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Dealing with Anger in Trauma-Informed Buddhist Practice

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Abstract

Buddhism, at the core of its teaching, is concerned with the relief from suffering, and arguably trauma in particular. Yet, recognition of potential complications in mindfulness practice related to previous trauma raised a need for contemporary trauma-informed Buddhist practice. Anger is one aspect of trauma, and Buddhist approaches to anger can be categorized into three broad approaches: cognitive-attentional contemplative techniques, mindful awareness of anger, and heart-anger. These approaches have various advantages and potential pitfalls in the context of trauma. Polyvagal theory can support Buddhist practice with anger, including using cognitive-attentional practices combined with mindfully held anger or heart-anger. The practical application of Buddhist approaches to anger in a trauma-informed framework will be explored, using the Plum Village style of practice as a case study.

Buddhism, at the core of its teaching, is concerned with the relief from suffering.[1] Thich Nhat Hanh's expression, "No mud, no lotus", conveys how mindful investigation of suffering can lead to spiritual transformation.[2] Practitioners of Buddhism and psychotherapy, for example, Mark Epstein, have recognized the applicability of Buddhist practice to healing trauma. In Epstein's view, the Buddha "achieved enlightenment by confronting his own trauma and using it to broaden the horizons of his mind".[3] Transforming the suffering of trauma is arguably well within the scope of Buddhist practice. Yet, early in the adaptation of Buddhist meditation to medical settings, it was noted that complications can arise, related to unveiling of previously repressed trauma, potentially leading to severe distress, flashbacks, and even psychosis.[4] As Buddhism and Buddhist practices evolve in the Western context, both as psychological treatment and spiritual practice, and given the ubiquity of trauma (almost 90% of a US nationwide sample had been exposed to trauma using DSM-5 criteria, the need for trauma-sensitive applications of the practices is now recognized.[5] Individuals with trauma-related difficulties may be particularly drawn to Buddhism due to the promise of a remedy for suffering, and trauma is so common that some number of individuals affected by trauma will likely be found in any group of people engaged in mindfulness practices derived from Buddhism.[6] Treleaven described the need for Buddhist teachers to be aware of systems of oppression in which trauma occurs and called for adaptations to mindfulness practice to address intense fear, shame, and emotional dysregulation associated with trauma.[7] His

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[1] Rupert Gethin. *The Buddhist Path to Awakening: A Study of the Bodhi-Pakkhiya Dhamma* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2001).

[2] Thich Nhat Hanh. *No Mud, No Lotus: The Art of Transforming Suffering* (Berkeley: Parallax Press; 2014), 128.

[3] Mark Epstien. *The Trauma of Everyday Life* (London: Penguin Press, 2013).

[4] John J Miller. “The Unveiling of Traumatic Memories and Emotions Through Mindfulness and Concentration Meditation: Clinical Implications and Three Case Reports,” *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*. 25 (1993): 169.

[5] Kilpatrick, Resnick, Milank, Miller, Keyes, Freidman. “National Estimates of Exposure to Traumatic Events and PTSD Pevalence Using DSM-IV and DSM-5 Criteria,” *Journal of Traumatic Stress.* (2013): 537-547.

[6] David Trelevan, *Trauma-Sensitive Manfulness: Practices for Safe and Transformative Healing* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), 272.

[7] Ibid.

recommendations for trauma-informed Buddhist practice can be further extended by consideration of trauma-informed Buddhist approaches to anger.

