Buddhist Conceptualization and Treatment of Anger

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From the Buddhist point of view, anger is a form of suffering—because the angry individual suffers as well as his or her victims. In the traditional Buddhist view, suffering is caused by three mental factors, The Three Poisons: Desire, Aversion, and Ignorance. The dynamics of anger are conceptualized on the basis of these three mental factors, as well as the biology of anger and aggression. The treatment of anger is presented in seven steps: (i) Taking Responsibility; (ii) Becoming Aware; (iii) Understanding Anger; (iv) Reflection; (v) Decision; (vi) Relaxation; and (vii) Opening the Heart. © 1999 John Wiley & Sons, Inc. J Clin Psychol 55: 339–351, 1999.

The view of anger presented in this article is not a strictly traditional Buddhist view but rather the view of a western psychiatrist trained in traditional Buddhist teachings and meditation practices. I have been a practicing psychiatrist and psychotherapist for almost forty years and a Buddhist for more than twenty. I shall present here a view on anger based upon my understanding of Buddhist teachings phrased in a modern idiom and integrated with western scientific knowledge. Limitations on space mandate that I present these perspectives in a bare outline form, beginning with a schema for understanding anger and aggression followed by seven steps toward healing them.

UNDERSTANDING ANGER AND AGGRESSION

From the Buddhist point of view, anger is a form of suffering, because it causes pain to the angry individual as well as to his or her victims. It is not possible to be happy while one is angry or to be happy in the company of an angry individual. Many psychotherapy clients who complain of anxiety and depression are also angry and suffer from their anger. To understand anger from a Buddhist point of view, it is necessary to understand

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the Buddhist view on the causes of suffering. These causes are known as The Three Poisons. (For a more detailed discussion see Leifer, 1997).

THE THREE POISONS

In traditional Buddhist teachings, the causes of human suffering are called The Three Poisons: Passion, Aggression and Ignorance. Each of the three has familiar synonyms. The first poison, Passion, is often called various names—such as Desire, Greed, Lust, Attachment, or Clinging. Aggression, the second poison, is also known sometimes as Hatred or Aversion. The Third Poision, Ignorance, is also known as Delusion or Illusion. For the sake of simplicity and conceptual harmony, I shall refer to the Three Poisons as Desire, Aversion, and Ignorance.

Let us consider the first two poisons from a western perspective and then consider the third poison in relation to the first two. The first two poisons, Desire and Aversion, are a dialectical (or polar) pair best understood in relation to each other. Each pole is fundamentally similar to the other. Yet each pole differs diametrically from the other. Each is a desire. One is the desire to have, the other is the desire to have not. Understanding primal words dialectically, or antithetically, is a pattern in ancient languages. It is a fundamental principle of Buddhist philosophy and is also recognized by many other religions as a fundamental duality. Viewed in this way, the first two poisons, Desire and Aversion, refer to the same polar phenomena that western behaviorists recognize as the basic motivations of the human mind: the desire for pleasure and the aversion to pain. And these are the same fundamental psychological polarities to which Freud referred in his enunciation of The Pleasure Principle.

Powerful as they are in shaping our lives and destinies, we do not see our desires clearly, because they are complex, often subtle, and fearsome. Suffice to say for now that Desire is not only a feeling of wanting accompanied by thoughts and images, it is *a way of relating* to objects, events, situations, substances, individuals, and even to life itself. In its extreme form Desire represents the motive to incorporate and merge with. In its more moderate and subtle forms it represents the desire to move closer to, to associate with, to identify with, to cling and attach to, to mark as a reference point, to use as a source of pleasure, enjoyment and security some external object, event, situation, substance or individual.

The second poison, Aversion, is antithetical to the first. This poison is a set of feelings, thoughts and images—but also a way of relating through avoiding, evading, escaping, and, failing these, destroying what it fears, dislikes, and hates. In this sense, anger, aggression and, hatred are forms of aversion. They differ from milder forms of aversion only in that they are so strong and destructive. Aversions need not take extreme form, however. They can take the milder forms—of disgust, disapproval, dislike, or disdain. Any avoidance, defense, or attack against that which is disliked is a form of aversion.

Described in this way, it can be seen that the first two poisons represent the fundamental motives of life: to attract and repel, to seek and avoid, to open to and to close to, the phyllic and the phobic, the desires to have and have not. Together, Desire and Aversion represent the fundamental polarity of the universe: attraction and repulsion.

