

*ANGER AWARENESS*

VERSUS

*ANGER DEFICIENCY*

A New Personal and Political Psychology of Anger



Peter Wilberg

2009

**"The great Islamic activist Hamza Yusuf Hanson distinguishes between two forms of political action. He defines the Arabic word "hamas" as enthusiastic but intelligent anger and "hamoq" as uncontrolled, stupid anger. The Malays could not pronounce the Arabic 'h', and the British acquired the word [amok] from them."**

George Monbiot

## **Preface**

This essay on personal and political psychology emerged from an awareness of the intense anger I myself felt at the outrages committed by the Israeli Zionist regime in Gaza - an anger fuelled by a *parallel* awareness of what appeared to be a fundamental 'anger deficiency' in response to these outrages within Western media and political circles. Together with this went a more general awareness of the way in which political leaders in international conflict situations seem to be too scared or *avoidant* of their own internal anger to even countenance the thought of *face-to-face encounter and communication* with their 'enemies' - thus resorting to indirect emotional communication through missiles, bombs and bullets. I see this as but one example of the way in which personal and political violence, far from 'expressing' highly-charged feelings of anger, serves principally to explosively *discharge* or 'let out' those feelings - in order to *avoid* having to bear that anger inside, and *evade* the challenge of feeling and communicating it in a fully aware and embodied way, face-to-face but without violence.

## **Introduction**

An all-pervasive but almost unquestioned belief has pervaded Western culture since the birth of Christianity, though it is also reflected in Buddhism and other 'spiritual' creeds. This is the belief that *anger* - at least if not 'controlled' or 'managed' - leads to violence and is therefore a 'bad thing'. The belief is reflected in the currently fashionable phrase 'anger management' - which suggests that unless it is kept at some 'moderate' level on a scale of emotional intensity, anger automatically transforms into violence. In this essay, I will argue that a whole host of personal, social and international conflicts - above all those that *do* erupt into violence - do not result from a surfeit or excess of anger but rather from its opposite - from cultures characterised by a type of 'anger poverty' or 'anger deficiency'. This anger deficiency is sustained by deep-rooted beliefs about anger - in particular the belief that if unchecked, anger leads to violence, for this a belief which in effect functions as a type of self-fulfilling prophecy. The purpose of this essay is to dispute this belief and argue instead for a fundamentally new understanding of anger,

together with a new form of ‘anger awareness’ – one that alone can overcome the *fear of anger* that I will claim is the true cause of violence. I will present my arguments rhetorically, as a series of ‘no’ answers to a set of yes/no questions to which most people would answer ‘yes’ to.

### **Questions concerning anger**

To begin with, let us begin with a seemingly innocent if not banal question to which one would undoubtedly expect such an automatic ‘yes’ answer:

Q. Do people get angry because they feel angry?

A. No they do not. Feeling anger is one thing. ‘Getting angry’, *acting* on that anger, is something quite distinct. People ‘get’ angry, act on their anger, not because they *feel* anger but because they are *afraid of feeling anger*. The *most* violent of individuals are those who are least capable of bearing feelings of anger – who find the slightest feeling of anger so *unbearable* that they must immediately seek a way to discharge that feeling through action. In particular such individuals are not *strong enough* to feel emotions of anger *with and within their bodies*. So instead they make use of their bodies and bodily strength as an instrument with which to *discharge* emotions of anger *from* their bodies. Finding it unbearable to abide or ‘stay with’ feelings of anger *inside* their bodies they have to ‘let out’ their anger on others or else find some way of discharging it or ‘channelling’ it, if not bodily violence then through obsessional physical exercise or competitive sports. Alternatively, they may simply make sure that there is always something *aside from* anger that keeps them so permanently preoccupied and busy that this very *busy-ness* leaves them *no time* to feel their anger – or else serves as a convenient ‘outlet’ for it.

Q. Do uncontrolled feelings of anger lead to violence?

A. No they do not. To repeat: it is *fear* of feeling the emotional charge of anger inside one’s body that leads to discharge through violent bodily action.

