

## UNMASKING ANGER

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*Unmasking Anger Many people believe that anger is "unspiritual," a damaging misconception that often causes us to stuff it inside. Spiritual traditions such as yoga and Buddhism can teach us how to react skillfully to anger without repressing it.*

By Alan Reder

In a post-September 11 world, one point seems undeniable: The most harmful force known to humanity is not high-tech weaponry but raw anger. Anger is lightning in a bottle, and the bottle is us. If we fan anger's embers inside us, the heat can consume our love, rationality, and emotional and physical health. If we direct the heat at others, it scorches everything in its path—friendships, work relationships, marriages, and families. At its worst, anger even maims and kills. Rwanda, Northern Ireland, the Middle East—beneath the issues in each case lies anger burning out of control.

We know that we're saner and healthier when anger isn't igniting our thoughts and actions. But anger can't be wished away; sometimes it flares up inside us as spontaneously as hiccups. Other times, we feel justifiably provoked—by a lover who betrays us, a work partner who lets us down, injustice in society. So the real question is: How can we deal constructively with this potentially destructive emotion?

For thousands of years, spiritual traditions such as yoga and Buddhism have offered detailed anti-anger prescriptions because anger undermines their main goal: attaining happiness and freedom. More recently, psychologists and medical researchers have studied anger to help prevent the damage it causes to both the perpetrator and the target. This accumulated knowledge makes clear that anger can indeed be tamed, because despite its destructive power, anger barely has a toehold in reality.

Under Cover Anger comes in several forms, including outrage, frustration, jealousy, resentment, fury, and hatred. It also masquerades as judgment, criticism, and even boredom. Like all emotions, it is a complex, ever-shifting state involving thoughts, feelings, and bodily changes.

The physiological effects, which include a two-stage jolt from the class of neurotransmitters called catecholamines (e.g., adrenaline), do for anger what gasoline does for fire. The first surge lasts just minutes but energizes the body for immediate action—either fight or flight depending on how we suss out the situation. Our fight-or-flight response is usually biochemical overkill, a holdover from the days when the main threats to our daily equanimity were sabertooth tigers, not telemarketers calling at dinnertime. This may explain why we sometimes act all out of proportion to whatever provoked our anger.

The second surge of catecholamines lasts longer, from hours to days. It puts us in an extended state of arousal and may account for why, when we're already having a bad day, we'll strike out at anything that moves—our kids, our spouse, the dog—for behavior that normally wouldn't bug us. It also underlies the

seductive, sometimes enthralling power of anger—high on catecholamines, we feel strong, clear, and purposeful, dark though that purpose may be.

Beyond this, anger is tough to categorize because first, different people respond differently to it, and second, researchers don't agree where it fits on the emotional spectrum. All emotions have variations and some emotions include blends of others. For instance, jealousy combines anger, sadness, and fear. So, is anger a primary emotion from which other emotions spring or a secondary effect of more basic feelings?

While the research community continues to argue about anger's qualities, however, many who counsel angry people believe that not just jealousy but all anger conceals more fundamental human responses. Sylvia Boorstein, the noted mindfulness teacher and licensed psychotherapist, says, "When I work with angry clients in a psychotherapeutic venue, I ask them: 'What frightened you and what saddened you?' These feelings aren't mutually exclusive."

Laughing, Boorstein recalls a decade-long grudge with a colleague over a comment he made to her. "Every time I thought about him, I got a wave of fury: 'How can he have said that about me?'" she says. Then while driving to a meeting she knew her antagonist would also be attending, it hit her: "He said it because it was true, and it had taken me 10 years to be able to say that about myself." In other words, the anger had obscured the fear that this person might be right. By the time she arrived at the meeting, she had lightened up and was glad to see her former accuser, as he was to see her.

Ven. Thubten Chodron, an American-born Buddhist nun and author of *Working with Anger* (Snow Lion, 2001), finds similar insights into anger from traditional Tibetan Buddhist sources. Besides unhappiness and fear, she lists habit, inappropriate attention, and attachment as key sources of anger. Sometimes we get angry because we've developed the habit of reacting angrily instead of with patience and compassion, she says. We become angry through inappropriate attention, by exaggerating negative aspects of people, situations, or other objects of our ill feelings. Our attachments lead to anger, she suggests, because the more attached we are to something or someone, the angrier we get if we can't have it or it's taken away from us.

Cope—psychotherapist, senior Kripalu Yoga teacher, and author of *Yoga and the Quest for the True Self* (Bantam, 1999)—finds the ancient yogic view of anger equal to anything he learned in his professional training. Yogis understand anger as an energy existing, like all emotions, halfway between a physical and mental

experience. Like heat or other energies, anger wanes naturally, says Cope, if we don't hold it back with psychological defenses—say, denying or repressing it: "Anger tends to arise in a very visceral wave. It arises, crests, and then passes away."

