

# **TRANSFORMING OUR ANGRY NATURE\***

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“He makes me so angry!” “My boss makes me so mad!” “My kids are driving me nuts!” How often have you heard, or even said, statements like these? Our language reflects our underlying beliefs and thoughts. In our culture, we tend to project blame onto others. In this case, they are the reason we feel angry or frustrated.

The difficulty with this perspective is that in order for our anger to change, the other person who is “making” us angry has to change first. If we have to wait for another person to change, we may be waiting for a very long time. In other words, when we blame, we give away our own personal power. We aren’t taking responsibility for our own life condition or experiences. After all, who is the person who is feeling angry, mad or enraged? Who is in control of what we feel and who has the power to change it? In Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism we discover that everything we experience is a product of dependent origination - an interaction of an external cause (stimulus) and internal cause (angry nature).

There are a variety of definitions of anger. One definition is that it is “a violent, vindictive passion, sudden and strong displeasure, as a result of injury, opposition, or mistreatment.”<sup>1</sup> From a Buddhist perspective, anger is an expression of the fourth of the ten worlds or life conditions. It is one of the four evil paths, a state dominated by a selfish ego. People in this state value themselves, but hold others in contempt. They are attached to the idea of their own superiority and cannot bear to be inferior to others. It is also noteworthy that Buddhism acknowledges that anger can function as both good and evil.

In the field of psychology, there are a wide variety of definitions of anger. We have chosen to share two with you that we find to be the most helpful as a foundation to consider anger and its transformation in our lives. Harriet Lerner, Ph.D., describes anger as a signal. It “may be a message that we are being hurt, that our rights are being violated, that our needs or wants are not being adequately met, or simply that something is not right. Our anger may tell us that we are not addressing an important emotional issue in our lives, or that too much of our self - our beliefs, values, desires, or ambitions - is being compromised in a relationship. The pain of our anger preserves the very integrity of our self.”<sup>2</sup> Dr. Lerner recognizes that anger is a real experience that may have a purpose.

Hendric Weisinger, Ph.D., defines anger as having four components. He describes it as an emotion which is “physically arousing and has unique physiological correlates; secondly, as a feeling which impacts the way we experience life; thirdly, as a communicator of information and lastly as a cause.”<sup>3</sup>

We particularly want to emphasize that there are aspects of our angry nature that can give us information about our life and environment if we choose to pay attention to them. We cannot change something about which we are not aware. Transforming ourselves takes mindfulness and effort.

Anger is a function of life and the theory of three thousand realms in a single moment of life explains how the life condition of anger is linked to all of the other ten worlds from hell to Buddhahood. Anger may appear to emerge only as an effect, but because of the simultaneity of cause and effect, this is only a part of what the moment of anger holds. At the same time it is a cause. Therefore, the choices we make in our lives as the experience of anger wells forth determine the future as well.

Anger has both positive and negative qualities. Anger can be disruptive when it leads to confusion, impulsiveness, or aggression. It is often used to cover up other feelings that we may believe to be less socially or personally acceptable, such as embarrassment, hurt, or anxiety. The more we use anger in this way, the less self-knowledge is available to us. The positive qualities of anger include giving us information that something is threatening or unjust, that it is time to take action, deal with an issue, or make a change. The welling up of anger can help us express our discomfort when a situation needs to change. This energy can provide a sense of control during a difficult or threatening event, helping us to take necessary action. One of our goals in offering this article is to assist people in diminishing the negative qualities of anger in their lives and increasing the use of the positive ones.

People tend to use the words anger and aggression interchangeably in our society. More recently, they have been distinguished as separate experiences. As stated above, anger is the word we use to describe a set of uncomfortable experiences which are associated with a set of thoughts, beliefs, or ideas which result in reactions that might be verbal, facial or the like. Aggression, on the other hand, refers specifically to the motor activity, or acting out, of behavior that hurts someone or something through physical contact.

In understanding, dealing with, and transforming our anger, it is very important to comprehend the difference between these two words and experiences. Additionally, it is necessary to appreciate that anger does not cause aggression, but rather adds to an aggressive response. It is not necessary to be angry to be aggressive, or to be aggressive from your place of anger. It is common for people to feel angry with their family, boss, or other drivers on the road. This may be expressed by a look or in words, yet no physical action is taken. An example of not being angry, but aggressive, would be that of a contract killer, who might bear no anger toward his victim, but simply doing his job. Another example of this is seen in football players who are stimulated by their coaches to be charged up to play aggressively, but not necessarily to feel anger toward the other team members or to intentionally hurt them.

