

CHAPTER 4. Anger Work and The Endurance of Suffering

Life is suffering. This is the first of the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism, and the foundation upon which the entire religion is built. However, this is not true only for Buddhism. Unhappiness is the most basic fact of human nature, the fundamental issue that we need to resolve: what do we do with our suffering? If there were no suffering, no incompleteness, there would be no need for us to be awake. It is reported that Aristotle wrote, “To perceive is to suffer.” Every moment of awareness happens because there is a rift that has opened between what we are and what we want to be. If there is a difference between how my stomach feels and the experience of satisfaction, I feel hunger. If I become aware of a gap between my power and the power of my neighbor, I feel envy or shame. And all human enterprises—warfare, flood control, the construction of cities, merchant trade, and technological advance are attempts to close the rift, to address the universal issue of suffering.

There are two ways of dealing with suffering which are quite ancient, going back to our animal ancestors: flight and fight. These reactions are almost hardwired, buried deeply within the human brain, in the amygdala. The path of flight involves anxiety. I may flee suffering through physical avoidance—simply getting away. An anxious person often attempts to stay away from whatever triggers anxiety—social situations, bridges, planes, or school. At its most extreme, an anxious person may construct an entire life of avoidance. One person I worked with was anxious about bridges. Rather than working on this fear, she set up an entire life—career, social connection, shopping habits—based on avoiding bridges. In most ways, her life seemed fairly normal: she worked, had friends, shopped, and went out on dates. However, in reality her life was constricted. If her dream job

required her to cross a bridge, she would not apply. If she met an attractive man who lived on the other side of the river, she would choose to not go out on a date.

There are other means of avoidance aside from physically separating myself from the source of suffering. I can also avoid through distraction, sedation, or denial. I may hide myself inside a television or computer, in a work assignment, or in a hobby that becomes a preoccupation. I may avoid through an addiction—sedating my discomfort with alcohol, pain medication, or tranquilizers. I might also attempt to avoid suffering through denial—which is an obstinate refusal to face my pain squarely. I may deny that a loved one is terminally ill, or deny that my father is alcoholic, or deny the severity of my financial situation through refusing to open the bills.

The second path in dealing with suffering is fight—the path of anger. In this path, instead of avoiding or removing myself from the source of suffering, I attack it. The secret logic (or psychology) behind all anger is this:

1. *I am suffering.*
2. *I judge that (person, animal, object) is responsible for my suffering.*
3. *If I stop what that (person, animal, object) is doing, my suffering will stop.*

This secret logic invites me to suit up in my anger armor quickly, to grab my weapons and get to work at eliminating or stopping the source of my suffering. Anger is unique among feelings in that it is often at bottom *a refusal to feel*. In order to reverse the hold that anger has on me, I must adopt a radically different approach to my suffering: I must learn to endure it.

Driving Us Mad

As men, we are often quite comfortable driving a car, and when the family takes a road trip we are often behind the wheel. But we are not as comfortable driving our emotions. Many men leave this job to the women in their lives—wives, girl friends, mothers. They let the women drive their emotional lives, and have slid over into the passenger's seat. *Too often, women know what we feel better than we do.* There are advantages to this strategy. If there weren't, we would not do it for long. One advantage is that we don't have to work to become aware. We can sit back and let women handle this job for us. A second advantage of this arrangement is that we get taken care of, and this may feel reassuring and comforting. If a woman reads my needs correctly, she may adjust my environment so that my needs are met. She may make the kids disappear, turn down the annoying music, or soothe me with her voice or touch when I get upset.

However, if a woman knows what I feel better than I do, this can cause problems. Very likely, a woman—like any creature—is motivated by self-interest. When she responds to my feelings, even by caretaking, it is because it serves her to do so. The woman who is able to read my feelings better than I can may use this knowledge to fulfill her own needs, leaving my needs wanting. I may experience this as manipulation—the woman using her special knowledge to affect my behavior and achieve her own goals. Unless I am the world's leading expert at reading my emotional life, I cannot expect that my emotional needs will be met, unless by some happy coincidence this also serves the woman's emotional needs.

