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The Pathology of Anger

*Why, sir, do you get angry at someone who is angry with you?
What are you going to gain by it?
How is he going to lose by it?
Your hostile attitude disturbs your thinking.
Your angry behavior brings dishonor on yourself.
Your physical distress is an invitation to illness.
How can the fire in your house burn the neighbor's house
Without engulfing your own?¹*

Hinduism: Basayanna Vacana 248

Ashes fly back in the face of him who throws them.

African Wisdom Proverb: Yoruba

After graduate school there were five years when the number one item on my personal self-improvement agenda was to get over the problem of becoming angry so often. I won't go into the details of what I learned about why I was getting angry except to note the general pattern that I eventually recognized. I found that in each instance of becoming angry I'd been put in a position that was difficult for me. I was either called on to do something I was not well prepared to do or I had to spend time doing something unpleasant. [Mind you, up until that time, like all the time I was in graduate school, I had spent a lot of time doing difficult or unpleasant things. But immediately after graduate school, it really did get much worse for a time].

Now it is interesting that, as distressing as this problem was, I found that nothing I'd learned about psychology proved to be very helpful in figuring this out. So I was left with the challenge of simply having to observe the unfolding of events until this pattern became clear to me.²

What I eventually learned about the nature of anger, and the desirability of transcending it, was more informed by what I had learned about Buddhism than by what I'd been taught about psychology. The Buddha enjoined his disciples to "regard anger as stale urine mixed with poison." In contrast to that unequivocal directive, I continue to be surprised by how wrong-headed psychotherapists and Christian clerics can be about the nature of anger.

Counselor types are often heard suggesting that anger is "natural" and can even be "healthy" if it is handled appropriately. "Love the sinner but *hate* the sin" is a fairly common sentiment among earnest Christians. Even more glaring are sentiments like, "My anger is righteous and my battle is in the service of the Lord." It is no

¹ I've taken some liberties in expanding this passage that I found in Timothy Freke's Illustrated Book of Sacred Scriptures in order to incorporate my medical-psychological understanding of the pathology of anger.

² This is, in fact, how I learned much of what has proved useful to me as a psychologist. Until I developed the solutions I've come to rely on for identifying and solving psychological problems, the formulaic routines I learned in school always seemed to prepare me for nothing more than "playing the part" of being a psychologist – for saying the sorts of things that a psychologist would say in thirty second sound bites. There wasn't much wisdom in it, in my estimation, and it wasn't even particularly effective as far as I could tell. That's why I don't have much respect for most of the people I know who do this work.

wonder that throughout history religious fanatics have carried out “holy wars” and that, in modern times, devoted Christians have occasionally bombed abortion clinics frequented and staffed by other Christians. Islamic terrorism isn’t that far removed from that and it all stems, I think, from what I regard as the *foolish aggrandizement of anger*.

If we take it back to fundamentals, my principle faith statement is that we are all put on this earth to learn to grow in wisdom, love and power. Narrowing down on the love part of that, it means learning to become more compassionate, but not merely to dutifully act more compassionately by being of service to some individuals. Rather, I think we should be cultivating the capacity to spontaneously take delight in promoting the welfare of others. Those who are becoming more adept at wisdom, love and power would be finding greater and greater pleasure from promoting the welfare of increasingly wider and wider circles of our fellow human beings, as well as of the other species with which we share the earth. I believe this lofty goal is fundamentally incompatible with indulgence in anger for any reason. I’m not saying that I don’t get angry from time to time, mind you, just that after the fact, I will generally acknowledge my foolishness whenever I do so.

Psychology has been doing an increasingly sophisticated job at measuring intelligence since the development of the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Test just over one hundred years ago. With the modern versions of intelligence tests we can pin down a person’s IQ with a high degree of reliability and precisely profile intellectual aptitude across several different pervasive cognitive factors such as abstract verbal reasoning, visual perceptual analysis, etc. In contrast to all of that psychometric sophistication, psychology has done virtually nothing towards developing tests to assess how loving or compassionate a person is.