Confusing and joining the meanings of these two experiences, or conditions will, however, make the transformation of your own anger immeasurably more difficult. Verbal abuse usually comes from anger and is directed toward another with the intent to hurt. However, it is not physical, and is therefore not aggressive. An aggressive response to verbal abuse will only escalate the problem, increasing the likelihood that the situation will get out of control.

## WHEN ANGER IS A PROBLEM

Once we accept the reality of anger as an aspect of human life, how do we recognize when it is a problem for us? In evaluating this, we need to consider the reactions we receive from others and honestly review patterns of our own thoughts, words, bodily reactions and choices of action.

In his *Anger Workout Book*, Dr. Weisinger presents clear guidelines to assist a person in doing this. Consider how often you feel angry. If your anger is frequent or serves no useful purpose, then it is more likely to be a problem. The same hold true for anger that is overly intense or lasts too long for the immediate situation. Anger is always a problem when it leads you to take unsafe or aggression action. Striking out more often complicates a situation, making it more difficult to resolve. If your anger interferes with personal relationships or work, it is a problem. Some people use anger as a defense to keep an emotional distance from others, creating an uncooperative work environment. When people are so distracted by anger that they can't concentrate or are spending a lot of time verbally venting to co-workers, they are not contributing to their workplace. We would like to add to Dr. Weisinger's guidelines that anger also becomes a serious difficulty when it leads to medical problems. It is now understood that anger plays a role in the development or exacerbation of heart disease, high blood pressure, chronic muscle tension, irritable bowel syndrome and other conditions.

Due to the complex workings of the human mind, we may need help assessing the above points. Facing our angry nature is not easy. To recognize if these problem areas are at work in our lives, we must pay attention to ourselves and to our environment with a minimum of self-delusion. In the July 2000 *Living Buddhism*, four categories of action to overcome the fundamental darkness within our lives are discussed. The third category, to "look within our lives to identify the causes of our suffering"<sup>4</sup> correlates with one function of psychotherapy. It includes efforts to recognize problems, seek advice, and study toward their resolution.

## THE FUNCTION OF PERCEPTION

The function of our perception has significant impact on anger in our lives. Consider the following examples:

Sally has promised to present important information at the discussion meeting. You are the designated person in charge of the event. You know that she is prepared and the two of you have discussed it thoroughly. She will be picking up another meeting participant on her way. At 4:30, you receive a message that she cannot make it. You are unable to reach her by phone. You might have one of several responses:

- 1) You get angry and slam down the phone when you cannot reach her.
- 2) You feel sad and discouraged. You feel like crying and give up hopes of having a good meeting.

- 3) You feel disappointed, but recognize that something urgent may have come up for Sally. You make time to call others to try to arrange a ride for the member Sally can't pick up and present the needed information in Sally's absence.

We all have patterns of response to our experiences that are habitual. Often we do not pay attention to these patterns and allow ourselves to be swept along in life by them. The thoughts we tell ourselves in our own minds are pieces of these patterns. In psychology, we call this "self-talk."

Let's look at some possible patterns of self-talk for the above examples:

- 1) You are angry because Sally could not participate at the last minute. You are full of negative thoughts such as, "Sally is a flake and cannot be depended upon. Forget her! She is trying to make it hard for the members to advance. She really doesn't care. Others will think that the meeting is poorly planned."
- 2) You are discouraged and sad. You think Sally does not value the group or think it is worth the effort to come. Your thoughts might be, "I'm not a good leader. I can't do anything right."
- 3) You are disappointed. However, you say to yourself, "I've had urgent things come up and had to miss meetings before." You may feel concerned enough for Sally to go chant for her. You may also realize that Sally's absence could provide an opportunity for another member to grow.

Note that the situation is the same in each example. What is different is the perception, which is the basis for subsequent action.

