

ANGER

THE CONFLICTED HISTORY OF AN EMOTION

BARBARA H. ROSENWEIN

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VICES AND VIRTUES

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FOREWORD

RICHARD G. NEWHAUSER AND JOHN JEFFRIES MARTIN



What made you angry today? There had to be something, because lately anger has become our default vice—and sometimes our virtue. Was it abortion? Brexit? Climate change? Democracy’s demise? Environmental degradation? Fascists on the march? There are more causes of anger than the alphabet can contain in this season of our wrath, in this time when outrage lurks around every corner, ready to stoke and celebrate our quick resentment or valorize our deepest convictions. Though other periods of history might be thought of as characterized by wrath, it is particularly important in the present moment to step back and look deeply at what anger has meant to our lives, and continues to mean.



The study of vices and virtues (and anger can be both of them) lies adjacent to many fields: from ethics, law, philosophy, and theology to anthropology, behavioral sociology, and psychology, but also, as Barbara Rosenwein’s volume demonstrates, the study of emotions. One of her key insights is that we have simplified a very complicated matter by labelling so many different feelings and behaviors “anger.” Moreover, different groups will respond with what they call anger to very different stimuli. These “emotional communities” value or devalue certain emotions and adhere to the same norms of emotional expression.

Anger is most often thought of as an excess or deficiency of some



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emotional substratum. The Basic Emotion analysts thought of anger as a natural element of human beings that could be detected and measured in facial expressions. Psychological Constructionists think of anger as part of a process of feelings. Enactivists speak of hard-wired circuits that can be called “anger” depending on the society in which they are expressed. For social constructionists, anger is created mutually by individuals acting in society and the tools (language, social settings, etc.) that society offers.

Different emotional communities will evaluate the moral valences of anger differently. Is anger morally negative? Buddhists seek to avoid anger altogether as a step towards avoiding suffering and stress; Stoics (like Seneca) counseled that anger should be actively resisted when it arises; some Neostoics, such as Descartes, thought it best to acknowledge anger, subject it to reasoned analysis, and turn it into the basis for a moral attitude that scorns anger. And all of these reflections on harmful anger have attracted therapies designed to alleviate the effects of this dangerous emotion, from a Buddhist therapist like C. Peter Bankart to the Neostoic echoes in anger-management therapy. But what, then, not only of the righteous wrath of God, but of humans who claim their wrath is a virtue? Christian communities justify anger when it serves to correct morals; Saint Augustine said anger should be directed at the sin, not the sinner. For Autonomists, like Hume, anger can be a source of morality when it is exercised as the disapproval of someone else’s vice. Rousseau turned anger at social injustice into a virtue.

Is it still possible in our lifetime to avoid, control, redirect, or manage anger? Have we entered a new phase of anger’s history in which the threatened loss of our identity—political, national, ethnic, religious—demands universal resentment? And must the expression of resentment always be outbursts of anger, unreflective, self-justifying? Perhaps. But Barbara Rosenwein’s book holds out the promise that knowing more about our emotional and ethical past will make it possible for us to navigate our emotional, ethical, and political lives in the present with greater insight and—we can hope—with better outcomes.



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Homer's *Iliad* begins with an order to the muse: "Anger, O goddess; sing the anger of Achilles!" In a way, then, anger is the first word in the written literature of the West. Is the *Iliad* the place to start a book on the topic? Many modern commentators think so. Indeed, Emily Katz Anhalt asserts that we need to read Greek myths like the *Iliad* precisely to overcome our own angry predilections: Homer's depiction of the horrors that flowed from the anger of Achilles will teach us to resist the violent times in which we live.¹

But Achilles' anger, however useful to study, was not the same as ours. It was not even the same as all ancient Greek anger, for which there were at least two words, two meanings, and thus, presumably, two sensations. Our own anger is a product of history. Potentially, it does include the sort of anger Homer sang about, but it embraces as well numerous other traditions of feeling, some of the most important of which are covered in this book.

That is why I prefer not to start with the *Iliad*. I'd rather begin with my own story and then look back.

When I was about three years old, I had a beloved rubber baby doll. It could swallow water, then dribble and pee—endlessly fascinating. I loved that doll fiercely. But I would also hide behind the living room sofa and beat it soundly, pummeling it with my fists. I clearly remember the turning point: I heard my mother say to a visitor, "That girl has a lot



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of anger in her.” I knew she was talking about me. I stopped; I was ashamed. What was this anger that I had a lot of?