It seems very strange to me that when I developed an assessment framework for determining how much talent or aptitude a person has for romantic intimacy,³ I did something that my profession had evidently not bothered to develop or utilize as a routine methodology. In a society with a baseline divorce rate of fifty percent, how can this be? My profession, and our society as a whole, has no common understanding of what it takes to succeed at marriage, so how can we hope to substantially lower divorce rates? How can we hope to reliably help people flourish in marriage?⁴

If we set out to develop a scale for measuring the capacity to be loving and compassionate, I would suggest that a good starting point would be to propose that anger is antithetical to love. Consequently, the most loving people would be those that rarely get angry over anything or at anyone. In fact, I want to suggest that anger is an unequivocal sign of relative psychological incompetence. It represents a lack of skill; certainly a limitation of compassion and generally a failure of wisdom.

Consider two maintenance mechanics who independently encounter identical problems with two identical pieces of machinery. They both set out to diagnose and correct the malfunctions. The first proceeds from one diagnostic test to another, considering the implications of his results at each step in the process. However complicated or prolonged the endeavor, he continues until he has identified the cause of the malfunction, replaced the faulty component and reassembled the device.

The second mechanic encounters an impasse. He either cannot make sense out of the findings of his diagnostic tests or he is incapable of performing the necessary procedures. In frustration he throws down his tools and, overcome with anger, kicks the offending apparatus and demonstrates his displeasure with the situation to

³ See Appendix II for the Inventory of Intimacy Skills.

⁴ I am told that Dr. Neil Clark Warren, founder of eHarmony.com (online dating service) specifically developed his assessment inventory with a goal of measuring factors that lead to compatible relationships. There has for several decades been sufficient theory and instrumentation for addressing the compatibility of various personality types. I am not aware of any system that, like mine, approaches the assessment of intimacy potential from a skills perspective. Certainly, nothing of the sort has been widely adopted in clinical practice. I am not familiar with Warren’s system.

everyone within shouting distance.⁵ Clearly, the first mechanic is competent to the task at hand while the second is not. I would suggest, however, that the second mechanic is also psychologically incompetent. I believe this holds in some measure for anyone getting angry over anything.

Anger generally arises from the inability to accept reality as it is in the present moment. Regardless of one's desire that circumstances should be other than they are, regardless of one's moral conviction that people should behave other than as they do, reality is what it is. One can attempt corrective action. One might feel compelled on moral grounds to attempt corrective action. The corrective action may succeed or not. Still, nowhere is anger required and always, the individual who can do what he feels must be done without anger will be obviously more competent with that situation than the person who becomes angry. There is never a moral obligation to become angry. Accepting the present moment in the present moment is not just a mark of maturity, it is fundamental to reality testing. It is sanity. Railing, "This must not be!" therefore, is a sort of delusion.

Anger is often touted as some sort of moral obligation in our culture or as a necessary consequence of pride, piety or patriotism. It has often been justified as a legitimate avenue to success in war, athletics, business or even the arts. Thellen told me once of walking down the hall with a manager at Allison's who said, "Now I have to go to a meeting and act mad." Evidently, he saw the process of engaging others by theatrically pounding on the table and raising his voice as a normal part of a day's work. We've all known coaches, bosses teachers or music directors for whom getting angry or being sarcastic or demeaning was business as usual. As peculiar as it seems to me, people that behave this way are often held in high esteem.

People have often insisted that some circumstances require them to get angry but I've never been convinced. Certainly, some circumstances require assertiveness but I have found in my own hard-won struggles to achieve some degree of effectiveness with assertiveness that even there, anger directly reflects ineptitude. If you can competently exercise assertiveness there should be no need for anger. In child discipline, for example, an angry parent is one who has lost control, not one who is exercising it effectively.

Since the US has gone to war again in Iraq I've had occasions to talk to many war veterans. As someone who has never experienced mortal combat, I obviously have to maintain an appropriate measure of humility in talking about that situation. Still, I think I have been able to make my point by suggesting that while the link between fear and anger is certainly understandable in such situations, there is precedent for combat training that takes warriors beyond that level of competence. My impression of the twelfth degree black belt martial arts masters is that these people prepare for combat not by getting hyped up like high school football players on a Friday night, but by clearing the mind and maximizing awareness of the present moment. It is just that proficiency at that level obviously requires extensive training.

