

## *Chapter 7*

# **Anger and the Oppressed: Indo-Tibetan Buddhist Perspectives**

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When the radical feminist philosopher bell hooks met Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, she immediately told him how angry she was: angry about her relationship with her male partner, angry about the particularly frustrating set of racist and sexist encounters she faced on her way to that very meeting. She was unsure what a Buddhist teacher (“Mr. Calm, Mr. Peace himself” hooks called him) would make of her anger. Hanh responded, “Hang onto that anger and use it as compost for your garden.” This response to hooks’s anger, which made her feel “as if one thousand rays of light were shining throughout [her] being,” gave her confidence to begin the difficult work of dealing with her troubled relationship (hooks 2016). “If we think of anger as compost,” she writes, “we think of it as energy that can be recycled in the direction of our good. It is an empowering force. If we don’t think about it that way, it becomes a debilitating and destructive force” (hooks 2015).

Although Buddhist philosophical ethics is best known as being staunchly anti-anger, and for some good reasons (see the *Some Buddhist Views of Anger* section), there are other influential threads in these traditions that offer more nuanced approaches to understanding anger, for example, Hanh’s “anger as compost” view or the contemporary Tibetan Buddhist teacher Mingyur Rinpoche’s advice to “make friends with your anger,” which includes practices designed to develop nonjudgmental awareness of anger and a genuine appreciation of its power (Mingyur 2007). These more nuanced views—that do not fall squarely into either “pro-anger” or “anti-anger” camps—are not modern inventions, although they may have gained in popularity as Buddhism engages more with Western cultures that tend to value some forms of anger. In this chapter, I present a 10th-century Buddhist model of anger that argues for the transformation—or, more precisely, the metabolization—of

anger for the sake of the liberation from suffering of self and others. I locate this view in the Indian Buddhist master Dharmaraksita's texts *Wheel Weapon That Strikes the Enemy's Vital Point* and *Poison-Destroying Peacock Mind Training* (Sopa 2001).

I examine anger in the context of oppressive systems, from the point of view of those disadvantaged by those systems: anger about one's own oppression. (Although anger is certainly present among those privileged by those same systems, that anger will not be the focus here.) One reason for this focus is that those living under oppressive systems have frequent occasions for anger and so have to make sense of and experiment with that anger in constructive ways. As Black feminist Audre Lorde said, "My response to racism is anger. I have lived with that anger, ignoring it, feeding upon it, learning to use it before it laid my visions to waste, for most of my life" (2007: 124). Anger in some form, including fear of anger, is a part of everyday life for many members of oppressed groups. Second, because of the frequency with which anger-provoking events arise in the context of oppression, members of oppressed groups will be particularly vulnerable to the psychological and moral burdens of any view on anger, whether it is pro-anger or anti-anger. One of the guiding assumptions of my inquiry into anger is that we should, in our theorizing, take seriously the burdens both of anger and of its extirpation for members of oppressed groups. This would mean that we judge the moral value (or disvalue) of anger not only on whether it is justified, whether it provides insight, or whether it motivates positive social change; we must also judge based on whether our view on anger can promote healing, flourishing, and moral excellence for members of oppressed groups who are so frequently exposed to anger-provoking situations in their lives.

I pause here to respond to one possible objection to my claim that moral theories should take seriously the psychological and moral burdens implied by moral prescriptions, especially those borne by members of oppressed groups. We might think, contra Aristotle and others, that it is not at all clear that morality or virtue is constitutive of personal flourishing; in fact, we seem to have evidence that they can and do come apart. And if they do, it is the purview of morality to say what is right and wrong, not what is easy or difficult, so long as what is morally required is not physically or psychologically impossible.

I'm not arguing that the consideration of moral and psychological burden trumps all other considerations when evaluating ethical theories but rather that it should be considered as a criterion by which we judge our theories. I think this is especially true in the case of moral theorizing about anger, since the burdens fall in a perhaps unusually lopsided way. The kind of insight that Aristotle had in mind in his discussion of the virtue of proper anger, for example, was likely not the kind of political, social, and interpersonal

barrage of insults, ranging from micro-aggressions to physical violence, that members of oppressed groups regularly contend with (see Aristotle 2002, 1126a3–1126a9; Tessman 2005). It is my hope that seriously considering the burdens of moral prescriptions on members of oppressed groups will highlight some implicit assumptions about the relationship between anger and power that may be implicitly influencing our moral theories on anger.

