

WORKING WITH ANGER

I'm very happy to be here tonight. First, I'd like to tell you how it came to be that we're having a talk in this beautiful Chinese temple. When I was in Seattle last May, a woman from Thailand took me to visit several Buddhist temples in the area. This was one of them. We had planned to go to a Thai temple that afternoon, but once we started talking with the two nuns here, we had such an interesting conversation that, in the end, we had no time to visit the other temple!

As a nun living in the West, I don't have the opportunity to be with other nuns very often. The two nuns from this temple and I felt an instant sisterhood, and we began to do our biweekly recitation of vows together. Also, since I've lived in Asia for many years — most recently in Hong Kong and Singapore — I feel at home in Chinese temples. When I returned to Seattle in August, the nuns from this temple and I met again, and therefore this talk was organised.

I'm also happy to give a talk at a Chinese temple be-

cause it's very important for practitioners of all Buddhist traditions to meet and to understand each other's traditions. In this way, we won't have misconceptions about other traditions and will appreciate them. Harmony amongst all Buddhist traditions is extremely important for the existence of the Dharma.

Buddhism is one of the few world religions that has never had a war fought in its name. This is due to the open-mindedness and mutual cooperation of Buddhists. The way to preserve these attitudes is to meet each other and learn about each other's traditions.

It's important to look beyond the external appearances of Buddhism in the various countries. For example, I was trained in Tibetan Buddhism but I took the bhikshuni (full) ordination in Taiwan. Living in a Chinese monastery was a big change for me. First, prayers and teachings were in Mandarin, so I couldn't understand anything. (Not that I always could in Tibetan, but I had at least some familiarity with the common prayers.)

Also, I had to wear Chinese robes, which are different from Tibetan robes. Accustomed to sleeveless shirts, I suddenly had to wear many layers of clothes with sleeves. In Tibetan temples, we sit down while reciting prayers, but the Chinese chant standing up. Because I wasn't used to standing for hours, my legs swelled up!

These external differences made me think deeply, "What is Buddhism? What is the essence of the Buddha's

teachings? How is this essence expressed in various cultures? What was the Buddha really aiming at?”

To answer these questions, I had to look beyond the superficial cultural appearances of Buddhist practice in different places. As Dharma comes to the West, we have to examine this too because we’re learning Buddhism through an Asian cultural overlay. We have to keep asking ourselves, “What is the real purpose of this ceremony or this practice? How do we practice Buddhism as Westerners?”

His Holiness the Dalai Lama says that Westerners don’t need to adopt Tibetan culture to practice the Dharma: “You may eat mo-mos, drink Tibetan tea and wear Tibetan clothes, but your nose is still from the West!” We need to seek the meaning of the Dharma, and not confuse it with cultural trappings and external forms. This challenge faces us Western Buddhists.

Tonight, we’re going to discuss anger and patience. There is nothing “Buddhist” about this subject. In fact, many of Buddha’s teachings have nothing to do with Buddhism — that is, if you think Buddhism is a religion, a dogma, a set of beliefs to cling to for fear of not being a good Buddhist. Looking clearly, we discover that most of Buddhism is simply common sense. Common sense isn’t the property of any religion. It’s lucidity about what is a reasonable and beneficial way to live.

Thus, when discussing the techniques the Buddha

prescribed for overcoming anger, we're talking about common sense, not our religious doctrine. In other words, let's look at our minds and see how we can deal with this explosive volcano called anger.

IS ANGER DESTRUCTIVE?

Let's first agree that anger is a destructive emotion. I'm bringing this up because some people think anger is constructive. They say, "This person cheated me. I'm right to get angry. It's good I told him off and put him in his place. Otherwise, he'd walk all over me!" In this way, they try to justify their anger.

If we think like this, we won't do anything about our anger, because we think it's beneficial. But let's look deeper and ask ourselves, "When I'm angry, am I happy?" Is anybody here happy when he or she is annoyed, irritated or furious?

No one is. If we're miserable when we're angry, how can anger be positive? Positive qualities bring happiness, but when we're angry, we're definitely unhappy.

Examining our own experience, we'll find that anger has many disadvantages. When we're angry, we do and say things that we regret later. Anger makes us lose control of ourselves, so we speak cruelly to others; and we may even physically harm those we love. Each of us has a hidden cache of events in our lives that we don't like

to remember, because we're ashamed of how we acted on those occasions.

Sometimes we wonder why others don't like us. We think we're pretty nice people! But if we look at how we treat others, especially when we're angry, then it's clear why they don't trust us.

Remember a situation in which you were angry. Step out of your own shoes and look at yourself from the other person's view. Look at what you said and did. Were you a likable person then? Were you kind? Would you want to be your own friend when you're irascible?

