

HEALING ANGER: The Power of Patience from a Buddhist Perspective

Question: *Western psychotherapy encourages the expression of anger. Is there is an appropriate expression of anger as opposed to the antidote of patience? What do you say to the psychologists and the counselors who say, "Let it all come out," about anger and hatred?*

Dalai Lama: Here I think we have to understand that there are many different situations. In some cases, people harbor strong feelings of anger and hurt based on something done to them in the past, an abuse or whatever, and that feeling is kept bottled up. Regarding this, there is a Tibetan expression which says that if there is any sickness in the conch shell, you can clear it by blowing it out. In other words, if anything is blocking the conch shell, just blow it out, and it will be clear. So it is possible to imagine a situation where it may be better to just let out feelings of anger and express them.

However, generally speaking, anger and hatred are the type of emotions which, if left unchecked or unattended, tend to compound themselves and keep on increasing. The more one works with them, the more one adopts a cautious attitude and tries to reduce the level of their force, the better it is.

Q: *Aren't hatred and anger connected with attachment, not only toward things, but also principles, ideologies, and especially the identification of "I" as a permanent self?*

DL: It is very true that both hatred and anger are ultimately rooted in the feeling of a strong, solid notion of self, a permanent ego. Generally speaking, when we talk about grasping at a notion of self or ego, we should distinguish between two types. One definition of ego is a self-centered attitude, where one regards one's own interest as the only one worthy of consideration and remains quite oblivious or indifferent toward others' needs or feelings. Then there is another type of ego, a belief in an enduring, permanent, concrete self or "I." At the beginning stage, these two types of egocentric attitudes are complementary, and one reinforces the other. So, in our minds they are inextricably linked.

But if one emphasizes the practice of bodhichitta, the aspiration to attain Buddhahood for the sake of all sentient beings, and yet harms that altruistic capacity by paying little attention to generating insight into the ultimate nature of reality, then it is possible that in some cases it may remain beyond one's intellectual scope. In such cases, the self-centered attitude based upon selfish thoughts, a feeling of disregard for others' well-being and others' feelings, may decrease, but grasping at a permanent, abiding, or enduring self may still remain. Similarly, if one emphasizes the practice of emptiness but does not pay attention to the bodhichitta aspect of the path, then grasping at a permanent, abiding, concrete self may loosen, but the selfish, self-centered attitude may still remain. So at a higher level, one can see a distinction between these two types of ego.

This is why it is so important when engaging in the spiritual path toward perfection to be able to adopt a path where there is the unification of good method and wisdom, skillful means and insight. I think this question is also related to the basic Buddhist stance that because hatred and attachment are ultimately rooted in ignorance, in a misconception of the nature of reality, the specific antidotes to anger and hatred and specific antidotes to attachment can be seen as limited because they are specific to individual afflictive emotions. On the other hand, the antidote to ignorance or misconception is more comprehensive in that it serves as an antidote not only to ignorance but also to hatred and attachment because they are rooted in ignorance.

Also, when we talk about the notion of self in Buddhism, it is important to bear in mind that there are different degrees or types. There are some types of sense of self which are not only to be cultivated but also to be reinforced and enhanced. For instance, in order to have a strong determination to seek Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings, one needs a very strong sense of confidence, which is based upon a sense of commitment and courage. This requires a strong sense of self. Unless one has that identity or sense of self, one will not be able to develop the confidence and courage to strongly seek this aim. In addition, the doctrine of Buddha-nature gives us a lot of encouragement and confidence because we realize that there is this potential within us which will allow us to attain the perfection that we are seeking. However, there are different types of sense of self which are rooted in a belief in a permanent, solid, indivisible entity called "self" or "I." There is the belief that there is something very concrete or objective about this entity. This is a false notion of self which must be overcome.

Similarly, within this false notion of self, we can see various levels, various gross forms where there is a naive belief in a permanent, abiding, unchanging self. If we go further we find that there is a belief in something possessing a sort of intrinsic reality and a status which is independent and unique to the thing. Again, that is a false notion.

Another strong sense of self which is false involves a tendency to disregard others' well-being and others' feelings and rights. That sense of self is, again, to be discarded and overcome. So we should be very sensitive when we use the words "ego" and "self" in the Buddhist context, not to totally adopt a black-and-white stance saying, "This is out, and this is in."

Q: *What is the role of wrathful deities?*

DL: This is not easy to explain. I think the basic philosophy is that human emotions, such as anger, usually act as a force to bring about swift action. I think that is the foundation. So the general principle behind the idea of wrathful deities is that the one thing which is unique to emotional states such as anger or other afflictive emotions is that they have a kind of energy, and when one experiences that emotional state, there is a kind of energy which would enable the individual to take swift action. It is a very powerful motivating factor. It is in relation to this fact that the practice of relating to wrathful deities has to be understood.

Another thing we have to understand is the basic Buddhist stance toward these so-called afflictive emotions. From the perspective of non-Mahayana systems, since the ultimate goal is one's own personal liberation from samsara, and there is no talk about the importance of generating bodhichitta, all the negative actions of body, speech, and mind are to be abandoned. There are no exceptional circumstances where they are permissible. So they are to be abandoned. Period.

However, in the Mahayana sutra vehicle, because the primary aim of a Bodhisattva practitioner is to be of service to others, there are certain exceptions allowed in regard to the negative actions of body and speech. However, no exceptions are allowed in regard to the nonvirtues of the mind because there is no possibility of mental nonvirtues being beneficial. In the case of the Bodhisattva practitioner, if the situation is such that it is beneficial to the larger community or many sentient beings, then there is permission for the Bodhisattva to use attachment, not so much on the path but as a complementary factor to the path, as an aid toward the goal of helping others.

However, there is no permission given to the Bodhisattva for generating hatred or anger in Sutrayana.

Tantric Buddhism contains unique techniques of meditation on emptiness which are based upon deity yoga, the meditative procedure whereby one dissolves ordinary perception and ordinary apprehension and deliberately adopts an identity which is perfected and divine. On that basis, exceptions are also allowed in regard to the use of anger on the path, and it is in this context that the wrathful deities are used in tantric meditation.

Naturally, when one utilizes the energy of anger for the benefit of others, at that time it is much easier to visualize wrathful deities rather than peaceful deities.