

Thich Nhat Hanh

Transformation and Healing

Fourteenth Exercise - Observing Anger

When anger is present in him, he is aware, 'Anger is present in me.'

When anger is not present in him, he is aware, 'Anger is not present in me.'

When anger begins to arise, he is aware of it.

When already arisen anger is abandoned, he is aware of it.

When anger already abandoned will not arise again in the future, he is aware of it.

This exercise is to observe our anger in mindfulness. In Buddhism, we learn that a person is comprised of the Five Aggregates of form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. Anger belongs to the aggregate of mental formations, and the unpleasant feeling which goes along with the anger belongs to the aggregate of feelings. The mastery of our anger is an important step on the path of practice. Identifying the presence and the absence of anger in us brings many benefits. For our work of mindful observation to be wholehearted, we combine the work of observation with conscious breathing.

The first benefit of mindfully observing the presence and absence of anger is that we see that when anger is not present, we are much happier. Anger is like a flame blazing up and consuming our self-control, making us think, say, and do things that we will probably regret later. The actions of body, speech, and mind which we perform while we are angry take us a long way along the road to hell. We may have never seen the Avici hells, but we can see clearly that whenever someone is angry, he or she is abiding in one of the hot hells. Anger and hatred are the materials of which the Avici hells are made. A mind without anger-cool, fresh, and sane-is one of the eleven wholesome mental formations. The absence of anger is the basis of real happiness, the basis of love and compassion.

The second benefit of mindfully observing the presence and absence of anger is that by just identifying our anger, it loses some of its destructive nature. Only when we are angry and not observing our anger mindfully does our anger become destructive. When anger is born in us, we should follow our breathing closely while we identify and mindfully observe our anger. When we do that, mindfulness has already been born in us, and anger can no longer monopolize our consciousness. Awareness stands alongside the anger: "I know that I am angry." This awareness is a companion for the anger. Our mindful observation is not to suppress or drive out our anger, but just to look after it. This is a very important principle in meditation practice. Mindful observation is like a lamp which gives light. It is not a judge. It throws light on our anger, sponsors it, looks after it in an affectionate and caring way, like an older sister looking after and comforting her younger sibling.

When we are angry, our anger is our very self. To suppress or chase away our anger is to suppress or chase away ourself.

When we are joyful, we are joy.

When we are angry, we are anger.

When we love, we are love.

When we hate, we are hatred.

When anger is born, we can be aware that anger is an energy in us, and we can change that energy into another kind of energy. If we want to transform it, first we have to know how to accept it. For example, a garbage can filled with decomposing and smelly organic material can be transformed into compost and later into beautiful roses. At first, we may see the garbage and the flowers as separate and opposite, but when we look deeply, we see that the flowers already exist in the garbage, and the garbage already exists in the flowers. The beautiful rose contains the garbage in it; if we look carefully, we can see that. It only takes one week for a flower to become garbage. The smelly garbage can already contain beautiful flowers and fragrant herbs, such as coriander and basil. When a good organic gardener looks into the garbage can, she can see that, and so she does not feel sad or disgusted. Instead, she values the garbage and does not discriminate against it. It takes only a few months for garbage to transform into fragrant herbs and flowers. We also need the insight and non-dual vision of the organic gardener with regard to anger and despair. We need not be afraid of them or reject them. We know that anger is a kind of garbage, but that it is within our power to transform it. We need it in the way the organic gardener needs compost. If we know how to accept our anger, we already have some peace and joy. Gradually we can transform anger completely.

When anger arises, other mental formations, which are lying latent in the depths of our consciousness, are not arising. This deep consciousness is called *alaya* by the Vijñānavada school. Joy, sadness, love, and hate, for example, are present in *alaya* when we are angry, but they are lying beneath the surface without manifesting, like seeds (Sanskrit: *bija*) in the ground. If we let the anger express itself without giving it a sponsor, it can do a lot of damage inside and outside of us. When the mental formation mindfulness (Sanskrit: *smṛti*; Pali: *sati*) arises from *alaya*, it can become the spiritual friend of the mental formation anger. As we follow our breathing and sponsor our anger with mindfulness, the situation becomes less and less dangerous. Although the anger is still there, it gradually loses its strength and begins to transform into another kind of energy, like love or understanding.

Mindfulness is like a lamp illuminating ourselves. As soon as the lamp is brought into the room, the room changes. When the sun rises, the light of the sun only has to shine onto the plants for them to change, grow, and develop. The light of the sun appears not to be doing anything at all, but in truth it is doing a lot. Under the influence of the sun, the plants produce chlorophyll and become green. It is thanks to the growth of plants that the animal species have what they need to survive. If the sun keeps shining on the bud, the flower will open. When the light of the sun penetrates the flower bud, the photons transform it, and the flower opens. Our mindfulness has the same function as the light of the sun. If we shine the light of full awareness steadily on our state of mind, that state of mind will transform into something better. Thanks to the illuminating light of awareness, we can see the roots of our anger. The point of meditation is to look deeply into things in order to be able to see their nature. The nature of things is interdependent origination, the true source of everything that is. If we look into our anger, we can see its roots, such as misunderstanding (or ignorance), clumsiness (or lack of skill), the surrounding society, hidden resentment, habit (or our conditioning). These roots can be present both in ourselves and in the person who played the principal role in allowing the anger to arise. We observe mindfully in order to be able to see and to understand. Seeing and understanding are the elements of liberation which allow us to be free of the suffering which always accompanies anger. Seeing and understanding bring about love and compassion. They are the drops of balm of the bodhisattva's compassion which cool our hearts and mind. As we have already seen, our anger is a field of energy. Thanks to our mindful observation and insight into its roots, we can change this energy into the energy of love and compassion—a constructive and healing energy.

