

# Embracing the Flame

Mindfulness of Anger

By Ulla König

## Introduction

*Anger is like a howling baby, suffering and crying. The baby needs his mother to embrace him. You are the mother for your baby, your anger. The moment you begin to practice breathing mindfully in and out, you have the energy of a mother, to cradle and embrace the baby. Just embracing your anger, just breathing in and breathing out, that is good enough. The baby will feel relief right away. (Thich Nhat Hahn)<sup>1</sup>*

Meeting our anger can be a challenge, as it comes with a driving energy and tends to evoke reactions of blame, fear or delight within us. The Buddha encouraged us to familiarize ourselves with all expressions of the heart-mind, but equally warned about the destructive forces of ill-will. Let us look deeply into the nature of anger and learn ways to channel it in skilful and liberating ways.

This small handbook is the outcome of a week of teaching the Morning Sessions on Sangha Live. Together we explored anger as a human experience, differentiating it from aggression and learning mindful and responsible ways to meet the anger within ourselves and in others.

During these sessions many, many questions arose. Part of the reason might be, that anger is a topic we hardly ever talk about in depth in our mindfulness practice. We understand it as something we need to overcome or get rid of.

As it is my attempt and wish, to establish a doable and realistic practice, which accepts human beings with all their dynamics, rather than teaching from an idealistic stance, I decided to look deeper into the nature of anger within myself. What I found filled me with curiosity but also great lightness. There is no need to condemn our nature! However, there is a great need to differentiate anger from harmful

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<sup>1</sup> In remembrance of Thich Nhat Hanh, who passed away one day after the daily sessions on anger ended. May his willingness to look deeply into our own hearts inspire us all, and may we learn from his capacity to see anger not as a problem but as something to take care of with kindness and compassion.

impulses, an ability to contain it in mindfulness and an invitation to enlarge our capacity for compassion even further.

The questions and answers on these pages are a response to the lovely exchange in our online week together. In addition, I wrote a small booklet on the theme called “Embracing the Anger” which is available on my website and as a paperback version on Lulu.com. May it be of benefit to the practice of many!

While reading this text, you might remember experiences of anger, fear, depression or aggression in your own life. We have a tendency to align that which we read or hear to our own past experience. As such, we are reminded also of unpleasant experiences. Please remember to be kind and patient at any time in your practice. There is no need to take in more than you can handle at any given moment and at some times in our practice it might be best to put a book down or stop listening to a talk, if the experience of it gives us a sense of overwhelm.

## Mindfulness of Anger - Questions and Answers

*Question: I often feel this need to express my anger as I am often left with a charge that needs discharging.*

The wish to discharge the energy of anger is a very skilful wish. The actual question is to find appropriate ways to do so. We might decide to reign in our energies in the middle of a heated discussion to protect a relationship or prevent ourselves from acting in ways we would regret later.

Therefore, we often store energy inside our bodies. While this is okay over a short time, doing so constantly would cause ourselves harm. The energy of anger on the one hand can make us feel powerful and ready to act, on the other hand it can make us feel restless and cloud the mind. In order to calm down, we need to find ways to discharge energy. One way to do so is to engage in physical exercise like running, walking or dancing which make use of the surplus energy in a safe way. We can also try to consciously direct our attention towards something which allows us to feel safe, soften and relax.

It can be difficult to sit and meditate while experiencing the energy of anger, as the body might feel a great need to move. In such cases it can be more skilful to engage in some exercise and keep the formal meditation for later.

If we notice that the anger still lingers and we feel we hold on to its energy, we might ask ourselves whether there is a need which wants to be recognized or a boundary which wants to be protected. In such cases to discharge these energies physically is still helpful. It allows us to regain clarity, a clarity we need to explore skilful ways to take care of our needs and boundaries.

*Question: How do we know we discharged the energy of anger sufficiently and returned to a safe zone?*

The body is a reliable source of information, when we would like to know whether we are in a healthy state of being. When we feel sufficiently at ease, safe and connected, we notice less of a drive in body, heart and mind. The body is neither restless nor numbed out. We do not experience compulsive thoughts or the constant need to think, do or say something.

When we meet a challenging experience with a balanced heart-mind, we might notice a sense of caution but still have clarity of the mind. Our thinking is not flooded with stories, or compulsive, repetitive thinking. You can test it for yourself: are you able to drop the issue and postpone thinking about it to a later point in time? Are you able to rest or take care of some everyday chores? Is it possible to meditate for a couple of minutes with your breath or sense of being here and know?

*Question: How do we know when we have moved from anger to aggression?*

We notice the difference between anger and aggression when we ask ourselves, whether we are in a state of "being with" or "doing".

The energy of anger flares up in the body as a reaction to an unpleasant situation. It expresses first of all its dislike about what is going on here and now. Anger can be recognized as a felt sense, a charge of energy somewhere in the body. It can be a pleasant sense of power and strength or an unpleasant sense of drivenness and agitation. You might notice impulses to act, think or speak, but you still have the ability to observe these rather than being overwhelmed by them.

