

# Becoming Anger

## The Ninth Applied Precept:

**I bear witness to the reality of my own ill will and the pain of divisiveness in the world, and aspire to respond with care when difficult situations and emotions arise.**

***Traditionally: Do not be angry, or, Do not hold on to anger.***

Why do I get angry? Our traditional image of a Buddhist is of someone who never experiences anger, who remains always cheerful and smiling, and perhaps it's the fantasy that this person could turn out to be *me* that is part of Zen's attraction to us. But rather than being my enemy, could we think anger as my true spiritual friend? The traditional wordings of this precept seems to suggest it as an enemy: do not be angry, and if you do, then let it go! Our Ordinary Mind phrasing links *ill will* and *divisiveness*: anger can separate us from each other, and also within ourselves. Anger offers us a sense of self, of purpose and identity. Anger takes the grey out of the picture, removing all nuance and refinement: it's always in stark black and white, them and us. We experience ourselves as separate from each other. And yet this separation is also a binding together: it's *you*, or *them* that *made* me angry, and with that anger and that blame I both push you away and hold you tight to me. No wonder it both exhilarates and hurts! If we can bear with this experience, and not try to drive it out or push it inwards, then we will come to understand better what it is to be a self in this world, and so *less* separate. So while anger is always a call to *action*, if instead we *resist* that call and allow ourselves simply to *experience* our anger, then it can indeed become our teacher.

## Heat and Cold

Some people I've met, including many of those I've met in prison, would like to limit what counts as anger to the 'red mist' kind: a blind and hormonally driven rage that makes us unaware of anything outside itself and demands acting out *right here and right now*, whether that's just my shouting at you or actual physical violence. Of course I probably won't acknowledge this sense in which I both *enjoy* being angry and feel validated by it even if, as we'll discuss below, my feeling anger may well be followed by feelings of shame. Hot anger burns: as I become angered I feel the rush of emotion, and the accompanying rush of blood. The entire balance of my hormones shifts, adrenaline is secreted, and while some of my sensations are heightened, others are suppressed, exactly as with drink, drugs or any of the intoxicants we discussed in relation to the Fifth Precept. The call to action is real, and it's deeply physical. Those tense muscles *demand* release, *demand* action. So this kind of anger calls for immediate *expression*: which is literally taking

something from *inside* and pushing it *out* of me. I might lash out, or shout out, push you back with my hands or the force of my words. I'll feel huge release in this moment, a triumphant sense of my own reality, although this will probably be short lived, and shame or regret may well arise in response. If I don't or can't act this out, get it *out* of me, don't *express* it, I will suffer: the tension in my muscles, the pounding in my head, the knot in my stomach. And the feeling of frustration that may border on desperation... I *need* to act, I *must* act, but I'm prevented. The heightened and partial sense of self that anger has given me may well collapse if I don't keep feeding it with self justification, reciting the crimes of my (perceived) aggressor and the wrongs I feel I am suffering. However it plays, it's important to understand that the function (*purpose?*) of all of this is in reality to *evade* my feelings of anger, and that that is true whether I punch you in the face, bang my own head against the wall, or collapse into a spiral of shame. Much of what I probably think of as too trivial to label as anger fits this same basic pattern also: the sudden irritation that draws me up sharp or to which I have responded with an unkind word before I'm even aware of it. Do I choose to spit it out or swallow it down? Either way I want rid!

This is all the anger referred to in 'do not be angry'. But what of *cool* anger, which the term 'ill-will' perhaps fits better? No adrenaline rush, no spasms of pain or cramp, no burning in my muscles that demands release. Ill will is altogether slower and more considered, and if I do notice it in my body, it's more likely as a diffuse tension. It lives as resentment or the plotted revenge, the pleasure in an 'enemy's' discomforting. It emerges *after* the event, whether I actually expressed anger at the time or not. It uses the same pattern of rumination, but rather than being an immediate 'acute' response to the situation it becomes 'chronic', acting over time, so becoming more of a mindset, a predisposition, a world-view. It's anger that's quiescent, seemingly passive, but which contains the constant possibility for finding the cutting remark, the shared put-down. It puts a more subtle tension in my body, hardening both my muscles and my thinking. We all probably have this to some degree, and much of the time may be barely aware it's there. Do I ever find myself speaking more sharply than I'd intended, being snarky, snapping at someone who just happened to be there? Do I find myself unintentionally coming back in my thoughts over and over again to the same annoyance or felt injustice? Do I find myself endlessly justifying my actions to myself, or find that I can't help doing so to other people? This process is circular: it's not that I have a certain wrong view of myself *causing* my anger, rather that the anger I feel is itself forming this aspect of self continuously, a self defined as *separate* and in *opposition* to other selves. Ill will is less exciting than hot anger, and can rarely find more than a momentary and partial release, although it may at any moment re-ignite as rage.