Anger is a common symptom of trauma, and one of the diagnostic criteria of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5).[8] Three main categories of approaches to anger in Buddhist practice can be identified. Cognitive-attentional approaches aim to reduce anger by shifting focus away from thoughts and attention patterns that reinforce anger. Masters identified two additional approaches that are found in Buddhist traditions: mindfully holding anger, to investigate and understand it; and heart-anger, or expressing anger when it arises, but from a place of compassion. The cognitive-attentional approaches can support the application of the latter two. Each approach to anger has advantages and potential pitfalls. Employing contemporary psychological understandings and awareness of trauma effects, particularly polyvagal theory, appreciation of contexts of oppression in which trauma occurs, and dynamics of suppressing or bypassing anger, will help spiritual practitioners and communities to apply the different Buddhist approaches to anger skillfully, while avoiding potential problems such as emotional dysregulation and invalidation. There is a large diversity in the way Buddhism is practiced, therefore, it may be helpful to narrow the scope of the discussion to one school in particular.[9] The teachings in the Plum Village tradition, a large international Buddhist movement created by Thich Nhat Hanh, will be examined as a case in point, particularly because this community is currently working towards incorporating trauma-sensitive practices, and findings applicable to this

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[8] American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th Ed.).* (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013).

[9] Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

community may generalize to other Buddhist communities with similar practices.

Cognitive-attentional approaches to anger in Buddhism are rooted in teachings that anger is counterproductive and undesirable. Thich Nhat Hanh's book on the topic, for example, described an angry person as a "bomb ready to explode", destructive of family life and corrosive to relationships.[10] In Buddhist literature, anger has been described as a dangerous delusion, founded upon distortions or inaccurate views, for example, falsely perceiving self and others as having inherent self-existence, leading to "self-grasping".[11] From the Buddhist view that no phenomena have independent self-existence, and that all effects are conditioned by previous causes which are themselves conditioned by other causes, the actions of other beings that purportedly cause one's suffering and anger are themselves acting "without volition" - acting solely on causes and conditions. Giving rise to anger creates conditions for future conflict and suffering to arise and is therefore undesirable.[12] From a more concrete perspective, anger can be the result of inaccurate perceptions about another person's intentions cognitive distortions, in psychological terms. This naturally leads to the use of various contemplative techniques to reflect on, and correct those distortions, in historical and contemporary Buddhist teachings. In general, these can be described as contemplative practices to shift attention from thought patterns that reinforce anger, to ones that help eliminate it. For example, in the Discourse on the Five Ways of Putting an End to Anger, the practitioner is advised through various similes to direct attention from the person's unkind words and actions, and make efforts to attend to whatever kindness the person does express,

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[10] Thich Nhat Hanh, *Anger: Wisdom for Cooling the Flames* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2001).
[11] Kelsang Gyasto, *Meaningful to Behold: Becoming a Friend of the World* (London: Tharpa Publications, 1989).
[12] Ibid.

however small.[13] This process could catalyze more empathic and compassionate thinking. Śāntideva advocated contemplations that challenge the notion that one is right and the other is wrong, which can justify and perpetuate anger - "Both his weapon and my body are causes of suffering. He has obtained a weapon, and I have obtained a body. With what should I be angry?" This type of contemplation draws the practitioner's attention to the ways in which he has contributed to his own suffering.[14] Among other practices, he also recommends consideration of the idea that the antagonist may be giving the practitioner a chance to practice forbearance whereas on account of the practitioner, the antagonist has entered into a negative emotional state.[15] Rather than feeling that he has been wronged and the antagonist owes him something, one contemplates the reverse scenario. This aligns with the principles of Naikan therapy, a contemporary practice derived from Buddhism, in which practitioners are advised to reflect on three essential questions - what was received from the other person, what was returned to them, and what troubles or difficulties one caused the other person. This practice of systematic reflection is intended to correct the common bias of dwelling on being wronged but overlooking the gifts they have received from others which forms the basis of gratitude. Essentially, contemplative-attentional approaches to anger in Buddhism shift the practitioner's thoughts and attention away from ruminations and observations that perpetuate anger, to thoughts that give rise to competing emotions such as empathy or compassion.

As interesting as the contemplative or attention-shifting techniques are, they potentially can suffer from the same issues that can be encountered when working with cognitive restructuring in

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[13] Thich Nhat Hanh *Chanting from the Heart: Buddhist Ceremonies and Daily Practices* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 2007), 431.