Aggression on the other side channels the energy of anger to do something. In doing so the energy gets a direction and a target. Aggression wants to get rid of what we define as the source of the unpleasant experience. When aggression flares up we lack the ability to stop and just be with the energy. A lack of clarity and an overwhelming urge to do something accompany each other.

*Question: How can I release a felt sense of anger which feels like being locked somewhere in the body, and not circulating?*

We often think of the energy of anger as being hot, intense and charging through the body. Yet this is not true for all of us. Some might experience quite the contrary when being in contact with anger. They report on hardly any feelings, or a felt sense of being stuck, stiff or a numbness somewhere in the body. Others experience a sense of drowsiness, volatile thoughts or a feeling of tiredness.

For something to be blocked, there needs to be a blockage which keeps the energy from moving. These can be based on internalized views like “Feeling anger makes me a bad person”, “I have no right to feel anger”, “It is dangerous to feel anger”, “If I get in touch with feelings of anger, it might be overwhelming”, etc. Such beliefs can stop us from actually being in touch with our anger. In the attempt of the heart-mind to protect us from the experience of anger, the arising energy gets redirected or just stored within our bodies.

If we wish to free the energy, we need to be mindful about the blockages. It can be helpful to explore our relationship and our views on anger. If we do not feel safe experiencing anger in the beginning, it can be a good preparation to deepen your knowledge about ways to establish a sense of safety, stability and care towards ourselves. Once we know how to do so, the heart might feel safe enough to remove the blockages and we can be in touch with our sense of anger once more.

*Question: I have a hard time figuring out whether I am angry or afraid.*

It can be a challenge to differentiate one emotion from the other. Emotional reactions are often closely linked to each other and can alternate quickly. They might appear as quick reactions to each other, where one triggers the next. In this case, the fear might thus not be a response to the situation itself but to the experience of anger.

Mindfulness of the body helps to differentiate the energy of different emotions. Anger and fear differ in their felt bodily sense. When we apply mindfulness in our everyday life, we will notice more and more situations where small frustrations or small worries appear. It can be helpful to tune into the body in such moments and notice the physical sensations.

Another way to differentiate the two is to see what perspective of yourself arises together with the emotion. Anger can come with a sense of agency and power as well as an urge to do something. Fear on the other hand has a more passive component. We have the impression something is happening to us and we either wish to withdraw from a situation or hope for it to quickly pass by.

*Question: If I get frustrated, it reflects in being angry with myself. How can I meet myself with more kindness?*

When our conscious and unconscious expectations are not met, we feel frustrated. Such frustration is usually quickly followed by the attempt to figure out who is responsible for the fact that things do not develop as planned or hoped. We name the scapegoat and often our aggression is channeled

towards it. This can be another person (“if he/she only were different, the situation would be less unpleasant”) but it can also be ourselves (“If only I were different...”).

In both cases the narrative is superficial, incomplete and driven by reactivity. In any situation there are more than just one cause or condition. There is more to action than conscious decision making, willpower or effort.

When we do not achieve the results we expected, we put pressure on ourselves. Words of shame and blame are turned inward. Thus, we believe we heighten the probability that we are going to try harder or learn to react differently. A deeply ingrained belief, especially in an achievement-based society, is that enough discipline, willpower or harshness, will allow us to achieve what we want. Yet this belief is short sighted. It ignores many of the causes and conditions which contribute to the outcome of a situation.

To be kind to ourselves implies first of all maintaining a steady basis of respect for ourselves. Words of blame or shame are always inappropriate; including towards ourselves. When we reflect on our human nature, we will see that we all made mistakes in the past. Even with the best of intentions and motivations, we will still continue to do so. The question is how we deal with such situations.

The pressure of blame and shame increases our self-awareness and makes it unlikely that we can look with clarity at a situation. Kindness instead accepts who we are right now and invites us to grow from there. The motivation to learn from these mistakes is rooted in our wish to suffer less and create stable and nourishing relationships.

*Question: My body collapses and I feel I shut down when people close by sound aggressive or put pressure on me. I don't know how to get my power back. Can you please make some suggestions?*

Past experiences of aggression in which we felt helpless or experienced harm can cause feelings of panic and anxiety many, many years later. One or many experiences in the past showed us, that others have the power to harm us physically or emotionally. We equally learned in these situations that we can do nothing about such aggressive behavior but to shut down and freeze until the aggression past.

These experiences can be so intense that even small triggers like the loud voice of a stranger will evoke a vivid memory of the traumatic experience. Once more we feel powerless. Once more we freeze.

It will take a lot of patient mindfulness practice, together with the potential help of trained experts, to overcome such deeply ingrained patterns. We need to develop a deep sense of compassion for the hurt we experienced in the past and then take baby steps towards new behavioral patterns in the present.