I argue that a Buddhist tantric view of anger can speak meaningfully to the psychological and moral burdens of anger in ways that many Western pro-anger views and Western and Buddhist anti-anger views cannot. I begin with a brief discussion of the particular psychological and moral burdens associated with pro-anger and anti-anger views for members of oppressed groups (Double Binds and Double Burdens). I then introduce some influential approaches to anger in Indo-Tibetan Buddhist ethics, starting with the anti-anger views (Some Buddhist Views of Anger) and ending with Dharmarakṣita's tantric view (Tantric Anger), which I will illustrate with an extended example (Tantric Anger and Oppression: Examples). I conclude with an argument that the tantric view of anger can respond to the specific psychological and moral burdens borne by members of oppressed groups.

## DOUBLE BINDS AND DOUBLE BURDENS

Members of oppressed groups face a double bind with regard to anger, especially anger at one's own oppression. To become angry in response to one's own oppression exposes one to dangers, such as being overwhelmed by rage, experiencing negative effects on one's health and peace of mind, and being demonized by those who refuse to take up one's anger. But refraining from becoming angry at one's own oppression also exposes one to serious dangers, including repression or suppression, self-deception, and being written off as being complicit in one's own oppression. The spirit of this double bind extends to moral theorizing about anger at oppression. When looked at from the perspective of members of oppressed groups, the question "is anger at oppression justified (or good or helpful)?" is difficult to answer since there are serious psychological and moral burdens for answering both "yes" and "no" to this theoretical question (see Tessman 2005: chapter 6).

This double bind falls out of the definition of anger and the social, political, and psychological facts of oppression. There is broad consensus in Western and Buddhist philosophical traditions, as well as contemporary psychology, that anger arises in situations in which one perceives oneself (or someone one cares about) to have been wronged or unfairly denied in some way.<sup>1</sup> People who are oppressed are clearly wronged and unfairly denied, and the pervasiveness of oppressive systems means that these wrongs, especially the

more minor ones such as micro-aggressions, occur frequently, even multiple times a day. Because of the frequency of the wrongs done to members of oppressed groups, we have, in general, many more occasions for anger than the non oppressed.

How is the oppressed person supposed to make sense of these myriad occasions for anger in the context of his or her larger moral life? There are, broadly, two theoretical choices. One can accept anger at injustice as virtuous (or at least permissible). I call this basic stance the pro-anger view. Being pro-anger, as I will use it, means accepting that at least sometimes, in some situations, and for some duration, anger at oppression is justified and morally good or permissible. There are many motivations for this view, including the desire to seek conspicuous revenge (as Aristotle says), to take seriously the wrongs that are done and to hold wrongdoers accountable for those wrongs, to be open to the insights anger may bring, to show that one is self-respecting, and to motivate positive social change (see Cherry in preparation; Frye 1981; Spelman 1989; Lugones 1996; Lorde 2007; Bell 2009). One problem with this approach, from the perspective of a member of an oppressed group, is that the sheer frequency of experiences of injustice makes it so one may be angry nearly all the time. The Stoic philosopher Seneca recognized this problem: “The wise man will never cease to be angry, if once he begins, so full is every place of vices and crimes” (*De Ira* II.9). Being so frequently angry, even if justified, presents serious psychological and moral burdens on the oppressed person. Anger, particularly constant, low-grade anger, has negative effects on a person’s peace of mind, health, and relationships, all of which are integral to his or her well-being (Tessman 2005; Harmon-Jones and Harmon Jones 2016). It also may prevent other modes of engaging with a wrongdoer that may have been available to the agent if one was not primed for anger, such as compassion or humor. Being limited in one’s emotional repertoire can be a moral danger for the oppressed person.

The other option is to eliminate the anger by coming to see it as ultimately unjustified. This is not an immediately attractive option for many people, especially people who are already angry. For members of oppressed groups, there is a worry that giving up one’s anger is tantamount to giving up one’s survival strategy. As Audre Lorde writes, “My anger has meant pain to me but it has also meant survival, and before I give it up I’m going to be sure that there is something at least as powerful to replace it on the road to clarity” (2007: 132). But Stoic and some Buddhist philosophers have argued that, on deeper analysis, we will find our anger to be unjustified and that ultimately it is the extirpation of anger that will lead us “on the road to clarity” (see *Some Buddhist Views of Anger*; see also Epictetus 1998; Nussbaum 1994; Seneca 2010; McRae 2015b; Flanagan 2017).

