

Living without Anger*
Monima Chadha (Monash)
Shaun Nichols (Cornell)

1. Motivation

Anger plays a vital role in our everyday lives. However, powerful philosophical arguments seem to call into question the theoretical presuppositions behind anger. In Western philosophy, this issue has been most extensively explored in the context of free will skepticism (e.g., Pereboom 2001, 2022). If people don't have free will, then it seems mistaken to feel anger towards them. As a result, free will skeptics argue that we should suppress our anger responses (see, e.g., Sommers 2007, Milam 2017). However, anger arguably plays an important role in our social lives, and so free will skeptics often propose ways that we need to revise our practices and attitudes in order to recover those important benefits (e.g., Pereboom 2014).

Buddhism poses a related kind of problem regarding anger. A central thesis of Buddhist philosophy is that there is no self. On this view, it makes little sense to feel angry at a person, since this falsely presupposes that there is a person to be angry at. Buddhism constitutes an enduring example of a philosophical and social tradition that encourages its practitioners to eliminate anger. However, uprooting our normal anger responses might be costly for our everyday lives (Strawson 1962). In this paper, we explore a multifactor Buddhist response to these concerns.

Although our framework for thinking through the problem of eliminating anger is that of Buddhism, we think that the issues are not of merely narrow historical interest. On the contrary, we take Buddhism to be a living philosophy, a contender for having the correct metaphysical view of the self. When considering the implications of Buddhism for the reactive attitudes, one must consider a range of questions that will include (1) whether the reactive attitude depends on an invocation of the self, and (2) whether the reactive attitude contributes to suffering. The results of this inquiry will indicate the kind of changes that would be recommended by Buddhist Revisionism.

2. Psychology of anger

The term "anger" is used to describe a wide range of emotional experiences, from the reaction to stubbing your toe on a rock to the outrage at war crimes. It's not obvious that there is a single kind of emotion that subsumes all these different experiences. Buddhists have been especially concerned about a kind of emotion we might call *moral anger*. But it will be useful to say a little more about some kinds of emotional experiences dubbed *anger*.

2.1. Kinds of anger

Moral-anger is characteristically caused by the perception that someone has done something wrong, especially something harmful to the self. Such anger is a response to the actions of another. This is reflected in Aristotle's definition of anger, "as an impulse,

* Acknowledgements: For comments on an earlier draft, we'd like to thank Santiago Amaya, Kevin Berryman, Jay Garfield, Joseph Ortung, Sara Purinton, Peter Railton, Mark Schroeder, David Shoemaker, and Manuel Vargas.

accompanied by pain, to a conspicuous revenge for a conspicuous slight directed without justification towards what concerns oneself or towards what concerns one's friends" (Rhetoric, II.2).

Another kind of anger can be characterized in terms of *frustration*. Frustration-anger is characteristically caused by the perception of an obstacle to achieve one's immediate goal. The obstacle need not involve another agent at all. If I can't get out of my house because the snow is too deep, this might cause intense frustration-anger. A leading proposal for the function of this kind of anger is that frustration anger serves to motivate a person to overcome the obstacles to their immediate goals (see, e.g., Berkowitz 1989, Barrett & Campos 1987, Lench et al. 2015). There is some evidence that frustration-anger is associated with increased persistence. Infants that are dispositionally inclined to feel anger (as compared to sadness) are more likely to try to overcome an obstacle to watching an appealing video (Lewis & Ramsey 2005, 518). When 4-5 year-old children are presented with a frustrating task (trying to open an unopenable transparent box with an attractive toy), the children who exhibited greater anger (as indicated by facial, bodily, and vocal factors) persisted longer than other children (Tan & Smith 2018, 193; for related results in adults, see Lench & Levine 2008, 136).

Frustration-anger is characteristically triggered by perceptions of obstacles in the world, and it is thought to be present in rats and so would typically not implicate any representation of the self (Awathale et al. 2020). As a result, there's no reason to think that the emotion of frustration-anger implicates or presupposes a problematic notion of self. Hence, although the Buddhist might reject frustration anger on other grounds, they need not reject it on the basis of a false presupposition of self.

An apparently different kind of emotion is *self-directed* anger. David Shoemaker notes that this kind of anger is familiar in sports. After hitting a golf ball into the water hazard, many a golfer has thrown their 3 iron. This kind of anger seems quite different from both moral anger and frustration anger (see also Shoemaker 2022, 38-40). One characteristic feature of self-directed anger is *negative self talk*. In self-directed anger, we castigate ourselves, "You are such an idiot!" (see Shoemaker 2022, 41 for a nice discussion of this).

