

Understanding Contact Anger

by Rodney Smith

The scene is familiar to us all: someone criticizes us or makes a disparaging gesture and it leads to a mood, an “attitude”, which we carry throughout the day. We pass it on to others just as we received it, and the anger spreads rapidly through all contacts. All moods are contagious, but anger seems to attach itself to us quicker than most. Like a silent viral infection it insidiously spreads from person to person beneath our conscious awareness. What is this disease which we pick up from the host carrier, and how can we use the energy of anger to serve our needs rather than passing it along unconsciously to others?

Anger is a defensive posture against feeling out of control. It is a method of self protection directed towards maintaining our internal sense of self worth and integrity. For example, the internal monologue from the above situation could go something like this: A friend, Joe, has just criticized me. Since I value Joe as a person and want him to value me, I feel hurt and discounted from this angry exchange. I attempt to regain control (and my self respect) by diminishing him as a person. If I can devalue him in my mind, my status is preserved. I look for ways to lower his worth and thereby elevate my own. The following reactive thoughts occur: “Who does he think he is anyway? As if he could do better! If he’s such a hotshot, why is his marriage in such disarray?”

The real problem is not Joe’s anger, but my need to evaluate myself through Joe’s comments. My self worth is dependent upon Joe’s recognition and respect. I am therefore dependent on being validated as a person through his moods and opinions. If his exchanges are light and friendly I feel good about myself while I am around him; if he is critical, the opposite is true. Those of us who are meditators understand the whimsical nature of moods. They often arise out of a person’s history irrespective of present circumstances. To hold ourselves accountable for someone else’s mood is to tie ourselves to the other person’s past. Isn’t living with our own

past difficult enough? Do we really need to take on someone else's past as well? Yet, as this example demonstrates, we do it all the time. To see if this is true, substitute Joe with your boss, spouse, mother-in-law etc..

We believe the other person's criticism of us is really true, that they have seen through our pretentious shield to who we really are. They have hit us where we hurt the most, at our lack of real worth and value as a human being. Our reactivity indicates how strongly that belief is held. We fight against those beliefs the only way we have learned, by striking back and hurting the other either in action or through our thoughts. By keeping the other person downgraded proportionately, we pretend that our own status is higher than we really believe it is. We do this because it hurts too badly to feel the pain from our lack of self appreciation.

These self beliefs need to be seen, understood, and questioned. We must be willing to open to the truth of these beliefs without assurance or guarantee that we are better than the belief says we are. When we are fully open to their true nature without any defense whatsoever, we expose these beliefs to the emptiness of thoughts themselves. The final strategy is to carry this understanding into everyday actions which run counter to these self limiting thoughts. Even if these activities seem conspicuous and unconvincing in the beginning, we continue to act on the understanding that our beauty is based in truth. Our beauty is the truth; our unworthiness and conceit are the echo from a distant past.