One mindful way to do so, is to learn how to bring a sense of safety, stability and strength to any situation in our lives. This is best practiced in situations which are neutral and relaxed. Once we know how to connect to the safe places in our body, breathing and perception, we can then use this to establish a sense of safety in more critical situations. It will take practice and time to make a change, but it will definitely be worth it.

*Question: As soon as I feel some anger, it almost immediately turns into feelings of fear and collapse. Any ideas how to come out of such fear and how to change this behavioral pattern?*

There can be several causes for feeling unsafe with the experience of anger inside. We might have for example experienced in the past that expressing our anger contributes to reactions of aggression or

blame in others. We learned that it is not safe for us to be angry, clarify our boundaries or stand up for our needs.

We might also have witnessed the harm another's aggression, either towards ourselves or others can cause. If we did so, we might find it particularly challenging to differentiate between a sense of anger and aggression towards ourselves. There might be a lingering belief, that anger will irrevocably lead us into aggression as well. As we experienced the hurt and tremendous harm ourselves, this is something we want to avoid at all cost.

Both ways, the experience of anger just does not feel safe for us. The process of growth and healing is one, in which we learn that it is okay for us to be angry and that we can safely contain this energy. It will also be a process which asks us to do small steps at a time without causing overwhelm to our bodies, hearts and minds.

It could be more helpful to work with the sense of fear first. Once we learned how to reassure and soothe the heart-mind, we can turn towards the anger. Noticing the felt sense of anger being present within us we realize that we are able just to be with it. In the beginning this meeting might only take a breath or two before other feelings and emotions arise. Over time and with practice, our capacity of containing an experience strengthens and we gain trust in our own integrity and strength.

*Question: I am easily overwhelmed by difficult and powerful feelings. If everywhere I look there are overwhelming feelings, I feel I have nowhere to turn to, nowhere to be.*

It is a thin line between neither suppressing our emotions nor collapsing into them. We either push away what we feel, because we do not know how to handle it, or we get all-consumed by the narrative and felt sense of an emotion. Mindfulness practice holds the key to an alternative path of being with moods, emotions and patterns of thought. It allows us to keep some distance from them which allows us to keep them company, explore them, even heal them, without getting overwhelmed.

We all have the permission to meet and be with our feelings only to the degree to which we feel safe doing so. Many think that mindfulness practice means to go straight to where it hurts the most and then "just be with it". This is usually not the most helpful way to approach a dynamic. Remember: if we overwhelm ourselves, we only contribute to more suffering and a deepening of the underlying harmful tendencies.

Instead, you can imagine your awareness to be like a vessel. In the beginning of our practice, the vessel is very small and will easily overflow. The more intense a situation or experience is, the more gets poured into it. Of course, this makes it more likely for the vessel to spill over. Our practice helps us to gently enlarge the vessel of awareness.

Mindfulness trains us over time to be with all kind of experiences. The good, the bad and the ugly. In the beginning we get easily reactive to unpleasant sensations or hooked by the narrative associated with an experience. Many times, we reestablish a sense of calmly observing our experience. In doing so, we train our capacity to hold something in awareness without reacting to it.

This process can only develop safely, if the experiences we choose for our practice are containable. Therefore, we first bring our awareness towards those physical sensations, emotions and patterns of thought which feel manageable. Mindfulness is a practice of wisdom not one of heroic attempt! Over time our capacity to hold something in awareness grows naturally.

In addition, it can be very beneficial to start our practice by connecting to the safe anchors within the body or breath. Experiencing even a small amount of calm and stillness within the body, can allow us

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to find some ease. It is helpful activities and physical exercises, aside from formal meditation, which help you to ground and anchor yourself. Then we have something to turn our attention to if being in meditation does not feel safe at the moment.

*Question: Sometimes the emotions and feelings that are floating in my mind are too mixed and unclear at the same time. How is it possible to have clarity around emotions in such situations?*

Emotions are actually complex compounds of various factors, like bodily sensations, impulses for action, likes, dislikes, narratives, moods, perspectives and meaning-making processes<sup>2</sup>. An emotion is thus never a fixed experience which just repeats itself, but will vary and come in different colors and intensities.

It is therefore not always easy to differentiate emotions from each other. Just like colors on a color palette, where one shade merges into the other, emotions too will overlap. Take the different nuances of fear for example: Is it even possible to clearly differentiate worry, sorrow, unease, restlessness, anxiety, fear and panic from each other?

It is normal that emotions feel vague, dynamic and are hard to pin down. The task is not so much to precisely label the emotion, but rather to be in touch with its felt sense in the body. How does the emotion express itself in the various areas of the body? What sensations go along with it?

We can also be aware of the dynamics of emotions in our minds. If we are supported by mindfulness, we might be able to have a good look at the narratives and perspectives which go along with an emotion. To what is my attention particularly drawn to? Who do I perceive myself to be right now? What stories does my mind tell at the moment?

