

## Loosening the Knots of Anger

By Thich Nhat Hanh

To be happy, to me, is to suffer less. If we were not capable of transforming the pain within ourselves, happiness would not be possible.

Many people look for happiness outside themselves, but true happiness must come from inside of us. Our culture tells us that happiness comes from having a lot of money, a lot of power and a high position in society. But if you observe carefully, you will see that many rich and famous people are not happy. Many of them commit suicide.



The Buddha and the monks and nuns of his time did not own anything except their three robes and one bowl. But they were very happy, because they had something extremely precious: freedom.

According to the Buddha's teachings, the most basic condition for happiness is freedom. Here we do not mean political freedom, but freedom from the mental formations of anger, despair, jealousy and delusion. These mental formations are described by the Buddha as poisons. As long as these poisons are still in our heart, happiness can not be possible.

In order to be free from anger, we have to practice, whether we are Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu or Jewish. We cannot ask the Buddha, Jesus, God or Mohammed to take anger out of our hearts for us. There are concrete instructions on how to transform the craving, anger and confusion within us. If we follow these instructions and learn to take good care of our suffering, we can help others do the same.

### The Knots of Anger

In our consciousness there are blocks of pain, anger and frustration called internal formations. They are also called knots because they tie us up and obstruct our freedom.

When someone insults us or does something unkind to us, an internal formation is created in our consciousness. If you don't know how to undo the internal knot and transform it, the knot will stay there for a long time. And the next time someone says something or does something to you of the same nature, that internal formation will grow stronger. As knots or blocks of pain in us, our internal formations have the power to push us, to dictate our behavior.

After a while, it becomes very difficult for us to transform, to undo the knots, and we cannot ease the constriction of this crystallized formation. The Sanskrit word for internal formation is *samyojana*. It means "to crystallize." Every one of us has internal formations that we need to take care of. With the practice of meditation we can undo these knots and experience transformation and healing.

Not all internal formations are unpleasant. There are also pleasant internal formations, but they can still make us suffer. When you taste, hear or see something pleasant, then that pleasure can become a strong internal knot. When the object of your pleasure disappears, you miss it and you begin searching for it. You spend a lot of time and energy trying to experience it again. If you smoke marijuana or drink alcohol and begin to like it, then it becomes an internal formation in your body and in your mind. You cannot get it off your mind. You will always look for more. The strength of the internal knot is pushing you and controlling you. So internal formations deprive us of our freedom.

Falling in love is a big internal formation. Once you are in love, you only think of the other person. You are not free anymore. You cannot do anything; you cannot study, you cannot work, you cannot enjoy the sunshine or the beauty of nature around you. You can only think of the object of your love. That is why we speak about it as a kind of accident: "falling in love." You fall down. You are not stable anymore because you have gotten into an accident. So love can also be an internal knot.

Pleasant or unpleasant, both kinds of knots take away our liberty. That is why we should guard our body and our mind very carefully, to prevent these knots from taking root in us. Drugs, alcohol and tobacco can create internal formations in our body. And anger, craving, jealousy, despair can create internal formations in our mind.

### Training in Aggression

Anger is an internal formation, and since it makes us suffer, we try our best to get rid of it. Psychologists like the expression, "getting it out of your system." And they speak about venting anger, like ventilating a room filled with smoke. Some psychologists say that when the energy of anger arises in you, you should ventilate it by hitting a pillow, kicking something, or by going into the forest to yell and shout.

As a kid you were not supposed to say certain swear words. Your parents may not have allowed you to say these words because they are harmful, they damage relationships. So you went into the woods or to an isolated place and shouted these words very clearly, very strongly, in order to relieve the feeling of oppression. This is also venting.

People who use venting techniques like hitting a pillow or shouting are actually rehearsing anger. When someone is angry and vents their anger by hitting a pillow, they are learning a dangerous habit. They are training in aggression. Instead, our approach is to generate the energy of mindfulness and embrace anger every time it manifests.

### Treating Anger with Tenderness

Mindfulness does not fight anger or despair. Mindfulness is there in order to recognize. To be mindful of something is to recognize that something is there in the present moment. Mindfulness is the capacity of being aware of what is going on in the present moment. "Breathing in, I know that anger has manifested in me; breathing out, I smile towards my anger." This is not an act of suppression or of fighting. It is an act of recognizing. Once we recognize our anger, we embrace it with a lot of awareness, a lot of tenderness.

When it is cold in your room, you turn on the heater, and the heater begins to send out waves of hot air. The cold air doesn't have to leave the room for the room to become warm. The cold air is embraced by the hot air and becomes warm—there's no fighting at all between them.

We practice taking care of our anger in the same way. Mindfulness recognizes anger, is aware of its presence, accepts and allows it to be there. Mindfulness is like a big brother who does not suppress his younger brother's suffering. He simply says, "Dear brother, I'm here for you." You take your younger brother in your arms and you comfort him. This is exactly our practice.

Imagine a mother getting angry with her baby and hitting him when he cries. That mother does not know that she and her baby are one. We are mothers of our anger and we have to help our baby, our anger, not fight and destroy it. Our anger is us and our compassion is also us. To meditate does not mean to fight. In Buddhism, the practice of meditation should be the practice of embracing and transforming, not of fighting.

#### Using Anger, Using Suffering

To grow the tree of enlightenment, we must make good use of our afflictions, our suffering. It is like growing lotus flowers; we cannot grow a lotus on marble. We cannot grow a lotus without mud.