IS IT GOOD TO LET OUR ANGER OUT?

Many therapists encourage their clients to feel angry about things that happened years ago and to let their anger out. Later, when the therapists or clients listen to Buddhist teachings on the disadvantages of anger, they wonder if the Buddha advocated suppressing anger.

No, he didn't. Suppressing or repressing anger doesn't get rid of it, it only hides it. We may have a smile on our face, but if we're still angry in our hearts, we haven't resolved the anger. That's not practicing patience, it's being a hypocrite! In addition, holding the anger is painful and can harm us.

It's important to be honest with ourselves and to recognise our anger, rather than to pretend it doesn't exist.

However, recognising we're angry is different from verbally and physically expressing it. When we let our anger out, we risk making other people miserable. Nor does releasing the anger by beating pillows or screaming in solitude resolve the hostility or frustration. That merely dissipates the anger-energy temporarily. In addition, we start to form a habit of screaming or beating things, which isn't beneficial.

There are alternatives to the extremes of either suppressing the anger or letting it out. Buddhism advocates dissolving it, so that it no longer exists. Then our hearts will be free from hostility and our actions won't threaten others' well-being. With clear minds, we can then discuss and resolve difficult situations with others.

TRAINING IN PATIENCE

What can we do when we're angry? The Buddha described a variety of techniques to develop patience.

Many of these are found in *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life* by the great Indian sage, Shantideva. Chapter Six is one of the longest chapters in the book, and it teaches how to avoid anger and cultivate patience.

First, we should learn the techniques for dealing with anger. Then we practice them in our meditation. This builds up our familiarity with and confidence in these new ways of perceiving things. By practicing these tech-

niques in a peaceful environment — seated on our meditation cushion — we'll build up a repertoire of alternative ways of perception in situations that usually make us angry.

Training in these techniques when we're not angry is important. It's like learning to drive. We don't go on the highway during the first driving lesson because we're unprepared and unskilled. Instead, we drive around the parking lot to become familiar with the accelerator, the brakes and the steering wheel. By first practicing in a safe environment, we'll be able to handle the car in more dangerous situations later on.

Similarly, we practice patience first when we're not in a conflict situation. We do this by remembering previous experiences — situations in which we exploded in anger, or events that even now make us hostile or hurt when we remember them. Then we apply the techniques to them: we re-run a mental video of an event, but we try to think differently in it. By viewing the situation from a new perspective, the anger decreases. Then we can also envision ourselves responding to other people differently.

Doing this not only helps us dissolve past hurt and grudges, but also makes us familiar with techniques that we can apply in similar situations in the future. Then whenever a situation occurs in our lives and we feel our anger arising, we can select a technique and apply it.

Sometimes, it's hard to dissolve our anger even when

we're in a peaceful environment, for we become trapped by our past emotions and misconceptions. But if we gradually learn to subdue them, then when we go to work, school or family gatherings, we'll have a fighting chance to work with our anger when it arises. With constant practice, we'll even be able to prevent anger from arising at all.

Subduing anger is a slow and steady process. By hearing one or two things tonight, don't expect your anger to be gone forever by tomorrow. Reacting in anger is a deeply-ingrained bad habit, and like all bad habits, it takes time to remove. We have to put effort into developing patience.

In addition, we have to learn to be patient with ourselves. Sometimes we may get angry at ourselves because we have lost our temper with someone else. "I'm so bad. I'm horrible. I've been attending Buddhist teachings for a month and I still get angry. What's wrong with me?" Thinking like this only compounds the problem. We aren't "guilty, bad and hopeless" because we got angry. We're simply not well-trained in patience. After all, patience is a quality we can only develop with practice and time.

In addition to increasing our patience, tolerance and wisdom — qualities which make our minds clear — it's helpful to learn to communicate clearly with others. Nowadays, universities, businesses and adult education

programmes conduct classes on communication, assertiveness training and conflict resolution. While Buddhist techniques help to pacify the internal anger, these courses teach us techniques for effective listening and expression.

ANTIDOTES TO ANGER

Let's look at some examples and examine ways to deal with anger. Receiving criticism frequently prompts our anger. Was anyone here criticised today? I wouldn't be surprised if all of you were to raise your hands. Generally, receiving criticism comes easily. We have to work so hard to get some things — like money — but criticism comes without even needing to ask for it!

When we're criticised we usually feel we're the only person that gets dumped on, don't we? "I do my best, but while the boss always overlooks others' mistakes, she inevitably notices mine. So many people pick on me!"

However, when we talk to others, we'll notice that almost everyone feels he or she is criticised too much. It's not just us. Our problems appear bigger than those of others because we're so self-centred.

