

Practicing with Anger: Reflections for Buddhists and Christians

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ABSTRACT

In Christian tradition, anger is a very powerful and coercive force and therefore a problem for the spiritual life. Christians think of anger as one of the “seven deadly sins” which afflict and distort the soul. Some of the spiritual masters of Christian tradition, however, recognize that anger has many causes and therefore many effects, not all of them bad. For example, Christians often look on anger as a proper response to injustice. In some cases, Christian teachers even speak of anger as being “justified” or “righteous,” words that, I presume, mean very little to Buddhists. For this reason, I believe that Buddhists and Christians coming together to learn from one another about anger and its role in human life serves a useful purpose. In this essay, I wish to reflect on what “practicing with anger” might mean for both Buddhists and Christians.

Introduction

Father Al Giaquinto, a Catholic priest, became my teacher when I was a young man. Father Giaquinto has led a long and fruitful life as a priest and has grown wise through what he has suffered over the years. Although always very busy with his official duties as a priest, Father has always made time to serve the poor and the homeless. Some years ago, I took a walk with my friend and teacher. He was reflecting on his experiences working in a “house of hospitality” (a soup kitchen) run by the Catholic Workers. He spoke of the great suffering of the men who come to the kitchen out of the cold for a bowl of soup and some bread. Then Father Giaquinto began to reflect on how great was the suffering of the poor and hungry and how paltry his contribution was to this immense suffering. He also lamented the unjust economic and social structures, which makes it so easy for us to be forgetful of the plight of the poor all around us. In the midst of all this, Father Giaquinto turned to me and asked, “Why am I not more angry?”

A Poison and Deadly Sin

In speaking about anger, Buddhists often think of the *Bhavachakra* (the “wheel of life”). This great circle, a representation of the twelve-fold chain of dependent co-origination, is held up by Yama, the lord of death, who devours all with his fangs. At the center of the wheel lie a cock, a pig and a snake consuming one other. These animals represent the “three poisons” of ignorance (the pig), craving (the cock) and anger (the snake). In keeping with the doctrine of dependent co-arising, Buddhists believe that each of the three poisons are constantly giving rise to the other two. The cause of anger, therefore is both craving and ignorance.

Buddhist stories recounting the consequences of anger are not hard to find. From the earliest days of Buddhism, we find stories about the “hungry ghosts” (*preta*), with their mouths on fire, consumed with anger. The *Khantivadijataka* (“Jataka on the Profession of Forbearance”) tells the story of an infuriated king who slowly tortures the future Buddha to death. Before dying, the Bodhisattva is asked if he is angry. He replies that he has renounced anger. In the end, the king is swallowed up by the earth for his heinous deed and is reborn in *avici* hell. In a similar vein, Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh, reflecting on his work with American Vietnam War veterans, teaches that “Anger and hatred are the materials from which hell is made.”¹

“Anger is in us all, so we need to recognize it,” Pandith Vajiragnana, Abbot of the London Buddhist Vihara, said at a meeting of Buddhists and Christian monks and nuns some years ago. “Then what to do?” A common Buddhist counsel in light of the ubiquity and power of anger in our lives is to practice compassion. “The Buddha very clearly said that anger cannot be appeased by anger,” according to Pandith Vajiragnana. “It is to be appeased by love. So we must practice love.”² Ven. Master Hsing Yun observes that there are many ways to overcome anger, but “when all is said and done, compassion is the single best method for overcoming anger.” Those who are angry need to be mindful that every sentient being suffers. Why would we want to increase this suffering? All sentient beings are our children. Why would we want to harm any of them?”³

In addition to applying compassion to anger as an antidote, Buddhists talk about using meditation for “observing anger.” According to Thich Nhat Hanh, “When our anger is placed under the lamp of mindfulness, it immediately begins to lose some of its destructive nature.” By observing our anger during meditation, “it can no longer monopolize our consciousness.” The point here is not to suppress anger or drive it out. We are simply to observe. Somewhat reminiscent of the Buddha’s famous “Poison Arrow Sermon,” Thich Nhat Hanh takes a pragmatic approach to the poison of anger: “like a fireman, we have to pour water on the blaze first and not waste time looking for the one who set the house on fire.” Just observe.⁴