There is, of course, much to be said about whether these Stoic-style arguments achieve their stated purpose of showing anger to be irrational (e.g., see Nussbaum 1994: chapter 11). But even if these arguments succeed in showing anger to always be a vice, there are significant burdens borne by oppressed people on this view, too. One danger arises from the difficulty discerning the extirpation of anger from its repression or suppression. In our (contemporary U.S.) society, anger is projected onto members of oppressed groups, even while the expression of genuine anger, if allowed at all, is expected to be politely tame. The anger of members of oppressed groups is often written off (e.g., the “irrational” anger of women) or demonized (the “threatening angry black man”) or both (the “crazy, scary, angry black woman”) (Frye 1981; Lugones 1996; Ahmed 2010). Since anger is at least in part communicative, happens in relationship, and requires some form of uptake, and since the uptake of oppressed people’s anger is routinely denied, oppressed people are faced with an extremely difficult psychological and moral task: How to abandon one’s anger with moral integrity in a society that did not take seriously one’s anger in the first place? Advising women, for example, to come to see their anger as ultimately unjustified, irrational, or bad would make many feminists bristle, since women’s supposed irrationality, and especially the irrationality of women’s anger, is one of the more pernicious oppressive stereotypes that feminism has worked to expose.

Even if this danger could be managed, there is another significant burden oppressed people face on the anti-anger view. Although there may be some people whose anger ceases on the deeper analysis recommended by Stoics and many Buddhists, for many of us, anger is more tenacious than that, especially anger at one’s own oppression. Overcoming anger requires significant psychological and moral effort. But given the frequency of insult and wrongdoing that people living under oppressive conditions face, the moral feat of not getting angry at injustice is required many times a day, a much higher frequency than for someone who is not oppressed. One is forced to take the moral high road every day and many times a day. This moral uplift can be admirable and inspiring (think Michelle Obama’s “When they go low, we go high” rhetoric), but the moral high road can also be lonely and exhausting. It places a double burden on the oppressed: the burden of oppression and the burden of near-constraint restraint. Of course, it could be that for some people refraining from anger is not experienced as a burden. Or it may be that with practice we can all learn to effortlessly avoid or abandon anger. This is presumably the hope of many Buddhist and Stoic sages. But in the many cases in which great effort is required to overcome anger, the anti-anger view implies that oppressed people face a much heavier moral and psychological load than the non oppressed.

Given these significant burdens, the double bind cannot be resolved by either the approach that counts anger at oppression among the virtues (or, at least, a morally permissible emotion) or the approach that argues for its elimination. Whatever answer we give to the question of whether anger at oppression is justified, oppressed people face significant extra burdens to their well-being and the possibility of their moral excellence. This suggests that we need to ask different questions about anger, at least in the context of anger at one's own oppression. What should we do about our anger at oppression? How should we think about our own anger in the broader narrative of our moral and spiritual lives? When is anger the best option (whether or not it is "justified") and when can it be abandoned for something better? If we can't sidestep the double bind of anger, can we manage it? Play it against itself? Transcend it? In what follows, I argue that the tantric view of anger helps more successfully navigate the double binds and double burdens of anger for members of oppressed groups.<sup>2</sup> I will begin by giving some context for the tantric view in the wider field of Buddhist ethics of anger.

### SOME BUDDHIST VIEWS OF ANGER

In general, Indo-Tibetan Buddhist ethics is deeply skeptical of anger; many of these ethicists considered it to be one of the worst vices, destroying not only our peace of mind and relationships but also the very roots of our virtue (see Cozort 1995; Tsongkhapa 2004). The eighth-century Indian saint and scholar Śāntideva famously argued against the appropriateness of anger in his classic treatise *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (*A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*) (see Bommarito 2011). He presents a wide variety of claims against anger: Anger makes you ugly and unlikeable (VI.4), anger causes unpleasant disruptions in interpersonal relationships (VI.6), anger makes you feel crazy and lose sleep (VI.3), anger is based on a confused notion of the self that cannot survive philosophical analysis (VI.22–31), anger is based on ignorance of the myriad causal connections that produced the anger-provoking event (including one's own role in that event) (VI.42–43), and anger is based on the mistaken idea that a wrongdoer is in control of his actions (VI.38–41).

