

Wisdom to Cool the Flames of Anger

A sermon by the Rev. Makenah Elizabeth Morriss

February 5, 2006

Anger is a very human response and experience. Anger is an emotional energy that arrives with a message. Each of us here this morning knows “anger” personally, interpersonally, and within our society and global community.

We know that anger can seem selfish, misguided, cruel, and dangerous. We also know that there are definitely times when anger is justified – when we are unfairly attacked or when we witness others being subjected to injustice or cruelty.

Anger as emotional energy used in healthful and helpful ways can help us strengthen our ability to respond with justice, compassion and the transforming power of love on behalf of ourselves and on behalf of others.

Thich Nhat Hanh, Buddhist monk, teacher, author and sage writes,
“Without communication, no real understanding can be possible. But be sure that you can communicate with yourself first.” (Hanh, *Anger*, p. 125)
To become skillful with the emotional energy of anger, we need to begin compassionately with ourselves.

Hmmm...you may be thinking. Does this mean we are supposed to try to reach some plane of meditative existence where we never experience anger? Is this just another “spiritual” way of trying to do away with anger?

Absolutely not. Although many of us were brought up by parents and teachers and religious leaders who may have indicated that most anger is wrong, modern psychology and enlightened spiritual understanding now teaches us that anger has a useful purpose when handled skillfully. Our goal is not to do away with anger but instead to develop new techniques and tools with which to more effectively and productively utilize the energy which anger offers.

I remember a theology professor I had in graduate school. Dr. Boggs was Presbyterian in his theological background and approach and in explaining the doctrine of “original sin” he used the temper tantrums of toddlers as an example of the validity of this concept. I and my liberal friends were appalled to put it mildly. And yet Dr. Boggs was very genuine in his belief.

What psychologists understand as healthy developmental stages of early childhood albeit with some challenging moments for parents, some others declare as prime examples of the waywardness of human beings.

Thank goodness for liberal perspectives, for utilizing a broader range of sciences and knowledge in understanding the emotions.

Karla McLaren, a teacher, therapist and author who has studied energy work, depth psychology, and the energetic effects of physical and emotional trauma, writes of anger in this way:

“Anger is the defining and primary emotion in the psyche; the honorable sentry of the soul (and the world). When your anger flows naturally you won’t even know it’s there – it will simply help you maintain your inner convictions and your healthy detachment from the dramas of others (and from the dramas you may sometimes create for yourself)...Anger’s basic energy is one of protection—for yourself certainly, but also for others when you channel it properly...”

She goes on, “When your anger is not allowed to flow naturally, you’ll have trouble setting and maintaining your boundaries, you’ll tend to dishonor or enmesh with others (because you’ll lack a healthy sense of self-definition), and your self-image will be imperiled by a tragic reliance on the capricious and often meaningless opinions of the world.” (McLaren, *Emotional Genius*, p. 194)

The first step in this wisdom process, this process of linking mind and heart as we deal with the energy of anger is to take care of ourselves.

Thich Nhat Hanh writes, “When you get angry, go back to yourself, and take very good care of your anger.” (Hanh, p. 24) He encourages us to treat our anger with the compassion a loving parent offers to a crying infant.

He invites us to use the tools of mindfulness – mindful breathing deeply and consciously—to help calm the rush of energy so that we can offer compassion and clarity to ourselves. He does NOT suggest that we shut down the feelings of anger, nor that we invite shame or guilt to appear because we have felt angry.

Instead he urges us to experience the energy of anger as a cry for help from deep inside.

Karla McLaren uses a somewhat different but related imagery. She writes:

“If I were to personify anger, I would describe it as a cross between a stalwart castle sentry and an ancient sage. Anger sets your boundaries by walking the perimeter of your soul and keeping an eye on you, the people around you and your environment. If your boundaries have been broken (through the deliberate actions or unconsciousness of others, or in any other way), anger comes forward to restore your sense of strength and separateness. The questions for anger are ‘What must be protected?’ and ‘What must be restored?’” (McLaren, p. 199)

What must be protected? And what must be restored?” these are important questions for us to use when we feel anger arise and arrive in our lives.

