

Holding Anger

We must develop a measure of psychological insight along with our meditation practice

By [Jules Shuzen Harris](#)
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[Anger](#) hinders our liberation from suffering. It takes its toll on our spirit and our health. [Stress](#) levels are on the rise. The Harris Poll in 2002 recorded that tension levels in almost half of Americans had worsened over the preceding year. According to the [American Institute of Stress](#), 75 to 90 percent of doctors' visits are for stress-related ailments. Psychological distress such as anger, anxiety, and depression seems to be a good predictor of high blood pressure, heart attacks, and sudden death. But what is missing from this research is the "first cause," the damaged self—a belief that manifests as anger projected for the most part onto others. On one level, this projected anger is a defense against one's "bad self." On a deeper level, it represents our feelings of vulnerability.

Over 2,500 years ago the Buddha identified anger as one of the [three poisons](#) that hinder our progress toward liberation from suffering. In the *Anumana Sutta*, a teaching on self-observation, the venerable Mahamoggallana, one of the Buddha's closest disciples, counsels bhikkhus against angry thoughts that lead to disparaging others. The bhikkhus are instructed to refrain from unruly behavior such as hypocrisy, mercilessness, jealousy, and selfishness, to name a few examples. In the *Lekha Sutta* the Buddha asserts that there are three types of individuals in the world and three ways they manifest anger. First, he

refers to the individual who is like an inscription on a rock. His anger stays with him for a long time. It is not effaced by wind or water. Next, the Buddha compares an individual who is often angered, but whose anger does not stay with him for a long time, to an inscription in soil that is effaced by wind or water. Lastly, the Buddha describes a person who is like water. When this individual is spoken to roughly or harshly, he or she remains congenial, companionable, and courteous, just as an inscription in water disappears immediately.

After more than 30 years of working first as a therapist and later a practitioner of Zen, the poison that stands out the most to me is anger. And while I believe that meditation has some transformative power, as a former psychotherapist I believe that teachers and spiritual guides need to address the role that small mind plays with regard to anger. Meditation enables us to see the transparency of our anger, and this is a good start, but we can still remain blinded to the mechanics of our anger. The Buddhist teacher and psychologist John Welwood asserts that “most of us live caught up in prereflective identification most of the time.” In working with dharma students, teachers must address the deeper wounds from which anger has sprung. We must enable students to see the anger they project onto others as a defense against old story lines, such as “I’m damaged, I’m unlovable,” and so on.

Anger is “habit energy,” to use Thich Nhat Hanh’s term; karmic in its origin, it is deeply engrained and deeply rooted. As Welwood says, we imagine that our thoughts and feelings are an accurate portrayal of reality and therefore justified. If we are to be effective in transmuting our anger into *prajna* (wisdom), then we must develop an additional measure of psychological insight along with our meditation practice that focuses on the cyclical relationship between thoughts and our body.

I saw chronic episodes of anger manifest when I trained former criminal offenders in counseling techniques that they could use to redirect youth caught up in the criminal justice system. The anger the ex-offenders projected onto their clients was cloaked in their judgmental attitude toward them. They were hypercritical of behaviors they themselves once engaged in. This behavior points to an aspect of anger that we don’t usually think of. We typically attribute the source of our anger to someone or something outside of ourselves: “I am experiencing great displeasure because it is the ‘other’ who is at fault.” The ex-offenders didn’t see their shadow beliefs and resisted addressing them. Their anger

toward clients was a defense—it allowed them to distance themselves from their “bad selves.”

In order to work on anger, we need to employ an approach that incorporates psychosocial strategies in the service of spiritual development. This approach embraces the transpersonal, personal, and interpersonal. Mindfully held anger is a step in the right direction. This approach requires that we contain our anger—that we meditatively attend to our anger with an emphasis on neither suppressing it nor acting it out. Being present with our anger enables us to witness the process of it, which includes all three levels of awareness. On the personal level, we witness the felt sense of our anger, along with its cognitive and perceptual dimensions. On a social level, we witness the effect our shadow beliefs have on our interaction with others. On the transpersonal level, we witness the “I,” or who it is who is angry.

Another approach to dealing with anger on the psycho-social-spiritual level is mind-body bridging. This technique enables us to see the impact that thoughts have on us viscerally. The prime mover behind the impact thoughts have on the body are our requirements: how we should be, how other people should be, and how the world should be in order for us to feel acceptable. This approach begs the question of how to bring compassion to our anger. It is not easy to refrain from repressing or indulging our anger. Our challenge is to embrace it with mindfulness and genuine caring.

We must become intimate with anger to clear the way to our connectiveness, to our vulnerability and an aliveness to everything. In the end, our anger is transmuted to wisdom, which in turn gives rise to compassion.

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