The real danger is that the more thoroughly and unconsciously we experience it, the more it can come to frame the world as a whole for us. Many years ago I read an interview with the celebrated American writer Gore Vidal. Not an exact quote, but it lodged in me as a paradigm of ill-will: 'Every time I hear about the success of one of my friends, a little something in me... *dies*.' This is the mind of ill will is the mind of suspicion, of reactivity, of my self and all others formed in permanent opposition and struggle. Note again that ill-will both separates me *from* you, but also binds me *to* you. You are in my thoughts, and in

the bones and sinews of my body, the object of my pre-occupation. But note also, that just as with the violent *ex*-pression of rage, what I'm really doing here is still avoiding the actual direct experiencing of my anger as it shows up in my body, but separating off from it, holding it at a safe, or at least cope-able distance. It may sour our relationship, and even sour my life, but at least I don't have truly to *engage* with it... This is the anger referred to in 'do not hold on to anger'.

This may well sound paradoxical, so am I performing some verbal sleight of hand here? I *feel* angry, so what do you mean I'm not *experiencing* it? Well, what I am trying to point to is that we feel anger when our sense of self appears to be threatened, and that this anger is *always* a call to action, to *do something* to allow it to discharge. Holding this anger focusses and strengthens our threatened sense of separate self through preparing for action (adrenaline, racing thoughts, muscles tensed...), I am going to *show* you/them I cannot be messed with! But my focus is outwards, directed onto the object I have found for my anger (you?). Holding this anger is exciting but also painful, I need to *express* it, act it *out*, get *rid* of it! And while I'm doing this I'm not really *experiencing* it. To experience our anger requires that we *don't* act it out or act it in, that we don't *evade* or *dissociate* from it. Easier said than done, but if we *can* do this then our practicing with anger becomes purposeful and enlightening. I'm no longer trying to make it go away or be always calm (...and how's *that* working out for you?). Instead, I can come to 'investigate it thoroughly', and so to change my relationship with anger.

**Practice Question:** *How far AM I aware of my own hot anger and how I express it?*

*How far am I aware of my own cool ill-will and how I express it?*

### **Practicing With Anger**

As always, Diane Rizzetto offers us a detailed way into our practice with this precept as a non-judgemental investigation of our *experiencing* of anger:

Become curious about what triggers your anger as you go about your daily activities. What events set anger into motion for you? Someone cuts you off on the freeway. There's a moment of madness and you make a rude gesture. You know there's nothing positive or helpful about your reaction, but you get some sense of satisfaction — momentarily. It'll take a while, but if you have the intention to be open and observant, you'll begin to pick up on what thoughts are present when the energy rises. At first, in all likelihood, several things will happen. First, you won't remember to turn the mind towards the inquiry until after the event. Then, you will judge it — I shouldn't be thinking that way, or I did it again, or I'll never get over this. You may also find that thoughts develop into a story about who did what, and so forth. If this happens, when you finally notice you've been off into a story (which can take seconds, minutes, or hours), just make a mental note of the thought by repeating it — "having a thought that..." By keeping the intention to not try to solve anything but to allow awareness of what type of thinking triggers anger reactions, you will begin to experience a little space in which your awareness can deepen so that your

experience resonates and speaks. Your particular pattern of thinking and feeling around anger will emerge. Be patient. You can't recognise years of collected requirements in just a few exercises. (WU, 155-6)

As before, Diane uses that insightful but double-edged term *requirements*. What do I feel I *need* or *demand* right here, what is it that is not being respected? ( ...or is the requirement simply respect, recognition itself?) Having 'requirements' sound *bad* and 'not very Buddhist'. What our requirements actually show us are specific aspects of how we come to be and act as the self we are in each moment: our *selfing*. So from the perspective of the way some Zenists talk — 'the self is unreal' or 'just be a no-self!' — our requirements clearly *are* only a hindrance. However, from our perspective of becoming *aware* of this process of our selfing, they simply invite further investigation. And so, beyond the *generic* idea of a unified good/bad self I can investigate why *this* 'requirement' and to what particular aspects of self (my 'identities' as they relate to my socially constructed fantasies of how it *should* be for me... ) does it connect? To do this, I have to learn to listen to my experiencing. To do this at all well, I have to listen differently to the stories of *separation* and *judgement* that I tell myself, stories that influence the quality of this selfing. I have to begin to hear these *as* stories, as the *defensive justifications* they are, and *not* as descriptions of fact or objective truth. So often with these stories we reach instinctively towards the binary inequalities of hierarchy, domination and shaming to reinforce our sense of mutual *otherness*, of our *non*-relationship with the object of our anger. We define who we *are* by opposing it to what we think we are *not*. In terms of my anger, I am neither Black nor White until there is somebody else to insist on or challenge the privilege that Whiteness brings, and the same goes for every other dualistic difference. *Looking* for defensive separation, we find it ready to hand in the differences on which inequality is founded. The stories we tell ourselves about what we are not are too often those where we feel we have been injured and angered, hence ill will and anger, as the emotions that seem most to divide us off from each other, make us appear to ourselves as truly *separate* selves. We do this by ruminating on the injury we see as having been done to us, and so setting up circular thought patterns that only increase our anger and ill will, strengthening our sense of having an identity that's different from the *other's*. And of being *someone* with a story to tell, and hence of being *real*. The traditional Buddhist term for this is *prapanca*, the way we use our repetitive self stories almost as a mantra to fabricate and make solid the illusion of separation, to hold our anger at a (safe) distance from ourselves.

