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## Chapter 4

# Cutting the Roots of Virtue

### *Tsong kha pa on the Results of Anger*<sup>1</sup>

Daniel Cozort

In the Buddhist Abhidharma literature, six root afflictive emotions are identified as the causes for episodes or entire lifetimes of suffering. Of these, anger holds a singular place. Like all other non-virtues, it establishes “seeds” or “roots” of nonvirtue; but it is also one of a very few mental states<sup>2</sup> that nullify the seeds or roots of virtue that are planted by exemplary actions such as giving and patience.

Among these states, anger is uniquely destructive. The *Mañjuśrī-vikrīḍita Sūtra* warns that a single moment of anger can make a person lose a hundred eons of virtue. Śāntideva, the ninth-century author of the greatly influential *Bodhisattvacaṛyāvataṛa (BA)*, multiplies this dire warning tenfold: anger wipes out not just a hundred, he says, but a *thousand* eons of virtue.

Since most of us lose our tempers with dismaying frequency, this would seem to be terrible news. It looks as though we have little chance of ever accumulating any merit. And it must certainly make us wonder how it is possible to assert, as Mahāyāna Buddhists generally do, that all sentient beings will gain merit sufficient to attain liberation.

It appears in light of these Indian sources that apologists for the Mahāyāna tradition have a heavy burden—they must interpret statements about anger’s effect on the stores of virtue as gross

exaggerations spun out as a matter of “skill in means”; or, they must delimit the range of persons to whom the statements are said to apply; or, they must indicate ways in which anger’s effects can be ameliorated.

I will look here at the analysis of one prominent Mahāyāna apologist, Tsong kha pa Blo bzang grags pa, who founded the Tibetan dGe lugs pa monastic order in the fourteenth century. He meticulously scrutinizes the Indian sources in two places, his *Lam rim chen mo* (“Great Exposition of the Stages of the Path,” abbreviated hereafter as *LRCM*), completed in 1402, and his *dBu ma dgongs pa rab gsal* (“Illumination of the Thought, Extensive Explanation of [Candrakīrti’s] *Madhyamakāvātāra*,” abbreviated hereafter as *GPRS*), completed in 1418.<sup>3</sup> In brief, he contends that the drastic penalties mentioned before come only in the case of anger directed at *bodhisattvas* and he deftly explains that “cutting” the roots of virtue means something far less than “destroying.” However, it is not clear that, in the end, Tsong kha pa has succeeded in demonstrating that anger does not, at least in some cases, prevent salvation.

### Quantifying the Penalty for Anger

Let us look at Tsong kha pa’s analysis. First, he attempts to quantify the penalty for anger. He must depend on just a few sources in the sūtras, for although it is clear that the Buddha regarded anger as a massively destructive force, he was seldom, according to textual evidence, more specific.

Tsong kha pa cites the *Upāli-paripṛcchā Sūtra*, the *Mañjuśrī-vikrīḍita Sūtra*, and the *Sañchaya-gāthā-prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*. The *locus classicus* appears to be the aforementioned *Mañjuśrī-vikrīḍita Sūtra*, which warns that one may lose a hundred eons of virtue in a moment of anger.

Candrakīrti, the seventh-century Mādhyamika interpreter through whom Tsong kha pa views nearly all important matters of Buddhist doctrine, probably basing his estimate on this source, also states that anger destroys a hundred eons of virtue. However, he clarifies the sūtra by indicating that hundred-eon anger is directed at a “Conqueror Child,” or *bodhisattva*. This, of course,

greatly reduces the likelihood that an ordinary person would experience such anger.

Tsong kha pa also cites Śāntideva,<sup>4</sup> who without specifying the recipient of anger, says (*BA*: 6.1):

Whatever good deeds [you have done],  
 Collected over a thousand eons,  
 Such as giving and homage to the Ones Gone Thus  
 Are destroyed in one [moment of] anger.

Aware that Candrakīrti has specified that the recipient of hundred-eon anger is a bodhisattva, Tsong kha pa surmises that the recipient of the thousand-eon anger mentioned by Śāntideva must also be a bodhisattva and, moreover, that the angry person must be a *non*-bodhisattva.<sup>5</sup> In that case, Tsong kha pa concludes, Candrakīrti's reference to a *lesser* penalty that also involves anger with a bodhisattva can only mean that we have one bodhisattva angry with another.

Anger is not something we normally associate with bodhisattvas, who, for Tsong kha pa, are persons always able to rouse their *bodhicitta*, the altruistic aspiration to buddhahood. However, that *bodhicitta* can arise spontaneously does not necessarily mean that it is continuously present. At least some bodhisattvas are susceptible to anger for nearly all of a period of "uncountable" eons. This is the length of the paths of "accumulation" (*saṃbhāramārga*, *tshogs lam*) and "preparation" (*prayogamārga*, *sbyor lam*), the first two of the five paths concluding in buddhahood.<sup>6</sup>

Anger is not precluded until one is well into the path of preparation, the second part of which is called "peak" (*mūrdhan*, *rtse mo*) because it is the end of the period in which one can generate anger that will sever the roots of virtue. The present Dalai Lama (Gyatso: 83) contends that a bodhisattva may become angry even after that point, but the anger is weaker than the anger to which the quotations refer and will not sever the roots of virtue.

