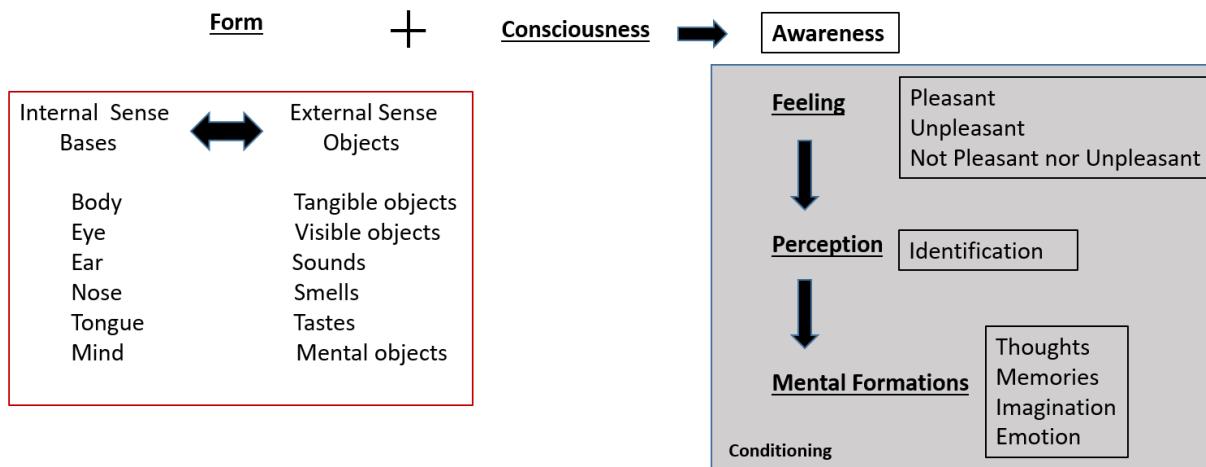
Anger has its roots in our body as well as our mind. “Our dualistic view tells us that mind cannot be body and body cannot be mind. But looking deeply, we see that body is mind and mind is body. If we can overcome the duality that sees the mind and body as entirely separate, we come very close to the truth.” (p. 14) We have to look deeply at how we eat, how we consume, and how we use our body in daily life.

We consume anger through all of the six senses -body, eye, ear, nose, tongue and mind.

How does anger arise?

The process of anger arising comes through the five aggregates of clinging, our gateway to all experiences. Our internal sense bases make contact with an external sense object (**form**) and once our **consciousness** is aware of this, an unpleasant **feeling** arises. We identify the situation (**perception**) and then emotions (**mental objects**) such as frustration, hostility, and anger arise. This cycle repeats itself with mental proliferation (more thoughts) occurring. This leads to the intensification of emotions and reaction. Reactions can include aggressive confrontation, passive aggressive behavior or withdrawal.

The Five Aggregates of Clinging



The fire of anger happens in the body yet we often perceive the problem and the solution as being external.

"When someone says or does something that makes us angry, we suffer. We tend to say or do something back to make the other suffer, with the hope that we will suffer less. We think, "I want to punish you, I want to make you suffer because you have made me suffer. And when I see you suffer a lot, I will feel better." Many of us are inclined to believe in such a childish practice. The fact is that when you make the other suffer, he will try to find relief by making you suffer more. The result is an escalation of suffering on both sides. Both of you need compassion and help. Neither of you needs punishment.

When you get angry, go back to yourself, and take very good care of your anger. And when someone makes you suffer, go back and take care of your suffering, your anger. Do not say or do anything. Whatever you say or do in a state of anger may cause more damage in your relationship.

Most of us don't do that. We don't want to go back to ourselves. We want to follow the other person in order to punish him or her.

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." (p. 23)

Another way to put it: As Malachy McCourt once said, “Resentment is like taking poison and waiting for the other person to die.”

Methods for Cooling the Flames

Thich Naht Hahn notes a sequence of methods for cooling the flames

- Mindful breathing
- Mindful walking
- Embracing our anger
- Looking deeply into the nature of our perceptions
- Looking deeply into the other person to realize that she also suffers a lot and needs help

Mindful breathing

Breathing in and breathing out puts you in contact with your body and the environment. It takes as little as one breath to be in contact with the body and three breaths to maintain that contact.

