

Practicing With Anger

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When you hear yourself say that you have an anger problem, you are probably not really talking about the anger so much as what you do when you're angry. Anger is an emotion like any other, neither good nor bad. When you don't see it coming or you haven't cultivated a relationship to anger, you find yourself behaving from it and often hurting yourself and others. To make it worse you might be embarrassed that you were reactive and acted out of anger and so pride takes over and refuses to let you apologize or repair the damage you have done.

To begin to practice with anger it's helpful to start with an understanding of what goes on before you feel angry. Of course the causes and conditions that give rise to anger are many and complex, but we can start with three of the most obvious.

First there is a primitive anger that arises in the face of a real threat. You are likely familiar with the term "freeze, flight, or fight response". When faced with a real threat the reptile-like part of your brain chooses from one of these three responses in an attempt to ensure your survival. The fight response includes a rush of adrenaline, a narrowing of focus, and a physical contraction that pushes blood to your fists. If you often misperceive threats and find yourself in "the freeze, flight, or fight response", then seeking modalities that heal trauma may be the best way to work with this kind of anger.

Second, there is an anger that builds from resistance to what's happening. This can occur in two ways. You might be responding to any little thing with resistance, going along grumpily wishing you didn't "have to" to do this or that, resenting traffic, wishing your kids weren't so loud, complaining that you work too much, etc. With these kinds of thoughts, you are unconsciously cultivating a mindstate that is quick to anger. You might create this same mindstate around something specific with which you are attached to your view about how it should be.

For example, let's say that you have a specific idea about how customer service should be. You call your telephone company and they don't measure up. You complain talking about how you should have been treated. You compare the next customer service experience to the last, refining your complaints and getting ever more specific about how it should be. Over time you tighten more and more around your view about how customer service should be. Actual life experience will rarely match your narrow view about how you think it should be - this is a primary condition that gives rise to anger.

Third, there is anger that arises out of a lack of resources. Parents all know about this anger. They see a tired, hungry, or overwhelmed look on their child's face and they know a meltdown is just around the corner. When you are under-resourced and you can't meet the next thing, anger shows up to help you bulldoze through the situation or simply shield you from what's happening.

For practicing with these last two types of anger, let's look at four concrete practices.

1. **Cultivate awareness.** Reflect on situations in which you got angry with the following questions:

2. **Pause and expand.** It's helpful to remember that anger lives on a continuum from slightly irritated to livid. By mindfully pausing with even the least bit of irritation, you can shift directions. Engaging in little practices like closing your eyes just for a moment and inviting your whole body to relax and expand takes you off the anger continuum. Doing this many many times a day will result in a deep sense of peace that grows over time.

3. **Self-care and Planning.** When you are in an under-resourced place, make a specific plan about how to handle that. Check in with the needs list and name what needs are going unmet. Make a date with yourself or get the support to meet those needs immediately or within the next few days.

In the meantime, remind yourself that in an under-resourced state, anger and other forms of reactivity are more likely to show up. This means that if you want to get through the day in alignment with your values, extra mindfulness is required. Bring your energy in a bit more so that you can focus on what's right in front of you in a spacious way. Give yourself permission to take long pauses before responding to others whether in person or in email. Where there is flexibility, put off difficult conversations for another day. Set your intention and make a specific plan about how you want to relate to challenging people or situations in the day ahead.

4. **Allow Grief.** Lastly, if you are not resisting what's true in a challenging moment, then you likely regularly feel grief. When that customer service agent isn't helpful, taking a moment to feel your disappointment helps you maintain a sense of peace in that situation. Allowing grief isn't about wallowing around in a pool of sadness. Grief is an expansive state that has its own rhythm of coming and going. It leaves you more able to see a situation clearly and take wise and compassionate action.

Practice

This week choose one of the four practices above to engage in at least once.