Tsong kha pa is very specific about the consequences of being an angry bodhisattva. A mature bodhisattva who is angered by one who is lesser<sup>7</sup> loses a hundred eons of virtue; on the other hand, a bodhisattva angry with a *greater* one loses an eon of virtue for each instant of the anger's duration. In the latter case, Tsong kha pa has a source in the *Saṅcaya-gāthā-prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, which states:<sup>8</sup>

If a bodhisattva who has not been prophesied  
 Angers and disputes with another who has so been,  
 He must bear the armor from the beginning for as many  
 Eons as the times his mind was imbued with hatred.

Tsong kha pa interprets this to mean that a bodhisattva's anger with one who has received the prophesy of buddhahood from a buddha will impede the former's progress for many eons. Presumably the number of instants would swiftly rise above one hundred, since anger has more serious consequences for lower persons than high ones and otherwise the greater bodhisattva would pay a higher price than a lesser.

However rare or common angry bodhisattvas might be, they incur lesser "penalties" for anger than do the rest of us. A bodhisattva's anger with a non-bodhisattva would entail a penalty far less than a hundred eons. Tsong kha pa explicitly asserts that "Only a bodhisattva is an object of anger that destroys roots of virtue accumulated over a hundred or a thousand eons."<sup>9</sup>

We non-bodhisattvas, then, must take care. According to Tsong kha pa, it does not matter whether one knows the person with whom one is angry to be a bodhisattva. Perhaps Tsong kha pa is thinking that even if one does not realize that the person at whom one is angry is an actual bodhisattva, one certainly would have experienced that person's compassion; one therefore would have correctly identified the fundamental character of the person even if one did not realize that the person merited the title "bodhisattva."

If so, it would support the view of the contemporary dGe lugs pa scholar, Geshe Kelsang Gyatso (154), who contends that anger toward anyone who has shown one great kindness is a source of "limitless destruction of merit." To become angry even at an equal, he continues, may cost roots of virtue collected over many lifetimes. He doesn't say why, but perhaps this is because anger mixed with ingratitude contributes to pride and other *kleśas*. This modern interpretation seems consonant with the thrust of the Indian sources.

Whoever is the recipient of one's anger, clearly anger is considered an immensely negative force. We would not be surprised to learn that anger could result in rebirth in a hell for thousands of years or that it might give one who had an otherwise fortunate birth an ugly countenance. But anger is far worse. What makes anger different from most other nonvirtues is that it not only

contributes to the store of causes for miserable future experiences but also affects the store of causes for fortunate experiences.

### Cutting Virtue's Roots

Tsong kha pa calls the principal effect of anger, occurring in all but a few instances, "cutting" the "roots of virtue" (*kuśulamūla, dge rtsa*)<sup>10</sup> (Gyatso: 83). Ways to "cultivate" and "plant" roots of virtue were a major concern in early Buddhism (Buswell: 107-134). For instance, roots of virtue are a major topic in the *Abhidharma-mahā-vibhāṣā*, the document from which comes the name of the Vaibhāṣika school that, according to Tibetan doxographers, is one of the two principal Hinayāna systems. Subsequent theoreticians of karma retained the horticultural metaphor but switched to the image of "seeds" rather than roots, and Tsong kha pa treats "roots" and "seeds" as synonymous terms. Both refer to the establishment in an individual continuum of a potential for future effects.

Again, the Indian texts seem to warn clearly and unambiguously that even a moment of anger can wipe out the virtue one has accumulated over the course of eons. What else might it mean to "destroy" (*bcom*) virtue "from the roots"? When a plant's roots are cut, it usually dies. Alternately, when its seeds are destroyed they can no longer bear fruit.

However, some plants, such as the sweet potato, do not die when their roots are cut; they lie dormant until the conditions exist for their regeneration, or they slowly produce new root systems. Tsong kha pa, it seems, considers virtue to be a sweet potato. He explains that when anger "cuts" virtue's "roots," it is not destroyed, although eons will roll on before it again becomes capable of producing the sweet fruit of a pleasant rebirth. Therefore, "destruction of the roots of virtue" is *not* equivalent to "totally cutting the roots of virtue," which for some early Buddhists meant a permanent disbarment from liberation.<sup>11</sup>

This is the fine-tuning in which Tsong kha pa engages as he addresses himself to certain unnamed scholars, apparently the followers of Bu ston,<sup>12</sup> the prolific thirteenth-century scholar of the Sa skya sect whose influential works were still reverberating when Tsong kha pa began his Buddhist studies. He affirms Bu ston's basic interpretation: despite the presence in the Indian sources of apparently unambiguous language such as "destruction"

or “elimination,” the “seeds” established by virtuous actions are certainly not destroyed by negative emotions such as anger; they are merely incapacitated. They cannot be destroyed by anger because only wisdom, i.e., consciousnesses at the level of the path of seeing and above, can eliminate karmic seeds. That is, until one has experienced emptiness mystically—without any dualities, without conceptuality—liberation from any sort of karma and its results is impossible. Hence, the language of the Indian texts is not literal, but must be interpreted in the following way: because the seeds of virtue cannot reach fruition, for the angry person it is *as though* the roots of virtue were destroyed.

Although it is not a question Tsong kha pa addresses explicitly, we can see that by interpreting “cutting” as something less than “destruction,” Tibetan exegetes seek to avoid a serious challenge to the Mahāyāna doctrine of universal salvation (namely, that all sentient beings will eventually reach buddhahood). If anger can be so potent, and as we know too well ourselves, occur so frequently, then certainly there would be beings who had no roots of virtue at all. In that case, how could they ever have fortunate rebirths in which to make progress toward buddhahood?

