

Transforming Anger

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The Destructive Emotions of Greed and Anger

As human beings, we are subject to many negative habits. The most serious and detrimental being craving and anger, which stem from our emotional attachments to the concept of having an individual and permanent self, and to our lack of understanding our true place in the universe and our relationships with all those who inhabit the universe with us.

Craving, or greed, arises from the mistaken idea that we can obtain and hold on to possessions, to ideas, and even to other people. Craving arises from selfishness, from the misconception that our bodies are who we are. But if we try to pinpoint where “I” actually exists in our bodies, we cannot do so. “I” cannot be found in the heart, in the head, or anywhere else in the body.

Every body is simply a combination of different parts: two arms, two legs, many different organs including the brain and the heart, but none of them is “I.” Not yet understanding this, we not only do everything we can to protect this body, but we also go to lengths to protect our possessions as well. We even think that if somebody threatens our ideas by simply disagreeing with us, that that is a threat to us.

The reality is that this body will only exist for a short time and that our possessions will be ours for an even briefer time, for we will take nothing with us at the end of this life. We know this reality all too well, but we still try to hold on dearly to whatever we have.

Clinging to Possessions

If you feel that this does not apply to you, please think of one of your most treasured possessions. Now, imagine giving away that treasured possession. How would you feel? If you are like most people, you will find it is very discomforting to think of no longer having such a valued possession.

This is a form of craving, as we desire to keep the things that we have and to acquire additional or new possessions. And believing that such possessions, even in the form of people and ideas, can make us happy.

But after we have acquired something new or obtained more of something we already have, we so often find ourselves wishing for another new object or perhaps for much more of what we just obtained. This is, unfortunately, human nature. Even young children do this as they do whatever is necessary, for example, to convince the adult with them to buy a new toy. Later, often in a matter of hours, the child loses interest and wants another new playingthing.

We do the same thing; our toys are just larger and more expensive. But the principle is the same: Old or young, we are rarely satisfied and are, instead, often disappointed and, thus, often unhappy.

We will never find lasting and genuine happiness through possessions, but will, instead, remain forever discontented. Not yet realizing this, we still feel that it is perfectly natural to want more, and to accumulate more. We are even envious of others, and maybe secretly hope to impress others with what we have.

This fault-ridden idea of “more is good” is buoyed up by an advertising industry that is constantly telling us that by purchasing what they are selling, we will find the answer to our prayers: hap-

piness, love, youth, security—the list is endless. Feeling that we do not have enough happiness, love, youth, and security, we buy into their enticing pitches in the belief that their product or service will alleviate our nagging sense of discontent.

Clinging to the idea that the source of happiness lies outside ourselves, we become attached to things, places, and even ideas. We ignore the reality that nothing remains with us forever: possessions are lost or become unimportant, people leave us or we leave them, places are left behind, ideas change. Such attachments are why we are still living lives of unhappiness: because we cling to things, to ideas, to life. We desire, we want, all of these.

Impermanence

In our desire to possess, we even wish to possess other people. We want others to respect us and to love us. We want others to only think of us. To always come back to us. To forever be with us. This is a form of craving and a major attachment, which is due largely to not yet realizing that we are all impermanent: We all change from second to second. None of us remains the same. No one can forever hold on to what we now have.

Our lives are brief. Time seems to tick by so slowly when we are miserable. But when we are happy, that moment in our lives feels very short. Albert Einstein, while trying to explain the theory of relativity, put it into simple words that most of us can understand. If we put our hand on a hot stove for a few seconds, it will feel like eternity. But if you are a man sitting next to an attractive woman, ten minutes can feel like seconds. Everything is relative.

But even as brief as our lives are, nothing will remain with us

forever. The person with us now will not always be with us. This is so painful for us because we become attached, in this case, to people whom we do not want to lose. When they are gone, we will miss them as we continue to think of them and the pleasant times we had together. But, for good or for bad, we cannot keep any person with us.

As Buddhists, we believe that we have been reborn innumerable times. In many of those lifetimes, we have cared deeply for others. In future lifetimes, this will happen again as our attachments pull us back into those relationships lifetime after lifetime. These attachments may be for places, for things, for ideas or people, and this time around they may spread over one lifetime, perhaps our current one. Or they may come rushing together in our final moments, overwhelming us.

When we are dying we can be lead into many directions by our thoughts. These final thoughts are so crucial because they lead us to our next lifetime. I have, on different occasions, spoken with nurses, family members, and friends who were with people who were dying. One such person told me of what had happened to a friend of hers.

A few years ago, another nun and I were speaking weekly to a small group of friends. The first time we met with them, we learned of a friend of theirs who was very ill. Her time was spent between hospital and home. When she was in the hospital, the friends would talk to her about practicing Buddhism and trying to be a better person, but she would explain that she did not have the energy right then and would do so when she returned home. When they visited her at home after she left the hospital and again discussed Buddhism and urged her to be a kinder, more forgiving and

honest person, she would say that she was healthier now and would get around to such things later.