[14] Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche, *Shantideva's A Guide to the Boddhisattva's Way of Life* (Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 2016).

[15] Ibid.

psychotherapy. An instruction to change one's thinking could well be experienced as invalidating, particularly for spiritual practitioners who have had a history of invalidation during childhood. The need for validation has therefore been recognized as an essential strategy in working with this population, in Dialectical Behavioural Therapy for Borderline Personality Disorder, a condition in which anger is a prominent feature. [16] Even if the practice of restructuring one's thoughts would prove to be ultimately helpful if diligently employed, a defensive response could lead to resistance to employing the technique, and the perceived invalidation, even if well-intentioned, could be a recapitulation of a previous invalidating trauma. Another potential problem is that if the intensity of anger is too strong, the overwhelming emotion could push the practitioner into a physiological state in which creative thinking becomes inaccessible.[17] This will be discussed further, below.

One way of addressing the need for support and validation, and the problem of emotional dysregulation, is another form of practice with anger that Masters described as mindfully held anger and emphasized by Thich Nhat Hanh in the Plum Village Tradition.[18] The practitioner refrains from speaking or acting while angry, mindfully focuses the mind on the breath and uses it to calm the mind and body, gives rise to compassion, and then looks deeply into the anger to understand its true nature.[19] This approach emphasizes self-care and therefore has validation built into the approach. It also incorporates a calming mindfulness practice to protect against being emotionally overwhelmed. Inquiring into the nature of one's anger, can then help the practitioner to identify deeper truths that

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[16] Marsha Linham, *Cognitive-Behavioral Treatment of Borderline Personality Disorder* (New York: Guilford Publications, 2018), 588.

[17] Stephen W. Porges, *The Pocket Guide to the Polyvagal Theory: The Transformative Power of Feeling Safe* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2017), 288.

[18] Thich Nhat Hanh, *Anger: Wisdom for Cooling the Flames*.

[19] Ibid.

were not initially obvious, such a tendency to project one's faults onto others, intergenerational transmission of anger tendencies, conflating a past upset with the present situation, or another underlying emotion like hurt or sadness that is being avoided - in this case, anger would be a secondary emotion.[20]

Masters described potential criticisms and shortfalls of the approach of mindfully holding anger.[21] For example, there must be scenarios in which anger is an adaptive, or primary emotion - for example, a need to speak out against injustice or an abuse. It may not be feasible or advisable for a survivor to wait until they feel completely calm and equanimous before peacefully speaking their truth. An instruction to wait until the intensity of feeling subsides, may lead to a form of silencing the suffering individual, because the opportunity to speak out has passed. At worst, it might establish a community norm in which a person is explicitly or implicitly shamed for expressing anger in a passionate way. Thich Nhat Hanh's taught explicitly that anger should be cared for, not suppressed.[22] However, Thich Nhat Hanh has also taught that anger should be communicated calmly rather than being used as a source of energy for self-expression, which could create a culture against expressing passionate anger in any form. This is similar to the potential for invalidation when working with cognitive-attentional approaches in a practitioner with a developmental history of trauma and/or invalidation.

A person who has experienced much invalidation and is prone to pleasing other people at the expense of taking care of their own needs, may be at risk of using spiritual practice to suppress or bypass their anger,

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[20] Robert Elliot, et.al. *Learning Emotion-Focused Therapy: The Process-experiential Approach to Change* (Washington: American Psychological Association, 2004), 366.

[21] Masters, Robert A. "Compassionate Wrath: Transpersonal Approaches to Anger." *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 32, no. 1 (2000): 32-38.