When someone criticises us, our instant reaction is anger. What prompts this response? It is our conception of the situation. Although we may not be consciously aware of it, we hold the view, "I'm perfect. But if I make mistakes, they're small ones. This person has completely

misunderstood the situation. He's exaggerating my one small mistake and declaring it at the top of his voice to the entire world! He's so wrong!!"

This is an oversimplified description of what is going on inside us, but if we're aware, we'll realise that we feel this way. But are these conceptions correct? Are we perfect or nearly so? Obviously not.

Take a situation in which we make a mistake and someone notices it. Now, if that person came along and told us we had a nose on our face, would we be angry? No. Why not? Because it's obvious that we have a nose. It's there for the world to see. Someone merely saw it and commented upon it.

It's the same with our mistakes and faults. They're there, they're obvious, and the world sees them. That person is only commenting on what is evident to him and to others. Why should we get angry? If we aren't upset when someone says we have a nose, why should we be when he tells us we have faults?

We would be more relaxed if we acknowledged, "Yes, you're right. I made a mistake." Or, "Yes, I have a bad habit." Instead of putting on the act of "I'm perfect. How dare you say that!", we can just admit it and apologise. Saying "I'm sorry" completely diffuses the situation.

It's so hard for us to say "I'm sorry," isn't it? We feel we're losing something by apologising, we're becoming less, we're not worthwhile. We feel slightly cowardly, and

fear the other person will have power over us because we admit our mistake. These fears make us defensive.

All this is our wrong projection. Being able to apologise indicates our internal strength. We're strong enough and have sufficient honesty and self-confidence so that we don't have to pretend to be faultless. We can admit our mistakes. Having faults does not make us a basket case! So many tense situations can be diffused by the simple words, "I'm sorry." Very often, all the other person wants is for us to acknowledge her pain and our role in it.

Similarly, when others apologise to us, we should accept. This is a bodhisattva vow. After someone has apologised to us, if we continue to hold a grudge, we torment ourselves. If we retaliate, we harm them. Of what use is either of these? What kind of people are we if we find happiness in vengefully inflicting misery on others?

Let's change the situation slightly. This time, we are criticised for something we didn't do. Or, we made a small mistake and the other person accuses us of a huge one. Even in such instances, there's still no reason to get angry. It's like somebody telling us we have horns on our heads. We don't have horns. The person who says that is merely exaggerating the situation. What he's saying isn't in the realm of reality. He made a mistake. Similarly, when someone blames us unjustly, there's no reason to become angry or depressed because what he's saying is incorrect.

Of course that doesn't mean we just sit there passively, while the other person lies or exaggerates, without making an effort to correct the misunderstanding. Each situation has to be examined separately, using discriminating wisdom. In some cases, it's better to just let it go, and not try to correct it, even later. The other person may later realise his mistake. Even if he doesn't, it might start a bigger argument if we try to explain what happened.

For example, if your mother is in a bad mood and starts to pick at you, it's better to let it go. Forgive her. If you make an attempt to explain, because she's already irritable, she may become even angrier. And, we would be nagging at our mother for nagging at us! It would be a nuisance to correct everyone every time he or she said something inaccurate. In addition, no one would like having us around.

In other situations, even though it may be painful, we should explain our actions and the evolution of the misunderstanding to the other person. It's our responsibility to do that, and to thus assuage their anger.

It's best to discuss the misunderstanding or disagreement when neither we nor the other person are in the heat of anger. First, when we're angry, we don't express ourselves well and this makes the situation worse. If someone shouts at us, we generally don't listen to what she's saying simply because the way she's saying it is disagreeable to us. Similarly, if we talk angrily to others, they also

don't pay attention to us. So first, we need to calm down by practicing some of the techniques to pacify anger.

Second, when the other person is angry, she won't listen to what we're saying. We don't listen to others when we're incensed because we're overwhelmed with anger at that moment. Similarly, let the other person calm down and approach her later when her mind is more open.

When we explain our actions and the evolution of the misunderstanding to the other person, it's much more effective to speak kindly rather than antagonistically. We don't have anything to lose by being humble and offering an honest explanation. In fact, for those people who have taken bodhisattva vows, it's our obligation to ease the suffering of those who are angry with us. It's cruel to arrogantly say, "Your anger is your problem" and ignore someone we've quarrelled with.

Thus, remembering the example of the nose and the horns is one antidote to anger.

ACTING OR RELAXING

Another technique is also simple. Let's say we're in a horrible situation. If we can remedy it, why get angry? We can act, we can change it. On the other hand, if we can't alter the situation, why get angry? There's nothing to be done, so we're better off accepting the situation and relaxing. Getting stirred up only compounds the suffer-

ing that's already there.