"The objectives of military training are limited and very simple, namely, to make men courageous, cool-headed and cooperatively efficient in the business of killing other men, with whom, personally they have no quarrel . . ."

Aldous Huxley – *The Perennial Philosophy*, p. 43.⁶

⁵ Ask me, if you are interested, for a much more colorful true life illustration of an incompetent mechanic.

⁶ As an aside, note how Huxley contrasted the training necessary to produce what he referred to as saints:

The objectives of spiritual training are much less narrowly specialized. Here the aim is primarily to bring human beings to a state in which, because there are no longer any God-eclipsing obstacles between themselves and Reality, they are able to be continuously aware of the divine Ground of their own being and that of all others. Secondly, as a means to this end, (they strive) to meet even the most trivial circumstances of daily living without malice, greed, self-assertion or voluntary ignorance, but consistently with love and understanding. Because its objectives are not limited, because, for the lover of God, every moment is a moment of crisis, spiritual training is incomparably more difficult and searching than military training. There are many good soldiers, few saints.

I think it is very interesting that psychiatry has specified dozens of diagnoses for various anxiety disorders and depressive conditions. We've also got boatloads of medications specifically marketed for treating anxiety and depressive disorders. In contrast there is precisely one diagnosis for addressing anger as a pathology and that only applies to a persistent pattern of acute episodes of rage, (i.e., intermittent explosive disorder). There is nothing to address chronic hostility, cynicism or negativity as pathological instances of anger and there is no pharmaceutical specifically targeted for anger as opposed to depression. I think that this reflects the fact that our culture fails to recognize anger as a pathology. Anger is commonly accepted a case of "the ends justifies the meanness."

Here is a principle that I have come to embrace as an axiomatic truth:

*Anger is a pathology, born of ignorance,
with inevitably destructive consequences.*

Being angry ought to be very much like having a viral infection that results in a fever of 104 degrees. If you've got a fever, you know you're sick and you don't go around justifying your right to have a fever. You recognize that you are suffering from an illness and you do whatever you can to recover as quickly as possible.

1) Let's be clear about the simple things. Anger is an emotional state which inevitably gives rise to toxic physiological conditions in the body. You need to look no further than the elevated levels of stress hormones such as cortisol and adrenalin to see the biological cost of anger. On a chronic basis elevated stress hormones do enormous damage to the cardiovascular system. On a short-term basis they thoroughly disrupt the operation of the immune system. I've seen research that shows that merely remembering being angry about something from the past for five minutes leads to depressed immune system functioning for at least six hours due to the mechanism of elevated cortisol levels. The physiological cost of anger under the rubric of the "fight or flight response" has been well documented for over forty years.

2) Secondly, anger is a state of mind that is wholly incompatible with rational deliberation, with maintaining any objective perspective on ongoing events or with creative problem-solving. To the degree that someone is angry, he no longer cares principally about truth or justice. He is preoccupied with winning and concerns himself only with what kind of ammunition he has got to work with and what sort of defenses he can exercise for what his opponent might be doing. Consequently, anger in the extreme inevitably makes us grossly irrational. It's like it costs us twenty IQ points, and most of us don't have twenty IQ points to spare.

When a judge sentences a drunk driver to take alcohol and drug education classes it isn't because the Court believes the guy is going to take the class, learn how to drive drunk safely and get a drunk driver's endorsement on his driver's license. You can't drive drunk safely, and that's that. And you can't be rational if you get very angry. There is another parallel with intoxication. When you get angry, one of the first things that goes is the accuracy of your judgment about just how angry you have become.

3) A third distinct feature of anger is that it is the most highly contagious pathological condition that humans are ever subjected to. One can readily become completely afflicted with both the physiological and cognitive impairments associated with anger merely by talking with an angry person on a cell phone. By comparison, that makes biological contagions look pretty manageable.