I had plenty of models of anger in my childhood, though not for what I was doing to that poor doll. No one but she was beaten up in my house. But my parents fought a lot—making for many other times when I (and my sister) hid behind the sofa. Apart from arguing, my father fumed about his job and his boss. My mother, meanwhile, a budding artist, listened to her mother and my father, who told her she should not have a profession; she should stay at home and take care of the kids. She bickered every day with her mother (not just about that) over the telephone. She was angry when she did housework, which she detested. And since nevertheless she spent every day dusting the furniture, she was almost always angry.

It would be easy to say that I “had a lot of anger in me” because I saw and experienced it everywhere around me. I could even explain away the times when I get angry today by blaming my childhood experiences. Most of us do that, at least occasionally, holding our parents largely responsible for who we are. Then again, I might not want to reproach my parents but rather argue that I “had lots of anger” because people are born with lots of anger—it’s a hard-wired, universal emotion, present in primates, useful for survival, separate from reason, and passed along to human beings in their DNA.

These are insights into my anger—and probably yours as well. But they are inadequate. Let’s tackle the DNA argument first because, if it’s true, if we are “programmed” to feel anger, then we need know nothing more, least of all the topics covered in this book. But “anger” does not come pre-loaded in the human psyche. When we begin life, we have no such word and no such well-defined feeling. The fact that some cultures have no exact equivalent notion should alert us to the problems inherent in this pseudo-evolutionary approach—pseudo-evolutionary because nowadays scientists have discovered that DNA is subject to change and that evolution may take place very quickly, even within one generation. Nothing is so hard-wired that it is immune to change.



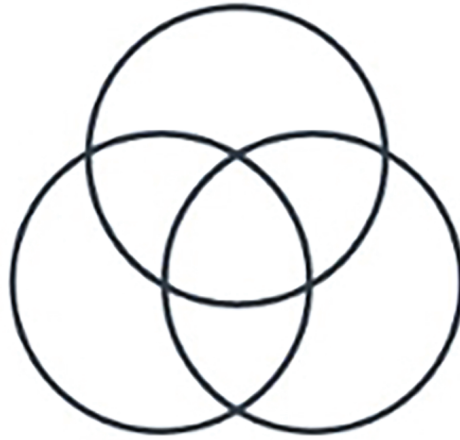
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Neuropsychologist Lisa Feldman Barrett points out that insofar as we humans are programmed, we are programmed to *learn*. Our brain is a mediator and a thermostat: it constantly monitors sensations from both within and outside of us, tries to make sense of them, and works to create the bodily states that are conducive to our survival. When we are babies, we don't know what to make of various sensations. But when the people around us talk and behave in certain ways that they call "angry," we start to lump together a variety of feelings and practices under that rubric. Our real "hard-wiring" comes from this sort of knowledge: we lay down the wires as we negotiate life in a particular household, school, and neighborhood, picking up cues. When people in our environment call certain feelings anger and when they label punching a rubber doll or fuming at a boss "anger," then we start to have a name for our feelings and those of others. But in societies where words are different, where feelings and behaviors are evaluated otherwise and cut at alternative joints, people may have names for very different sets of observations by that monitor that is our brain. The feelings that *we* call anger may be combined with others that *we* call shame or sorrow or shame *and* sorrow, and they may be given a name that doesn't quite correspond to any English emotion word. Anger is the Anglo-American term, but it is not universal.

That takes care of the DNA argument for the moment. The one about our upbringing is more complicated. Certainly, our childhood environment helps explain our later emotional life. But our parents were themselves shaped by *their* parents, by *their* upbringing. Nor do we or they live in a vacuum. We all live in what I call emotional communities. Let me sketch here what I mean by the term; in the course of this book, its meaning should gradually become clearer.

Emotional communities are groups that share the same or very similar norms and values about emotional behavior and even about feelings themselves. Think of a Venn diagram (Figure 1), in which the circles represent different emotional communities existing at the same

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1 A Venn diagram of emotional communities



time. Each community favors some emotions and shuns others; each expresses its emotions in certain characteristic ways. At certain points, however, they may intersect.