This technique is also good for people who worry a lot. Ask yourself, "Can I do something about this situation?" If the answer is yes, then there's no need to worry. Act. If the answer is no, again worrying is useless. Relax and accept the situation.

CAUSE AND EFFECT

Another technique to counteract anger is to examine how we became involved in the unpleasant situation. Often we feel we're innocent victims of unfair people. "Poor me! I'm innocent. I did nothing and now this nasty person is taking advantage of me!"

That's a victim mentality, isn't it? By getting angry, we make ourselves the victim. Other people don't make us victims. We aren't the victim of another's anger. We're the victim of our own anger. Someone else may blame us, but we become a victim only when we conceive of the situation in a certain way and then get angry at what we've projected. The meaning of this is quite profound. Let's look at it in greater depth.

"Poor me! I didn't bother anyone and now these people are dumping on me." Is this interpretation of our experience accurate? Instead of immediately losing our temper and blaming the other person, let's recognise that this situation is a dependent arising. It depends on both

the other person and us.

First, let's look at what we did in this life to encounter others who treat us poorly. How did we get into this situation? What did we do that aggravated the other person and made him act this way towards us? We must be very honest with ourselves. Maybe we really weren't so innocent. Maybe we were trying to manipulate the other person and he didn't fall for it. He got upset and so we play hurt and offended. But in fact, our own behaviour brought the situation about.

By being introspective, we'll notice our faults and can correct them. Then we won't find ourselves in such unpleasant situations in the future.

This means we take responsibility for being in that situation, regardless of whether or not the other person is making an undue fuss. By acknowledging our mistakes or wrong motivations, we'll become aware of how our behaviour affects other people. By avoiding destructive behaviour in the future, we won't activate others to harm us.

That's looking at what we did in this lifetime to trigger the event. Let's now look from a broader viewpoint, over the course of many lifetimes. This brings in the topic of karma — intentional actions. Our actions leave imprints on our consciousness. These imprints later ripen and influence our experiences.

What we experience now is a result of what we have

done in previous lifetimes. Let's say someone is beating us. This signifies that in previous lives, we have harmed others. To experience that effect now, we must have done something previously. Karma — action and its result is like a boomerang. We throw it out and it comes back to us. Similarly, if we treat others in a certain way, we put that energy into the universe — and it comes back to us later.

Understanding this allows us to accept responsibility for the situation. We're not a victim. We've harmed many others in the past — even in this life we can see that we haven't been little angels. We've hurt others' feelings, we've kicked dogs, as children we have fought with other kids on the playground.

Now we're experiencing the result of these actions. It's nothing surprising: the imprints of our own negative actions are ripening. Acknowledging this, we'll see that there's no reason to be mad at the other person. She's just the cooperative condition whilst we have created the principal cause for being in this situation.

Don't misinterpret this and masochistically blame yourself for everything. It's an extreme to think, "I'm such an awful person. Everyone can beat me and take advantage of me because that's all I deserve." Such a view is totally incorrect.

Instead, it is better to acknowledge, "Yes, I have harmed others in the past. Now the result is coming back

to me. If I don't like this experience, then I have to be careful how I act towards other people so that I don't create the cause to meet with painful situations like these again.

In this way, we'll learn from our mistakes. It isn't important to remember the exact action we did in a past life that brought about our present problem. A general feeling of the kinds of actions we must have done in the past to precipitate the present occurrence is sufficient. Then we can make a strong determination not to do those actions in the future.

If you are interested in learning more about karma and its effects, please read *The Wheel of Sharp Weapons* by Dharmaraksita. This small book explains the links between our current experiences and our past actions. It also encourages us to abandon the selfish attitude which spurs us to act negatively.

By training ourselves to think in this way, we can transform bad situations into the path to enlightenment. How? We think about them in constructive ways; we learn from our mistakes instead of getting trapped in a victim mentality.

THE KINDNESS OF THE ENEMY

The more we train in this way, the more we'll realise that the people who harm us are in fact very kind. First, by

harming us they allow our negative karma to ripen. Now that specific karma is finished. Second, by harming us, they force us to examine our actions and make firm decisions about how we want to act in the future. Thus, the person who harms us is helping us to grow. He's kinder to us than our friends!

In fact, enemies are kinder to us than the Buddha. That's almost inconceivable. "What do you mean my enemy is kinder to me than the Buddha? The Buddha has perfect compassion for everyone. The Buddha doesn't harm a fly! How can my enemy who is such a beep beep beep be kinder than the Buddha?"

Look at it this way: to become Buddhas, we need to practice patience. That's one of the far-reaching attitudes and it's a very important practice of the bodhisattvas. There's no way to become a Buddha if we can't be patient and tolerant.