## **RIGHTEOUS OR NOT SO RIGHTEOUS ANGER**

Dr. Lerner states, "Anger is something we feel. It exists for a reason and always deserves our respect and attention. We all have a right to everything we feel - and certainly our anger is no exception."<sup>5</sup> However, it is important to be mindful of our anger patterns. Due to the simultaneity of cause and effect, anger may seem to emerge only as an effect. In the same moment, it is a cause, as well. What we choose to do, say, and think as our anger emerges will determine our future.

Therefore, it is important to examine our anger to determine if it is justifiable or not. In the SGI, purposeful, justifiable anger is referred to as righteous anger and considered an expression of compassion. It is our compassion that leads to anger at injustice and evil. This type of anger means that you have the right and often the responsibility to confront what you regard as a grievance. One way to examine this is to consider if most other people would be angry in a similar situation.

Many times we may find that our anger is not justifiable. It may be evoked by the actions of someone who has no intentions to injure us. Dr. Weisinger's useful suggestion to determine the difference between these two types of anger is the question, "Is my anger directed toward someone who has knowingly intentionally and unnecessarily acted in a hurtful manner?"<sup>6</sup> Purifying our perceptive abilities through our Buddhist practice can help us respond to this question in a more accurate manner.

In society today, it is common to assume that another person's actions are a threat to our own needs or wants, without examination. This type of anger is most often an expression of egoism, referred to as a sense of entitlement. Unjustifiable anger includes: when someone accidentally steps on your foot, a group member does not want to talk at a meeting or when members are late to a meeting because of traffic problems. Whereas, examples of righteous anger may include when someone embarrasses you in front of others, or you are physically, sexually, or emotionally abused.

When our anger is justifiable, we have an opportunity to use its positive aspects to challenge or change an unfair situation or evil. When our anger stems from egoism it is more likely to function as a destructive force. Once we recognize this we can choose to change it. However, even if our anger is appropriate, that does not mean that the way we choose to confront the situation is automatically appropriate. In fact, a poorly considered expression of anger can detract from the perceived validity of a justifiable grievance. As practitioners of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, we often need to chant for the wisdom to most effectively address the situation for the best resolution for everyone involved.

## **THE IMPACT OF LIFE CONDITION AND WISDOM ON ANGER**

One of the major differences in our response to a situation, such as the example of Sally we previously described, is what we call life-condition. This refers to the ten worlds, or ten conditions of life from Hell to Buddhahood. This is easily defined by Ted Morino, SGI-USA Study Department Senior Advisor, who states, "Like an elevator in a 10-story building, we go up and down among the Ten Worlds between the lowest and the highest - from Hell, where our suffering and rage envelops us and drains our energy, to Buddhahood, where joy, compassion, wisdom and courage are commonplace...Our character is just like the constant width of a river. The change in our life condition is something like the river's waters changing - from impure to pure, or shallow to deep."<sup>7</sup>

SGI President Daisaku Ikeda states that one's happiness is determined by one's state of life. "Even though they dwell in the same environment, people feel different degrees of happiness and unhappiness depending on their state of life. The practice of faith is a continuous effort for self-development that enables one to limitlessly broaden and expand one's state of life."<sup>8</sup>

One benefit of challenging ourselves in our Buddhist practice is wisdom. Knowledge is neutral and has no value. We need wisdom to use knowledge correctly. The wisdom we uncover through our Buddhist practice is to find the value in our own life. Many people lack confidence in their own potential, their own life's power. One major goal of our practice is to uncover the great capacities from within our own life. Through these challenges we create a strong character that is not swayed, and is a foundation for the development of a strong sense of joy.

The wisdom we generate from a determined practice has many facets. At a Florida Nature and Culture Center lecture on *The Wisdom of the Lotus Sutra*, several points were described that we will share with you.<sup>9</sup> The first point is patience. It is derived from wisdom, as one must have a certain perspective to support a patient response. The second is the wisdom of transformation. This is the ability to perceive life from a positive instead of negative viewpoint, thus creating more value in our process of human evolution. As an example, we will share our friend's experience. John has had the dream of building his own home for all the years we've known him; he already owns the property on which to build. However, he had a rent-free house in which he was living. Suddenly, he was forced to move out of this comfortable arrangement when that property was sold. John can choose to stay angry about having his comfort disrupted or he can choose to challenge himself to create his dream house. Should he do the latter, he will have transformed the disruption of moving and his anger about the circumstances into an impetus to fulfill a long-held desire.

