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Teaching in Outrageous Times: Vipassana Practice and the Pedagogical Power of Anger

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In this reflection piece, I draw on my own experiences, as a progressive professor grounded in awareness practices, to explore some of the pedagogical facets of anger. Due to some deeply held Western assumptions associated with race and gender, I suggest, anger generally continues to be under appreciated and underestimated. I sketch out an alternative, constructive role that anger has begun to play in my own teaching and point to similar strategies and understandings that might be useful to others.

Perhaps one of the most dangerous and damaging consequences of the pop-contemplative movement is the notion that through deep breathing, yoga, meditation, and the like, anger and rage should be overcome, dissipated, or conquered, as if an “improved personality” were yet one more commodity to be acquired. According to this often implicit understanding, it is through awareness practice that one can become a “better” version of oneself, a notion that emphasizes being more agreeable, happy, and nice. But it may be one of the great misunderstandings of awareness practice that anger and other “difficult emotions” have come to be seen as a tainting influence to be eliminated if one is to fulfill one’s most authentic social and spiritual goals. Certainly, it’s a trap I have fallen into.

And this misunderstanding is especially pernicious with respect to members of particularly vulnerable, socially disempowered groups, including women, people of color, and LGBTQ individuals, people who, like me, already face extreme scrutiny about whether they are “nice” and “likable.” In fact, our legitimate concerns are often summarily dis-

missed on the grounds that we are “unreasonable,” “angry,” or perhaps even “militant.” Spiritually or contemplatively oriented members of these groups, then, must be especially wary of awareness practices that promise to neutralize what may well be healthy, constructive anger. In this reflection piece, I describe this risk and explore what I have come to see as an imperfect but more genuinely human and engaged interpretation of anger, one that better empowers and inspires me as a social-justice-focused teacher. While I may not be able to transform the dominant culture’s view of my anger, examining and reframing my own understanding of it has been a critical step forward for me.

As a mid-career, white, out lesbian professor who teaches race- and gender-focused courses and LGBT and queer studies, I have never been more aware of my own anger and grief or that of my students, many of whom are of course people of color, women, or LGBTQ individuals. For many of us, the oscillation between grief and fury has become an almost mundane fact of life. It doesn’t help at all that grief and anger are so often depicted in oppositional, exclusionary terms. And certainly the question of how to “handle” all of this emotion is fraught for both professional and personal reasons. We are left to wonder, for example:

- Will my institution continue to tolerate me or my courses if I stray from the coolly reasonable script that supposedly marks me as an acceptable academic?
- If I focus on such powerful feelings, will my class devolve into a political rallying point rather than a site for disciplined historical, philosophical, and sociological analysis?
- How can I move into the realm of anger such that my time with students does not become a therapy session, a scenario that I am not qualified to facilitate?
- Will I still be able to function as a kind and reasonably compassionate person if I fully face my own outrage as the tenuous rights of vulnerable people are summarily stripped away? Will I simply end up fulfilling the stereotype of the “bitter, angry lesbian”?

Though I may never be able to answer all of these questions—certainly not in this brief essay—my first step as an educator grounded in Eastern practices has been to more closely examine the relationship between anger and contemporary spiritual practices such as yoga, meditation, and other mindfulness strategies, all of which I have practiced. After all, many of us are attracted to such activities precisely because of their apparent potential to help us domesticate difficult, unpleasant feelings. I conclude that there is some question not about the value of the practices themselves but about some key underlying presumptions which are rooted in distinctively Western biases. These include

- an externally driven, shallow, effortful notion of self-improvement, according to which one endlessly strives to become “better and better”—an exercise grounded not in self-love but in an almost consumerist hunger for an identity that is “new and improved”;
- the bourgeois, sexist notion that being “nice” and “polite” is, especially for relatively privileged white women, an attainable existential goal according to which one’s value can be assessed, both by others and by oneself;
- the racist assumption, utterly endemic to U.S. history and culture, that brown and black people are intrinsically “uncivilized and uncivilizable”—that is, more prone to “base” emotional responses such as anger; and
- the homophobic tropes according to which LGBTQ people, especially gender nonconforming individuals, are marked as absurd or insidious and lesbians specifically are stereotyped as bitter, ball-busting man-haters.