In his commentary on Śāntideva's discussion of anger, the 14th-century Tibetan philosopher Tsongkhapa uses Śāntideva's arguments to show that anger is never justified. On his view, anger and other afflictions have three main causes: the object of the anger (who or what the anger is about), the subject of the anger (who feels the anger), and the basis of the anger (the background conditions—or "latent tendencies"—that dispose one to anger or patience). For Tsongkhapa, to say that the person one is angry at (the object) caused one's anger is misleading, since the one who feels anger (the subject)

is also at least causally implicated in the anger-provoking episode, a point he emphasizes with a quotation from Śāntideva: “His the knife, and mine the body—the twofold cause of suffering. He has grasped the knife, I my body. At which is there anger?” (VI.43). But anger also requires that certain background conditions be present, namely, the tendency to become angry. As we all know, one person may be able to shrug off what would infuriate someone else, a fact Tsongkhapa explains by pointing to different bases for the anger in different people.

Whether we look at anger from the point of view of the object cause, the subject cause, or the basis cause, Tsongkhapa argues that it is never justified. From the point of view of the subject cause, anger is not justified since one’s anger is at the object but not the subject, even though they are both causes of one’s suffering. Moreover, anger is harmful for the one who feels it, a fact that should motivate the subject of the anger to extirpate his or her anger (164). From the point of the view of the basis, anger is also unjustified because it is possible to strengthen, through practice, one’s commitment to patience and compassion, thus changing one’s tendencies and background dispositions (165). The trickiest arguments against anger are from the point of view of the object cause, the wrongdoer who has harmed us. Tsongkhapa gives several arguments here, drawing on Śāntideva’s arguments, namely that the wrongdoer lacks self-control (160–162), that the wrongdoer’s faults are only adventitious and so should not be the object of anger since they can be changed (162–163), and that the anger-provoking event is part of a longer, complicated causal chain that, when properly understood, would mitigate anger by revealing the inconsistencies of its application (163–164).

But there are also influential arguments in Buddhist ethics that complicate this straightforward anti-anger position. For example, in the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, a treatise on the stages of the path to moral and spiritual perfection, the fourth-century Indian Buddhist philosophy Asanga discusses several exceptions to the “never anger” rule. Although he is clearly against “pain-passing” anger, for example scolding someone because that person scolded you or criticizing someone because that person criticized you, other anger-associated behaviors require more subtle analysis. For example, although, in general, an aspiring *bodhisattva* should accept an apology from someone who has harmed him or her, he or she need not accept if that apology is insincere. Asanga even claims that, although allowing one’s anger to remain unchecked is always what he calls an “afflicted [moral] offense,” there is no offense in the case of the *bodhisattva* “who has developed that aspiration to abandon [this fault]” and is “committed to resisting [the fault] by adopting [its] antidote but who still repeatedly generates [it] because he or she is naturally overcome by strong mental afflictions” (I.10.2.10.2). The idea seems to be that the moral value or disvalue of anger, and other afflictions, is best understood in the

larger context of a person's moral and spiritual commitments, goals, and practices. If we are committed to overcoming our anger and doing the hard work of trying to understand how it fits into our moral and spiritual lives, then the disvalue of an angry outburst is less than what it would be for reactive, uncritical anger.

Even Śāntideva suggests that the disvalue of certain afflictions is not as obvious as we might assume, at least in cases in which afflictions are used to combat other afflictions (VI.54). In an unusual set of verses (VI.55–62), Śāntideva seems to distinguish between real afflictions, such as pride and desire, and more refined or virtuous states that seem similar to the affliction. “Those beings conquered by pride,” he tells us, “are wretches with no pride!” (VI.56). These wretches are conquered by an afflictive pride (a delusional sense of superiority) and so, paradoxically, have no “virtuous” pride (confidence in their potential for liberation that is grounded in the understanding of the equality of members of the moral community). It is interesting that Śāntideva uses the same word, “pride,” to describe both states, suggesting that the boundaries between afflictive and nonafflictive mental states may require phenomenological sophistication and subtlety to sort out. He makes a similar remark about desire, another core affliction on the Buddhist view, claiming that “one should be intoxicated by that task [of liberation], insatiable, like someone hankering for the pleasure and fruit of love-play” (VII.62). In a surprising move, one is repurposing one's desire, even one's erotic desire, for the sake of liberation. The idea seems to be that we can use our afflictions, or at least something like affliction, to develop our moral agency, even though, ultimately, afflictions limit the exercise of our moral agency. This is one of the fundamental features of a tantric approach to afflictive emotionality. The remainder of this chapter is devoted to explaining this apparently paradoxical claim.