Asaṅga, in his *Abhidharma-samuccaya*, asks just this question and answers that there *are* hopeless cases.<sup>13</sup> On the one hand, he makes a distinction between “roots” and “seeds” of virtue and nonvirtue such that it might be possible for someone to have lost “roots” but not “seeds” and therefore retain the possibility of future regeneration of the roots of virtue. However, he contends that there are some among those whose *roots* of virtue are eradicated who also have no *seeds* of virtue and therefore have no “dharma of *parinirvāṇa*.” They make *samsāra* truly endless, for they themselves will never escape it.

Tsong kha pa makes no distinction like Asaṅga’s between “roots” and “seeds” and does not admit the possibility that some are doomed to endless *samsāra*. He appears to think that the roots of virtue can be regenerated; they have been deadened by the poison of anger, but they can be revived by certain antidotes. As I will discuss shortly, it is not clear that his explanation succeeds.

To sum up, Tsong kha pa agrees with Bu ston and his followers that the roots of virtue continue to exist despite anger. However, he disagrees with them over whether this will entail adverse consequences. The problem, they think, with asserting that virtue

might still exist despite having been “cut” is that it might then seem to follow that if certain precise conditions were to occur, virtue’s seeds might yet sprout; therefore, anger would not actually have had a deleterious effect on virtue. E.g., if virtue continued to exist, could not a wayward monk whose temper too often bested him somehow still experience the effects of past virtue? Tsong kha pa’s response falls under several headings below.

### Seeds Can Exist Without Ripening

In the first place, Tsong kha pa wishes to establish that karmic seeds *can* exist without ripening even in the presence of conditions that ordinarily would cause them to “sprout.” He uses as an example the way in which one can stop the effects of a nonvirtuous act from being issued by using the “four opponent powers.” These are spelled out in Bhāvaviveka’s sixth-century *Madhyamakāhṛdaya-ṛtti-tarkajvālā* as remorse, restraint, the cultivation of specific “antidotes,” and cultivating *bodhicitta*. For instance, with regard to a harsh utterance, one might regret it, pledge not to do it again, cultivate loving-kindness, and so forth. This will prevent unpleasant effects of the fruition of the act, even though it cannot actually *destroy* the seed of nonvirtue that has been established. Teachers often use the confusing term “purification” to refer to this suppression of the maturation of negative karmic seeds, which one might incorrectly assume entailed complete destruction or elimination, but which in fact means only temporary incapacitation. In just the same way, Tsong kha pa maintains, anger can prevent the pleasant effects of virtue even though it cannot destroy the seeds of virtue.

Another of Tsong kha pa’s examples involves a far more advanced person who has attained the path of preparation, that level at which, according to Tsong kha pa, there has been an inferential understanding of emptiness. For such a person, the attainment of a higher path consciousness ensures that even the presence of what ordinarily would be proper ripening conditions will still not lead to the maturation of those seeds of nonvirtue that could ripen as wrong views or birth in the miserable realms of animals, hungry ghosts, and hell-beings. This level of attainment incapacitates those seeds, even though it has not yet destroyed them. Indeed, *all* “heavy” karma, the sort that results in particularly fortunate or

miserable birth, suppresses the issuance of effects that are contrary to it. For instance, a hell-being never experiences pleasure, nor does a god experience pain (until, after vast stretches of time, his or her birth-impelling karma approaches exhaustion). Therefore, in Buddhist cosmology, the incapacitation of seeds of nonvirtue or virtue is a common occurrence.<sup>14</sup>

Tsong kha pa's final example is not as obvious as the others. In fact, it involves such a difficult point that it is included within a special list in the dGe lugs pa doxographical literature, which Tsong kha pa calls the "eight great difficult points of Nāgārjuna's *Madhyamaka-kārikās*."

Among seeds that exist without ripening are those that have *already* ripened, yet continue to exist. Commenting on a passage in the *Akṣayamati-nirdeśa Sūtra* that compares virtue to a drop of water placed in the ocean, remaining as long as the ocean endures, Tsong kha pa says (*GPRS*: 56b), "Virtuous roots are not consumed through the emergence of their effects; however, it is not the case that anger does not consume them." In *LRCM* (401) he says, "Even with regard to virtuous and nonvirtuous actions that have ceased upon issuing their own maturation, there has not been an elimination of their seeds." In brief, he says that actions can cause effects without being "used up."

How could "ripened seeds" continue to have any kind of existence? One answer is that we must recall that seeds established by virtue (or nonvirtue) cannot be destroyed by anything other than wisdom of the path of seeing or above; therefore, they are not destroyed even if their effects have already issued forth.

I think, however, that Tsong kha pa's point is considerably more subtle. He expands upon it in *GPRS*, commenting on Candrakīrti's statement in *Madhyamakāvātāra* (6.33) that:

Because a sprout is not other [i.e., *inherently* other]<sup>15</sup> than its seed,  
At the time of a sprout, the seed has not been destroyed.  
However, because they are not the same  
It is not said that at the time of a sprout its seed exists.

Tsong kha pa comments (*GPRS*: 127b):

In the [non-Prāsaṅgika] systems, they think: "When a thing such as a sprout has disintegrated, everything that is part of the sprout is obliterated." Since one does not get any other thing that is different from a sprout, such as a pot, they assert that disintegratedness<sup>16</sup> (*zhig pa*) is utterly not a thing.

In the [Prāsaṅgika] system, for example, one cannot designate as an illustration of Upagupta either (1) Upagupta's individual five aggregates (*skandha, phung bo*), (2) their collection, or (3) that which is a different entity from those two, and Upagupta is also unsuitable to be an illustration of those three. However, it is not contradictory that despite that, what is designated as Upagupta in dependence on his aggregates is a thing. Similarly, even though disintegratedness also cannot be an illustration of either the thing that has been destroyed or anything that is the same type as that, it is a thing because it is produced in dependence on a thing that has been destroyed.

