

Last week Rick spoke, so clearly and eloquently, about skillfully communicating one's needs and desires, sometimes even to ourselves, certainly to people significant in our lives – the people we live with, work with, share the dharma path with. Many, many ways to be mindful, and skillful, in that practice of relationships.

Last time I spoke here, I taught about comparing, critical and contentious minds, and indicated then that contention, or anger, could be a signal – that something in relationship with other people is less than wholesome, is not in alignment with the dharma, and, needs to change. When anger is a normal and natural response of our body-brain to a perceived violation of a boundary, to a perceived action of disrespect or humiliation or oppression, then anger – as a signal - can be a very useful signal to wake up! pay attention! To discern is what's happening in this moment is this wholesome or unwholesome? Is it aligned with the dharma as we understand it, or de-railing into grasping, aversion, delusion? And to ask for skillful wise effort in response, to ask for change

So, I've titled this talk Anger: A Prelude to Change.

Traditionally, in the Eastern Buddhist tradition and the Western psychological tradition, anger has been seen as a “destructive” emotion. That's the title of Dan Goleman's book that reported on the year 2000 Mind-Life conference in Dharamsala, India, with HH the Dalai Lama, Tibetan monks, dedicated Western practitioners like Matthieu Ricard and Alan Wallace and Western neuroscientists like Richie Davidson, Paul Ekman, all exploring what happens in the mind when emotions like anger arise and how Buddhist practice could help relieve the suffering of any destructive emotions.

Of course, we have to be mindful and compassionate about our anger, someone else's anger, even mindful and compassionate about the behaviors, the protest, the violence, the abuse, that can result from anger. And we'll look at how practice can help support us in all of that in just a moment.

But I want to first lay the foundation for how anger can be a prelude to change, within ourselves, within our relationships, within our world.

As Buddhism comes to the West, and as Western neuropsychologists understand better how anger, or any intense, primal affect operates in the brain, we can better frame the event of anger in three stages:

Anger is a signal, in the body, to wake up, pay attention, focus attention, on an external event when that event is perceived by the brainstem and amygdala as a possible threat. I experienced a similar body signal this morning that was not about anger, so I can use it to illustrate anger as a signal. I was taking a bowl out of my kitchen cupboard and – there was a silverfish crawling around in the bowl. My body freaked out – yuk! Revulsion. But my awareness could take in – uh oh, this isn't right, and, pretty calmly, carry the bowl outside and drop the silverfish in the

grass. And also realize I did not need to go into any story about I'm a bad person because my kitchen is so messy that I would have an insect crawling around in my cupboards. None of that was true and, once the body reaction had signaled me to do something skillful, I could let go of the signal and let go of any story or reactivity. It's the same with anger.

In psychology, anger is increasingly being seen also, as a signal of fear, hurt, or unmet need. Hence the tie in to Rick's talk last week. Anger is a legitimate response of the body-brain to a perceived violation, disrespect, humiliation, and it is a natural and common response to fear, hurt, unmet need. In fact, our bodies tend to perceive the violation, the fear, the hurt, the unmet need, before our conscious minds do. It is our body's reaction to the event that is hard-wired in, from before we are born. Anger activates our nervous system, mobilizes our body to move; anger generates the fight half of the fight-flight response. Anger is an innate survival mechanism; we will never not have that capacity to mobilize and fight to protect.

The second stage, then, is our mindful response to the signal of anger, our response or reactivity to the mobilization we feel surging through our bodies. There are somatic markers of anger, as there are for any emotion. Jaws clench, hands contract into fists, breathing gets shallower and more rapid. So we can recognize anger as it is happening. We may consciously look for the cause – the trigger of our anger and try to make sense of it. We may even flip through our rolodex of possible responses, but our unconscious conditioned habits are already responding in ways we have responded before, or been conditioned to respond before. We may fly into a rage before we have time to think straight, to think at all. (I still struggle with road rage and techno-rage, and I've been practicing catching my body signal and saying compassion! For years.)

If we learned early on it's not safe to respond to someone else's anger or to a threat to our sense of self, our self-esteem, by fighting back, we adopt other survival response instead – we flee, we freeze, we submit, we collapse. (I realize there is truly great wisdom in the teachings of no self, no problem, but here we are dealing with a level of reactivity below the level of the conditioned self.)

Or, we use our mindfulness practice and our compassion practice, the two wings of the dharma, to catch the signal of our anger— something's happening, someone just stepped on our toes! stop, notice, allow the experience as an experience, hold the experience as an experience, (count to ten, not react) and then we can let go of the signal – it has done its job in waking us up. We can let go of any story, any conditioning the anger signal is triggering. We don't have to slide down the whole cascade of uh!uh!uh! We can respond wisely out of the practices we practice all the time, kindness, compassion, generosity, equanimity. We let go of the anger after it has done its job of signaling. As the Buddha taught: Holding onto anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else; you are the one who gets burned. Catch, notice, breathe, let go so that we can do the wise effort of inviting and evoking change.

