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Imagined revenge: what task does the inner story perform

The Person and Inner Life

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Epigraph

> *“Overcome the angry by non-anger”.*

Dhammapada 223, excerpt, translated by Acharya Buddharakkhita. Chapter XVII.

What this article is about

An inward revenge story can seem more convincing than life. The right words are spoken, recognition arrives, and another finally understands the pain caused. Yet stories may serve different purposes: restoring dignity, preparing a conversation, imagining protection or replaying punishment. Their mere presence does not establish character, an intention to act or the cause of an event.

This article asks what result we expect from such a story and what it actually changes. Laboratory work challenges guaranteed relief from retaliation while preserving research in which satisfaction depended on an offender understanding a message. Ethical and religious texts offer different limits on responding; they replace neither empirical examination nor the right to protect oneself. The practical question is what imagination is supposed to restore and whether an available action addresses that task without arbitrary harm. An answer may lead to refusal, acknowledging loss, support or changed participation. Forgiveness is not compulsory, and immediate disappearance of the feeling is not promised.

I. An imagined response is not an intention to act

An imagined scene, an intention and an action have different status. Someone may imagine harsh retaliation without wanting to carry it out, picture a calm discussion yet answer cruelly, or want punishment while choosing another step. One story cannot establish a future act. This does not make every fantasy irrelevant. It permits examination without premature judgement, followed by separate questions about intentions, consequences and available participation.

Consider an employee unfairly accused at a hypothetical meeting. That evening they rehearse a speech after which the manager admits the error publicly. The scene may concern more than retaliatory humiliation: the accusation had witnesses, so correcting the public account needs to be heard too. Naming that task helps more than immediately labelling character vindictive. Yet

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the scene may add a demand that the manager suffer exactly as the employee did. Correcting facts and reproducing suffering then merge despite addressing different questions.

In Nicomachean Ethics IV.5, Aristotle assesses anger and response in context rather than declaring them equally wrong everywhere. This is ethical judgement, not a fantasy-risk scale. It prevents absence of anger from becoming the sole moral ideal. One can object to a violation and choose a measured response. But the ancient text does not determine what will repair a contemporary public accusation. That requires the episode's facts, possibilities for correction, power differences and consequences for those involved.

Begin by asking what happens after punishment in the story. Does it end when the other understands? Is suffering without understanding enough? Would correction without suffering be satisfactory? These questions identify an anticipated outcome rather than reveal a secret personality. Wanting a hearing, proportionate accountability or complete control may emerge. Each answer belongs to the current account, not a final cause of future responses. A task previously hidden behind the single word revenge becomes available for separate choice.

II. An inward story may be asking for a witness

An imagined revenge scene may seek a witness to pain more than another's suffering. Someone pictures the offender recognising consequences and ceasing to deny the event. This is one possible meaning, not a universal cause. Punishment, ending a threat or regaining influence may instead matter most. Notice which part recurs: acknowledgement, apology, the participants' positions, an audience's response or suffering. A detailed scene can still leave its intended outcome unnamed. Alternatives then seem insufficient even when they could change an important part of life.

After a hypothetical humiliating conversation, someone imagines presenting every argument without interruption. The other listens silently. Perhaps they need to finish their account or establish that their experience deserves recognition. A request might concern a specified time and willingness to listen. But systematic denial may make the desired understanding unavailable from that recipient. Precise language cannot be promised to compel hearing. Another suitable person might provide witnessing, which differs from agreement by whoever caused the harm.

Gollwitzer, Meder and Schmitt's 2011 paper describes three experiments in which satisfaction after retaliation received stronger support from an offender understanding the message than from comparative suffering alone. We read the publisher abstract and do not reconstruct sample sizes. This counters the formula that revenge never satisfies. It does not establish that harm is necessary for understanding, that satisfaction lasts, or that the action is permissible in

every relationship. A psychological consequence and ethical permission require different grounds.

Our application asks whether recognition can be pursued without making another's suffering indispensable. A record may be corrected, a voice restored or support found. Sometimes the wanted acknowledgement is unavailable. That painful limit cannot be renamed easy liberation. Recognising it differs, however, from indefinitely waiting for that particular person to supply the answer. Imagination may preserve an impossible ending while an available action addresses another task: less contact, safer participation or no longer being the sole keeper of one's history. Changing the task does not erase past injustice.