***Practice Question:*** *Can I begin to recognise my 'requirement' when I get angry?*

*Can I become aware my circling thoughts as prapanca?*

## Opening To Anger

Can I own up to all this in myself? Can I *open* to it all? Can I hold even my thoughts of self-judgement without getting lost in self-justification or self-reproach?

Once you more frequently notice your reactions, it is important to *allow* their presence in open awareness, so if judgemental thoughts arise you can just repeat them to yourself and move on: Having a thought that I'm still getting angry over... Or, I don't feel anything and I should... Sometimes people will say that they know they are angry but don't have a feeling in their body. (WU 156-7)

We *don't want* to experience the fear that underlies our anger, and so, outside the buzz of acted out or imagined expression, we *don't want* to own the anger itself. Most likely our anger has already been displaced anyway from its initial source as *fear*, and in a way it's *still* fear, but now transformed into the need to *act*, to *do*. Which is why we refuse our *experiencing* of anger by expressing it (pushing it out) or displacing it into shame, or back onto fear (fear of my expressing it, fear of the other's response...) It won't help if I'm just not used to connecting up my feelings (emotions) with my feelings (bodily sensations), but we all dissociate like this to some degree. Maybe I'm not even used to connecting my thoughts to my emotions? Actually, that's probably all of us too... have you ever been challenged, '...hey, you seem really angry!' only to thunder in response 'I am NOT ANGRY!' And perhaps I do think that I 'never get angry'? What if I really believe I don't get angry, that I never experience anger? Well, the chances are that I have learnt to suppress my conscious anger by channelling it into ill will, where I can banish it from my awareness, though not from having its effect on how I act. Many families make it perfectly clear to their children that anger is not an acceptable emotion, and that it must never be displayed but instead be hidden, swallowed down and ideally repressed. Within the family this is a strategy of control, of power, that minimises any challenge to those holding authority. Of course this is often a strategy our parents learnt from their parents, and that they may not even be consciously aware of: it is simply *unthinkable* that one would display anger, and contrary to one's core (received) values. So...I may think I'm *bad* if I get angry. I might believe (have been implicitly or explicitly told) that I appear to be bad, ungrateful, lower class, a sinner, or even mentally ill if I display anger. To be *good*, I make sure I never feel any anger... or at least not *show* any anger, and from there become able to not be *aware* of the anger I'm feeling. I might divert my feeling of anger on to my sense of injury... 'I'm not angry, just sad...' or I might even try to repress that feeling too. Perhaps I learnt as a child never to be *bad* by being angry, and became *so* good that I never appear to be angry at all, and never consciously feel it. It may not even feel safe to experience my own anger, either because I think my anger may hurt or even destroy me, or that it might provoke other people into harming me. If my carers or peers appear frightened by anger — whether their own or other people's — then this becomes even more likely. So, by whatever route I've come to the idea, I may well feel that I *shouldn't* get angry, and if I do then it's wrong, unskilful. So I have a perfect motive for either persuading myself that I'm not angry when in fact I am, or thinking I'm *really* bad for feeling angry. These kind of reactions and thought patterns easily transform into *shame*.

There's a link here too to the way Diane's student's examine their requirements in their examination of their own beliefs about anger:

*Diane:* ...the belief, then, is that it's destructive in some way?

*Student:* Yes, the belief is anger is always destructive.

*Another Student:* If I were a better person, I would have some better way of dealing with this situation than getting angry about it.

*Diane:* So what's wrong with anger, what's the belief?

*Student:* It's a sign that there is something else wrong, that I have bad coping skills or something. Then anger shows I'm a failure...

*Diane:* If the belief is that anger can hurt people, are you included in that hurt?

*Student:* What I'm really afraid of is that it will show my weakness.

*Diane:* It will show weakness: yes, that is the belief we've been circling around as it comes into the light — anger will reveal my weakness.