[22] Thich Nhat Hanh, *Anger: Wisdom for Cooling the Flames.*

enacting the same disavowal of anger or aggression, and their needs, in their spiritual community.[23] Establishing a norm within a spiritual community, of calm, tranquil communication, can also potentially lead to rejection, however subtle, of individuals who do not or cannot conform to this expectation; these individuals may be unable to comply with the norm due to intensity of emotion that has arisen, at least in part, because they have been invalidated and rejected in the past, and a rejection from the spiritual community can be a recapitulation of this painful experience. As Treleaven described, trauma occurs within larger systems of oppression.[24] Spiritual communities function within those larger systems. Anger may be just what is needed to create enough of a disruption in the status quo for change to occur. The author recalls attending a retreat in which a woman with a physical disability spoke with passionate anger about the way she had been excluded from participating in many activities due to the lack of wheelchair accessibility; had the community insisted that she remain silent until she could speak in a calm tone of voice, the opportunity to address all of the retreatants, and to convey her message with intensity, might have been lost. A trauma-informed way of practicing Buddhism should explicitly account for this potential need, at times, for anger to be expressed in the moment.

Mindfully held anger is also subject to the same vulnerability to overwhelming emotional intensity as the cognitive-attentional

[23] Mark Epstein “"Psychodynamics of Meditation: Pitfalls on the Spiritual Path," *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 22, no. 1 (1990): 17-34.

[24] David Trelevan, *Trauma-Sensitive Manfulness: Practices for Safe and Transformative Healing* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), 272.

approaches; a person experiencing very intense anger may have trouble doing mindful activities such sitting meditation or walking meditation.

Masters described an alternative approach to mindfully held anger, which he called heart-anger, and which addresses the need to express anger in the moment.[25] This is consistent with the practice of other spiritual teachers cited by Masters but contradicts the explicit teaching of Thich Nhat Hanh; refraining from acting or speaking when anger arises is a core practice in the Plum Village tradition.[26] As described by Masters, heart-anger involves expressing anger while simultaneously experiencing genuine compassion for the object of the anger. Rather than holding the anger back and expressing it calmly later, the anger is expressed at the time it is needed, to produce necessary change. According to Masters, this can connect people, overcome resistance to change, and correct injustices.[27] This consistent with historical views of anger as a potentially righteous or purifying force, and the understanding that anger can be a motivating force that can inspire a person to take some necessary risks.[28] This view of anger can account for the need for angry self-expression in certain situations that are recognized in Buddhist practice. For example, speaking out against oppression is a core practice of engaged Buddhsim within the Plum Village tradition.[29] In the context of Buddhism, teachers such as the Tibetan master Marpa have been described as using harsh anger to correct a vice or to stimulate repentance for spiritual purification

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[25] Robert A. Masters, "Compassionate Wrath: Transpersonal Approaches to Anger." *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 32, no. 1 (2000): 32-38.

[26] Thich Nhat Hanh *Chanting from the Heart: Buddhist Ceremonies and Daily Practices* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 2007), 431.

[27] Robert A. Masters, "Compassionate Wrath: Transpersonal Approaches to Anger."

[28] Michael Potegal and Raymond W. Novacao, "A Brief History of Anger," in *International Handbook of Anger*, ed. by Michael Potegal, Gerhard Stemmler, and Charles Spielberger (New York: Springer, 2010), 9-24.

[29] Thich Nhat Hanh, *Chanting from the Heart,* 431.

of the student.[30] The addition of the concept of "heart-anger" as a complement to mindfully holding anger, could provide a means for community members to shock others into making necessary changes where injustices or systems of oppression are operating.

There is potential to misuse or abuse the idea of heart-anger, becoming ensnared in "self-aggrandizing" purposes, serving one's own interests rather than truly keeping the other person's best interests in mind.[31] The compassionate form of anger expression could be easily confused with unleashing or venting anger in an unskillful way. Masters elaborated on qualities and capacities that are essential in practicing heart-anger effectively, in order to avoid the pitfall of unleashing anger in a disinhibited, destructive way. Besides being firmly grounded in love and compassion, the individual should have a well-established capacity for mindfulness of whatever is arising; familiarity and ease with emotional release practices so as to access cathartic procedures when they are needed; well-tested self-knowledge of one's agendas and psychological makeup; a capacity for being empathetic, conscious, and appropriately non-defensive in relationships; and respect and love for passion.[32] This implies a fairly high level of skill and self-knowledge. Members of a spiritual community who may have the most perspective on injustices and oppression within the society, and who therefore would be in the best position for speaking out, could well have more difficulty doing so, because their knowledge of injustice might come from experiencing that injustice in a traumatizing way. Their capacity to remain mindfully engaged with emotion and traumatic memories without becoming overwhelmed could be compromised by limitations in the window of tolerance of physiological arousal; the person could become tipped into a "fight or flight" state