Practitioners of meditation do not discriminate against or reject their internal formations. We do not transform ourselves into a battle field, good fighting evil. We treat our afflictions, our anger, our jealousy with a lot of tenderness. When anger comes up in us, we should begin to practice mindful breathing right away: "Breathing in, I know that anger is in me. Breathing out, I am taking good care of my anger." We behave exactly like a mother: "Breathing in, I know that my child is crying. Breathing out, I will take good care of my child." This is the practice of compassion.

If you don't know how to treat yourself with compassion, how can you treat another person with compassion? When anger arises, continue to practice mindful breathing and mindful walking to generate the energy of mindfulness. Continue to embrace tenderly the energy of anger within you. Anger may continue to be there for sometime, but you are safe, because the Buddha is in you, helping you to take good care of your anger. The energy of mindfulness is the energy of the Buddha. When you practice mindful breathing and embrace your anger, you are under the protection of the Buddha. There is no doubt about it: the Buddha is embracing you and your anger with a lot of compassion.

#### Giving and Receiving Mindfulness Energy

When you are angry, when you feel despair, you practice mindful breathing, mindful walking, to generate the energy of mindfulness. This energy allows you to recognize and embrace your painful feelings. And if your mindfulness is not strong enough, you ask a brother or a sister in the practice to sit close to you, to breathe with you, to walk with you in order to support you with his or her mindfulness energy.

Practicing mindfulness does not mean that you have to do everything on your own. You can practice with the support of your friends. They can generate enough mindfulness energy to help you take care of your strong emotions.

We can also support others with our mindfulness when they are in difficulty. When our child is drowning in a strong emotion, we can hold his or her hand and say, "My dear one, breathe. Breathe in and out with mommy, with daddy." We can also invite our child to do walking meditation with us, gently taking her hand and helping her calm down, with each step. When you give your child some of your mindfulness energy, she will be able to calm down very quickly and embrace her emotions.

### Recognizing, Embracing, Relieving the Suffering of Anger

The first function of mindfulness is to recognize, not to fight. "Breathing in, I know that anger has manifested in me. Hello, my little anger." And breathing out, "I will take good care of you."

Once we have recognized our anger, we embrace it. This is the second function of mindfulness and it is a very pleasant practice. Instead of fighting, we are taking good care of our emotion. If you know how to embrace your anger, something will change.

It is like cooking potatoes. You cover the pot and then the water will begin to boil. You must keep the stove on for at least twenty minutes for the potatoes to cook. Your anger is a kind of potato and you cannot eat a raw potato.

Mindfulness is like the fire cooking the potatoes of anger. The first few minutes of recognizing and embracing your anger with tenderness can bring results. You get some relief. Anger is still there, but you do not suffer so much anymore, because you know how to take care of your baby. So the third function of mindfulness is soothing, relieving. Anger is there, but it is being taken care of. The situation is no longer in chaos, with the crying baby left all alone. The mother is there to take care of the baby and the situation is under control.

### Keeping Mindfulness Alive

And who is this mother? The mother is the living Buddha. The capacity of being mindful, the capacity of being understanding, loving and caring is the Buddha in us. Every time we are capable of generating mindfulness, it makes the Buddha in us a reality. With the Buddha in you, you have nothing to worry about anymore. Everything will be fine if you know how to keep the Buddha within you alive.

It is important to recognize that we always have the Buddha in us. Even if we are angry, unkind or in despair, the Buddha is always within us. This means we always have the potential to be mindful, to be understanding, to be loving.

We need to practice mindful breathing or walking in order to touch the Buddha within us. When you touch the seed of mindfulness that lies in your consciousness, the Buddha will manifest in your mind consciousness and embrace your anger. You don't have to worry; just

continue to practice breathing or walking to keep the Buddha alive. Then everything will be fine. The Buddha recognizes. The Buddha embraces. The Buddha relieves, and the Buddha looks deeply into the nature of anger. The Buddha understands. And this understanding will bring about transformation.

The energy of mindfulness contains the energy of concentration, as well as the energy of insight. Concentration helps you to focus on just one thing. With concentration, the energy of looking becomes more powerful.

Because of that it can make a breakthrough that is insight. Insight always has the power of liberating you. If mindfulness is there, and you know how to keep mindfulness alive, concentration will be there too. And if you know how to keep concentration alive, insight will also come. So mindfulness recognizes, embraces and relieves. Mindfulness helps us look deeply in order to gain insight. Insight is the liberating factor. It is what frees us and allows transformation to happen. This is the Buddhist practice of taking care of anger.

Every time you give your internal formations a bath of mindfulness, the blocks of pain in you become lighter and less dangerous. So give your anger, your despair, your sorrow a bath of mindfulness every day—that is your practice. If mindfulness is not there, it is very unpleasant to have these seeds come up. But if you know how to generate the energy of mindfulness, it is very healing to invite them up every day and embrace them. And after several days or weeks of bringing them up daily and helping them go back down again, you create good circulation in your psyche, and the symptoms of mental illness will begin to disappear.

Mindfulness does the work of massaging your internal formations, your blocks of suffering. You have to allow them to circulate, and this is possible only if you are not afraid of them. If you learn not to fear your knots of suffering, you can learn how to embrace them with the energy of mindfulness, and transform them.