As we continued to meet with the group, we learned that in the past when the friends would go out shopping, the one who was now sick would invariably say that she had forgotten her money and would then ask to borrow some from the others. It was also a habit of hers to forget to repay what she had borrowed. The friends were understandably upset about this.

One day, when the woman was in the hospital again, one of the friends visited her. As she was lying there, she began to tell her visitor about a time when she had loaned another person some money and jewelry. As she was bitterly and angrily complaining that this person had failed to return the jewelry, the woman suddenly died. The friend who had been with her told us that the woman's face was contorted with anger when she died. And within thirty minutes, her face turned a very dark gray.

What we are feeling in our final moments will lead us to our next lifetime. If we are calm as we are dying, that calmness will lead us to our next lifetime. If we are very angry, then anger will lead us into the next lifetime. We may not be able to prove where this woman was reborn, but her appearance right after she died was dire indeed. She died this way because of anger and craving.

She was not thinking of the kindness of the friend who had come to visit her, or of the thoughtfulness of all the other friends who regularly visited her every time she entered the hospital—all those who wanted to help her become a better person. She was not thinking of any of that. Neither was she thinking of the nurses and doctors who were trying to help her and to ease her pain.

She was thinking of her missing jewelry and she was indulging

in her anger. As Buddhists, we are taught that anger will lead one to be reborn in the hell realms and that greed will lead one to be reborn in the hungry ghost realm.

The hungry ghost realm is a realm where beings have insatiable desires. They are constantly hungry, and constantly thirsty. Their stomachs are immense, but their throats are tiny and, so, they are unable to satisfy their hunger and thirst, unable to quench their desires. Notwithstanding whether one believes that the hell and hungry ghost realms are in other dimensions or whether they exist now in this world, we are led to them because of our anger and craving.

Our greed and craving tie us to unhappiness and lead us to so much harmful behavior. Because of craving, we become angry as others take or have something we want. Greed can also be there in the act of giving should we continue to think about the object we have given away, because our mind still clings to it.

Greed is one of our most severe problems, but there is a way to counteract our greed. It is the first of the six perfections that Bodhisattvas, who are awakened beings, practice.

The Giving of One's Self and Possessions

To counteract our craving we can practice generosity. Think again of giving away that treasured possession. Do you think that you might miss it and wish that you had not given it away? Ideally, when we give something to others, we want to do so without a lengthy analysis, including such thoughts as to whether or not we like the receivers of the gift or whether they may or may not deserve getting it. Upon seeing somebody needing an object that we

have, we can simply offer the object to the person.

Genuine generosity is to spontaneously and unconditionally offer what we have and to believe that it will make the other happy. We do so without having second or remorseful thoughts. After such giving, we strive to let go of the thought that we had given and that of the object given.

When we practice generosity, we can start out with something that is not a favorite item, and from that we continue giving. We live in an affluent world and many of us have more than we need. We only need a modest amount of clothes to keep us comfortable and to protect us from inclement weather. We only need a reasonable size home. We can live very healthily on simple, wholesome foods. We really do not need a lot. Instead of clinging to every item that we have, we can practice generosity.

Initially, if you find generosity difficult, start by giving something that you have not used for a while, say a year or two. Doing so, most people will realize they do not have any regrets or feel a sense of loss. On the contrary, most of us will instead feel good because we have helped another person. We have given away an article of not much use to us and in doing so helped someone else.

Eventually, we will unconditionally and spontaneously offer the things that we do use and treasure when we feel the other person needs it more than we do. Afterwards, if we happen to think about the object, we still feel happy and glad that we had given it to another.

Even if the recipients use the item for a short time, we will gradually accept that we have practiced genuine generosity and had made an offering of happiness. From this giving we can be contented. And even if they never use it again or pass it to another, we can remain happy knowing that we have begun to reduce our

clinging, and that we are one tiny step closer to severing all of our attachments. One tiny step closer to awakening to the innate goodness within each of us.

What about those who are unable to give possessions because they may not have much themselves? For those who may just have enough to provide food, shelter, and the basic necessities for their families, what can they do if there is nothing extra to give to others?

Not having excess material resources does not preclude us from giving, for we can also give of our abilities and time. All forms of giving allow us to counteract our craving—this is just another way to do so. How many times has somebody asked us for help to do something? And how many times have we excused ourselves by saying that we were very tired but, in reality, we just wanted to stay home and relax, or maybe watch television. Couldn't they find someone else to help them?

And what if we had helped? How many of us had thought “I wonder how soon I can leave. This work is very difficult and when I am finally finished, I'm going to be exhausted and won't have time for myself. I wish I had stayed home.”