Who do we practice patience with? Not with the Buddhas, because they don't make us angry. Not with our friends, because they're nice to us. Who gives us the opportunity to practice patience? Who is so kind and helps us develop that infinitely good quality of patience? Only the person who harms us. Only our enemy. So, the enemy is much kinder to us than the Buddha.

My teacher made this very clear to me. At one time, I was the vice-director of a group. The director and I

didn't get along at all. That's why I know Chapter Six of *A Guide to the Bodhisattvas' Way of Life* well. During the day, I became so mad at this person, and in the evening I'd go back to my room and think, "I blew it again! What does Shantideva suggest I should think in this situation?"

Finally, I left that job. I went to Nepal and saw my teacher, Zopa Rinpoche. We were sitting on the verandah of Rinpoche's house, looking at the Himalayas, so peaceful and calm. Then Rinpoche asked me, "Who's kinder to you, Sam or the Buddha?"

I thought, "You've got to be kidding! There's no comparison. The Buddha is obviously so kind. But Sam is another case." So I replied, "The Buddha of course."

Rinpoche looked at me as if to say, "You still haven't gotten the point yet!" and said, "Sam gave you the opportunity to practice patience. The Buddha didn't. You can't practice patience with the Buddha. Therefore, Sam is kinder to you than the Buddha."

I just sat there dumbfounded, trying to digest what Rinpoche said. Slowly, as the years went by, it sank in. It's interesting to see yourself change when you let yourself think in this way.

So, this is another way to think when we're angry: focus on the kindness of the enemy, and think of the opportunity to practice patience. Take the bad situation as a challenge to help you grow.

GIVING AWAY THE PAIN

Another technique is to give the harm and the pain to our self-cherishing thought, which is our real enemy. As we become more aware of our thoughts and actions, how they influence others and ourselves, we notice that our selfish attitude causes many problems. Propelled by selfishness, we say and do things that hurt others, things we're later ashamed of. Almost all conflicts we have with others are involved with selfishness: we want our way, the other person wants his. We're convinced our idea is right, the other person is convinced hers is. In addition, the selfish attitude is one of the biggest impediments to our gaining spiritual realisations because it causes us to be lazy in our Dharma practice.

Thus, the real enemy which obstructs our happiness and well-being is the self-cherishing attitude. We must be firmly convinced of this. When someone criticises us or betrays us or beats us, we're hurt and angry. We feel, "How dare this person treat me like this!" That attitude views the event only from our own perspective. We're preoccupied with me, MY feelings, what is happening to ME. However, this selfish attitude isn't inherently us. It's like a thief in a house. We can kick it out once we recognise it's dangerous.

Being convinced of the disadvantages of the selfish attitude, we can then take any pain we experience and give it to the selfish attitude. Instead of feeling, "This is

awful. I don't like listening to what this person is saying," we can think, "Great! All this pain and uncomfortable feeling I'll give to my selfish attitude. It's the real enemy, so let it take the blame." Then we can subtly chuckle, "Ha, ha, selfish attitude. Instead of letting you make me unhappy, I'll give you this pain and worry!"

If we practice this sincerely, then when someone criticises or harms us, we'll be happy. This is not because we're masochistic, but because we've given the damage away to the real enemy which is our own selfishness. We don't need to be upset anymore. In addition, our enemy, the selfish attitude, is suffering, so we should rejoice.

Then, the more someone harms us, the happier we'll be. In fact, we'll think, "Come on, criticise me some more. I want my self-cherishing attitude to be harmed." This is a profound thought-training technique. The first time I heard it, I thought, "This is impossible! What do you mean I'm supposed to be happy when someone criticises me? How can I possibly practice this?"

I'd like to share with you a story from my personal experience, one time when I practiced like this. It was remarkable! I was in Tibet, on pilgrimage with five other people to Lhamo Lhatso, the famous lake at 18,000 feet. Because the lake is very remote, we went there on horseback. Something was wrong with the horse one person was riding, so he had to walk and lead the horse by the reins. Henry was hungry and tired from the long jour-

ney and the high altitude. On top of that, he had to walk instead of ride. Since I felt okay, I offered my horse to him.

Well, Henry blew up. And, as is the case when people get angry, they remember everything you've done wrong for the last ten years. He told me all my faults from years ago, all the problems I had caused other people that he'd heard about through the grapevine, all my mistakes!

Here we were in this idyllic place in Tibet, on pilgrimage to a holy site, and there he was going on and on, "You did this and you did that. So many people complain about."

Generally, I'm very sensitive to criticism and feel hurt easily. So I determined, "I'm giving all this pain to my self-cherishing attitude." I meditated like this as we were walking along, and much to my surprise, I started thinking, "This is good! I really welcome your criticism. I'm going to learn from it. Thank you for helping to consume my negative karma by telling me my faults. All the pain goes to my selfish attitude because that's my real enemy."

