

Transformation of Negative Emotions

Have you ever experienced a good period of meditation first thing in the morning, where you felt somewhat aware and awake, only to “come to” later in the day with the realization that hours have passed by in waking sleep?

Perhaps one of the most pivotal understandings in spiritual practice is the realization of the extent of sleep. Most of the time--let's be honest--we're simply not aware. We get lost in virtually everything we do and every identity that we assume. Rarely do we act with conscious intention--most of our thoughts and actions arise predictably and mechanically from our conditioning. Rarely do we know who we are, except in a narrow or self-conscious way. We need to recognize the pervasiveness of this waking state of sleep as our usual mode of being. This is not a pessimistic assessment of the human condition; rather it is something that must be clearly understood in order to have an intelligent approach to spiritual practice.

The other pivotal realization is the extent to which we don't want to wake up. Take, for example, all the times we make the choice not to meditate, or choose to entertain a fantasy, or to blame. Again, the point is not self-condemnation, but to see this clearly, in order to understand the magnitude of what we're up against. The question is: why is it so hard to awaken? In part, it's because the life force necessary to

awaken is constantly leaking away from morning till night. Four specific leaks are worth mentioning.

The first is unnecessary talking. This could take the form of mindless chatter, elevating ourselves, putting down others, gossiping, complaining or dramatizing. Unnecessary talking takes place almost every time we open our mouths to talk. The second way we leak energy is through internal daydreams, whether it be planning, fantasizing, conversing, worrying, or just random thoughts about nothing in particular. Each indulgence in unnecessary thinking depletes a small amount of energy. The third leak is unnecessary muscular tension, the physical contraction that results from the constant struggle to try to make our life strategies work--trying to win, trying to please, trying to hide, trying to avoid discomfort.

The fourth leak is the manifestation of negative emotions, where energy is squandered in small and huge doses throughout the day. “Negative,” as used here, does not mean a bad; it means an emotion that negates or denies. It says “No” to life. Anger, for example, says, “I don't

want this!” I’m not just talking about loud outbursts of anger. We manifest negative emotions as irritability, as judgments of self and other, as impatience, as passive aggression, and on and on.

One important emphasis in practice is on learning what is required to close these leaks. This is why silence is often stressed at retreats, so that we don’t leak energy through unnecessary talking. This is also why we focus on not getting lost in the story line of our thoughts, where we leak energy through internal daydreams. We also bring experiential awareness to our strategies and to the bodily tensions that these strategies lock in place; this addresses leaking energy through unnecessary physical tension.

But the one area that requires perhaps the most attention is how to work with our negative emotions, particularly with the many forms of anger. When we can stop the expression of anger, and instead experience the energy of anger itself, something begins to happen--something that we can call transformation.

Here’s an analogy that might be helpful in understanding this process. We all know that food gives energy to the body. But there’s another kind of “food”, namely our impressions or experience, that feeds what we can call our being. Every experience can be good food or bad food, depending on how much awareness is present. When we react to an experience negatively, it is like eating bad food. It doesn’t digest. In fact, it can even poison us. And then we often spew

the poison back out into the world, usually at a person.

The alternative to blame, self-justification and the manifestation of anger is to bring physical awareness to the arising negative reaction. Normally we fuel our reaction by believing and justifying the thoughts. But when we can disengage from the thoughts and justifications, attention can instead be focused on the visceral experience of the negative energy itself. This allows a different type of digestion to take place. Through this process, the energy is transformed into nourishment for our being.

Remember, I’m not talking about not having emotions arise, nor about repressing them. I’m talking about refraining from expressing them, either inwardly in thoughts, or outwardly in words and actions. It is only by withholding this expression that we can actually experience the energy and digest it in a new way. In the process we learn to live (be) in a way that is more in accord with our true nature, our open heart.

One question which often arises is why is it so difficult to stop the expression of anger? We seem to hold onto this habit with a stubbornness that defies common sense. The simple answer is: we want to be angry. We want to be right. We like the juiciness and the power that we feel when we express our anger.

But there is more to it than that. Expressing negative emotions also protects us, by covering over the fear-based pain that often underlies our anger---- the pain that we simply don’t want to feel. For example, take being criticized. We will

often feel an immediate surge of anger. Most of the time we will jump directly into blaming and self-justifying, which is our strategy to avoid feeling the pain of the rejection and unworthiness that the criticism triggers.

But if instead we refrain from expressing anger, it allows us to go deeper and truly feel the anger. This is a quiet inner process, where we naturally drop deeper into our experience. Staying intently present with our experience in this way allows us to break through the layers and layers of armoring and thereby enter into the fear-based pain we've never wanted to feel. Although it is never pleasant to be with our most deeply-seated pain and fear, it is only by uncovering and residing in this place that true transformation can take place. It is only here that we can ultimately reconnect with our basic wholeness.

Until we learn to refrain from expressing anger, and instead experience it, thus allowing the transformation of the energy of anger itself, we will keep wondering why the life force necessary to awaken eludes us. This is not a conceptual process; no amount of thinking will allow you to understand what is at work here. The only way to verify the truth of this transformative process is to stop our habitual mode of expressing and justifying our anger whenever it arises. This is crucial if we are to wake up.