Q. Is the exercise of force and violence an exercise of strength, power and dominance?

A. No it is not. It is a *surrender* to a sense of *weakness and powerlessness* in the face of feelings of anger, aimed at making the victim feel the same weakness, powerlessness and *fear of anger* that lies behind the acts of the perpetrator - a fear that often stems from their having been a victim of violence and fearing the retribution that anger might bring).

Q. Is the overcoming of anger either a pre-condition, purpose or benefit of religiosity or 'spirituality'?

A. No it is not. More often than not, it is those that suffer from what I call 'anger' deficiency' that use religion or spirituality to fill the 'hole' it leaves them with. Yet unless their particular religion or form of spirituality is one that *affirms* anger as a natural and valuable emotion (which most do not) no amount of contemplation, meditation or prayer will fill the spiritual emptiness they feel in themselves. Anyone with *anger deficiency* will be haunted by a spiritual vacuum, felt as an underlying sense of boredom, depression, restlessness or lack of meaning in their lives. Yet unless they first of all allow anger to fill this spiritual hole, anger as such *cannot* be spiritually 'transcended' or transmuted into empathy and compassion. For how can someone with anger deficiency – someone basically uncomfortable with even moderate anger - possibly 'empathise' with the intense anger and outrage felt by those who are economically exploited or starved, subject to cruel political and military oppression or victims of criminal violence and abuse?

Q. Isn't the ideally 'developed' or 'civilised' society one in which both the general populace and political leaders in particular are happy and not angry?

A. On the contrary. For we see in the 'developed' world - and the West in particular - how anger deficiency leads to a state of *almost total emotional apathy and indifference* towards outrages being committed in other parts of the world – an apathy and indifference shared by both politicians and the general populace, who would rather entertain themselves by watching fantasy TV violence or war-glorifying films than empathise with those suffering from real violence and wars. The Western media in particular, play a central role in preventing hosts of real-world outrages being fully

revealed on screen or in print – for fear of the intense anger or outrage this might in turn evoke in their viewers or readers. Thus the British tabloid press would far prefer to frontpage a famous football player such as ‘Gazza’ – one of many to have experienced so-called ‘anger’ problems – than to reveal and express anger at the outrages committed by Israeli military forces in Gaza.

Q. Aren’t Western or Western-allied powers such as the United States, the United Kingdom and Israel right in tackling violent rhetoric and terrorist violence in the Middle East and elsewhere?

A. Not if they deny the suffering that gives rise to them - and their own historic, economic, political and military responsibility for that suffering – and, last but not least – not if they fail to see also that it is precisely their own indifference and *lack of anger* towards that suffering that fuels the very violence they decry. The essence of Western military technology lies in the fact that it does not require any human feeling or an *iota of anger* to obey an order to release missiles that will kill or maim children, decimate families, destroy innocent lives and create whole generations of people filled with an intensity of anger towards the West. A principal reason why this anger does find expression in violence is because the suffering behind it neither understood nor responded to - except through hi-tech military operations of a sort that require *no human feeling* whatsoever to conduct. Thus it is that those who *surrender* – who *see no option* but to *discharge* their real human feelings of anger and outrage through acts of violence such as suicidal martyrdom - are called ‘terrorists’, whilst professional killers hired to deploy high-tech weaponry are called ‘professional soldiers’.

Q. Isn’t it still true that the only way to control violence is to control feelings of anger?

A. On the contrary, it is only if people are taught to affirm rather than avoid feelings of anger - and to feel their anger to the fullest degree possible - that the danger of their discharging anger through violence is diminished. Anger repression is not a solution to violence but its principal cause. The true solution is a new type of ‘Anger Awareness’. This is a way of overcoming fear of anger and the resulting ‘fight-flight’ response to it – the tendency to either flee from anger (or any people or situations that might evoke it),