It was amazing! As we continued along the mountain path, I felt, "Say more. This is really good!" Finally, we set up camp for the evening and made tea. My mind was completely peaceful. I think this was the blessing of the pilgrimage. This proved to me that it's possible to be happy when undesirable things occur. I didn't have to fall into my old habit of "Poor me! Other people don't ap-

preciate me.”

IS IT THE PERSON'S NATURE TO BE DISAGREEABLE?

There's yet another technique to prevent anger when someone harms us. We ask ourselves, “Is it this person's nature to harm us?” If the person's nature is harmful and obnoxious, then getting angry at him is useless. It would be like getting angry at fire because its nature is to burn. That's just the way fire is; that's just the way this person is. Becoming upset about it is senseless.

Similarly, if the person's nature isn't harmful, then there's no use getting angry at him. His inconsiderate behaviour was a fluke; it's not his nature. When it rains, we aren't mad at the sky, because the rain clouds aren't the nature of the sky.

In one way, we can say it's others' nature to criticise, find fault and blame. They're sentient beings caught in the prison of cyclic existence, so naturally their minds are obscured by ignorance, anger and attachment. Our minds are too. If that's the situation, then why expect ourselves or others to be free of misconceptions and negative emotions? There's no reason to be angry at them because they harm, just like there's no reason to be angry at fire because it burns. That's just the way it is.

On the other hand, the harmful person's deepest na-

ture isn't harmful. He has the pure Buddha potential, his intrinsic goodness. This is his real nature. His obnoxious behaviour is like a thundercloud which temporarily obscures the clear sky. That behaviour isn't him, so why make ourselves miserable by being impatient? Thinking in this way is extremely helpful.

We need to apply these techniques to actual situations. In our daily meditation, we can pull the painful experiences from our memory and look at them in this light. All of us have a reservoir of painful memories or grudges that we still hold against others. Instead of suppressing them, it's helpful to draw them out and interpret those situations using some of the above methods. In this way, we'll let go of the resentment and painful feelings.

If we don't do this, we may hold grudges for 20 or 30 years. We never forget harm we received and make ourselves miserable by carefully guarding these memories. For example, during the first purification retreat I did in India, I realised that I was still mad at my second grade teacher because she wouldn't let me be in the class play. This had happened over 20 years ago and I still hadn't forgiven her!

Families are very good at holding grudges. I know an extended family who has two houses on one piece of property. They purchased them together as holiday houses. Once the people in one house quarreled with their siblings and cousins in the other house, and since then

they haven't spoken to each other. Over forty years ago, they decided they hated each other and wouldn't speak to each other for the rest of lives. The families still go on holiday there, but they don't speak to each other. It's rather ridiculous, isn't it?

Let's look at the grudges we've held for years: a small incident happens — someone didn't come to a wedding or a funeral, or someone snickered at us, or someone embarrassed us in front of others — and we vow never to speak or be nice to that person for as long as we live. We keep this kind of vows so perfectly, yet we find it difficult to keep vows not to lie or cheat.

For years we're angry at another person. But who loses out? Who's miserable? When we hold a grudge, the other person isn't unhappy. He has generally forgotten about the incident. Even in a more serious situation, for instance a divorce, the other person may have apologised for what he did. But in either case, we cling to the harm as if it were engraved in stone. Someone swore at us once, but by re-running the memory in our minds day after day, we relive it over and over again. This is an excellent form of self-torture.

Holding a grudge serves no productive purpose. Like mental cancer, grudges eat away at us. As long as we hold onto our resentment, we can never forgive others. But our lack of forgiveness doesn't hurt the other, it hurts ourselves.

Why is it so difficult to forgive others' mistakes? We make mistakes too. Looking at our own behaviour, we notice that sometimes we were overcome by negative emotions and have acted in ways that we regretted later. We want others to understand and forgive our mistakes. Why then can't we forgive others?

Of course, we can forgive someone without being naive. We can forgive an alcoholic for being drunk, but that doesn't mean we expect him to immediately stop drinking. We can forgive a person for lying to us, but in the future, it may be wise to be aware and to check her words. You can forgive a spouse for having an extra-marital affair, but you shouldn't ignore the problems in your marriage which led your spouse to seek companionship elsewhere.

To have a free and open heart, we need to do internal spring cleaning: we have to take out all those grudges, look at the pain, but without re-running the same self-pitying video in our minds. We can look at those situations from a fresh perspective, employing the various techniques for dissolving anger that have been described above.

In this way, we'll let go of the hostility we've carried in our hearts for years. In addition, we'll gain familiarity with the techniques so that we can swiftly recall them when similar incidents occur in our daily lives.