Our sense of weakness is itself shaming, and to connect this to our anger is to place us in a tight double bind. At one level my anger is an assertion of strength, but the fear underlying that anger is shaming, because this fear is in itself always an acknowledgement of a potential lack of control, of weakness. The angrier I get, the greater the potential for shame: it's a delicate balance! The experience of shame is shaming (the shame spiral!) Which may either cause my anger to collapse, or one the contrary increase into blind rage... None of this will help me become better aware of my anger, or learn to work with it. None is in any way helpful, or will let me address the reality of my anger, the reality of my own life as it is.

***Practice Question:*** *Do I really believe I never get angry?*

*Do I get angry and feel bad about it.....or self-righteously insist on my 'right' to feel angry?*

### **I am Not Angry, But...**

I mentioned our stereotype of the good Buddhist earlier, and you might well have noticed a parallel there with what we have just been looking at. Buddhists are never angry, but instead are always happy and smiling, they never experience negative emotions. Or least this is what many people, including many Buddhists (and perhaps ourselves), think is the way Buddhists should be (note '*should*'). So if I have already have picked up the idea that anger is 'bad' then my Buddhist identity and beliefs will reinforce it, even if I want to substitute 'unskillful' for 'bad'. I now have a further motive for hiding my anger from myself and from those around me. I retreat from the reality of my anger into a world of goodness, but one into which my ill will is in constant danger of breaking through. I remember a Dharma talk by Martine Batchelor about her own experience living in a community of 'passive-aggressive' Buddhists, superficially all smiles and good will, but ill will constantly breaking through in their fault-finding and sniping at each other. Who

washes out their cup and who doesn't? Anything could and did become an opportunity for the display of injured and resentful virtue; this just isn't discussed nearly enough. Joko Beck also talks about this traditional Zen approach to anger...

When anger arises... much of traditional Zen practice would have us blot out the anger and concentrate on something, such as the breath. Though we've pushed the anger aside, it will return whenever we are criticised or threatened in some way. In contrast, our practice is to become the anger itself, to experience it fully, without separation or rejection. (NS, 85)

Many of us have experienced coming back from a sesshin, or just a particularly peaceful meditation session, feeling nothing but interconnection with all beings... only to be dragged back to a very separate 'self' awareness by the pettiest of problems or disagreements... In my sitting I make myself open and vulnerable, and so the slightest perceived challenge may launch a defensive response, the more so when I'm feeling closer to that fantasised state of inner peace... What is the alternative to this? As Joko suggests, simply experiencing my life as it is, the reality of my anger as it is, without covering it over or hiding from it. Experiencing my anger as it arises, and the suffering it brings. Of course perhaps 'simply' is not so simple. There's no point pretending I'm not angry, or exhorting myself not to be. There's no point pretending it's all ok. My anger is a part of me, and it needs acknowledgment and care, it needs *experiencing* without *acting it out* on someone (including acting out on myself). If I don't *judge* myself for feeling angry, don't think I'm *bad* for feeling angry, that I *shouldn't* feel this way, then I can be honest with myself about how I actually do feel, and observe my anger and take care of it as a part of myself. But this can be hard, hard work. Back to Diane Rizzetto: the important point...

...practicing with habitual patterns of mind and body is to allow an open inquiry into their workings. ...we must explore anger events in all their forms whether it's a simmering upset or a full-blown harangue. We slowly learn to face it and embrace it. We come to know its face intimately. Invite it in and call it by its true name. This can seem very frightening. It is difficult to do when we are in the heat of it ...we move slowly...

Be patient... Just opening, inviting, what naturally wants to reveal itself will come to the surface in time. You may begin to notice that tightening in certain areas of the body or breath holding is subtle associated with certain emotions or thoughts, such as frustration or jealousy. Try to relax and rest in the experience of Just This. In time you will notice that whatever you experience is just a passing wave of energy. The key is to allow — don't try to change it, manipulate it or get rid of it. (WU 154-5)

**Practice Question:** *Can I connect, BECOME my anger without being consumed by it?*

## The Problem with Anger?

But... letting off a little steam, clearing the air... where's the harm in that? And what about the anger that fuels our struggles to overcome obstacles, and right wrongs? Against the grain of more traditional Buddhist approaches that would seem to ask us to struggle wholly to banish our anger, it's now often asked whether our anger and ill will *really* do any harm? Contemporary Zen, drawing on both serious therapeutic practice and pop psychology can show a more tolerant, even positive attitude towards anger. It's admitted that this Precept shows us how we strengthen our self-identity and delusion through anger, but let's not delude ourselves about our living in the midst of delusion, and that we are not going to escape any time soon...

In answer it's worth pointing out that different contemporary Zen teachers take different lines here, hence the variety of phrasings of the precept. It's worth looking at the different orientations of these different versions. 'Do not be angry' suggests that as it deludes and blinds us, anger in any of its forms is best avoided. 'Do not hold on to anger' supposes that it's more the mindset of ill will that's the real issue, that a 'clean burn' of anger lived in the moment is no problem, it's the residue and rumination left when it *doesn't* burn out that's the damaging part. It's also argued that 'justified' or 'righteous' anger is a positive emotion, as we can use the great energy that anger gives us in a good and unselfish cause... Diane Rizzetto makes this distinction in an interesting but nevertheless problematic way between what she calls *self-centred* and *life-centred* anger.