4) Finally, anger is far more subjectively unpleasant than the other major categories of bad moods, i.e., depression (sadness) and anxiety (insecurity or worry). My evidence for this is that people will voluntarily watch movies that they know at the outset will make them sad. The Titanic was a love story that ended in tragedy. The boat sinks. The lover (and almost everybody else) dies. Have a good cry. Maybe see the movie again. You paid for the privilege to appreciate the poignancy of the human condition.

Similarly, kids go down to King's Island to ride the screaming neemies. By any biological marker (e.g., heart rate, blood pressure, etc.) they are frightened by the experience. They get off and wait in line to do it again and, as with the sad movie, they paid for the privilege knowing the outcome.

In contrast to those relatively benign "bad moods," I've never thought of a single instance in which people will knowingly routinely volunteer to become enraged. You can't make any money in the entertainment business pissing off the paying customer.

I often tell patients that I think it would have been a marvelous adaptation if human beings had evolved the characteristic that whenever one of us got angry, we would erupt in an episode of uncontrollable, profuse, farting. If that were the case, then everyone else would know to avoid us while we are angry and we might be inclined to be a little more embarrassed about having become angry.

As a spiritual aspiration, the New Testament gives us the directive that one ought to love one's neighbor as oneself. I say, forget that. That is for advanced practitioners who are well along their way on the path of spiritual ascendancy! For most of us mere mortals schlepping along with nothing more in the way of a spiritual practice than a hodgepodge of fleeting good intentions, I would suggest that it is more than enough that we should aspire to refrain from deliberately inflicting pain and suffering on the people we already avowedly love. At a minimum, that means zero tolerance on speaking or acting out any anger or frustration towards them. If everyone were merely competent at that, there would be a very small market for marriage counseling.

When frustrations arise, then certainly there is a need for conflict resolution. But conflict resolution should never take precedence over anger-control. I say, get over being angry, and then address what needs to be addressed. Historically there are isolated instances in the sphere of international relations when the necessity of resolving conflicts was so vitally important and desperately urgent as to justify the inevitable casualties of war. But there is no room for casualties in a marriage or other personal relationships. At least in these contexts it certainly makes no sense to "destroy the village to save the village."

I often tell couples, "Worst case scenario, if you cannot resolve or learn to live with your conflicts, then you should quietly walk off to divorce court with your dignity intact, preserving as much compassion as possible for your former lover. Nothing warrants hostility and intentionally hurtful arguments along the way. Nothing warrants arriving at divorce court battered or embittered."⁷

In doing child discipline, then, you should be ever ready to punish, but strive to do so calmly, never displaying anger. It is not necessary that you ever show mercy, if you never show contempt in dispensing justice. In fact, in the interest of consistency, it is good to not compromise the standards of behavior you have decided on for your children, but that doesn't preclude being entirely sympathetic about the necessity of doing discipline when the child crosses the line.

So where does anger come from? Anger is best understood sympathetically as a form of unhappiness; a manner in which suffering occurs.

Symptoms of Psychological Distress

People generally do not seek psychotherapy because they aspire to personal growth, relationship enrichment or personality change. They seek help in order to get over their unhappiness, distress and stress-related symptoms.

⁷ It has occurred to me that the Catholic Church could better serve its followers in many cases by making a sacrament of divorce rather than maintaining the provision for annulment as currently practiced. If people could be called to approach an inevitable divorce in a prayerful manner then many things would go much better.

People who are not attentive to their own emotional reactions are apt to experience any of a number of fairly disruptive problems when their lives get disordered such as chronic relationship problems, compulsive behavior problems like addictions, or somatic complaints. People who maintain more insight into their emotional experiences, however, generally recognize psychological distress as a combination of one or more of three "**bad moods**." It is an achievement of some note when people can use their own bad moods to discover problems in how they are living their lives and move on to develop better approaches. The primary bad moods are:

- 1) **Depression** (from transient and trivial disappointment to acute sadness, grief, morbid regret or chronic despair);
- 2) **Anxiety** (e.g., worry, tension, agitation, feelings of inadequacy, insecurity, jealousy, self-consciousness, phobias, anxiety attacks or obsessive-compulsive problems); and
- 3) **Anger** (e.g., irritation, annoyance, impatience, resentment, bitterness, disdain, cynicism, judgmental attitudes, defensiveness, contempt or rage).