Although it may seem at first that anger should be understood in the context of Aversion, the second poison, we shall see that the situation is not so simple. The first two poisons work in such close interaction that desires may create aversions and aversions may create desires. For example, the desire to have a national identity often involves competition or antagonism toward other ethnic or political groups in antithetical relationship to whom self is defined. Recent wars in the mideast, the former Yugoslavia, and

Northern Ireland illustrate this tendency. In a contrasting case, the fear or aversion to strange, open spaces may dialectically create the love of the familiar territory of home and the desire to stay home. As a dialectical pair, each pole of Desire and Aversion contains shadows and reflections of its opposite.

The third poison, Ignorance, refers to the denial, repression, or lack of awareness of the truths of existence and the facts of life—including the personal, mental, and emotional facts of an individual's own life. In the Buddhist tradition, these basic truths are called "The Three Facts of Existence:" suffering, impermanence, and emptiness.

The truth of suffering refers to the fact that all conscious beings inevitably suffer at birth—suffer from not getting what we want, suffer from getting what we don't want, and suffer from old age, sickness, and death. The truth of impermanence refers to the fact that all compound objects, including ourselves, eventually decay, disintegrate, and die. Scientists tell us that someday even our sun will die. The truth of emptiness refers to the fact that all compound objects lack essential, independent, inherent existence. Everything is composite and hence interdependent. Nothing has an intrinsic identity or substance. The failure to understand these facts and to live in harmony with them creates the conditions for the thoughts, feelings, and actions that are the root cause of the suffering we inflict on ourselves and others—including that inflicted through anger and aggression.

Ignorance is the key factor in the generation of anger in the sense that it is not merely a lack of awareness but is also the projection on to self and phenomena of something that is not there—namely inherent substance. Confused and panicked by our own ineffability, we strive to create the illusion of a solid, immortal self. The term "ego," which has several meanings, is relevant here. In psychoanalysis ego refers to the executive functions of mind that mediate between the desires and aversions of the id and the prohibitions, inhibitions, and ideals of the superego. In ordinary parlance, ego refers to self—to a sense of substantial personal identity or soul, who ascribes to itself supreme value and importance, and who feels entitled to the selfish pursuit of happiness and the avoidance of discontent, often at the expense of others.

THE DYNAMICS OF ORDINARY MIND

To understand anger and aggression it is necessary to understand how The Three Poisons operate in ordinary mind. In Buddhist parlance, the term "ordinary mind" is used to denote the ordinary, normal, neurotic mind as opposed to awakened or enlightened mind. In this usage, "ordinary," "normal," and "neurotic" are related terms in that what we consider ordinary, normal mind is usually considered neurotic. The term "neurotic" is used similarly in both Buddhism and psychoanalysis. From the psychoanalytic point of view, neurosis refers to conflicts between the desires and aversions of the id and the prescriptions and aversions of the super ego and ego ideal, which the ego attempts to mediate. The failure to resolve these conflicts gracefully results in anxiety and other painful neurotic symptoms, such as depression, aggression, guilt, and shame. Buddhists use the term "neurotic" to refer to a complex of desires, aversions, ego, and suffering. (This definition was given to me by Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, Abbot of the Karma Triyana Dharmachakra, a Tibetan Buddhist monastery in Woodstock, New York.) To say that ordinary mind is neurotic is to say that it is dominated by the Three Poisons: Desire, Aversion, and Ignorance, which are the causes of the suffering that we inflict on ourselves and each other.

Ordinary mind functions in the service of the defense, survival, and prosperity of the ego by pursuing the satisfaction of its desires and avoiding or attacking that to which it is aversive. To phrase the same idea differently: Ordinary mind functions selfishly in the

pursuit of its own pleasure and happiness and in the avoidance of its own pain and unhappiness.

Ordinary, neurotic mind is like a cocoon in which everything we like and want is inside and everything we don't like, fear, and despise is kept on the outside by a secure defensive wall. We strive mightily to let in only those individuals, objects, and situations we want, approve of, and take delight in. And we try to keep out all the individuals, objects and situations that we reject, fear, and loathe. MY ROOM is me in the sense that it contains all that I desire, hope for, and identify with and has walls and defenses to keep out everything that I don't like, don't want, and don't think of as me or mine. Keeping my room my way is my Happiness Project. (Leifer, 1997.)

The cocoon of ordinary mind consists not only of individuals, objects, and situations we cherish, but also of our sense of self—our national, ethnic, group, family and personal identities. It also includes our habitual (or conditioned) patterns shaped by past experiences, conflicts, and traumas—which condition our thoughts, feelings, and actions. Our cocoons are our self-territories. We identify with them, defend and protect them, and strive to make them safer, more comfortable, and more durable. Any threat to our cocoon rooms—any perceived possibility of losing what we desire, are attached to, and identify ourselves with, or of being invaded, intruded upon, or negated by that which we dislike and fear—are regarded as threats to our very existence. This is the basic set-up, or psychobiological context of anger and aggression.

