

Tricycle Talks

“Transforming Anger into Compassion”

Episode #77 with Allison Aitken

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James Shaheen: Hello, and welcome to *Tricycle Talks*. I'm James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. There are lots of reasons to be angry right now. It's often said that if you're not outraged, you're not paying attention. But according to scholar Allison Aitken, anger only leads to further harm, no matter how justified it may feel in the moment. As a professor of philosophy, Aitken believes that Buddhist texts offer valuable resources for working with our anger and healing contemporary divisions. Drawing from the work of the eighth-century Indian philosopher Shantideva, she positions compassion as a substitute attitude for anger and lays out methods for moving beyond righteous rage. In today's episode of *Tricycle Talks*, I sit down with Allison to talk about how anger distorts our perceptions, why anger can be so seductive, and how we can transform our rage into compassion.

James Shaheen: So I'm here with Allison Aitken, a professor of philosophy at Columbia University. Hi Allison, thanks for joining us.

Allison Aitken: Hi, James. Thank you so much for having me.

James Shaheen: So we're here today to talk about a Buddhist understanding of anger. You recently spoke at the Holberg Symposium, where the topic was "Fear and Anger in Public Life: The Challenge for the Humanities." As you state in your piece, anger is very much in vogue right now. Can you say what you mean by that?

Allison Aitken: Anger in the form of moral outrage in particular is something that's really prevalent in our contemporary culture at the moment. As the saying goes, if you're not outraged, you're not paying attention. But I think there's also a kind of destructive anger in our



contemporary culture that's quite prevalent in fostering uncharitable and judgmental attitudes among our colleagues, relatives at the Thanksgiving dinner table, and our fellow global citizens. There's a kind of temptation to say things like "Society has never been so divided" and to blame the rhetoric of our current political leaders or social media or viral misinformation campaigns and other kinds of byproducts of the Internet age. But I also think it's important to recognize that this kind of divisive tribalism is nothing new, but that we might have contemporary manifestations of it that are brought about by a unique concoction of our own set of conditions. But the outcome is a familiar set of human emotions. I think that the Buddhist text tradition has a lot to offer when it comes to understanding anger and coping with it in the most productive way.

James Shaheen: So you turn to Shantideva's *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, or the *Bodhicaryavatara*, as a resource for how to deal with or heal contemporary divisions. So for listeners who might not be familiar with the text, can you give us some background on Shantideva and the *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*?

Allison Aitken: Sure, so Shantideva is a great eighth-century Indian Buddhist philosopher who is perhaps most famous for his *Bodhicaryavatara*, *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*. He also authored the *Sikhsamuccaya*, the *Compendium of Training*. The *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life* is a really beautiful text first and foremost. It's often regarded as one of the greatest pieces of Sanskrit poetry. But it's also a kind of manual for living for effecting a kind of shift in one's experience, specifically someone who's aspiring to be a bodhisattva. So the assumption is that our kind of default state is one characterized by a kind of metaphysical ignorance and misunderstanding about the nature of the world, and attendant with that ignorance is all sorts of disturbing emotion and a whole variety of different forms of suffering. By following this kind of training manual, the idea is to develop wisdom, a correct understanding of the nature of things, the nature of the self and the world, which in turn brings about this kind of positive affective states, and foremost among those is compassion.



James Shaheen: So a lot of people, all of us, I would say, can be very, very attached to our anger. It's something that we hold fast to. If somebody suggests that we get over our anger that makes us only angrier. It may not be the most skillful thing to say to somebody who's angry—while they're angry, anyway. So why should we want to defuse our anger? From a Buddhist perspective, what's wrong with anger to begin with?