The third stage is we practice the two wings of the dharma, mindfulness and compassion big time in dealing with the anger of others. Finding that sweet spot taught in the Dance of Anger by Harriet Lerner, not reactive, or rageful, not submitting like a doormat, (which is another survival response) but the middle path, being differentiated, boundaried, yet present and engaged. You are you and I am I; I am not you and I am not your view of me; staying anchored and centered in

our own awareness of our own true nature, as much as possible – practice helps. Staying anchored in our awareness of their true nature – practice helps. Common shortcut translation – they’re doing the best they can. If they could manage their anger better than this, they would. And practicing stating our own needs directly, clearly, firmly.

What’s often used as a common model for dealing with anger or conflict with another person or even within a group of people, or between two groups hostile to each other, is non-violent communication. Rick mentioned NVC last week because it ties into skillfully expressing needs, wants and desires. NVC is taught at SRMC. Founded by Marshal Rosenberg 35 years ago, NVC is now called compassionate communication, which is a more accurate name for it, but NVC bespeaks the power of NVC as a communication tool.

NL Basic steps

1. When I perceive [A] (taking ownership of my perception – no shame blame, no escalating the conflict, and what I perceive maybe a violation, a disrespect, a fear, a hurt, an unmet need.

2. I experience or I feel [B] – the subjective experience or feeling; have to be able to read your own signals (you may feel angry back) and you have to be able to name them. Frustrated is a big umbrella term for many variations of anger: irritated, annoyed, miffed, peeved, nettled, vexed, irked, cross, resentful, galled, rancorous, riled, wrathful, furious, enraged, outraged, pissed off, put out, in a snit, indignant, irate, fuming, seething, hot under the collar, foaming at the mouth, hopping mad, in a lather, incensed, livid, offended, infuriated.

Have to discern whether our perception is a legitimate response to an event seen clearly or is filtered through the impact of our own conditioning that leaves us vulnerable to perceiving a slight or an insult or a criticism or an injustice where perhaps there isn’t any. We are simply being triggered by our own conditioning. Still have to own this is my experience, this is my story about my experience.

3. What I need is [C] genius of NVC, identifying actions that will actually rectify the sense of injustice or calm the fear or soothe the hurt or meet the unmet need.. Not character change or attitude change but change in behavior. It is perfectly legitimate to ask someone to change their behavior so that they are acting wisely and not acting out. So that they are using skillful means, not unskillful means.

4. Therefore I request [D]. In the version of NVC I use with couples, the person speaking identifies three behaviors the other person could do that would help repair the situation, and three behaviors or actions they themselves are willing to do to rectify the situation.

Example: a) when I perceive that I have taken the trash out every weekend this month (and I have not perceived you taking out the trash) b) I begin to feel put upon and resentful, c) what I need is more cooperation between us, d) therefore I request that you take out the trash this weekend without me reminding you and I will take it out next weekend without you reminding me.

The respect and care that is probably the deeper need is implied in the behavior change request; it can even be spoken out loud, but this example simply illustrates that anger in the form of resentment was a signal something needs to change in our relationship to another. By mindfully responding to that signal wisely, we can create change for the better.

There is something tricky with NVC. We have to be able to manage our own feelings of anger and reactivity – lifelong mindfulness and compassion practices. As Marshal Rosenberg, founder of NVC says, It's never what people do that makes us angry; it's what we tell ourselves about what they did that makes us angry. And we have to be able to distinguish our feelings of anger from the other person's anger. Anger is a highly contagious emotion. We're hardwired to pick up the signals of someone else's anger or tension as readily as our own. That's the basis of – and the hazard of - empathy and understanding someone else's emotions even without words, faster than words. Part of the survival mechanism of the tribe. But we may be feeling someone else's anger and reacting to it as though it were our own.

So we have to know you are you and I am me and even if I feel angry, I can manage my own anger, even if you feel angry, I can distinguish my feelings from yours and your feelings from mine. Lifelong practice.

I also want to address dealing with the impact of anger when it's out of control. Not a separate stage of anger exactly, because anger doesn't always go that far. But practice has to get a lot deeper, a lot steadier, when we are dealing with reactions to violation, to fear, hurt, unmet need that can turn rageful, hateful, aggressive, violent, abusive, oppressive. We've all seen that happen, in ourselves or others. Every single human being is capable of violence (out of fear, out of anger, in response to the shame of being humiliated) so this question is not just for "them over there." We have all had our moments, and witnessed other people having their moments, that are terrifying and can be fatally destructive. People getting shot over a disputed parking place is not a joke.