In short, these factors combine to make anger especially fraught for just about everyone except some white men. This leaves many of us struggling to control our anger even as some white men give hideous expression to theirs—for example, in the form of murderous gun rampages directed at women, LGBTQ folks, Jews, and people of color. There is a double standard operating here, according to which the dominant society rejects the right of some to express anger—consider for example the prohibitions and terrible consequences for supposedly “angry”

people of color—while enabling and rationalizing it for privileged white men. Brett Kavanaugh’s Supreme Court confirmation hearing, a classic display of spluttering bombast, is a good illustration: though his performance of privileged white male rage was criticized by many, it was excused by many others as both comprehensible and natural. Consider, too, the spate of white men who have been brought gently into police custody and received empathetic treatment in the media after murderous gun sprees. Contemporary media accounts often highlight stories of how these men were supposedly mentally ill, bullied, rejected by women, or fired rather than their horrific actions or their consequences (Traister, 2015; Butler, 2015; Ruiz-Grossman, 2017; Duxbury, Frizell, & Lindsay, 2018). As many critics have pointed out, among them feminist philosopher Kate Manne (2017), angry white men, even rapists and mass murderers, can expect a level of understanding for their rage that will be denied to others.

While such destructive emotion is obviously not the sort of anger to which marginalized people ought to aspire, the existence of this double standard sheds light on how factors such as race and gender shape and contort our various relationships to anger. Happily, though, the development of systematic channels to shape ethically inspired rage into a collective force also mark these times as exhilarating. For example, the Black Lives Matter and Me Too movements illustrate how anger and outrage can be productively mobilized in the service of noble social justice goals.

Still, the success of such movements on a macro scale raises questions about how we as social-justice-oriented individuals relate to our own anger. Many of us are turning to awareness and mindfulness practices simply as a means of getting through, a coping strategy for a time of national upheaval we hope is temporary, and yoga and mindfulness meditation are almost certainly far better coping strategies than, say, drinking buckets of wine or binge-watching Netflix. And for social-justice-oriented teachers the motivation is particularly high: we must find ways to not only “manage” (or so we may think) our own cranked-up anger but also work productively with that of our students.

My recent exploration of anger began with a reconsideration of what Buddhism—the spiritual tradition that informs so much popular contemplative practice, scholarship, and teaching—is commonly under-

stood as teaching about this powerful emotion. I reconsidered some of the most ubiquitous quotes about anger that have been attributed to the Buddha, though their origins and authorship remain uncertain: for example, that “holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intention of throwing it at someone else; you are the one who gets burned.” It occurred to me that the ways we interpret such Buddhist memes might serve as a litmus test for the hidden assumptions we make about anger.

Given the capitalist, sexist, racist, and homophobic presumptions I described above, it is quite natural for Westerners like me to read this quote solely as confirming the perniciousness and toxicity of anger. From this point of view, the purpose of a mindfulness meditation practice might well be to neutralize one’s anger, like adding baking soda to an acidic stomach. With this “baking soda” interpretation, one goes to yoga or takes mindfulness walks primarily to decompress and relax, to eliminate whatever difficult emotions one feels to be impeding one’s acquisition of peace and happiness, and one succeeds in spiritual practice to the degree that one feels one has achieved or acquired equanimity.

But though a heightened sense of peace and happiness often accompanies awareness practices, I’ve found it works better for me to imagine these benefits as happy side effects rather than direct or intrinsic goals. With that in mind, I’ve reconsidered the “hot coal” quote to see what else it might have to offer. I wonder, for example, if it might not also be suggesting that anger is not solely about the supposed external circumstances or object of one’s emotion but also the relationship one has to it, and thus one must examine one’s subjective experience of anger and not merely the “objective” world that seems to be provoking it; or that passively holding onto anger (a hot coal in one’s hand) is damaging and therefore one should seek ways of employing anger—of moving its energy along—that do not result in self-harm (after all, hot coals can also function as tools to produce life-giving warmth and tasty food). In short, if I very deliberately step away from gendered, heteronormative, and raced assumptions about the appropriateness and desirability of anger, I can make room for more expansive interpretations of what commonly accepted awareness teachings are recommending.