Whatever form it takes, unhappiness serves much the same purpose as physical pain:

- 1) It draws our attention to the fact that a problem has developed,
- 2) It gives us clues as to the nature of the underlying problem, and
- 3) By getting gradually worse and worse, it eventually provides motivation for attempting to correct the problem once the problem has been identified.

The Dynamics of Bad Moods

I would say that one of my most significant professional insights was to recognize that there is a hierarchy of the major categories of bad moods. Of the three categories, only disappointment is, in principle, inevitable. Disappointment, the minor transient version of depression, can arise anytime there is a discrepancy between a positive expectation and a relatively negative outcome. Disappointments can be trivial and fleeting, or profound and enduring such as in grief or bereavement. The good thing about disappointments, relative to the anxiety-based moods and anger-based moods, is that they occur only in response to immediate provocation. Consequently, there is a one-to-one correspondence between the *bad news* and the *bad mood*. One disappointing event gets you one instance of a disappointed mood.

The anxiety-based moods like fear, worry or feelings of inadequacy are much more expensive in terms of your health and happiness. Anxiety generally amounts to anticipated disappointment. It usually involves being unhappy about the possibility of a future *potentially* disappointing event. There is a little research that suggests most people worry about ten things for every one that actually comes to fruition. In terms of squandering your happiness, that is like buying something and having to pay a nine hundred percent *needless suffering surcharge*. Consequently, it is far better to maintain an optimistic outlook and remain happy until such time as a disappointing event actually occurs. That saves a lot of senseless, self-inflicted suffering.

Of course, included in what we often refer to as "worrying" are things like simply realizing that you've got an assignment that is coming due. If you simply respond to the realization by planning when you will complete the work and carrying it out as planned, then there is no real worrying involved. Some of the real worrying comes in only if one gets caught in the spiral of procrastination where the realization that the deadline is approaching is sufficient to cause suffering before it is sufficient to motivate completing the assignment.

As expensive as anxiety can be in terms of causing unhappiness, anger is far worse for reasons I've already addressed: 1) it is a physiologically toxic state, 2) it tends to significantly compromise your rationality, 3) it is highly contagious and 4) it is subjectively more unpleasant than the other bad moods. Consequently, if you know you are suffering from such an affliction, if you are aware of the cost to your physiology and rationality, if

you are at all concerned about the possibility of infecting those around you, then the only reasonable thing to do when you are angry is to refrain from discussing the matter and carefully quarantine yourself until you feel better, can think straight and are no longer infectious.

There is another unique aspect of anger, and this is the issue of how anger arises. Anger is never, I believe, a direct response to a situation or event. To become frightened in response to an unexpected loud noise, is the result of a hard-wired neurological reflex. For fright to arise from such a sensory assault is the exception to the rule that anxiety usually amounts to anticipated disappointment. The fright reflex is built into the nervous system and newborn babies will reliably demonstrate that effect. To become disappointed when bad things happen or when expected good things fail to occur, is a direct response to an immediately developing situation. However, with anger the situation is different, I think, although it often takes some careful introspection to recognize the difference.

I'm convinced, and I have convinced an awful lot of patients who used to have anger-control problems, that anger does not arise directly in response to provocative events. Rather, anger only arises through our intermediate experiences of anxiety or disappointment. When we have been subjected to more disappointments or perceived (real or imagined) threats than we can handle, then we effectively get angry about the suffering that arose from the anxiety or disappointment we felt. We are not driven directly to anger by the disappointing event or perceived threat. We are driven to disappointment by the disappointing event or to anxiety by the perceived threat. In each case, the anger is secondary. That is the crux of my insight about the hierarchy of bad moods.

*Fear is the path to the dark side. Fear leads to anger.
Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering.*

Yoda

For example, if someone sneaks up behind you and playfully startles you, you might well respond by being momentarily afraid and then laughing about it. If someone seriously frightens you, however, you are likely to let that emotional response overflow the "anxiety bucket" and turn into anger. The person did not make you angry. He frightened you and you allowed your fear to make you angry.