In Christian tradition, Evagrius Ponticus (346-399), one of the first Christian monks to write extensively, is often cited in regard to anger and its effects on prayer. “The most fierce passion,” according to Evagrius, “is anger” because it “constantly irritates the soul.” Buddhists who practice meditation I think will agree with what Evagrius says about the problem anger poses to prayer: “it seizes the mind and flashes the picture of the offensive person before one’s eyes.”⁵ Additionally, “resentment blinds the reason of the one who prays and casts a cloud over his prayer.”⁶ Brooding over injuries (what Buddhists no doubt would recognize as a form of clinging) destroys what Evagrius calls “our memory of God” and distorts or disrupts the working of grace within us.⁷ Evagrius has much practical advice for those afflicted with anger which seems to have parallels in Buddhist tradition. “Turbid anger is calmed by the singing of Psalms, by patience and almsgiving,” according to Evagrius. Buddhists speak of sutra chanting, *khanti* and *dana* (notice that “patience” and “generosity” are both included among the ten perfections). Evagrius warns, however, that these practices are not to be done to excess, but rather “according to due measure

and at the appropriate time.” This is because “what is short lived is more harmful than profitable.”⁸

Teachings, such as those offered by Evagrius, have secured a place for anger among what Christians call the “seven deadly sins”: pride, envy, sloth, avarice, gluttony, lust and anger. According to Christian tradition, these seven mental states are classified as sins, not because they involve conscious and voluntary choices as is the case with sin in general. They are not sins in the strictly moral sense. These seven mental states are “deadly sins” because they each bring with them a basic disposition to do what is harmful for the spiritual life. In this respect, the Christian notion of a “deadly sin” seems to bear much in common with the Buddhist notion of a “poison.”

A Positive Force in Human Life

In 1955, Rosa Parks, an African-American woman, was told to give up her seat to a white man as she rode a bus in Montgomery, Alabama. Parks was tired from her day at work and angry over the injustice of “Jim Crow,” the discriminatory laws then on the books in Alabama. A boycott of the bus company was soon organized by Dr. Martin Luther King, whose study of Ghandi’s non-violent political struggle in India would prove to be decisive for the success of the boycott. For Martin Luther King, non-violence in the face of injustice gradually came to be what Christians call an *ascesis*, roughly equivalent to the notion of “practice” (*sādhana*) in Buddhism.⁹

As a form of spiritual practice, however, non-violent resistance to evil requires great skill and self-discipline. For this reason, King’s non-violence is an *ascesis* laden with pitfalls and dangers. My Buddhist friends would say, “if it is practice, it is very difficult practice.” King’s practice of non-violence is difficult because, almost of necessity, it entails making people angry. Even though it makes people angry, the goal of non-violent practice is to win the understanding of the opponent, not to defeat or even coerce them. The resistance is always directed against the evil, never against persons. Thus, we are not allowed to villainize those who may very well be responding to our practice with violence. Neither is the practitioner allowed to cultivate anger within him or herself. According to King, non-violence “avoids not only external physical violence but also internal violence of spirit.”¹⁰ The true practice of non-violent resistance may provoke anger in the opponent, but must never lead to anger within the practitioner. My Buddhist friends are correct: if this is practice, it is difficult practice.

In Japan, there is a story told about the Zen master Hakuin which has to do with making people angry. Once, a samurai came before Zen Master Hakuin. “You’re supposed to be a great Zen master,” he said. “So I want you to tell me the truth about heaven and hell. Do they really exist?” Without a moment’s hesitation, Hakuin responded, “What, even such an ugly and untalented man as you can become a samurai? Amazing!” Immediately the proud samurai became angry and drew his sword. Fearlessly Hakuin said, “This is hell.” The samurai paused and grew thoughtful. His face softened from its angry scowl. Sheathing his sword, he put his hands together

palm to palm and bowed before Hakuin. “And this,” said Hakuin, just as calmly, “is heaven.”