The psychotherapy of anger and aggression require that the client understand the setup of normal mind and its relationship to the dynamics of anger and aggression. This understanding is conveyed to the client through the interpretations of the therapist, which call attention to the client's selfish desires, aversions, and ego defenses. Before the client is ready to hear, accept, and integrate these interpretations, however, the client must be willing to take responsibility for his or her anger and to turn attention inward to the mind.

STEP ONE: TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

The first step toward healing anger is to take responsibility for it. This means not blaming anyone or anything else. Unfortunately, the tendency is for individuals to make excuses and attempt to justify their anger by blaming other individuals, social conditions (for example, poverty or injustice), or mental illness due to past traumas, genetic defects, or neurochemical imbalances. This serves only to justify and perpetuate anger. Blaming others may seem justified when the offense is outrageous. But the biblical lesson of Job, indeed of all religious leaders, is that to rage against what is and cannot be changed is the sin of pride (the assertion of ego) and is in itself a cause of suffering. To the degree that we fail to take total responsibility for our anger, we cripple our ability to heal it.

In the traditional Buddhist view, anger is a function of mind. It originates in the mind and is experienced by the mind. It follows from this that anger can only be healed through the mind. Past history, external circumstances, other people's actions, genetic endowment, and the misfortunes of life are *factors* in the generation of anger, *but they are not the cause of it*. This does not mean that frustrating social injustices or inequities should not be addressed and reformed. Ultimately it means that anger can be reduced and healed only by taming and training the mind. Only the angry individual can heal his or her anger. As Buddha said: “No one can wash the hands of another.”

This is clear in the two cases presented. Neither client was willing to take responsibility for his or her anger. It seems that neither one had been adequately informed by their therapist that they were *suffering from their anger* and that accepting responsibility for it was a necessary condition of successful therapy. When Celeste's therapist timidly sug-

gested that he was unsure of her contribution to this "interpersonal quandary," Celeste quickly and aggressively raised her defenses and denied she had any personal contribution. She blamed all the individuals who "bother" her. Unless this defensive denial of responsibility is exposed and dropped there is no possibility that Celeste can heal her lifelong predilection for hot and cold anger. The same is true of David. He also had a tendency to blame others as an excuse for taking responsibility for his own anger. David believed that external agencies caused his anger and, hence, that an external agency must heal it. Unless this attitude changes he will continue to find psychotherapy unsatisfactory. If the causes of anger lie within the mind then one must look within to heal it.

In cases such as those of Celeste and David, in which the client is unwilling to take responsibility for his or her anger, the first task of the therapist—after establishing a sympathetic relationship—is to encourage the client to look at his or her role in generating the angry state of mind and to look at the negative consequences of anger for self and others. The resistance to taking responsibility is often difficult to overcome. In such situations, it may be helpful to educate the client about the dynamics of anger as I shall present them in the third step. Clients should be encouraged that, by becoming aware of the dynamics of anger and looking within themselves for the causes of it, they are offered a powerful potential for taming and healing it.

STEP TWO: BECOMING AWARE

The psychotherapy of anger and aggression, as well as other forms of suffering, requires that the client becomes aware of the healing power of awareness itself. In all Buddhist traditions there are four levels (or foundations) of awareness (or mindfulness): (i) mindfulness of forms, including the body; (ii) mindfulness of feelings, of which there are three—desires, aversions, and neutral; (iii) awareness of mind; and (iv) awareness of the Dharma (or teachings) as they apply to the dynamics of mind. Becoming aware of the dynamics of mind involves looking within. Obviously, the phrase "looking within" is a metaphor. It does not mean literally to open our heads and look inside our brains. (Unfortunately, neuroscientists and psychiatrists have increasingly tended to look to the brain for the causes of much human evil, including anger and aggression.) It means becoming aware of the activities of mind. All the world including ourselves comes to us through the mind. This is not a solipsistic position. One can admit an external reality, relatively speaking. It means that our perceptions of ourselves, others, and the world, and our responses to them are experienced through the mind and conditioned by the mind. Looking within means examining the workings of mind empirically and logically. The Tibetan word for Buddhist is "nang-ba"—an insider, or one who looks within. Meditation is translated as "becoming familiar with." Meditation is a technique for becoming familiar with one's own mind and with the nature of mind and of phenomena as they are perceived by mind.