Now we know what karmic “seeds” *really* are, according to Tsong kha pa—the “disintegratednesses” of intentional actions. When an action disintegrates, its state of *having* disintegrated—its disintegratedness—arises. This state, too, disintegrates, giving rise to the “disintegratedness of the disintegratedness” of the action, and so on, and on, until a fruition occurs. Hence, “seed” really refers to the present moment of “disintegratedness” of an original action. Asserting that “disintegratedness” is a functioning entity but denying that it is substantially existent allows Tsong kha pa to avoid either the absurdity of saying that karma persists unchanged or of proposing a substantially existent entity like the Vaibhāṣika “acquisition” (*prāpti, thob*) to account for the continuing link between a mind-stream and a karma.<sup>17</sup>

To continue with the quotation: Based on his understanding of Prāsaṅgika philosophy, Tsong kha pa describes all phenomena as mere imputations designated in dependence on certain bases. In his example, a man named Upagupta is not identical with the body and mind in dependence on which “Upagupta” is designated. This is Upagupta's mode of existence because he is empty of inherent existence. Nevertheless, Upagupta exists.

Similarly, says Tsong kha pa, the “disintegratedness” of a virtuous action exists upon the action's disintegration. Although there is nothing to which one can point that is the “disintegratedness” (just as there was nothing to which one could point which was Upagupta), nevertheless there is a basis—the disintegrated action—in dependence on which “disintegratedness” can be designated (just as there is a basis—a body and mind—in dependence on which “Upagupta” can be designated).

The consequence of this is that Tsong kha pa feels that it is possible to assert that even when an action's fruition has been

experienced, the action's disintegratedness, which functions as its "seed," does not cease. Of course, to look at this another way, how could "disintegratedness" ever cease to exist? After all, once something has disintegrated, it will always be true that it has disintegrated. Thus, there is no way that anger could destroy the seeds of virtuous actions.<sup>18</sup> (It may also be that this manner of explaining the persistence of virtue's "seeds" even when virtue has been "ripened" has to do with denying that the accumulation of merit is a "zero-sum game." That is, although virtue might ripen in fortunate rebirths, it continues to "count" toward the store of merit that comprises half—the other half being the store of wisdom—of the requisite for buddhahood.)<sup>19</sup>

### **One Can Be Virtuous Without Having Roots**

The preceding discussion is one response to Bu ston's objection that if "cutting the roots of virtue" doesn't mean total destruction of them, there might still be some way that virtue will bear fruit. Continuing, Tsong kha pa explicitly argues that not only does anger not really destroy the roots of virtue, it does not preclude the performance of virtuous acts. That is, even though one cannot experience the effect of previous virtuous actions during the period in which virtuous roots have been incapacitated, one's predispositions to perform virtuous acts have not necessarily been eliminated.

We might have expected the opposite, namely, that one result of the incapacitation of virtue would be a neutralization or reversal of its "habitual" effect, the establishment of propensities for further virtuous action.<sup>20</sup> Apparently Tsong kha pa feels that although the seeds are incapacitated, the habits are not necessarily broken. This seems to make sense because persons who are occasionally angry may have had much conditioning to predispose them to virtuous behavior. Certainly this would be true in the cases of the bodhisattvas who become angry with each other or with common beings. It would contradict what we observe daily to maintain that a moment of anger dramatically and permanently alters an otherwise balanced or even benevolent personality.

However, this means that one can accumulate more virtue even while sitting in the karmic penalty box. Does this mean that there are "fresh seeds" that might ripen as fortunate rebirth or pleasant

experiences? If so, does this not considerably reduce the negative effect of anger? Since this would otherwise constitute a major loophole in Tsong kha pa's formulation, we can perhaps presume that these seeds, too, are incapacitated by anger. This assumption is consistent with the basic thrust of Tsong kha pa's interpretation of the meaning of "cutting the roots of virtue," since it looks *forward* toward eons in which there will be no ripening of the seeds of virtue rather than looking *backwards* at so many eons of virtue ruined.

Of course, it leads to the apparent paradox that the stores of virtue may be increased during the same period in which virtue's roots are "cut" and raises questions such as: if new roots of virtue are produced—and incapacitated—does this mean that some dormant "older" roots are activated? In other words, does anger affect a certain *quantity* of virtuous roots?

### Virtue That Is Cut Only Partially

Now, let us look at Tsong kha pa's third response to Bu ston's qualms about the existence of roots of virtue. Tsong kha pa also distinguishes between degrees of anger, only the worst of which truly "cuts" the roots of virtue. Thus, he appears to think that although in general, anger prevents the seeds of virtue from ripening, there may be exceptions. He says:<sup>21</sup>

The overcoming of a virtue does not mean that a virtue in one's continuum ceases to exist after one generates anger; rather, anger harms the virtue's capacity to issue forth an effect. The extent to which later fruition is harmed accords with the amount of harm done, causing a small, middling, or great extinguishment of virtue as explained above.

Tsong kha pa is referring to the *Upāli-paripṛcchā Sūtra*, which says:

Upāli, I have not seen such a drawing of a wound or maiming as when a trainee in the pure life (*brahmacārya*) abuses [another] trainee in the pure life. Upāli, then those great roots of virtue become diminished, thoroughly reduced, and eliminated. Upāli, if you would not try to attack with your mind things such as burning logs, what can we say about a body with consciousness?