I have to acknowledge, though, that some quotes widely associated with Eastern spirituality do not neatly support an alternative reading—

for example, the sayings that “holding on to anger is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die” and that “you will not be punished for your anger; you will be punished by your anger.” At first blush, both sound like advice from an anger-management group, consistent with the notion that anger should be suppressed, avoided, and neutralized. But as I suggest below, such popular spiritual-advice slogans can reasonably be interpreted as encouraging a lack of reactive identification with anger rather than a suppression of it.

In order to better see anger, perhaps without so much of its social and cultural baggage, I decided to follow the Buddha’s repeated advice to rely on my own experience. With this in mind, the practice I rely on is *vipassana*, one of the oldest Buddhist awareness practices: the ancient clear-seeing meditative approach that involves the uncomplicated process of fully, openly, and nonjudgmentally experiencing whatever arises. Vipassana has become wildly popular, to the degree that it now serves as a foundation for mindfulness practices of the sort undertaken in yoga studios, corporate break rooms, and progressive church basements. Indeed, the challenge of vipassana may well be its very simplicity, ubiquity, and cooptability, for if one practices with a heavy hand—for example, with the goal of “getting it right” or “being good”—danger lurks.

When working with anger, one might enter into vipassana practice by simply noticing the breath and other ordinary sensations of body, patiently learning to observe without the typical judgmental mental chatter that often accompanies such introspection. Then, eventually, perhaps with the guidance of a compassionate and experienced teacher, one can intentionally call to mind people and experiences that tend to provoke difficult feelings such as anger. And this is the critical juncture at which this popular awareness practice can either reveal its power or simply become another tool for self-delusion. One may, for example, lapse into false cheerfulness, a supposedly spiritual stoicism, or even self-flagellation.

In light of the background assumptions I described above, a likely tendency at this point is to be so afraid of or unfamiliar with one’s anger that one is unwilling or unable to experience it in all its nakedness. This has happened to me at times, no doubt precisely because I have effectively been trained to experience my anger as a loathsome or ugly quality that would keep me from being seen as a “good girl” or even as

acceptably feminine at all. These are not conscious thoughts that arise during vipassana practice, but my social conditioning is so thorough that I sometimes feel my own anger as a reeking, hulking beast to be avoided or silenced.

For people endowed with white heterosexual male privilege, vipassana work with anger will probably be differently challenging. Though such men may not have been inculcated to fear and despise their own anger, nor is it likely that they have developed a healthy relationship to it. Rather, they may be either reactively in its thrall—feeling compelled to express and wield it against others—or so afraid of being perceived as “typical” privileged white men that they, too, flee at the first scent of it. In any case, the challenge is not only to be scrupulously honest about whether or not one is experiencing one’s own naked anger but, as so many spiritual teachers have urged, to be willing to tell the truth about whether or not we’re telling the truth.

I find that as I move more deeply into the practice, the sure sign that I am feeling my anger in and of itself, without a subtle narrative to force any particular interpretation on it, is that it transmutes, revealing itself to be a complex of other kinds of feelings and sensations—for example, fear and vulnerability. And then, too, almost magically, I begin to feel it simply as a kind of force, a thrumming energy about which I mostly feel curiosity. It is here that I can begin to reframe anger, to see that it may actually be adaptive, protective, and useful, like a bicycle helmet or a hammer, that it might both shield me from emotional overwhelm and facilitate my journey forward. I can then stop being so angry and afraid of anger that I forget to be grateful for its utility and its lessons.

Just as significantly, especially during these volatile, dangerous times, I can view my anger as a messenger providing clarity as to what and whom I care about. Feeling anger on my own behalf is a reminder of my own healthy self-regard and self-esteem. Anger on behalf of others—for example, my Mexican-American students or Muslim colleagues—is an expression of the empathy and compassion that bind me to other sentient beings. Further, I can see that my anger about the treatment of animals, the natural world, and disregard for basic values such as truth-telling is a further sign of my rootedness in a plenum that includes all. Once I can make use of the gap vipassana provides between the difficult feel-

ings and my own essential identity—I am not one with my anger—I can better hear the anger rather than merely suffering at its mercy or being ashamed of it.