## TANTRIC ANGER

Śāntideva does not use anger as an example in these passages; he does not, for example, say “Those beings conquered by anger are wretches with no anger!” But some later tantric Buddhist ethicists do apply this idea of using affliction against affliction to the case of anger. In tantric Buddhism afflictive mental states, such as desire and anger, are “taken as the path” to liberation, that is, they are not directly extirpated but used on the path to enlightenment in a variety of ways (McRae 2015a). In his *Wheel Weapon That Strikes the Enemy's Vital Point*, the 10th-century Indian master Dharmaraksita presents an account of using affliction for the sake of liberation from suffering, both for self and for others. This text and his related *Poison-Destroying Peacock*



*Mind Training* are part of a genre of text in the Tibetan tradition called *lo jong* (*blo sbyong*) or “mind trainings.” These pithy texts give instructions on how to train one’s mind along the path to liberation. Many are moral trainings that train the mind in love, compassion, and the overcoming of affliction. In Dharmaraksita’s *lo jong* texts, he compares the ability of the *bodhisattva*, the moral agent committed to developing deep moral concern for all sentient beings, to metabolize affliction to a peacock that can eat poison; not only can the peacock survive the poison, but it actually thrives on it because it (unlike the “cowardly crow”) is uniquely able to metabolize it.

When peacocks roam through the jungle of virulent poison,  
 Though the gardens of medicinal plants may be attractive,  
 The peacock flocks will not take delight in them;  
 For the peacocks thrive on the essence of virulent poison. (Sopa 2001: 59)

Dharmaraksita claims that the *bodhisattva*, “like the peacock in the forest of cyclic existence, convert[s] the afflictions, which are like a jungle of virulent poisons, into an elixir” (v. 7, p. 61). He argues that the *bodhisattva* can do this with anger and use this “metabolized anger”—what is literally “that which is like anger” (*zhe sdang lta bu*)—to fight against “enemies of the Dharma” (*Poison-Destroying Peacock*, v. 13, p. 195).

In these short texts, Dharmaraksita has introduced a new, anger-related concept: “that which is like anger,” which I will call “tantric” or “metabolized” anger. Metabolized anger is the virtuous channeling of the power and energy of anger without the desire to harm or pass pain. It is based on compassion and the deeply caring orientation fundamental to Mahayana Buddhist ethics (*bodhicitta*) and does not include, as definitions of anger tend to, the desire to harm another or seek, in Aristotle’s apt phrase, “conspicuous vengeance” (*Rh.* 1378a31). Although it is oriented and limited by a deeper desire for benefit and positive change in self or others, it does not reduce to compassion. This is because, as we will see, tantric anger retains certain qualities of normal (non-metabolized) anger that differentiate it from typical expressions of compassion.

Some translations render the Tibetan phrase *zhe sdang lta bu* as “simulated anger,” suggesting that what it is going on here is simply the feigning of anger by a skillful moral agent in order to benefit others (Sopa 2001). Although feigning anger could be a moral skill in some cases, metabolizing anger is not about faking it but transforming it. The peacock, after all, does not pretend to eat the poisonous plant; it eats and metabolizes it. Although tantric anger is not feigned anger, it is also not normal anger, because it has metabolized that desire for harm. This is why Dharmaraksita calls it “that which is like anger”: It is not like normal anger, yet it is not just faking anger for compassionate purposes either.

We can see the forceful energy of metabolized anger in Dharmaraksita's *Wheel Weapon That Hits the Enemies Vital Point*:

Habituated to attachment and aversion, I revile everyone opposed to me.  
 Habituated to envy, I slander and deprecate others.  
 Roar and thunder on the head of the destroyer, false construction.  
 Morally strike at the heart of the butcher, the enemy, ego! (Sopa 2001: 85)

In the *Peacock Destroying Mind-Training*, Dharmaraksita says something similar:

Everything utterly useless in this universe—  
 The turbulence of karma, afflictions, and confusions—  
 I shall wear the armor of eagerly embracing them  
 To help forcibly rob self-grasping of it's life. (v. 75)

Phat! Hurrah! Mortally strike, Yamantaka!  
 Set fire to the life force of this demon, the joy-seeking desire  
 Dance and trample upon the head of procrastination!  
 Cut completely the thread that binds to cyclic existence. (v. 76)

In these verses, Dharmaraksita discusses the possibility of using tantric anger against one's own faults, which is the most common example used in his (and other Buddhist ethicists') texts (see Śāntideva). We can see that he is applying his frustration, impatience, and revulsion at his own faults of attachment, aversion, and envy, thus using his anger in the service of his overall spiritual development. Although Dharmaraksita does not express the desire to inflict harm on anyone, including himself, we can still see the power and energy of his emotional orientation (the roaring and the striking!). That this "roaring and striking" is conceived of as part of broadly compassionate orientation is clear from the verse that follows these: "At that point, see all beings as your parents, and draw them forth together without hesitation. Without far and near, nestle them in the heart of your compassion. With no prejudice, sustain them with the two truths" (37).

