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Emotions, Ethics, and Choice: Lessons from Tsongkhapa

Emily McRae¹

Abstract

This paper explores the degree to which we can exercise choice over our emotional experiences and emotional dispositions. I argue that we can choose our emotions in the sense that we can intentionally intervene in them. To show this, I draw on the mind training practices advocated by the 14th century Tibetan Buddhist yogin and philosopher Tsongkhapa (*tsong kha pa blo bzang grags pa*). I argue that his analysis shows that successful intervention in a negative emotional experience depends on at least four factors: the intensity of the emotional experience, one's ability to pay attention to the workings of one's mind and body, knowledge of intervention practices and insight into the nature of emotions. I argue that this makes sense of Tsongkhapa's seemingly contradictory claims that the

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meditator can and should control (and eventually abandon) her anger and desire to harm others and that harmdoers are “servants to their afflictions.”

The intentional intervention in—and cultivation of—our emotional experiences is a foundational part of Tibetan Buddhist ethics. Many of the Tibetan Buddhist mind training (*blo sbyong*) exercises are aimed at reducing the negative emotional experiences of anger, envy and hatred and cultivating positive emotions, including love, compassion and equanimity. For instance, the seven-point mind training formulated by Atisha (11th century) is designed to reduce feelings of greed and partiality and generate feelings of love by directing us to see all sentient beings as our mothers and encouraging the wish to repay them for all of their kindness (Gyalsten 247-257). Another common mind training exercise called Tonglen (*gtong len*), or “exchanging self and other,” is specifically designed to increase our feelings of compassion by imagining ourselves taking on the suffering of another being (Patrul Rinpoche 223-237; Tsongkhapa 50-60).

In Western philosophical ethics, however, there is relatively little discussion of the processes by which our emotional dispositions form and the possibilities for changing these dispositions, despite an extensive literature on the emotions.² As Robert Solomon and others have pointed out, the general trend in Western philosophy has been to see the emotions as passive events that happen to us, sometimes despite our deepest wishes and intentions (*True* 190-200). Recently, some philosophers of emotion have begun to challenge the characterization of emo-

² A notable exception to this trend is the emotional therapy of the ancient Stoic philosophers, including Epictetus and Seneca. For descriptions and analyses of these therapies, see Hadot, Nussbaum, (*Therapy of Desires*) and Sherman.

tional experience as unbidden and arising without our consent or control.³

In this paper I explore the degree to which we can choose or exercise control over our emotional experiences. I turn to the 14th century Tibetan Buddhist yogin and philosopher Tsongkhapa whose account of certain emotional experiences, such as anger and compassion, offers a compelling explanation of the causes and conditions of our emotional experiences and the extent to which they are under our control. Drawing on the insights of Tsongkhapa, I argue that our ability to choose our emotions is best understood as a capacity for intentional intervention, which depends not only on the strength of the emotion in question, but also on our background knowledge of the nature of emotional experiences and our capacity to observe our emotional states as they occur.

I begin with a discussion of the difference between the object of an emotion and its cause. In the next section, I present Tsongkhapa's account of negative emotional experiences, such as anger, and argue that its inclusion of the "basis" of the emotion, or the basic predispositions that help shape our emotional habits, allows it to explain a variety of emotional experiences. I then present a puzzle for Tsongkhapa's account with regard to exercising control over our emotions and argue that it can be solved by considering the conditions by which we can successfully intervene in an emotional experience.

First, two qualifications regarding terminology are in order. As has been demonstrated by others (Dreyfus; Heim), there is no concept of emotion in Buddhism and hence none of the accompanying concepts, such as the reason/emotion dichotomy, which are so prevalent in Western philosophy. In Tibetan, as in all traditional languages of Buddhism, there is no word for "emotion," although there are words for particular

³ Solomon, "Emotions, Thoughts, and Feelings"; Solomon, *In Defense of Sentimentality*; Solomon, *The Passions*; Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*; Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*.

emotions, such as love, anger, compassion, and envy, which are analyzed at length.⁴ Although there are no theories of emotion in Buddhist philosophy, philosophical reflection about the nature of certain emotions tends to emphasize the cognitive and affective elements of emotional experience, as well as long-term causes and conditions of emotional experience, such as underlying predispositions and habits, one's environment, and the company one keeps. In what follows, I draw on these reflections on the nature of particular emotional experiences in order to investigate the degree of control we have in these experiences and the dispositions, which form from them.