III. Relief after retaliation cannot be guaranteed

Expected relief is a forecast even when imagination makes it seem already experienced. A story presents the outcome we choose: understanding, audience agreement and an end to inward argument. Actual action does not obey this script. An offender may deny, retaliate or interpret the response differently. Involvement may continue. Separate the intended action from the anticipated feeling afterwards. A decision depending solely on final relief especially needs examination; its foundation may be less definite than a repeatedly imagined scene suggests.

In Carlsmith, Wilson and Gilbert, 2008, Study 1 used a simulated group monetary game with an uncooperative player. Forty-five of 48 students were analysed after three noncooperators were excluded. Having the opportunity to impose a financial penalty was associated with worse mood and continued thoughts about the player; satisfaction forecasts differed from experience. This narrow short-term laboratory situation represents neither every victim nor an argument against just accountability. The paper's three studies support possible divergence between forecasts and feelings, not revenge's universal fate.

Aristotle IV.5 offers a different account: for a particular form of prolonged anger, retaliation replaces pain with pleasure. This is philosophical observation within character ethics, not a modern experiment. It need not match a monetary game. Preserve the disagreement rather than claiming an ancient author anticipated the laboratory effect. Contemporary findings about satisfaction when a message is understood also resist one simple conclusion. Conditions, times and outcomes differ. The evidence supports caution about guarantees, not a completed moral command.

In a hypothetical dispute, ask what consequence matters regardless of mood: ending mistreatment, correcting facts, restoring choice or changing accountability. It may matter without producing joy. Conversely, brief pleasure does not establish fairness or benefit. This avoids permitting every response because it promises relief and forbidding accountability

because feelings may persist. A proportionate action can be chosen through its subject and consequences while future experience remains unknown rather than guaranteed to end the inward story.

IV. Repetition can keep another person in the opponent's role

A repeating story may keep the offender central to inward life. Even victory depends on their response: understanding, yielding, regret or suffering. This is a possibility, not a rule. An imagined conversation can help preparation and then end. Another repetition may add nothing while demanding attention again. Ask whether a clearer step follows or merely another version of the same ending. Preparation has a threshold of sufficiency; imaginary punishment may have none because the other's response is recreated each time.

Bushman's 2002 experiment analysed 600 undergraduates. Focusing on a provocateur while hitting a bag accompanied more anger and aggressive responding than comparison conditions. Two women declining bag hitting were excluded, and responding was measured with noise blasts. This does not study every imagined story or forbid remembering injustice. The relevant limit is that purported release through renewed offender-focused attention does not guarantee less anger. Attention and action conditions matter rather than being replaced with the everyday metaphor of released steam.

After a hypothetical quarrel, someone nightly imagines an acquaintance rejected by every friend. Initially this suggests restored order. Later, attending to their own affairs becomes harder because more evidence of deserved punishment must be added. The story may still seek external acknowledgement or postpone an unpleasant decision about distance. These possibilities cannot be assigned without the person's account. Its practical consequence can be noticed: how much attention does it take and what becomes more available afterwards? No available step invites clarification rather than an accusation of weak will.

Stopping repetition and abandoning justice differ. Someone can retain a record, choose participation and cease requiring an imaginary opponent to undergo trial again. This does not promise easy attention control. Unwanted returns need not become moral defects. Examine what is available: new analysis, suitable conversation or action on an already clear matter? When nothing is being resolved, postponing inward proceedings does not depend on fully excusing the offender or declaring the event unimportant.

V. A measured response includes people who did not commit the wrong

A revenge story often simplifies participants into the person who harmed and the person responding. Actual action also affects colleagues, children, relatives, bystanders and one's future. Expanding the view does not require silence for others' convenience. It identifies who bears a chosen means' cost. Disclosure, disruption of shared work or involving third parties extends effects beyond the original pair. A just demand does not automatically make every means of presenting it just, even when the original harm is serious.

In a hypothetical episode, someone wants to publish correspondence with a former partner. It contains evidence of mistreatment and other people's private information. Restoring one's account may also remove several people's control of their stories. We do not decide a particular publication's permissibility without circumstances and legal grounds. Distinguish confirming an event, public condemnation, protecting future participants and causing shame. These goals may require different means. Imagination can omit collateral consequences by choosing an audience entirely on our side.

Quran 42:40–43 preserves proportionality alongside responding after injustice. Dhammapada 223 proposes non-anger in response to anger. Their religious frameworks differ and cannot merge into one retaliation formula. Our comparison concerns limiting self-authorisation: feeling supplies no unconditional power to inflict harm. Buddhist spiritual ends and Islamic judgements of just response remain distinct; contemporary protection cannot follow from a short verse without considering circumstances.

