

# Plutarch: On The Avoidance of Anger

*Adapted by Steve Williams*

Plutarch (46–120 AD) was a Greek writer who became a citizen of Rome. The topic of anger was one of the most popular subjects in philosophy and literature during Plutarch's time. These are some adapted extracts from a dialogue by Plutarch between two imaginary characters, Sulla and Fundanus. Sulla has very little to say but he starts the conversation by asking Fundanus a question.

## **Sulla**

It's good to see you again Fundanus. It seems a long time since you were in Rome. I've noticed that you don't have such a fiery temper as you used to. How have you managed to control it?

## **Fundanus**

[1] I look at it this way: anger is like a bully and my mind is like a house. The anger-bully shoves out intelligence. Then it makes a mess of the house so that it is full of chaos and smoke and noise. I am not able to see anything so I can do nothing sensible.

[2] I know everyone gets angry from time to time and lashes out. The worst thing of all is when we get angry because other people are angry. We shout: "Don't get angry with me!"

[3] If anger becomes a habit, then my emotions become raw, bitter and easily upset. On the other hand, if I fight against any outburst of anger, it not only helps me in the current situation, it gives my mind energy for the future. That is what happened to me. I experienced what the Theban soldiers did: once they defeated the supposedly invincible Spartans, they were never defeated by them in battle again.

[4] It is easier to control a flame when it is just starting as a flicker than when it has exploded into a blaze. Anyone who doesn't fuel a fire puts it out and anyone who doesn't feed anger in the early stages is eliminating anger.

[5] I am glad that I have defeated anger because it can become a habit. It can rise up out of very small things, even a joke, a laugh, a nod, or a look. Anger leaves nothing alone, nothing in peace: we get angry at enemies and friends, at children and parents, and even at animals and lifeless objects.

[6] It may be that mourners get rid of a lot of their grief in the release of crying and weeping. Anger is made more intense by the speech and behaviour of people in an angry state. So if you are angry, it is normally best to stay calm or find refuge in silence.

[7] Some people see anger as magnificent or manly but it is not. They mistake its chaos for success, its menace for courage, its stubbornness for strength, its harshness for righteous indignation. They are wrong. It is not just that angry people assault children, treat people harshly and punish animals, they are often weak and the weakness provokes the anger. Lazy students are angry with their teachers, vain people are angry when they don't get compliments all the time.

[8] Anger is not very effective either. Parents often say to children: "Stop crying and you can have it." We could say the same thing ourselves when we are angry: "Be quiet, calm down and you are more likely to get what you want. Take time to decide what you should do."

[9] When I was trying to see how anger starts I noticed that people often get angry when they believe they are being slighted or ignored. I try to control this feeling and be more like Diogenes. When someone said "These people are laughing at you Diogenes," he replied "But I don't *feel* laughed at."

[10] I also try to be less nosy. Finding out what everyone saying and doing gives me more to be angry about, especially when I suspect people are talking about me behind my back or doing things to harm and cheat me.

[11] So, in answer to your question Sulla, I experimented on myself. I tried out ways to control my anger. I am glad you have noticed a change in me.

## References

In preparing this I used: *Plutarch Essays*, Translated by Robin Waterfield (Penguin).