The key is to really know whether the anger motivates action that benefit the well-being of ourself or others, or if it motivates actions that are hurtful to ourselves or others. One action we can say is life-centred; the other action we can call self-indulgent. Life-centred anger has the power to be open and transformative... It rises and falls quickly and is never held onto.' WU148

This is the 'clean burn' view, and we are offered a classic anecdote about Joko Beck herself in support. The seventy-five year old Zen teacher is walking on the beach when she sees two young men fighting furiously: feeling the sudden burn of anger she rushes over and pushing them apart yells "STOP IT!"... which they duly do. For her student Diane this is 'skilful action that responds to circumstances...' (WU149) Happily it turned out well, but how would we tell the story if a mis-aimed punch had instead ended the life of this unwelcome interloper?

I think there are problems too in how she uses her other examples. I'll look at just one: the 'Mothers Against Drunk Drivers' campaign group founded in response to 'the rage and pain' of mothers whose children had been killed on the roads. This group is indeed a wonderful example of a life-centred response to such a devastating loss, and to the overwhelming and complex feelings it would inevitably bring up. But 'response' is the key word here: my 'reaction' would probably run more to wanting the individual that took the life of my child to be cruelly tortured or killed by the state, or my hunting them down myself. Founding a non-profit organisation engaging in wide-ranging support and educational work is exactly going *beyond* rage, to allow the fear and pain to begin to

resolve through empathy for others and practical appropriate action. It's certainly 'life-centred', because instead of acting-out to *ex-press* and hence *evade* that anger, it *engages* with it, allows it, and connects it in awareness to the fear and pain which lie underneath it. This is anything but a 'clean burn' quickly rising and falling. It is the itself-painful ongoing work of holding the experiencing of anger as it continues to continue, decade after decade.

The point here is connecting 'my' pain, 'my' anger up to that of others, and so theirs to mine, as a way of affirming the mutuality of relationship, a *non-separation* that releases us from the *separation* of fear and anger. Thich Nhat Hanh always spoke of it not being enough to *want* peace or even to *fight* for peace. We have to *be* peace. This is the potential trap in *every* fight against injustice, and one we all too easily fall into, not through our badness or stupidity, but exactly because this injustice here in front of us genuinely *is wrong*, and needs to *be stopped*, and *now!* This is not to make the political point that the bad faith of our opponents will inevitably cast us as 'extremists', 'trouble-makers' or even 'terrorists'. Insofar as we *make* ourselves separate by wanting a clear distinction between *their* wrong and *our* right, we amplify the problem itself. What are my chances of meeting you with openness and possibility when I'm burning with anger at you? And if I can't, then what are my chances of being understood? In my self justification, can I really stand so detached that I will not be speaking of my own superiority and denigrating you? And how will you respond in that case? So we need to consider the Fourth, Sixth and Seventh Precepts. And we can also recognise anger as one of the forms of intoxication that relate to the Fifth Precept, in the clouding of our judgement in the rush of blood and adrenalin. How can I judge *well* in that condition? Can we ever really communicate without finding a genuine openness and equality?

So how do we *Bear Witness* to our anger when it is structural or personal injustices that provoke it? How do we speak our truth? There is no magic formula, but I'll offer an example. This was in the context of a discussion about the Church of England's latest mis-step in its bungled attempt to come to terms with the decades-long cover up of sexual abuse carried out by its clergy. A representative of a group of those who had been abused spoke, not of the abuse itself, but of their feelings in response to having been initially vilified, and despite the ponderous bulk of an administrative machine called into being to examine the 'problem', having since then been largely ignored. Even when they had finally been listened too, even when the truth of their cases had been acknowledged, there was still no sense that they were ever really *recognised*, that their human suffering, ongoing in its consequences, had been put at the centre of the inquiry.

He spoke with an intensity that was overwhelming, and overwhelming because it held an infinite but controlled rage in balanced tension with an equal sadness that bordered on despair at the seeming impossibility of their ever gaining true recognition as human beings. Of the damage that had been done to them, and the further damage still being done in withholding the recognition that might offer at least some step towards healing. It was both an accusation and a plea for help, a plea he expected to fall on well-intentioned but ultimately deaf ears. His kept his voice under control, *just*. You could not hear him without feeling anger, outrage, deep sadness and, yes, despair. I felt his pain.