In this story, Hakuin uses anger strategically as a way of leading the samurai out of ignorance. Hakuin’s practice of getting people angry as a form of “skillful means” (*upāya*) is of great interest to Christians, especially Christians who engage in the difficult *ascesis* of non-violent political action. A good deal of the interest this Buddhist story has for Christians lies in the differences which distinguish Hakuin’s skillful use of anger and Martin Luther King’s. One clear difference has to do with whom it is who changes as a result of the practice. According to King, “the nonviolent approach does not immediately change the heart of the oppressor. It first does something to the hearts and souls of those committed to it.”¹¹ In contrast, Hakuin’s skillful way of getting people angry is for the benefit of the samurai, not himself. A man very much in need of being released from ignorance is transformed by a man who has already been transformed. To be sure, Martin Luther King gets people angry so that they may change, but this goal takes a back seat to the more important goal of changing the practitioner – cleansing all anger from the heart of the one who would practice non-violence, the anger in the heart of the oppressor will be cleansed some time in the future.¹²

Another difference has to do with Hakuin’s fearlessness. Without fear, Hakuin insults the proud samurai and fills him with anger. And then, “just as calmly,” Hakuin shows the samurai what heaven is. In his reflections on the practice of non-violent resistance to injustice, Martin Luther King contrasts the anger in the heart of the oppressor to the fear in the heart of the practitioner.

Can Anger be Skillful?

Christians like Father Giaquinto, however, want to take the notion of “practicing with anger” a step further. Up until now, the discussion of “practicing with anger” has presumed that anger is a “deadly sin” or one of the “three poisons,” a serious threat to our spiritual life and religious practice. Additionally, as we saw with both Hakuin and Martin Luther King, making other people angry can be an acceptable form of spiritual practice for Buddhists as well as Christians, even though this form of practice is difficult and fraught with dangers. The question I seek to raise for both Christians and Buddhists has to do not with the renunciation of one’s own anger, nor with the practice of making other people angry (however skillfully). Rather, I want to ask if it is possible to use one’s own anger for a religious purpose.

Christians sometimes speak of anger as being “justified” or “righteous.” In Christian tradition, righteous anger is legitimate because it serves a divine (not merely a human) purpose. I have already noted that terms such as “righteous” or “justified” have little if any meaning for Buddhists, at least when they apply to anger. Perhaps a better way to raise this issue for Buddhists would be to ask if it is possible to use one’s own anger skillfully as a way to lead others to find release from suffering. The anger I am asking about is neither a poison to be renounced nor a sin to be repented. Rather, the anger I wish to learn about is an anger that is cultivated and used skillfully for a

purpose that is ultimately compassionate. Is there such an anger? Can Buddhists and Christians practice with such anger?

Pandith Vajiragnana's answer to this question is quite clear and unambiguous. Speaking at a meeting of Christian and Buddhist monastics, he stated quite flatly that "There is no way in Buddhism that we can accept anger as a good thing. Under no circumstances is it accepted as a good thing."¹³ Rita Gross, a Buddhist in the Tibetan tradition, is less absolute, but very dubious about the notion of cultivating anger for a spiritual purpose. In a private conversation she told me that some very advanced practitioners may be able to cultivate anger and act skillfully with it. Practitioners such as these, however, are very few indeed. We should not delude ourselves about our ability to practice with our own anger. In Christian tradition, the New Testament itself warns of the dangers of cultivating anger. "Keep this in mind dear brother: Let every man be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for a man's anger does not fulfill God's justice." [James 1:19-20]

However, there is a teaching found among the desert fathers in Christian tradition which notes that anger is not necessarily bad. Anger is usually a cloud of passion which blurs our spiritual vision and distorts the soul unnaturally. Some anger, however, may be from God, and as such this anger must be accepted humbly and gratefully. Evagrius teaches that "Anger is given to us [by God] so that we might fight against the demons and strive against every pleasure." The angels counsel us to turn our anger against the demons. Then Evagrius notes,

[Demons] for their part, draw our anger to worldly desires and constrain us – contrary to our nature – to fight against our fellow men to the end that, blinded in mind and falling away from knowledge, our spirit should become a traitor to virtue."

In this way, Evagrius makes a distinction between anger that is self-serving and destructive, on the one hand, and anger that is a gift from God to be accepted with humility and used carefully when facing our demons, but not for hurting our fellow human beings.