But let's suppose there are women who are genuinely altruistic—focused on the man's feelings, and committed to getting the man's needs fulfilled. Even then, there can be problems. 1) When I'm physically separated from the woman that I've relied on for noticing my feelings, I could feel totally lost, in a

dark place. I may experience abandonment and desperation when she is not there to observe me and nurture me. 2) Even if the woman is present and genuinely attempting to read my feelings and needs, she may misread me. The woman's need-sensor can never be 100% accurate. She may misread the smoke signals of my nonverbal and verbal behavior. Let's suppose that I am upset about my wife being late getting home from work, and this feeling shows up in my behavior as agitation—shifting eyes, restless movement, a furrowed brow. She notices my behavior, and asks me if there is anything wrong. I am not familiar with noticing and expressing my feelings, so I respond that no, everything is fine. My wife notices my continued behavior and correctly guesses that I'm upset. However, she guesses wrong about the reason for my upset. She guesses that I'm upset about a conversation I had with my sister. She tries to comfort me by talking about my sister and the feelings I must be having, but she gets it totally wrong. Now my original feelings of anger and abandonment due to her lateness are compounded. I have additional feelings of anger and abandonment, because she is not correctly reading my mind and sensing what I need to calm my emotions.

As men, we need to get a driver's license for operating our own emotional lives. We need to slide over behind the wheel of our emotional lives and take control of the decision-making process. In addition, we need to know as much about the workings of our emotions as we know about our cars. We need to become experts at reading the gauges on our emotional dashboard, so that we notice our feelings quickly and accurately. "My anxiety level is about a five, my sadness level is about a 3." When we drive a car, if we notice the temperature needle getting up to the red zone, we would very naturally stop the car, let it cool down, then check for antifreeze or broken fan belts. Too often, when we suffer an emotional breakdown, we stare helplessly down to road for a woman to come and fix us. We need to develop confidence and self-sufficiency regarding our feelings and needs. We must

develop our own tools to assess and service our emotions, to become as knowledgeable and adept at emotional mechanics as we are at auto mechanics.

Primary Colors

As men, we frequently have constricted emotional lives due to our blindness to feelings. A man I worked with in a group once remarked that the only feelings he knew were mad, bored, and hungry. This is an example of a common syndrome in men called *alexithymia*, which translates roughly as “not knowing the words for feelings.” If we are only aware of boredom, rage, and hunger, this is similar to painting with a palette of only a few colors, missing the full spectrum.

It is nearly axiomatic that there are four primary feelings, analogous to the primary colors of the spectrum: glad, sad, mad and scared. Obviously there are more feelings than these, just as there are more colors than yellow, cyan, and magenta. But these four are the basics. They are similar to the four cardinal points on the compass. Glad and sad are obvious opposites, in that they represent opposite degrees of pleasure. Anger and anxiety are opposites, as well, but represent different kinds of movement in response to stress: fight and flight. When I am anxious or fear something, I move away, avoid, or flee. When I am angry, I move *towards* the source of stress to change things. Anger is the change agent par excellence.

If I were well-balanced emotionally, when happy events occurred, I would be happy, when sad events happened, I would feel sadness, and so on. But we often find ourselves out of balance, so that one of the feelings predominates no matter what the life-event. If a person is unbalanced too much in the direction of fear, she may need treatment for anxiety. A person who feels sad disproportionately would suffer from depression.

Men often feel anger disproportionately. Anger then becomes the surfacing-point for all the other emotions. Instead of feeling sadness, a man feels anger. Instead of experiencing fear, he gets mad. Some men do not even realize they are in love until they experience jealousy—for jealousy may be defined as love transformed into anger. Figure 22 shows a spectrum of different feelings. If one imagines the prism for a moment as a funnel, the full spectrum of feelings become transformed when they move through this funnel into anger, and the discrete colors of the emotional life are lost—mingled, constricted and muddled. To recover what we have lost, it is necessary to run anger through the prism to separate it into the original component feelings. This is one of the keys to anger management.