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[30] Robert A. Masters, "Compassionate Wrath: Transpersonal Approaches to Anger."
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.

or a freeze response, both of which could compromise mindful self-expression.[33] The need for highly developed personal capacities could be a major limiting factor in using heart-anger effectively.

Applying the three categories of Buddhists approaches to anger skillfully in the context of trauma requires identifying when to use each type of approach, as some of the approaches make up for shortcomings of the others. However, especially when trauma is involved, other trauma-informed practices can ensure that conditions are in place to mitigate the previously discussed potential pitfalls of these approaches, such as being overwhelmed by anger, or experiencing invalidation.

In general, the heart-anger approach appears to be useful if there is an urgent issue that needs to be addressed in the moment, or the practitioner is aware of ongoing oppression or injustice that needs to be addressed passionately. It may be wise to use the heart-anger approach only in when it appears be specifically required as the prerequisite capacities to use it effectively are considerable, and there is potential for the anger to damage relationships. Mindfully held anger appears to be a useful default approach, as it minimizes the risk of damaging relationships while also working to transform the anger into something of value, like improved self-knowledge. This leaves the question of the role for cognitive-attentional practices for anger, if any.

It appears that while approaches of mindfully holding anger and heart-anger recognize some value in anger, the cognitive-attentional approaches are directed at eliminating anger. This appears to be a contradiction, but recognizing different dimensions of anger - cognitive, affective, somatic, and volitional helps to reconcile this. Anger in the sense of hatred or ill-will, or envy as identified in the Discourse on the Five Ways

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[33] David A. Trevalen, *Trauma-Sensitive Mindfulness,* 272.

of Putting an End to Anger, could involve negative cognitions (for example, blaming the other, ruminating on ways that one was wronged, envying another's good fortune) and negative volitional dimensions (desire to punish, hurt, or sanction the other or behaving as a passive victim) that may be appropriately thought of as counterproductive to relationships and personal growth.[34] On the other hand, anger may be a secondary emotion that defends a more vulnerable emotion; or adaptive anger, a reaction to a realistic threat.[35] The former could be held mindfully to achieve greater self-knowledge, and the latter could potentially be expressed in a skillful way. These forms of anger may differ from the ill-will type in the types of cognitions and volitions yet share similarities in affect and somatic activation. Recognizing different aspects of anger allows for the possibility that the aim of cognitive-attentional practices is not necessarily to eliminate all dimensions of anger but to eliminate harmful thoughts and urges that are a part of anger. Putting an end to ill-will, therefore can be complementary to the other two approaches; whether there is a need to express anger passionately or contemplate it quietly, hatred or malicious intent should be eliminated for best effect - in the former case, to minimize the risk of acting out in a destructive way, and in the latter case, to gain greater clarity of mind for reflection on the situation. When holding anger mindfully, adding contemplations to modify angry thoughts could potentially lead to more rapid change in the anger than mindfully noticing sensations, thoughts, and feelings that are arising with anger, though this assertion has not been empirically verified to the author's knowledge, and could be a topic for further study.

Contrary to expectations, the severity of the insult, or in some cases trauma, may not impact on the suitability of specific contemplations to put aside angry thoughts. Gregg Krech described an example in which

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[34] Thich Nhat Hanh, *Chanting from the Heart,* 431.

[35] Robert Elliot, et.al. "Learning Emotion-Focused Therapy," 366.

