

WORKING WITH ANGER

BUDDHIST PRACTICE IN CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

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One thing psychotherapy and Buddhist practice have in common is that they are both attempting to uncover our subjectivity and allow us to access a kind of emergent knowledge. A lot of the time we walk around with preconceptions about everything; we know how we're going to be, we know how other people are going to be. Buddhist practice works to help us get out of these conceptual boxes, to the immediacy of our experience, in order to see more clearly what is going on. The Buddhist approach is to cultivate very careful mindfulness and attention. In psychotherapy we work through the narratives of our lives, the stories we tell, and explore things with an open attitude of inquiry. This too allows things to emerge in a new way. Many of us here are treading one or both of these paths and are seeking an emergent knowledge with respect to our experience.

Most people in the United States today unfortunately don't have much of a cross-cultural perspective. The reality is that many of us now study with American teachers who have studied with American teachers and are reading books that are written by American teachers who have studied with American teachers. So we are getting a particular vision of Buddhist practice, which is useful in many ways, but which is not allowing us to confront traditional Buddhism directly. The good news is that this makes the teachings easier to assimilate. The bad news is that we're not exposed to things that somebody else, because of their inclinations, decided should be excluded. It is inevitable that we filter what we learn through a whole set of predispositions and inclinations, through our likes and our dislikes. The more it is filtered the further away we are getting from Asian Buddhism; yet in the process we are getting a better reflection of who we are as Americans.

There is a cultural issue here, but there is also a psychological issue. Richard Schweder, a cultural psychologist, says that in the enterprise of studying another culture we eventually reach a stage when *we become aware of ourselves engaging with the other*. To the extent we learn more about the other, we learn more about ourselves; and the more we learn about ourselves, the more we learn about the other. Those of us interested in meditation in a deep way are trying to become less bound by our sense of self as we currently construe it. One of the things that cross-cultural reflection can do is make us aware of our sense of self in a more transparent way. Most of us, especially if we haven't traveled or considered other cultures very closely,

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are immersed in or identified with a certain sense of self. By reflecting on other cultures, and by seeing how they do things differently, we can begin to see how much of a constructed event the self really is. There is nothing universally true about valuing individuality to the extent we do as a hyper-developed construct. This is not a given of human reality, but is a development of a particular strand of human possibility in the twenty-first century. It is an artificial construct, due to time and cultural conditioning, and it is something that can be penetrated by the insights that come with deep Buddhist practice.



The topic I want to bring attention to today is anger, and I would like to frame this in a larger, cross-cultural context. Doing so can not only be pragmatically useful in understanding ourselves, but can also make a deep spiritual contribution to our practice. Let me begin by creating a stark contrast on anger. On the one hand we have a quotation from a classical sutta:

Bhikkhus, even if bandits were to sever you savagely limb by limb with a two-handed saw, he who gave rise to a mind of hate towards them would not be carrying out my teaching. Herein you should train thus: “Our minds will remain unaffected, and we shall utter no evil words; we shall abide compassionate for their welfare, with a mind of loving-kindness, without inner hate.” (M21:20)

Contrast this with the words of Leigh McCoullough Vaillant, a psychotherapist here in Boston:

Angry feelings have evolved in response to our need to prevent intrusions, to right wrongs, or to obtain something that is lacked. If patients are not able to set limits when attacked, give voice to what is wanted or not wanted, feel deserving of things desired, or walk into a room with their head high and feel a right to be there, they have missed a huge component of healthy, adaptive functioning.

These passages demonstrate the chasm I have experienced when my therapist encouraged me to express my anger while my Buddhist teachers had clearly discouraged me from expressing anger. How does one make sense of all this? How can one both be involved in Buddhist practice in a profound way and also make good use of what psychotherapy has to offer?

Let's start with the matter of translation. It's not a big technical issue, but when they talk of anger in the Buddhist context they're really talking about hate. Anger is usually defined as the wish to harm somebody. We have this meaning in English too, but we also have several others that fall somewhat short of this. Sometimes it's really just a strong reaction of dislike. When the caterers burn the food, one might say “I was so angry, I screamed at them in front of the guests.” Then there's anger that has to do with assertiveness, independence and the affirming of boundaries. “My roommate assumed I wanted the same pizza she did. I got angry and made it clear she should have called to check instead of trying to read my mind.” There is also the sense of protesting injustice. “We were angered by the bigoted behavior of that organization and decided to create an informational picket.” The assertiveness and strong dislike might have elements of harmfulness and wishing to harm someone else, but it might not. Protesting injustice is interesting. Both His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh have expressly said that they don't consider people protesting injustice to be necessarily acting out of anger. We use the word anger as the cause of our protest, but it can often simply refer to an appropriate form of behavior.