Collateral Damage Anger may be superficial and transitory, but that takes nothing away from its real and present dangers. Angry people hurt themselves and others, sometimes grievously and indiscriminately.

Brian Hanrahan, who lives in the Pacific Northwest, admits that failure to manage his anger cost him his marriage. In the early '90s, his wife, Sheila (not their real names), began meeting with a man from work in the evenings before coming home. They weren't having sex, she insisted, but Brian still stewed over someone else occupying her attention.

As Sheila began spending more time with her friend, Brian's anger heated to a boil. His outbursts, sometimes in front of the kids, made their home life so unpleasant that Sheila finally moved out. Meanwhile, her other relationship crescendoed and then ended, just as Brian suspected it would. But his marriage had ended too. "If I had let her fascination run its course, she might have come back," Brian says slowly, his shoulders slumped as he tells the story.

Obsessed with what he perceived as Sheila's rejection of him, Brian started a daily journal to address his pain. The entries documented that he had put the marriage on hold well before Sheila did. It was a recipe for marital disaster, but he didn't get it until it was staring at him in his own words on paper.

Exercise helped Brian process his anger; so did a friend who reflected Brian's thoughts back to him without taking sides. In addition, Brian began reminding himself to ask, "What result do I really want here?," instead of letting anger dictate his actions. All of these methods blunted the edges of Brian's emotionality and enabled him to reconcile with Sheila as a co-parent, if not as a husband. When Brian gets angry these days, he's more likely to "recognize my anger as hurt and then sit with that hurt a bit," rather than acting from rage.

The wreckage from Arjun Nicastro's fury couldn't be so easily fixed, but that made his turnaround all the more remarkable. Imprisoned at age 17, he escaped and, while out, shot and killed a man during a drug theft gone awry. Back in prison, this time with a life sentence, he tried to escape again. He was caught once more and sent to solitary confinement for more than a year. But the man who walked out was different from the one who had been locked in.

Anguished about a future that seemed as limited as his six-by-eight-foot cell, Arjun was floored one day by the realization that his predicament was entirely self-created. For the first time, he felt the weight of the suffering his behavior had caused others.

parents, those he had robbed, the family and friends of the man he had killed. He also realized that if he had ruined his life, he had the power to fix it. He started the repair job on the spot, by committing to

stop reacting thoughtlessly to his anger. .I didn't have any methods to help me live differently, but I had the intent,. he says.

A series of fortuitous circumstances then equipped him with the psychospiritual tools he previously lacked. A new therapist at the prison introduced him to Gestalt therapy, which helped him release anger through focused awareness on its thoughts and physical sensations. A fellow inmate handed him a copy of Bo Lozoff's book *We're All Doing Time*, distributed free to prisoners via the Lozoff-led Human Kindness Foundation. The book taught Arjun basic yoga, meditation, and pranayama, wrapped in a prisoner-friendly condensation of universal mystical wisdom.

Arjun began practicing Lozoff's teachings daily. His new spirituality turned an incorrigible hothead into a model inmate. Lozoff, who had begun corresponding and meeting with Arjun as part of the Foundation's Prison-Ashram Project, convinced the parole board that Arjun's efforts were sincere and offered to house and employ him in the Foundation's spiritual community if the board would grant Arjun his release. Arjun was paroled in 1998 at age 40, after 23 years behind bars. Today, Arjun oversees much of the Foundation's work with prisoners, sits on the Foundation's board, and is married to a Foundation staffer. Anger, he says, "is not what I want to put out in the world. There's enough already. I don't need to be adding to it."

Turning Heat into Light Does anger ever serve us? Some insist it does. Anger, they point out, alerts us to wrongs that demand redress.for instance, when our rights are violated. In sports, some argue, anger helps fuel the desire to win. Anger fuels our efforts to correct social injustice, others say.

Chodron disagrees with all these notions. She says anger can be an unreliable barometer of wrongdoing: Sometimes our wants are frustrated or others disagree with our values or ideas, and we resentfully brand our reaction as something nobler, like moral outrage. On competition, she reminds us that former UCLA basketball coach John Wooden, who led his teams to more championships than any other coach in college history, never pushed his athletes to win. Instead, he urged them always to give their best effort; winning was the after-effect.

Chodron also thinks that compassion is a far better approach to social action than anger. A compassionate mind looks at a situation more broadly, seeking a solution that's acceptable to everybody.

Michael Nagler, a noted scholar and author on nonviolence, observes that Mahatma Gandhi's effectiveness against the British in India came largely from his ability to convert the raw power of anger into something more creative and positive, like turning heat into light. Gandhi developed the ability,

Nagler says, from a pivotal insight he had as a young attorney in South Africa in 1893. While traveling on a train, he was thrown

out of a first-class compartment after a European passenger complained about letting a "coolie" travel in the first-class coach. Rather than take the offense personally or direct his rage at the individuals involved, Gandhi decided—after an epic inner battle— to dedicate himself to changing the social conditions that gave rise to the incident.