Blowing Up

Anger is constructed like dynamite, with a fuse and an accelerant. A lit fuse is a small flame that will turn quickly into a huge flame (we call the huge flame an *explosion*) once the spark reaches the accelerant—nitroglycerin, in the case of dynamite. In the case of anger, the fuse is always a feeling of *discomfort*. The anger cannot happen without discomfort. If I am not uncomfortable, I am lying on the beach, the waitress is bringing me cold drinks, and it is simply impossible to get angry. If the waitress is slow in bringing my drink, or if she spills a tray of cold drinks on me, I start to experience discomfort. This discomfort can become the beginning of anger. Often this fuse is very short—so short we have no awareness of it. It seems then as if an event happens, and “I just get mad” right away.

The accelerants in anger are the thoughts and attitudes that transform the original feeling of discomfort into the angry explosion. Without these thoughts, we are left with simple discomfort. The thoughts work as transformers. They change us from passive sufferers into active agents, attempting to remove

what we believe to be the cause of the suffering. We will return to these thoughts in Section III, and try to understand more specifically how they work to transform discomfort into anger.

Anger is always a two-stage feeling, beginning with some feeling of discomfort. The discomfort is the fuse that sets off the dynamite of anger. For example, someone steps on my foot. . . “Ow!” This is not yet anger. This is simple pain. It only becomes anger after I identify the source of my pain, then start to ruminate on why the person might have stepped on my foot and how I should respond. I call these thoughts inflammatory thoughts, and they fuel anger like the accelerant in an explosive charge—like the gasoline in a Molotov cocktail. The fuse is some sort of suffering, which may or may not originate in something physical. If it is psychological pain, it might be anxiety, jealousy, shame, disgust, guilt, grief, sadness, or disarray. Because of the way our emotional lives are wired, we are often unaware of the triggering feeling, and in our reports about the incident we may skip over this stage entirely: “He stepped on my foot and I got mad.”

An essential part of anger management is *fuse-lengthening*. Why? Because this allows the opportunity to ponder what we do, to get the neocortex—the more sophisticated part of the brain—into the decision-making process. In the old westerns, when the fuse was lit to the dynamite or keg of gunpowder, the guys in white and black hats could punch each other, roll in the dirt, fall into the water trough, and shoot a couple of horses. Then, at the final possible second, the white-hat guy could pull the fuse out. *I want to be in this position: to have the opportunity to pull out the fuse.* But if the fuse in the cowboy movies had been an inch long, there would have been no opportunity for all the fuss, no chance to defuse the bomb. To make a decision, it is crucial that we have a longer fuse.

It is very important in anger work to *identify* the fuse of discomfort: the pain I am feeling that triggers my anger. Why? Because if I can identify it, it might be possible to learn to *endure that feeling of discomfort without making it immediately into anger*. If shame usually triggers my anger, then it might be possible for me to feel shame just as shame. To do this, I must learn to lengthen my fuse. If I can lengthen the fuse a little, this increases the possibility that I might be able to decide whether, how, and when I express my anger.

The Anger Train

A man I was working with told me that his co-worker criticized his job performance, so he got angry. I asked, “Did you experience any shame when he criticized your job performance?” He responded, “I don’t know.” We often board the anger train in the stimulus station, and then speed right through to anger. We fly past the discomfort station so fast, we can’t even read the name of the station. The man had no idea what shame was—he had never allowed himself to slow down and experience it. One of the first things we need to do in working with our anger is to slow the train down so that we can at least notice the feelings of suffering that happened before the anger. “Oh, there it is: that’s shame, my old friend.” Or, “Sure enough, there’s that feeling of being used.”

At a later stage in my work with anger, it might be useful to stop the train at the Discomfort Station, and then get off the train. I might then read the local paper, have lunch, talk with the locals, explore the town, and then spend the night. In other words, it would be useful to learn to simply experience the discomfort, to live with it and relax with it. I may learn to experience it not as something to be feared or avoided, but rather as just garden-variety discomfort, nothing unusual. After staying in discomfort for a while, learning to relax with it and breathe with it, it is possible that when I re-board the anger train, it is no longer going to the anger station. It is possible that when the Anger Train arrives, I

will no longer feel the desire to get on board, that the urgent need to go somewhere else has disappeared.

Armor

Norbert Elias, a historian who wrote a two-volume study on *The Civilizing Process*, asked the question, “Why do we have road-rage on the modern highway?” He suggested that we look at the history of travel. At one time, travel was a dangerous enterprise, where one risked attack by wild animals, warring tribes, or bands of robbers every time one traveled from town to town. It made sense that men would suit up in their armor, both physically and emotionally, as they were preparing for travel. Now when we travel, we don’t risk attack by wild animals, robbers, or warring tribes. These have all been eliminated in our society. The main risk we face is other drivers who have also suited up in their armor. When we step into a car, we are suiting up in 2000 lbs of armor. We men are stepping into an ancient male role that was once necessary for travel.

During our angering process, we are always suiting up in our armor, sometimes very quickly. Notice what is happening to your muscles as you get angry: you may notice tension in the shoulders, head, arms and legs. This is part of our normal physiological reaction when we get angry: the body sends larger amounts of blood into the muscles, into the extremities, in preparation for battle. By contrast, while humans experience anxiety, the blood is withdrawn from the extremities and is concentrated in the trunk of the body. This serves the purpose of protecting the body in case of attack, of reducing bleeding in the extremities if an enemy or wild animal wounds me.

Certain feelings of discomfort may seem almost indistinguishable from anger, so that the feelings tend to run together. For example, for some individuals, it is impossible to

feel envy or unfairness without also feeling anger. For others, it is impossible to feel humiliation without feeling anger. One will notice that his shoulder muscles are becoming tense, his arms are twitching, as he experiences humiliation. An essential part of anger management is learning to feel discomfort without automatically suiting up in armor, without automatically making the humiliation into anger. This requires considerable practice, self-consciously keeping the muscles relaxed as one experiences the discomfort that usually triggers us.

Look at your entries in the Anger Record so far. Look at the feelings listed in the Feelings column, which—you will recall—are the feelings that came immediately before the anger. Do these feelings tend to be shame-humiliation, abandonment-jealousy, anxiety-chaos, frustration-claustrophobia, or injustice-envy? Get some initial sense for the main triggers to your anger. If you can learn to endure these feelings without making them into anger, this gives you considerable power over your anger. *The more you endure your pain, the more you can control your anger.*

Surfing the Waves of Discomfort

When pain begins to rise, it is easy to assume that it will rise continuously until something stops it—until the source of the pain is removed. This is commonly where anger fits in: as an attempt to control and remove pain. For example, if I am in a discussion with my wife over who should be responsible for paying a bill, this might cause me to feel shame, because I feel I should be more in control of our finances. Shame is quite uncomfortable, and I might well feel I need to act quickly, or the discomfort will go through the ceiling. Since I identify her criticism as the source of the shame, I could get suddenly furious with her in an attempt to stop the discomfort immediately.

Those who have studied pain closely, however, have noted that it does not rise indefinitely. It is structured like a wave, with crests and valleys. The hypnotist Milton Erickson suffered from two bouts of polio, and contended with his own chronic pain throughout his life. He observed that this pain was not constant, however. It might be very intense for a time, but if he became engrossed in a film or an interesting conversation, the pain would diminish and sometimes disappear. When my oldest daughter was born, I attended Lamaze childbirth classes. The instructor told us that when the pain of a contraction starts, it is the mother's natural tendency to tense up, to prepare for battle against it. But this is counter-productive, and can cause damage to both mother and newborn. Lamaze training attempts to help women relax in the midst of the pain, to let it roll over them like a wave that rushes in, and then goes out again.

If I can turn myself into an observer of my pain, and not just a reactor to it, I will perhaps discover something similar. When shame, guilt, or anxiety begin to rise, if I watch it and simply endure it, the pain will rise, level out by itself, then decrease *even if I do nothing*. This is an attitude towards suffering that is much more common in the East, and is found in Buddhism, Hinduism, and the *Tao Te Ching* of China. In the West, heroes slay dragons; in the East, they are more likely to endure them. If I turn myself into a hero of endurance, sitting and watching the tides of my emotions as they roll in with considerable noise and drama, then recede without my effort, my susceptibility to anger will diminish markedly.