Second, one of the aims in this paper is to uncover what "choice" means in the context of emotional life. I use the word "choice" mainly because it is used in the Western philosophical scholarship of the emotions with which I am in dialogue (Nussbaum; Rorty; Solomon). I take "choice" to refer to a general sense of having control of and facility with our emotional experiences as well as the capacity to directly, intentionally and through our own power influence our emotional dispositions. In this way, I use a more common sense rather than philosophically technical definition of "choice," for instance, one that relies on metaphysical notions of free will. Not surprisingly, in Tibetan there are no words that directly correspond to the Western philosophical concepts of choice or free will.⁵ But, there is overlap between the more common sense notion of choice, as outlined above, and the traditional concepts found in Tibetan Buddhism. For instance, the Tibetan word *rang dbang*—which Tsongkhapa uses in his discussion of managing our negative emotions—connotes self-control, autonomy, and independence. In what follows I

⁴ According to Dreyfus, in some circles the neologism *tshor myong* is used in order to facilitate communication between Tibetan teachers and Western students, for whom "emotion" is too important a concept to do without (31).

⁵ I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for helpful comments and questions on the meaning of choice in the context of Tibetan Buddhist mind-training texts, particularly Tsongkhapa's.

hope to show that we can learn a great deal about exercising choice in our emotional lives—in the general rather than philosophically technical sense—by examining Tsongkhapa’s analysis of the possibility of having self-control (*rang dbang*) in the midst of a strong emotional experience.

Emotions and Emotional Dispositions: Objects vs. Causes

In recent Western scholarship on emotion, increased attention has been paid to the intentionality of some emotional experiences.⁶ That (most) emotions are *about* something is an important aspect of our experience of them; it is a key element in the narrative that we create about our emotional lives. If I am angry and you ask me to explain myself, I will usually speak in terms of the *object* of the anger: I am angry *at* you for some perceived wrong you inflicted on me. In this case the intentionality of the emotion is complex, since the object or target of my emotion is you, but my emotion is about the perceived wrong.

But reference to the object of an emotion is not the only way to explain its occurrence. Some of our emotional responses are fueled by repressed events from our past of which we have no or little conscious knowledge. It is not uncommon to feel anger or resentment towards someone without fully understanding the reason. Or we may notice, for example, that the pitch of our anger far exceeds the gravity of the perceived slight. In these cases, we often try to construct reasons (with varying degrees of plausibility) that support our emotion.

There is, in other words, a distinction between the *object* of an emotion and its *cause*. Traumatic childhood events are one kind of cause for an emotion. Others include sleep deprivation, hunger, illness, or sexual dissatisfaction. For example, after a sleepless night and four cups of

⁶ Nussbaum *Upheavals of Thought*; Rorty; Solomon “Emotions and Choice”; Solomon, “Emotions, Thoughts and Feelings”; de Sousa; Taylor.

coffee, I may be angry with you for what I take to be your unfair criticism of my paper. Or, because of an unsatisfying sex life, I may become romantically infatuated with someone. In these examples, the objects of the emotions (the critic, the captivating beloved) are distinct from the cause of the emotions (fatigue and overstimulation, sexual deprivation).⁷

When we experience an emotion, the object of the emotion is often much more obvious than the cause. In fact, Robert Solomon argues that when the cause and object come apart, as they do in the examples above, our continuing to feel the emotion requires that we not know the real cause of the emotion. He writes,

If I am angry about John's stealing my car (the object of my anger), then I cannot believe that the sufficient cause of my anger is anything other than John's stealing my car. If I attribute my anger to lack of sleep, I cannot be angry at all....I can only be angry so long as I believe that what has caused me to be angry is what I am angry about. Where the cause is different from what I am angry about, I cannot know that it is. (29)

This position is surely too strong. I can attribute my anger to lack of sleep (or too much coffee, or PMS) and still remain angry, although the quality of my anger may change. Similarly, I may attribute my infatuation with someone to my loneliness or sexual dissatisfaction and yet continue to be infatuated. It is not as though, upon realizing that my attraction is fueled more by my sexual dissatisfaction than the beauty of the beloved, that my attraction vanishes. Nevertheless, Solomon's general points still stand: (1) there are other causes for our emotions besides their objects; (2) we often cannot recognize these other causes; and (3)

⁷ I have borrowed these examples from Solomon (1973).

recognizing these other causes may not completely uproot the emotion but may be an opportunity to intervene in the emotional experience.