Now please stop thinking of the Venn diagram, for it has at least four drawbacks. First, it makes all the circles equal. Second, it suggests that each circle is closed even though, to the contrary, emotional communities are open and porous, able to adapt and change and even at times to merge. Third, alternatively, they may be entirely separate, or as separate as they can make themselves. Fourth, the Venn diagram doesn't envision a larger circle engulfing all—or at least most—of the others. Consider my own family. When I was growing up, we belonged to a striving lower middle-class, urban, Jewish emotional community. We were a definite minority, even within the Jewish community, because we rejected organized, synagogue-based religion. At the same time, my family intersected at certain points with larger emotional communities, especially the one represented as an ideal of familial togetherness on television. And yet, again simultaneously, both my parents were part of an overarching intellectual community, represented above all by the University of Chicago, which both had attended and which at that time was seen as a bastion of high-minded thought.



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When my mother called me “angry,” she was being both rational and emotional. She was making an “objective” observation, true; but behind it was a feeling—in this case one of disapproval. There is no hard line between reason and emotion. We speak and think and participate in things because of some motive—because we want to or hate to or are forced to or need to do so. Our emotions in such cases may be pretty tepid; they may be hidden, but they are working away—they must be, because they are a product of our constantly monitoring and mediating brain.

And not just our brains. The brain is in vogue these days, but its relevance to our emotions has been recognized only quite recently. According to many earlier thinkers, emotions were in the “mind,” which was the equivalent of the soul, and often the soul and its emotions were in the liver, the gut, or (most often) the heart. Some modern scientists are rediscovering the validity of those ancient views, as we ourselves recall in our day-to-day encounters, when we talk casually about our heart as the abode of our feelings: My heart is heavy; My heart is full of love; My heart skipped a beat. Our whole bodies are involved in our emotions and the ways we think about them. For anger: I blew my top; She is getting on my nerves; He was ready to have a cow. No one sends a brain image on Valentine’s day, and there is good reason why the emojis for love are  and  rather than brain scans.

We are bodies and minds. And just as our bodies are trained—to bow in silent prayer, to run marathons, to sit quietly at our desks in school—so too our minds are trained to know and respond to certain kinds of emotions, to approve of some, and to censure others. I learned from my mother what she thought anger was. I understood that pummeling a doll was not the right—the approved—way to express it, and I figured out how it should be expressed in my family’s emotional community, namely volubly and dramatically, with an admixture of grief.

I learned otherwise when I got married and discovered a very different notion of anger in my husband’s emotional community. It was political, not personal; it was righteous, not self-pitying. Did learning that anger



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ought to be directed against a “system” rather than at a person really change the way I felt? Yes. But this isn’t just my story. We are all guided by ideas, and I mean not just what philosophers propound (indeed, perhaps that least of all) but what all sorts of people who matter to us say. Many of us care about whether our anger is justified, whether it can and should be expressed against those whom we love, whether it is okay to rage against the driver who is honking his horn behind us, and so on. These are questions about the sorts of anger that are “acceptable,” and, as Peter and Carol Stearns showed more than thirty years ago, the answers to those questions have changed over time. The Stearnses called their study of changing standards “emotionology.” Even if anger were universal (which it isn’t), the ways in which it is supposed to be expressed, suppressed, eliminated, sublimated, or directed have been subject to constant transformation. Yes, there is a delay between the time that people are interested enough in a new standard to read about it (or hear about it in sermons or learn about it from a therapist or on radio or in a blog), and its implementation in “real life.” But eventually there is an effect, and it can be profound. We shall see throughout this book the interplay between *thoughts* and *theories* about anger and angry *behaviors* in daily life.

The emotionology informing my mother’s “she’s got a lot of anger in her” came not from her DNA but her own emotional community, a mixture of the notions, standards, and practices of Jewish immigrants from East European shtetls; the tide of Freudian psychoanalytic assumptions that hit the United States after World War II and to which my family adhered with the fervor of converts; the domestic settings of sit-coms on TV, and more. The “more” is what this book is about. If I am to understand my own anger—and you yours—we need to explore its many possibilities, including the probability that “it” exists only as a convenient word that covers a great variety of feelings. That is why I offer here no handy definition of anger.

We need to know about how anger functions and has functioned in emotional communities other than our own; how some of these



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communities rose and fell and even so are still around us—in writings, in attitudes, in the practices and teachings of some groups.

Anger seems easy enough to understand. All of us think we know when we are angry, and we are pretty sure we can recognize anger in others as well. But these assumptions are far from true. Within our (and their) anger lurk whole realms of meaning. In the course of this book, we shall see various sorts of angers and many diverse attitudes about them. All are potentially available to us. Indeed, divergent notions of anger—and various feelings of rage, irritation, resentment, frustration—jostle together within us, our families, our neighborhoods, and beyond. Some of us worry that our many angers—so profoundly delightful, horrible, frightening, and powerful—will tear apart our delicate social fabric. But in part that is because we have simplified a very complicated matter by labeling so many different feelings and behaviors “angry.” This book teases out the particulars and, in so doing, aims to give us a new perspective on ourselves and our era.