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Another step we might take, as Westerners wanting to follow Buddhist teachings and interested in therapy, is to ask the basic question, “What is an emotion?” Turning again to the cultural psychologist Richard Schweder, it might help to look at a (paraphrased) definition he offers of emotion: *an interpretation of feelings and physical sensations that arise in response to events that we experience, and the actions we envision as a response.* When you insult me, I feel heat in my face, and perceive that you are threatening me, and in response to this perception and sensation, I react with an impulse to insult you back. This is one description of an emotion.



In considering an emotion in a cross-cultural context, we have to understand a little bit about how we differ from our Asian cousins. In general, at least in traditional cultures, there was a holistic, societal interdependence wherein parts of the whole depended on one another. There were rules and roles that determined how the various parts of the whole interrelated, and there was often a great deal of joy in fulfilling these rules and roles. We in the West have evolved

tremendously from this model. We have ideas of entitlement in our culture that stem from the major democratic revolutions in the 17th and 18th centuries, where the word “rights” or “right” become operative. This is not the case in traditional cultures; they don’t talk about rights. They talk much more about duties, rules, and roles.

Individuality, too, is something that has emerged over the last four or five hundred years; it is a very interesting thing to trace. It stands in stark contrast to more traditional cultures, where family, kin, or the area you’re from are much more important than who you are individually. For example, when I’d walk into a store in Nepal and bump into a Tibetan monk, the first thing he’d ask me is, “Which lineage of Tibetan Buddhism do you study?” He’s not interested in who I am, or in my particular life experiences; he wants to know what team I’m on. He lives in a team culture. It’s important for a Tibetan monk to know what team you belong to, but the fact that you have unique thoughts and experiences is far less interesting to him.

Generally speaking, the expression of anger in the West has to do with expressing difference, autonomy, and personal rights. When our rights, goals, or needs are obstructed, we feel entitled to express our upset. This is in line with our appreciation of independence and the articulation of what is due us. For example, one of the things I reflected upon during a recent trip to Nepal is that there are few lawsuits to speak of in Asia. Here, if I trip, I’m entitled to \$400,000; it’s a business proposition. But if I trip in Nepal and get gangrene and die, then hey, that’s life. There is no one to sue. It’s a very different worldview.

Because of our deep love of independence, we value difference between individuals. We approve of anger in the sense of vigorous expression of difference, because this is a vehicle for us to embody our value of maintaining separateness and individuality while retaining contact with one another. Schweder points out ways in which it is even part of our earliest intimations of a self: “Anger, in the sense of forceful disagreement within a relationship, is part of what helps us in the West develop into discrete, individual selves.”

Anger is a vehicle for maintaining separateness and individuality.

Our cultural context of anger is seen in bold relief when we contrast it with aspects of Asian culture. For example, Japanese society places great significance on building relationships and attending to the needs and goals of others. The emphasis is on attunement and alignment between individuals. Anger, in the sense of a strong, disharmonious expression of individuality, is understood to disturb the sought-after sense of interdependence and is viewed very negatively. Thus, one sense of anger, the emphatic assertion of difference, has a potentially positive connotation here, but a distinctly negative connotation in Japan. And some similar appreciation of social harmony is part of most traditional Buddhist cultures.



Another interesting observation the cultural psychologist Richard Schweder makes goes something like this: all of us, around the world, can wake up on a given day and feel terrible. But the stories we tell ourselves about why we are feeling terrible are very different. He says there are four major narratives. 1) There are those people who wake up feeling terrible and would explain it as due to karma. This is actually a large proportion of the world's population. Something I did in the past is leading me to feel miserable in the present. 2) Another large proportion of the world's population believes in bewitchment. I wake up feeling terrible this morning and I have a strong suspicion that somebody wishes me ill and has done something magically to make me feel crummy. Many people believe this. 3) Some people believe that I'm waking up feeling crummy this morning because there's something wrong with the physiology or the chemistry of my brain. This is the somatic explanation. 4) And then some people believe that I'm waking up feeling crummy this morning because something probably occurred in a relationship in the last two or three days, something with my boss or my lover, that's making me feel terrible right now.

So reflect for a moment: if you wake up feeling crummy one morning, what explanation do you give yourself? Is it your karma? Probably not, aside, perhaps, from some of you here from India. Or do you wake up and feel that somebody stuck a needle in a doll and bewitched you? Also, probably not. But I suspect a lot of you, when you wake up in the morning feeling crummy, might think there is something wrong with your brain cells right now—maybe the neurons are swollen—and think about taking an aspirin. Or you might search back in your memory to reflect upon what happened with your boss a few days ago, or perhaps it was that talk you had with one of your friends. These are different ways of making sense of our experience, and it's important to recognize how variously people around the world do this.

When anger is being discussed in Asia, particularly in the Buddhist context, it is framed in the karmic frame. And if we're honest with ourselves, most Westerners find a difficulty with that language frame. It's not immediately transparent to our experience. So if you've been exposed to an Asian teacher, you are likely to hear that the reason not to get angry is because in the immediate present anger obstructs the mind, is a hindrance to meditation, and occludes and darkens our clarity. Not only is this a hindrance to meditation, but you are also sowing seeds, with harmfulness, of future pain. That's the big deal. You don't want to experience pain in the future, so don't get angry in the present. This is the major context for understanding anger.

