

## Anger

You have demanded of me, Novatus, that I should write how anger may be soothed, and it appears to me that you are right in feeling especial fear of this passion, which is above all others hideous and wild: for the others have some alloy of peace and quiet, but this consists wholly in action and the impulse of grief, raging with an utterly inhuman lust for arms, blood and tortures, careless of itself provided it hurts another, rushing upon the very point of the sword, and greedy for revenge even when it drags the avenger to ruin with itself. Some of the wisest of men have in consequence of this called anger a short madness: for it is equally devoid of self control, regardless of decorum, forgetful of kinship, obstinately engrossed in whatever it begins to do, deaf to reason and advice, excited by trifling causes, awkward at perceiving what is true and just, and very like a falling rock which breaks itself to pieces upon the very thing which it crushes. (Seneca, Of Anger, book 1, section 1)

Anger is madness. It is the most dangerous of all the vices and the one we must be most vigilant about in ourselves. Our goal should be to extinguish it wholly, for any smoldering coal can be whipped up into a conflagration. Anger is irrational, for we are either angry with Nature, which is outside of our control and bears no faults, or with other people, who know no better. We are born to be allies and companions, not enemies and rivals.

Whether it be according to nature will become evident if we consider man's nature, than which what is more gentle while it is in its proper condition? Yet what is more cruel than anger? What is more affectionate to others than man? Yet what is more savage against them than anger? Mankind is born for mutual assistance, anger for mutual ruin: the former loves society, the latter estrangement. The one loves to do good, the other to do harm; the one to help even strangers, the other to attack even its dearest friends. The one is ready even to sacrifice itself for the good of others, the other to plunge into peril provided it drags others with it. Who, then, can be more ignorant of nature than he who classes this cruel and hurtful vice as belonging to her best and most polished work? (Seneca, Of Anger, book 1, section 5)

"But certainly there are times when anger is justified and useful," the critic will say. Anger can do nothing better than reason, justice, courage, and temperance can on their own. We mistake self-righteousness and anger for usefulness. It does not help us punish criminals or reform wayward men, only return harm to them. It does not aid us in a fight or at war, instead exposing us to unnecessary danger and ruin. It is unhelpful in defending one's friends or family, as it pushes out wise counsel and replaces it with impulse and frenzied action.

But certainly, is it right and just to be angry with the evil deeds of bad men?

It is impossible, says Theophrastus, for a good man not to be angry with bad men. By this reasoning, the better a man is, the more irascible he will be: yet will he not rather be more tranquil, more free from passions, and hating no one: indeed, what reason has he for hating sinners, since it is error that leads them into such crimes? now it does not

become a sensible man to hate the erring, since if so he will hate himself: let him think how many things he does contrary to good morals, how much of what he has done stands in need of pardon, and he will soon become angry with himself also, for no righteous judge pronounces a different judgment in his own case and in that of others. No one, I affirm, will be found who can acquit himself. Every one when he calls himself innocent looks rather to external witnesses than to his own conscience. How much more philanthropic it is to deal with the erring in a gentle and fatherly spirit, and to call them into the right course instead of hunting them down? When a man is wandering about our fields because he has lost his way, it is better to place him on the right path than to drive him away. (Seneca, Of Anger, book 1, section 14)

“But my anger takes hold of me without my choice or consent!” This is false. While the first impulses are outside our control, in the very next moment, we have a choice whether to believe them or not. We have never become angry without making the choice to do so. We experience an irksome feeling, and instead of disagreeing with it, we believe it and become its advocate. We say, “I have been injured by this thing,” and begin a plan of revenge, when we truly have not been, and when any harm we may endure can only come from ourselves.