Causes and Conditions for Afflictive Emotions: Tsongkhapa's Account

These “other causes,” which include anything from childhood trauma to a sleepless night, are explored and refined in the work of the 14th century Tibetan Buddhist philosopher Tsongkhapa. In his discussion of the afflictive emotions in the *Great Treatise of the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment* (*lam rim chen mo*), Tsongkhapa draws on three main causes of these emotions: object, subject and basis. The first cause, the “object,” is who or what the emotion is about. Under this heading, Tsongkhapa also includes the judgments we make about the objects of our emotions. If I am envious of you, both you and the judgment I made about you (“you have more than you deserve”) are included as part of the object of the envy (161-163). The object, and the judgments made about it, are conditions for afflictive emotional responses that are often emphasized in Western scholarship on emotions. Along with the object, emotional experience also requires a subject, that is, the being who is experiencing the emotion. The third cause of an afflictive emotion is what he calls “the basis,” or the basic predispositions towards certain emotional responses and against others. These predispositions are formed by (often complex) previous causes and conditions.⁸

Suppose I am angry with you for (what I perceive to be) a harsh criticism of a paper of which I am (or was, until your criticism) particularly proud.⁹ The object of the emotion, anger, is *you and your harsh criticism*. I am the subject of the emotion and the basis of the emotion is my

⁸ For a more detailed account of the causes and conditions of emotional experience as explained by Tsongkhapa, see Tenzin.

⁹ This example is based on an example given by Robert Solomon (“Emotions and Choice”).

own predisposition to be sensitive to criticism and my over-identification with my philosophical ideas. These predispositions, which set me up to be angry in situations where my work is under review, are formed by my experiences in this and previous lives. For example, I may have been taught or picked up the view that a direct challenge to one's most cherished beliefs is a sign of deep disrespect and I may have seen friends or family members respond with anger in these situations. If I have developed the habit of becoming angry in this kind of situation in the past, then it is likely—if I do not intervene in some way—that I will become angry again in the present circumstance. Other people who do not share my predispositions would not be similarly set up to feel anger in this situation.¹⁰

These causes are identified because of their practical application in both explaining afflictive emotions and, more importantly for Tsongkhapa, providing guidance for the transformation of these emotions. They are discussed in the context of trying to manage (and eventually transform or abandon) negative emotions, such as malice, hatred and anger, and cultivate positive emotions and virtues, such as compassion and patience. Unlike many Western theories of emotion that also investigate some of the same causes of emotions (some of which I discussed above), Tsongkhapa does not offer this list as a set of necessary or sufficient conditions for something to count as an emotion. This, of course, is sensible, since Tsongkhapa is not working within a conceptual framework that sees “emotion” as a distinct category. For this reason, the definition projects that so occupy contemporary Western scholarship on emotion—projects that attempt to answer the question “What is an emotion?”—are absent in Tsongkhapa's analysis.

¹⁰ I focus on the emotion of anger because for Tsongkhapa, and other Mahayana Buddhist philosophers, anger is a particularly destructive emotion and great attention is given to methods of reducing, eradicating or transforming it. See Cozort.

Tsongkhapa's inclusion of the basis of emotion gives his account particular explanatory power, since by examining the basis we can better account for emotional experiences that would be difficult to explain by just looking to the object of the emotion and the judgments that we make about the object. Consider Tsongkhapa's analysis of someone who intentionally (and without remorse) harms another. He writes,

. . . when the conditions and causes—seeds left by afflictions to which they were previously habituated, a nearby object, and erroneous conceptions—come together, [those who do harm] give rise to the thought to harm, even though the harmdoers do not think, “I will feel malice”; whereas if those causes and conditions are not complete, they will never produce the thought to harm, even if the harmdoers think, “I will feel malice.” (161)

This analysis recognizes that, for hatred or malice to occur, one needs to have the perception of the right kind of object (“the nearby object”) as well as a certain kind of judgment (which, on Tsongkhapa's view, amounts to some kind of “erroneous conception”). But the basic predisposition toward hatred or malice is what allows certain thoughts and perceptions to “stick” and develop into the intention to harm. As Tsongkhapa points out, the thought “I will feel malice” is not, by itself, necessary nor sufficient to give rise to actually feeling malice and the accompanying desire to harm others, since such feelings and desires can arise without the thought “I will feel malice” and one can have this thought without it actually giving rise to malice. The thought must resonate with the person's basic predispositions in order for it to give rise to intentions.