Saw a bumper sticker Monday: God bless everyone. No exceptions. I was so struck by that because in the DJ group two weeks ago, someone was sharing their reactions to seeing Diane Sawyer interview Jaycee Dugard, the woman who had been kidnapped by Phillip and Nancy Garrido at age 11 and held captive by them for the next 18 years. Jaycee was repeatedly abused and gave birth to two daughters before she was discovered last year at age 29; her captors are now in prison for life. Janene sharing how much compassion she could feel for this woman's suffering, and how much admiration for her resilience. Of course.

And then, somewhat innocently, as a dharma teacher, I asked about compassion for the perpetrator. The room went dead silent. And not that I could do that so easily either. Keep my heart open in the face of such brutality and cruelty. But when we apply the teachings to put no one out of our heart, and try to stretch the bandwidth of our compassion and our capacity to see the true nature in anyone, it is possible to penetrate all the conditioning and see the untarnished Buddha nature obscured by the accumulated soot of greed, hatred, delusion.

As the Buddha could see in the teaching story about Angulimala. Angulimala began as a bright and obedient student, Ahimsaka, loyal to his teacher and to the teachings. Someone jealous of

the Ahimsaka spread a rumor that Ahimsaka was having an affair with the teacher's wife. Not true, but the teacher became convinced and set out to avenge himself (anger!) by telling Ahimsaka he would impart special knowledge to him if he brought back evidence that he had killed 1,000 people. (I don't know the origin of the name Ahimsaka, but ahimsa means non-violence, non-harming.)

According to the story, Ahimsaka was extremely reluctant to kill other people, but he wanted the special teachings the teacher was offering, and trusted his teacher, so he began his wayward mission of becoming the serial killer of the day, collecting fingers from his victims as the evidence his teacher wanted. At the time he had 999 fingers in a necklace around his neck, and became known as Angulimāla, "garland of fingers", the king put out a warrant for his capture. The Buddha heard that Angulimāla's mother had gone into the forest to warn Angulimāla of possible capture, and the Buddha went to find him first so he wouldn't have the karma of killing his own mother.

According to the story, Angulimāla was delighted when he saw the Buddha, not recognizing who he was, and began chasing his 1,000th victim. But a powerful force prevented Angulimāla ever coming close to the Buddha, so Angulimāla yelled, "Stop!" The Buddha turned to face Angulimāla, penetrating all that fierce anger and hatred with his own radiant compassion, saying: "I've already stopped. It is you who have not stopped. I have stopped because I have stopped killing all living beings and have established myself in universal love. But you, you have yet to do so. Angulimāla recognized the Buddha, and the power of the teachings, threw down his dagger, and asked to join the Buddha's followers as a monk.

The king and his men found Angulimāla in the monastery of the Buddha, saw that he had given up his evil ways, and decided to leave him alone. Angulimāla stayed in the monastery and, under the guidance of the Buddha, practiced until he achieved nibbana and died.

Other monks asked the Buddha how someone as evil as Angulimāla could achieve nibbana, and the Buddha replied that Angulimāla had previously done much evil because he lacked good counsel and lacked good friends in the dharma, but he had become steadfast and mindful in the practice of the dharma, his evil deeds had been overwhelmed with good, and therefore he had achieved enlightenment. "He who overwhelms with good the evil he has done lights up this world as does the moon freed from the clouds."

Well, there's the gold standard of holding our ground, holding the wise view that every human being is nobly born and having the compassion for the conditioning that derails their manifesting that in this lifetime. Even in such distressing situations, our own anger and outrage can be a catalyst to wake up and act to change the conditions in our society, all 10,000 causes upstream, that contribute to creating brutality and callousness in human beings that did not start out that way.

So now we want to explore how practice can help us recognize and use the signal of anger to catalyze change, to ask for change, to insist on change when something isn't working within ourselves, between us and another human being, in the world at large.

As Pema Chodron says, “Feelings like disappointment, embarrassment, irritation, resentment, anger, jealousy, and fear, instead of being bad news, are actually very clear moments that teach us where it is that we’re holding back. They teach us to perk up and lean in when we feel we’d rather collapse and back away. They’re like messengers that show us, with terrifying clarity, exactly where we’re stuck. This very moment is the perfect teacher, and, lucky for us, it’s with us wherever we are.”

- Pema Chodron

Exercise: groups of four; sharing a moment when you caught a signal or anger, or you witnessed someone else catch a signal of anger and could pause, and reflect, and wisely discern, and use the signal as a prelude to some needed change.

De-brief.

June 2011 e-newsletter: Anger: A Prelude to Courage. Access through website, easy and free download. Sign up for future.

Sit for a moment.