

## Angry Bhāradvāja Brothers

Bhāradvāja, a wealthy man of the brahmin caste, the most respected, highest social class in India, had a wife named Dhānanjāni, who was very devoted to the Buddha. She had attained the first level of enlightenment, called stream-entry. She had a practice of praising the Buddha aloud whenever she sneezed, coughed or stumbled. Each time, she would solemnly utter,

“Homage to the Exalted One, All-Worthy, Perfectly Enlightened!”

One day, she along with her husband and others were distributing food offerings to some local brahmins who were holy men but not followers of the Buddha. Suddenly, she stumbled. She immediately spoke her solemn praise of the Buddha as usual with a loud voice.

All the brahmins heard it and were very offended. So many people in the area were flocking to the Buddha rather than going to the brahmins to make offerings and seek spiritual guidance and blessings. The brahmins probably thought that the Buddha’s teachings were wrong and evil and therefore that Dhānanjāni’s praise of him made the food impure. So, they left without eating the food that had been so nicely prepared for them.

Consequently, Bhāradvāja, who had never visited the Buddha, preferring the company of the brahmins, became very angry. He said to himself,

“No matter where it may be, whenever this vile woman stumbles, she utters the praise of this shaveling monkling in this fashion.”

He apparently had a lot of contempt for monks with shaven heads.

He said to his wife, “Now, vile woman, I will go and defeat that teacher of yours in an argument.”

She replied, “By all means go, brahmin; I have never seen the man who could defeat the Exalted One in an argument. Nevertheless, go ask the Exalted One a question.”

Bhāradvāja went to the monastery where the Buddha was staying, and approached the Buddha without bowing, without politely greeting him, and without even putting his palms together in respect. He stood to one side of the Buddha and, addressing him by his family name rather than by a term of respect, directly asked questions in the following stanza:

“What must one slay to live at ease?  
What must one slay to grieve no more?  
Of what one thing do you approve the killing? Tell me, Gotama!”

In answer, the Buddha said the following stanza:

“To live at ease, anger must be slain,  
With anger slain, one grieves no more.  
Of anger with its poisoned root,  
And honeyed climax, brahmana,  
The noble ones praise killing it.  
When it is slain, one grieves no more.”

Upon hearing this calm response, Bhāradvāja had no argument, no opposition, no rebuttal. It was the truth, and he acknowledged that his anger was a weakness. Standing in the presence of the profoundly wise, serene and powerful Buddha, Bhāradvāja was a changed man. He knew that the Buddha was unlike any other spiritual teacher. He wanted the Buddha to be his teacher, so he requested permission to be ordained as a monk. And he then became one of the Buddha’s monks.

Someone told his younger brother, called Akkosa Bhāradvāja, “Your brother has become a monk.” The younger brother was extremely angry about it, so he went to the monastery and ranted to the Buddha with abusive, ugly words.

In response, the Buddha asked, “Do you sometimes have guests, brahmin?”

Akkosa Bhāradvāja replied, “Yes, Master Gotama, I sometimes do.”

The Buddha then asked, “Do you entertain them with various kinds of food?”

“Yes, I do,” was the response.

The Buddha continued, “Now, if they do not accept your food, to whom does it then belong?”

Akkosa Bhāradvāja replied, “If they do not accept it, it again belongs to me.”

The Buddha explained, “In the same way, brahmin, those words of scolding and abuse which you gave us, we do not accept; hence, brahmin, they belong to you.”

Hearing this, Akkosa Bhāradvāja too gained serene confidence in the Buddha and requested permission to be ordained as a monk. And he then became another one of the Buddha’s monks.

There were two younger brothers, called Sundari and Bilanjika, and they became angry when they heard what happened to their older brothers. They also went to vent their anger at the Buddha, and the Buddha subdued their anger the same as he did with Akkosa Bhāradvāja. Then these younger brothers also became the Buddha’ monks. All four brothers became arahants, reaching enlightenment.

One day, in the Hall of Truth, the monks had a discussion in which they marveled at the virtues of the Buddhas, that although these four brothers abused the Buddha, he became their refuge. The Buddha entered the hall, and when he asked them what they were discussing, they told him, and he said, “Monks, because I possess the power of patience, because I am without defilements among those who are defiled, therefore I am truly the refuge of the multitude.”