This is a form of greed. This is thinking that this body—our body—is important, that keeping our body comfortable is important, and that keeping it happy just might be more important than helping someone else.

To counteract this kind of greed, we can practice generosity. We all probably know excellent examples of people who do this, people whom we admire and whom we wish we were like. Upon being asked for help or just seeing that somebody needs assistance, these people automatically help the other person. It just seems so natural for them to do so—an effortless effort.

When we spend some time to think about it, we will realize this kind person was probably even more tired than we were, but was able to do so much more than we did, or wanted to, and seemingly without getting tired or disgruntled. They looked happy doing what exactly what they were doing, which was helping someone else. This is genuine generosity.

We, too, will be overcoming our greed when we can help others spontaneously. If we persevere, the day will arrive when we will be able to help people without waiting to be asked, when we will just do so without any prompting. This practice takes time to develop, but, gradually we will improve.

We can also practice giving when upon seeing somebody who is upset, we walk up and simply smile at them or say a few thoughtful words. Doing so, we instinctively provide them with what they need to feel better. And it might be at a moment when we ourselves, very honestly, might not have felt like smiling or being insightful, and perhaps even felt like we were the ones needing a smile or kind word from another. But frankly, helping others will be more beneficial than being helped. Always.

When we are able to give in this way—when we learn to give as caring and generous people give—we will no longer feel tired. And even if we feel tired when we begin helping, after a while we will realize that, instead, we feel alert, happy, and energetic. We will no longer be worried by what had been troubling us before. By concentrating on helping others, we will no longer be upset by negative feelings that seem to be constantly bombarding us. This is the result of sincerely giving to others.

The Giving of Teaching

We can also give by teaching. We may not have many things to give. But many people are good at doing things that others are not, or may know things that others do not know. We can impart to others whatever skills and knowledge we have. We do not need to have exceptional skills or special knowledge. We just teach others who wish to learn, so that they too will acquire those skills or understanding.

When we see someone who is in need, perhaps, of food or other basic necessities, we can first give them what they need to meet their immediate needs, but then we can go a step further by finding ways to teach them what they need to know to become self-sufficient. This way they, too, can care for those they love and are responsible for.

In our teaching, however, we should not withhold any information, but continue teaching all that we know, as long as the person wishes to learn. If, due to our selfishness, we decide to not teach the other person to the best of our ability by sharing all that we know, or perhaps due to self-interest, we decide that we have done enough and that the other person can figure out the rest himself, then we are not sincerely teaching. Sincerity is the key. We may not know a lot, but as long as we know something that others do not, then we should openly and honestly share our skills and knowledge with them.

Even if we do not have possessions or knowledge to give, we can still be kind. We can still be respectful to others. We can still be considerate of all beings around us. We can help others to feel safe around us.

The Giving of Fearlessness

Another way we can give is to relieve the worries and fears of others. A friend told me of an incident that had occurred in her home. A caring woman with an excellent sense of humor, she does draw the line at some things. Upon walking into her bathroom, she saw a large python on the floor. Having good reflexes, she drew the line and firmly closed the door. Knowing she was not at risk, her immediate thought was for her elderly cat that could no longer move quickly.

Jenny, who is Buddhist by practice, called to her husband, Rob, who is Buddhist at heart. Rob looked in the phone book and located a snake catcher. However, before the snake catcher was allowed to leave the premises with his catch, Rob painstakingly queried the gentleman: Was the snake okay? How would it be released and where? Would it be safe or would it be subject to any risk? The snake catcher patiently explained that he would take it a considerable distance away before he would release it in a safer and more natural environment. My two caring friends watched while the snake catcher carefully checked the python, and then assured them that it had not suffered any from its capture and that it would be fine in a safer habitat.

How many of us would have taken the time, made the effort, and gone to the expense that was involved in catching and saving the snake? This was a case of the giving of safety and of caring for the welfare of others, even when the “other” is a six-foot python. This is helping other beings feel safe around us because this offering of fearlessness and safety was not given to only one being—the cat—but also to another, to the snake.

Every thought we have is instantly felt by all others throughout

the universe, for we are all one: We are all inter-related. We just do not yet realize this because we have not experienced this oneness. In the above example of the snake, the thought was to protect one life without harming the other. That thought, of compassion and loving-kindness, was felt by all beings whether they were in the house with the snake or on the other side of the universe.

Many people who find themselves in this situation probably would have thought “To protect my cat I will kill the snake.” But Jenny and Rob’s thoughts did not come from attachment to their cat or from the desire to protect what was theirs. Rather, their thoughts arose spontaneously from the reverence held equally for all forms of life and their wish to provide security and safety.

When we, too, begin to give with compassion and understanding, we will gradually feel a sense of contentment and happiness. In time, we will be able to look at a treasured possession and think, “I know who would really like this.” And, in time, as our giving becomes more natural, we will find that, more and more, our spontaneous giving is accompanied by fewer thoughts of what we have just done.