Tsongkhapa's example “I will feel malice,” however, may not be the best one for making this point, since it does not seem like the kind of thought that would normally trigger malice anyway. But he seems to be

taking this example (and the phrase “I will feel malice”) from Santideva’s *Bodhicaryavatara* (VI. 24): “A person does not intentionally become angry, thinking, ‘I shall get angry,’ nor does anger originate, thinking, ‘I shall arise.’” The point here seems to be that anger arises from myriad causes and conditions. The “cause” of anger—or, indeed, any emotions—cannot be isolated to one thought or judgment.

Contemporary Western philosophical scholarship (Solomon *Passions*; Nussbaum) often focuses nearly exclusively on the judgments or thoughts behind an emotional experience. In the case of malice, these thoughts may include “You are inferior to me,” “you do not deserve what you have,” or “you have wronged me.” We can apply Tsongkhapa’s point to these thoughts as well, which are more characteristic of hatred or malice. For example, the thought “you are inferior to me” may give rise to feelings of contempt, hatred or malice in some people. But in other persons it may give rise to shame, guilt or pity, which may motivate a desire to help another as a form of compensation. Alternatively, such a thought could give rise to feelings of pride or arrogance without any desire to harm or help another. The same thought and the same perceived object can produce different emotional and conative states in different people. This fact is difficult to explain if we only focus on the intentionality of an emotion and its accompanying thoughts, beliefs or judgments. Tsongkhapa, however, would explain these differences by pointing to differences in underlying predispositions.¹¹

¹¹ Amelie Rorty has also argued for the explanatory power of the basis of an emotion, which she called the “magnetizing disposition” that orients an emotional experience. She defines it as a “disposition to gravitate toward and to create conditions that spring other dispositions” (106).

A Puzzle for Tsongkhapa

Tsongkhapa (and most Tibetan Buddhist philosophers) generally sees emotions as fundamentally malleable and subject to intentional cultivation, despite the fact that they issue from a wide range of causes and conditions, some of which are more consciously accessible to us than others. Yet, despite his commitment to the project of intentionally transforming our emotions, he often emphasizes the lack of self-control one has over one's emotional states. In fact, one of Tsongkhapa's tactics for cultivating patience is to see anger as unjustified. The main strategy for doing that is to see the person who has wronged you as lacking self-control. Immediately following the passage on malice quoted above, Tsongkhapa writes,

These causes and conditions produce the desire to harm; this in turn produces the work of harming; and this produces suffering for someone else, so those harmdoers do not have even the slightest self-control (*rang dbang cung zad kyang med*). Moreover, they have become like *servants of their afflictions*, because they are under the control of others, i.e., their afflictions. (161, my italics)

This claim seems surprising, especially since it is stated in the middle of a larger discussion about how to manage our emotions, particularly anger and the desire to harm. How, on the one hand, can Tsongkhapa argue that those who feel malice toward us have no self-control and yet our own malice towards others must be controlled, managed and eventually eradicated? Do we not also lack even the "slightest self-control" with regard to our own anger? Are we not also "servants of our afflictions?"

The apparent ambivalence with regard to the degree to which we can chose, control or intervene in our emotional experiences is not

unique to Tsongkhapa's account.¹² We often use passive phrases when we talk about emotions, for instance "fallen in love," "lost my temper," or "hounded by guilt." We also sometimes excuse otherwise objectionable acts if they were committed in the "heat of the moment." At times we excuse others' (and our own) hurtful actions by recognizing and accepting that they are the result of what seem to be unchangeable emotional dispositions. John Lennon sings, "I didn't mean to hurt you. I'm sorry that I made you cry. I'm just a jealous guy." All of this suggests that we, at least at times, think of emotions as things that happen to us, and our emotional dispositions, our tendencies toward having certain emotional responses, as fixed aspects of our character.

But, at the same time, we often take responsibility for our emotions and expect others to take responsibility for theirs. We sometimes "feel bad" about our emotional reactions and outbursts. We may even feel guilty about them. Sometimes we go so far as to apologize for our emotions, and not just the John Lennon-style apology that is paired with an excuse, but a real apology, one that says, for instance, "I should not have become so angry. I'm sorry."

