

## Dealing with Intense Emotions

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Sometimes we walk around like skin bags filled with bones and organs and blood and other things we're seldom aware of. We're often least aware of the non-material things inside us: our emotions and thoughts.

These fabrications of the mind are not us, or even part of us. We don't choose to have them, any more than we chose our organs. Mental proliferations just arise out of nowhere – from no material place.

Sometimes they abduct us. They mess with what we're doing, cause mistakes, waste our time. Emotions can commandeer our actions, turn us into robots obeying their whims, leaving us with a bitter aftertaste that can linger for a long time.

It's almost silly that we think of thoughts and emotions as "me" or "mine." Instead, they can become things we desperately need to get free of, like a giant octopus gripping us from all directions.

I'm talking about the kind of mental phenomena that came to seduce and torment Siddhartha Gautama on the night of his enlightenment, collectively represented by Mara, the personification of delusion and dukkha – suffering. Emotions like fear, anger, hatred and related thoughts.

Many years ago, someone in my Monday night sangha, "Insight Oakland," asked me a terrific question: how can we deal with intense emotion? Like a gift out of nowhere, the answer came to me and I laid out a five-step process.

The question was about anger, which is usually the easiest emotion for us to identify, so I'll use it as the example, although jealousy, humiliation, regret and many other feelings can also be very hard to deal with.

The five steps of dealing with difficult emotions are questions for us to explore. I'll go over them later in detail:

- 1) How do you know you're angry? 2) How did you get there? 3) What happens when you're intensely angry? 4) How did you know when it had passed? 5) What brought about its passing?

As you may have realized, only the first two are practical at the time you're "under the influence" of some passionate emotion. Maybe the third one could help in the moment, but definitely 4 and 5 are for retrospection.

These questions are inspired by the story of the soon-to-be-Buddha's encounter with Mara. Lord Gautama vanquished the embodiment of dukkha by saying, "I see you, Mara." He was able to feel the emotions arise in him without either grasping or pushing them away. Truly *seeing* Mara defeated him, and allowed the Bodhisatva to become fully enlightened.

Now for question number one: 1) How do you know you are angry?

We usually have some "lead time" before our emotions dominate us. Unfortunately, we often don't realize that annoyance or frustration has become anger and is still building until it's too late and we're in a state of rage.

Once we're in a passion, we've *become* that emotion and there's no independent awareness able to make a rational choice about our reactions. At this point we *might* be able to crawl back to self-control by thinking, "This is a powerful emotion," or just "an emotion is present."

Like Bikkhu Analayo said in his book Satipatthana, "labeling introduces a healthy degree of inner detachment" [from emotions] and "diminishes one's identification with them."

So, this first question seeks to identify what turns on the lightbulb in our minds and enables us to say, "Wait. I'm angry." Recognizing clues that we're feeling angry can train us to notice sooner and sooner as our feelings escalate.

This question focuses on our 'internal' experience. We have to look inward to cut off the force of a feeling. Sometimes it's a thought so outrageous that it catches our attention, like, "I'm going to take this golf club and kill that person." Well, let's just hope *that* catches our attention before we act on it.

Our bodies have a simpler way of expressing emotions than the mind, so that we usually feel the same sensations each time we have a particular emotion. The question is, what sensations in the body catch our attention enough for us to realize we are intensely angry?

It could be your breathing or a change of heart rate, or your muscles tense up. One friend of mine feels his ears burn. Some people feel their stomachs tighten or get queasy. You might feel your hands clenched, or your jaw.

Next, see if you can link the physical sensation with the emotion. We might realize, “my stomach is knotted and there’s a buzzing in my head, and I feel angry.”

Maybe rather late in the process your own conduct is the clue when you see yourself tearing up papers, slamming the table top or using harsh words. When it goes this far, spend some time later investigating your physical experience during the episode. Be curious. That will help keep a calm mind and avoid judging yourself or others as you review what happened inside you.

Examining how we knew, or could have known we were angry lets us become familiar with the physical feelings of an intense emotion. This equips us with an "early warning system," so gradually we learn to see what’s developing, and keep our equanimity or at least stay rational.

## 2. How did you get there?

This doesn’t ask about events or the actions of other people that you think “caused” you to become angry. Reviewing "the story" can get us stuck there, reinforcing our anger. Instead, this question also invites an exploration of your *inner* experience. This may have to wait until you cool down, but the sooner you ask how you got intensely angry, the better.

Question two is looking for the “set-up,” the conditions in your mind that were waiting like tinder for the events that sparked your reaction. It could be expectations that you were clinging to and suddenly felt were thwarted, or an old hurt that felt wounded again. Maybe it was injured pride.

You may find that your sense of fairness was offended, but don’t stop your investigation there. We can oppose injustice without becoming overwhelmed by anger – in fact we will act far more effectively with cooler heads. Ask what made the difference between a moral objection, and the intense reaction you experienced?

Following the pathway from our emotions back to their earliest internal causes will weaken the mental habits that can “snap” us into a negative reaction. In some circumstances, we can realize this on the spot, and try to undo any harm we’ve caused.

## 3. What happens when you’re intensely angry?

There’s a point where our reaction jumps from internal experience to action. This question asks what that behavior was and if we have fallen into harmful reactive habits.

See if you can identify any of your behavior that was triggered or influenced by your emotional history. It may follow a pattern of past responses. Recognizing these can have a healing effect on old, still troubling wounds.

Also, consider the impact your anger had on the immediate situation, and look for any long-range effects. Un-mindful reactivity so often has a cost. What toll did it take on your blood pressure, your friendships, material losses, or opportunities you didn't get because of what you did. And don't forget the dreaded apologies you eventually should make.

#### 4. How did you know when the intense anger had passed?

This looks for physical sensations, conduct or thought patterns that let you know the powerful anger was gone. Try to remember what it was like at the time you were no longer so angry. Maybe you could feel the tension, the dukkha, melting away. It can feel really good. If you feel it as it happens, savor it.

Or there may be a moment when you realize you just don't have that stress anymore. Focusing on and getting to know the feeling of sanity will hardwire the map for you to get back to it next time. Remembering how it feels to recover from anger will help you recover in the future.

#### 5. What brought about its passing?

Sometimes it just takes time – but reflect on how long that was. Maybe there were particular words spoken that soothed the anger, like someone saying sorry, or advice from your friends, or thoughts that occurred to you. Just look and see what helped the anger pass. This is training in returning to equanimity.

We really need to know our feelings, not just anger but all the powerful ones. It's so tempting to describe our feelings in terms of the events that preceded them and seem to have caused them. Delving into the answers to these five questions will shift the focus and help us gain valuable insight into how our emotions work and, sometimes, get out of control.

We have to begin by knowing we *have* these emotions, and then learning as much as we can about them. Jack Kornfield said in [The Wise Heart](#) that, "Wisdom knows what feelings are present without being lost in them." May your wisdom guide you.

This dharma talk will join all my previous dharma talks on the website, [RebeccaDixon.org](http://RebeccaDixon.org), within the next week. It will be available in both audio and written form. Thank you