ANGER REJECTED PART 1

ANGER REJECTED (ALMOST) ABSOLUTELY



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I knew I was doing something wrong behind the couch; the tone of my mother's voice told me so. Some 2,500 years ago, the Buddha would have agreed that my anger was wrong—indeed, wrong-headed and self-destructive. It was also, he would have noted, ruinous for another, my doll, ultimately making it doubly self-damaging, for I was attached to that doll as we are all (opines the Buddha) attached to one another, even to those whom we hate.

From the *Tipitaka* (Three Baskets), the collection of Buddhist canonical texts in the Pali language, we know that however much the Buddha would have concurred in censuring my anger, he would not have approved of my singling it out, as if it were separate from all the other afflictions—poisons, really—that prevented me from “awakening” and thereby freeing myself from the endless cycle of rebirths (or, more correctly, repeated deaths) that condemned me to perpetual suffering. For life, all life, everyone's life, means suffering. Not that there are no pleasures; there are plenty of those. Even anger has its pleasures. But anger's joys, like all the rest, are fleeting, uncertain, and therefore unsatisfying.

Anger (*kodha* in Pali; *krodha* in Sanskrit) belongs to one set of mental afflictions, the one compassed by the larger mental category “hatred.” In our own society we carefully separate hatred from anger. A “hate crime” in our legal system is worse than one committed for almost every other





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motive. By contrast, a crime committed in sudden rage is in fact *less* culpable than others, as if its perpetrator were “beside” herself, helpless in the face of her passion.

But the Buddha was not interested in such fine distinctions. He was intent on detaching people from the world and its fleeting pleasures and enduring pains. And so he made anger a form of hatred, and he identified just two other troublesome mental tendencies apart from hatred: desire and delusion. Even those categories were too many, for all have the same effect. They attach us to the world. We are chained to the things that we desire, even though they will inevitably decay and fall to dust. We are enslaved by our ideas, which are in fact delusions and misguided assumptions about what is right and wrong, partial yet dearly held notions of reality. Finally, we are fettered by our hatreds, which arise from our egoistical notions of ourselves: we are proud, we nurse our wounds, and we fail to recognize that we are part of a larger whole that includes all sentient beings. Anger is the bitter fruit of our self-regard.

These things imprison us, but they need not do so. We are responsible for our own chains. We cling to our desires, delusions, and hostilities toward others as if they were precious possessions. In truth, they are the sources of all our unhappiness. And because they belong to us, we can reject them. “Abandon anger” commands the Buddha. Anger is our desire to assert ourselves; it is a distress that grows out of our relationship with the world. “Abandon anger”: the admonition is an absolute. There is no occasion on which anger is right or even appropriate. It can never be right because anger is as self-destructive as it is destructive of others. The angry person suffers; they are full of painful afflictions that torment their mind. If we enter into that mind-set, meeting that anger with our own, we suffer as well. When we get angry, we have missed our opportunity to care about the suffering of another. We have lost our hard-fought battle against our own ego and our dearly won prize of compassion for others:





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Whoever doesn't flare up
at someone who's angry wins a battle
hard to win.¹

The battle is won by patience. On the surface, this seems parallel to Christian patience: did not Christ say, "Turn the other cheek"? But the meaning of patience is rather different in the two traditions. Christ accepted his torments patiently in order to redeem mankind from the original sin of Adam and Eve. For the Christian believer, turning the other cheek means following in the footsteps of Christ and reaping the rewards of eternal and beatific life with God. The Buddha had a somewhat different purpose in mind: patiently bearing pain meant relieving both one's own suffering and that of the tormentor. In the Vepacitti Sutta (a *sutta*, or in Sanskrit *sutra*, is a discourse attributed to the Buddha), the Buddha tells a story about an ancient war between the demons and the gods. When Vepacitti, the chief demon, is captured and brought before the ruler of the gods, he spews forth a string of curses. The ruler is unmoved. One of his servants, frustrated with the ruler's seeming passivity, accuses him of weakness. In reply, the god praises patience as the virtue of the strong. Patience is curative, he says, healing both the offender and the offended at the same time.