Allison Aitken: I think this is a really important question. Classically, in the Buddhist text tradition, we see these familiar classifications that anger is a moral vice, a *papam* or *apunya*, a *klesha*, a mental affliction, or it's one of the three poisons in the form of *dvesha*. It's one of these fundamental mental states together with ignorance and desire that perpetuate cyclic existence, which is characterized by suffering. We see it in the list of the 10 non-virtues or the 10 unwholesome actions, the *dashakushalani*. I think it's very common in the Buddhist texts to see it classified in these negative ways. When we consider our contemporary perspective in our contemporary culture, the American Psychological Association recognizes anger is in most cases a healthy human emotion, and I think it's commonly regarded not only as healthy but helpful. We generally think of it as motivating us to right wrongs and to avoid being victimized or taken advantage of ourselves, so it's a kind of protection in this way. There's a widespread opinion that anger in the form of moral outrage is not just morally permissible, but really, it's morally obligatory in the face of injustice. That's how we ought to respond.

So how do we square this? How do we understand the Buddhist classification of anger as this moral vice in the context of our more common prevalent contemporary understandings of anger as something that could be helpful to us? I think that the best place to start in approaching that is to understand how it's defined in the Buddhist textual tradition. And here, it's helpful to look at the Abhidharma texts. So the Abhidharma literature contains detailed taxonomies of mental states. These are incredibly rich resources based on a careful analysis of geography of our mental experience. Anger there, for example, in Asanga's *Abhidharmasamuccaya*, the



Compendium of Abhidharma, is classified as a kind of mental aggression that's a species of enmity, *pratigha*. It's something that's occasioned by a present offense or slight, some kind of perceived wrong, and it functions as a basis for violence, for taking up arms and weapons, and so on. So I think there's a lot to unpack from this definition, but a couple of things that we might notice straight away is that it's occasioned by the perception of some wrong. So it's some mental state that arises when we perceive some slight or some wrong. And it also involves aggression toward the perceived wrongdoer, which we might understand as a kind of thought that it would be good if that wrongdoer suffered some bad consequence. These two features are interesting to pull out in that there's a lot of resonance with the history of Western philosophy as well. We see these two features picked out by Aristotle, by the Greek and Roman Stoics. I think this is an interesting place to start. So we have a perception of the wrong accompanied by aggression towards the wrongdoer, and we might understand that this is part of the nature of anger. In any sort of good definition in the Abhidharma context, we're asking about what is something's nature and then what is its function? So anger has this nature, but what does it function to do? What does it bring about? And according to Asanga, it functions as a condition for harmful actions. It's something on the basis of which one engages in inflicting harm.

James Shaheen: You mentioned Asanga and Asanga's definition of anger, and I imagine some of our listeners may be saying, "Well, sure, anger inspires you to bring harm to others. Might it not also inspire you to defend and protect others?"

Allison Aitken: I think it's commonly thought that anger is a useful motivating force in righting wrongs. As much as we could say that anger might prompt someone to engage in harming another person, it might also prompt them to confront some injustice. And so we might think, well, anger is just like a tool. Its value depends on its aim, and it might be used for good or ill. The response from someone like Asanga or Shantideva would be to say that misunderstands again both the nature and function of anger. Because anger is a specifically afflicted mental



state—this is another classification from these texts—it necessarily, invariably co-occurs with ignorance. We never have a moment of anger without an accompanying episode of ignorance. And what's more, ignorance is a necessary condition for the arising of anger in the first place. Anger is prompted by ignorance, and anger co-occurs with ignorance. And because there's this tight connection between anger and ignorance, it's an unreliable guide to confronting injustice and confronting wrongs.

James Shaheen: Yeah, I want to ask you about that. My next question, in fact, was to mention that for Shantideva anger is intimately connected to ignorance, as you just said, and you just said something about the relationship between anger and ignorance. In other words, anger does not arise absent ignorance. But how can anger distort how we see the world and the people around us?

