

Uprooting the Seeds of Anger

Anger has something to teach us. Can we listen?

By [Jules Shuzen Harris](#) | Artwork by [Faith McMclure](#)
[Summer 2012](#)

We operate under a common illusion that the things that make us angry lie outside of ourselves, that they are external to us. Something out there is in opposition to our need for safety and security; it threatens our comfort or position. We feel a need to defend our vulnerable selves. Anger limits us. But if we have the courage to look at our anger and its causes and to learn from it, we can develop an open heart—a heart of genuine [compassion](#).

My own journey in dealing with anger has included work with several systems of martial arts. Initially I studied the martial arts to learn how to defend against the enemy outside myself, which I thought was the reason for my anger. After some time, I was drawn to [iaido](#), the art of drawing, cutting with, and sheathing a Samurai sword. Loosely translated, the term *iaido* means being able to fit into any situation harmoniously. Unlike many other martial art forms, iaido is noncombative, which was key: to create a harmonious relationship with myself, I had to confront the enemy within—and the enemy was my own anger.

I have often observed that while we each experience anger in our own way, a more general sense of anger pervades our society. That is, as a culture, we are angry. Our sense of humor is very sarcastic. A lot of what we find entertaining involves putting someone down. We have slapstick comedy: people running around doing mean, spiteful things that we are supposed to find funny. Whether it is a television show or a new viral Internet video, we find humor in words that mock or put others down, or insults that allow us to watch from the outside as someone else is subjected to some form of humiliation. We might ask ourselves, “What’s funny about that?” Not much. Laughing at others’ misfortune is a kind of expression of our own anger.

Have we ever said to someone, “You’re lazy,” or “You’re a bitch” or “You’re an insufferable bastard”? Of course. We’ve all done that in one way or another. Or maybe we have said, “If it weren’t for you, I would be better off,” or “It’s because of you that I am suffering.” It is as if we believe that by putting others down, by placing the blame or responsibility for our unhappiness on others, we can make ourselves better or relieve our own feelings of inadequacy. But anger doesn’t make us feel better. As Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche said, “You cannot really eliminate pain through aggression. The more you kill, the more you strengthen the killer who will create new things to be killed. The aggression grows until finally there is no space; the whole environment has been solidified.”

Among the Three Poisons we find the Pali term *dosa*, “anger.” The Three Poisons of anger, greed, and delusion keep us in bondage and control us—they overwhelm our best intentions and cause us to do harm to others. We may even cause the greatest hurt to the people we most care about. We don’t want to hurt them, or ourselves, but we are driven by our anger. Many times we

find that a feeling that arises in us is the outward manifestation of a deeper underlying emotion or experience. We might explore this possibility by asking ourselves about where our anger really comes from. What is the other side of anger? Fear. We can't free ourselves until we work through both our anger and our fear. And what is the cause of fear? Ultimately, it is the fear of nonexistence, death, the fear of losing ourselves and being forgotten. But a fear of death translates into a fear of living, because impermanence is itself a fundamental condition of our lives. In this fear lie the seeds of anger.

When anger arises, it is pointing to something. Our anger is a clue to our underlying beliefs about ourselves.

How do we break the cycle of anger? We all know anger from experience, but when we are asked to pause and consider, "What is this anger?" it's not always so easy to see what it is. Yet when we approach our feelings of anger with awareness, with mindfulness, it becomes a productive part of our practice. We find, after all, that anger has something to teach us.

Anger is what Thich Nhat Hanh calls "habit energy." Like most habits, it takes just one particular event or word or incident to trigger us, as quick as a snap of the finger. Just because we have a *kensho* experience and see into our true nature and maybe for a second or two experience some sense of bliss, that doesn't mean that we won't return to habit energy five minutes or an hour later. If someone does something that irritates you, ask yourself the question, "Who is it that is ticked off? Who is it that's angry?" We'll find that there is no self to get angry or to defend.

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And yet there may be something that sets us off again and again, as reliably as an alarm clock. Maybe we know what some of those things are. Often other people can tell us what brings out our flashes of anger even if we are not ourselves aware of them. But these habitual flashpoints offer us an opportunity to see ourselves more deeply, with a fuller understanding and with greater compassion, to look at what incited our angry reaction, and to follow the thread within ourselves. All we need is the space between trigger and reaction to mindfully look within.

So where do we find this space to separate ourselves from our anger? Many Buddhist traditions teach that all things are insubstantial. When we see this, we see that the support for anger and hate is eroded and eventually destroyed. This speaks to one of the three marks of existence—impermanence. We have all found ourselves in situations that illustrate the transitory nature of events. Something happens to us that makes us angry; perhaps we get into an argument at home with a partner at the very start of the day. A couple of hours later, we're at work and we're still thinking about the incident. More time goes by, and we continue to stew over it at lunchtime, and by the time we get home, we're still holding onto it. But where is it? Where is the incident? It's like last night's supper—it doesn't exist.

Over and over again, I tell students dealing with anger, "This practice is about being mindful!" While that may sound simple, it is in fact a very, very difficult practice because it goes against a lot of what we hold sacred. Many of us have a particular group of gods that we worship. It's not

God, Jesus, or Buddha. We worship pleasure, comfort, and security. Despite knowing that everything is impermanent, we still hold onto objects that we think will bring us security. We cling to what we believe will spare us from discomfort, and when these things slip out of our grasp, fear and anger arise. Part of mindfulness is looking at our reactions and perceptions—if we are all truly one body, why are we cutting off the relationship with our partner, our coworker, or our friend? If my hand is in pain, do I cut it off? Of course not. I take care of it. I take some Tylenol. I look more carefully into what might be causing the pain—maybe it’s an injury, or it could be that I’m developing arthritis and need to think of some therapies. But when it comes to anger, we cut ourselves off because we have an investment in maintaining who we think we are. Anger limits our expression of seeing our whole self. As a divisive force, it prevents us from living a fully rich life of connectedness. Instead of experiencing the one body that pervades everywhere, anger isolates us and reinforces the sense of a separate self, preventing us from identifying with and feeling compassion for others.