To use a very simple example from our animal friends, think back to a time when you watched the response of a cat, maybe your cat, to another cat that invaded what it considered to be its space. There probably was an arched back, fluffed out fur, spitting and general “this-is-MY-space-so-back-off” response. And often the invading cat may have backed off.

Anger’s energy affects us physically, emotionally and mentally. Both Thich Nhat Hanh and Karla McLaren urge us to handle this energy with mindfulness and clarity.

The Buddhist approach is to utilize mindful breathing and perhaps also mindful walking as we deal with the physiological energy effects of anger.

“Breathing in, I know I am breathing in. Breathing out, I know that I am breathing out. Breathing in, I calm my whole body, breathing out I calm my whole body.” (Hanh.p.179)

Sometimes depending on the situation mindful walking may be possible, but mindful breathing is always possible.

If mindful walking is possible, it too can be very helpful. With this kind of walking, you allow yourself to feel your conscious connection to the earth. You experience your sense of physical wholeness in a physical world. This is an excellent way to reinforce your sense of personal boundaries and thus personal safety.

Karla McLaren suggests a slightly different technique with some of the same results. We can use the energy jolt of anger to reinforce our sense of personal energy or aura boundaries. For those of us who find this image helpful, it would mean using the increase in energy to imagine one’s personal aura boundaries lighting up with a strong and protective color. You do not shoot the energy out into the world or toward someone else. You use it instead to affirm your self-hood, your clarity, and your inner strength.

Either technique is helpful as a first step when anger arises.

The second step is to mindfully and with clarity look within to what your mind, body, heart or soul feels has been threatened. You might to yourself something like, “I’m here for you, listening deeply now. Let’s see what just happened or got triggered.”

It may be that you misperceived something that was said and took it as a personal or professional attack. This would need to be checked out.

It may be that actions or words of another may have triggered old wounds or hurts and caused you to respond with the defense of anger.

It may be that what just occurred is a genuine and current or long-standing threat to your emotional physical, psychological, or professional well-being.

These are just a few possibilities. By slowing down, turning inward with compassion for your own feelings, your inner self will be able to help you understand why the anger feelings arose. This is not a process of judgment or even analysis at this point. This is instead a time of clear and empathic looking and listening to your inner self.

What happened—what was the sequence of events that triggered my anger? To what are my feelings connected that caused my sense of being attacked?

Anger is often linked with fear – although the fear may be deeply hidden. For example, when we are criticized at work by someone in a supervisory position, anger is not an uncommon response – because there is always a possibility that our job may be at stake. If the criticism is unjust and unwarranted and continues over a long period of time, we may decide that job was not worth it.

Coretta Scott King tried to work as a house maid during high school to make extra money. But the white woman for whom she worked was so difficult that she eventually quit that job. She used her anger to affirm her sense of self-worth by not putting herself in a degrading situation any longer.

Anger is also sometimes connected with sadness as in situations where we know deep down that our relationship or attachment to another needs to be let go of or to change in some way. Here anger is our unconscious way of strengthening our sense of self as we move forward in new ways. Adolescent anger is sometimes of this kind as teenagers are forming their identities in new ways and breaking away from old family patterns.

So when we are looking mindfully at our anger, we are asking to what other feelings this anger may be linked? Is the threat we are experiencing real or imagined? Is it linked way back to our personal history with some kind of threat made long ago by someone else? This is the step in which we are looking deeply to see where seeds of anger may lie.

Many of us grew up in family situations where anger was present, perhaps acted out physically or emotionally, but never openly acknowledged. We swore we would never do that to our loved ones or our children. And yet, we may at times find ourselves doing exactly the same thing, maybe not to the same degree, but certainly in very familiar ways.

Here we are dealing with seeds planted early in our life formation that lie dormant until watered by some trigger event. If we water our seeds of potential anger often, through our thoughts or actions, then they will burst open more quickly.