Allison Aitken: Anger is prompted at least in part by ignorance. It's preceded by ignorance. So one thing we said before is that it's prompted by a perceived slight or some perceived wrong, but mixed in with that is a kind of ignorance that essentially oversimplifies the situation. So we have this mental activity of discernment, *sanna*, that just wants to categorize things, put them into neat boxes. So whenever we're confronted by what we understand to be some kind of slide or wrong or injustice, the first impulse is to pin things down into categories of right and wrong, good and bad, friend and enemy. The problem with this is—I mean, this is extremely useful. This is how we navigate the world. We couldn't navigate the world without categories. But when we assign things to these value-laden categories, the ignorance involved in this process is thinking that things intrinsically belong to these categories and in fact map onto them precisely. So to think that something's intrinsically bad or someone's intrinsically a jerk or intrinsically bad or good. So on the basis of this kind of oversimplified view of the world, anger has a very clear target and can zero in on some individual or group of individuals or system or structure and say, "That's the culprit, that's single-handedly responsible for this wrong," when in fact, the situation is always



far more complex than this way of thinking leads us to believe. So this inclination to put things into neat boxes is obscuring the complexity of the actual situation. I think this is what Shantideva is urging us to recognize and his text: whatever we diagnose what's going on in a given situation as who has wronged us, who is an appropriate target of our anger, whatever the situation is, it's always more complicated than it seems.

James Shaheen: I think, in part, what you're saying is that anger can offer us a false sense of clarity: This person did this to me, and they are the culprit, and I'm going to take action based on that simple act. Say they stole from me, and the countless causes and conditions that gave rise to that are lost on me. So I can hear somebody say, "Well, you know, Shantideva is a pretty heavy lift. From his perspective, if someone is sawing off his leg, he feels compassion toward them, not anger." I can just hear listeners, in fact, all of us, I will not exclude myself, and I imagine you too, would feel like, "Well, wait a second. How realistic is this? And how natural is it for us to feel compassion for someone who is dismembering us?" I mean, it's extreme. But those are the examples really that are given. How do you see that? Is this an impossible ideal? Or is it attainable to the practitioner, maybe not in this lifetime but in future lifetimes, if you want to think of it that way? Or is it something to aspire to, but in fact, is just something we're reading in a book?

Allison Aitken: Shantideva is laying out what seemed like very lofty ideals, and we might wonder, is this just something that is a kind of goal that we might aspire to, or is this something that we can reasonably hope to attain? I mean, I think from the perspective of the textual tradition, one thing that's very unique about Buddhist thought is the incredible optimism for the possibility of human transformation. So certainly from Shantideva's perspective, this is realistic to aspire to reach a state where one could respond to any situation with compassion based on a kind of empathetic understanding of what each of the individual beings involved in the situation are undergoing and without this aggression, which is brought on, he thinks, by virtue of a kind of



misunderstanding of the situation. So if it's possible to correct our understanding of the world, then it's possible to promote affective states that are compatible with a correct understanding of the world. Of course, in our own day to day lives, even from the perspective of the Mahayana tradition, this path takes three countless eons. Even from Shantideva's perspective, the idea is to take a long-term perspective and not to expect that one would have reached the results immediately or in one's daily life or even in this lifetime. He famously addresses anger in his chapter on patience, and I think in this respect as well, it's important to have patience with ourselves from his perspective in this regard.

James Shaheen: Yeah, I think it's really important that you mentioned that, and I love that chapter on patience because so many of us blame ourselves or feel that we've failed if we feel anger, and there's no shortage of people who will point to you and say, "Oh, you're just angry," which makes a person of course angrier. But having patience with ourselves is so important. Can you say something about that because we do tend to blame ourselves for not being perfect?

Allison Aitken: One of the things that's so beautiful about Shantideva's advice in this chapter is that it's equally applicable to oneself and others. He provides strategies for defusing your anger in the case of what someone else has done, which involves developing a kind of empathetic understanding of all their many circumstances and seeing them almost as a victim of their own anger, of their own ignorance. They're kind of just the last domino in some beginningless chain of dominoes. So we can understand that part of what it is to be angry is itself to suffer. Anger is, by its nature, an unpleasant mental state that also prompts further unpleasant mental states. So what it is to be angry is in part to suffer, and that is a byproduct of a complex set of causes and conditions. Just as we can understand that in the case of others through this kind of forensic analysis of how they got there, we can also apply that same analysis to ourselves. How did I get into this situation where I feel so distressed, so upset, so enraged? I can apply this same analysis and engender some kind of empathetic understanding of my own condition. Shantideva's purpose



in explaining why he thinks anger is irrational is not to shame us or make us feel guilty for having anger but instead, just as when we think about the anger in another person, the idea is to understand that this is something that we should feel is a kind of tragic situation: Oh, it's so sad that this person is experiencing this kind of concoction of their own sorts of pain and suffering. And then the same fault applies to oneself. So I think that there's two different perspectives he offers in the text. One is this kind of forensic perspective where we look at how did we get here, and we can use that perspective to understand the vast complexity of the situation.