Unlike frustration anger, self-directed anger does seem to implicate self representation. Certainly, when we engage in negative *self talk*, we are representing the self. As a result, this kind of anger does seem to be at odds with the Buddhist no self view. The Buddhist have a special emotion word for self-directed anger, *omāna*, which might be thought of as contempt for oneself. Heim describes *omāna* thus, "*Omāna* is a conceit, rather than a variety of hatred, because it involves a subtle form of preoccupation with the self. This inferiority complex is not a matter of depression or dejection but of pride and self-promotion. I am the worst, truly despicable. No really, I am. I must insist. I am the very worst. Ever." (2022, 215). Since *omāna* is rooted in the false conceit of the self, and linked with pride, Buddhists strongly encourage getting rid of self-directed anger.

Although frustration anger and self-directed anger are important kinds of emotion, we want to focus on the interpersonal form of anger associated with blaming others. To explain this notion more fully, we need to explain the characteristics of anger and the kinds of benefits it is supposed to provide. Psychological accounts of emotions are typically given in terms of inputs, phenomenology, outputs, and function (see, e.g., Keltner & Lerner 2010). There is broad agreement about how to characterize anger on these dimensions. In brief, anger is caused by perceived mistreatment, it is an unpleasant feeling, it generates a motivation to retaliate against the agent, and it functions to guard against future mistreatment. So, for example, if James

perceives Fred to have insulted him, this will lead James to have an aversive experience at the thought of this insult, and James will subsequently be inclined to get back at Fred in some way. This will discourage Fred from repeating the offense.

2.2. *The psychological profile of anger*¹

Inputs: Anger is triggered by insults and slights. But anger is also triggered by the knowledge that someone has cheated you or cheated on you. One kind of evidence for this comes from autobiographical reflection studies. Mikula (1996) asked participants to recall an occasion on which they were treated unjustly, and they were asked to indicate what emotion they felt. The most common emotion that participants reported was anger. This study focuses on reactions when one is treated unjustly, but anger isn't entirely a self-oriented emotion; for instance, anger can be elicited by the judgment that one's friend has been cheated or assaulted. This collection of inputs can be gathered under a general category, what Lazarus calls a "core relational theme" that captures what the emotions have in common. According to Lazarus, the core relational theme for anger is "a demeaning offence against me and mine" (Lazarus 1991; see also Ortony & Turner, 1990: 324, Averill 1983). This is reflected in a cross-cultural study which asked participants to recall instances in which they felt various emotions and then to register their evaluation of the situation. For cases of recalled anger, participants tended to give high ratings of unfairness for the situations in which they felt angry (Scherer 1987: 911).

Phenomenology: What does it feel like to be angry? It feels bad. When asked to recall emotional events, people recalled the situations in which they felt angry to be extremely unpleasant (Ellsworth & Smith 1988, 279, 291; see also Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). Similarly, when participants are induced to feel anger in the laboratory (by having the participants watch a movie clip involving clearly unjust harm) they rate their feelings as being painful (Gross & Levenson, 1995, 96).

Outputs: When people are angry, they are motivated to attack or retaliate against the person who committed the affront. This is reflected in self-report studies. When asked to describe episodes in which they felt angry, people report verbally attacking the person who caused them to be angry. People also report imagining physically attacking the offender, and often report having done so in the particular case (Shaver et al. 1987, 1074, 1075, 1078). Studies with economic games provide experimental evidence on the kinds of behaviors motivated by anger. Participants in Ultimatum Game studies report feeling angry when the proposer makes an offer perceived to be unfair by the responder; these reports of anger predict rejection of the offer, which constitutes a financial penalty to the proposer (Pillutla and Murnighan 1996, 220; see also Fehr & Gächter 2002). Subsequent studies show that when participants perceive a player to behave unjustly, they often punish such a player even if the player will not know that he has been penalized (Nadelhoffer et al. 2013; Crockett et al. 2014). Thus, the anger-driven motivation seems to be retributive rather than educative.

Function: The function of anger is somewhat more controversial than the input, phenomenology and output. But perhaps the most prominent view is that a primary function of anger is to guard

¹ Henceforth we will use "anger" to refer to the interpersonal kind of emotion characterized below.

against mistreatment (Haidt 2003, 856; Tavris 1989, 285). Insofar as anger leads to retaliation, if people realize that mistreating you will result in reprisal, this will make them less likely to mistreat you (Frank 1988).

2.3. *The benefits of anger*

The most obvious benefit of anger follows from the function just noted. Anger benefits an individual because it motivates behavior that discourages being mistreated. If James got angry when Fred mistreated him, and James verbally (or physically) attacks Fred as a result, Fred will be less likely to mistreat James in the future. This is good for James. And insofar as others come to know this about James – that he is prone to retaliate when mistreated – then this widens the benefit of James' anger.