Healing anger requires becoming familiar with it. This is tricky as the inner landscape of anger is subtle and complex. At the deepest level, the sheer energy of it is so volcanic that it could only come from the life force itself, in defense of itself—which explains why taming anger seems to be such a Herculean task. Anger is fueled by the energy of frustrated desire and aversions. Our desires and aversions, projected into the future, take the form of our "Happiness Projects" (Leifer, 1997); our plans, hopes and images of what will make us happy and should therefore be pursued and what will make us unhappy and should therefore be avoided. Frustrated Happiness Projects are the basic motivations of our anger and aggression. When our Happiness Projects are frustrated we feel anger, humiliation, helplessness, fear, and depression. The idea that whatever we

think will make us happy is what we will likely suffer from is a difficult pill to swallow. This is why courageous, honest self-reflection is a necessary condition for understanding and healing anger.

In the clinical examples presented, neither Celeste nor David, so far as I can tell, were willing to look at their desires and happiness projects as the root cause of their anger. The task of the therapist, after encouraging the client to take responsibility for his or her anger, is to encourage the client to reflect on the causes of anger and how they apply to the client's predicament. This might mean pointing out to the client the tendency to defensively blame outer conditions or individuals for their anger; the uselessness of this position for healing anger; and the necessity to look at one's own frustrated desires and aversions as its origin.

STEP THREE: UNDERSTANDING ANGER

When a client shows willingness to take responsibility for his or her anger and to reflect upon the causes of anger, I usually present them with a copy of the chart represented in Figure 1. I ask them to look at the chart and notice that anger begins in our desires, aversions and self-protective mechanisms. I then ask them to think about the situation in which they became angry and to ask themselves: "What did I want that I was not getting? What was I getting that I did not want?" This is the key question. I ask the client to consider that the more rigid and insistent their desires and aversions the more vulnerable they are to becoming angry and aggressive. On the other hand, the more flexible we are, the more we are willing to give up what we cannot have and to accept what we cannot change, the less likely we are to become angry and aggressive.

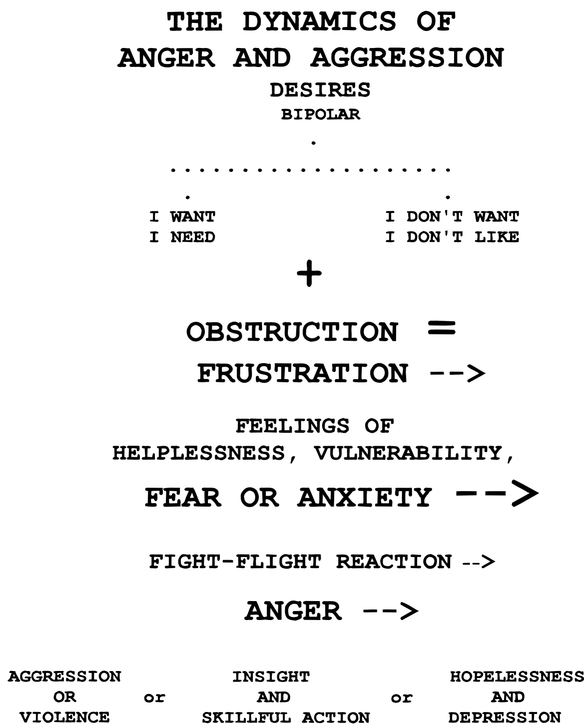

Figure 1.

I then continue to direct the client's attention to the roots of anger as illustrated by the chart represented in Figure 1. I explain that, when our desires are obstructed, our aversions intrude, and our sense of self is violated, we feel frustrated. Things are not as we wish them to be. Individuals differ in the degree of frustration they can tolerate. Indeed, the ability to tolerate frustration is the hallmark of the mature, civilized individual. Various factors may influence an individual's ability to tolerate frustration, including temperament and other inherited factors, early overwhelming emotional traumas, training in frustration tolerance or the lack thereof, and—most important—self-discipline and moral fibre.

The experience of frustration has several significant strands. It is permeated by subtle but powerful feelings of helplessness of which the angry individual is often unaware or in denial. Feelings of helplessness are always associated with frustrated desire. Indeed, the feeling of helplessness may be defined as the perceived inability to satisfy one's desires. No desire—no feeling of helplessness. The reader can confirm or falsify this through introspection by recalling a feeling of anger, identifying the feelings of frustration, and checking for a simultaneous feeling of helplessness. One of the most important facts about anger, one that is usually denied and repressed, is that an angry individual feels helpless.