Furthermore, that you may know in what manner passions begin and swell and gain spirit, learn that the first emotion is involuntary, and is, as it were, a preparation for a passion, and a threatening of one. The next is combined with a wish, though not an obstinate one, as, for example, “It is my duty to avenge myself, because I have been injured,” or “It is right that this man should be punished, because he has committed a crime.” The third emotion is already beyond our control, because it overrides reason, and wishes to avenge itself, not if it be its duty, but whether or no. We are not able by means of reason to escape from that first impression on the mind, any more than we can escape from those things which we have mentioned as occurring to the body: we cannot prevent other people’s yawns tempting us to yawn: we cannot help winking when fingers are suddenly darted at our eyes. Reason is unable to overcome these habits, which perhaps might be weakened by practice and constant watchfulness: they differ from an emotion which is brought into existence and brought to an end by a deliberate mental act. (Seneca, Of Anger, book 2, section 4)

This could be an ancient summary of the modern “ABCDE” method of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), which itself was inspired by the Stoic teachings of Epictetus. The process is explained as follows:

- A: Activating Event (some thought or person irks you)
- B: Belief (you tell yourself “I have been harmed!” and believe the lie)
- C: Consequence (anger, thoughts of revenge, declarations of war)
- D: Disputation (you ask yourself “Have I really been harmed?” and marshal evidence to the contrary)
- E: Effect (the anger dissolves and you return to sanity)

This is an excellent tool in our fight against anger. As we make progress in our practice, our goal should be to catch ourselves after the first irksome feeling and preemptively deny belief to the idea that we have been harmed. We must remember that we can only be harmed if we harm ourselves.

## **How to Avoid Anger**

A large part of mankind manufacture their own grievances either by entertaining unfounded suspicions or by exaggerating trifles. Anger often comes to us, but we often go to it. It ought never to be sent for: even when it falls in our way it ought to be flung aside. No one says to himself, "I myself have done or might have done this very thing which I am angry with another for doing." No one considers the intention of the doer, but merely the thing done: yet we ought to think about him, and whether he did it intentionally or accidentally, under compulsion or under a mistake, whether he did it out of hatred for us, or to gain something for himself, whether he did it to please himself or to serve a friend. In some cases the age, in others the worldly fortunes of the culprit may render it humane or advantageous to bear with him and put up with what he has done. Let us put ourselves in the place of him with whom we are angry: at present an overweening conceit of our own importance makes us prone to anger, and we are quite willing to do to others what we cannot endure should be done to ourselves. No one will postpone his anger: yet delay is the best remedy for it, because it allows its first glow to subside, and gives time for the cloud which darkens the mind either to disperse or at any rate to become less dense. Of these wrongs which drive you frantic, some will grow lighter after an interval, not of a day, but even of an hour: some will vanish altogether. Even if you gain nothing by your adjournment, still what you do after it will appear to be the result of mature deliberation, not of anger. If you want to find out the truth about anything, commit the task to time: nothing can be accurately discerned at a time of disturbance. (Seneca, *Of Anger*, book 3, section 12)

We ought to put our trust in people and refuse to be suspicious of them. It is more noble to be deceived than to suspect. We should not believe rumors from others or thoughts originating within ourselves unless they prove themselves true.

Readiness to believe what we hear causes very great mischief; we ought often not even to listen, because in some cases it is better to be deceived than to suspect deceit. We ought to free our minds of suspicion and mistrust, those most untrustworthy causes of anger. (Seneca, *Of Anger*, book 2, section 14)

We become angry over petty things because we are spoiled and luxurious. Adopting a more Spartan lifestyle can help us build resilience against such trivial provocations.

When pleasures have corrupted both the body and the mind, nothing seems enduring, not indeed because it is hard, but because he who has to bear it is soft: for why should

we be driven to frenzy by any one's coughing and sneezing, or by a fly not being driven away with sufficient care, or by a dog's hanging about us, or a key dropping from a careless servant's hand? [...]

Nothing, therefore, nourishes anger more than excessive and dissatisfied luxury: the mind ought to be hardened by rough treatment, so as not to feel any blow that is not severe. (Seneca, Of Anger, book 2, section 25)

The greatest remedy for anger is delay. Do not become angry about things you heard second-hand. Do not believe what you hear or think at the first impression. Take time to gather evidence and put the accusations on trial.

