

Bob Gunn, Editor

Anger: The Enemy Within

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Anger is our enemy. It's the sorcerer within who leads us astray, thwarts our desires, causes our suffering, and leads us to torment others through provocations and outbursts. Powerless to prevent the consequences, we are like the ship's captain who helplessly watches his

vessel driven before the winds—annoyance, irritation, or resentment—that build into a seething hurricane.

From where do these rages arise? They come from our own thinking, the workings of our minds. In truth, moods are nothing more than intangible, fleeting mental states. By not being mindful of yapping thoughts, we allow them to run like a pack of wild dogs, destroying all in their path.

How does something as unsubstantial and ephemeral as a thought wreak so much havoc on our lives and those around us?

We allow it. We never think to ourselves, "Now I will be angry," but we become caught in anger's whirlwind just the same. Circumstances or past actions have created the conditions for outbursts. Over a lifetime, even feelings of mild annoyance can carve deep channels in the brain, needing only a spark—a stray thought—to trigger fury.

Our destructive anger starts as momentary irritation, a seemingly insignificant disruption in our thinking. The problem, too often, is that by the time we become aware of our thoughts' corrosive drip-drip-dripping, anger has already slipped its cage and loosed its tethers. We become incapable of checking cruel words and preventing their consequences. Escalation inevitably results in increased misery and torment for everyone involved. Not until the storm has passed do we realize that the destruction could have been minimized or prevented

had we been more aware of the subtext of our thinking.

But what is it that we are really fighting? Our own mental afflictions. An aggressor can inflict bodily harm, but all mental anguish is purely self-inflicted: It comes from within our own minds. Confronting our anger requires courage to face its source. It requires paying meticulous attention to even momentary flashes of impa-

tience or criticism and then being alert so that we can neutralize them *before* they escalate.

How? Mild but growing feelings of discomfort or annoyance are the clues that we are indulging what began as a stray thought and that our thinking may soon

run amok in a futile attempt to protect wounded pride or whatever affliction has us in its grasp. As we become increasingly vigilant, we become better able to recognize these feelings at the first hint and, thus, better able to prevent



*“All the joy the world contains
Has come through wishing happiness for others.
All the misery the world contains
Has come through wanting for oneself.”*

SHANTIDEVA (8TH CENTURY TIBETAN MONK)

emotional torrents.

“What feelings/thoughts am I to be vigilant about?” you ask.

Advantage. Annoyance. Approval. Assumptions. Criticism. Disappointment. Disparagement. Disrespect. Fame. Fear. Frustration. Gloating. Gossip. Harshness. Haughtiness. Inferences. Insolence. Irritation. Jealously. Mockery. Pride. Protection. Recognition. Resentment. Reward. Righteousness. Worry. In short, anything that knocks us out of a calm or quiet mental state.

Whether subtle or obvious, these are the feelings/thoughts behind the actions that too often lead to outbursts of harmful words. Particularly when we are tired, stressed, or have had even a little bit of alcohol, we may be as powerless to resist as a ship’s captain before the gale. We will be swept away, dashed on the rocky shore. When rested, we may be able to resist these miseries and maintain the willpower to refrain from speaking or acting when afflicted.

No doubt, it’s easier said than done. When those subtle, negative thoughts first arise—that’s when we still have the chance to make a positive choice! Catch yourself in the moment. Be silent. Refrain from action. Notice, observe, and release. Allow the angry feelings to pass. Wait for your mood to lift. When the forest is burning, the wisest course is to clear away the fuel and prevent the flames from spreading.

Inhibition of thought isn’t the path. Thoughts flow and ebb—no

one can control everything that comes to mind. Efforts to do so, however well intended, are doomed to fail, if merely from eventual exhaustion at the unrelenting stream of consciousness.

Indeed, attempts at thought control will leave us a withered, impotent husk—so frightened or bound by ritual that all of life’s joy is squandered in a fruitless attempt to regulate our brains. Who knows the source of the hurricane’s first breeze? Who can stop the wind before it materializes? How can we hope to set up enough safeguards so that no errant thought could ever slip through?

Patience is the path to helping us extinguish the fire kindled by churning thoughts before it becomes a conflagration. To resist anger, we must stay calm. We commit to training our mental capacities, raising our consciousness via the habits of self-reflection, scrutiny, and vigilance. We become fully aware that we are the thinkers, living in the moment-to-moment realization that each person’s own mind is creating his or her experience of reality.

“But wait!” you say. “Aren’t I justified in resenting those who try to do me harm, stand in the way of my goals, or treat me badly?”

Certainly some people seem to be intrinsically hostile. But these people are unaware of the grip of their mental habits and the effect on their own lives and happiness. We should hate the destructive thoughts, not

their victims. Hating the individual is as futile as blaming a hot stove for burning our skin when we touch it.

Others may be momentarily afflicted by negative thoughts in the same way that we are vulnerable to acting on our impulses when we are upset, worried, or in any way off-balance. How can we be angry with someone for having a human lapse? Shouldn’t those actions arouse our understanding? After all, don’t we need compassion when our mental afflictions get the better of us?

Our “tormentors”—our thoughts about those people—are actually our friends. They illuminate our past actions. Each taunt, slight, and provocation is nothing more than a spotlight on our past defilements. Each one points us toward work that we need to do to acknowledge our errors and express regret to and ask forgiveness from those whom we have harmed. We need not—must not—suspend our ethical sense in a blind condoning of someone’s thinking gone amok. Patience isn’t apathy or resignation, but acceptance: the felt understanding that, as humans, we are bound to “lose it” sometimes—just as we are bound by common experience. Haven’t we all suffered the bitter fruits of anger?

And perhaps the place to begin is to become patient with ourselves, accepting the pain we have brought into our own lives through anger. ■

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