Tsong kha pa interprets "diminished," "reduced," and "eliminated" respectively as small, middling, and complete elimination. That is, he argues that although it is true that anger cuts the roots of virtue, it may do so only partially. It is not clear whether this

means that in “small” or “middling” eliminations only some roots of virtue are touched or whether it means that all roots of virtue are diminished significantly, so that only partial fortunate results are possible.

In short, Tsong kha pa argues that although the Indian texts warn of draconian consequences to even a moment of anger—the loss of a thousand eons of virtue, for instance—this really means, in most cases, that there is a partial incapacitation of that virtue for a long future period. The result is that some of the seeds of virtue might actually ripen as a good body with good resources, etc., and because of this one could probably continue to make progress as a bodhisattva on the paths to buddhahood.

However, one’s progress will be slow. Although a novice bodhisattva’s anger at a mature bodhisattva will not de-commission her, it will impede her development. In any case, “cut” not only means nothing more than “incapacitation”; it also can mean just “mostly incapacitated.” Perhaps anger incapacitates those roots of virtue that would have ripened as lifetimes with superb conditions for the study of Dharma, enabling only those roots of virtue that could ripen as lifetimes or circumstances that are relatively mediocre.

### **Contradictions, Apparent and Real**

According to Tsong kha pa’s own reckoning, the journey over the paths to buddhahood requires no less than three periods of “countless” *great* eons. In a sense, then, a moment of anger resulting in a few hundred or thousand eons in the karmic penalty box amounts to no more than a stumble on the path. On the other hand, who gets angry only once in a great while, like a thousand eons? Even with Tsong kha pa’s modifications, it seems unlikely that an ordinary person would have any virtue not incapacitated by anger.

The most serious problem with any of the accounts of the effect of anger, then, is that they seem to leave open the possibility that there might be persons who would be the karmic equivalent of indentured servants, unable ever to be born into a body from which they could seek liberation. This would contradict a deeply held dogma about the possibility of universal salvation, which Tsong kha pa supports.<sup>22</sup> A single lifetime’s episodes of anger (particularly if that life is spent largely being jealous of one or more real bodhisattvas) could easily dig a hole so deep that even innumerable eons seem too brief to permit escape. This is why

vice is so vicious; it impels one into life after suffering life in which anger, among other negative emotions, is the norm rather than the exception.

The Tibetan tradition uses a famous analogy to *samsāra* which compares the chances of being born as a human who can hear the Dharma to the odds that a blind sea turtle, surfacing only once in a hundred years, will stick its head through a golden yoke floating on a vast ocean. In consideration of what we have learned about anger, we should change the setting of this scenario to outer space, where the yoke drifts through millions of cubic miles of the ether. What odds remain? In short, Tsong kha pa's efforts at moderation notwithstanding, the Indian sources seem to lead to an untenable conclusion.

Second, an apparent self-contradiction in Tsong kha pa's interpretation is that he himself maintains that regarding the roots of virtue, "cut" cannot be equated with "delay" or else there would be no great difference between anger and other negative emotions such as jealousy or gossiping, which also can delay the issuance of the effects of virtue. He actually says (*LRCM*: 401):

The mere temporary postponement of maturation is not appropriate to be the meaning of destroying the roots of virtue; otherwise, all the nonvirtuous actions that have power would have to be set forth as destroyers of the roots of virtue.

Based on our analysis, it is difficult to see how his understanding of the destruction of roots of virtue amounts to anything *other* than delay, since anger, though much more potent than any of these other *kleśas*, seems to be different only by degree. It is true that he sees a difference in the *way* in which the other *kleśas* cause a delay; he says (*LRCM*: 401):

The virtuous or nonvirtuous actions that have matured earlier temporarily stop the opportunity for the maturation of other actions; however, merely those [earlier maturations] cannot destroy virtue or nonvirtue and that is not set forth [in scripture as the meaning of "cut" the roots of virtue].

The fruition of the seeds of any virtuous or nonvirtuous action can result in a birth that prevents the maturation of seeds of its opposite. For instance, a seed established by nonvirtue might ripen as a birth in one of the hells. Because such a life is devoid of pleasure, seeds formerly established by virtue would lack the necessary conditions for their maturation. These seeds would not have been rendered ineffective in exactly the same way that anger renders seeds ineffective; they would not have been "cut" or "scorched"

or “withered” or otherwise directly neutralized. They would be like patrons in line for a film who do not know that around the corner, near the box office, others are cutting in. But what difference does it make that anger and pride, for instance, operate differently? In practice, the result is the same. You never get to see the movie.

### Other Questions

By focusing on the narrow issue of how and to what degree anger affects the stores of virtue, we have not yet asked several obvious questions. First, why is anger considered so incredibly destructive? There is no other religious tradition that approaches Buddhism in its negative assessment of the consequences of a moment’s angry outburst. What is special about anger for Buddhists?

Let us look at Tsong kha pa’s arguments against anger in the “patience” chapter of *LRCM* (in which he follows the lead of Śāntideva’s *BA*).<sup>23</sup>

(1) Anger against others is irrational because others lack autonomy. They are helpless against their own conditioning, which leads them to commit acts that provoke us to anger. It is obvious that they lack autonomy because even though they themselves want happiness, they commit acts that lead to suffering.

(2) Similarly, if one thinks that others are inherently annoying, they cannot rationally be blamed, since they are merely doing what is their nature.

(3) If, on the other hand, their annoying qualities are not inherent, then those qualities are a merely adventitious product of conditioning and should not be held against them.

(4) The provocative person is only indirectly responsible for annoyance; he or she is being used by hate in the same way that a person uses a stick. One should oppose the annoyance, not the person (i.e., “love the sinner, hate the sin”).