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Actually, for fright to arise from a sensory assault, such as a loud noise or even a nearly-missed automobile collision, this is the exception to the rule that anxiety usually amounts to anticipated disappointment. We worry that some event may occur which, if it actually did occur, would result in our being disappointed that it occurred. This too can drive us to anger.

Similarly, with trivial disappointments we can generally accept the disappointment and let it go at that. But with grave disappointments we will often become preoccupied with anxiety about the possibility of further disappointments in the future or we may become angry over the disappointment. For example, we might become intent on finding someone to blame or even punish for our disappointment. In doing so, of course, we have gone from disappointment to anger and in doing that we have compounded our unhappiness and potentially that of others.

In the context of disappointments or perceived threats arising within a relationship it makes an enormous difference whether one is able to merely react with disappointment or anxiety versus anger. Consider the

situation where you are feeling frightened because of how your companion is driving. If you are able to address this while remaining congruently anxious, you are reasonably likely to get a sympathetic response.

“Honey, when you drive this fast I can’t relax. It scares me.”

“Oh, I’m sorry dear. I can slow down.”

On the other hand, if you allow your fear to turn into anger, your attempt to address your fear is likely to come out as a critical or hostile accusation, which in turn, will likely inspire angry defensiveness.

“You’re driving too fast! Slow down. Are you trying to get us killed?”

“There’s nothing the matter with my driving! What’s your problem?”

It is the same with disappointment. If you can address your disappointment from a congruently sad or disappointed mood, you may well get a sympathetic response. But if you allow your disappointment to fester and turn into anger, it is quite likely to come out as hostile accusations which may well, provoke a defensive response rather than to elicit sympathy, consolation or reconciliation.

How significant a disappointment one can accept graciously is a mark of relative maturity. It is the same with our anxieties or ultimately, about how sanguine one can be about the existential conditions of life; about the fact that there is no absolute security, that we all will at least occasionally suffer in life, and that eventually we will all die, along with everyone we have ever loved, soon to be forever unknown to future generations. It requires some real maturity to be OK with that sort of thing.

Finally, there is one further point about anger. So far we have been talking about bad *moods*. With each of the categories of bad moods we can experience a little sadness, worry or irritation in turn without that becoming evident to those around us. The bad mood is a private experience unless we choose to talk about it. You can be nervous about a job interview but if you are well prepared for the interview, you won’t necessarily appear to be nervous.

Whenever any one of these bad moods becomes intense, however, it no longer remains a private experience. At high levels of emotional intensity we will inevitably look and sound depressed, we will look and sound anxious, or we will look and sound angry. In particular, when we get very angry, the temptation is to take out our anger on something or someone. Chronically angry people often go through the pointlessly destructive motions of punishing inanimate objects. We don’t see people “rending their clothing” much anymore like they did in the Old Testament but I’ve known lots of guys who have frequently smashed TV remote controls and punched holes in walls.

Stages of Anger Dissipation

Before considering the process through which one can learn to transcend anger. Let’s look briefly at the natural course through which anger dissipates. What follows is an idealized version of the stages that a theoretically maximum onslaught of anger might work itself out.

1) **Shock/numbness.** If the intensity of the reaction is too great it will not take form in any coherent response at all. The person will be dazed. This is very rare and is generally seen only after traumatic violent deaths or catastrophes.

2) **Helpless rage.** At a somewhat less intense level of reaction, or after the initial shock has passed, the individual might become overcome with rage. But still, there is no coherence to the reaction or any organized goal for its expression. Instead, perhaps he breaks nearby objects or screams at people that have nothing to do

with the original provocation (perceived threat or disappointment).

3) **Empowered destructive rage – Revenge. “Gonna hurt that SOB.”** At a lower level of intensity, the rage reaction can be contained well enough to be directed towards the person perceived to be the source of the disappointment or threat. At this level, however, good judgment does not prevail and the anger is vented in a destructive and often counter-productive manner.

4) **Empowered constructive rage - “I’m going to do something about this situation (e.g., Mothers Against Drunk Drivers).** Eventually, the anger usually dissipates to the point that one’s intellect is no longer significantly compromised and the situation can be considered reasonably rationally. At this point most people will find themselves possessed of sufficient wisdom to act in accordance with the “change the things that can be changed” portion of the Serenity Prayer.