The greatest remedy for anger is delay: beg anger to grant you this at the first, not in order that it may pardon the offense, but that it may form a right judgment about it: if it delays, it will come to an end. Do not attempt to quell it all at once, for its first impulses are fierce; by plucking away its parts we shall remove the whole. [...]

If you were about to give sentence in court about ever so small a sum of money, you would take nothing as proved without a witness, and a witness would count for nothing except on his oath. You would allow both sides to be heard : you would allow them time: you would not despatch the matter at one sitting, because the oftener it is handled the more distinctly the truth appears. And do you condemn your friend offhand? Are you angry with him before you hear his story, before you have cross-examined him, before he can know either who is his accuser or with what he is charged. Why then, just now, in the case which you just tried, did you hear what was said on both sides? (Seneca, Of Anger, book 2, section 29)

We can always find a reason to forgive someone who has wronged us. We must train ourselves in this, so it becomes our first reaction to anger.

Perhaps he is a child; let us pardon his youth, he knows not whether he is doing wrong: or he is a father; he has either rendered such great services, as to have won the right even to wrong us—or perhaps this very act which offends us is his chief merit: or a woman; well, she made a mistake. The man did it because he was ordered to do it. Who but an unjust person can be angry with what is done under compulsion? You had hurt him: well, there is no wrong in suffering the pain which you have been the first to inflict. Suppose that your opponent is a judge; then you ought to take his opinion rather than your own: or that he is a king; then, if he punishes the guilty, yield to him because he is just, and if he punishes the innocent, yield to him because he is powerful. Suppose that it is a dumb animal or as stupid as a dumb animal: then, if you are angry with it, you will make yourself like it. Suppose that it is a disease or a misfortune; it will take less effect upon you if you bear it quietly: or that it is a god; then you waste your time by being angry with him as much as if you prayed him to be angry with someone else. Is it a good man who has wronged you? do not believe it: is it a bad one? do not be surprised at this;

he will pay to someone else the penalty which he owes to you—indeed, by his sin he has already punished himself. (Seneca, Of Anger, book 2, section 30)

## **How to Subdue Anger**

If we have failed to check ourselves and have become angry, we are not without tools to bring ourselves back to sanity. Our first step should be to reassess our expectations. Our anger will say to us, “How dare they! Do they not know who I am?” as if we are someone who ought not face disrespect or hardship, when we are really the type to both expect them ourselves and inflict them upon others.

This is caused by our excessive self-love: we think that we ought to remain uninjured even by our enemies: every man bears within his breast the mind of a despot, and is willing to commit excesses, but unwilling to submit to them. Thus it is either ignorance or arrogance that makes us angry: ignorance of common facts; for what is there to wonder at in bad men committing evil deeds? what novelty is there in your enemy hurting you, your friend quarrelling with you, your son going wrong, or your servant doing amiss? Fabius was wont to say that the most shameful excuse a general could make was “I did not think.” I think it the most shameful excuse that a man can make. Think of everything, expect everything: even with men of good character something queer will crop up: human nature produces minds that are treacherous, ungrateful, greedy, and impious: when you are considering what any man's morals may be, think what those of mankind are. (Seneca, Of Anger, book 2, section 32)

All anger is self-righteous and brings with it a certain kind of pleasure that enjoys witnessing the suffering of others. But revenge is not justice, and this pleasure is the mad delight of the tyrant.

But anger possesses a certain pleasure of its own, and it is sweet to pay back the pain you have suffered.” Not at all; it is not honorable to requite injuries by injuries, in the same way as it is to repay benefits by benefits. In the latter case it is a shame to be conquered; in the former it is a shame to conquer. Revenge and retaliation are words which men use and even think to be righteous, yet they do not greatly differ from wrong-doing, except in the order in which they are done: he who renders pain for pain has more excuse for his sin; that is all. (Seneca, Of Anger, book 2, section 32)

It takes two to fight and to drag each other down to hell. The wise person, when they realize they have begun to act out their anger, drops their weapon, even in front of their very opponent, perhaps incurring some additional injury to themselves, but saving both parties from disaster. The true victor is not the one who vanquishes their foe, but the one who ends the strife and returns voluntarily to the wise and safe path.