*Question: Is it helpful to explore to what degree our pain and anger are rooted in our childhood experiences or traumas?*

To explore our past can be helpful to a certain degree. Reflecting back on dynamics and experiences helps us to understand what causes and conditions underlie certain dynamics in the present. We can then understand, that some of the behavioral patterns which we have these days have their roots in our childhood. Many of them were patterns we needed as children to feel safe and get along with those on whom we depended. All this can contribute to a heightened sense of compassion and understanding for ourselves and others.

While looking into the past allows us to comprehend these patterns, it will not necessarily change them. The chances are, that we spend much time and energy trying to fully comprehend what actually happened. Yet at times dynamics can be complex and unreliable sources of information. Our wish to find out 'the truth' about our past often remains unfulfilled, as it depends on perspectives and views.

It is thus worthwhile reflecting whether at a certain point it is more fruitful to return the attention to the present moment. It is right here and now, where the patterns learned in the past cause us challenge and suffering. In meeting them with mindfulness, compassion and wisdom we can make a difference to this moment and potential moments in the future.

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<sup>2</sup> Meaning-making processes are associations drawn from sense input. These range from identifying a patch of color as "apple" or "my partner" up to "this makes me such a person", etc. Associations, labels, concepts, memories of the past come together and create a meaning around an experience, a person or our own identity

*Question: I find myself reacting with a lot of anger when I watch news programs featuring extremist political or media figures. Any advice on helpful practices?*

The media is full of information on suffering, injustice and discrimination. As compassionate, sensitive beings, it is all too natural that taking in such information brings stress to us. Being confronted with the global suffering we often feel helpless and trapped or angry and aggressive.

It is part of our practice to find mindful ways to deal with the media input. Taking in too much, we can experience states of helplessness, fear or aggression. It can be an act of self-care to limit the time we expose ourselves to the news and any images which create a sense of anxiety within.

This advice might conflict with our wish to be a responsible global citizen. We watch the news because we want to have enough information to base our decisions on, to point out harm and discrimination, and to stand up for those who are not safe enough to express their concerns. Based on this wish, we might deny ourselves the choice to stop watching the news, as we interpret doing so as an act of disinterest or care for others.

While honoring our sense of fierce compassion for others, we need to reflect on how to bring the most to others. If we lack clarity, calm and balance, it will be challenging to find actions to be of support. We spend wasting our precious energy in waves of helpless aggression or despair. How much information do we truly need to know someone is suffering? What kind of information do we need? Is an endless repetition of pictures of suffering truly benefiting our sense of agency?

At times we might feel clueless about what we can potentially do in the face of such global suffering. We feel too small to make a difference. Watching more news can appear like the only contribution we can make (“At least I am not turning my back on the suffering of other people.”). Doing so is potentially traumatizing and feeding us a sense of despair.

Can we instead trust, that even small ways of contributing to change are meaningful? We all can make many daily choices on how we want to eat, make our living, express our views, communicate with others and what we consume. Though we might not be able to see a huge, immediate effect of such personal actions, they still fill us with a sense of direction and integrity and are potentially inspiring to others.

In addition, I personally would wish for media structures which do not focus on the problematic alone, but also take the responsibility (and risk) to point towards options or potential ideas for positive change. This could serve as inspiration to all of us.

*Question: What is the difference between needing a time-out from a situation and escaping it?*

There are multiple intentions which make us end a conversation. On the one hand, we might ask for a time-out, based on an awareness for the dynamics inside of us. We might have a sense of increasing tension and contraction within us and know about the rising potential to engage in reactive behavior. We thus need the pressured situation to end, until we have calmed down. Out of respect for ourselves and other people, we communicate our need for a break and find a possibility to safely discharge these energies.

Withdrawal, rejection or escape on the other hand are reactive patterns. They can be motivated by fear as much as by aggression. We might shy away from the conversation altogether, by not engaging in it in the first place. Or we consciously or unconsciously wish to regain some power over the situation, by not allowing the other person to communicate with us.

When the wish to prevent or stop a conversation arises, we can reflect on the intention behind this impulse. Is the idea of having a conversation connected to a sense of fear? If so, what reassurance, what boundaries would we need to have in place to still have this conversation? If we notice a sense of bitterness or aggression towards the other we might want to take care of this first, while signaling the other a willingness to have the conversation at a later point in time.

*Question: How can we manage arising anger with someone with whom we regularly experience ourselves being irrational? Often these conversations end up in tears and myself feeling small or weak. How can I protect myself by not showing my hurt emotions?*

Tears are often a signal of us feeling sad or hurt. They might show that we feel ashamed or fearful. If a sense of helplessness or weakness arises within the conversation with another person, we need to explore whether there is something in the behavior of the other which indicates the presence of aggression, shame or blame. Reactive or aggressive behavior from other people can contribute to a us feeling small and unheard, which might provoke the tears. Remember: needs and boundaries are nothing we should feel ashamed of or ridiculed for. We do not have to defend ourselves for having certain needs.