Once I acquire the patient courage to see that the monster of my own anger is no monster at all—recall *Sesame Street*'s Grover in *The Monster at the End of This Book*—I can begin to expand my vipassana practice in ever-widening circles to include my colleagues, my students, and perhaps my nation and world. Although vipassana begins as an internal, subjective practice, it also has social, political, and pedagogical correlates. If I can become a brave explorer of the contours of my own anger, the challenging feelings expressed by others may also become less frightening and taboo. It certainly helps me to be less afraid that raising difficult topics—for example, the treatment of immigrants, people of color, and LGBTQ people—will become an out-of-control free-for-all of irrepressible fury or bottomless grief.

The practice of sitting peacefully with anger can also inform our curricular decisions. Social justice history is full of examples of courageous radical activism, the full ferocity of which is too often obscured. For instance, groups such as ACT UP, which fought for a response to AIDS in the face of malignant public and political neglect, are often depicted by us teachers as a historical aberration, an almost embarrassingly outrageous exhibition of desperate people publicly laying bare their bodies and emotions; the more radical side of the civil rights movement is often glossed over in favor of the supposedly more conciliatory rhetoric of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr; and the anger-fueled manifestos of radical lesbian American feminists of 1970s are often dismissed as anachronistic, a necessary embarrassment on the way to more “civil” and palatable forms of feminist protest and discourse.

However, when grounded in an expansive vipassana approach, we teachers might be more inclined to spend time exploring the complicated subjectivity of some of the most “outrageous” activists, through, for example, memoirs and imaginative exercises, as well as our students’ unsanitized subjective responses to them. We can, perhaps, better face the full fierceness of our social justice histories, as we do our own roiling internal furies. The possibilities here are many, not necessarily just new add-ons to our current teaching practices but perhaps also a reframing of

current content. For teachers who do not now include much in the way of memoir, fiction, or film but rely instead on more “objective,” factual material, this approach may supply yet another reason to embrace more such richly personal, subjective material. This is not to say, of course, that one can’t approach the “objective” material along the lines I am suggesting, but that fiction, memoir, poetry, and film often more readily invite such an approach.

And for those seeking innovative, holistic approaches to helping students more mindfully approach material that is perhaps less obviously humanistic, resources are available. For example, a recent article by Daniel P. Barbezat (2016) in this journal describes the pedagogical application of awareness practices in economics. As he explains, “by de-emphasizing content in favor of cultivating attention, conscious choice and meaning making, our students gain deep insight into their own motivation” (p. 33). The trick, then, is to focus on students’ subjective process of relating to the material and not simply on the material itself, and this can include making friends with supposedly “unwelcome” responses such as boredom or irritation.

Further, another JOCI article, “Contemplative Approaches to Reading and Writing,” describes mindfulness practices that can be incorporated as basic skills for students to carry with them through a variety of college courses and beyond. “The one aspect of their learning over which students are sovereign,” argue Dorothe J. Bach and John Alexander (2015), “is their awareness of their experience and their own thoughts and reactions to the material covered in the course. The careful examination of their private responses can be a powerful ally in both student engagement and understanding” (pp. 52-53). Again, developing the pedagogical habit of shifting some emphasis away from external content and toward students’ subjective internal landscapes can help develop self-reflective familiarity, curiosity, and responsibility, qualities that will be indispensable when the feelings that arise are, like anger, especially challenging.

Obviously, we must still be responsible teachers in all of the ways that we know how to be, availing ourselves of practical precautions and providing our students with mental health resources, especially given the increasing rates of depression and suicide among besieged young people from marginalized groups. Of course, awareness practice is not a

panacea, but for me, a professor charged with teaching in difficult times, it has been incredibly helpful to begin to see it less as a mere coping and relaxation strategy and more as a sophisticated pedagogical tool that I might carry with me into my classrooms. After all, if marginalized people in the U.S. have learned anything in recent years, it is that there is no escape from this difficult reality, one that includes not just the anger of newly empowered white supremacists but also a fury that lives within us. May we make the most of our awareness practices, then. May they bring us into a more intimate relationship with our complex contours and shadows rather than become yet one more excuse to flee from them.

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