Naikan contemplation might be applied, with sensitivity, to a female survivor of rape from an uncle: contemplating other relationships besides with the rapist might highlight the care and benefits she gained from others and counterbalance the emphasis on being hurt. Eventually, in contemplating the ways in which the rapist helped her or how she inconvenienced the rapist, she might gain a more complete and accurate understanding of her uncle and her relationship with him while not in any way condoning the rape. Healing could come in the form of appreciation that the pain of the experience took place in the context of life that was mostly full of love and support. Even in more heinous cases of chronic abuse or deprivation, it is possible to imagine that there were still caring factors that allowed the person to survive and other aspects of his or her relationships besides pain and anger. It may be possible, at least theoretically, to apply contemplative practices even when there has been trauma underlying the anger.

Despite selecting the most useful approach to anger for the situation, one challenge of trauma is that the emotion may be too overwhelming or dysregulating to apply the strategy effectively – the practitioner might be too overwhelmed to think clearly, stay mindful, or act compassionately. Polyvagal theory, as applied to trauma, can provide a framework for understanding nervous system states of arousal that correspond with anger and practices that can optimize the processing of that anger. The window of tolerance idea in polyvagal theory suggests that maintaining an intermediate level of arousal between an over-aroused, threat-response mode and a hypoaroused, shut-down mode is optimal for social engagement and cognition, while either extreme hinders pro-social activity. Practices to support practitioners in remaining within the window of tolerance include recognizing signs of dysregulation and slowing the pace of practice or taking breaks if needed.[36] Potentially, as well, practitioners

[36] David A. Trevalen, *Trauma-Sensitive Mindfulness,* 272.

can work to expand the window of tolerance so they can be more resilient in the face of strong emotions like anger. Traditional Buddhist practices like mindfulness meditation, which may help in part by promoting a parasympathetic nervous system response by reducing external stimulation (if practiced in a calming environment) and slowing the breathing could be supplemented by practices from other traditions or systems of training that might increase the parasympathetic tone, deliberately strengthen the capacity of the autonomic nervous system to return to a regulated state.[37] Training with cold water exposure, for example, has been popularized recently by Wim Hof and has been shown to be a potential means of activating the parasympathetic nervous system.[38] Biofeedback-related techniques, with or without technology, for example, from the Heartmath Institute, can also be employed to create optimal conditions in the body and nervous system for clear thought and mental flexibility, relevant to coping with anger.[39] These techniques, like heart-focused breathing may also draw the attention of practitioners of Buddhism to helpful ways of practicing that might already be part of their tradition, like placing a hand on the heart and focusing the awareness on the heart, that might otherwise be downplayed or ignored.

Polyvagally informed techniques facilitate the practitioner being able to stay engaged with anger without becoming overwhelmed, which can support the skillful practice of heart-anger, as well as mindfully held anger; in those cases, the individual also would need to be able to remain present to the anger but not be overwhelmed or even dissociate.

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[37] Robert Brown and Patricia Gerbarg, *The Healing Power of the Breath: Simple Techniques to Reduce Stress and Anxiety, Enhance Concentration, and Balance your Emotions.* (Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 2012).

[38] Wim Hof, *The Wim Hof Method: Activate Your Full Human Potential* (Louisville: Sounds True, 2020).

[39] Doc Childre and Deborah Rozman. *Transforming anger: The Heartmath Solution for Letting Go of Rage, Frustration, and Irritation*. (New Harbinger Publications, 2003), 176.

Cognitive-attentional contemplative practices in Buddhism would also be more effective when done with a calm nervous system. Polyvagally-informed practices also would apply to other strong emotions like fear, that may be present in a post-traumatic state, which Treleaven described in more detail.[40]