Once we are able to clearly recognize shame and blame as such, we start to develop a sense of empowerment. From now on, we are able to see harmful patterns of communication for what they are, and can then ask the other to stop.

In some cases, the source of shame and blame it is not the person we are talking to. At times there are shadows of the past, which make us feel helpless and fearful. The memory of the past hurt impacts the conversation we are having right now. Based on our previous experience we expect the other to behave similarly, to be aggressive or put us down.

If this is the case, we are invited into a mindful journey of discovering the present situations without the shadow of the old. We are invited to learn how to state our needs and boundaries. Then we can mindfully observe how people actually respond to us when we do. Potentially we see that most of the people, at least those close to our hearts have a willingness to hear about our needs and find solutions with us. Over time, our sense of trust in the care and interest of others will re-grow.

*Question: Sometimes when we express our hurt and anger, we are told not to be a victim. How can we deal with such blame?*

Being a victim to a situation usually implies a certain dynamic in which something unpleasant or harmful happens to us and we have no power or say in this situation. Passivity is key here: 'something happens to us', rather than us 'doing something'.

Being called a victim by someone can indicate that he or she thinks that we are either not accepting our part in the dynamic of the situation, or not taking responsibility for our action. The accusation is one of us withdrawing into helpless passivity, whereas the other is of the view that we have the chance to act and thus a certain responsibility for the outcome of the situation.

Facing an accusation, we first of all need to grant ourselves some time to calm down. An accusation is a sort of a verbal attack, which is very likely to trigger some reaction in us as well. Only if we take good care of our own impulses and soothe our reaction, are we then able to reflect on the situation in a clear-headed manner.

We can for example reflect on the different circumstances which brought about the situation. Which part did you and the other person play? Which intentions were at work? Is there something which you

regret doing or not doing which you can take responsibility for? Do you take on responsibility for the entire outcome of the situation (usually too much), none of it (usually too little) or can you have a discerning look at the dynamics and see the different causes and conditions?

Sometimes, being called a victim says more about the approach of the other than about our actions. It can be an attempt to put shame on the other, when he or she is asking for needs or showing their vulnerability. The other might be unwilling to handle a situation with compassion and care and therefore uses harshness to silence the other in shame. It could also be that by attacking and handing over the entire responsibility for a situation to the other, someone tries to deflect their own contribution to the situation.

*Question: How can we transform passive-aggressive behaviours into assertive behaviours?*

Though there are passive elements in it, passive-aggressive still describes behavioral patterns, which have the intentionality to put pressure on someone to get what we want. Where aggressive patterns do this in an obvious way, passive-aggressive behavior usually avoids direct confrontation, including asking for what we want. Instead in applying it, we try to get our needs met through the backdoor.

Whether you think of the silent treatment, the cynical comment or the sulking withdrawal – all these patterns are about manipulating another into doing something he or she might not want to do without such a sense of pressure.

Beneath passive-aggressive behavioral patterns, there is often a belief which holds people back from freely sharing their needs. The idea might be, that asking for what we want puts pressure on the relationship or is inappropriate. We might secretly hope that the other understands us without us actually doing something. We avoid asking straight for what we want because we fear that the other person might not take us seriously, criticizes us or make fun of us.

We take the step from passive-aggressive to assertive behavior by first making ourselves familiar with our needs and boundaries and then secondly learn mindful ways to communicate these openly. Our mindfulness practice will help us to break through probably long-standing behaviours to manipulate situations, and instead speak courageously but without aggression about what we want.

*Question: How do we practice with an image of compassion when we haven't got someone who has cared for us compassionately in the past?*

The most important part of connecting to any of the heart-qualities (*brahmavihara*), whether it is compassion, friendliness, appreciation or equanimity, is to establish a felt sense of this quality. They are not intellectual practices but something to experience.

There are many tools which can support us: Some practitioners use a set of phrases like “May you be happy”, some work with memories of situations or people which embody this quality. This can become challenging, when we cannot remember anyone in our past modelling and embodying this quality. The painful perspective arises that there is or was no one offering us kindness and compassion, an impression which usually makes us feel depressed and lonely.

To find such a memory or an image, we are invited to be on the lookout for the small acts of kindness and compassion in our everyday life. Maybe it is possible for you to rest with the smile of a neighbor or the short gesture of kindness from a friend? Even if these acts appear to be small and insignificant in the beginning, try to bring them back into awareness. Can you reconnect with the felt sense of body, heart or mind in this situation? How does it feel to know that someone dedicated time, energy and

awareness to you? Look for any sense of well-being, softening or ease which might arise with this reflection.

If it is challenging to come up with a 'real' person, we can make good use of our sense of imagination. Imagine an ideal friend, parent or grandparent. How would it feel like to be in their presence? Or go a step further and allow yourself to be inspired by images, figures from stories or archetypes, like Mother Maria, Guanyin<sup>3</sup> or the Buddha. Play around a little until you found an image of someone, who embodies the qualities of kindness, care and compassion for you. The only aspect which truly matters is, whether this image has enough resonance to convey a felt sense of kindness and care into your practice.

*Question: How do you deal with situations in which someone who has a pattern of being aggressive regularly causes me to become angry too?*

We are sensitive beings and as such we react to the actions of others. It is only natural that the anger of another evokes a reaction in us as well. Aggression coming from someone can feel like a threat. It can be perceived as pressure coming towards us, and it is only normal and healthy to wish to protect ourselves. Practice does not ask us to be helpless in the face of harmful action.

The anger of others can cause within us a sense of overwhelm. Also the idea of being attacked triggers us quickly into reactive behavior. Mindfulness is key here! In such situations, the body usually sends clear signals that we do not feel well. You might notice a heightened tension in the muscles, the heart pounding louder or heat in the body. Listening to our bodies, we can clearly know when it becomes more likely that we will react in an aggressive or defensive way.

One way of protecting ourselves (and others) is to take the heat out of such a pressured situation. It is not a sign of weakness, but of strength to interrupt reactive situations and take a short pause. This might mean everything from taking a couple of conscious breaths while you think about what to say next, up to putting a conversation on hold.

It is important to interrupt any spiraling circles of reactivity early on. The pause which is created by doing so, allows us to take care of our hurt feelings, reflect on the statements we heard from the other and reflect equally on our own set of needs and boundaries. Before we then re-engage in the conversation with the other, we might want to establish healthy rules for having a conversation which guarantee a sense of safety for ourselves and others (like no abusive language, no raised voice, etc.)

*Question: I am noticing anger as an intense smoky feeling inside, which echoes for a long time within me and makes me feel scared of walking with it through my day. Do you have any suggestion how to let it go?*

In Buddhist circles we often hear the advice "(just) let it go". If we take a closer look, letting go or loosening the contraction around something, is not a decision we can simply make. In many cases, we would feel actually very relieved if we could, as we notice the pain and suffering connected to holding on. Yet, we hold on for a reason. The clinging and contraction are an attempt to get what we want or avoid what we don't want. Until we see an alternative to that, the contraction continues.

If we thus wish to support the movement of letting go, we need to first, see clearly the underlying dynamics which contribute to the clinging and second develop alternative ways to offer the heart-

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<sup>3</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guanyin>

mind safety, contentment and connection. Letting go is possible, not as an act of willpower, but as a natural consequence of the fruits of our practice.

Often it takes us many, many attempts at being mindful of a dynamic before we see clearly what triggers it, fuels it and what it needs in order to dissolve. Until we gained such clarity, situations will leave their unpleasant imprint on our heart-mind. Again, we cannot simply decide not to have these reactions. The cognitive, intellectual mind usually has little to say, when we work with our aversion, desires and fears. Putting pressure on ourselves to simply act or be different is inappropriate and of little use.

Patience and kindness are the most important corner stones of our practice. We might not fully understand why we react the way we react, but we can learn to deal skillfully with the outcome of a situation. Feeling a sense of pressure, agitation or unease are enough to take compassionate care of our heart-minds right here and right now.

Compassion can ask the heart-mind skilful questions, which explore what would contribute to more ease and calm inside. Does the heart-mind need some appreciation for the goodness within? Would words of gentle encouragement be helpful? Is it supportive to remember acts of kindness and care from others? Would it be helpful to direct the attention to the sense of stability and strength within the body? Does it feel supportive to breathe gently and slowly?

In exploring our inner turmoil, we develop an immense potential for resilience. We learn step by step how to meet the inner response to challenging experiences with care and compassion. As life will never be free from conflict and friction, this is an enormously important skill. Over time we learn how to handle such moments and will thus be less fearful and reactive in difficult situations. We do as the Buddha recommended: We become our own island<sup>4</sup>.

*Question: Sometimes it seems there is bitterness because a hurt has not yet been acknowledged. Is it skilful to go to the other person for acknowledgement or is it your own acknowledgement which matters?*

It is true that a sense of hurt first of all wants to be seen and acknowledged before it can heal. Just like physical wounds needs care and attention, inner wounds do too! If we neglect them both have the potential to get infected or to develop scar tissue.

If hurt needs careful attention, we might wonder who is the one to give it? Is it the one who has inflicted the hurt upon us? Or can we ourselves take care of the wound?

At times, we think we can only experience closure if the other person, who we think of as the cause of our sense of hurt, apologizes and makes amends. While this might happen at times, it is not always the case. Asking another to acknowledge their harmful impact upon us will often be interpreted as blame and drive the other into (even more) defensiveness. While we ourselves can do a couple of things in response to a harmful situation, like communicating our perspective on the situation, express our hurt and set appropriate boundaries to avoid similar situations in the future, we cannot make the other do anything!

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<sup>4</sup> This is a quote from the [Maha-parinibbana Sutta](#) (DN 16), which describes the last days of the Buddha. Interestingly the words *attadīpā* can mean a couple of things, for example be your light, be your lamp but also be your island.

