

# ANGER: THE ENEMY WITHIN



Be mindful of the feelings that ignite destructive behaviors.

Anger is our enemy; the sorcerer within who leads us astray, thwarts our desires, causes our suffering, leads us to torment others through provocations and outbursts. Powerless to prevent the consequences, we are like the ship's captain who helplessly watches his vessel driven before the winds – annoyance, irritation or resentment - that build into a seething hurricane.

From where do these rages arise? We know the source: they come from within – our own thinking, the workings of our minds. In truth, moods are nothing more than intangible, fleeting mental states. By not being mindful of yapping thoughts, we allow them to run like a pack of wild dogs, destroying all in their path. How does something so unsubstantial, ephemeral as a thought cause such harm, wreak such havoc on our lives and those around us?

We allow it. Never do we think, “Now I will be angry;” but, just the same, we become caught in anger's whirlwind. Circumstances or past actions have created the conditions for outbursts. Over a lifetime, even feelings of mild annoyance can carve deep channels in the brain - needing only a spark, a stray thought, to trigger fury.

Our destructive anger starts as momentary irritation, a seemingly insignificant disruption in our thinking. The problem, too often, is that by the time we become aware of our thoughts' corrosive drip-drip-dripping, anger has slipped its cage, loosed its tethers; we become incapable of checking cruel words and preventing their consequences. Escalation inevitably results in increased misery and torment for everyone involved. Not until the storm has passed do we realize that had we been more aware of the subtext of our thinking, destruction could have been minimized or even prevented. But what are we fighting, really? Our own mental afflictions.

An aggressor can inflict bodily harm; but all mental anguish is purely self-inflicted, for it comes from within our own minds. Taking on our anger requires courage to face its source – paying meticulous attention to even momentary flashes of impatience, of criticism, and then being alert so that we can neutralize them before they escalate.

How? Mild but growing feelings of discomfort or annoyance are the clues that we are indulging what began as a stray thought; that our thinking may soon run amok in a futile attempt to protect wounded pride – or whatever affliction has us in its grasp. As we become increasingly vigilant, at the first hint of such feelings we become better able to recognize them and to prevent emotional torrents.

“What feelings/thoughts am I to be vigilant about?” you ask. Advantage. Annoyance. Approval. Assumptions. Criticism. Disappointment. Disparagement. Disrespect. Fame. Fear. Frustration. Gloating. Gossip. Harshness. Haughtiness. Inferences. Insolence. Irritation. Jealously. Mockery. Pride. Protection. Recognition. Resentment. Reward. Righteousness. Worry. In short, anything that knocks us out of a calm, quiet mental state.

Whether subtle or obvious, these are the feelings/thoughts behind the actions that too often lead to outbursts of harmful words. Particularly when we are tired, stressed, or have had even a little bit of alcohol, we may be as powerless to resist as a ship's captain before the gale. We will be swept away, dashed on the rocky shore. Sober, rested we may resist these miseries, able to maintain the willpower to refrain from speaking, to stop from acting when thus afflicted.

Easier said than done. No doubt. When those subtle, negative thoughts first arise - that's when we still have the chance to make a positive choice! Catch yourself in the moment. Be silent. Refrain from action. Notice. Observe, Release. Allow the angry feelings to pass. Wait for your mood to lift. When the forest is ablaze, the wisest course is to clear away the fuel; prevent the flames from spreading.

Inhibition of thought is not the path. Thoughts flow and ebb; no one can control everything that comes to mind. Efforts to do so, however well intended, are doomed to fail, if merely from eventual exhaustion at the unrelenting stream of consciousness.

Indeed, attempts at thought-control will lead to suppression and repression. They will leave us a withered, impotent husk - so bounded by rituals or frightened that all life's joy is squandered in a fruitless attempt to regulate our brains. Who knows the source of the hurricane's first breeze; who can stop the zephyr before it materializes? How can we hope to set up enough safeguards so that no errant thought could ever slip through?

Patience – that is the path to help us extinguish the fire kindled by churning thoughts before it becomes a conflagration. To resist anger, we must stay calm. So we commit to training our mental capacities, raising our consciousness via the habits of self-reflection, scrutiny and vigilance. Becoming aware, fully, that “I am the thinker,” living in the moment-to-moment realization that each person's own mind is creating his or her experience of reality.

“But wait!” you say. “Aren't I justified in resenting those who try to do me harm, who stand in the way of my goals or treat me badly?”

Certainly some people seem to be intrinsically hostile. Bob had a boss whose every action thwarted Bob's progress. But the boss was unaware of the grip of his mental habits and their effect on his own life and happiness. The boss's destructive thoughts - those we should hate, not their victim. Hating him was as futile as blaming a hot stove for burning our skin when we touch it.

Others may be momentarily afflicted by negative thoughts in the same way that we are vulnerable to acting on our impulses when we are upset, worried, in any way off-balance. But how can we be angry with someone for having a human lapse? Shouldn't those individuals' actions arouse our understanding? And, in the same way, don't we need compassion when our mental afflictions get the better of us?

Our “tormentors” (my thoughts about those people) actually are our friends. They illuminate our past actions. Each taunt, every slight, all provocations are nothing more than a spotlight on our past defilements. They point us toward work that we need to do to acknowledge our errors, express regret to and ask forgiveness of those whom we have harmed. We need not – must not – suspend our ethical sense in a blind condoning of someone's thinking-gone-amok. Patience is not apathy or resignation, but acceptance: the felt understanding that, as humans, we are bound to “lose it” sometimes – just as we are bound by common experience. Haven't we all suffered the bitter fruits of anger?

And, perhaps, the place to begin is to become patient with ourselves: accepting the pain we have brought into our own lives through anger.

“All the joy the world contains  
Has come through wishing happiness for others.

All the misery the world contains  
Has come through wanting for oneself.”

*Shantideva (An 8th Century Tibetan Monk)*

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