*Practice Question: When have I truly spoken my truth to another?  
And when has another spoken their truth to me? Could I hear that truth?*

## **Anger is Relationship**

So let's ask again: why am I angry *now*, here in this present moment? Why do I *ever* get angry, and harbour so much ill will? To start with, I'll probably reply...'it's *you*, you *made* me angry... ( ...by what you did, or what you didn't do that you should have). It's *your fault* I'm angry!' But this is actually just a *story* about my anger, the story I tell about a separate me and a separate you that justifies my anger towards you. I could of course instead adopt the classic naive-Buddhist attitude and make it all about *me*: it's *my* 'self', *my* badness, *my* unskillfulness, *my* karma... Both of these approaches deny our actual relationship *through* anger: we are paradoxically tied *together* by our separation *from* each other. And we are both tied to the world *outside* our relationship also: whether this is the first time we have met or have spent our lives together, neither of us came here today empty and immaculate, but as complex social beings engaged in the world. So what is it that is really making me angry? So many of the examples we have looked at point clearly towards relationship and its breakdown as being the source of anger. Sometimes these are face to face and personal: the choirboy and his priest. Sometimes these are institutional or both institutional and personal: the Church authorities and those particular individuals charged with investigating, the promises made of bringing resolution, the despair as it fails to materialise and those individuals are replaced by others... Sometimes the relationships are more abstract or diffuse: 'drunk drivers', 'our children'. For most of us, most of the time, it's more the day to day irritations and crises at home or at work, or the passion with which we address an ongoing cause: the climate crisis, child poverty... In all of these, both intimate and distant, what rouses my anger is the sense of the *failure* of some aspect of a relationship, a failure that poses a threat that's not simply physical but in some way existential: my core sense of 'who I really am'.

Because we are social, relational beings 'who *I* really am' is always itself about 'who *we* really are'. Bound up both with some sense of our many identities, and with our mutual *recognition*. So while anger will always be a reaction to fear, that fear is fundamentally of a *threat to my relational sense of self*, and it is this that will give it the specific quality of anger. I experience my sense of self as being challenged by your implicitly *mis*-identifying me, because you are breaking the 'lawfulness' (in Jessica Benjamin's sense) underpinning our real or assumed relationship. So in *your* eyes do I really even exist as the person I think I am? And, given our mutual necessity, if I am not *recognised* by you, do I really exist at all? How *dare* you treat me like that!

Anger is also always relational in a second sense, and importantly so. There is a *relative* but *real* difference between the anger I feel at my computer acting up and my experiencing anger at your denial of recognition to me because, say, of the colour of my skin or my presenting as female. Or between you 'stealing' 'my' parking space and the letter I receive refusing my application for disability benefits. None of this is simply *about me*, nor about some generic idea of a *self* I do or do not think I possess, but about the different actual

kinds of relationships in the world's worlding *as 'me'*, as me living as *this* person in *this* society. Because my anger is so often experienced immediately and so intensely and intimately, it offers me a superb opportunity to begin to see the *selfing* of myself in my relationships, to become aware of this process of my showing up as *this 'me'*. My anger can actually help me come to begin to experience this absence of any final fixed form or inner essence to my 'self', and help me *experience* that I'm much more a *process* than a fixed or permanent *thing*.

**Practice Question:** *Can I begin to own my anger as something co-created, and without blame?*

*What difference does this make to the way I am able to experience it and think about it?*

### The 'Should' in Anger

Easy to see the extremes of our hot anger as a reaction to a direct threat to my sense of self. Harder perhaps to see how pretty much *everything* we get angry about presents such a threat. But if we shift the emphasis of how I think of this 'self' that I am, from the permanent and isolated separate being of our delusional fantasy, and instead as being the process of a moment by moment formation out of our widest sense of relationship, then this will become more apparent. So, if someone's unkind to my child, I'll probably get angry, and there's an obvious 'self' connection there. But if I see pictures of 'migrants' in boats being detained as they reach land, I might well get angry *either* at this swarm of invading potential terrorists intent on freeloading while they destroy the fabric of my nation, *or* at the inhumanity with which we meet the *other* when they are poor and desperate. In neither case am I apparently directly threatened physically, emotionally or existentially. But in actual fact there *is* a subtle existential rupture, when viewed relationally. It's not only in our *directly* meeting each other that Jessica Benjamin's idea of relationship as mutuality grounded in a sense of lawfulness applies. Our general sense of *fairness* is important to all of us and in all situations, and is an aspect of this idea of lawfulness. Note that this can be applied in *either* direction in my example, depending on how and where I draw the line of otherness: *either* it's not fair that these *others* take what's *ours*, *or* it's not fair that we treat our *fellow humans* in this way. Because *all* our relationships are based in mutuality — we can't recognise ourselves except through recognising each other — this sense of lawfulness grounds the possibility of meaningful relationship, and so a challenge to this sense of lawfulness (which we often experience as 'fairness') is felt as a failure of recognition towards *me*, and so as a fear-provoking potential *existential* threat.