If instead we acknowledge that these seeds are in our unconscious, and that we really do not want to act them out, then our mindfulness can help us find alternative and more healthful responses. Here again, it is not a matter of making us feel ashamed or guilty about the seeds planted so long ago,

but instead looking for the positive seeds planted by others who modeled more productive, creative and compassionate responses in similar situations and choosing to use the energy images from these models instead.

The third step in this more mindful process of handling anger, is to decide what you want to do in response to the situation. Thich Nhat Hanh offers the suggestion that you set a time to talk with the one who caused you to feel anger, that you communicate to them that you are suffering from what happened, that you are working with it mindfully and that you want a time to talk with them later in the week.

When that meeting time arrives, a Buddhist approach would invite you to share your feelings and insights clearly and openly without placing any blame. You then ask the other person to share deeply as you listen to them. In this way it may be possible to find points of new understanding and perhaps some sense of healing.

Such an approach works very well if the other person involved is someone who is able to acknowledge that there are always at least two if not more perspectives to any experience.

Even if the other person is not able to listen or hear you as deeply as you might like, your sharing honestly without blame and offering them a space to be heard are still important in the process of affirming your own self-worth and integrity.

Karla McLaren likewise recommends using your sense of increased boundary energy and inner clarity to decide how to respond. Coming from a well-grounded space, where you are breathing deeply and affirming to yourself your self-worth will help you speak in ways that express your pain, your perspective, what you see as your part in the problem or situation and what you would like to suggest might happen to improve or heal or remedy the relationship or experience.

She writes, “instead of counterthrusting and increasing your opponent’s sense of danger (or ignoring the conflict and increasing his or her abusive tendencies), you can protect yourself skillfully while modeling proper anger behavior. When you’re centered and grounded, you won’t have to lash out or fold into yourself—because within your restored energetic boundaries, you’ll be able to protect yourself and your opponent while continuing to restore your boundaries throughout the exchange.

“You can also set verbal boundaries by questioning your opponent’s accusations or by bringing some self-effacing humor forward to defuse the situation. When your anger is honored and welcomed into anger-inducing situations, it will no longer be a mindless hooligan or an unsuitably softened weakling—instead it will take its rightful place as the honorable sentry of your soul and the soul of anyone fortunate enough to cross your path.” (McLaren, p. 201)

Thus three steps in productively handling anger are: (1) mindfully acknowledge your anger; (2) mindfully and compassionately listen to your anger; and (3) decide with grounded-ness and clarity how you want to respond. These are easy steps to articulate – they are not necessarily easy or pain-free to implement. And yet the more we practice them, the more skillful we will become.

There is a Taoist saying, “The glory is not in never falling but in rising every time you fall.”

This speaks directly to the honorable use of anger. The fact is that life being what it is our boundaries will feel threatened at times. Our self-esteem will feel destabilized, our most cherished beliefs may be attacked and our sense of right and wrong may seem disrupted.

And as Karla McLaren writes, “The task of the healthy person is not to hide from these diminishments, but to fall and rise again each time with honor, compassion and integrity. Healthy anger does not (and should not) stop you from falling; instead, it gives you the strength to rise again.” (McLaren, p. 202)

As we develop our skills in handling our personal anger, we will become more and more adept at utilizing these techniques in the wider arena of society – where we are called to address situations where others are being made vulnerable through injustice or cruelty. Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. and Coretta Scott King all offer us models for using the energy of anger in non-violent ways to confront the inequalities and injustices of life.

The energy of righteous anger when utilized with a clear mind and heart, and with a commitment to a more just world for all can be transformative.

In the words of our covenant, words that we say together each week, we promise to live together in peace, to seek truth and to help others.

Living together in peace does not preclude times when we experience feelings of anger in our personal or professional or community lives. The energy of anger happens.

And when it does, we pledge that we will seek truth by finding the courage to look mindfully and deeply within ourselves and within the situation in which this energy arose so that we may untie the knot of pain and confusion. We pledge to help others and to help ourselves, to offer compassion and empathy – so that the truth of the inherent worthiness of each individual may be encouraged to shine forth.

The gift of our individual consciousness, our unique perspective, our abilities to love, live, breathe and walk in mindful ways are the gifts we offer to each other and the generations yet to come.
So may it be.