Tantric practices, including the metabolization of anger, are generally considered advanced practices. There are at least two reasons for this: the sophistication required to actually be successful in the practice and the nontrivial dangers of failure. It demands that we make subtle psychological and phenomenological determinations: We need to know when and how to metabolize anger, we need to know whether our anger has been properly metabolized (what are the signs of a metabolized anger?), we need to understand the skillful use of such "anger" (who exactly are the enemies of the Dharma?), and so on. The dangers of failure in the metabolization of our anger are significant,

too. Tantric anger at my own faults, for instance, could backfire if I have not properly metabolized that anger, since, in addition to the faults I already have, I would add the fault of self-loathing (McRae 2015b). For these reasons, in the Buddhist context, tantric anger is a sophisticated, phenomenologically subtle practice for which one trains through self-cultivation and meditation practices, guided by an accomplished teacher.

To summarize, then, in Dharmaraksita we see an account of anger emerge that is significantly different from accounts in Western and even other Buddhist traditions. Tantric anger is a virtuous channeling of the power and fierce energy of anger without the desire to harm or seek vengeance. It is grounded in and energized by—but not reducible to—an active, engaged compassion. Such anger is a transformation or metabolization of normal, pain-passing anger and is not simply feigning anger that one does not in fact feel for some virtuous purpose, since it is a process that requires subtle determinations, especially in one's own emotionality, and is cultivated through practice, over time.

### TANTRIC ANGER AND OPPRESSION: EXAMPLES

Using anger for good, particularly for insight into the nature of oppression and the motivation to fight oppression, is something that has been well described in feminist literature.<sup>3</sup> Tantric Buddhists, it turns out, are not the only ones using their anger for good. But the helpfulness of the tantric view, I think, lies in the ways that it theorizes this general sense of “making good use of one's anger” and the practices that it employs for helping us to do so.

Consider, for example, Virginia Woolf's (1981) description in *A Room of One's Own* of the narrator's becoming angry when she stumbles on Professor Von X's *The Mental, Moral, and Physical Inferiority of the Female Sex* in the British Museum:

But while I pondered I had unconsciously, in my listlessness, in my desperation, been drawing a picture. . . . It was the face and the figure of Professor Von X. . . . He was not in my picture a man attractive to women. He was heavily built; he had a great jowl: to balance that he had very small eyes; he was very red in the face. . . . A very elementary exercise in psychology, not to be dignified by the name psycho-analysis, showed me, on looking at my notebook, that the sketch of the angry professor had been made in anger. . . . It referred me unmistakably to the one book, to the one phrase, which had roused the demon; it was the professor's statement about the mental, moral and physical inferiority of women. My heart had leapt. My cheeks had burnt. I flushed with anger. (31–32)

In what we could call a Dharmaraksitan move, the narrator neither extols her anger as a virtue nor makes any attempt to extirpate it. She instead

experiments with it; at times she finds it interesting, at times she finds it funny, at times she finds it edifying.

This anger-provoking event was not isolated but one of many described by the narrator, including being barred from the college library without a male escort and, once in the British Museum, feeling inadequate when she realizes that she has never been trained to do research and so does not know how to proceed, unlike the young man next to her who is diligently (and somewhat obnoxiously) taking notes. The narrator is vulnerable to the psychological danger of believing the story of her own inadequacy and giving up her project. In this sense, her flush of anger is a welcome event, steeling her from the temptation to cave under the weight of sexist pressure.

The narrator does not immediately try to summon pity for Professor Von X as a victim of his own misogynist culture, or because of some tragic personal history. She briefly attempts this, but snarky anger intrudes once more: “Could it be his wife, I asked, looking at my picture. Was she in love with a cavalry officer? Was the cavalry officer slim and elegant and dressed in astrakhan? Had he been laughed at, to adopt the Freudian theory, in his cradle by a pretty girl? For even in his cradle the professor, I thought, could not have been an attractive child” (31). This is clearly not an attempt to extirpate the anger she feels and replace it with straightforward pity or compassion, but neither is the use she makes of her anger completely divorced from a compassionate framework. Her acknowledgment of anger at Professor Von X is at least self-compassionate, since it insulates her from worse dangers, such as complete resignation to patriarchy.