Lives of Happiness and Freedom

Buddhist teachings can be subsumed into three phrases:

Avoid all that is bad,
Embrace all that is good,
Purify the mind.

To live lives of happiness and freedom, we need to “eradicate all

that is bad.” We need to curtail—and eventually—eliminate our craving, desires, and attachments because they lead the way to so many of our negative emotions and bad habits. And to lifetimes upon lifetimes of unhappiness if we allow them to make us cling to possessions, people, etc.

As we work to “embrace all that is good,” a good place to start is the eradication of our greed through giving and generosity. We will feel the happiness from giving something to another. Gradually, we will find ourselves thinking less of the elation we feel after having done something for another. Eventually, we will just find ourselves offering spontaneously and no longer even thinking about what we have done. We will find, instead, that we naturally maintain a quiet and serene state of happiness.

As we let go of attachments, at some point we will no longer become upset but will remain calm and content when we encounter things not working out as we hope. This will happen infrequently at first, but gradually we will react this way more often. Conversely, when things do go the way we want, we will again remain calm and content, instead of proud or desirous in wanting the pleasantness to continue. The more we let go of selfishness and attachments, the more we will remain calm and content, and it matters not what the circumstance. In this way, we will be learning how “to purify the mind.”

Many of us will find that we can gradually manage not becoming upset at bad occurrences. But not wanting the good times to continue can be more difficult because it seems harmless. What is wrong with wanting tomorrow to be as good as today? While this thinking does not harm others, it can inadvertently harm us for we are attaching or clinging to good times. And this is a form of greed.

What we are aiming at is to remain calm and content—to be unattached—at all times. Yes, this is extremely difficult at first and may well seem impossible. But with enthusiasm and effort, very gradually, we will find that when things do not go our way and on those unusual times when they do, we will remain calm and content either way.

So often it seems that other people want to do something differently from the way we want to do it. When others want to go one way and we want to go another, this is the very time that we need to be not attached to our way of doing things. If their preference is not morally wrong but just another way of doing something, try to go along with it.

Becoming upset, being in a bad mood, and making everyone uncomfortable will not help anyone. Try and remember two contrasting occasions: one that had you fuming and another in which you were extremely happy. Which feels better? Do not give in to the old negative habits: Find a saner way of reacting.

A cost-free, painless, and instantaneous way of reacting is to smile. Even if there is no one around, we can smile. Initially when we try to do this, we will feel somewhat embarrassed should somebody walk into the room and find us sitting there just smiling to ourselves. They may look somewhat concerned at first, but as we sit there, smiling, they will very quickly feel like smiling too. So smile and be happy. Others will feel it.

Feeling the happiness of others is far superior to picking up on other people's greed and selfishness. We do not feel comfortable with people who seem to radiate such negative feelings. Alternatively, when we are with others who are generous and always thinking of others, we feel happy just being near them.

As we practice generosity and start to eradicate our greed, others will notice. They may not say anything, but they will notice. And they will see that in sincere giving, both the one who gives and the one who receives benefits. This is how we can teach others without saying a word but by setting examples.

If someone tells us to give but they themselves do not give, we really do not believe what they say. On the other hand, if we see somebody who seems to not have much, but who is constantly giving things away—for example, somebody who only has a little bit of food, but who says, “Here, have this”—this is the person to learn from.

Greed is very ugly. It leads to many negative emotions. It leads us to endless lives of unhappiness because we try to selfishly protect ourselves, our possessions, our ideas, and our knowledge, and because we think our possessions, ideas, and knowledge are real and will make us happy. But our ideas, possessions, craving, desires, and attachments will not bring happiness.

Generosity will bring happiness. More than likely, we are not yet able to practice the level of generosity that we wish. But we can still begin where we are. We can teach others. Surely, each of us can smile at somebody else. Many of us have things that we can give to others, skills that can be used to help others, or time that can be used to benefit others.

In so doing, we will feel happy and we will begin to feel free. We will even begin to feel lighter, because our attachments will start to drop away from us. But if we do not eliminate or at least reduce our greed, cravings, and attachments, we will fall prey to an emotion that most of us have come to dread—anger.

The Seeds of Anger

Anger arises when greed is unrestrained. Or when we do not get what we want, because others reject our ideas or obtain what we had wanted for ourselves. Or when what we have is taken from us, or those we love are lost to us. The ways that craving, desire, and attachments can overwhelm us and, then, lead us to anger are endless. And the pain generated, as a consequence, is infinite.

Anger is one of our greatest problems. It arises before we even realize what is happening. Somebody says something and, in a flash, we are angry. It is too late to try to control the anger: It has already ignited. When this happens we can try to think about why we have become angry, where this anger really came from.