Where and how are these lines of otherness drawn? How too can we measure the 'lawfulness' or 'fairness' in the competing interests of *different* beings? Where, between the limits of '*only I matter*' and '*saving All Beings*' is the line drawn in *this* moment, *this* relationship? And is it drawn in such a way that *allows for* our mutually necessary relative and reciprocal otherness, or which denies it in the fantasy of an absolute otherness, an absolute separation between you and me, or between *us* and *them*? On what grounds do I ask for your recognition, your respect? Simply as another fellow human, or as the possessor of a certain identity defined in opposition to an *other*? When my self-sense is grounded not in my shared vulnerability (also bearing in mind that I may think you *do not*

share in this shared vulnerability), then when in my eyes *you* fail to show me recognition, *I* feel injured. This is very similar to how the whole shaming/ being shamed cycle works, and of course anger is itself part of that cycle. Often, as we explored with thinking about shame, the actual injury may be minuscule, but the feeling of hurt and anger is huge.

So, for the purposes of our practice, I'd suggest that it's this sense of separation from the mutuality of relationship (in its widest sense), and the fear resulting from the failure of our shared sense of lawfulness or fairness, that provokes our anger as an involuntary reflex. Anger always implies a 'should': they *should* act in this way *not* that! We are back at Joko's story of the rowboat that crashes into mine out on the lake. My anger rises at the unfairness of the rower's actions: they *should* have looked out for other boats, they *should* have had the intention to be paying attention! As I suddenly see there was *no* rower, but the boat is empty and merely drifting, my anger collapses. Fairness, lawfulness, have not been violated, and so neither has my sense of self. *Without* this 'should' that underlies our shared sense of lawfulness, our relationship has no guidelines: you might do anything at all! That's frightening both physically — what *might* happen? — but even more importantly at the level of recognition: without *your* recognition I don't *fully* exist... and depending on the significance of our relationship I may feel that without that recognition I don't *really* exist at all. How *could* you do that to me? Important to remember once again that it's not just the extremes of 'red mist' anger that are like this: in their own ways the minor irritations that cause anger in my day to day life are equally involuntary responses to this sense of the failure of relationship. And of course this is why I may well come to feel the hurt most strongly in the minutiae of my most intimate, long-term relationships: the dishwasher not emptied, the offhand remark, the lack of response in the others' eyes... I don't want to feel this way, I don't want to feel this hurt, this fear and so I push *out* this feeling and *express* it by acting out, or push it *inwards*, and dissociate from it or repress it. In neither case am I willing to *be with*, to *bear witness* to, and thereby for this moment, simply to *be* this anger.

**Practice Question:** *Can I come to see better the way my sense of self relies on my sense of you?*

*What are the wider issues that come to show up in the day to day ruptures in this relationship?*

## The Teacher

Are we brave enough to allow ourselves really to feel our pain? Again, this is 'without judgement', because there are so many reasons why we evade it, and many of them good ones. Our own suffering and particularly our trauma, whether acute or developmental, will render our pain difficult and sometimes impossible to hold. This being with, this coming to *be* my anger is always only ever work in progress. The reality of my anger is what I experience when I bring my awareness to it, which means — in this moment at least — *not expressing* it and so *avoiding* it, and also not avoiding it by distracting myself or justifying myself. When I stop trying to avoid it, and instead can simply *be* with it, whatever the stories I am telling myself about what has caused it, then I don't need to separate off from you by blaming you, or from the angry part of myself by blaming me, or by trying to hide what I actually feel.

How then, might we best think of, and work with, the anger we all experience? As an enemy to be vanquished? As the shame-filled marker of our weakness, our failure to live up to our fantasised self-image? Better I think to see it as a part of our 'life as it is', and so as a teacher, and often a very great one. If we can distinguish carefully between the actual experiencing of our anger, and the *acting-out* or *acting-in* that *prevents* us experiencing it, anger is, as Diane Rizzetto herself emphasises, a wake-up call. What is *this* anger showing me about *our* relationship? About our relationship when seen in its widest sense, beginning with you and me as we are right here and right now in this moment, but extending outwards to potentially All Beings? Allowing the stories, the *prapanca*, to settle and still themselves, and to feel into the experience of this anger as it is in this moment. And allowing that the 'us' here may have to include both my experience and experiencing of different parts of myself, and include too the known or 'faceless' representatives through which I engage with the myriad organisations, private or public, with whom I have to deal. To do any of this well I do have to learn to discipline my *reactions* into *responses*. I can always put it as a question: am I acting *out of* my anger by responding to its deeper call and its questioning, or am I *acting it out* by reactively pushing it away as violent words or actions? I'll emphasise again that acting-out of course includes the different kinds of acting-in: as aggressive thoughts aimed at my sense of self, or as violent actions against my body; or swallowing and suppressing the conscious experience of my anger through dissociation, only for it to show up as depression or in the festering of ill will.