Emotions are not unique in this way; actions, thoughts and beliefs also vary with regard to the extent to which we can choose or control them. Choosing to raise my arm is (in normal circumstances) a different kind of choice from, to use Robert Solomon's example, choosing to assassinate a dictator, which requires planning, strategy and manipulating external conditions ("Emotions" 31). Similarly, there is a sense in which we can choose thoughts; I can bring to mind, for example, the shape of a

¹² Tsongkhapa is not the only Buddhist philosopher to embrace this seemingly paradoxical position. He is following the lead of Śāntideva (7th century), who, in his *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life* (chapter on Patience), argues that just as we are not angry at our bile (or bacteria) that cause us to become ill, we should not be angry at people who cause us pain. (For a critique of this position see Bommarito.) Nevertheless, Śāntideva, like Tsongkhapa, believes that the meditator can intervene in her own anger and eventually abandon her desire to harm others.

triangle whenever I wish to do so. Other thoughts, however, are quite unbidden or are so captivating that we cannot turn from them even if we wish to, such as having an irritating song stuck in one's head or flashbacks to embarrassing or unpleasant memories. Nor can we bring to mind any thought whatsoever, for instance when we "lose our train of thought" and cannot return to it.

Beliefs, too, are not clearly chosen. In fact, beliefs, like emotions, can sometimes be recalcitrant, since some beliefs, such as sexist or racist beliefs, may remain despite well-considered judgments that oppose them. We nevertheless can change our beliefs through investigation, dialogue and by having an open and non-defensive attitude towards criticism. Given the variety of ways we can and cannot choose actions, thoughts and beliefs, it is not surprising that the degree to choose our emotions is also on a spectrum.

In what follows, I will argue that, with regard to the emotions, choice is best understood as the capacity for intentional intervention in our emotional experiences. Successful intervention in our emotions depends on certain factors, including the knowledge of methods of intervention, some understanding of the nature of the emotion and the depth and breadth of one's awareness of one's emotional state. In the following section, I will examine some Western philosophical conceptions of choice or control over the emotions and argue that choice is best understood as intentional intervention. I will then argue that this understanding of emotional experience can explain the puzzle that I posed for Tsongkhapa.

Emotions and Choice

Historically in Western philosophical ethics, emotions have often been seen as fickle, unreliable and ultimately out of our control. Since the

pervasiveness of this view in Western philosophy has been well documented elsewhere, I will only briefly recount it here (Sherman; Solomon, *Passions and True*). Many of the most influential thinkers in the history of Western ethics, despite deep theoretical differences, shared skepticism about the possibility and desirability of intervening in one's emotional responses. Kant, for example, was skeptical of the project of basing morality on emotions at least in part due to the unreliability of emotional responses.¹³ Neither David Hume nor Adam Smith—despite their view that emotions, in particular sympathy, are the foundation of morality—present or even imply a program by which we can intentionally cultivate, control or choose sympathy.¹⁴ Even Aristotle, in his *Rhetoric*, clearly recognizes the power of orators to trigger certain emotional states, says surprisingly little about the intentional cultivation of emotions in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In fact, he claims that emotions do not issue from choice (1106a2) and expresses a general skepticism regarding our ability to change our emotional dispositions as adults (E.N., Bk.X).¹⁵

¹³ In the *Groundwork*, he notoriously overstated his skepticism when he claimed that “inclinations,” such as love or sympathy, are “so far from having an absolute worth” that it must be the “universal wish of every rational being to be altogether free of them” (79).

¹⁴ According to Smith, although the ability to feel love and sympathy is inherent in human nature (even the “greatest ruffian,” according to Smith, is not altogether without them), there are natural limits to the degree to which we feel these emotions (73). Smith writes that feelings of sympathy “never can carry us beyond our own person” since our sympathetic responses to another's suffering can only recreate a fraction of that original suffering (73–74). Not only are there natural limitations to our ability to feel certain emotions such as compassion, but Smith also notes that our inherent ability to sympathize with another can be blocked by distraction, fatigue or some other emotional experience, such as grief or anger. Given that the prominence of sympathy and compassion in Smith's (and Hume's) ethics and their acknowledgment of its limitations, we might expect to find some sort of program by which we can cultivate this inherent compassionate response and intervene in the mental states, such as distraction and negative emotions, that obstruct it. Yet, no such program is offered or implied.