Her ruminations on her anger are also oriented in a more broadly caring orientation, expressed as an interest in understanding the psychology of patriarchy. Her own anger leads her to insight about the curious phenomenon of the anger of oppressors (for, in all the books she surveyed about women that were written by men, there was always an “element of heat” [32]). How does one explain this absurdity of the anger of the powerful?

Life for both sexes—and I looked at them, shouldering their way along the pavement—is arduous, difficult, a perpetual struggle. It calls for gigantic courage and strength. More than anything, perhaps, creatures of illusions as we are, it calls for confidence in oneself. Without self-confidence we are as babes in the cradle. And how can we generate this imponderable quality, which is yet so invaluable, most quickly? By thinking that other people are inferior to self. (34–35)

There is a certain compassionate anger expressed in this passage. It is an explanation of the psychology of patriarchy but not an excusal; it expresses a clarity in recognizing both the severity of the wrong done and pitiable psychology which motivates it.<sup>4</sup>

This example shows the possibility of an experience of anger to be grounded in compassion without straightforwardly reducing to compassion. According to the tantric view, this is achieved by harnessing the energy and fiery clarity of anger while bypassing the desire to harm. Although this combination of angry energy without desire for harm perhaps sounds strange if we define anger as including some kind of pain-passing, it is something that members of oppressed groups, out of necessity, have long been experimenting with. The tantric view of anger is helpful not because it offers a radically new anger practice for members of oppressed groups but because it systematically theorizes this way of doing anger as part of a larger understanding of moral life. In the Buddhist tantric context, making good use of one's anger means harnessing the sense of being "fired up" and motivated for positive social and personal change and separating it psychologically and conceptually from the desire to do harm. It does this by contextualizing tantric anger in a larger project of cultivating wisdom and compassion (*bodhicitta*). It also understands making good use of one's anger to be grounded in a commitment to long-term ethical and spiritual practices—including, but not limited to, meditative and contemplative practices—that help train one's mind to achieve this kind of transformation, by first becoming aware of one's anger nonjudgmentally and then experimenting with letting go of an underlying desire to do violence.<sup>5</sup>

## TANTRIC ANGER AND THE BURDENS OF OPPRESSION

In this section, I argue that this tantric view of anger can better respond to the psychological and moral burdens, of both the pro-anger and anti-anger views, for members of oppressed groups. The oppressed are burdened both by views that value their anger at oppression as a virtue and by those that recommend its extirpation on the grounds that anger is a vice. These burdens take a toll on personal flourishing and moral integrity. To review, the burdens that hinder personal flourishing are (i) on pro-anger views, the negative effects on personal happiness and health of being nearly constantly angry; and (ii) on anti-anger views, the negative effects on well-being of being frequently called on to abandon or eliminate one's anger. The moral burdens are (iii) on the pro-anger view, the danger of the moral erosion of the frequently angry moral agent, including the problem of misplaced anger and an inability, strengthened by habituation, to consider possible nonangry responses that might be better for self and others; and (iv) on the anti-anger view, the dangers of the moral erosion of the never-angry agent, including the dangers of self-deception and of believing the harmful stereotypes, such as the "irrationality" or "scariness" of the anger of oppressed persons, stereotypes that unhappily reinforce the imperative for oppressed people to not be angry.

Tantric anger, by definition, would not be vulnerable to the first worry, the negative effects on flourishing for the frequently angry agent. The metabolization of the anger is supposed to increase flourishing, like the peacock that thrives and not just survives on the poisonous plants of the jungle. The idea is that the grounding in a broader desire to help, combined with the more exciting qualities of normal anger, such as its fiery energy, makes tantric anger confidence-building and inspiring, as hooks experienced in her discussion with Thich Nhat Hanh. This assumes that bad health and well-being outcomes of anger are caused by the pain-passing aspects of anger rather than other aspects of anger, such as feeling fired up. Although plausible, this assumption would require empirical research to confirm.<sup>6</sup>

The second worry, the exhausting effects of being called on to eliminate anger, also does not arise on the tantric view, since there is no expectation to never get angry or to extirpate the anger that arises. In fact, one of the interesting aspects of mind-training texts is that one must experience the afflictive emotion in order to work with it. The mind-training text, “Guide to the Heart of Dependent Origination,” even advises to refrain from applying the mind-training “the moment the affliction arises” but states that one should begin only once the afflictive emotion has peaked (Jinpa 2006: 428). This applies to the practice of metabolizing anger, since there needs to be anger in order for one to metabolize it. When one practices the metabolization of one’s anger, eventually the arising of (normal, pain-passing) anger is no longer experienced as threatening, destructive, or overwhelming but as an opportunity for transformation.