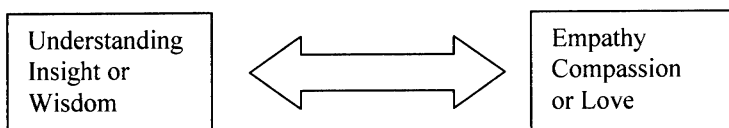
5) **The anger is dissipated - Apathy/neutrality.** By the time the anger has completely dissipated, it no longer is a motivational force for any action and one’s life is no longer directed by anger. Just recall things that made you angry from the past. Perhaps you can remember what you were angry about but the matter no longer has power over you. I often talk with couples who can’t remember what they had a big argument about less than one week ago. When anger is no longer present one is able to allow motives other than anger to direct one’s life. Many spiritual training practices focus on cultivating the capacity to be consistently motivated by positive emotional states (e.g., love, joy or contentment) rather than by negative emotional states (e.g., sorrow, remorse, anxiety, guilt, anger or contempt).

I’ve presented these stages of anger dissipation as a theoretical model covering a wide range of emotional intensity. In reality, few of us are ever so overcome with anger as to find ourselves in shock or helpless rage. Also, in reality, persons with more emotional control can respond less maladaptively to higher levels of disappointment and perceived threat without turning it into anger in the first place or at least without having their rationality significantly compromised by moderate levels of anger.

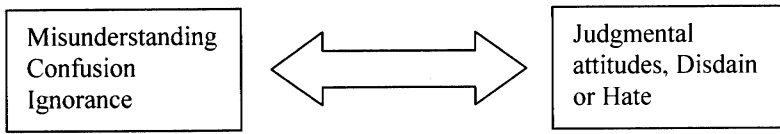
The young people I’ve known who have responded to a romantic breakup by vandalizing their former partners’ automobiles are obviously not from the high end of the maturity spectrum. Those who can deal with truly tragic events with grace, dignity and effectiveness we sometimes call “heroes.” Most of us fall somewhere in between. It is a very useful thing, I think, to have a clear vision of how one would like to be able to respond to disappointments and threats. I have personally found that eliminating the anger option as an acceptable response is a very high ideal to shoot for and that doing so provides a lot of opportunities for personal growth.

Beyond Anger to Wisdom and Compassion

There is a dialectic between insight into or understanding of a situation (wisdom) and empathy or compassion towards the people involved (love). The more comprehensive one’s understanding of the situation, the easier it is to feel compassionate towards those involved. The more compassion you have towards another, the more interested in and receptive you are likely to be to developing a more comprehensive understanding of his situation.



On the other hand, a lack of understanding or insight into a person’s situation fosters judgmental, critical attitudes and contempt towards the other person.



A flippant judgment like, “He is just a jerk.” does not reflect a comprehensive understanding of the motives and circumstances that give rise to “jerk-like” behavior. We are generally only inclined to take such a dismissive attitude towards others if we have little emotional connection with them. If we deeply care about someone we might tolerate quite a bit of his distress-induced irritability and still remain compassionately concerned with understanding what is wrong, what personal suffering has given rise to his, perhaps uncharacteristically, inconsiderate behavior.

In judging another for his behavior it is easy enough to imagine, “If I were him, I’d just do such and such instead of this and that like he does.” If your understanding of the situation is sufficiently complete, however, it will be evident that *If you were him*, you would do *exactly* what he does in the same situation because, for better or worse, you would be working with the same motivations, dispositions and concerns. Understanding this provides a rational basis for compassion and shows the folly of judgmental contempt.

The Place of Free Will

Much of what we do is habit. Much of what does or does not even occur to us does or does not do so because of long-standing habitual patterns of thinking. I think of character as a combination of innate disposition and habit. The transcendence of anger, or the attainment of having become a notably kind and loving individual, is the outcome of a long-term project carried out in innumerable individual choices.