¹⁵ There are some exceptions to this general skepticism. In his discussion of friendship, Aristotle considers the possibility that one's friends, once good, can become bad (E.N. 1165b1–b23). He also implies that it is possible that one's friend may, as an adult, be made good again (1165b19–b20). Since becoming good means habituating one's action

However, in contemporary Western philosophical scholarship on the emotions there has been increasing criticism of the traditional view that emotions are out of our control.¹⁶ Solomon, for example, even claimed that we can choose our emotions (“Emotions”). But what does “choosing” one’s emotions actually mean?

Even a skeptic would agree with one basic sense in which we can choose our emotions: we can choose, at least to some degree, the external circumstances that are likely to give rise to emotions that we value and not to emotions that we do not value. This very limited sense of choice is analogous to “choosing” not to get sick; we can only choose to do things that will make it less likely that we will get sick.

This idea of choice, which basically amounts to the avoidance of triggers, is philosophically thin and not always easy to accomplish. Philosophically, this basic sense of choice is not about emotions. Rather it is about exercising choice over one’s actions and control over one’s circumstances. However, although learning to avoid situations that we have good reason to think trigger uncontrollable negative emotion is certainly important, it is not possible (and probably not desirable) to avoid all triggers of our negative emotions. Simply by having relationships with others we will be exposed to situations that will trigger negative emotions, such as jealousy or clinging infatuation. If, as Tsongkhapa suggests, there is a sense in which our emotional dispositions set us up for similar emotional experiences in the future—consider the case of the angry person looking for someone to knock the chip off his shoulder—

and feelings, becoming good would presumably involve the changing of one’s emotional habits as an adult. However, Aristotle does not state whether these changes are achieved through intentional invention or because of a change in one’s circumstances.

¹⁶ Solomon, *The Passions; True to Our Feelings*; and *In Defense of Sentimentality*; Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thoughts*; Sherman.

avoiding triggers may be difficult indeed. Even hermits meditating alone in caves cannot escape the triggers of negative emotions.¹⁷

Robert Solomon offers a more robust sense in which we may choose our emotions. He argues that emotions are essentially judgments. For example, anger is the judgment that one has been wronged and compassion is the judgment that another is unfairly suffering. According to this view, choosing emotions basically amounts to choosing how we judge situations. He writes,

By forcing myself to be scrupulous in the search for evidence and knowledge of circumstance, and by training myself in self-understanding regarding my prejudices and influences, and by placing myself in appropriate circumstances, I can determine the kinds of judgments I will tend to make. I can do the same for my emotions. (32)

The idea here is not that we choose our emotions simply by avoiding the external situations that trigger them, but rather that we choose them by recognizing the emotion, including the object and cause(s) of the emotion, and challenging the judgments (or, we might add, thoughts, beliefs or images) that are triggering and sustaining the emotional experience. This kind of choice, while not nearly as direct as choosing to lift one's arm, is still a robust sense of choice that can capture the ways in which we generally think we should take responsibility for our emotional lives.

This approach to choosing our emotions allows for more direct engagement in the formation, maintenance, and longevity of an emotional experience than does the avoidance of triggers approach. On this

¹⁷ In a recent *New York Times* article on meditation retreats for lay people, one retreatant admitted that during his one month silent retreat, he suffered from (a completely unfounded) worry that his dog had died while he was in retreat (Stout).

view, if we are angry with someone we can choose to reduce or eradicate that anger by analyzing the judgments we have made about the object of our anger. If the judgment is, “she has cheated me,” we may reflect on the accuracy of the judgment; or, if the judgment is accurate, we may examine other, underlying assumptions, such as “she had a choice whether to cheat me and she chose to cheat me.” By critically examining these judgments we are reducing the duration and intensity of, and perhaps even eradicating, the emotional experience.

One problem with this approach, however, is that it focuses only on the engagement with the *object* of the emotion. As I argued previously, the object of the emotion is not always the cause of the emotion. We may feel anger at someone due to the complex causes and conditions that shaped our personal history, such as our physical and psychological health, childhood experiences, emotional stress or fatigue, or substance abuse. In other words, although an emotion almost always has an object, sometimes the main cause of the emotion is the basis, not the object. When this is the case, analyzing the judgments that we make about the objects of our emotion seems ineffective, except perhaps to show us that the object is not the real cause of the emotional experience.