The third point is the wisdom of alternative choice. This is the ability to discover new and different ways of meeting needs, overcoming obstacles, and accomplishing goals. When people approach life with a victim stance, they are giving away their own life force and power. Usually they do not perceive that this is occurring and continue to seek happiness from external sources, without lasting results. Someone in this condition is externally focused and does not use their power of choice to take responsibility for their situation or the necessary steps to change it. An example of this is the following colloquial story.

One very rainy and stormy night a horseback rider came rushing to the valley warning the residents of a small town that the dam at the head of the valley was about to burst and that they all needed to get to high ground for safety. He went to one house and advised the homeowner of this. The man looked at the rider and stated, "I put my faith in the Lord, He will take care of me." The rider hurried on with his warning. Some time later, the dam had indeed burst and the water was rising and had begun to flood the valley. A man in a boat was steering through the turbulent water to again advise and rescue those who hadn't yet left their homes. He came upon this same homeowner. He was now standing on the table in his dining room with water swirling around his ankles. The man in the boat begged the homeowner to get in before the water rose any further. Again the man demurred stating, "I put my faith in the Lord. He will take care of me." The boatman left to tend to others. Later, a helicopter was flying through the valley to rescue those who had not heeded the earlier warnings. It came upon this same homeowner who was not standing on the peak of the roof of his house with water to his knees. The pilot asked that he come aboard the helicopter, but once again the man said, "No, I put my faith in the Lord. He will take care of me." The helicopter left. Some time later, this same homeowner found himself at the Pearly Gates. He was stunned and amazed that he'd died. Just then, God arrived

and the man gushed, “Here I am at the Pearly Gates! I’ve died! It’s not that I mind being here in Heaven, but I trusted You to take care of me!” God looked at the man for several minutes and then boomed, “I did try to take care of you! I sent a man on a horse, a man in a boat, and a helicopter!” The point of this story is that we must learn to attend to what is going on around us to be able to use the wisdom of alternative choice.

## HOW TO TRANSFORM ANGER PATTERNS

It is important to remember that we are the focus of change, not others. It is not the purpose of our Buddhist practice to change other people or make them do what we want. In fact, when changing others becomes the focus of our efforts, it is more likely that we are disregarding our responsibility for our own life or the efforts we need to make to improve it. It is our responsibility to communicate our desires, beliefs, thoughts and feelings to others in an effective and respectful manner. One author states, “The more I learn to communicate with others, the less I trigger their anger and the less they respond in ways that might trigger my own anger.” He also says, “The more often I see that there are other feelings that I can choose in a situation, the less often I choose anger.”<sup>10</sup> These are statements of personal responsibility that support President Ikeda’s assertion that “From our standpoint, Buddhism is a philosophy for helping people become self-sufficient. It is a teaching that explains how people can develop themselves through their own effort.”<sup>11</sup>

In psychological literature, there are many suggestions for changing angry patterns. We have distilled them into five common points:

- 1.) Be clear about my true source of anger and consider its many aspects.
- 2.) Learn to correctly observe my own non-productive patterns of anger and interrupt them.
- 3.) Learn communication skills.
- 4.) Recognize that others in my environment, who are used to my angry habits, may resist my attempts to change them. When I take responsibility for my anger it makes it clearer to others which part of the interaction is theirs.
- 5.) Practice and visualize new response behaviors.

Through our own study and practice as Buddhist practitioners, we have developed some ways to approach the above points:

- 1A** Face the Gohonzon with a sincere willingness to see my anger clearly and to see my part in creating this in my life.
- 1B** Be willing to challenge myself when what I believe does not match with my thoughts, feelings and actions.

- 2 Chant to develop my wisdom to be a clear observer of my own life's process and have the courage to make necessary changes.
- 3 Chant to become a true master of hear-to-heart dialogue. Study President Ikeda's guidance's on this topic as well as other materials. Develop the wisdom to use what I know appropriately.
- 4 Chant to remain mindful in my daily life. Effectively use my wisdom (patience, transformation, and alternative choice) to stay out of old habit patterns and create healthy new ones.
- 5 Chant joyous, victorious daimoku. Allow myself to see my own compassionate Buddhahood at work in my life. Do not dwell on all my past mistakes and negativity. Focus on the person I am becoming.