If we think we need the acknowledgement of the other person to heal or even have the permission to feel hurt, we put ourselves in a trap. Our peace of mind and our healing process, now depends on the actions of another. If we wait for an apology before we can move forwards, we might wait for a while. During that time, the resentment and hurt might will increase. In addition to the hurt a sense of bitterness or helpless may arise.

Taking care of our suffering depends neither on the action nor the view of anyone else. We do not have to find out who did what to whom to gain permission to take care of ourselves. By listening to our bodies and heart-minds, we clearly see that we are suffering. This is enough to invite compassion to arise.

*Question: Do you have advice about dealing with the bitterness of others towards life and ourselves?*

The bitterness and aggression of other people can weigh heavy on us. Our partners, friends, colleagues or family members can be trapped in negativity or a critical mind set. With such a perspective at work, they might be quick in finding things to criticize in other and spot our less than perfect behaviors. This not only robs them of many opportunities for happiness, but the ongoing bitterness and negativity will also be difficult to handle for those around them.

It is a challenge to find the right balance between our sense of care and compassion for their ongoing struggle as well as our own need for harmony, rest and emotional safety. If we wish to spend quality time with other people and have long-lasting relationships with them, we need to address that which robs us of happiness and connection. Enduring the negativity of the other person only contributes to bitterness within ourselves.

Often, we mistake compassion for the need to avoid conflict by silently enduring inappropriate action. Yet, this is not what compassion is! We can understand compassion as the middle way between reactive action and passive endurance. It asks us not to throw out the baby with the bath water: We are invited to maintain our respect and kind intentions for the other while clearly pointing out inappropriate behavior.

Clarifying conversations are never easy and usually need to be well prepared. It can be helpful to emphasize to the other person that we truly care and wish to spend time with them. We can let the other know that we are concerned because we see some disruptive patterns in the relationship which we would like to address. You can help the other by specifically pointing out the behavior you find difficult and avoiding generalizations of any kind. Let the other person know what behaviors you would wish for as an alternative.

Of course, no matter how careful we express ourselves, the other might feel hurt anyway. It is best to allow the other person time and rest after hearing something they might easily interpret as criticism. If on the other hand, they do not listen properly, it might be necessary to state to them quite clearly, that while we wish to spend time together, this shared journey is only possible if certain boundaries are respected and aggressive behavior (including a language of blame and shame) stops.

If the other still does not wish to explore new ways, it might be necessary to take a break from an interaction, leave the situation, or stop the conversation for an appropriate amount of time.

*Question: What is the difference between being compassionate or forgiving?*

Forgiveness is another form of letting go. In this case we let go of our bitterness towards another. As it has been stated before, letting go is not an act of willpower or something we can consciously do. It

is rather an insight deep within the being, which ripens once we feel nourished, supported and calm enough. Once we have inner stability, we will have the clarity to see that we pay a high price for holding on to the bitterness. When seeing suffering so clearly, letting go might come quite as a natural act.

Sometimes we confuse our wish to forgive with the idea that we need to continue the relationship or pretend the harmful action of the other person is acceptable. This is not true. Forgiveness lets go of the grudge we hold. In doing so, we shift the focus from the narrative about the past towards the present situation. What matters right now?

Sometimes this shift can only happen, if we placed some boundaries which make sure that the harmful action will not happen again. Sometimes we let go of our bitterness without having any wish to see or meet the other again.

While forgiveness is something which develops over time as a fruit of insight and practice, compassion is a quality we can bring to our relationships at any time. Whether we meet the suffering inside of us or recognize it in another person, compassion is the active choice to see how we can support a situation with kindness and care.

*Question: I find it easier to access the concept than the actual experience of compassion. Is there something I could or should do to access the felt sense of compassion?*

When finding it challenging to connect with any quality we want to nourish in our lives, it can be helpful to start noticing when it is present already. Like all the other beneficial qualities, compassion is already present within us.

Make it a practice to notice over the day(s) any stress, unhappiness, tension or sadness in yourself or another. Be mindful of your response to this. Is there a natural wish for the other or yourself to be well? Is there a sense of tenderness or warmth arising in the heart? Do you look for ways to help and give support? All experiences may be based on a sense of compassion. When you notice these experiences, try to connect with your body. How does it feel to be in touch with someone else? Can you get a felt sense of compassion within? Once you know how compassion manifests in your body, you might recognize it more and more often in your daily life.

At times we shy away from compassion as we feel it might be overwhelming to be in touch with suffering. This doesn't mean we are not compassionate, but rather that we need to take care of this fear, before compassion can fully flourish in our lives. At other times, a sense of compassion might be mingled with other feelings like aversion, a sense of pressure or an insecurity about what to do. As most other qualities, compassion does not come alone but is interwoven with other impulses and intentions. It is a great practice to notice what accompanies compassion and whether there is something, like fear, to be taken care of.