Inverted Landscape, No. 11, Monoprnt Collage, 2011

Mindfulness is cultivated through meditation practice. That is one of the reasons why I like the focused practice period of *sesshin*, several days of intensive sitting. It is amazing how much stuff surfaces in *sesshin*. In my first few years practicing Zen, I thought of myself as a pretty laid-back, easygoing guy. But then during these intensive meditation periods, I couldn’t believe the amount of anger and rage that came up. I was ready to kill the teacher, kill the monks, and burn

down the monastery! It stood in stark contrast to my ideas of who I thought I was. My anger was exacerbated by having the duty of scrubbing the toilets with a toothbrush. But all along the way, I continued meditating. And at some point, scrubbing the toilet with a toothbrush became a practice of mindfulness for me.

When we work with anger in [Buddhist practice](#), we work with it a little differently than you would in psychotherapy. We don't ask you to beat a pillow, open the window, and scream. When I was a psychotherapist, I had a Bozo the Clown bop bag in my office; you could hit it and it would just bounce back. And I would say, "Just keep pounding it, get it all out!" But that's not our approach. In Buddhism, we work to illuminate the fundamental truth of our self-nature. When anger arises, it is pointing to something. Our anger is a clue to our underlying beliefs about ourselves. It can help to reveal our constructed sense of self-identity.

Today many psychotherapists embrace Buddhist practice as a way of looking at ourselves in relationship to others. The Identity System developed by Stanley Block, M.D., involves two processes called "mind-body mapping" and "bridging." Mind-body mapping as a part of Buddhist practice requires an openness to adapting the dharma for a particular time, place, and person—in this case for the Western psyche. You begin mind-body mapping by paying attention to a particular thought that is on your mind, perhaps one that is connected to strong feelings. Then, using this first thought as a focal point, you trace the paths of further thoughts and ideas that are generated out of the initial thought. At the same time, we give attention to how our thoughts feel in relationship to the body. We all have personal requirements, thoughts, or rules about how we—and the world—should be. While they may remain hidden from our conscious awareness, we can recognize them by our anger, which arises when our requirements are broken. By deepening our ability to be fully present, we have a better chance of seeing our requirements and letting them go, uprooting the seeds that sprout into anger.

This exploration, together with an approach called "bridging," has proven to be a valuable tool. Bridging is akin to mindfulness. When you are washing the dishes, you are focused on touch, the place, the water on your hands, the feel of the sponge; or when you are driving your car, you listen to the hum of the engine, the vibration of your hands on the steering wheel. Bridging and mind-body mapping help us deal with the shadow beliefs we carry with us—"I'm not good enough," "I'm undeserving"—which create negative story lines. Our anger can be seen as a defense against these vulnerable feelings and negative self-beliefs. The deep-seated fear and anger we harbor has to do with our feelings of a damaged self. Mind-body mapping and bridging enable practitioners to see how they create their suffering in relationship to the body rather than a situation outside themselves. From a Buddhist perspective, we are trying to reach the place where there is no separation, no subject, no object. Bringing our mind back again and again to a place of present-moment awareness, we create a space where we let go of our habitual reaction patterns and our recurring negative feelings. We then open the opportunity to view ourselves—and others—with real compassion.

Our meditation practice is also a place where we can work directly with our experience of anger by becoming the anger. To "become the anger" does not mean to act it out. It means we stop separating ourselves from it; we experience it fully so that we can understand what's behind it. In

sitting zazen, we can encourage the anger to come up. We become intimate with anger, and in doing so, we watch it dissipate.

We have to look deeply into the cause of our suffering. Our anger not only creates suffering for others, but it also creates more suffering for us. We might take a mind-body perspective that what we think affects every cell in our body. Neuroscientists suggest that our neurons are affected by our immediate environment. If we are in a hostile, argumentative, negative environment, then that affects our neural networks and neurochemistry, and our nervous system becomes conditioned to react every time we go into that environment. So we could say that very environment becomes toxic. We've all had the experience of walking into a certain space and feeling at home, and going into a different space and becoming very agitated or depressed, because of the subtle energy or our unconscious relationship to the place.

We must remember that we create our own anger. No one makes it for us. If we move from a particular event directly to our reaction, we are skipping a crucial awareness, a higher perspective on our own reactivity. What is that middle step, that deeper awareness? It is mindfulness about our own beliefs, our attitude, our understanding or lack of understanding about what has really happened. We notice that a given situation reliably provokes our anger, and yet somebody else can be exposed to the very same situation and not react angrily. Why is that? No one can tell us: we each have to find the answer ourselves, and to do that, we need to give ourselves the space to reflect mindfully.

We're going to keep getting angry. It's going to come up. It has come up in our lives before, and it will come up again. This practice is about becoming more mindful, becoming aware of how we are getting stuck. With care and work, we find ways to get unstuck. But we also know that the moment we get unstuck, we're going to get stuck again. That's why it is called a practice—we never arrive. So when you find yourself upset or angry, use the moment as a part of your practice, as an opportunity to notice and uproot the seeds of anger and move into the heart of genuine compassion.

From: <https://tricycle.org/magazine/zen-and-anger/>