The social coherence of the community via synchronization of physiological parameters between individuals is also an essential factor in successful practice with anger.[41] The calming presence of other community members can help the angry person to come into a state of physiological regulation by providing cues of safety.[42] This is supportive of all approaches to working with anger but especially important when applying the cognitive-attentional approaches to anger, which require capacity for clear thinking and which the practitioner may resist due to the desire for validation. The advice for contemplations given in the time of the Buddha, or by Śāntideva, who was active in the 8th century regarding anger, was probably primarily directed at fellow monastic practitioners part of a cohesive community of people sharing the same values and ways of living, and striving to live harmoniously.[43] Most of the time, they were likely venerated by the lay community. This likely created factors for psychological safety and belonging. It would probably have been much easier to reflect on one's faults, to think about ways in which one may have contributed to others' difficulties, and to contemplate an antagonist's good qualities when able to rest assured of the community's support. Working in a contemporary context, the sense of safety created through the unconditional positive regard of a psychotherapist, or a community of practice with

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[40] David A. Trevalen, *Trauma-Sensitive Mindfulness,* 272.

[41] Rollin McCratty. "New Frontiers in Heart Rate Variability and Social Coherence Research: Techniques, Technologies, and Implications for Improving Group Dynamics and Outcomes." *Frontiers in Public Health* 5 (2017): 267.

[42] Stephen W. Porges, *The Pocket Guide* to *Polyvagal Theory.*

[43] Rupert Gethin, *The Foundation of Buddhism.*

strong bonds, might stand in for the membership in a monastic community; this aspect of co-regulation within a community is likely essential to use these contemplative practices for anger, especially with individuals who have experienced trauma. It is possible that under supportive conditions, these techniques could help to produce a more powerful transformation of angry thoughts, even in the context of trauma, than mindful awareness alone.

Practical recommendations for a trauma-informed Buddhist approach to anger can be made, considering the Plum Village tradition as a specific example. This community emphasizes the practice of mindfully holding anger, and the suggestions may generalize to other communities with similar practices. In this type of community, it may be helpful to acknowledge that there may be a role for the heart-anger to catalyze social change or motivate reparative action. There is an arguable concern that expressing anger in this way could be harmful for the individual by strengthening the tendency towards, or "seed", of anger.[44] However, it is also important to recognize that passionate anger may be needed to draw attention to injustices and that completely metabolizing anger may not be realistic or desirable in time-sensitive situations. Thich Nhat Hanh's advice on mindful and compassionate listening when someone is expressing anger can be very valuable to help the expresser of anger feel heard and validated so that the anger, having served its purpose, can subside.[45] In the Plum Village community, there is recognition that conflict in a community will happen and that anger may need to be expressed and heard. Building on this, the community could emphasize the need for the community to listen and create safety rather than putting the onus on the individual to express anger skillfully. Making space for the expression of anger could also counteract a tendency for the community to inadvertently

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[44] Thich Nhat Hanh, *Wisdom for Cooling the Flames.*

[45] Ibid.

encourage an agenda of suppressing anger. Contemporary practices from polyvagal theory can be taught generally to support practitioners in staying within the window of tolerance for their work with anger. If conditions are sufficiently supportive, practitioners may be able to make use of contemplations to shift perspective and rapidly transform negative cognitive and volitional aspects of anger in addition to using mindful awareness. Work with regulating the nervous system and establishing social safety and co-regulation should be prioritized before using cognitive techniques.

Three categories of Buddhist approaches to anger have been described. Buddhist contemplative techniques can be used to eliminate the destructive aspects of anger but may feel invalidating and challenging to use in the context of strong emotions. Mindful awareness of anger is likely to be helpful as a general baseline approach as it incorporates calming and validating elements. However, care must be taken not to inadvertently shame or censor practitioners experiencing anger or encourage spiritual bypassing. Awareness of collective trauma and social injustice draws attention to the potential benefit or even need for heart-anger, expressed with compassion when the circumstances require it. Still, there are risks of harming oneself or others by expressing the anger. Polyvagal theory can support the various ways of working with anger in Buddhist practice, including using the cognitive-attentional practices combined with mindfully held anger or heart-anger. Practicing within a cohesive and supportive community is particularly important. Consideration of anger furthers the understanding of how Buddhism might be practiced in a trauma-informed way.

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