Part of what makes the emotion of anger itself important in these cases is that retaliation is costly. Hence, if one simply does a short-term cost-benefit analysis, it seems like retaliating against the offender will only compound one's current losses. But anger gives a person motivation to retaliate, which serves the person's *long-term* interests. Anger effectively changes the payoff so that one's decision reflects one's long-term interests (Frank 1988).

The expression of anger also leads to benefits in perceived status. Participants assign higher status to individuals who publicly expression of anger as opposed to sadness (Tiedens 2001). For instance, after observing a video of a political candidate who expresses either anger or sadness, participants were more likely to support the anger-expressing candidate. In another study, participants were presented with job applicants who expressed either anger or sadness, and the participants tended to think the anger expressing candidate should have a higher salary and a higher status position (Tiedens 2001, 92).²

Anger also seems to carry benefits for the community. Again, the key evidence comes from studies using economic games. Players will punish others who engage in free riding, and they will do so even if they know they will never interact with that person again (Fehr & Gächter 2002). That is a kind of "altruistic punishment", again driven by anger. But it has a remarkable effect of encouraging cooperation in the free-rider's subsequent behavior. The presence of this kind of punishment leads to high levels of cooperation in public goods games, at least in Western cultures (cf. Herrmann et al. 2008).

3. Anger and no self

Buddhists believe that anger is aversive and unpleasant. Anger can cloud one's judgement and lead one to act badly. Buddhists articulate the case against anger by pointing to its negative consequences for the angry person: anger feels bad and leads to bad intentions, actions and results. Buddhaghosa makes the point that anger makes things worse for the angry person: "Suppose an enemy has hurt you now in what is his domain, why try to hurt your mind yourself as well? That is not his domain" (The Path of Purification IX.22). Buddhaghosa's point is that

² However, there seem to be important differences in the effects of anger, as a function of the relative power of the individual. For instance, some work indicates that the benefits of the expression for anger applies to men but not to women. See Chan 2022 for an insightful discussion.

anger increases your suffering, so why allow it? As we saw above, Frank (1988) would maintain that we should allow this immediate increase in suffering because it has good downstream consequences. So Buddhaghosa's point that anger increases one's suffering does not show that anger should be extirpated. It's possible to insist that anger's good effects outweigh the bad.

Some philosophers (e.g., Srinivasan [2018] and Shoemaker [2018]) argue that, even if it were true that the effects of anger are overall bad, it would not follow that anger is altogether unjustified or that we ought to cultivate it away. This is because in some cases anger is a fitting affective response to moral wrongdoing. Just as grief can be a fitting response to loss of a loved one, so anger can be an apt response to moral wrongs. Shoemaker argues that apt anger is rationally justified independently of its effects – it is a means of recognizing and appreciating that wrongdoing has occurred. Buddhists, however, argue that anger is never a fitting response because it is based on a fundamental mistake: the conceit of the self. Furthermore, Buddhists argue, angry responses and attitudes are intrinsically bad because they involve suffering and in turn cause further suffering.

3.1 Metaphysical Arguments against Anger

The Buddhist offers a metaphysical reason to argue that anger is always unjustified. Anger is always unjustified and never apt because it is inconsistent with the denial of self. Buddhaghosa actually uses the Buddhist denial of self as a strategy for eliminating anger. If a person is nothing over and above a collection of mental and physical states (*skandhas*), the supposed target of anger doesn't even exist.

Since states last but a moment's time Those aggregates, by which was done the odious act, have ceased, so now What is it you are angry with? . . . Is it head hairs you are angry with? or body hairs? or nails? . . . For when he tries the resolution into elements, his anger finds no foothold, like a mustard seed on the point of an awl or a painting in the air (The Path of Purification IX.14, 22, 38).

Śāntideva's critique of anger also draws on the Buddhist critique of the self. His argument appeals to the Buddhist principle of 'dependent origination', that is, 'everything that exists depends on causes and conditions.'

Whatever transgressions and evil deeds of various kinds there are, all arise through the power of conditioning factors, while there is nothing that arises independently. (6.25)

In this way everything is dependent upon something else. Even that thing upon which each is dependent is not independent. Since, like a magical display, phenomena do not initiate activity, at what does one get angry like this? (6.31)

Śāntideva argues that the self is an illusion just like a mirage in the desert which cannot quench one's thirst. The appeal to a self plays no role in the causal explanation of anything (cf. Vasubandhu's argument against the Nyāya self as autonomous doer). It is the mental states that are responsible for action, but mental states are not independent. Bad intentions, like everything else in the Buddhist universe, depend on causes and conditions. Śāntideva counsels:

End of Excerpt

This is the accepted manuscript version of the article. In keeping with the publisher's self-archiving policy¹, up to 25% of this version is permitted in an institutional repository. The final version is available online from Oxford University Press.