If anyone is angry with you, meet his anger by returning benefits for it: a quarrel which is only taken up on one side falls to the ground: it takes two men to fight. But suppose that there is an angry struggle on both sides, even then, he is the better man who first gives

way; the winner is the real loser. He struck you; well then, do you fall back: if you strike him in turn you will give him both an opportunity and an excuse for striking you again: you will not be able to withdraw yourself from the struggle when you please. (Seneca, Of Anger, book 2, section 34)

If you still cannot check your anger with reason, counter it with another vice. Remember that anger is madness and can destroy your whole life in a moment if you give it the chance. Use the fear of that destruction to bring it under control.

No way leads more swiftly to madness: many have, consequently, remained always in the frenzy of anger, and, having once lost their reason, have never recovered it. Ajax was driven mad by anger, and driven to suicide by madness. Men, frantic with rage, call upon heaven to slay their children, to reduce themselves to poverty, and to ruin their houses, and yet declare that they are not either angry or insane. Enemies to their best friends, dangerous to their nearest and dearest, regardless of the laws save where they injure, swayed by the smallest trifles, unwilling to lend their ears to the advice or the services of their friends, they do everything by main force, and are ready either to fight with their swords or to throw themselves upon them, for the greatest of all evils, and one which surpasses all vices, has gained possession of them. Other passions gain a footing in the mind by slow degrees: anger's conquest is sudden and complete, and, moreover, it makes all other passions subservient to itself. It conquers the warmest love: men have thrust swords through the bodies of those whom they loved, and have slain those in whose arms they have lain. Avarice, that sternest and most rigid of passions, is trampled underfoot by anger, which forces it to squander its carefully collected wealth and set fire to its house and all its property in one heap. Why, has not even the ambitious man been known to fling away the most highly valued ensigns of rank, and to refuse high office when it was offered to him? There is no passion over which anger does not bear absolute rule. (Seneca, Of Anger, book 2, section 36)

Finally, if all else fails, remember that we are bad people, living among bad people, and our only chance at forgiveness comes from each other. We must forgive if we are to be forgiven.

We all are hasty and careless, we all are untrustworthy, dissatisfied, and ambitious: nay, why do I try to hide our common wickedness by a too partial description? we all are bad. Every one of us therefore will find in his own breast the vice which he blames in another. Why do you remark how pale this man, or how lean that man is? there is a general pestilence. Let us therefore be more gentle one to another: we are bad men, living among bad men: there is only one thing which can afford us peace, and that is to agree to forgive one another. "This man has already injured me," say you, "and I have not yet injured him." No, but you have probably injured someone else, and you will injure him some day. Do not form your judgment by one hour, or one day: consider the whole tendency of your mind: even though you have done no evil, yet you are capable of doing it. (Seneca, Of Anger, book 3, section 26)

At the end of each day, reflect on how you fared. Journal, or think through, each instance of anger and how you managed it. Make this a part of your nightly routine, and you will make progress towards controlling and extinguishing this most wicked of vices.

The spirit ought to be brought up for examination daily. It was the custom of Sextius when the day was over, and he had betaken himself to rest, to inquire of his spirit: "What bad habit of yours have you cured to-day? what vice have you checked? in what respect are you better?" Anger will cease, and become more gentle, if it knows that every day it will have to appear before the judgment seat. What can be more admirable than this fashion of discussing the whole of the day's events? how sweet is the sleep which follows this self-examination? how calm, how sound, and careless is it when our spirit has either received praise or reprimand, and when our secret inquisitor and censor has made his report about our morals? (Seneca, *Of Anger*, book 3, section 36)

On this journey to master anger, we must remember that we are imperfect beings striving for improvement. By practicing daily reflection, delaying our responses, and seeing others clearly, we can gradually loosen anger's grip on our lives. The Stoics remind us that we are all flawed individuals living among other flawed individuals. In this understanding lies the seed of forgiveness, both for others and ourselves, and the end of anger. By continually applying these principles, we can not only conquer this most hideous of passions but also build the foundations for a life of peace and tranquility.