It did not start with this incident; nor did it start yesterday, last week, or last year. As Buddhists, we believe that it started many, many lifetimes ago. In the past, one of us said something to the other. We did not mean to hurt the other one's feelings. We just did not pay attention to what we were about to say. So we spoke carelessly and did not realize that something in what we had said had hurt the other person.

But deep within the one we had upset, the incident was registered in that part of all of us that courses through each lifetime. When we next met, maybe in our next lifetime or maybe after a hundred lifetimes, that other person unconsciously remembered the pain of what had happened. This time, he said something to us and this time there was just a hint of resentment. After that, the incident again withdrew into both of our sub-consciousnesses.

We continue to pass the anger back and forth each time we encounter one another. Each time our mutual anger becomes

stronger. Each time, as we act on that anger our feelings intensified. One time, verbally lashing out at the other will not be enough. One of us will strike the other. But still it does not end.

Meeting again, we will get into a fight. Meeting yet again, fighting will not be enough as our need to seek retaliation—to hurt the other—will have intensified into a white-hot fury. Our desire for revenge will lead us to an inevitability: One of us will kill the other. But even this is not the end, for personal anger and desire for retaliation is not confined to individuals. Individual anger leads to territorial, ethnic, and religious conflicts. Conflicts lead to war. War to annihilation.

All of this anger, pain, and suffering came about because of one unnoticed thought, one careless word. We did not mean to hurt the other person; we just were not paying attention to what we were saying. And this is how anger and hatred begin.

So the next time anger is being passed back and forth, and we become more embroiled in it, remember that we are not innocent victims in the latest spate of rage. We both have participated in this exchange, one which has gone on for longer than we can imagine. Yes, the other person is not the only one at fault. With this realization comes the thought that we can continue fueling the anger, or one of us can choose to stop what is happening—by consciously letting go of the anger.

When we become angry nothing positive is accomplished, nothing is resolved. Nothing at all. If we respond in anger, that anger will grow more tenacious, more frightening. But responding with logic while the other person is angry may not help to diffuse the anger either.

Logic is, very often, the last thing an angry person wishes to

hear. We have been there ourselves. Just try and remember the last time you were angry. How would you have reacted if the other person told you to calm down. It takes a very special person who can say to us “Please, do not be angry” for it to have any real effect, especially when we are practically fuming.

So what is this anger that is so difficult to control? Or is it? The reality is that the anger is coming from within us not from the other person. We are making us angry by allowing the other person to “push our buttons” and to infuriate us. We are doing it to ourselves.

Being cognizant of this, we can choose, instead, to let go of the anger. Maybe we can choose not to say anything else right away. Maybe we can count to ten or take deep breaths. Maybe, instead of replying angrily to them, we can simply say “Amitufo.” Maybe we can say nothing or if nothing else seems to work, we can quietly withdraw.

Usually, in this way, the other person’s anger will die down more quickly because we are not responding to them. Later on, we can try talking to them. We could ask what we did to upset them and possibly apologize for having done so. Often, all the other person needs to hear is “I’m sorry.” And this may be enough to control, reduce, or diffuse the anger on their part.

Anger makes us miserable, guilty, and upset, as we cannot sleep or concentrate. More than likely, the other person feels equally unhappy, upset, and unsettled. Out of compassion for the other person we should do what we can to try and reduce this anger, to try to resolve what is going on between us. If we cannot do so, if we cannot find a way to eradicate—to stop—what is happening, we might try to avoid the person for a while, or avoid the circumstance that seems to trigger the hostility.

Also, we can think about what happened in this instance—what

we did that contributed to the other person as well as ourselves becoming angry—and, then, we can resolve how to act more judiciously in the future.

Affinities and Enmities

From all our past lifetimes, the people we encountered are more than we can count. Some of these relationships had been good ones, while others, unfortunately, had been bad ones. Sometimes, when we encounter people we had known before, we “recognize” them. Most of us have had the occasional experience whereupon meeting someone, we felt like we were meeting an old friend. In a sense, we were. We felt like we could have sat down and talked for hours, and maybe we did. Whenever we are with such an “old friend,” we feel happy and relaxed. This is a good affinity, a natural positive connection with another person.

Conversely, we all probably have had the experience of meeting someone and instantly felt an immediate dislike for that person. The individual did not say anything offensive, perhaps only said hello, but still, we felt a strong dislike. Whenever we encounter our “old antagonist,” we feel uncomfortable and tense. These are enmities, or negative affinities from our past.

When we encounter someone with whom we have a negative affinity, we can remind ourselves that, very possibly, we are irritating him just as he is irritating us. Why have we ended up in this situation? Karma. Karma is literally an “action.” Our thoughts, verbal and physical behavior plant causes. Everything that happens in our lives today is almost entirely the result of the causes we planted in

our past lifetimes. Very little of what is happening to us now is the result of what we did earlier in this lifetime.