Tsongkhapa’s analysis of the three main causes of afflictive emotional experience, however, can give an account of choosing our emotions that is not limited to analyzing the object of the emotion. On his account, our emotional experiences are the result of many causes and conditions—and not only the object (which is most apparent to us). When we believe, as we usually do, that the judgments that our emotions make are true, it seems that the only way to explain and hence transform that emotion is to do something about the object. For instance, usually when I feel anger I believe that it is caused by some wrong someone else has done to me. When I believe that my anger has that singular cause, then my attempts to address my anger will focus on the person

who I perceive as having wronged me. I may, depending on my social power and personality, abuse or attack the person or I may turn the anger inward and cultivate resentment and hostility. But, if I open up the causal story of my anger to include, for instance, my sleep-deprivation, my childhood and other formative experiences and the habits I have formed because of them, the company that I keep, and the environment in which I spend my days, then I have many more avenues for addressing my anger. I could take a nap, seek psychoanalytic therapies or spiritual practices that address childhood trauma, or befriend more positive people. Because emotions have more causes than simply their objects, these methods that address the other causes (in addition to the object) will be efficacious.

The intentional intervention in this wide range of the causes and conditions of emotional experience is, I submit, the best way to think about exercising choice or control over our emotions. As Tsongkhapa's account makes clear, emotions form a variety of causes and conditions, including our judgments about the objects of our emotions, our environments, health and personal history. The problem with the first two conceptions of choice—choice as the avoidance of triggers and choice as engagement with judgments—is that they are too narrow in scope. The first focuses exclusively on one's environment and the second focuses only on one's judgments. But if Tsongkhapa is right about the range of causes and conditions of emotional experience, which I believe he is, then successful intervention in one's emotions is going to engage all of these causes and conditions.

There are certain core features of successful intentional intervention in one's emotional life. These features are highlighted in what I take to be the solution to Tsongkhapa's puzzle, to which I will now return.

Solving Tsongkhapa's Puzzle

Tsongkhapa's account of afflictive emotional experience allows for many avenues for intervention. This explains his assumption that emotions can be transformed, trained and cultivated. But how do we explain his comments that others who act on their afflictive emotions lack all self-control? One possibility is that his claim that others lack control over their afflictive emotions is a useful fiction designed to facilitate our own moral and spiritual development. If the goal is simply to decrease and eventually eliminate our afflictive emotions, then imagining those who harm us as having little or no control over their actions seems prudent (as long as it is believable enough to be motivating). Tsongkhapa uses this analogy to describe the attitude one should have towards a harmdoer:

For instance, some people who have been possessed by demons and have come under their control may wish to hurt those who are helping them to get free of their demons and thereupon beat them, etc. However, their helpers think, "They do this because their demons have eliminated their ability to control themselves," and do not have even the slightest anger toward them. They then strive to the best of their ability to free them from their demons. (162)

If we think of those who harm us as being like those possessed by demons, our anger loses some of its bite.

But given Tsongkhapa's general commitment to understanding reality and not simply producing desired mental states, it seems unlikely that he intended these reflections on a harmdoer's lack of control as useful fictions. I see no reason not to take Tsongkhapa at his word that there is some important sense in which the people who harm us have no or

little control over their afflictive emotions yet we (readers of Tsongkhapa) have some degree of control over ours.

Tsongkhapa's discussion introduces two levels of control over the emotions: the relative self-control of the reader of Tsongkhapa who has a commitment to practice the meditations he presents (the "meditator") and the relative lack of self-control of the person who has harmed another (the "harmdoer"). There are two main differences between the meditator and the harmdoer that can explain why it may make sense to say the former has control over her afflictive emotions while the latter does not. The first is that the harmdoer has already harmed someone (in this case, the meditator). The meditator, on the other hand, feels anger or resentment, but has not yet harmed the other person (as the example goes). The second main difference is that the meditator, just in virtue of being a meditator and a reader of Tsongkhapa, has exposure to a variety of practical methods that are designed to intervene in our afflictive emotions. This is not to say, of course, that a person who is a meditator could not also be a harmdoer or vice versa. Rather the differences are between a person who, out of hatred or malice, has already intentionally harmed someone else and a person (maybe the same one at a later time) who feels hatred or anger toward another but has not acted on it.

Tsongkhapa seems to take the fact that the harmdoer has already harmed another out of hatred or malice as evidence that the harmdoer lacks control over her afflictive emotions. The idea is that, since people who have strong afflictive emotions and harm others are, in the Buddhist view, perpetuating their own suffering, we can be sure that they lack self-control since presumably they do not want to suffer and would not, if they can help it.¹⁸ The fact that they are participating in the mis-

¹⁸ Tsongkhapa writes, "If these beings had self-control, they would not have any suffering, because they could control it" (162).

ery-producing lifestyle in which people intentionally hurt each other means that they lack control over their afflictive emotions.