(5) Whatever makes one angry is the result of one’s own past actions. Annoying persons are nothing other than the agents of one’s own previous misdeeds.

(6) Only a provocative person gives one the opportunity to amass merit that can be helpful for spiritual progress. Therefore, one ought to be grateful for the provocation.

Note that his focus is on what happens to an *angry* person, not on the immediate consequences to the *recipient* of the anger. In other words, Tsong kha pa does not argue that anger ought to be avoided because it leads to violence against others or because it tends to provoke the recipient of one's anger into an equally angry state. These would be legitimate arguments, but Tsong kha pa's concern is for the mental state of the person who gets angry. He wishes to convince us that anger is simply irrational and that forbearance is beneficial, not that anger is wrong because it leads to physical or verbal acts (as he might argue if, for instance, he were addressing the faults of intoxication). It is a reminder that karma is primarily about *intention* (*cetanā, sems pa*), rather than act.

What is noteworthy about these arguments is that most of them revolve around the angry person's assumption of autonomy with respect to a provocateur—around the sort of ignorance that Buddhists identify as the “root of *samsāra*.” To be angry with someone implies that one falsely imputes to that person an autonomous self, and the dynamics of anger serve to reify that misconception. Tsong kha pa also demonstrates that anger involves ignorance about oneself, for it indicates that one does not understand that harms, real or imagined, arise only in dependence upon one's own continuum.<sup>24</sup> Because anger reifies ignorance, it is strongly contrary not only to the development of wisdom but also to the development of compassion, which grows only where the distinction of self-and-other has been weakened.

Perhaps, then, anger is felt to be in a different class than other nonvirtues because even more than desire, etc., it solidifies that most vicious of all vices, ignorance. That is why anger joins ignorance and desire to comprise the “three poisons” functioning as the hub of the wheel of *samsāra*.

Moving to a second question, why do Buddhists say that anger affects *virtue* instead of simply saying that anger is a nonvirtuous act that carries tremendous potential for future suffering? Why place anger (and a few other nonvirtues, as described below) in a different category than any other act? Perhaps the answer is that anger does not merely set in motion a future retribution and habituate the one it grasps to further outbursts; it creates a mood, or is one, which undermines positive thoughts and actions. It would not be sufficient on the plane of ordinary experience to describe

anger's effect only in terms of future negative effects. We would surely also want to add that anger diminishes positive movement. Thinking homologically, it must seem necessary in karmic theory to claim that anger produces not only roots of nonvirtue but affects the roots of virtue as well.

This is equally true of weighty virtues, such as giving. They establish roots or seeds for future pleasant lives or experiences, but they also "purify" nonvirtues (as we saw before when we considered the four powers that can temporarily nullify nonvirtues). The language of *cleaning*, rather than that of destruction, is used; for instance, we are not told that generosity "cuts the roots of non-virtue." With virtues, what Buddhist teachers emphasize are ways in which the fruition of the virtues will enhance the attainment of liberation for oneself and others.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, one question that might be raised with regard to the purification of nonvirtue is what consequence this might have for virtue. We have seen that according to Tsong kha pa, anger can be nullified by the four opponent powers of remorse, restraint, etc.<sup>26</sup> But if anger is nullified by remorse, etc., is its nullification of virtue similarly canceled? Are the roots of virtue then freed? Or does one just establish roots of liberation? Tsong kha pa, commenting in *LRCM* (402) on Bhāvaviveka's statement that even though there is purification by the four powers, there is no destruction of seeds, concludes that "even though your accumulation of sins is washed away through purification by the four powers, this does not contradict the fact that you are slow to produce higher paths." In *GPRS* he is even more explicit; referring to the *Sarva-vaidalaya-saṃgraha Sūtra*, he says:<sup>27</sup>

If one abandons the doctrine as set forth in the sūtra but confesses the fault three times daily for seven years, the fruition of that deed is purified, but even at the fastest, ten eons are necessary to attain endurance [i.e., to progress to the next path]. Thus, even though confession and restraint in many ways do not restore a path that has become slower, they will purify experience of the fruition.

In other words, the purification of nonvirtues such as anger does not undo their devastating effect on virtue. "Purification" prevents the issuance of unpleasant effects, but does not rehabilitate good seeds gone bad.

## Summary

This has been a complex issue, so let us summarize. Anger, identified along with ignorance and desire as a “poison” that generates *samsāra*, is singled out by Tsong kha pa as a particularly destructive emotion. It is founded on ignorance and reifies it. It establishes potentials for future occasions of suffering; it habituates its subject to react similarly in future provocative circumstances; and it also has a considerable impact on the store of previously accomplished virtue.

The *magnitude* of its effect on virtue is dependent on:

- (1) the degree of anger,
- (2) the status of the person toward whom it is directed,
- (3) the status of the person who is angry, and
- (4) whether it is “purified” by the four opponent powers.

To expand briefly on these points:

(1) Anger has “small,” “middling,” and “great” forms. Only anger that is of “great” intensity can “cut the roots” of virtue. While lesser instances presumably can produce painful effects, they do not also affect the ripening of virtue.

(2) Anger is most destructive when directed toward persons who display great compassion. Therefore, anger with buddhas and mature bodhisattvas is worst, anger with lesser bodhisattvas next worst, anger with persons who have shown one great kindness next worst, and so on.

(3) Conversely, the higher a person’s status, the less damaging are his or her instances of anger. If a mature bodhisattva were ever angry, the anger would have only minor consequences; an ordinary person’s anger with a buddha or mature bodhisattva, on the other hand, can result in the cutting of the roots of virtue for a thousand eons.