Human actions have always been complex in terms of the causes and conditions that brought them about: someone's history, their socioeconomic circumstances, what they had for breakfast. Today, we know so much more about the causes and conditions that bear on each human action: our brain chemistry, our microbiome, our social media feeds, our online news sources. We have a different new array of ways of analyzing the causes and conditions that lead to a given human action, which just makes it all the more apparent that there is no independent autonomous action or agent, and in understanding that, in generating this kind of more accurate metaphysical view of a given situation, whether it's ourselves or others, automatically, this kind of empathetic understanding, this compassionate affective state arises. And then there's the forward-looking perspective. The forward-looking perspective just pertains to ourselves and what is the appropriate response for me in this situation, whether I'm thinking about responding to some external wrong or looking at my own past behavior, and Shantideva's point here is that when we're taking this forward perspective of what ought we to do, that path forward never includes anger. That's never going to be a skillful response or a helpful response in moving forward.

James Shaheen: Just for argument's sake for a moment, you might talk to an evolutionary biologist who says that anger has its role. Say I'm under attack by a wild animal, and all at me responds with a kind of ferocity and anger. I'm sure you've heard that before. How do you respond to that in the context of the teachings anyway? Although they existed before



evolutionary biology did, there were nonetheless people who felt anger was a natural and useful tool.

Allison Aitken: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I think this goes back to our discussion of anger as a useful motivation. And similarly, we might think of it in a more primal context of survival. I think it's a natural thought to think that there is a place for aggression. It has some kind of utility. Now from the perspective of these texts, anger will never be the most efficacious impetus in a given response. So we might think that you can only respond to some kind of primal attack with aggression efficaciously. Or you can only white injustice, for example. If we're fighting something, we want aggression. That's going to be what's going to get the job done in the most productive and efficacious manner. I think that's a natural thought. Again, from the perspective of these texts, because aggression is tied up with ignorance, it's going to distort our view. It's going to kind of muddy the waters of our path forward in addressing the situation. And there's a kind of substitute attitude that we can slot in for anger, namely, compassion, which is going to do the job better. So whatever it is that anger or aggression promises to do for us, Shantideva insists that anger is a deceiver. It misguides us. It misleads us. And in fact, compassion is better suited to the job.

James Shaheen: Yeah, I was just going to say one thing that characterizes anger is its proliferation. It begins, and it's like a fire. It's not like once the job is done, we're no longer angry. The narrative continues, the anger builds, and we become especially ineffective if we don't burn out. So we've kind of come around to something that you mentioned early on: the adage that if you're not outraged, you're not paying attention. So it seems in fact, if you take Shantideva, Asanga, and others seriously, we flip that and say if you are outraged, you're not paying attention. Is that fair?



Allison Aitken: There's definitely a way to understand that from the perspective of these texts. So this again, as we were talking about before, goes back to the idea of moral outrage, that moral outrage is a kind of moral sentiment that helps us detect moral wrongs in the world. And so if you're paying attention, you are going to be outraged because there are harms taking place all over the world in all sorts of ways. But I think that this is part of what motivates this common adage. And certainly, there's something to be said for that. We oughtn't be so absorbed in our own egoistic narratives that we are unaware of all of the harms taking place in the world and all of the forms of injustice that need to be corrected and so on.

James Shaheen: What you're saying reminds me of something that Bob Thurman or Robert Thurman talked about. In an article he wrote for us many years ago, he referred to the cool warrior—in other words, somebody fighting for justice from the basis of compassion—that would outlast the angry warrior.