Include oneself in the wider view. What arrangement does the response create? Which obligations, contacts and risks follow? A decision requiring prolonged conflict, observing suffering and repeatedly confirming victory may cost more than imagination suggests. Yet all effort towards accountability is not pointless. Correcting facts may deserve work. Ask whether that work addresses the chosen purpose and whether consequences are acceptable. Measure then becomes neither endless softness nor unconditional force, but a connection among the objection's grounds, response's means and those actually affected.

VI. Protection does not depend on promising forgiveness

Declining arbitrary revenge does not require former closeness. Protection, reduced participation or an available accountability process can be chosen without knowing whether one's attitude will change. This editorial distinction is not a universal definition of forgiveness, which has varied ethical and religious meanings. Clarify whether it means avoiding retaliatory harm, accepting an apology, resuming contact or abandoning a request for correction. These forms should not automatically become one obligation for the person harmed.

After repeated broken agreements, a hypothetical person leaves a joint project without exposing humiliating information or trying to destroy another's work. The refusal may still be experienced as revenge. Consider its subject, measure and history: ending one's participation differs from creating extra harm for suffering's sake. It may affect another, but not every unwelcome consequence is punishment. Lost capacity to continue can be acknowledged. This distinction must not provide a convenient disguise; a proclaimed boundary may indeed conceal punitive intent, requiring honest examination of consequences.

In Ephesians 4:26–32, forgiveness belongs to Christian life and divine forgiveness. The Quranic passage places forgiveness beside responding to injustice. We derive no single psychological route requiring everyone to pass through prescribed feelings. Contemporary safety decisions need their own evidence. Declining evil does not establish an offender's reliability; apologies do not automatically establish an end to repetition; absence of anger does not prove that access can be restored safely. Distinct grounds survive similar vocabulary.

The hardest limit may be recognising that the desired ending will not happen. The event cannot be undone, acknowledgement is absent and the former connection will not return. This may be loss rather than failure to forgive correctly. Imagination may preserve another ending for a time without requiring self-accusation. Available decisions can concern future life: participation, conversation, retained information and commitments no longer made. This promises no relief; it prevents all future choice from depending on another's final remorse, which desire cannot make reliable.

VII. A useful imagined scene has a stopping point

If imagination serves preparation, define what makes preparation sufficient. For a hypothetical discussion, it may mean a clear subject, one request and understanding a possible refusal. Correcting a fact may need a brief sequence and checkable evidence. Limiting participation may need a decision and, where safe, a way to communicate it. These are editorial options, not a compulsory method. Unlike endless victory, they produce something usable outside imagination. A complete inward feeling of correctness is unnecessary before preparation becomes practical.

A hypothetical employee requests correction of a public accusation. Instead of a long speech about the manager's character, they identify the false statement and where correction should occur, then consider refusal. Agreement is not guaranteed, but dependence on one perfect ending decreases. An unsafe conversation may require another role or support; direct presentation is not obligatory. Rehearsal must not promise an obedient reaction. Readiness for several outcomes differs from believing the right words inevitably produce the desired one.

Dhammapada 222 compares restraining rising anger to driving a moving chariot. This is a religious image of discipline, not a measured instruction for controlling imagination. Our limited comparison distinguishes holding a means from directing an action. Supposed control of a story may conceal its continuing control of attention. The text's spiritual judgement does not permit condemning a reader for involuntary returns. The practical question concerns changing an available task rather than proving one deserves to be a true charioteer.

A stopping point can be temporary. Facts are recorded, a request prepared and the next step chosen for today; the rest remains open until an event supplies information. This neither ends inward life nor promises to stop feeling. New evidence can justify returning. Without it, another rehearsal need not certify conscientiousness. This limit protects attention from endlessly proving that pain was real. An event's reality does not depend on evenings spent imagining its correction. Self-respect can mean retaining the fact while attending to what remains part of future life.

VIII. Life need not wait for the perfect ending

Choice after a violation can occur before inward completion. Someone may still want acknowledgement and sometimes imagine a response while acting on an already clear matter. This is neither hypocrisy nor proof that the decision is unreal. Feeling, desire, intention and participation change at different speeds. A new arrangement may clarify them or tension may persist. Assess actual choice separately from continuing experience. Requiring complete composure before any step makes future life depend on a condition not always voluntarily available.