Since the causes were already created, there is nothing we can do to change them. We can, however, control the conditions that allow the causes to develop a result. For example, a seed is a cause that needs the right conditions to grow: good soil, adequate water, and plenty of sunshine. When these conditions are present, the seed can grow. But we can keep the seed from maturing by withholding the necessary conditions. Without soil, water, and sunlight the seed cannot grow—the cause cannot mature—because the necessary conditions are absent. Therefore, if we cannot diffuse the anger by letting it go, we can try to control the conditions.

There is an account of a Buddhist who had attained a certain level of insight due to his years of cultivation. Having some ability at knowing what would happen in the future, he knew that in a certain city in China, an individual would kill him because he had killed that person in a previous lifetime.

Knowing this, he also understood that although he had attained some achievement in his practice, he was not yet at the level where upon being killed he would not feel anger when this happened. Consequently, he would not be able to avoid creating more negative karma by controlling his emotions.

However, by not going to that particular city, he could control the conditions. In this way, he was able to further continue his practice with sincerity and diligence. When he had reached the level where he would no longer give in to anger, he went to that particular city in China. He met the person and he was killed. But since he could control his emotions, he was able to stop the anger and hatred at that point.

He managed to practice to a point where he could control the conditions—a rare feat indeed. He did this not just for himself but for the other person as well, because he understood that if he gave rise to anger then he would, in turn, kill the other person in a future lifetime.

His actions required a level of self-discipline that is much more than most of us possess. But we can still work at controlling conditions on a more modest level. If somebody constantly irritates us and all of our efforts to resolve the situation have failed, we can withdraw temporarily and go work on reducing our anger, with a goal of eliminating it. In this way, we can begin to control conditions.

Who Makes Us Angry?

Also, we can remind ourselves that other people do not make us angry: We ourselves do. When we encounter a difficult situation, we have a choice of how to react. We can carelessly fall into our usual habit of losing our temper or we can react wisely. It is entirely up to us.

Why do we so easily become angry? We do so because we are attached to self-importance, our view of who we are, to the concept of “I.” When my concept of “I” is threatened, “I” very often strikes out in anger.

A good example of this is criticism. We have many faults but we generally do not appreciate others pointing them out to us. Regardless, others very often criticize us, just as we are often critical of others. When somebody points out a fault, they, like us, usually do so clumsily, and consequently, our feelings are hurt. Few people

are able to correct us or criticize us without us reacting negatively.

We respond defensively with resentment, or guilt, or embarrassment, or a score of other reactions. We may well know we have done something wrong, but we do not appreciate others pointing it out to us. We resent critiques because we feel that others are in no position to criticize us: Surely, they must have, sometime in the past, done what we just did—made the same mistake as us. Or we may find it difficult to apologize—no matter how guilty we feel—and so we react with anger or try to ignore the situation

It is very difficult when somebody criticizes us and it is the rare person who would find it easy to say, “You are absolutely right. I apologize and will not do it again.” Such humility coupled with strength of character is usually not readily found in most of us. More likely, we will act defensively, or worse. We may, in turn, criticize the other person. So, let us think before we react.

There are two possible things going on here. The first possibility is, yes, we did or said something wrong. If we are unable to deal with this reality right away, perhaps we can go off by ourselves or with a friend. Hopefully, on our own or with our friend’s help, we can figure out how not to make the mistake again. Maybe we can try to be more aware of how others are reacting to us, or maybe we can try to think more before we speak or act. Whatever we decide to do, we must do so with determination.

Instead of being angry or feeling guilty or becoming embarrassed, we can try to be grateful. After all, it is not they who had done something wrong—it was us—so becoming defensive and getting upset is rather futile. More importantly, we must realize that we have been provided an opportunity to improve and to be a better person in the future. For this we should be appreciative, not angry.

This is what can happen when we make a mistake and someone is helpful enough to bring it to our attention.

The second possibility is for someone to criticize us even if we have done nothing wrong. Being accused of doing something when we have not is even more likely to invoke anger. As quickly as possible we need to get over our indignation. Whether the other person honestly thought we did something wrong, misunderstood what happened, or maybe exaggerated the circumstances is not the issue.

We can try to calmly clear things up, but whether or not we succeed, again, we have a choice as to how to respond. Knowing that anger will not resolve anything, if we cannot help the other person to understand our position, we can at least try to let go of our anger.

Aware of our mistake, we can try not to commit it in the future and let go of what has happened. We do not need to constantly go over the incident or feel sorry for ourselves that someone is giving us a difficult time. Simply forget about it. Let it go.

If they criticize us and we did do what they said we did, they have pointed out one of our shortcomings and we know what we need to correct in the future. But if they have misjudged us and criticized us for something we have not done, then we must have done something in the past that brought this criticism about—perhaps we had unfairly criticized another, and our karma has caught up with us.