Allison Aitken: Yeah, I think that's a nice image. I think before, you were talking about anger as kind of self-perpetuating. We often think about cycles of anger, revenge, or this kind of payback that never ends. So you might think that that might be a more sustaining force. But I think that the cool warrior, the compassionate warrior, is actually going to be a more efficacious and enduring foe of suffering, of harm. You know, a lot of people would worry that an affect like compassion or emotion like compassion is just not going to be powerful enough to confront the wrongs that need to be confronted and that we need something like anger. But I think if we think about the extraordinary lengths that a parent will go in order to alleviate the suffering of their child, hold no bars, I think this is a nice illustration of the incredible power of compassion. In the Mahayana Buddhist texts, we often hear that a natural consequence of training in compassion is the development of the so-called special aspiration, *adhyashaya*, or *bsam pa* in Tibetan, which is that aspiration that just can't bear that others are suffering and idly sit by, but feels compelled to take personal responsibility for the welfare of others. So I myself will do whatever it takes to

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alleviate the suffering of others. And this is the kind of penultimate mental state before the arising of *bodhicitta*.

James Shaheen: Can you just briefly tell our listeners what bodhicitta is?

Allison Aitken: Bodhicitta is the motivation of the bodhisattva. It's a mental state that has two aspirations. One is to attain complete enlightenment, but it's for the purpose of this second aspiration, which is to alleviate the suffering of all sentient beings.

James Shaheen: You know, as I listen to you, I think that anger wants results now, whereas compassion is patient and in it for the long haul. So I was wondering in all of this what role equanimity plays.

Allison Aitken: In Chapter Eight of the *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, Shantideva talks about this contemplation of equalizing and exchanging oneself and others as a method for developing compassion and ultimately for developing bodhicitta. Equalizing oneself and others is the starting place where we engender a kind of equanimity that then on the basis of which we can develop compassion. In terms of his argument or his chapter on anger, where we understand equanimity is understanding the basic equality of all sentient beings insofar as all of them equally want happiness and all of them equally don't want suffering. I think that would be a very helpful contemplation to pair with his prescribed analysis to defuse anger. I think those pair well.

James Shaheen: So I want to ask you about fear. We recently had the Zen priest Jan Chozen Bays on the podcast. She's also a physician, and she talked about her work supporting healthcare workers through burnout. So she leads workshops on anger, and she mentioned that she often encourages people to find the fear hidden beneath it. How does fear factor into Shantideva's understanding of anger, or does it?



Allison Aitken: Fear is a really interesting mental state. I was talking before about the Abhidharma lists of mental factors in the various Abhidharma texts—sometimes you have 49, sometimes 51—where they have given us a taxonomy of all the different mental activities we could undertake and categorized them into wholesome and unwholesome, which has a moral valence, but also pertains to our welfare, whether they're good for us or not good for us, they feel good or don't feel good, they bring about good results or not good results. And one thing that's interesting is that fear is absent from those lists. Now, the lists don't purport to be exhaustive, but that's a pretty hefty list of mental activities, and fear seems like such a pervasive part of human life. I find it interesting that it doesn't find a more prominent position there. But in Shantideva's text, a kind of vision that he gives of one dimension of the bodhisattva, someone who's traversing this path with bodhichitta, wants to attain enlightenment in order to benefit all beings, is that they develop a state of fearlessness. And that fearlessness is linked with an understanding of selflessness, the absence of this substantially real autonomous and independent, enduring and unitary self or agent that we thought was there, but in fact, is not. Fear is tied up deeply with self-grasping, and self-grasping is tied up deeply with this kind of ignorance, this fundamental form of ignorance that perpetuates our suffering. All of that is, as Shantideva argues, this necessary prerequisite for the arising of anger. So I think that that makes a lot of sense from Shantideva's perspective as well. If we're looking at what's underneath the anger, we're going to be looking at our misunderstandings of the world, this kind of confusion that grasps to a self and grasp to intrinsic properties and other people and autonomous agents out there being good and bad from their own side, and that that as well is tied up with this kind of fear of our most fundamental fear, being a kind of fear of death or loss of self, loss of this self that we thought was there, but which Shantideva would say turns out upon analysis is not there.