Mindful walking

Maintaining mindful breathing while walking keeps you in the present. As you make contact with the earth, you are also staying connected to the world around you.

The method of embracing our anger

First look at yourself in the mirror. Assume the facial expressions of anger. Notice how tense your muscles are. Now practice breathing mindfully and smile. Look in the mirror again and notice the relaxed gaze. “Smiling allows the energy of mindfulness to be born in you, helping you to embrace your anger.”

“In the same way, all mental formations and all physiological formations in us are sensitive to mindfulness. If mindfulness is there, embracing your body, your body will transform. If mindfulness is there, embracing your anger or despair, then they, too, will be transformed. According to the Buddha and according to our experience, anything embraced by the energy of mindfulness will undergo a transformation.

Your anger is like a flower. In the beginning, you may not understand the nature of your anger, or why it has come up. But if you know how to embrace it with the energy of mindfulness, it will begin to open. You may be sitting, flowing your breathing, or you may be practicing walking meditation to generate the energy of mindfulness and embrace your anger. After two or twenty minutes, your anger will have to open herself to you, and suddenly you will see the true nature of your anger. It may have arisen just because of a wrong perception or the lack of skillfulness. (p. 28)

Embrace your anger with lots of tenderness. Your anger is not your enemy; your anger is your baby. You can transform it into positive energy.

The method of looking deeply into the nature of our perceptions

As practitioners, we have to be anger specialists. We have to attend to our anger; we have to practice until we understand the roots of our anger and how it works. (p. 33)

At the moment you become angry, you tend to believe that your misery has been created by another person. You blame him or her for all your suffering. But by looking deeply, you may realize that the seed of anger in you is the main cause of your suffering. **Many other people, confronted with the same situation, would not get angry like you.** They hear the same words, they see the same situation, and yet they are able to stay calm and not be carried away. Why do you get angry so easily? You may get angry very easily because your seed of anger is too strong. And because you have not practiced the methods for taking good care of your anger, the seed of anger has been watered too often in the past. All of us have a seed of anger in the depth of our consciousness. But in some of us, that seed of anger is bigger than our other seeds—like love or compassion. The seed of anger may be bigger because we have not practiced in the past. When we begin to cultivate the energy of mindfulness, the first insight we have is that the main cause of our suffering, of our misery, is not the other person—it is the seed of anger in us. Then we will stop blaming the other person for causing all our suffering. We realize she or he is only a secondary cause. You get a lot of relief when you have this kind of insight, and you begin to feel much better. But the other person still may be in hell because she does not know how to practice. Once you have taken care of your anger, you become aware that she is still suffering. So now you can focus your attention on the other person. (p.34)

The method of looking deeply into the other person to realize that she also suffers a lot and needs help

“When someone does not know how to handle his own suffering, he allows it to spill all over the people around him. When you suffer, you make people around you suffer. That’s very natural. This is why we have to learn how to handle our suffering, so we won’t spread it everywhere.” (p.36)

When someone is angry, and doesn’t know how to handle her anger, she is helpless, she suffers. She also makes the people around her suffer. At first, you feel that she deserves punishment. You want to punish her because she has made you suffer. But after ten or fifteen minutes of walking meditation and mindful looking, you realize that what she needs is help and not punishment. This is a good insight. (p.36)

In a period of fifteen minutes, or half an hour, the practice of mindfulness, concentration, and insight can liberate you from your anger and turn you into a loving person. That is the strength of the dharma, the miracle of the dharma. (p.37)

Three phrases:

“I am angry and I want you to know that I am suffering.”

“I am doing my best to take good care of my anger for me and for you also.”

“I need your help.”

If you can say these sentences, the other person will know that “He is faithful to me. He is keeping his commitment. He is trying to do his best. I must do the same.”

Taking good care of yourself is the first step.

Wise Words

Anger is a problem to be solved when you are not angry.

Never let a problem to be solved be more important than a person to be loved.

Notes:

In the Introduction, Thich Naht Hahn tells the story of a women with anger and resentment towards her husband:

“I need your help in order to understand you better, in order to love you better. Please tell me what is in your heart. I know you suffer a lot, I must know your suffering so that I will not do the wrong things again and again as in the past. Without you, I cannot do it. I need you to help me so that I will not continue to hurt you. I want only to love you.” ...Please my dear, please tell me what is in your heart. I want to learn to do better so that I won’t continue to make mistakes.”

(p. 14)