If we do not get upset, then we may be able to repay one karmic debt. If so, the person has just helped us and has, actually, done us a favor. If we can accept the situation and not get angry, become defensive or irritated, or feel anything negative, then this person has helped us to repay a karmic debt—of which we have an uni-

imaginable amount. How can we become angry with someone who has helped us?

When a friend helps us, we appreciate their thoughtfulness: When does a reasonable person ever respond with anger? Never. Even if this friend were not doing something out of kindness, they are still helping us, still doing us a favor—something we can try to appreciate.

Yes, it is extremely difficult to view the situation this way, but gradually developing the ability to look at life's iniquities from this perspective will help us to become calmer and more contented. By criticizing us unfairly, those doing so have actually done us a kindness. If somebody has done something thoughtful for us, how can we become angry?

If, in the face of our trying to reason with our critics—and with a deep determination not to give in to anger—they continue to criticize us, there is no need to respond in kind or, even, in defense. If we respond by defending ourselves, we know what will happen. They say something. And we will say something. They will say, “Yes, you did.” We will say, “No, I didn't.” “Yes, you did.” “No, I didn't.” This goes on and on, with both of us becoming louder and angrier: Neither one of us is accomplishing anything, other than planting more seeds for criticism, unhappiness, and anger in the future. The other person may not realize what is going on, but we do because we have some understanding of karma and causality.

Everything arises from the mind. What we say and do now will determine what happens in our future. If we argue, we plant the seeds for acrimony in our future. If we are considerate, we plant the seeds for thoughtfulness in our future. If we appreciate the fact that this person has helped us to repay a karmic debt, and, consequently, react with kindness by deciding to have any anger

stop here and now, then we have planted the seeds for understanding in our future.

When we start planting more seeds of consideration and selfless concern for the welfare of others, we will create good conditions in our future, as well as contributing to a better future for others. We can start doing this by realizing that as much as the person irritates us now, if we do not stop the escalation of anger, it will only get worse: The person who is irritating us now will keep doing so even more in the future. And the result will be two persons getting frustrated and angry, not just one—not just you. For his sake as well as our own, we need to stop this ugly exchange of anger.

Ideally, we will no longer worry about how we feel but be focused on how the other person feels: on how to free them from pain and unhappiness. At this point, we will be acting in accordance with our true nature. And the goodness that we create will be immeasurable: even enough to positively influence our current lifetime.

Deciding to Change

Liaofan's Four Lessons is the recorded account of Liaofan Yuan, a government official who lived in China almost five hundred years ago. As a young man, he was told exactly how his life would unfold, and for many years everything happened exactly as he had been told. He became convinced that since a person's life was destined there was no need to try to do anything: What was supposed to happen would. And so he aimlessly coasted through life.

After doing so for many years, he met an accomplished Zen

master who explained to Liaofan how he could change what was destined to happen if he could correct his faults, change his selfish behavior, think only of benefiting others, and create goodness. Doing everything the master told him to do, Liaofan created so much goodness in his life that he was able to change his future.

Previously it was said that almost everything that happens in this lifetime is the result of our thoughts, speech, and physical behavior from past lifetimes. It is extremely difficult to change what is destined to happen in one's current lifetime but that is what Liaofan did.

He admitted to the master that one of his worst traits was a bad temper, which easily inflamed him with anger at the least provocation, and which made him critical, impatient, undisciplined. And yet with all of these as well as many other shortcomings, Liaofan developed new positive ways of reacting to situations and other people. In this way, he completely changed his life.

He was destined to die at the age of fifty-three, but he lived until seventy-four. He was destined not to have children at a time when having sons to carry on the family name and bringing honor to one's ancestors was extremely important, but he and his wife had two sons. He was not destined to have a good job, but retired as a respected government official.

Liaofan lived five centuries ago in China. How can we relate to a man who is so far removed from today's world? We can because what Liaofan learned was a universal truth, which is not bound by time, geography, language, or cultural mores: We reap what we sow.

He learned that all his problems—poverty, childlessness, a dead-end job—were all the results of what he had done previously. And his bad temper lay at the heart of his problems. So many

things would set him off, not unlike today, when it seems that everything we encounter has the potential for angering us.

We, like Liaofan, can decide how we will react in the future to all those frustrating and infuriating situations we encounter. We might decide to control our tempers by promising ourselves that we will catch the anger before it gets out of hand, but this is very difficult to do for we will have to catch our anger before it erupts.

Another way to control anger is to understand causality: We become angry because of past thoughts, speech, and actions. Due to present thoughts, speech, and actions, if we do not modify our behavior now, we will suffer even more from our tempers in the future. This understanding will enable us to better overcome our anger.