James Shaheen: You know, that's really helpful because I've often wondered, why is fear mentioned so infrequently? And, in fact, in Buddhism, what we're reading about so frequently is



an attempt to preserve the sense of self. That's fear. I hadn't really thought of it that way until I listened to you just speak about it. And so, yeah, that is, in other words, in many ways, representative of what we normally refer to as fear. So that's very helpful. Thank you. You write that according to Shantideva, anger is not only morally wrong but also simply bad for us. How can anger close us off from happiness and joy?

Allison Aitken: From Shantideva's perspective, he takes it for granted that his readers, presumably fellow Buddhist monks, are already on board with him and agree that anger is a moral vice. That's textbook for all good Buddhists in his intellectual milieu. But he's out to convince his readers that it's just bad for our welfare. Ordinarily, when we think something's good for our welfare, if it's good for us, it's valuable, then we think it's either making a direct contribution to our welfare, it's intrinsically good—often pleasure itself is cited as something that's just intrinsically good—or it's instrumentally good. It indirectly contributes to our welfare. And someone might think that money isn't good in itself, but it's instrumentally good. It can bring about some kind of pleasurable experience, and I might think that pleasurable experience itself is intrinsically good. Shantideva sets out to convince his readers that anger is not good in either of these ways. It's not good in itself, or intrinsically good, because it's just an unpleasant experience. So what it is to be angry is to be disturbed. It's a kind of *klesha*, this mental affliction. This word *klesha* and something that's *akusala* or unwholesome, these are also related with a medical classification. It's a kind of illness for our mind in so far as it's some kind of discomfort, dis-ease, or distress.

I think a lot of people would just agree that it doesn't feel good to be angry. A lot of people would rather quickly be on board with Shantideva when it comes to his claim that anger is not intrinsically good. I mean, Shantideva gives these examples like when you're angry, you can't enjoy anything. I mean, your food doesn't taste good. You can't sleep. I think there's a lot of immediate and intuitive evidence to tell us that anger is not good for our welfare. It doesn't directly contribute to it. But I think most people think that it's instrumentally good. It can be a



means to getting us something that is ultimately going to be good for either our welfare or another person's welfare. And so here's where Shantideva has a tougher case to make. We talked before about how anger is often cited as having motivational utility, and so we might think that it's instrumentally good insofar as it's this motivating force to bringing about some good. Of course, Shantideva would say that compassion is a better motivating force because it doesn't come with this attendant ignorance.

A common line of thought when we're talking about the possible utility of anger is it's a kind of moral sentiment that signals to us that we are encountering some kind of moral wrong. It's a moral antenna for identifying or detecting injustice. And this idea is really prominent in the Western intellectual tradition. It traces back to Aristotle's view that the passions enable one to perceive moral value, where passions are what we ordinarily think of as emotions, and versions of this claim were developed by the British moral sentimentalists of the 17th and 18th centuries—for example, the Earl of Shaftesbury, Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, Adam Smith. It's a really common view today as well. This is linked with the idea of a kind of moral outrage. But on the Buddhist view or on Shantideva's view, not only is anger unnecessary for discerning the moral value of an action, but once again, since anger is invariably attended by this kind of ignorance that distorts the nature of its object and oversimplifies things, it turns out that it's an unreliable guide to diagnosing wrongs. So it's not actually fulfilling this role that we had expected or wanted it to do.

Shantideva would wheel in compassion as the affective attendant of right view. So because it's compatible with an accurate view of the world, it is better suited than anger to help us detect moral wrongs. So now we could just use our kind of analytical mind to say, "OK, I perceive some kind of injustice," but compassion as a kind of an effective substitute for anger is, in fact, incredibly useful as a detector of moral wrongs. And why is that? Because compassion from a Buddhist perspective definitionally involves a kind of sensitivity to harm or pain or suffering in others. Classically, we think of compassion as the awareness of someone suffering and the wish or aspiration or desire that they be free of that suffering. Because compassion



necessarily involves this sensitivity to suffering, when combined with this correct view, it turns out to be a better detection device for moral wrongs than the supposed moral sentiment of anger would be, according to Shantideva.