Is anger not justified when someone threatens your life? Not even then, says one of the Buddha's parables: if "bandits were to carve you up savagely, limb by limb, with a two-handed saw," should you get angry? By no means. Having trained yourself to put aside greed and distress, you will say nothing in anger. Rather you will feel compassion toward the bandits; your mind will be full of good will. Aware of your connectedness to the bandits, you will "keep pervading" them with your benevolence, which you will extend even further, toward the entire world.² The first of the "five faultless gifts" of the Buddha is not to kill. This is considered an inviolable precept, but there are ways around it, as we shall see.





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In the context of fifth- and fourth-century BCE India, where he lived and taught, the Buddha's doctrines were quite moderate. Indeed, they were a "middle way" compared to the extreme discipline advocated by many of the other religious wanderers who, like the Buddha, were rebelling against an increasingly powerful and entrenched political and religious elite. The dissatisfaction of these religious seekers implicitly critiqued the Brahman priestly class, specialists in ritual rather than ethical lives. The dissident strivers broke away, becoming renunciants who left home and ordinary attachments, lived on alms, and debated with one another. They elaborated a great variety of approaches to life and the afterlife. Siddhartha Gautama, who became the Buddha, tried extreme asceticism—no food, no sleep—but found the results unenlightening. Only after he rejected that path did he become the Buddha (deriving from *budh-*, to awaken from delusions, to understand; and related to *bodhi-*, perfect knowledge). His new, middle way of life stressed a healthy body and a calm and joyful mind. After attaining this understanding, he returned to the monks who had followed him in his earlier phase, outlining a series of precepts that emphasized asceticism tempered by moderation.

In general, the practices cultivated by Buddhists—both laypeople and monks—involve forms of meditation. Chanting is one. It involves repeating key Buddhist teachings over and over, in a low voice with tiny variations of pitch and rhythm. Another, normally guided by a teacher, begins with mental exercises. The method commences simply with breathing in and out, focusing on just that act, aware of the length of our breath, long or short. Then it moves to breathing in and out "sensitive to the entire body," as the Buddha put it. "Sensitive" here means that we widen our focus, still concentrating intensely on our breath but adding equal attention to our body "in and of itself." This last phrase is crucial: it means focusing on how our body moves and feels, but not on how it appears to the world. If we keep that focus, we are mindful. From sensitivity to the body, still breathing in and out, the meditator turns





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(perhaps after weeks, perhaps after months) to the other foci: feelings, mind, mental qualities. In all of these, the focus is “ardent, alert, and mindful—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world.”³

Such practices were available to lay Buddhists. There were more detailed and specific rules for monks and nuns. Nuns were especially hedged about by rules, many involving ways for them to show deference to the male monks—by bowing and so on. In some places, nuns and monks lived together in one compound, while in others they lived (and live) in separate communities. When monks or nuns got angry, they were expected to make full acknowledgment of the fault, either privately—in the presence of the Buddha or his image—or at a bimonthly ceremony. Thus, “should any monk, angered and displeased, give a blow to [another] monk, it is to be confessed.”⁴ Speaking helped exorcize the demon.

Let us return to the command to abandon anger. It was but the first line of a much longer versified sutta. The first verse goes as follows:

Abandon anger
be done with conceit
get beyond every fetter.
When for name and form you have no attachment
—having nothing at all—
no sufferings, no stresses, invade.⁵

Unpacking these lines allows us in effect to sum up the Buddhist philosophy and program. *Abandon anger* is not so much a command or a wish as it is one half of a promise: *If you abandon anger, then suffering and stress will no longer invade you.* The next line, *be done with conceit*, elaborates on what it means to be angry. Conceit is pride, the vanity of our ego, which imprisons us within our preconceptions, our received categories. We don't see or think about things as they are but rather as we have learned to think about them—not only during this life but also





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in the course of our nearly endless cycles of deaths and births. We are, as the next line says, “fettered” by the tangled web of our notions. They are part of us, part of our (false) sense of identity.

We can escape our chains. But that will happen only when we observe the things that we sense and think about them in a new way, seeing how things appear and how they pass away, recognizing their allures and their drawbacks, refusing to be ensnared by them.⁶ Through meditative practices, we achieve *no attachment*. Not all of us can manage that in this life; perhaps we will be reborn many times, perhaps just once more to become fully “awake.” That is the ultimate achievement, when *no sufferings, no stresses, invade*: it is nirvana.