We may wonder, though, whether the imperative to metabolize one’s anger is as exhausting and relentless as the imperative to extirpate it. Since members of oppressed groups have so many occasions for anger, one would be called on daily to metabolize one’s anger, a process that Buddhists themselves consider difficult and advanced. There is some truth to this worry. It is the nature of oppression that those who are oppressed are burdened in ways that other, non oppressed people are not. Those burdens cannot simply be avoided or sidestepped, since if they could be, they would not be oppressive (Frye 1981: 2–7). Given this fact of oppression, it is not possible to find a burden-free moral life for oppressed people while we are still oppressed. What we should be thinking about, in addition to ways to dismantle oppressive systems, are ways for moral theories to meaningfully speak to the burdens borne by the members of oppressed groups that prioritize nourishing and inspiring us in our continued fight for justice. The tantric view of anger, I submit, is able to nourish and inspire members of oppressed groups in ways that neither the pro-anger nor the anti-anger views can. This is not because metabolizing one’s anger is easy—it isn’t—but because the call to metabolize our anger is

a call to fight injustice and respect the reality of one's anger without being destroyed by it.

Finally, let us consider the moral dangers of the pro-anger and anti-anger views for members of oppressed groups. By removing the pain-passing aspect of anger, the tantric view effectively removes the moral danger of misplaced anger and the inability to respond with compassion. The moral danger of misplaced anger is that one will pass pain to someone who is not deserving of that pain and may not even be associated with the original pain-causing, anger-provoking event at all. By abandoning the pain-passing part of the angry experience, one is unlikely to make it to this particular moral mistake. Since metabolizing anger is grounded in compassion, not at odds with it, it also seems unlikely that the metabolizer of anger would ignore or devalue more straightforwardly compassionate responses. Rather, by training the mind in both compassion and tantric anger, the metabolizing agent would be in a better position to judge which is the better approach in his or her situation.

By not requiring the agent to extirpate his or her anger, the tantric view does not threaten the kind of self-deception or self-deprecation that anti-anger views might. There is no danger of trying to convince oneself that one is not angry when one is, since the metabolization of anger requires that there is (normal) anger to begin with. That we cannot do the practice without the arising of normal anger is important to many Buddhist thinkers (see Tsoknyi 1998; Hanh 2002; Mingyur 2007), who see the arising of anger as, first, an occasion for nonjudgmental awareness and then as an opportunity for transformation. For these reasons, the danger of self-deprecation and believing disempowering stereotypes about oneself is also minimized on the tantric view, since the focus of metabolization is not making negative judgments about one's anger, such as "it's irrational," but using and transforming it for good. This cultivates in one an appreciation of one's power and range of one's emotionality even as one works to transform it.

## NOTES

1. For example, Aristotle's influential definition of anger in *Rh.* 1378a31–32; see also Harmon-Jones and Harmon-Jones (2016).

2. In a previous paper (McRae 2015b), I introduced an account of tantric Buddhist anger that, I argued, can respond to a certain tension in the moral theorizing about anger, what I called the problem of moral anger: It seems that neither anger nor its elimination can respond to the dual moral aims of effectively responding to wrongdoing and cherishing humanity. This chapter focuses on the effects of the tantric view on the one who feels the anger rather the moral consequences of that anger for other members of the moral community.

3. For a classic example, see Audre Lorde's "The Uses of Anger" in Lorde (2007).

4. For another example of metabolizing anger in the face of oppression, see Toni Morrison's recent essay on the psychology of white supremacy and the 2016 U.S. presidential election (2016).

5. In addition to Dharmaraksita, see Hanh (2002), Mingyur (2007), Tsoknyi (1998), and Dzogchen Ponlop (2008).

6. There is research that suggests that there are a variety of positive affects—such as feeling attentive, aware, alert, and strong—that accompany normal anger and that people can distinguish these and locate and name these associated positive affects even when they are experiencing anger (Harmon-Jones). To support metabolized anger, though, we would have to show that it is possible to separate out the negative and positive affects associated with anger and that, once the negative ones are transformed, the bad health and well-being effects of anger are also diminished or eliminated.

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