James Shaheen: That was excellent. Shantideva writes that, "In brief, there's nothing that can make an angry person happy," and you touched on that as something that blocks us from our joy or happiness. Most people would agree that anger is an uncomfortable state. Yet I know—and I know others feel the same way at times—anger is very seductive because when I first feel the surge of anger, I'm actually attached to it. I actually like the feeling. It makes me feel powerful, or it makes me feel that there's a self there. All of a sudden, I have agency and I can straighten things out. Can you say something about the seductive quality of anger? Because in the end, it has never led me to a good place, but in that moment, there's a certain addictive quality to it. Do you want to talk about that?

Allison Aitken: Yeah, I think that's definitely relatable. The reason that anger is so seductive in that way is because of its close link with the ignorance that simplistically classifies, which in its most fundamental form is self and other. But we extend this self and other, this reified sense of self and indignation, that it drives a stark and deep wedge between oneself and other and between the group or people that you identify with and those that you don't, and then we can easily paint them with this brush laden with some kind of moral value: Here are the good guys, and here are the bad guys, and I, me, this self is very squarely and clearly on the good guy camp, on the good side of the divide. So I think there's something very compelling and seductive about this kind of simplistic view of the world. It's very nice, neat, and comfortable. When everything is in its own box, I've domesticated the world, I know who's good, I know who's bad, and I know where I sit, and I can feel good because I'm on the good side. This kind of narrative, when we overlay this onto the world, it's incredibly compelling. It's much more uncomfortable to start to scratch the surface and see that there's much more to the story, things are much more complex



than they seem, this person isn't intrinsically a jerk, or whatever it is that we're focusing on. These kinds of labels that fuel our anger, these kinds of narratives are seductive because of their simplicity.

James Shaheen: We see that playing out everywhere on the political spectrum. It's so much easier to define your enemy and not to look at nuance or complexity. It's the lazy way of approaching politics, I would say. You referred earlier to compassion as a substitute attitude for anger. So I just want to get a little practical. What do you mean by that, and how can we move from anger to compassion?

Allison Aitken: Actually, I borrowed that expression from Martha Nussbaum. But I think we might also perhaps more classically from the perspective of the Buddhist textual tradition talk about it as an antidote to anger. I think it's helpful, though, to think of it as a substitute attitude for anger insofar as all these roles that we expect anger to fulfill, like detecting moral wrongs, like motivating us to right wrongs, like protecting us from being victimized or our loved ones from being victimized, there's a lot of things we want anger to do for us and that anger promises to do for us. But as Shantideva argues, anger is a deceiver, and it turns out that compassion is better suited to the task. It's actually going to more efficaciously fulfill all of these roles. At the same time, compassion and anger have a very interesting relationship, and not only might we slot in compassion where we may have wanted anger to act, but in fact, developing compassion from a Buddhist perspective is an antidote to this poison of anger. They are two contradictory mental states such that we can't really hold both of them fully towards the same object in our mind at the same time.

So by virtue of developing and in the process of developing compassion towards a given object, we thereby diminish or undermine our anger towards that object. So Shantideva provides a number of strategies for moving from a place of anger toward compassion. So developing this kind of substitute attitude is going to be more helpful for us in righting all of the wrongs that we



think need to be righted or whatever it is that we had wanted anger to do for us. One of these very helpful strategies, I think, focuses on understanding that anger is an irrational mental state.

So again, this goes back to anger's relationship with confusion or ignorance. Ordinarily, we may think that anger is justified or rational when it's directed towards an individual who's autonomously responsible for doing some particular action that we take to be a harmful action or a slight or a wrong. We might think ordinarily that if someone was coerced, if they didn't act autonomously, if someone made them do it, then it's not rational or justified to be angry at the person who was coerced into wronging us. We should instead redirect our anger toward the person who was controlling them in the background. We're looking for the person who's responsible for the wrong, and we expect that person to be autonomously responsible for that wrong. But as Shantideva argues, there is no human action that is autonomous, that is entirely free of the influence of extrinsic conditions. So what it means to act autonomously is to act on something else without yourself acted upon. But we can't find any such thing. There's nothing that acts in a vacuum independently of causes and conditions.