Then he said the following teaching as a stanza, explaining virtues that define a brahmana, or holy person:

“Angerless does he endure abuse,  
Beating and imprisonment,  
Patience his power and armed might—  
That one I call a brahmana.”

### ***Dharma Discussion – Anger:***

The Buddha says the anger must be slain, and that the noble ones praise killing it. Our first impression might be that we are to eradicate anger immediately, cutting it off completely, like stabbing it to death with a sword.

But if we try to do that, there’s a grave danger that we will either repress our anger, bottling it up inside, or that we will falsely deny that we have anger, leading to cognitive dissonance and painful symptoms mentally and physically.

The way to slay our anger is more like “death by a thousand cuts,” which means many small increments of pain leading to death. But rather than a thousand small increments of pain, we practice many millions of small increments of victories over our anger over time.

But before we can start slaying, we need to get ready.

Dealing with our anger starts with healing ourselves.

Teenagers experience hormone shifts and sometimes have conflicts in the family with issues such as control and freedom that can escalate feelings of anger.

Aside from teenage issues, many of us have experienced or continue to experience trauma, such as cultural, racial, systemic, or generational trauma; trauma from abuse, neglect, loss, or witnessing abuse; or social trauma, for example, from rejection or bullying.

Such traumas can cause deep-seated feelings of injustice, frustration, anger, revenge, hatred, hopelessness, anxiety and/or depression. These feelings and experiences must be acknowledged, validated and processed so they are not repressed or denied.

And, those of us who have experienced trauma or who are going through teenage struggles especially need to avoid harsh self-judgment, guilt and shame.

Therapeutic, healing support is important to make sure we develop a healthy self-esteem and self-worth. A support group or professional therapy might be needed to help accomplish this.

To the extent that therapy offers different approaches to handle anger than the guidance here, you can evaluate and use whatever techniques work best for you, and then continue to evaluate what are the best techniques for you as you progress, which might change over time.

Also, we might be able to channel or direct our deep-seated feelings of injustice into constructive activities such as activism or joining organizations that address the injustice.

Whether or not we have experienced trauma, we need to develop a practice of mindfulness to get ready to deal with anger.

Mindfulness helps us calm our mind and take a little rest from what is going on around us and from whatever is troubling us.

It also helps us to be more aware of when our anger is arising, so we can think and respond well to upsetting situations rather than just impulsively react in a destructive way.

Mindfulness can be practiced for just a few seconds, just about anywhere and anytime.

Once we have started practicing mindfulness, and have support to handle any trauma, then we can start dealing with anger. There are five parts: Recognize, Relax, Reason, Respond, and Resolve.

#### *Recognize:*

The first step is to recognize when anger is starting to arise—we notice when we are feeling upset, frustrated, annoyed, irritated, or enraged. At first, we might only notice it when our voice becomes louder, changes pitch or says angry words. But before that happens, we can start to notice subtle changes in our body as our anger rises—our breathing and heart rate are faster, we tense up, the body heats up; maybe the stomach feels uncomfortable, or we might make restless movements.

Whenever you feel upset, try to pay attention to any and all sensations you feel in your body.

This mindfulness of the body gives you a few moments to distract yourself from the anger.

And, the earlier we notice anger arising the better chance we have of calming it before we say or do something we later regret.

Importantly, when we recognize that we're feeling upset or angry, we don't judge ourselves.

We all experience anger; it's our natural protective emotion, a tool for survival to warn others not to harm or abuse us or our loved ones. It warns us that something is wrong, that something needs to be addressed. It mobilizes us to take action, for example, against an injustice, and motivates us to set boundaries as protection from abuse or from being manipulated.

Anger actually leads us toward the Dharma in that when we're angry, we experience suffering, which is the First Noble Truth and one of the Four Thoughts that Turn the Mind Toward the Dharma (the other three are impermanence, precious human body, and karma). When we experience something that deeply angers us, it can motivate us to seek relief in the Dharma.

But we don't need to let loose our anger whenever we get upset, because it's harmful not only to others but to ourselves.

Some people think that expressing anger and aggression is a show of strength, assertiveness, dominance, control, fierceness—a positive thing.

But anger is a weakness, a lack of control; even small children and animals lash out in anger.

Expressing anger might make us feel relieved, but doesn't extinguish it; rather, it leaves an imprint to do it again—it feeds the anger, creating a habit, a pattern of behavior.

Anger, especially when it is frequent or chronic, stresses our body and can result in physical symptoms such as headaches, digestion issues, sleep problems, lowered immunity, and heart disease, and can result in an unhealthy lifestyle that leads to diabetes and other problems. Anger hinders our thinking; we can't think as clearly and rationally when we're angry, so we might say or do something that we later regret and which might cascade into more problems and pain for us.

And, our anger stresses others around us—our family, loved ones, coworkers—which might result in more difficulties.

Rather than letting anger weaken us, we take steps to weaken the anger.

So, while we don't judge or criticize ourselves for feeling angry, and we don't repress it, we recognize that it's harmful and that it's important to find skillful ways to deal with it.

### *Relax:*

Once we recognize that we're feeling angry, we need to find a quick way to calm our body and bring our mind away from the endless loop of angry thoughts.

What do you typically do to try to calm down?

We can take some slow, deep breaths; breathe out stress, and breathe in peacefulness.

We can practice mindfulness of the body: sit still, close your eyes and notice as many sensations as you can that you feel in your body. Do you feel pain or tension anywhere? Can you feel your heart beating? Notice your body's position and posture. Notice all the different sensations (warmth, pressure, weight, touch, etc.) you feel in various parts of your body, from your feet, legs, lower body, upper body, hands, and arms to the face and top of your head.

Here are some other ideas that might help you relax in various situations:

Find a quiet place where you can clear your mind, and perhaps chant or say a prayer.

Massage your forehead, temples, head and neck; or look in a mirror and try to relax your face.

Drink cool water or other beverage, which helps cool your emotions.

Go outside, and perhaps take a walk.

Do some kind of exercise, sport activity or yoga poses.

Read something other than social media, "doomscrolling," or other potentially upsetting materials.

Lay down, take a shower or bath, or listen to music.

Write in a journal, or talk to a friend.

Do some cleaning or organizing in your home.

### *Reason:*

Next, we use our reasoning to process the anger and reduce its intensity and duration, and thus relieve ourselves from the stress and other unpleasant symptoms of anger.

Through reason we develop patience, which is an antidote to anger.

There are several ways we can reason using Buddhist concepts to identify the faulty thinking behind our anger. You can use one or more of the techniques listed below as appropriate for different types of situations.

1. Analyze the object of the anger

When we are angry at a person, we can ask ourselves, what are we really angry at? The person's body? Their personality? Their mind? Their words? Their behavior?

We are angry at their words or behavior, not the whole person.

The words and behavior come from their mind, which is confused, ignorant, full of delusions.

If they didn't have this confused mind, they wouldn't talk and behave the way they do.

When someone harms others, they are suffering, hurting inside; as the saying goes, "hurt people hurt people" (people who are hurting inside hurt others). People who are truly happy don't harm others.

So, rather than being angry at the person, we can be angry at their ignorance, their confusion, and recognize that we also have ignorance and confusion, otherwise we would be enlightened.

## 2. Analyze the cause of the anger

Think about what exactly you are angry about.

Is your anger protecting you or someone else against a seriously harmful abuse or injustice?

If not, we can take steps to analyze the real causes of our anger and relieve ourselves of it.

The root causes of anger are attachment, aversion and ignorance, the Three Poisons.

Attachments are whatever we like or desire, and aversions are whatever we dislike or hate.

We like certain things to stay the way they are, and we like things to go as we expect.

We dislike—and maybe get angry—when they change or when they don't go as we expected.

When we have too many attachments, then we will experience so much disappointment, frustration and anger when we don't get what we like, and when things don't go our way.

When we have too many aversions, or when we have many things that we particularly dislike, that particularly trigger us to get angry, then we have a pattern of getting angry whenever that trigger occurs. What are your triggers? What types of events particularly get you upset?

Often, what makes us angry is how we interpret the changes and triggering events.

Our anger is a result of our interpretations and assumptions: for example, we interpret something as a threat, we assume others have bad intent or are stupid, or we assume something will hurt us, deprive us, or bring us problems or some kind of misery.

These assumptions may stem from negative experiences we have had, but if we are aware of our assumptions and patterns of anger, we can begin to eliminate them, recognizing them as thought patterns that aren't helping us but instead are making us irritable, annoyed or emotionally volatile.

For example, the Bhāradvāja brothers weren't angry generally at shaven heads, monks, or the Buddha. Rather, what made them angry was their negative assumption that the Buddha was a threat to their way of life and would make them miserable. When they met the Buddha, they found out their assumption was wrong.

Instead, we can try to be open-minded and flexible, open to different outcomes, possibilities and perspectives, and open to other ways of looking at a situation which may be better than we assumed or have benefits we hadn't thought about.

It takes practice to let go of expectations and assumptions, but if we are willing to loosen them, then we avoid so much disappointment, frustration, annoyance and anger.

As the Buddha taught, without anger, when anger is slain, we don't grieve anymore.

### 3. Karma

Everything we experience arises from the causes that we created and the conditions that arise to bring it into existence.

The causes are our own karmas, actions we have done previously or in past lives.

So, our negative experiences are the result of our own negative past actions.

This can be difficult to accept—we suffer so much, and yet it's our own fault? We feel innocent!

We don't deserve the terrible situations in our life that make us angry!

Yes, you may be innocent now, but we all have done things in our past, including distant past lives, that were done out of ignorance. Even the fully enlightened Buddha had to suffer a terrible injury to his foot due to a harmful act he had done in a distant past life. And the famous arahant Venerable Moggallana (Maudgalyayana) died a violent death due to having killed his parents in a past life.

So, rather than being angry about unjust, abusive or other terrible situations that we face, we can calm our anger by remembering that through these situations, we are exhausting the results of negative actions from our past. While we are strong enough to bear them, we are finally exhausting them, releasing them.

The ways we react now to anger-provoking situations create results in our future.

Will we react with hostility, creating causes for more negative experiences in the future, or can we respond in a better way, which creates causes for positive experiences in future?

When others behave in ways that rouse us to anger, we can consider that they are creating negative karma for themselves; they are creating their own future suffering.

So, we can try to develop compassion for them. They are confused, their mind is obscured by ignorance.

We can sincerely wish or pray that they find peace and happiness so they don't create more suffering for themselves and others. We are then creating merit by making that wish or prayer.

#### *Respond:*

In an anger-provoking situation, instead of impulsively reacting with anger, we respond in a way that deescalates the anger or at least avoids further escalation of anger.

We can refuse to accept someone else's anger.

If someone is angry or disrespectful toward you, and you haven't done anything wrong to them, then, like the Buddha, don't accept their anger.

Don't accept anger like a victim by being defensive, don't accept anger like a doormat accepts dirt by letting their anger rub off onto you, and don't escalate anger by scolding them; in other words, don't bring yourself down to their level of negativity.

Instead, remember how the Buddha responded when the Bhāradvāja brothers were disrespectful to him. He didn't defend himself, scold them or get upset by what they said. He spoke calmly and explained that he didn't accept their anger.

You too can speak calmly, listen without saying much, or don't respond at all.

Anyone can shout or respond aggressively. It takes strength to deescalate anger.

If you're accused of something and it's true, you can learn from it. If it's false, then the person accusing you is wrong, not you, so you can calmly explain, but don't quarrel about it or try to force them to accept that they're wrong. Some people refuse to accept that they are wrong. Their false accusation is their wrongdoing, not yours.

Set boundaries, limits or rules with others to prevent future misunderstandings and disagreements.

If there is a conflict with another person, rather than simply trying to win the conflict, find a solution that results in fairness for all. Speak your position and listen to the other's position. Negotiate and try to come to an agreement without bickering, and be willing to be flexible or compromise if necessary to achieve a fair outcome.

Whenever you feel angry, then transform it into merit by making a wish that others not have to suffer with anger like the anger you are feeling.

*Resolve:*

Review what happened; think about how you handled the situation. Could you have handled it in a better way? If so, what would you do differently?

Make a plan of how you can avoid the repeating the same problem which made you feel angry.

If you feel you didn't handle it so well, then resolve that the next time a similar situation arises, you will handle it in that better way.

By doing this, you are consciously taking steps to improve, so you relieve yourself of guilt.

The more often we use these five techniques—recognize, relax, reason, respond, and resolve-- the faster we will remember the techniques and the faster we will calm our anger.

And each time we remember the techniques is a victory of practicing patience, another step toward slaying our anger.