(4) Anger that is not addressed will fester and fulfill its potential for destruction. Remorse, etc., can nullify the painful effects of anger. However, it is impossible to undo anger’s effect on virtue; at best the damage can be moderated.

Although the effect of anger—or, at least, intense anger—is to “cut the roots (or, destroy the seeds) of virtue,” this does not actually mean that virtue is destroyed, for nothing other than a wisdom consciousness can destroy karma. Rather, the roots or seeds of virtue

are incapacitated. Consequently, one may be reborn many times in the miserable realms below the level of humans, or, if born a human, will be unable to make much spiritual progress.

As I stated earlier, I do not find Tsong kha pa's attempt to explain and moderate the position of the Indian texts to be wholly convincing. On the one hand, since anger only temporarily incapacitates the roots or seeds of virtue, it is not clear how it differs from other *kleśas* such as pride. Tsong kha pa himself says "cut" must mean more than "delay" but in the final analysis it appears to mean that and nothing more.

On the other hand, even if anger means only incapacitation, its extraordinary damage spreading over many eons, based on as little as a moment's outburst, seems to make liberation a practical impossibility for most persons. Tsong kha pa's interpretation would have to be even bolder—or, anger of the root-cutting variety would have to be clearly restricted to only the most extraordinary moments of rage—to avoid this untenable conclusion.

## Notes

1. The present article is a revision of an article that originally appeared in the *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, 2 (1995): 83-104. I thank the *JBE* for permission to include it here.

2. Anger is not unique as a negative emotion that can "cut the roots" of virtue. In *GPRS* Tsong kha pa cites sūtra passages collected in Śāntideva's *Śikṣāsamuccaya* that identify other extremely counterproductive notions such as disbelief in cause and effect, boasting about spiritual attainments one does not have, etc., as root-cutters. He also mentions that the *Ākāśagarbha Sūtra* identifies root infractions of bodhisattva vows as root-cutters. See *GPRS*: 57a.5-57b.1. Of course, none of these are said to have the force of anger.

3. *LRCM* is the common name for *sKyes bu gsum gyi rnyams su blang ba'i rim pa thams cad tshang bar ston pa'i byang chub lam gyi rim pa* ("Stages of the Path to Enlightenment Thoroughly Teaching All the Stages of Practice of the Three Types of Beings"). It is Tsong kha pa's grand synthesis of Indian materials pertaining to the enlightenment path. *GPRS* is the common name for *dBu ma la 'jug pa'i rgya cher bshad pa dgongs pa rab gsal* ("Illumination of the Thought, Extensive Explanation of (Candrakīrti's) Madhyamakāvātāra"). It is Tsong kha pa's attempt, late in life, to clarify the thought of Candrakīrti, who he saw in turn as the most important of Nāgārjuna's Mādhyamika successors. Since Candrakīrti's discussion in the *MA* revolves around the ten bodhisattva grounds, *GPRS* is also concerned with many of the same issues as *LRCM* and is also characterized by copious citations from Indian texts. Tsong kha pa makes similar statements in both sources (in fact, much of the text of *GPRS* on this topic has simply been lifted from *LRCM*). The principal difference is that in the later *GPRS* he clarifies a few matters (for instance, the precise parties to whom he believes the Indian texts refer).

4. Although Tsong kha pa mentions Candrakīrti's and Śāntideva's estimates in both *GPRS* and *LRCM*, he reconciles the differences in only the later work, *GPRS*. Candrakīrti is particularly important for Tsong kha pa's understanding of Madhyamaka, but Śāntideva is particularly important for his understanding of the topic of patience.
5. Admitting that Prajñākaramati's commentary on the *BA* says otherwise, mentioning only "sentient beings," Tsong kha pa says that he finds this "difficult to believe."
6. The extensive dGe lugs pa grounds and paths (*bhūmi* and *mārga*, *sa lam*) literature is based on Maitreya's *Abhisamayālaṅkāra* (which in turn is based on the Prajñāpāramitā literature, where the five-path scheme can be dimly discerned) and Haribhadra's commentary; it also uses the five-path scheme of Kamalaśīla's *Bhāvanākrama* (following a much older tradition evident even in Sarvāstivādin texts—Hirakawa: 208ff.). In brief, the bodhisattva path of accumulation begins with the initial generation of *bodhicitta*, and the path of preparation with a union of calm abiding (*śamatha*, *zhi gnas*) and special insight (*vipaśyanā*, *lhag mthong*) with emptiness (*śūnyatā*, *stong pa nyid*) as the object.
7. The angry bodhisattva must still be a relatively low one since a bodhisattva who has progressed past the third of the ten bodhisattva *bhūmis* (a pre-Mahāyāna system adapted to Mahāyāna in, for instance, the *Daśabhūmika Sūtra*) is no longer ever subject to anger. This qualification can be found in Maitreya's *Abhisamayālaṅkāra* and elaborated in subsequent treatments of the bodhisattva path (cf. Candrakīrti's *MA*: 3.13). The dGe lugs pa scheme would place such a person even lower, as low as the second level of the path of preparation.
8. Translation from Hopkins (1980: 212).
9. *GPRS*: 54a.5-6. Translation follows Hopkins (1980: 210).
10. It may not be the case that *all* instances of anger cut the roots of virtue. As we will see, instances of anger may be differentiated on the basis of their recipients, but are there other factors that make one instance worse than another? Tenzin Gyatso, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, says that it is still possible for someone past the path of seeing to experience anger; however, since root-cutting anger is no longer experienced past the second part of the even earlier path of preparation, it is clear that this anger would not impel lifetimes of suffering. The implication is that a higher bodhisattva's anger is not as serious, perhaps because to some extent its root cause, ignorance, has been undermined. Does this also mean that not all instances of anger would result in severance of the roots of virtue? Would Tsong kha pa agree with the Dalai Lama's conclusion?
11. Cf. Buswell: 118-123.
12. The seventeenth-century dGe lugs pa abbot 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa makes this identification in his *dBu ma chen mo* ("Great Exposition of the Middle Way," *BMC*: 160a), which is a commentary on Candrakīrti's *MA*.
13. Pradhan: 35/Rahula: 78. 58. Cited in Buswell: 119-120. According to Tsong kha pa's dGe lugs pa order, the mind's emptiness of inherent existence is a "natural lineage" (*rang bzhin gnas rigs*) that is the buddha-nature of each sentient