This fact cannot be emphasized too strongly, because when we are angry we are striving and straining to deny our helplessness and to assert its opposite—a sense of mastery, or might, or macho. Indeed, one of the psychological functions of anger is to reduce the sense of danger by denying and repressing the feelings of helplessness and replacing them with feelings of pseudo-power. The power of anger is pseudo because it is born in helplessness and is motivated by the desire to deny feelings of helplessness. Without being aware of the feelings of helplessness that underlie anger, it is extremely difficult to manage the anger energy.

Feelings of helplessness give rise to feelings of vulnerability and danger. If one feels helpless to satisfy a desire, one may feel a loss of control over one's life and destiny. This is experienced as a threat to the organism. The experience of threat stimulates the fight-flight reaction, which explains the physiology and subjective physical feelings of anger.

The question is often debated as to whether human anger and aggression are innate or learned, whether they are instinctually or culturally determined. In my view they are both. The capacity for anger and aggression are built into the animal body. Animal aggression is a manifestation of the fight-flight response, an automatic physiological response to the perception of danger. It involves preparing the body for action—either fight or flight. Physiologically, this involves a neurohormonal response that differentially shifts the distribution of blood in order to bring oxygen and nutrients to the muscles and carry wastes away. The heart beats faster, respirations increase, the metabolic rate increases, the skin becomes flushed to carry away heat, the stomach and intestines are drained of blood (causing the fluttering butterfly feeling in the pit of the stomach), and the muscles become tense and active. In both fight (aggression) and flight (anxiety), neural, vascular, respiratory, and hormonal changes prepare the body for muscular activity. The inhibition of muscular activity in human anger, which is due to the moral constraints against aggression, result in the experience of tension—which is the hallmark of modern stress.

The difference between human and animal anger lies in the difference between the human and the animal mind. The animal becomes aggressive in order to eat, to propagate, and to defend life, family, and territory. Human anger and aggression serve not only these animal ends, but also serve the sublime, selfish, egoic interests of ordinary mind to establish a secure sense of identity and meaning. Human anger is fueled by the selfish-self, futilely striving for happiness by pursuing what it wants, avoiding what it fears, and asserting, promoting, or defending itself.

STEP FOUR: REFLECTION

Once one has gained some familiarity with the causes of anger, it is then necessary to reflect upon anger as it arises. This is not easy and may not be possible for the beginner. It takes patience and self-discipline. Anger has the capacity to overcome and disable our powers of reflection and logical analysis. To begin, the best most individuals can do is to reflect on anger after it has subsided.

After an incident of anger, as soon as one is able, it is good to reflect on it and try to visualize vividly the situation in which the anger occurred. Then ask yourself: "What did I want that I wasn't getting?" "What was I getting that I didn't want?" "How did I feel that my sense of self was being negated?" After the desires have been identified, one should try to identify the obstructions to the satisfaction of those desires. Once these factors have been identified, one can then focus on the complex compound of the feelings of frustration.

One must go slowly here. It is essential to become fully aware of the feelings of frustration, vulnerability, helplessness and fear. Anger involves the denial of these feelings. Healing anger requires opening to them, becoming aware of them, accepting them. The feeling of helplessness, in particular, is a key to anger. The subjective sense of danger aroused by the feeling of helplessness stimulates the fight-flight response. One can check for oneself how feelings of anger blot out feelings of vulnerability, helplessness, and fear.

Had she taken responsibility for her anger and reflected upon it, Celeste might have been willing to hear and reflect upon her therapist's interpretations, which might run as follows: "You have blamed your colleague for your being fired, but can you see that your ambition—your desire to "make it big" and please your father—motivated your unethical search of your colleague's computer, the discovery of which resulted in your losing your job? Even if she competed with you unethically, you have the choice to respond constructively or self-destructively. In this case, your response to your colleague's actions was the cause of your being fired. Your feelings of helplessness about not achieving your ambition to be manager of your magazine were intolerable to you. You resorted to unethical tactics in response to your colleague's ruthless competition and you were caught. Had you been willing to experience and accept your feelings of frustration, anxiety, and helplessness you might be still working for the magazine and still have a chance to be editor. You need to learn that you cannot always have what you want when you want it. And if you become angry and act aggressively out of the frustration and feelings of helplessness, you will have to face the consequences."