By contrast, the Western discussion of anger is typically occurring in the somatic or psychological framework. It's a completely different context, which is important to understand. Along with these various narratives, people respond to life differently. The Harvard cultural anthropologist Arthur Kleinman did some interesting research

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in Taiwan, and the same type of research has been done in India, which shows how people experiencing life stressors in those cultures typically respond with somatic symptoms called neurasthenia—headaches, fatigue, dizziness, insomnia, weakness, or muscle tension. The bible for mental health professionals in the West, known as the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, identifies as indicators of stress-related problems such things as depression, sadness, hopelessness, guilt, trouble with concentrating, and so forth. In response to stress, they have something going on in their body, while we typically psychologize or emotionalize our experience. This is, I think, a big deal.

The story was told recently in the New York Times of a psychiatry conference about depression in developing countries. The essence of the lectures was that people in those areas commonly express depression as physical symptoms. They somaticize their depression, to use medical parlance, complaining of malaise, stomach aches, dizziness, and other symptoms that are hard to pin down. Techniques were discussed for dealing with the patient who insists their only problem is a heavy head or a squeezing sensation in the belly, but who is clearly depressed. Toward the end of the meeting, a doctor from India stood to speak. “Distinguished colleagues,” he said, “have you ever considered the possibility that it is not that we in the third world somaticize depression, but rather that you in the developed world psychologize it?” This comment, apparently, was met with stunned silence.

If you are interested in this type of discussion, I recommend Richard Schweder’s book *Thinking Through Cultures*. He’s got a chapter on Arthur Kleinman’s work, and makes the case against essentializing what is going on in other cultures. Why not just understand, perhaps, that with unique causes, with unique experiences, and with unique narratives, people have really different emotional experiences. This would suggest that when people in Asia are saying not to get angry they are talking about one thing while we might be talking about something else entirely.

I can imagine myself sitting next to a Chinese student, saying my life is meaningless. I’m sad, sort of tired, and feeling unhappy. She might tell me she feels as though she has tired blood, is a little bit dizzy, and her head is hurting. She is talking in physical terms, while I am using emotional terms. Furthermore, I might be thinking in my mind that it is all due to a difficult discussion I had with my wife yesterday, while she’s attributing her ailment to oppression that occurred at work. I feel I need to have another conversation to try to resolve my situation with Anne, and she is making plans to take an herbal medicine. Meanwhile, a traditional Indian gentleman sitting nearby with a similar problem would probably say that it’s his karma. Are we talking at all about the same experience? These are very different worlds.

If you haven’t lived in Asia and haven’t been around traditional culture much, it is hard to appreciate this, but at least amongst traditional Asians, if the teacher says “Just quiet down now and be happy,” it’s got an unimaginable force. I’ve actually seen this happen: an Asian on the verge of psychosis goes up to a teacher and the teacher basically says, “Get a grip.” It’s sort of like the earth moves. We just don’t have that belief in authority here, and we don’t want to make use of authority in that way. Our bumper sticker says “Question Authority.” From our psychological framework we can actually see anger as a doorway to enriching relationship, whereas in Asia, typically, it was something that was not to be felt, not to be experienced. It was understood in a karmic framework in which teachers would teach people “Don’t be angry,” and they could make use of great moral authority in doing so.

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So, how to put this all together with respect to anger? Individuals in many traditional Buddhist cultures may have been more likely to produce physical symptoms rather than emotions in response to the ups and downs of life. Furthermore, these cultures did not encourage individual expression of feelings as we do, or to an extent that produces disharmony. The Buddhist narrative about anger is primarily concerned with explaining suffering in terms of moral cause and effect. The meaning of anger in this context is harmfulness, and it is historically the subject of moral instruction by teachers to students, who took such instructions quite seriously. We in the West are much less familiar with and open to moral guidance than those in traditional cultures. We are also much less likely to respond unquestioningly to a teacher's moral authority. To work constructively with feelings of harmfulness, Westerners require something other than time-honored prescriptions from a venerable spiritual tradition.

Buddhist and modern Western uses of anger make it evident that we must consider a variety of interventions for dealing effectively with this emotion. Given our preference for dealing with things in emotional terms, interventions that acknowledge our psychological reality will be most effective for us today. Our Western contribution for working with difficult feelings is the understanding that they may be opened up through carefully structured discussion into a means of connection. I've not seen anger used in this way in traditional Buddhist cultures.

This is a truncated version of Harvey's talk. If interested in further reflections on anger from the perspective of Buddhism and psychotherapy, consult his recent book Buddhist Practice on Western Ground, where two chapters are dedicated to this issue.

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