fight to control it - or seek to evacuate it through an actual fight. To cultivate Anger Awareness means first of all ceasing to judge or label anger as a 'negative' or 'unspiritual' emotion. Instead we must allow ourselves to affirm and fully feel any anger within ourselves. Yet to overcome the fundamental fear of anger that stops us from doing this requires more than just rejecting the belief that anger is a 'bad thing'. It means also recognising that the awareness of an emotion such as anger is not itself an emotion. Only by reminding ourselves that the awareness of anger within ourselves is something quite distinct from - and therefore also free of anger - can we feel free to affirm that anger, without any fear of it controlling us, and without any need to control or 'manage' it. The practice of Anger Awareness then, involves (1) identifying with the awareness of feelings of anger rather than with the anger as such (2) thereby feeling free to fearlessly feel and affirm that anger - not as some negative emotion that we need to either 'control' or 'let out', but simply as a particular inner-bodily sensation that we can choose, with awareness, to stay with, embody and *let be*. Only such a new type of Anger Awareness offers the basis for a new, non-violent politics of justified anger. Without this Awareness however, the symptoms of Anger Deficiency will continue to plague society. These include not only violence but spiritual emptiness or meaning-loss, together with boredom, anxiety, depression and their counterparts - the restlessly manic 'busy-ness' and technological and spiritual consumerism that defines the culture of late capitalism. We know all too well that many young people become violent not through an innate surfeit of anger but because they are bored or excluded through poverty from the promised compensations of this culture. If we do not wish them, or anyone to become *violent*, it is all the more important that we *feel* and respect their *anger*. This is something that those with an emotional *fear* and *poverty* of anger cannot do.

Q. Aren't all emotions, including anger, basically 'irrational'?

A. Certainly not. Just as in a sick world there are all sorts of *good reasons* for people to feel 'depressed' - reasons which make the treatment of depression as a medical 'disorder' both irrational and irresponsible - so also are there always good reasons why people come to feel angry. The great *virtue* of anger however, is its capacity to act as an emotional yeast or vitamin - one which can very quickly restore a person's sense of bodily vitality

and mental clarity and by doing so renew their sense of meaning and purpose – something which makes it particularly valuable in transforming states of apathy, lethargy or ‘depression’, individual and social. ‘Anger deficiency’ then, can be compared to a type of unrecognised vitamin deficiency; not a biological deficiency but a culturally-conditioned one, shaped by almost universally accepted beliefs *about* anger.

## **Summary**

It is high time to finally dispel the mythical belief that anger possesses an innate malignity or negativity linking it to violence. On the contrary, it is only by *affirming* anger with *awareness* that we create the conditions for clear-headed, empathic and *ethical* actions – replacing actions that are only ‘knee-jerk’ reactions to or ‘outlets’ for anger with those that stem from a capacity to be aware of inwardly felt anger and to stay with that *awareness*. Since *awareness* of anger - however affirmative of that anger - is itself nothing ‘angry’, it is only through greater and not lesser ‘anger awareness’ that anger can be ‘transcended’ in a truly authentic and *non-avoidant* way – freeing us from the impulse to blindly *react* to or act *out* of anger, and offering us instead a vital *third option* in place of either repressing or ‘managing’ anger or ‘letting it out’. That is why giving ourselves time to be *fully aware* of any inwardly felt anger, as well as time to stay with, affirm and *fully feel* that anger, is far from being something ‘unspiritual’. Instead it is one of the important forms of *meditation* needed in today’s conflict-ridden world. Hence *these* written meditations on anger - themselves borne out of a meditative and affirmative *awareness* of anger. Or rather borne of out a state of *outrage* towards outrageous acts. Indeed perhaps in the very word ‘outrage’ we can hear the hint of a state of ‘anger awareness’ that, whilst arising from the highest intensity of anger (‘rage’) nevertheless – or for that very reason – transcends or ‘out-strips’ that anger and rage - thereby undermining the need to ‘act it out’ in angry, raging or violent ways. Anger and rage are emotions. Outrage is a state. Heard in this way, the word ‘outrage’ itself could be taken as a pointer or even as a type of synonym for a new type of Anger Awareness – a state of awareness that propels us in the direction of aware, non-violent and forward-looking actions in response to the outrageous.