Such interpretations, which are delivered in the unique style and language of individual therapists, are difficult for many clients to hear and accept. This difficulty is what psychoanalysts call "resistance." The therapist must be diplomatic, patient, and gentle in interpreting these resistances. Clients who can accept that they cannot always have what they want and must often accept what they don't want and deal with the feelings of helplessness and frustration by experiencing them gracefully usually are able to overcome their anger and aggression. Those who resist will probably not benefit much from therapy.

All this also applies to David. Had he been willing to take responsibility for his anger and reflect on it he might have seen that his lifelong pattern was to half repress his desires and half repress the anger that arose to deny the consequent feelings of helplessness. The result was that he was unhappy with everyone around him because they did not satisfy his endless desires—and they were unhappy with him because of his chronic, "silent" anger. David needed to be prodded to become aware of and articulate his desires, to reflect upon how reasonable or childish they were, and to see how his dark moods were the result of

his chronic feelings of frustration, helplessness, and anger. Gradually, over time, he too might have been able to modify his behavior and to relate differently to the objects of his desires.

STEP FIVE: DECISION

Once one has reflected on the causes of a particular incident of anger as it arises, one must make a commitment, an assessment, and a decision. The commitment is to not act out feelings of anger, to not repress them—rather to become aware of them, reflect on them, and find another way of responding to the underlying feelings of frustration and helplessness. Once one has made this commitment it must be activated the moment one is aware of a rising feeling of anger. This involves the development of self-control, as every discipline does. In my opinion, and from the Buddhist point of view, good therapy (or good religion) involves the development of awareness and self-discipline.

The assessment is prompted by the search for an alternative to the satisfaction of one's desires or the amelioration of one's bruised ego. The question is: "Was (is) there some way I could have gotten what I wanted or avoided what I didn't want, or some satisfactory level of either, without becoming angry?" This involves both a practical and a moral assessment.

Finding alternatives to anger and aggression depend upon finding alternative means to satisfy our desires. There is nothing wrong with satisfying our desires provided that we are not hurting others or ourselves. On the other hand, perhaps one cannot think of any other way to get what one wants except through intimidation, manipulation, scheming, cheating, or other immoral or illegal means. Celeste sometimes went after what she wanted with no regard for morality, ethics, or law, which got her into the trouble that caused her suffering. As Sophocles observed sagely of Oedipus (and all of us): The greatest griefs are those we cause ourselves.

Finding alternatives to anger involves making a moral evaluation of the situation: "If I pursue this course of action to satisfy my desires, will anyone be hurt by it? Will I be hurt by the consequences?" The limitations on the satisfaction of our desires imposed by civilization creates frustrations we all must bear, without anger and with good cheer. This was the thesis of Freud's epic work *Civilization and Its Discontents*. When, as often happens, we cannot find a satisfactory way to satisfy our strong and insistent desires—when we feel that there is nothing we can do or say to ameliorate our painful and humiliating feelings of frustration, helplessness, and anxiety—we are vulnerable to being overcome by anger.

The solution to this dilemma is best expressed in the famous Serenity Prayer: "Give me the courage to change what I can, the serenity to accept what I cannot change, and the wisdom to know the difference." If we have the insight and moral fibre to find a legal and ethical way to satisfy our desires, then we need the courage to pursue that course. If there is nothing we can do, however, how do we achieve serenity in the face of frustration, fear, and a feeling of vulnerability?

Some clients are not willing to reflect honestly on these questions, which is one reason drug therapy is so popular. If it were possible to talk honestly with her, I would have asked Celeste what else she might have done short of an unethical or illegal act to compete with her colleague? Perhaps she could have done something to earn the trust or respect of her superiors. Perhaps all she could have done was to continue to do her job to the best of her ability. She would have to reflect on the wisdom of committing unethical or illegal acts to achieve her desires, particularly with regard to the possible negative

consequences for her—one of which happened and drove her into therapy. Perhaps, despite all her honest efforts, her colleague would have won the job. She would have to accept the fact. Refusal to accept that would inevitably result in the persistence of her feelings of frustration, anxiety, helplessness, anger, and eventually—possibly—depression. If she were willing to work on accepting the fact and working with her painful feelings, she could move on to the next step.

The same is true of David. Having faced the specific intensity and objects of his desires, he would have to ask himself whether they are possible to attain and, if so, how? Can he make his relationships and life into what he wants them to be? Or is he dependent on others to do it for him and angry with them if they don't? He too would have to consider making changes in order to satisfy his desires; when he has reached the limit of his ability to do this, he has to relax into his feelings of frustration, anxiety, helplessness, and chronic anger and begin to practice patience and acceptance of others and of his life.