IS THE OTHER PERSON HAPPY?

One more technique for working with anger is to ask ourselves, “Is the person who is harming me happy?” Someone is shouting at me, complaining about everything I do. Is she happy or miserable? Obviously, she’s miserable. That’s why she’s acting this way. If she is happy, she wouldn’t be quarreling.

All of us know what it’s like to be unhappy. That’s exactly how this other person feels right now. Let’s put ourselves in her shoes. When we’re unhappy and “letting it all out”, how would we like others to react? Generally, we want them to understand us, to help us.

That’s how the other person feels. So how can we be angry with her? She should be the object of our compassion, not our anger. If we think like this, we’ll find our hearts filled with patience and loving-kindness for the other, no matter how she acts towards us.

Our attitude changes, because instead of seeing the situation from our own self-centred viewpoint — what someone is doing to ME — we put ourselves in the other person’s shoes, experience her pain, feel her wish to be happy. Seeing that in essence she’s just like us, it’s easy to think, “How can I help her?” Such an attitude not only prevents us from becoming upset, but also inspires us to relieve another’s misery.

Several techniques have been discussed to help dissolve our anger. To review them:

1. Remember the example of someone saying we have a nose or saying we have horns. We can acknowledge our faults and mistakes, just as we acknowledge having a nose on our face. There's no need to get angry. On the other hand, if someone blames us for something we didn't do, it's as if he said we have horns on our head. There's no reason to be angry at something untrue.
2. Ask ourselves, "Can I do something about it?" If we can, then anger is out of place because we can improve the situation. If we can't change the situation, anger is useless because nothing can be done.
3. Examine how we got involved in the situation. This has two parts:
 - a. What actions did we do recently to prompt the disagreement? Examining this helps us to understand why the other person is upset.
 - b. Recognise that unpleasant situations are due to our having harmed others earlier this life or in previous lives. Seeing our own destructive actions as the principal cause, we can learn from past mistakes and resolve to act better in the future.
4. Remember the kindness of the enemy. First, she points out our mistakes so we can correct them and improve

our character. Second, she gives us the opportunity to practice patience, a necessary quality in our spiritual development. In these ways, the enemy is kinder to us than our friends or even the Buddha.

5. Give the pain to our selfish attitude by recognising it as the source of all our problems.
6. Ask ourselves, “Is it the person’s nature to act like this?” If it is, then there’s no reason to be angry, for it would be like being annoyed with fire for burning. If it isn’t the person’s nature, again anger is unrealistic, for it would be like getting angry at the sky for having clouds in it.
7. Examine the disadvantages of anger and grudge-holding. This gives us tremendous energy to let go of these destructive emotions.
8. Recognise that the other person’s unhappiness and confusion are making him harm us. Since we know what it’s like to be unhappy, we can empathise with him. Thus, he becomes the object of our compassion, not the object of our anger.

Whether or not these techniques work for us depends on us. We have to practice them repeatedly in order to build up new mental and emotional habits. Keeping medicine in a drawer without taking it doesn’t cure the

illness. Similarly, just listening to teachings without putting them into practice won't lessen our anger. Our peace of mind is our own responsibility.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Q. Does being patient with people who harm us mean being passive? Must we let them get their way or walk all over us?

A. No. We can redress a bad situation without antagonism. In fact, we'll be more effective in doing so when we're calm and clear-thinking.

Sometimes we may have to speak strongly to someone because that is the only way to communicate with her. For example, if your child is playing in the street and you very sweetly say, "Susie dear, please don't play in the street," she may ignore you. But if you speak forcefully and explain the danger to her, she'll remember and obey.



Q. As a sports enthusiast, isn't anger good because it helps you win the game? Is sports a good way to release anger?

A. Yes, sports is a socially accepted way of venting anger. However, it doesn't cure the anger, it only temporar-

ily releases the physical energy accompanying anger. We're still avoiding the real problem, which is our disturbing emotion and misconceptions regarding a situation.

Yes, anger may help you win the game, but is that really beneficial? Is it worthwhile to reinforce negative characteristic just to get a trophy? The danger in sports is making the "us and them" too concrete. "My team must win. We have to fight and beat the enemy."

But let's step back for a moment. Why should we win and the other team lose? The only reason is "My team is best because it's mine." The other team feels the same way. Who is right? Competition based on such self-centredness isn't productive because it breeds anger and jealousy.

On the other hand, we can concentrate on the process of playing the game, not on the goal of winning. In this case, we'll enjoy the physical exercise, the camaraderie and team spirit, whether we win or lose. Psychologically, this attitude brings more happiness.



Q. How do we deal with anger when we witness a person harming another?

A. All the techniques described above are applicable here. However, being patient doesn't mean being passive. We

may have to actively stop one person from harming another, but the key is to do this with impartial compassion for everyone in the situation.