The essential insight of Buddhism is the recognition that life is suffering—endless misery through countless deaths and rebirths—unless the cycle is broken by means of a new way of perceiving, a new approach to thoughts and feelings, and a new practice of living. Anger is rejected absolutely. Even if bandits are ready to cut you up, you will not get angry but will “remain sympathetic, with a mind of good will, and with no inner hate.”⁷ The first of the Buddha’s faultless gifts is not to kill—not any sentient being, not even insects.



And yet these very precepts have led many Buddhist schools to embrace war and murder, often as forms of “compassionate violence.” From the start, the Buddha was supported by various kings, and ever since that time, Buddhist rulers have generally been exempted from its strictures on violence. For example, an early Sinhalese chronicle recorded the bloody—and successful—battle of a sixth-century Buddhist king against an invading army. The king was penitent, but eight enlightened monks told him that the deed was “no hindrance” to his progress toward nirvana. The men he had killed were “of evil life [. . .] not more to be esteemed than beasts.”⁸ The moral was two-pronged: the enemies were





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non-Buddhists and therefore of little virtue; and the king was acting out of “pure intentions” in his bid to save the Buddhists under his rule.

Nor was killing with “the right intentions” the prerogative of the ruler alone. Buddhists were allowed to murder if their motives were virtuous. According to the Mahayana Scriptures—followed by many in East and South Asia—Buddhists may kill people if their minds are empty of bad thoughts and feelings. Even better is to kill out of compassion. The concept of “skillful means” excuses an otherwise evil deed. In the *Upayakausalya* (Skill in Means) sutra, the Buddha is said to have been a ship’s captain in an earlier life. In a dream, he learns from the ocean gods that an evil robber on board his boat plans to rob and kill all the five hundred other passengers. The deities tell him that “these five hundred merchants are all progressing toward supreme, right and full awakening; [. . .] If [the robber] should kill [them], the fault—the obstacle caused by the deed—would cause [the robber] to burn in the great hells for as long as it takes each one of these [merchants] to achieve supreme, right and full awakening, consecutively.” After a week “plunged deep into thought,” the captain/Buddha realizes that if he were to report his dream to the merchants, “they would kill and slay him with angry thoughts and all go to the great hells themselves.” But if he himself did the killing, he alone would endure the pains of hell. He stabbed the robber “with great compassion and skill in means.” As a result, the robber “died to be reborn in a world of paradise,” the five hundred merchants went on to become enlightened, and the captain suffered not eons in the great hells but rather a painful thorn in his foot.⁹

The idea that killing a bad person may be a form of compassion was further developed in Vajrayana Scriptures, which sometimes saw killing as “liberating” the unvirtuous from the consequences of their bad actions (karma). When Tibetan king Lang Darma was assassinated by Buddhists in 841, the act was justified as a liberation not only for the Buddhists suffering under Darma’s rule, but also for him, since it prevented him from doing further evil. Such ideas were supplemented by myths about



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wicked demons defeated and killed and then reborn as Buddhism's protectors.

Tantric Buddhism was particularly forgiving of violence once poisonous emotions were conquered. It created an elaborate pantheon of deities, both male and female, to help people learn mental control and achieve Buddhahood in one lifetime—a very fast track, indeed. For tantric Buddhists distressed by anger, there were “wrathful” deities (the males were called *Herukas*, the females *Dakinis*). Sporting hideous, seemingly rage-filled faces, they were nevertheless said to be anger-free. (See Plate 1.) Releasing tantric practitioners of their uncertainties, incomprehension, and mental turmoil, they displayed anger's grisly effects. Yet, as they trampled corpses beneath their feet, they evoked the glory of victory. The tantra known as Kalacakra celebrates a cosmic war between a bodhisattva king and a Muslim army: the king's forces annihilate the barbarians, destroy Islam, and re-establish Buddhism. Composed in the eleventh century, the story represents a Buddhist fantasy of retaliation against the contemporary Muslim invaders of northern India. Many of these violent traditions continue today, sometimes reinforced by nationalist fervor and Western myths of racial purity. We know that today Myanmar villagers join the military in killing, raping, and expelling Rohingya Muslims from their homes. We shall explore the contemporary situation in Myanmar in greater detail in the final chapter of this book.