STEP SIX: RELAXATION

It is difficult enough to achieve serenity when everything is going our way. The challenge, which is not for the fainthearted, is to remain serene when things are going wrong. Most individuals are stressed out, to one degree or another, by the fear of things going wrong. This is a good working definition of stress—"the fear of things going or staying wrong." Picture poor ordinary mind, mindlessly pursuing its insatiable desires, strenuously avoiding its unavoidable aversions, and struggling to maintain a modicum of cheerfulness and hope in the face of bewilderment about life and the knowledge of certain death. This is an impossible task. It is bound to fail. Things are bound to go wrong, and regularly do—not because evil exists in the world, but because life doesn't always work out the way we want. Obstacles to our Happiness Projects constantly arise.

The precariousness of life means not only that no one knows the time or manner of their death but also that no one can satisfy the demands of ordinary mind to fulfill every desire, to avoid everything unpleasant, and to be regarded with value by everyone forever. This is the context of the anxiety that plagues civilization. The increased complexity of modern society has multiplied that anxiety into the stress syndrome—a chronic state of anxious worry that things will go wrong, which keeps the sympathetic nervous system activated until it becomes exhausted and causes cardiovascular collapse.

The energy of anger can be tamed by turning down the fight-flight response, by calming the sympathetic-adrenal axis. This is the well-known relaxation response (Benson, 1990). The relaxation response is essentially an intentional turning down of the sympathetic-adrenal response through a biofeedback mechanism. It has a physiological and a psychological component—relaxing the body and relaxing the mind.

When my clients have reached this stage and are ready to condition themselves to experience their feelings of frustration, helplessness, anxiety, and anger with a greater degree of self-containment and equanimity, I teach them how to relax body and mind. First, one must learn how to relax the body when one is not angry, and then learn to apply this technique as anger arises. Relaxation will turn down the fight-flight reaction (which provides the physiological fuel of anger). Relaxation of the body is muscular relaxation, often known as progressive muscular relaxation. The client sits in a comfortable chair, closes the eyes, and relaxes. I tell them I am going to guide them through a relaxation exercise. To understand the technique, I tell them, you must become aware of the difference between tension and relaxation. I ask them to press their toes into the floor and feel

the tension. I then tell them that the effort creates the tension and that relaxation is the withdrawal of effort from the muscles. I then guide them up each major muscle group (lower legs, upper legs, abdomen, chest, upper arms, forearms, hands and fingers, jaw, face and brow), asking them to visualize withdrawing effort from each group—like allowing a stretched rubber band to come to its resting position. I ask them to practice this exercise many times a day in order to be ready to invoke it at the moment of awareness of arising anger. Relaxing the muscles in this way turns down the sympathetic nervous system response in the same way that exercise turns it up—by feeding information to the central processing unit that the muscles are not needed, not going to be used, and therefore the preparation of the body for action can be disabled.

Once the technique of muscular relaxation is learned, practiced, and mastered, it can be applied in the moment of anger—particularly when it has been decided that no satisfactory alternative action is possible and that one must open to the feeling of helplessness. The technique is to focus awareness on the feeling of helplessness while relaxing the muscles. This deconditions the anxiety associated with frustration and helps create the feeling of serenity.

The second component of relaxation is relaxing the mind. A tense mind is a busy mind. A busy mind is thinking about the past and future, scanning the life field for problems and, inevitably, finding them. According to an old Buddhist saying, a person with a busy mind is bound to suffer. This is because busy mind looks for problems and finds them, which stimulates the fight-flight reaction and other negative emotions. A frightening thought can provoke the physiology of fear.

The traditional method for calming the mind is meditation. A beginning meditator is instructed in shamatha meditation, also called stabilizing and tranquilizing meditation. The Tibetan name is "shi ne"—which means "dwelling in peace." This meditation calms and quiets the mind by bringing awareness into the present moment, without the agitating hypermentation. The basic technique is sitting in a relaxed but alert posture and focusing attention on the breath. When intruding thoughts distract, one deliberately brings attention back to the breath. There are many variations on this method. I teach this basic method in my office to clients who have reached this step in the therapy of anger. I do not refer to Buddhism or meditation. I call this technique "quieting the mind." If the client seems interested in pursuing meditation practice further, I refer them to a local meditation group (including my own, which I hold every Friday evening from 6:30 to 7:30 free of charge and without obligation).

It has often been noted that the male of the human species seems more inclined to anger and aggression than the female. Certainly the historical record would confirm this. The explanation often given is that male and female hormones differ, the male's testosterone in particular being associated with aggressive behavior. There is another compatible explanation; namely, that although women are trained to be helpless—the much discussed "learned helplessness"—men are trained to deny helplessness and, instead, to assert their power: the tradition of Macho, which means "might" or "power." Thus, although women have benefitted from assertiveness training workshops to overcome learned helplessness, men could benefit from learned helplessness workshops to overcome Macho.