In changing our anger patterns with the power of our own faith and practice, we need to develop a correct perspective of our own Buddha nature, determination, and courage. Please remember that change occurs in thought, word, and deed.

## **OUR BUDDHA NATURE, DETERMINATION AND COURAGE**

It is important to remember that Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism empowers each one of us to bring forth the Buddha nature that already exists in our life. When we train ourselves to have confidence in our Buddhahood we can more easily develop joy in, and appreciation of, our own Buddha nature. President Ikeda has often reminded us that both joy and appreciation are catalysts for our own happiness. One guidance states "limitless belief gives rise to limitless wisdom."<sup>12</sup>

Keeping this in mind we can chant to bring forth our Buddha nature and transform our anger into compassion. We can chant to use our patience, the wisdom of transformation, and the wisdom of alternative choice so that we are less likely to be limited by our own ego-thinking minds. Another guidance states, "First of all let's tear down any walls existing within our own minds. For it is often the case that we ourselves determine our limits."<sup>13</sup>

Determination is an essential factor in creating change. The time to transform our lives comes "only when we pray to the Gohonzon and manifest determination and awareness of our mission of kosenruffu (the Buddhist concept of world peace). We have to make a determination, pray and take correct action."<sup>14</sup> This kind of determination is not as likely to be hindered by our own self-doubt and fear.

Courage is an absolute requirement for change. If we lack courage, we will waver in our determination and be unable to persevere. The courage to do our practice each day, the courage to ask for help when we feel we can't go on, the courage to seek guidance when we feel stuck, are all aspects of this point.

There are many aspects to consider in the process of transforming our angry nature. With our Buddhist practice as a foundation we can use concepts from modern psychology to assist us in our change. Buddhism's focus is the present moment and now is the only moment we can make a transformation. Daisaku Ikeda states, "A change in a person's moment of life fundamentally changes everything."<sup>15</sup> In another writing he notes, "How you orient your mind, the kind of attitude you take, greatly influences both you yourself and your environment. The Buddhist principle of a single life-moment encompassing three thousand realms completely elucidates the true aspect of life's inner workings. Through the power of strong inner resolve, we can transform ourselves, those around us and the land in which we live."<sup>16</sup>

\* Published in *Living Buddhism*, Vol.5, No.2 (February 2001), pp.32-39.

## References

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<sup>2</sup> Lerner, Harriet Goldher, Ph.D. *The Danger of Anger*, New York: Harper and Row. 1986, p.1.

<sup>3</sup> Weisinger, Hendric, Ph.D. *Dr. Weisinger's Anger Workout Book*, New York: Qual. 1985, p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> *Living Buddhism*, July 2000, p.13.

<sup>5</sup> Lerner. p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Weisinger. p. 38.

<sup>7</sup> World Tribune, January 20, 2000. p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Ideka, Daisaku, *Faith Into Action*. Santa Monica: World Tribune Press, 1999. P. 133-34

<sup>9</sup> World Tribune, March 31, 200. p. 10

<sup>10</sup> Cole, Jim. *Thwarting Anger: A View of How We Keep Anger Alive*, distributed by Ed and Janet Reynolds, 37 Lomita Dr., Mill Valley, CA 94941, 1985.

<sup>11</sup> Ideka, Daisaku. *Lectures on the "Expedient Means" and "Life Span" Chapters of the Lotus Sutra*. Santa Monica: World Tribune Press, 1996. Vol.3. p.29.

<sup>12</sup> *Seikyo Times*, March 1990, p. 21.

<sup>13</sup> Ideka, Daisaku. *A Brilliant Life*, p. 96

<sup>14</sup> Ideka, Daisaku. *Lectures on the "Expedient Means" and Life Span Chapter of the Lotus Sutra*. Santa Monica: World Tribune Press, 1995, Vol. 1, pp. 32-33.

<sup>15</sup> Ideka, Daisaku. *Lectures on the "Expedient Means" and Life Span Chapter of the Lotus Sutra*. Santa Monica: World Tribune Press, 1996, Vol. 3, p. 13.

<sup>16</sup> Ideka, Daisaku. *For Today and Tomorrow*, Santa Monica: World Tribune Press, 1999, 146.