

Zen Center

O F S A N D I E G O

ZCSD Newsletter

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When Anger Arises

There is sometimes a tendency for practitioners to believe that experiencing anger is bad. But our practice is not to judge the emotion of anger when it arises. If we believe that anger arising shouldn't be happening, then that belief springs from our conditioning, not from our practice guidelines. And if that *is* our conditioning, and we're caught in it, then, when anger shows up, we'll want to push it away. Stuff it. Deny it. Turn it inward on ourselves to hide it or to punish ourselves for feeling it. But that's not how we practice with it.

Strategies we developed to hide our anger, even from ourselves, might have worked well for a time, protecting us from experiencing the energy of anger. But strategies can't work forever, because they are a lie. At odds with our true experience, they inevitably wear thin and fail us. In practice, in therapy, or simply in the ups and downs of life, we start to see through them, whether they entail looking good, pleasing people, staying quiet (hiding), overworking, not caring, or turning the anger on ourselves in harmful and destructive ways.

So, it's not a bad thing when anger surfaces in practice

2023 Sesshin Dates

December 28-31

December Sesshin
enrollment
opened November 1st.
<http://www.zencentersandiego.org/schedule/sesshin.php>

The Sexual Misconduct
Complaint Procedure and
Code of Ethical Conduct for
Teachers/Practice Leaders
can be found on the ZCSD
website under "Policies."
<http://www.zencentersandiego.org/Policies/>

after being hidden for a long time. First, it's what's happening—that is our life in that moment. And second, if something operates in us without our knowing it, it controls us like a puppet, and even without intending to, we may act out of it with harmful consequences.

Our practice is clearly seeing the nature of suffering and nurturing an end to suffering. Once we can recognize the energy of anger in us (tightness, pressure, heat), we can take responsibility for it and choose what we do with it. This is so important. "Anger keeps the world in a mess," says Joko Beck. But "practice is a space where we can be the anger without hurting anyone, including ourselves."

Being the anger begins with noticing the emotion as it hits us and *being willing* to experience our life in that moment, exactly as it is: strong energy moving in the body, thoughts and reactions swirling. Uncomfortable, yes, but with practice, it becomes easier. Anchoring the breath in the belly may help. We learn to let the energy be and allow thoughts to pass without building a story. We opt out of the drama. In this way, we decouple our emotional reactivity from the initial trigger (insult, resurfacing of painful memories, rejection).

If we can stay with the bodily experience without feeding it, then we regain some equanimity. We may see and even sense the experience of helplessness and fear underpinning the anger. Our practice is to reside in it all. Thoughts may still come, but at every turn, the breath is there, offering us a refuge, a return to presence. And what's skillful and compassionate for us to do begins to come clear.

At the milder end of the anger range, there may be lots of ways we take offense from morning till night—*How could she forget to pick me up? ... I can't believe you said that!* Being rattled is a signal that we have an unmet expectation of life. That's a cue to investigate: Okay, so what's my expectation here? How is life supposed to be? *Ah, I expect others to come through for me. ... I expect people to be careful in what they say.* When we see the expectation—a strand of our underlying conditioning—then the irritation often disintegrates quite easily.

This may seem like small stuff, but practicing with little things makes a difference in our life overall. Gradually, it becomes second nature to catch ourselves in this game, and we are better able to maintain awareness through bigger jolts and disappointments.

What about when we project anger onto practice? *This isn't working!* If our core belief tells us we aren't worthy, and we're practicing to become worthy—and still, in our own eyes, falling short—then we'll get fed up with

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practice. We won't want to do it. In fact, any time we are pushing against the current of an unhealed core belief—I can't ... I'm not good enough ... I can never do enough to be loved—we are in a fight with life. Clarifying all this is essential for practice to mature.

Expectations are fixed beliefs. Core decisions about ourselves are fixed beliefs. And when we hold in our mind a fixed belief about how things should be, or who we are, then we are at odds with reality, and that dynamic generates the friction that we call anger.

When anger arises in us, can it have a *useful* function? If we are paying attention, anger can be a signal, alerting us that we are clinging to a view of self by holding fast to an opinion or protecting an identity we cherish. Anger can also alert us in other ways. When behavior is inappropriate or abusive, the emotion of anger may be the wake-up call that indicates a need for action or change. What's more, anger may give us the *energy* to act, summoning the will to intervene or stand firm or work for a new approach. But here we must remember our vow of doing no harm. To avoid perpetuating the cycle of pain, we recognize that anger, though often energizing, is not a skillful means in itself. Put differently, between anger and action there is practice—allowing us to shift from emotional reaction to skillful response.

Sometimes it's tempting to pin our upset on someone once and for all, but just as in time we see the helplessness and fear beneath our own anger, so we begin to discern those same vulnerabilities in others. The verse of atonement speaks of "beginningless greed, anger and ignorance." "Beginningless." The anger we felt hurt by arose in someone who was suffering. And what came before then? And before then? Beginningless. Little by little, we see the size of the cloth, and then as, Naomi Shihab Nye tells us, "only kindness makes sense anymore, / only kindness ties your shoes / and sends you out into the world to mail letters and purchase bread."

Let's be reminded: An intellectual understanding of practice may be helpful in some ways, but it doesn't transform our life. Transformation happens through faithful hours on the cushion and in the trenches of everyday practice, where at times it may feel more like hand-to-hand combat as we struggle to stay with uncomfortable sensations and see some uncharitable thoughts we never knew that we had.

—Myoku

"I think maturing practice is the ability to be with life and just be in it as it is." —Joko Beck