Relaxing body and mind means relaxing into existence. Physiologically, it means turning off the fight-flight response—which is essentially combat with or flight from existence in the service of the survival of body and ego. Psychologically it means accepting existence as it is in the present moment, without struggling to change anything to satisfy the demandingness of ordinary mind's happiness projects. Relaxation and meditation are the antidotes to anger and the keys to Serenity.

STEP SEVEN: OPENING THE HEART

As one works with anger with patience and perseverance, through one episode after another, the cumulative effect is an opening of the heart. Opening the heart is also referred to in Buddhist circles as "softening ego." It means relaxing one's defenses, opening to the pain of not getting what one wants and of getting what one doesn't want with patience and fortitude. Softening of the ego refers to lowering the protective walls of the cocoon of ordinary mind and developing a more flexible and skillful response to life. As the heart opens, one learns to let go gracefully of desires that are impossible to satisfy and to accept what one does not want but cannot avoid. As one opens to the feelings of frustration, helplessness, and vulnerability, one becomes less frightened of them, more willing to experience them, and increasingly able to relax into them. The effect is relaxing into the maelstrom of existence with a calm and tranquil mind. And, as one voluntarily opens one's heart, the cumulative effect is the reduction in the frequency and intensity of anger.

In the Buddhist tradition, the antidote to anger and aggression is patience. Patience is suffering without aggression. It means experiencing without anger or aggression the pain of frustration, anxiety, and helplessness that come from not getting what we want when we want it and of getting what we don't want when we don't want it. The practice of patience means enduring the unwanted without aggression. As we open to the unwanted, the insistent energy of selfish desire weakens. Tolerance for the dissatisfactions and frustrations of life is strengthened. And the vulnerability to anger and aggression is reduced.

Working with clients like Celeste and David at this level involves looking at their responses to the events of their lives, week to week, as therapy unfolds. The focus is on feelings of anger. The awareness of anger becomes the vehicle for curing it by reflecting on the dynamics—by reflecting on one's desires and aversions, the circumstances in which they were frustrated, the feelings of helplessness, anxiety, and anger. The process continues by analyzing the specific situation in terms of possible options to make desired changes and their possible consequences. If change is not possible and it is necessary to accept what cannot be changed, I guide the client through relaxation and meditation on the specific event.

Another specific Buddhist practice that can help to heal anger and is increasingly available to the public in plain language is "lo jong." "Lo" means consciousness, or mind; "jong" means cultivation or training. It is a Tibetan Buddhist form of mind training called "Raising Boddhicitta"—which means taming the mind and opening the heart. It has a meditation associated with it and also a postmeditation practice. The meditation, which rides on the breath, is called "tong-len"—which means "sending and receiving." The mediator visualizes sending to others on the out breath what one desires, values, and covets for oneself, and receiving from others on the in breath their problems, troubles, and pain. It is the practice of opening to the unwanted that softens the ego and opens the heart. The postmeditation practice involves developing more skillful self-discipline, self-reliance, and mindfulness as well as compassion for the pain of others—which has the same causes as our own. This is the Buddhist path of understanding and healing anger and aggression.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The Buddhist approach to healing anger and aggression is based upon the principle that anger is generated by mind, not by external circumstances or physiological processes. This implies that certain conditions are necessary for the successful healing of anger and aggression. First, the client must take responsibility for his or her anger. This first step

often presents many obstacles. Taking responsibility may feel like blaming oneself, and the client may resist and continue to complain about others. Once a client is willing to take responsibility, the second step is to turn awareness to the mind—particularly to the Three Poisons, which are here defined as Desire, Aversion, and Ignorance. In practical terms, ignorance refers to selfishness. The third step involves understanding the causes of anger and aggression, which is taught didactically to the client. At this point, therapy is an educational process in which the client learns how anger arises through the frustration of one's desires, aversions, and defensive mechanisms. This education matures into a self-transformation as the client moves to the fourth and fifth steps and learns how to reflect upon analyze anger, to identify the desires and obstacles, to change what one can and to accept what one cannot change. Acceptance is learned through the sixth step of relaxation—meditation and opening to the pain. The seventh step is a lifelong process of responding to life events, reflecting upon one's response, and changing one's thinking and behavior in order to ride more skillfully the energies of anger and aggression on the spot as they arise.

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