Gandhi found no problem with feeling anger, only with how it was expressed. That is a crucial distinction that many spiritual practitioners miss. Many people believe anger is "unspiritual," a damaging misconception that leads them to stuff the emotion, trapping it inside themselves, says Cope. Sylvia Boorstein says that those who think their own spiritual practice will erase anger are terribly mistaken: "I'm continually telling people, we don't get to be different people—we have the same neurology and physiology and, actually, the same neuroses all of our lives—but we do get to be wiser about how we put them out in the world."

**Mastery over Anger** If we're stuck with our anger, what's the trick to mastering it? The ancient yogis didn't have access to the sophisticated knowledge of anger's biochemistry that researchers do today. But their mind-body-energy concepts are a fairly good analogue for the model that researchers apply to anger now; that partly explains why yoga is such an effective approach to dealing with it.

In yogic theory, asanas, pranayama, and meditation comprise a comprehensive toolkit for freeing up blockages at the mental, physical, or energetic level.

In fact, with a growing body of research backing yoga's effectiveness as an anger "de-fuser," physiologist Ralph LaForge regularly advises physicians to recommend yoga to their hostility-prone cardiac patients. LaForge is managing director of the Lipid Disorder Training Program at Duke University Medical Center's Endocrine Division in Durham, North Carolina, where groundbreaking research has taken place on "hot reactive" personality types—that is, people who react to anger more explosively than most. When these same people have cardiac risk factors such as high blood pressure, cholesterol problems, and central weight gain, to which they are statistically prone, an angry episode could trigger a catastrophic heart attack or other life-threatening coronary event. Yoga, particularly therapeutic forms like restorative yoga, says LaForge, has proven to be a valuable method of cooling hot-reactives down.

Stephen Cope suggests that asanas may be in fact the best yogic antidote for anger "because asanas allow you to move the energy." He cautions against meditation for folks in an explosive state because meditative awareness just feeds the flames once the temperature has reached a certain point.

Cope's observations underscore the fact that anger manifests differently in each person, and must be treated differently as well. Some of us get so revved up by our catecholamines that we can't think straight. In those cases, experts have found that methods such as deep breathing, moderate exercise, or walking away from a

provocative situation are the best way to lower the arousal level. But for those who are milder by nature, awareness can accelerate anger's rush through, and out of, the body. "Yoga helps people stay with the wave of anger all the way to the other end," explains Cope.

Besides asanas, Cope touts a yoga-based technique taught at the Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health in Lenox, Massachusetts, for integrating emotional experiences. The technique, called "riding the wave," employs five sequential steps: Breathe, Relax, Feel, Watch, Allow. To begin the process, Breathe from the diaphragm, thereby switching your focus from your physical body to the world of energy. This switch can lead to dramatic insights and emotional release, as the prana carried in the breath penetrates blocked areas of the body and their associated blockages in the psyche.

Next, Relax your muscles as much as possible to help remove physical blocks to feeling the wave of energy. The wave's spontaneity and intensity can be frightening, spurring you to defend yourself by tensing up, Cope notes. Cueing yourself to relax enables the wave to continue doing its psychically liberating work.

Then, Feel, which here means focusing on the wave's sensations and investigating their qualities. What's their mood, color, texture, shape? Where do you feel them most intensely in your body?

After answering these questions, Watch—that is, engage what yogis call the Witness. "If you can stand in the Witness—what Freud called the observing ego—and stay present with the wave of sensation, then it moves through you and you can make discerning choices about how to respond to it rather than reacting to it," says Cope.

The final stage of the technique, Allow, simply involves trusting the intelligence and positive outcome of the wave and not resisting it. The brilliance of riding the wave, Cope says, is that you stay with the raw feeling without acting on it "until you're really clear."

Classical Buddhism approaches anger in much the same way, says Chodron: "In Buddhism, we are constantly practicing the mindful observance of ourselves, including the arising, abiding, and subsiding of destructive emotions like anger. We don't stuff our anger down, but we don't buy its storyline either. Sometimes we can just watch it, and it will lose its power and dissipate. Other times we apply an

antidote to it—a more realistic or beneficial way of looking at the situation'so that the anger evaporates."

To illustrate the latter, Chodron points to the explosive tensions between the Israelis and Palestinians, a tragedy she finds especially painful because she was born Jewish. The anger each side feels stems largely, she says, from being so obsessed with the insults and injuries to their own people that they forget human concerns on the other side. "To correct injustice and harm, you have to take into consideration the feelings and needs of everyone in the situation," she says.

Chodron's unspoken implication: What holds for Middle Eastern political tensions also holds for individuals everywhere. The havoc anger wreaks can make taming this terrible force look almost impossible. Yet the task is paradoxically simple if we remember our cues: Take the compassionate view of things. Wait out the biochemical surge. Ride the wave.

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