In the West today, Buddhism has been imported with suitable adaptations. Vietnamese, now French, monk Thich Nhat Hanh, for example, writes books to inspire readers in the West with the sort of Buddhism that can be incorporated into the ordinary work week. He begins a book on anger with the story of a Catholic woman who, within a very short time, learned mindful meditation and compassion and healed her marriage, which had been roiled by anger and recrimination.¹⁰





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Nhat Hanh gives laypeople counsel—from “eat healthy foods” to “do not spread fake news”—and offers a procedure for abandoning anger: make an appointment to confess your rage to the one who has apparently caused it. In the meantime, meditate so that you come to recognize that both you and your “enemy” are suffering. In the end, you should want to apologize. This is “caring for anger.”

In most Western emotional communities today, certain forms of anger are accepted, even lauded, while others are shunned. For much of history, as we shall see, the wrong forms have been considered problems to be solved by self-control rather than, as the Buddha would have it, by revising our interpretation of reality. But recently some psychologists have recognized “inappropriate”—that is, socially unacceptable—or chronic anger as a psychological problem that requires outside intervention and treatment.

A Buddhist therapist like C. Peter Bankart adapts the Buddhist idea of suffering to help people today overcome their anger. In a chapter of a book edited by Eva Feindler that offers various therapeutic approaches to anger management, Bankart considers how he would treat the anger of “Anthony M.”¹¹ A summary of Anthony’s case history is offered here, as it will come up several times again in the course of this book as we compare treatment methods.

ANTHONY M.’S CASE HISTORY

“A 48-year-old white male of Italian descent and a non-practicing Roman Catholic,” Anthony sought treatment when his increasingly intense moments of fury seemed likely to estrange him from his wife and daughters. While recognizing that his anger was directed particularly at those whom he loved, he also became enraged when people or events frustrated his hopes and expectations. He had had an “embarrassing incident” just before seeking treatment: while coaching his daughter’s softball team, he became furious at the girls’ “lack of competitive drive,” yelled at them, drove some to tears, and threw a





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bat at the backstop. Parents witnessing his behavior called for his resignation as coach, and he himself felt “ashamed.”

When he was young, Anthony’s mother often hit him and was generally unsupportive and distant. When he was seven years old, an uncle began to abuse him sexually, a practice that continued over the course of five or six years. As a teenager, he was (in his words) “hyper masculine,” a champion swimmer and talented football player. However, he lost an athletic scholarship to college because he got into a fight with a teenager at a bar, and, although he attended college, he never finished his degree. Chronically out of work, Anthony resented the fact that his wife was the main wage-earner in the family.

A Western Buddhist, Bankart has seen a number of men like Anthony and has considered ways to adjust Buddhist ideas to their problems. No longer stressing the cycle of deaths and rebirths, Bankart focuses not on the suffering inherent in life itself but rather on the pains caused by mental disease. Like all the other contributors to Feindler’s book, Bankart has not met Anthony; his discussion is purely theoretical. Nevertheless, it provides a good idea of how Buddhism may be a therapeutic tool.

Bankart begins by observing that Anthony’s suffering is tied to his desires and attachments. At first Anthony will be convinced that his anger is justified: he will say that he raged at the girls at the softball game because they were acting as if they didn’t care about it; their nonchalance was “profoundly wrong.” But Bankart will point out to Anthony that “he was mindlessly and selfishly attached to his desire to have the world the way he wanted it to be.” This, according to Bankart, is part of a more general issue: Anthony’s “desire to be right, respected, and obeyed.” Anthony, in Bankart’s view, is fettered by his greed for recognition and unaware that he is connected to others and therefore bound to feel compassion for both them and himself.



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Bankart's role is above all to "model" this compassion, to suffer and rejoice along with Anthony. He will insist that Anthony neither despair nor find excuses for himself but rather realize that his anger is a poison, a "corrosive outer layer," around his heart. Within, Anthony has a "Buddha nature" (one of love and compassion); he has only to break through the hard shell of his egotism. But how? Bankart incorporates Buddhist practices into a meditative exercise program. It begins with several short sessions during the day. These focus at first simply on breathing, then they add the body—concentrating on its movements, balance, ability to stretch, sensations of touch, sight, taste, and so on. The meditation gradually embraces thoughts: as Anthony becomes aware of them, especially as he becomes fully conscious of his erroneous belief that he is morally in the right, Bankart will tell him to keep a journal and be in constant touch with Bankart himself by phone and email. This is how Anthony will slowly shed his former attachments. Bankart is sensitive to the cultural values that keep Anthony in fetters; angry men in the American subcommunity of which Anthony is a part, cling to "absolutist rules about 'right' and 'wrong'" and invoke numerous abstract principles to justify them. They are convinced they must live up to manly standards, which, in accord with American culture, tend to privilege violence. Men in Anthony's emotional community distrust all authorities apart from themselves, putting a premium on rugged individualism, heroic righteousness, and on supermen who "stand up for what is right." They feel victimized and enraged when others disagree with them. All too often, they need to control what in fact does not need to be controlled. Their anger, Bankart concludes, is a mixture of the three poisons: they are greedy for mastery and obedience, hostile to those unwilling or unable to follow them, and delusional about reality.