James Shaheen: So that's why Shantideva views anger as something that is tightly bound with the notion of autonomy, which you just talked about. So in other words, in a certain sense, it refers back to what I was saying when anger gives me a sense of agency or self. Is that what we mean?

Allison Aitken: We can think about autonomy on both sides of the equation. I think part of what he's pointing to in drawing our attention to autonomy is to show us that the target of our anger has no autonomy and so therefore isn't a suitable target or a suitable cognitive terminus for our anger because we haven't found the holy and independently responsible party at whose feet we can lay the blame. That's one dimension. Tied up with that is this innate sense that we have of ourselves as this autonomous agent who has been wronged. We have this intuition that we are this independent, enduring unitary individual, which again Shantideva says that that, too, doesn't



stand up to analysis. So this kind of bifurcated picture where we have this neat world of autonomous individuals, the self and the other who are in this kind of drama, dissolves upon analysis, and the more we engage in this analysis of the causal history, we're kind of continually defusing the blame among the countless causes and conditions such that that aggression can't find a terminus, they can't find a resting place, and kind of just drains the water out of the bathtub of our aggression. You might think that, in doing that, we're just absolving people of any responsibility for their action. I think that might be a natural concern. But that's not what's intended. You know, Shantideva is not trying to say that there is no such thing as moral responsibility. People are still morally accountable for anything they engage in. Nor is it that we're supposed to become cold, clinical, and detached by engaging this analysis where we kind of defused responsibility among the various causes and conditions. But again, instead, by contemplating how this situation arose and the causal story that led to it, that very act of contemplation, of coming to a more accurate understanding of how we got here, itself engenders this kind of empathetic understanding where we just naturally, the thought is, become more compassionate and, as Shantideva emphasizes, you start to see a person as a victim of their own anger, a victim of their own mental states. And again, we might also apply this analysis to ourselves.

James Shaheen: I was thinking this sort of work can also play out on a societal level, and you quote the philosopher Martha Nussbaum, whom you mentioned before, and you refer to her vision of leaders of revolutionary justice movements as "strange sorts of people, part stoic and part creatures of love." Can you say more about that quote and what it means to be part stoic and part creature of love? I love that.

Allison Aitken: Beautiful turn of phrase from her. She advocates for this image, this kind of amalgamation, part stoic, part creature of love, where we can understand the Stoics as this school of ancient Greek philosophy that also took a very hard-line approach to anger, much as

Tricycle Talks

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Episode #77 with Allison Aitken

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the Buddhist text tradition does, and also viewed anger as tied up with a kind of misunderstanding. But where the Stoics are asking us to be kind of detached, in a sense, Martha Nussbaum adds that we also ought to add love into the equation, that this is an important affective state for someone who's going to be a leader of a revolutionary justice movement, that they ought to not be motivated by a kind of destructive anger that's punitive and retributive, that that's going to be counterproductive to an effort to right wrongs in the world, but then also, they ought to be guided by this affective state of love. I think that what's so beautiful about texts like Shantideva's and his message is that it captures both of these elements really uniquely, I think. So he's guiding us to understand the way in which anger and ignorance are tied together and that it would be helpful for us to, in a sense, detach from that anger, but at the same time, the result isn't this cold and clinical detachment. What we should instead be cultivating is a kind of love and compassion and the kind that takes personal responsibility for the welfare of others and works to alleviate suffering wherever possible in whatever way one can.

James Shaheen: Well, Allison Aitken, thanks so much for joining us. It's been a great pleasure. And for our listeners, be sure to look out for Allison's article in the November issue of *Tricycle*. Thank you, Allison.

Allison Aitken: Thank you so much for having me.

James Shaheen: You've been listening to *Tricycle Talks* with Allison Aitken. We'd love to hear your thoughts about the podcast, so write us at feedback@tricycle.org to let us know what you think. *Tricycle Talks* is produced by As It Should Be Productions and Sarah Fleming. I'm James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening!