THE SPIRT OF ANGER
A Sermon Preached by Pamela Patton
All Souls, New York City
April 26, 2026

There's a story that Tibetan Buddhist teachers love to tell. A hermit is living alone in the mountains, meditating in a cave. One day a herdsman passes by and calls out, "What are you doing up here all alone?"

"I'm meditating," says the hermit.

"On what?"

"I'm developing a peaceful mind, a steady mind of non-reaction."

There's a pause. The herdsman nods, turns to leave. Then he looks back over his shoulder and shouts, "Hey — go to hell!"

"YOU go to hell!" comes flying right back.

The herdsman laughed and walked away. He'd made his point.

The hermit is attempting to develop an unperturbable mindset, and it may have seemed like it was going pretty well until another human being came along.

Tibetan Buddhism uses the terms forbearance or patience for when we're able to maintain a peaceful mindset in the midst of provocation. To be clear forbearance is not meekness. It's not submission. It's not accepting harm. Some situations don't offer us a choice — we simply survive them. Forbearance is for the moments when we do have a choice and we're tempted to allow anger to make it for us.

When we're disturbed by anger we don't see a choice in how we behave or speak, we just blurt or blow up or we shove it down inside. We lose the power and intelligent thinking we've spent our lives developing. We forget how we are rooted, feet on the ground, decisive, capable.

It's not possible not to feel anger. The question is how we respond to those feelings. Even the Dalai Lama says, "Like anyone else, I too have anger in me." He was once asked "How do you control the anger in your life?" He answered by describing how when he was younger he would express anger with shouts and demands. Then he witnessed something in his early 20s that enabled him to see the destructive impact of anger.

He inherited a car from his predecessor the 13th Dalai Lama. There were very few cars in Lhasa where he lived at the time largely because there were so few drivable roads in Tibet. So the car had been shipped in many pieces and had been reassembled. Of course the car was wonky from the journey, not to mention the beating it took from the local terrain. No one

knew much about driving or repairing cars given their scarcity, but there was a Tibetan man who did his best to maintain the car. The Dalai Lama is very curious, always eager to learn how things work so he liked to watch this man do his work. One day this man was under the car repairing it, and as he came out from underneath it he hit his head on the fender. Out of frustration he started banging his head on the car over and over.

Instead of consoling himself and treating his injury, he harmed himself. While the Dalai Lama watched this he had a realization of how we can lose our minds in anger. The Dalai Lama suddenly saw the foolishness of how he'd been expressing his own anger.

Many decades later he continues to teach frequently about how to experience and respect anger without allowing it to overtake our minds. He talks about how he senses anger arise and takes the time to observe it, to allow it to diminish before responding. He has trained his mind so he is never hijacked by anger; he is always making a choice about how to respond in a wholesome and thoughtful way. He understands something the writer and teacher Ruth King names: anger is initiatory, not transformative.

What happens when our minds are hijacked like the man fixing the car? Psychiatrist Daniel Siegel illustrates this by using his hand as a model of the brain. Try making a fist with your thumb inside. This is your brain when it's working. Your fingers are the part that thinks, that regulates your emotions, that makes moral judgments, that lets you choose how to speak and act. Now lift your fingers up. Your thumb is the emotionally reactive part of your brain — the part that fires the fight-or-flight response. When your fingers are down, the thinking brain keeps your emotional reactions in check. When anger hits, the fingers fly up, and then the emotional brain is running the show with nothing to temper it. Siegel calls it flipping your lid. Without the "lid" you lose emotional balance, empathy, reasoning, the ability to choose. You're the mechanic banging his head on the car.

Some neuroanatomists report that the surge of anger lasts 90 seconds–that's how long our body's chemistry is keeping us on full alert. I think of it this way: for 90 seconds, your lid is up. The thinking brain is trying to come back online. If you can ride those 90 seconds without reacting — without adding a story — the fingers come back down. 90 seconds can feel like an extremely long time, but we can develop our tolerance with practice. If we can pause, allow the anger to surge, and hold off on reacting, we can take care of our minds.