That the harmdoer did not intervene in her afflictive emotion (and subsequently harmed someone) means that either she did not attempt to intervene in the emotional experiences that preceded her harmful action or she did and was unsuccessful. If she did not in any way consider intervening, then either she does not know how to intervene (ignorance) or she does but did not on that occasion think to attempt an intervention (thoughtlessness). In either case (ignorance or thoughtlessness), the harmdoer does not have many live choices because she either does not know what her options are or she is not mindful enough to realize she is in a situation in which interventions in her afflictive emotions may be helpful. Alternatively, a harmdoer may have considered an intervention but did not follow through, or attempted an intervention and failed because, for example, she was attracted to the afflictive emotion or identified with it. So, if someone has already done harm, as in the example, that indicates that they have lost a good deal of self-control.¹⁹

The meditator, on the other hand, is experimenting with interventions at an earlier stage, when the anger or hatred is still forming. Because the meditator presumably has knowledge of possible interventions (because she is reading Tsongkhapa), ignorance of appropriate tactics is not an obstacle to intervention. Similarly, since the meditator is engaging in these meditations, thoughtlessness is not an obstacle to intervention. Furthermore, because the meditator has not yet harmed another, it seems that her afflictive emotions have not reached the pitch of those of the harmdoer. She already has three advantages to successful intervention—knowledge, mindfulness, and somewhat decreased emotional intensity—that the harmdoer did not have.

¹⁹ This is one of the interesting points of similarity between Tsongkhapa's view and Socrates' position that no one ever willingly does wrong (*Apology*, 25e-26b; *Meno*, 77b-78b)

When we consider these advantages it seems less inconsistent to claim that the harmdoer lacks control of her emotions but the meditator does not. Tsongkhapa's example of the lack of control of the harmdoer and the relative self-control of the meditator reveals some important features of successful intervention in emotional life. First, successful intervention depends not only on the intensity of the emotional experience, but also on our knowledge and ability to pay attention to our experiences. Second, within the same emotional event, say anger, there may be points at which we can intervene and points at which we cannot. Anger, like many emotions, is not a monolithic experience. If it is at all prolonged, there are points when the anger surges and when it begins to subside. Although we may lack control during points when our anger has surged, we may not when the feeling begins to diminish (or before it surges). It is helpful, therefore, to have some understanding of the nature of emotional experience as changing and amorphous. To say that the degree of control we have in our emotional lives varies does not, therefore, translate into the claim that there are some emotions that we have control over and others we do not. Rather, within any emotional experience there are opportunities for intervention.

Concluding Remarks

Transforming and cultivating emotions is a significant, although often overlooked, aspect of moral life. Our emotions are both an extremely valuable and a deeply problematic part of moral life. They are valuable because they perceive, express and bestow value, motivate moral actions, and give insight about ourselves and others. They are problematic because they are often unreliable, misrepresent the world and can motivate foolish or wrong actions. Cultivating certain emotional states and intervening in others is a key component of understanding moral life

because it is by training our emotions that we can harness their power and minimize the problematic aspects of an uncultivated emotional life.

Examining these training methods is also important for a more complete understanding of the nature of emotional life. Because of his inclusion of the basis of an emotion, Tsongkhapa's analysis uncovers more causes and conditions for emotional experiences than just the object of the emotion (which is the cause that contemporary Western philosophers of emotion tend to focus on). Through investigation of these other causes and conditions, we can access more opportunities for intervention in an afflictive emotion. With regard to the afflictive emotions, it seems best to think of "choice" in terms of opportunities for successful intervention. (With regard to positive emotions—which were not the focus of this paper—it seems best to think about "choice" in terms of cultivation.)

I have argued, with Tsongkhapa, that successful intervention in a negative emotional experience depends not only on the intensity of the emotional experience, but also on one's ability to pay attention to the workings of one's mind and body, knowledge of intervention practices, and insight into the nature of emotional experiences. I maintain that this explains Tsongkhapa's seemingly contradictory claims that the meditator can and should control (and eventually abandon) her anger and desire to harm others while the harmdoer is a "servant to [her] afflictions."

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