*The Mills of the gods grind slowly,
yet they grind exceedingly fine.*

Proverb

Free will is most evident in our inconsequential decisions. About the big decisions involving strong feelings, there is relatively little room for the exercise of free will. In our big decisions, for free will to be evident, we must be ambivalent or conflicted. Depending on the character one has carefully cultivated (or casually accumulated) one might be compelled to behave honorably or be incapable of doing so in any given situation. This is why people who are praised for heroic behavior in crisis situations often react as if they had done nothing special. They often say that they simply did what had to be done. We set our direction in life when we choose how to respond to a situation not simply based on our immediate emotional reaction but with a consideration of the kind of emotional reaction we would like to see ourselves having in such situations.

Transcending Anger

So, how does one learn to transcend anger? How does one learn not to be moved by feelings of anger? How can one learn to avoid even generating feelings of contempt, disdain or hostility? Long after I had formulated an anger-control protocol for patients, I happened to be working with a fellow on other issues and he mentioned in passing that he used to have a serious anger problem. I’m always interested in how people solve their problems so I asked him how he did it. I was delighted to find that he did it without any professional counseling. This was getting really interesting; an apparently successful do-it-yourself project.

What he said he’d done was very simple. He said he’d told himself, “Regardless of what happens . . . REGARDLESS of what happens, don’t react.” That was it. Don’t react. Do not express the anger. That happens to be the first step in my anger-control protocol. I tell people, they must learn to not express anger for

any reason. There are some ancillary techniques that might be useful, e.g., take a deep breath, take a walk, learn to manipulate chi, develop some compassionate insight into your adversary, etc., but it all starts with disabusing yourself of the notion that some anger is justified and applying whatever self-control you can muster to inhibiting the voluntary expression of anger.

Naturally, this will work for small things before it works for big things, and none of this keeps one from feeling angry. That comes later. This merely amounts to refraining from continuing to practice acting angry. I'm not in favor of the "blow off steam" approach. I don't get paid enough to set myself up for listening to that sort of self-indulgent display and anger is, as I've said, highly contagious. I don't want to get infected. Besides, I think that practicing expressing the anger, perhaps since the age of three, is how people get so good at doing it in the first place and doing it is not a good thing.

It is true that if a pathologically angry guy resolves to refrain from swearing and all other expressions of anger or frustration, such as sarcasm and disdainfully critical comments, he is certainly going to begin to experience some accumulating pressure to blow off steam. Assuming that no one is at risk for violence over this, then that's fine, because it takes us right into the crucial second part of the protocol. That is the piece that I've never seen addressed in any published anger-control treatment program.

When he finds himself feeling angry, irritated, critical or merely impatient, he needs to figure out whether this specific instance of anger had its origins in an anxiety-based response to a perceived threat or to feelings of disappointment from disappointing circumstances. Recall that I have suggested that anger never comes as a direct response to a situation or event. A very helpful clue about whether the anger came from a perceived threat or from a disappointment is that threats point to the future. Disappointments exist in the present. If the stressful event in question has not yet actually occurred, it represents an anxiety-producing threat, not a disappointment. If the stressful event has already taken place then the origins of the resulting anger were probably disappointment.

Once he can identify the intermediate emotional response that preceded the anger (i.e., feelings of either anxiety or disappointment), then he needs to talk to those feelings and about the circumstances under which they arose. The key is that he has to do this in an emotionally congruent fashion. For example, he has to be grounded in merely being disappointed. He must not try to talk about the disappointment while he is still preoccupied with feeling angry. It is the same with talking about a worry or threat that may have given rise to feelings of anxiety or vulnerability. He must not attempt to discuss the precipitating perceived threat while he is still angry.

If he can talk about his anxiety without being contaminated with anger, then the other person is less likely to get defensive and may well be able to offer some reassurance. If he can talk about his disappointment without being contaminated with anger then the other person may have some consolation to offer. However, if he tries to talk about either anxiety or disappointment while he is still angry then he will likely introduce hostile accusations into the discussion and his hostility will almost certainly infect whomever he is talking to with the result that the other person may become defensive and hostile as well.

I've got a number of ways to help people learn to contain and transcend anger but long-term results essentially boil down to helping them learn to recognize and address the less maladaptive feelings of disappointment and anxiety before they lead to anger.