Usually when people are angry, they say and do things which cause damage to others and themselves. There are people who speak and act in ways which wound others. They believe that doing so will release the field of angry energy which is burning in their hearts. They shout and scream, beat things, and shoot poisoned arrows of speech at others. These methods of release are dangerous.

Sometimes people try to find ways to express their anger in a less dangerous way. They may go into their room, close the door behind them, and pound a pillow with all their might. Naturally if you beat a pillow until your energy is exhausted, your anger will subside, and you will probably experience a temporary feeling of relief-exhaustion is easier to bear than anger-but the roots of the anger remain untouched, and when the conditions are right, the same anger will arise again. Therefore, the method of mindful observation in order to see and to understand the roots of our anger is the only method that has lasting effectiveness.

As we have seen already, when anger arises, we first need to come back to our conscious breathing and sponsor our anger with mindfulness. We concentrate on our breathing in order to maintain mindfulness. We avoid listening to or looking at the person whom we regard as the cause of our anger. Usually when we are angry, we do not return to ourselves and take care of healing our anger. We want to think about the hateful aspects of the person who has made us angry-rudeness, dishonesty, cruelty, maliciousness, and so on. The more we think of them, listen to them, or look at them, the more our anger flares up. Their hatefulness may be real, imaginary, or exaggerated, but whatever it is that is making us angry, we are inclined to give our full attention to that. In fact, the root of our problem is the anger inside of us, and we have to come back to it and take care of it first of all. Like a fireman, we must put water on the blaze immediately and not waste time looking for the person who set the house on fire.

"Breathing in, I know that I am angry.

Breathing out, I know that I must take care of my anger."

So it is best not to listen to, look at, or think about the other person, or say or do anything as long as anger persists. If we put our mind into the work of observing and calming our anger, we will avoid creating damage we will probably regret later. We may like to go outside and practice walking meditation. The fresh air, green trees, and the plants will help us greatly. As we walk, we can recite this verse:

Breathing in, I know that anger is still here.

Breathing out, I know that anger is me.

And I know that mindfulness is me also.

Breathing in, I know that anger is an unpleasant feeling.

Breathing out, I know that this feeling has been born and will die.

Breathing in, I know that I can take care of this feeling.

Breathing out, I calm this feeling.

Mindfulness embraces the feeling as a mother holds her crying child in her arms and transmits all her affection and care. If a mother puts all her heart and mind into caring for her baby, the baby will feel the mother's gentleness and will calm down. In the same way, we can calm the functioning of our mind. In order to lessen the unpleasant feeling brought about by the anger, we give our whole heart and mind to the practice of walking meditation, combining our breath with our steps and giving full attention to the contact between the soles of our feet and the earth. After a while, our anger will calm down, and we become stronger. Then we can begin to observe the anger and its true nature. We know that we cannot eat potatoes without cooking them first. We fill our pot with water, put the lid on, and light the fire. The lid of the pot, which keeps the heat inside, is the power of concentration-not to speak, not to listen, not to do anything at all, but just

to concentrate our whole mind on our breathing. As soon as the pot is on the fire, the water begins to get warm. When we practice conscious breathing, although our anger is still there, it is accompanied by mindfulness, the fire under the potatoes. The anger-the potatoes-has started to transform. Half an hour later, the potatoes are cooked, and our anger is transformed. We can smile, and we know that we understand the roots of our anger, and we can face the person who precipitated it.

Our anger is rooted in our lack of understanding of ourselves and of the causes, deep-seated as well as immediate, which have brought about this unpleasant state of affairs. Anger is also rooted in desire, pride, agitation, and suspiciousness. Our method of dealing with events as they arise reflects our state of understanding as well as our state of confusion. The chief roots of our anger are in ourselves. Our environment and other people are only secondary roots.

We can put up with the damage brought about by an earthquake or a flood, but if the same damage has been caused by people, we might not show much patience, and anger and hatred may arise in us. But if we know that earthquakes and floods have causes, we should also be able to see that there are causes-deep-seated or immediate-of the harm done to us by people. We need to see and understand these causes also. We have to see hardships brought about by others as a sort of natural disaster. These people make our lives difficult because they are ignorant, prisoners of their desires or their hatreds. If we speak angrily to them and treat them as our enemy, then we are just doing what they are doing, and we are no different from them. In order to realize the state of no anger in our conscious and subconscious mind, we have to practice the meditations on love and compassion.