being, and hence there is no one who will fail, eventually, to attain buddhahood. (For a review of reasons why some of Tsong kha pa's followers found difficulties with these doctrines, see Lopez.) They interpret Asaṅga to mean that he sees five lineages (*gotra*, *rigs*) for sentient beings, respectively those who follow the path of the *śrāvakas*, *pratyekabuddhas*, and bodhisattvas, those who switch from one of the former to the latter, and those without a lineage for liberation.

14. The latter example is not Tsong kha pa's, but my own, which I include because it seems parallel to his. As I point out below, Tsong kha pa wants to distinguish between the temporary *suppression* of fruitions by the ripening of other, contrary, karmas, and the *incapacitation* of fruitions by anger. That is, anger is qualitatively different from most other nonvirtues. That is why I think that he himself would not use this as an example. However, there seems to be no difference between the practical effects of these nonvirtues.

15. Tsong kha pa and his followers consistently interpret the "not other than" statements in Indian Madhyamaka as meaning "not inherently other" since, of course, things such as seeds and sprouts are different from each other. On the other hand, they are individually not inherently existent (*svabhāvasiddhi*, *rang bzhin gyis grub pa*) and do not have a relationship of inherent otherness, i.e., they do not have a relationship that is not merely imputed by thought.

16. "Disintegratedness" is a rather ungraceful term, but it refers to a thing's state of having disintegrated, and since this state is held itself to be a functioning thing, I have nominalized it.

17. *Prāpti* and other means to account for the continuation of karma, such as the *ālayavijñāna* of Yogācāra texts, are rejected by Tsong kha pa as entities not included in the conventions of the world (which he thinks are, in contrast, upheld by sūtras of definitive meaning and in the ultimate commentarial tradition of Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka), not to mention the fact that as described by their proponents they could be established only by ultimate analysis. This is a major topic of the "unique tenets of Prāsaṅgika" section of 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa's *Grub mtha' chen mo* ("Great Exposition of Tenets," *GTCM*), which I translated as part of *Unique Tenets of the Middle Way Consequence School* (Snow Lion Publications, 1998). For a recent discussion of Vaibhāṣika positions and how they are critiqued by Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya*, see Hayes.

18. Of course, it also raises the question of how *wisdom* could destroy seeds. This is reminiscent of a discussion by 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa (*GTCM*: 628) on the "disintegratedness" of the obstructions to omniscience (*jñeyāvaraṇa*, *shes sgrub*) for buddhas. To become buddhas, of course, necessitated the destruction of those obstructions, but 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa, wishing to avoid saying that buddhas have anything like a taint in their continuums, maintains that the disintegratedness of obstructions to omniscience does not exist. His reasoning: in order to be a functioning entity, something must be capable of producing an effect, and this disintegratedness cannot. Instead, the obstructions to omniscience are completely "extinguished into the *dharmadhātu*." I have discussed arguments for and against 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa's position in *Unique Tenets*.

19. Although I doubt that they are that to which Tsong kha pa refers, there *are* some seeds that are capable of producing more than one effect; e.g., a single

act of killing is said to be capable of ripening into numerous lifetimes in the miserable realms. Even if some effects had ripened, those seeds would continue to exist.

20. A single action produces three effects: a “seed” (*bija, sa bon*) for a future effect, a “predisposition” (*vāsanā, bags chags*) or tendency to repeat that type of action, and an environmental effect of contributing to the causal conditions for the world shared with other beings. Cf. Dhargyey: 87-88.

21. *GPRS*: 57a.2-3. I follow Hopkins’s translation.

22. As Donald Lopez has shown (1992), Tsong kha pa seems not to have believed that all sentient beings *would* inevitably reach buddhahood, bringing an end to *samsāra*; on the other hand, he would certainly claim that it is *possible* for any individual to attain liberation and omniscience.

23. This is a summary of *LRCM*: 405-414.

24. This comes close to implying that every unpleasant occurrence is a direct result of one’s own karma. Tsong kha pa would not say this, I think; however, he might argue that every unpleasant experience at least indirectly stems from one’s past actions insofar as one’s actions are a part of the collective karma that creates and sustains a shared environment.

25. Cf. Buswell for an analysis of the importance of giving, in particular, for the spiritual path. Giving can be seen not only as a virtuous act but one that is a conditioner of insight.

26. Kensur Yeshey Tupten, a great twentieth-century dGe lugs pa scholar, adds (Klein: 85) that even prior to the direct cognition of emptiness that begins to destroy karma on the path of seeing and above, conceptual understanding of emptiness also purifies the seeds established by anger.

27. *GPRS*: 55a.5-6. Translation follows Hopkins (1980: 212).

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