*Question: What if the other cannot or will not feel his anger and any attempt for conversation runs into the void?*

The intention behind an absence of words can differ. At times remaining silent can be a form of protest, when we feel we have no other safe option to act. At other times giving the other the silent treatment can be a form of punishment.

Apart from silence as a form of passive-aggressive behavior, some people are fearful about speaking their mind, or have given up on any attempts to solve situations or explain their needs to others. For

some, periods of silence will alternate with sudden eruptions of communication, where a flood of accusation and blame is uttered, based on previously suppressed anger.

As in the saying “it takes two to tango”, we often feel helpless or frustrated if the other person refuses to communicate. Without him or her, we are not able to settle the conflict, solve an issue or find ways to deal with a situation. What to do?

We first need to see that being silent is the decision of the other. After an attempt or two to reenter into communication, it is suggested that we accept the situation as it is right now. This avoids power struggles and also allows the other to calm down.

Rather than insisting on a continuation of the conversation, we can first use the silence as a much-welcomed break. It grants us time to explore the situation. We can first be mindful about the impact the silence has upon us. Does it cause us feelings of shame, worry or frustration, which we need to take care of?

The unwanted pause allows an opportunity to regain some clarity and have a deeper look at the dynamics of this situations. What causes and conditions brought about the conflict? What can we learn from the situation and what steps can we take to grow from it? What would we wish the other to do differently to contribute towards more understanding and safety in our relationship?

When we gained calm, clarity and insight in this way, we might go back to the other and deliberately ask what he/she would need to continue the conversation. We can then reflect on the answer and see whether the need or boundary they stated is something we can go along with.

*Question: Can you say something about dealing with the anger of young children as they do not yet have the tools to regulate? How do we as parents / caregivers deal skillfully with their anger?*

Just like us, children are in the process of learning how to channel the energy of their anger in skillful ways. While it is okay for them to be angry, to disagree and to express their needs and boundaries, we wish to teach them about appropriate ways to do so. It is our intentions as caregivers and parents to show them how to take care of their needs in a non-aggressive but assertive way.

In a moment of calm and friendliness we can together with the children explore a set of rules, which apply to all members of the community. No shouting, no hurting, etc. We can explain to them that these basic rules will protect our community and allow us to have meaningful conversation. It will empower the children to know that these rules are in place for all of the members of the community and that everyone will be held accountable.

Every now and then children will test these rules. It is important that they learn that their needs will not be met by putting pressure on the other. It is important to teach them that a loud or nagging voice or harmful behavior will not end in getting them what they want. When anger is expressed as aggression, we are invited to set clear boundaries to such behavior. At times, it can be best to postpone the communication to a point where one or both sides have reestablished their calm.

As parents or caregivers, we become role-models by giving skilful response to their anger. Our reaction will demonstrate to them which expression of anger is appropriate. This is first of all a mindful challenge for ourselves. We need to learn to remain calm, settled and grounded in the face of their emotions.

On the other hand, it is equally important to show our children that they are heard once they express their needs without aggression. This will of course not end necessarily in them getting what they want,

but we are invited to point out to them in words of appreciation whenever they state what they need in an assertive, clear but respectful way.

Handling anger is usually a big learning curve for parents / caregivers and children alike. We need a willingness to forgive, a compassionate heart and the readiness to start over again and again.

*Question: I am left with a sense of guilt as someone from my past is still angry with me, expressing blame and shame. I have apologised many times for my part in the conflict. I do not experience anger anymore in myself but I am left with a sense of guilt that somehow the other's suffering is my fault. Can you say something of this feeling of guilt I am left with?*

Human interactions are full of smaller and larger wounds. Sometimes we hurt someone without even knowing, at other times we get so reactive that we do or say harmful things to someone else. If we are able to look past our own hurt, we can notice our role in a conflict and how we contributed to the situation. It is never easy to apologize for our part in the dynamic and make amends, but it will contribute to a sense of integrity and self-worth which give us peace of mind.

Yet even if we have the courage to do so, there is no guarantee, that the other will accept the apology, reflect on their share of responsibility or that the relationship can be repaired. Conflict can cause long lasting feelings of disappointment or mistrust within us and other people. Whether or not the other is able to overcome their hurt is something we only have partial influence on. For some reason others might hold on to their grudge even if we apologized and made amends with the best of intentions.

In such situations it can be important to reflect on the fact, that we are human beings and as such imperfect. We made mistakes in the past and will continue to do so in the future. We cannot expect perfection from ourselves or anyone else. All we can do after we realize we did something unskillful, is to be honest about our actions and take serious step to learn and grow so that the dynamic will not repeat itself.

In doing so, we take responsibility for the situation. Lasting blame and shame are unhelpful and inappropriate responses. They might be based on the others person lingering sense of hurt, rather than our actions. In such cases, we might go through a process of grieving, in which we need to accept that the other cannot or does not wish to renew the connection at the moment. We can do so, while still holding ourselves accountable, growing from the past and feeling at peace with our sense of integrity.