Within the "sanctuary" offered by the therapeutic space, Bankart will ask Anthony to add to his practices of mindfulness a ten-step program. It begins with asking Anthony to reflect on the authoritarian rhetoric that he has hitherto made his own. "The entire gender-package of masculine anger



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must be uncovered and processed in therapy.” Then Anthony should move on to see the habitual patterns he has practiced: stridently disagreeing with others, challenging them, experiencing disappointment, and then becoming enraged. He must accept, at least intellectually, that (as the Buddha says) anger not only hurts others but is self-destructive. The rest of the therapy works to create new habits, having Anthony practice acts of kindness rather than confrontation, and asking him to enjoy the resultant pleasure of others. Eventually, Anthony should circle back to his childhood, transforming its pain into the protection of those he loves; he should heal himself by forgiving his abusers.

For Bankart, anger has no good use, no ethical justification. He echoes the Buddha’s “Abandon anger.” To the objection that anger is part of human nature, he would reply that human nature—true human nature—is “Buddha nature.” What we ordinarily consider natural must be transformed and *may* be transformed through the insight that life is suffering and by practicing mindful meditation.



What is anger? A definition for all time makes no sense. Like all emotions, anger cannot be seen under a microscope or manipulated with an instrument. It is known only by observing how people define it and what they imagine are its causes and effects—perhaps insults, raised voices, elevated blood pressure, oxygenation in certain areas of the brain. What “counts” as anger varies with the emotional community, as does the way in which it is judged. My mother concluded that I was “angry” because I punched my doll. I was sure that my parents were angry when they argued with each other. My mother disapproved of my behavior, and I was very scared and uncomfortable with theirs. But no one in my emotional community suggested that we should “abandon anger.” Indeed, there was a sense in which arguments “cleared the air,” and even hitting my doll was thought to do some good in that it “got the anger





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out,” as if anger were a gas or a noxious food that I had to expel. Expressing anger was much better than “repression,” a term popularized by Freud, who postulated that repression was responsible for mental disorders.

For the Buddha, however, discomfort, disapproval, approval, getting things off your chest—these were not the issues at all. Anger meant suffering. It was not to be “expelled” or “repressed” but rather transcended. It was a matter of ego. Since we are all interconnected, we must give up this “ego.” In the story of Vepacitti, the Buddha’s model was a “teflon” god who refused to be harmed or to harm in return; in the parable of the two-handled saw, the exemplar meets his own dismemberment with sympathy and good will.

When dealing with anger today in the United States, a therapist like Bankart finds it necessary to adapt Buddhist philosophy to a certain sub group in American culture that valorizes anger, seeing it as “masculine” and righteous. But he does not veer from the Buddhist position that anger in *any* form is bound to make both the enraged and his object suffer.

The Buddhists who killed King Lang Darma in the ninth century did not think that they were angry. Instead, they were part of a long tradition of non-angry violence. But there are many Buddhist schools, many Buddhist emotional communities. Not all are convinced that murder may be justified. Today in Myanmar, even as the persecutions of the Rohingya continue, some villages cultivate Buddhist-Rohingya cooperation. In 2014 a Buddhist abbot, U Witthuda, opened the gate of his monastery to hundreds of Muslims fleeing violent clashes in central Myanmar. Soon a hostile crowd gathered outside, demanding the refugees be handed over. The abbot replied, “I am helping those people who are in trouble. [. . .] If you want to get them you have to kill me first. I can’t bring them out.”¹² The group retreated.





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There are many Buddhisms. One version says that all killing comes from anger and is bad. Another justifies anger and violence in the name of Buddhism's survival. Still others teach that killing is sometimes, if committed without anger, a form of compassion. In Myanmar, as the incident with abbot U Witthuda shows, people may hesitate as they confront the discordant convictions and clashing emotional norms that uneasily co-exist within Buddhism. "Abandon anger" is a Buddhist absolute, but what it means in any given circumstance is open to interpretation.