It's easy to have compassion for the victim. But compassion for the perpetrator is equally important. This person is creating the cause for his own suffering: he may be tortured by guilt later, he may encounter trouble with the law, and he will reap the karmic fruits of his own actions. Recognising the suffering he brings on himself, we can develop compassion for him. Thus, with equal concern for the victim and the perpetrator, we can act to prevent one person from harming another.

We needn't be angry in order to correct a wrong. Actions done out of anger may complicate the situation even more! With a clear mind, we'll be able to determine more easily what we can do to help.



Q. How can we help someone who is creating negative karma by getting angry at us?

- A. Each situation is different and will have to be examined separately. However, some general guidelines may apply. First, check up if the other's complaints about us are justified. If so, we can apologise and correct the situation. That stops his anger.

Second, when someone is very upset and angry, try to calm him down. Don't argue back, because in his present state of mind, he can't listen to you. This is understandable: we don't listen to others when we're in a temper. So, it's better to help him settle down and later, perhaps the next day, discuss it.



Q. What do we do when people criticise Buddhism?

A. That is their opinion. They're entitled to have it. Of course, we don't agree with it. Sometimes we may succeed in correcting another's misconceptions, but sometimes people are very closed-minded and don't want to change their views. That's their business. Just leave it.

We don't need others' approval to practice the Dharma. But we do need to be convinced in our hearts that what we do is right. If we are, then others' opinions aren't important.

Others' criticisms don't hurt the Dharma or the Buddha. The path to enlightenment exists whether others recognise it as such or not. We don't need to be defensive. In fact, if we become agitated when others criticise Buddhism, it indicates we're attached to our beliefs — that our ego is involved and so we feel compelled to prove our beliefs are right.

When we're secure in what we believe, others' criticisms don't disturb our peace of mind. Why should it? Criticism doesn't mean our beliefs are wrong, nor does it mean we're stupid or bad. It's simply another's opinion, that's all.



Q. Tibetan Buddhism has many images of fierce deities. What do they mean?

- A. These deities or Buddha figures are manifestations of the Buddhas' wisdom and compassion. Their ferocity isn't directed towards living beings, because as Buddhas, they have only compassion for others. Rather their force is aimed at ignorance and selfishness, the real causes of all our problems.

By showing a fierce aspect, these deities demonstrate the need to act firmly and swiftly against our ignorance and selfishness. Being patient with internal enemies, the disturbing attitudes, isn't beneficial at all. We should actively oppose them. These deities illustrate that instead of being wrathful towards other beings, we should be fierce with internal enemies like ignorance and selfishness.

In addition, as manifestations of compassionate wisdom, these deities symbolically represent compassionate wisdom conquering disturbing attitudes.

Q. How do we identify our anger?

A. There are several ways to do this. When we do the breathing meditation, clearly focusing on the inhalation and exhalation of the breath, observe what distractions arise. We may recognise a general feeling of restlessness or anger. Or we may remember a situation from years ago that we're still irritated about. By noting these distractions, we'll know what we need to work on.

We can also identify our anger by being aware of physical reactions, whether we're meditating or not. For example, if we feel our stomach tightening, or our body temperature increasing, it may be a signal that we're starting to lose our temper. Each person has different physical manifestations of anger. We can be observant and note ours. This is helpful, for sometimes it's easier to identify the physical sensation accompanying anger than the anger itself.

Another way is to observe our moods. When we're in a bad mood, we can pause and ask ourselves, "What is this feeling? What prompted it?" Sometimes we can observe patterns in our moods and behaviours. This gives us clues as to how our minds operate.



Q. What can we do about anger that has been building up over a long period of time?

A. It will take a while to free our minds from this. Habitual anger must be replaced with habitual patience, and this takes time and consistent effort to develop. When we notice our anger building up towards someone, it's helpful to ask ourselves, "What button is this person pushing in me? Why am I so irritated by her actions?" In this way, we research our reactions to determine the real issue involved. Do we feel powerless? Do we feel no one listens to us? Are we offended? Observing in this way, we'll come to know ourselves better and can then apply the right antidote to that disturbing attitude.

Of course, prevention is the best medicine. Instead of allowing our anger to build up over time, it's better to be courageous and try to communicate with the other person earlier on. This stops the proliferation of misconceptions and misunderstandings. If we allow our anger to build up over time, how can we blame it on the other person? We have some responsibility to try to communicate with people who disturb us.

DEDICATION

Now let's dedicate the positive potential we've accumulated so that all beings will have peaceful minds, free of hostility. By practicing patience, may we dispel our own anger, and thus may we be able to teach others and inspire them to become peaceful Buddhas.