The notion of a "righteous anger" can be found in the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas as well. Thomas teaches that anger is the proper response to injustice. With this in mind, Father James Wiseman, a Benedictine monk, argues that we need to make a distinction between anger that is "appropriate, limited, and rightly directed at situations that are genuinely unjust" on the one hand, and anger that "arises only because one is perhaps immature, or unable to accept criticism" on the other."¹⁴

According to the *Bhavachakra* (the "wheel of life"), each of the three poisons is the cause of the other two. Thus, anger arises because there is ignorance and craving. Don Mitchell, a lay Catholic member of the Fokolare Movement, argues that, in addition to the purely destructive and harmful form of anger, "there is also a kind of anger that arises over injustice." The anger about which Mitchell speaks is not the anger that the *Bhavachakra* recognizes as a poison. Anger over injustice "does not come from self-centeredness or ignorance, but out of compassion."¹⁵ Moreover, the anger about which Mitchell speaks cannot arise from craving either. Mitchell gives as

examples an adult abusing a child or the rich exploiting workers. The injustice should fill us with anger and a sense of compassion for the victims.

In my view, the most difficult aspect of “practicing with anger” in this respect lies not only in showing loving kindness toward the victims of injustice, but toward those who are perpetrating the injustice as well. In other words, can anger ever be so skillful that it becomes a concrete realization of compassion? At the very least, Christians need to remember that “righteous anger” can very easily become merely “self-righteous anger” with spiritually disastrous results.

I have no doubt that some Buddhists, perhaps most Buddhists, will reject even the possibility that anger can be skillful in this sense I have been proposing. Perhaps socially engaged Buddhists and humanistic Buddhists will respond to this question differently than other kinds of Buddhists. However, the question itself may be useful for Christians to raise with their Buddhist friends.

Notes

¹ Thich Nhat Hahn, “Peace Is Every Step,” in *Parabola* vol. 16:4, p. 75

² The meeting was held at the Trappist Monastery at Gethsamani Kentucky in 1998. For material on anger and spiritual practice, see *The Gethsamani Encounter* Donald Mitchell and James Wiseman eds. (New York: Continuum, 1998), pp. 174-181.

³ Ven. Master Hsing Yun, *Being Good: Buddhist Ethics for Everyday Life* p. 31 ff.

⁴ Thich Nhat Hanh, p. 75.

⁵ Evagrius Ponticus, *The Praktikos: Chapters on Prayer* (Spencer MA, Cistercian Publications, 1970), p. 18.

⁶ Evagrius, p. 58.

⁷ Evagrius, p. 39.

⁸ Evagrius, p. 20.

⁹ Martin Luther King Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1958), p. 101.

¹⁰ Martin Luther King, pp. 102-105.

¹¹ Martin Luther King, p. 219.

¹² For a reflection on this aspect of Martin Luther King’s non-violent practice, see E. Glenn Hinson, “On Coping with Your Anger,” in *Weavings* vol. 9 (1994), p. 38.

¹³ Mitchell and Wiseman, p. 176.

¹⁴ Mitchell and Wiseman, p. 175.

¹⁵ Mitchell and Wiseman, p. 177.

The Eight Sufferings are a more detailed description of the suffering that all sentient beings must endure. The eight sufferings are grouped according to what they describe.

The first is the suffering of birth. Following many dangerous months in our mother's wombs, we at last experience the pain and fear of birth. After that, anything can happen. We are like prisoners in our bodies and to the worlds into which we are born.

The second is the suffering of old age. If we are fortunate enough not to be killed while we are still young, we will still have to face the suffering of growing old, and of watching our bodies and minds decline as our friends disappear one by one.

The third is the suffering of illness. Good health is a pleasure because it is such a contrast to illness. All of us at some time must suffer the pain and humiliation of illness.

The fourth is the suffering of death. Even if our lives were somehow perfect, we still would die. If death is not sudden and frightening, then it is too often slow and painful. We are like leaves blown in the wind. No one knows what tomorrow will bring.

The fifth is the suffering of lost love. Sometimes we lose the ones we love, and sometimes they do not love us in return. We all suffer because we cannot always be with the people we love.

The sixth is the suffering of being hated. No one wants enemies, but in this world it is very hard to avoid them.

The seventh is the suffering of unfulfilled desire. Our lusts and desires determine so much of who we are. They limit our capacity to understand the Dharma even as they cause us endless troubles. And what is worse, most of them are never fulfilled and thus they harm us twice.

The eighth and last suffering is the suffering of what are known in Sanskrit as the five *skandhas*, or components of existence: form, sensation, perception, activity, and consciousness. They are the "building blocks" of conscious existence and the means through which all suffering occurs. They are like an unlimited fuel source that produces pain and suffering life after life after life.

—Lotus In A Stream, by Hsing Yun, pp.31-32