You might be thinking: my anger lasts a lot longer than 90 seconds. And it's true that we generally do feel it for much longer, sometimes indefinitely. The reason it lasts so long is that we're fueling it

with our stories of blame, we're perpetuating it with behavior that keeps the anger burning; we're effectively keeping the physiological response at full blast because we're piling on.

There is a Buddhist image in which the mind is often compared to a drunken monkey, leaping from tree to tree. When I first ventured into learning meditation, a teacher gave us basic instructions for beginners: "For the next 10 minutes count up to 10 with each exhale and then back down to 1 and so forth. Restart at 1 if you lose track. I'll tell you when the time is up." It felt like forever as my monkey mind was leaping madly. I'm not exaggerating when I say I don't think I made it past the number 4, maybe even 3.

After 10 minutes the teacher said he had new instructions for us. He wanted us to think of something that annoys or frustrates or angers us and just let our minds wander in that state for 10 minutes. We were free to ponder blame, revenge, to go wherever our minds took us. I found the minutes flew by. My righteous monkey mind found a comfy branch and just sat there, content. The hard part was disengaging after 10 minutes. I had more thinking to do. He made his point.

Notice that the teacher didn't give instructions like this morning's RAIN meditation where we're invited to feel the anger in our bodies, to investigate it, to companion ourselves through it. His instructions were to just let it be the boss of my mind.

There is a Zen parable of two monks, an elder and a novice, walking when they come to a river. A woman asks for help crossing. The elder monk picks her up, carries her across, sets her down, and the two monks continue walking in silence. Hours later, the young monk finally bursts out: how could you do that? We're not supposed to touch women! The elder monk says: "I set her down at the river. You're still carrying her."

The young monk's anger is stuck in the narrative he's constructed over hours of walking, reviewing his outrage, allowing his mind to fuel the strong feelings of anger. Meanwhile the elder monk saw someone who needed help. He carried her, set her down, and kept walking. He didn't add a story. He didn't build defenses to justify it, not even when confronted.

So how do we disengage from anger? How do we avoid flipping our lids?

We pause. We let ourselves feel the anger. This is completely different from letting ourselves ruminate. It means letting the anger be in our bodies–the heat, the tightness, whatever it is–giving it your full attention and being super uncomfortable while you feel it.

If we can just allow ourselves to feel and watch the anger for 90 seconds, we can disengage from the hijacking and proceed with some perspective. When you stub your toe on the sofa, instead of looking for the culprit who moved the sofa into your path or calling yourself an idiot, you pause and see the conditions for what they are–no one to blame, just ride out the surge of toe pain and frustration.

Zenmaster Thich Nhat Hanh refers to the pause as tending to your own burning house instead of chasing the arsonist as they flee the scene. We tend to chase the arsonist because the urgency of anger takes over and distracts us from what will actually help which is tending to the fire. Letting the urgency of the anger dictate our reaction is the path of least resistance. Meanwhile the house is burning down. By pausing we let the fire of the anger subside, and then we see what really happened here and what do we need to do next.

Years ago I was driving to see my best friend who lived in Boston. She was very sick with cancer, and I knew I had only a few visits left with her. My kids were young and it was difficult to get away for a couple of days. I was in a frantic state between leaving home and preparing myself to be with my friend who also had young children. While I was in stopped traffic at a toll booth somewhere on Mass Pike, I picked up my phone to text my friend to let her know my timing. Somehow while looking at my phone I slightly eased my foot off the brake and moved forward enough to bump the car in front of me. I was startled. Within less than a second I imagined a raging man fiercely opening his door, marching to my window and calling me an idiot. I was steeling myself. What could I say? I messed up, I did feel like an idiot. I was also pretty much of a wreck as I anticipated seeing my friend.

Then I caught sight of the driver in front of me looking at me in his rear view mirror, smiling, and wagging his finger gently. It was salvific. I was so relieved not to get yelled at. But much more than that, I had a realization. I would have been the one to call someone an idiot if they bumped me. If I were he, I would have at least made a face and done the arm thing so the driver behind me could see my exasperation.

My anger arising is a warning sign, it's telling me here comes a juicy opportunity to teach someone a lesson. Instead I can do what that driver did for me: take a breath and respond like a person who has a choice.

That driver at the toll booth didn't flip his lid. He wagged his finger and he let me go. He set me free.