Why am I angry? Because I am suffering. How do I experience this? I can feel it in my body (I am this body...), I can experience the tension, the physical tension, the pain of *not* shouting, *not* lashing out, *not* turning my back, *not* searching for the release of the put-down or cutting remark. There's a real *demand* from my body — a desperate need to act, to turn away from this pain and to *do something!* I can experience too the cycling of my thoughts, justifying myself at the expense of the other, trying to convince myself...(I am these thoughts...) I can observe the pain of the emotions I'm feeling (I am these emotions...). If I stay with these feelings and thoughts they *will* shift and change, and may open onto others, leading me deeper into this sense of hurt itself, and widening the scope beyond what I wish to see as the immediate trigger of my anger.

***Practice Question:*** *Can I map in detail the way anger shows up in and as my body?*

*What arguments am I finding to stoke the fire?*

*Do I find myself repeating this internal monologue?*

*How does my anger develop and disperse or discharge?*

*Did I 'come to my senses'?*

*Did I act on it (how?)?*

*Did I try to bury or push it away?*

*Did I call myself bad or stupid?*

*Don't try to force this by analysis, just sit with the questions and see what happens...*

## Vulnerable

This is my practice in my zazen when anger arises and falls. It can also become my practice whenever I can bring awareness in the moment to the rise of anger and am able to take a breath, a mental or physical step back. Sometimes, when I'm face to face with you, feeling the confrontation and feeling the anger rise, then taking that step back, or breathing in that slow breath may be all I can manage. Such simple physical, embodied actions can still be enough to check my outburst or hostile response. I may even have to hold silence ('keep my peace'), in order not fill the space with unwise words. If I do feel I *have* to leave, (and sometimes this really may be the best option) then in doing so my shrug, the *way* I turn my back to go, may still speak volumes (wisely or unwisely so...). I can at least note my posture: stiff and closed, arms folded(?) and how this relates to the anger I'm feeling. But how would it be, if from this position I could still *open* to the other, to you? Arms wide, offering not defence but vulnerability, and without any submission on my part, still *meeting* you undefended with openness and possibility? How would you then respond? Thich Nhat Hanh advised that if someone annoys you, then give them a present. Not to try to change *them*, not to be 'kind', but to help me mend my *own* sense of separation from them. How do we, how *can* we meet each other, here in this situation? You and I disagree, because one way or another we have broken the implicit sense of lawfulness that has held us in relationship, and so now feel threatened in ourselves. How do we heal that? Of course, one or both of us may *really* need some space alone right now, but *just* for now. But if not? Our shared sense of lawfulness isn't some legal contract to be rendered null or void if 'broken', or with specified penalty clauses for failures to comply fully. *Our* sense of 'lawfulness' is multi-dimensional and multi-layered, largely implicit and felt within us, and often only articulated in thought and speech when we already have the felt sense of its having been broken. From the most basic empathy we can feel for *any* living thing (the struggling fly, the neglected pot-plant), through the shared sense of being 'people like us', and so to the absolute specificity of being *you* and *me*. Our more important and enduring relationships have resilience precisely because there is always somewhere else to go: our shared experience, our common goals that make us *mutually* necessary to each other, not-separate. Of course, if my actual safety (physical, emotional, sexual) is being threatened, then I need to get out of there *now*, as swiftly and safely as possible. But you and I, here and now, can't we get over this?

This is patient, long-term work. Learning to recognise anger in all its forms as it reveals itself in the tension in my body, the tone of my voice, the train of my thoughts. Learning to stop, to check, to pause, to breathe into it. Learning to feel and to listen underneath the flow of thoughts and stories to allow the deeper connections to begin to reveal themselves. It is in this way that 'my' anger ceases to be 'good' or 'bad', 'right' or 'wrong'. I cease to hold tight to it as 'mine' at all, and it can then become a good spiritual friend and teacher. But only if I allow it to be so, by learning to experience it. If I fail to do so, the result is violence. There is an intimate connection between anger, violence and our shared vulnerability. The experience of anger brings us forcibly back to our actual mutual necessity and interconnection, and so to our infinite vulnerability with each other. Our violence, whether the sharp word or the knife or gun, in attempting to turn away the potential shame of that exposure to each other, instead only confirms it. Our society, which

does so much to celebrate and elevate our actual inequality and engage us in perpetual competition, both programmes and compounds this sense of fearful vulnerability. In our moments of relationship we can nevertheless come to experience the *joyful* vulnerability that is the precondition of our self-sense of mutuality and connection. We do this in our *caring*: our caring *about*, our caring *for*, and our *receiving* care. Relationship is never without risk, and rarely without rupture: it's the reality of not-knowing. It is the deep joy of our being *not-separate*.