The best way, however, is to have a change of heart. When we do so, we will have already begun to understand how hurt and resentful criticism feels, and how uncomfortable and upsetting anger feels. We will also understand how hurt, resentful, and upset the other person feels. Eventually, empathizing with their pain and the pain of so many beings who suffer from the consequences of anger, our anger will dissolve and not even arise.

Overcoming our anger by watching our thoughts is very difficult: We have to be aware of each incident that irritates us so we can catch the anger before it erupts. Overcoming the anger by understanding causality is also difficult because we have to constantly remind ourselves of what is actually going on.

Overcoming and transforming anger and damaging, negative emotions is best accomplished by no longer having room for them in our hearts. There is no place for thoughts of retaliation, ego, or defensiveness. All that are allowed to grow are unselfish thoughts of helping others.

We can do this in everything we do in our lives. The triggers for anger are encountered constantly: driving, at work, at home or school, when we are with other people or alone. But everything depends on how we react. We can give in to the anger or we can realize that if somebody has said something unkind, instead of lashing back, we can overcome and transform the rising anger by choosing to react wisely and kindly. By doing this we can plant the seeds for all the good things that we want to happen in our lives.

Reflect within. Think about how we feel when we become angry. Contrast this with how we feel when we are calm and content. Think about the quiet state of serenity. Which do we prefer? The anger or the serenity?

Transforming Anger

It is entirely up to us how we will feel in the future. It is entirely up to us what others around us will experience in the future. It is entirely up to us what our world and other people in this world, and other beings throughout the universe will experience. It all starts from within us. Serenity and joy start from deep within us, grow to include those around us, and then swell to include all those we meet. Ultimately, our serenity and joy will reach every being throughout the universe.

All this can happen if we just transform our anger and craving—by illuminating our lack of understanding with the light of wisdom. Perhaps we were not taught, or even if we were, we do not understand or do not believe. Whatever the cause, we do not truly understand. If we did, we would not behave as we do.

We would not carelessly say things that hurt others. We would not ceaselessly be wanting more, or constantly be giving in to anger. We would not continually be making the same mistakes over and over, lifetime after lifetime.

When we read or hear that our thoughts and actions will have consequences that we will have to bear in the future, many of us say, “Yes, that’s right” and nod in agreement. And while we are reading or listening, we believe and accept. But, how long will we remember and how well will we understand after the book is closed or the speaker has ceased speaking?

We do not truly understand. We have been told, but we cannot remember, we cannot do, and we cannot change. So easily we fall back into those comfortable bad habits of desire and attachment, selfishness and anger. We try: We want to do what is good. We sincerely do not want to hurt another person, put ourselves first at the expense of others, or be consumed again by our anger. But as time passes, we slip back into forgetting.

Maybe, in this age of almost instant communication, we have become desensitized to wrong doings. What’s a little bit more anger? A little bit more hate? A little bit more gossip? A little bit more falsehood? Besides, everyone is doing it. Stealing. Coveting. Lying. People argue, “Surely, the law of cause and effect does not apply to little indiscretions.” But it does. It is a universal law, which means it applies 100 percent—not 60 percent or 80 percent—of the time. In our desensitization, we conveniently rationalize that certain wrong actions are OK to do, and that only certain wrong actions are truly wrong. And so we end up with our own little law of cause and effect. And we end up with knowing—but not fully understanding.

Our old habits blind us to remembering the principle of cause

and effect. Maybe, if we can be reminded right away, or just before we do anything wrong, that a wrongful action is forthcoming, maybe we can stop our old bad habits. If only we can, just like when we hit our fingers (the cause) we feel pain (the effect), feel the consequences right away, maybe we will stop all our wrong doings. The fear of instant repercussions, in this case, instant throbbing pain in the finger, will surely stop further causes. Alas, most times we do not have such instant reminders. And so we slip back again and again, further and further. To knowing, but not fully understanding.

A person who truly understands realizes that constantly wanting more is pointless, because we only need what we can reasonably use whether it is food, clothing, a place to live, etc., and that we will not find happiness in wanting and obtaining “more.” This wise person finds contentment in the appreciation of what we have.

A person who is aware knows that they feel much better when they are calm and undisturbed than when they are angry and agitated. This wise person understands the futility and danger of anger, and chooses to let go of it.

The reality is that the wisdom is already within us, as is contentment and serenity. Craving, anger, and unawareness are not our true essence, rather destructive habits that we have picked up. Although we have yet to become sincerely accomplished at all the practices of generosity and goodness, each of us can work to accomplish them.

By thinking of benefiting others instead of ourselves, by letting go of our anger instead of allowing it to grow and fester, by illuminating the darkness of unawareness with the clear light of understanding, we will transform ourselves from within, from our heart and mind. We can carry this determination with us. We can broaden that

thought until it is our guiding thought. And then one day, we too will awaken to our perfect compassion, gentleness, and happiness.