A hypothetical person ends joint work, retains records and stops answering humiliating messages, yet sometimes imagines remorse. The returning scene does not undo the external step. If they re-enter conflict solely to confirm the imagined ending, examine its cost. What task does returning serve now? Have participation's grounds changed? Is there new information? These questions permit revision without excusing the past. A choice can remain justified by current grounds even before the emotional story reaches its last sentence.

Religious and philosophical texts provide limits, not one universal ending. Buddhist non-anger belongs to spiritual discipline, Quranic proportion to divine judgement, and Aristotelian

appropriateness to character in circumstances. Experiments examine mood, thought and satisfaction in limited tasks. Together they cannot prove that declining revenge inevitably brings freedom. Our smaller conclusion is that promised suffering need not be the sole basis for restoring available participation in one's own life. Other, more definite purposes and means can exist.

After acting, examine those purposes. Was a fact corrected, dangerous mistreatment reduced, a contact limit respected or support obtained? These are outcomes even without triumph. If absent, the decision needs refinement regardless of the story's elegance. Relief can be recognised without becoming universal law; its absence is not automatically personal failure. Retain the harm's history, ethical objection and future choice without tying them to defeating another. Separateness makes the inward story one source of understanding rather than the sole director of the future.

What this means in practice

Choose one recurring story and describe it without an accusatory label. What does the other person do? What follows for us? Who is present? Which acknowledgement or consequence marks completion? These questions concern imagination's content, not diagnosis. Declining to examine it now is a valid limit. Imagining an act does not establish intention. Intentions and real consequences require separate examination; the article offers no methods of harm and makes no fantasy an obligation to act.

Name the anticipated task: correcting a fact, speaking fully, ending mistreatment, seeing accountability or regaining influence? Several answers may coexist without final clarity. For each, ask whether another route exists and what observable outcome could follow. Recognition from a particular person may remain unavailable. Someone else's support does not wholly replace it but can serve another task. Safer distance leaves the past intact while changing future participation. Partial change must not be presented as complete restoration of justice.

External steps require assessing measure, role and cost. Who besides the offender is affected? Is private information exposed? Might risk increase for oneself or a dependent person? Is refusal freely possible? Power and coercion change whether conversation is available; precise speech cannot guarantee an end to danger. Recording facts, preparing support or limited action may precede direct presentation. Declining arbitrary revenge requires neither restored trust nor contact. Forgiveness, if the person chooses the word, is not a prerequisite for protecting future life.

Preparation can have a sufficiency point: known facts recorded, a request formed and an immediate option chosen for today. New evidence may reopen the question; its absence

creates no duty to rehearse an ideal trial. Afterwards assess the task's outcome as well as mood. Factual correction may help without relief, and pleasure may arise without fairness. The practical result is a clearer relation between imagined endings, real needs and available participation. Unfinished feelings need not be finished at another's expense, nor must all future time await the required remorse.

Key quotation

> *“Others only hold the reins”.*

Dhammapada 222, closing words, translated by Acharya Buddharakkhita. Context. The full verse compares restraining rising anger to driving a chariot; the image does not diagnose the reader.

Connections between traditions

Purposes and forms of knowledge remain distinct. Empirical satisfaction is not ethical permission, and a spiritual image does not predict everyone's experience.

Comparison	Similarity	Limit
Aristotle IV.5 ↔ Carlsmith and colleagues	Response and subsequent feeling need examination	Philosophical pleasure after retaliation differs from the narrow experimental result
Carlsmith ↔ Gollwitzer and colleagues	Expected outcomes do not exhaust their conditions	Satisfaction when a message is understood counters the claim that revenge never satisfies
Bushman ↔ examining a repeated story	Offender-focused attention may sustain involvement	Bag hitting differs from every form of imagination or discussion
Dhammapada 223 ↔ Quran 42:40–43	Responding has an ethical limit	Non-anger and proportionate response after injustice occupy different spiritual frameworks
Ephesians 4:32 ↔ trust and forgiveness	An attitude towards an offender can change	Christian forgiveness does not establish safe renewed access

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Tags

inner navigation, human experience, emotions, distinctions, life episode, interpretation, responsibility, consent, dignity, safety, boundaries, relationships, dialogue, choice, consequences, uncertainty, attention, ethical judgement, hypothetical example, philosophy, religion, research, United Wisdom, practical reflection, facts, Imagined revenge, imagination

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