



HARNESSING ANGER'S ENERGY

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When we harness our anger, it becomes like a horse held in reins by its rider. With an experienced rider, the horse becomes focused, directed, and powerful – full of positive energy.

Think of all the words in the English language connoting anger, i.e. frustrated, irritated, resentful, annoyed, exasperated, vexed, aggravated, peevish, infuriated, furious, ticked-off, pissed off, incensed, and enraged. Isn't it amazing that the words in our language conveying feelings of anger are more numerous than the words conveying love – even though both of these powerful, human emotions embody an abundance of passion and energy? A component of our spiritual and emotional journey is to be able to consider any form of energy as a positive, powerful fuel. This even includes the energy from anger.

Despite our rich language describing anger and despite the potential embodied in its energy, it is often a taboo subject – something we hesitate to talk about, let alone deal with. Most of us deal

with anger in extremes: we suppress it, or explode with it. To add to the difficulty, any awareness of, or expression of anger is often accompanied by shame. It is as though we are a bad person if we experience anger. As a culture, we express this shame about feeling angry with derogatory expressions. For example, we describe an angry person as being “hot under the collar”, or that they “fly off the handle”, “go into a tailspin”, “have a hemorrhage”, “blow a fuse”, “hit the ceiling”, “bite someone's head off” or “flip their lid”. It is interesting, that in addition to the negative connotations in these expressions, they also imply the power in anger.

Anger can be like a volcano, hence the development of other expressions like: “flaring-up”, “seeing red”, “smoldering”, “blowing-up” or “exploding” that speak to the eruptive quality of anger. We are able to see and talk about the power in an active volcano, yet forget that an inactive volcano also contains this power. Like the volcano, our anger contains this powerful energy, whether it is trapped in our bodies or released in an explosion. When we do not release anger, its energy remains trapped within us and powerfully burns away our healthy physical and emotional selves. On the other hand, when anger is too explosively released, like an erupting volcano, it has the power to destroy everything in its path.

The spiritual use of anger's energy lies in the middle ground – in our ability to harness anger's steam and use it to propel us on our spiritual/emotional journey. When we release the energy from anger gently and gradually, it is like a softly whistling valve from a teakettle, discharging steam to warn us of the rising heat and pressure. It is not destructive. We can be like the whistling teakettle and use the energy in anger in a productive way.

On a very basic instinctive, animalistic level, anger's energy is used in a fight or flight reaction. When we are physically attacked, just like an animal, we use one of these two primal responses to protect ourselves. However, this animal-like physical response is rarely needed, unless we are fighting to protect ourselves, or a loved one, such as in a war or being attacked on the street.

We humans, having evolved beyond our primal nature, still experience this anger; however, most stimuli come from non-threatening situations. For example, when we are betrayed by someone we love, when someone insults us, when we aren't promoted as expected, when our car breaks down, when our child doesn't listen to us, or when we burn the dinner. When these things happen, we can feel anger's energy rising within us – some toward others and some toward ourselves. However, since none of these incidents requires a fight nor flight response, we must instead find a way to use the energy in anger to work toward a spiritually/emotionally congruent solution.

We must find a solution which more effectively connects us to our inner selves, to the external environment, or to whatever higher energy source we turn to as a part of our spiritual practice. We must harness our inner energy, our inner power to become like the steamboat that harnesses steam to drive it down the river of life.

Most of us have a hard time with anger because we were never taught its positive attributes nor shown how to use it effectively. In most families anger is usually dealt with in extremes – either “stuffed” and hidden, or expressed in an emotionally or physically destructive way. In families where anger is hidden, conflicts are suppressed by avoiding issues that cause conflicts, or

by hiding all conflicts behind closed doors. Anger is often hidden by a co-dependent person denying their needs, feelings and thought.

In these dysfunctional families, where anger is hidden, the children are taught to do the same – to keep their feelings to themselves, or if they can't manage their feelings to go to their rooms until they can. The message is clear to all family members that angry feelings are bad and must be suppressed and/or hidden.

In families where anger is expressed like an erupting volcano, everything will seem still and peaceful until something riles one family member and the volcano blows. When it does, whoever or whatever is in the way will be the object of the assault - either emotionally, physically or both. The result is fear and the realization that having anger and the expression of anger are both dangerous.

What most families fail to teach is that anger is a normal, human response to an unacceptable or hurtful situation. Fred Rogers, television personality from *Mister Roger's Neighborhood*, said in chapter 6 of his book *Mister Roger Talks With Parents*, that through their living examples, parents must teach their children that "...anger can be expressed through words and non-destructive activities..."

Anger is never right or wrong, good or bad. Anger just is. It is a normal human response to an unacceptable situation. At its best anger is a message from our higher selves that something is not resonating with our true nature. It is a message letting us know that what is happening is not in synch with our inner truths, needs, experiences, feelings, etc. It is our psyche nudging us into taking action. To be fully on our spiritual path, we must not ignore this energetic tug.

The marriage of Emma and Hal is a perfect example of two people who never learned how to deal effectively with anger. Hal was a workaholic, who rarely paid attention to Emma, to the children, or to the home. He felt that all he had to do for the family was provide a good income. Emma wanted more of an emotional connection with her husband and was angry that she was not receiving it. However, Emma was not aware of this anger because her family never allowed anger to be expressed. Emma came from a religious family that believed anger was a sin and that if people prayed hard enough, anger would go away. Emma became so good at suppressing her anger that she could no longer identify the feeling. However, as often the case, her angry energy caused physical and emotional problems. The power of her anger turned into depression and high blood pressure. Because she developed these problems she entered psychotherapy. In this emotionally safe environment, she began to articulate her feelings.

Hal, on the other hand, was terrified of anger because his rageful father had physically abused him. The hardest part for Hal was that he never knew the cause of his father's anger because it was never discussed. Hal's fear of anger led him, in part, to marry Emma, subconsciously knowing that she would not express her anger.

In Hal and Emma's marriage, the dynamic around anger was even more complex because even though Hal was afraid of anger, his father (as his primary male role model) had taught him to deal with his fears by using rage as a means of control. This terrified Emma who became more emotionally distant, fearful and filled with self-blame. To hide her anger at Hal from him and

herself, she turned her anger inward and blamed herself for Hal's anger and his inability to be emotionally available. It is often said that "anger turned inward" becomes depression.

Neither Emma's, nor Hal's way of dealing with anger are healthy or productive. As adults on a spiritual journey, we have a whole spectrum of feeling – both positive and negative. We must become as aware of our anger, as we are of our joyous feelings. We must understand and acknowledge anger's source and then deal with the feelings in an emotionally healthy manner. We must learn that the feelings of anger, frustration, irritation, annoyance, all come to us as messages from our inner selves, and as such are to be honored, not ignored.

The first step in dealing with anger is to recognize its existence. That sometimes mean we must just “hold” onto our anger for a moment in order to be clear what is causing it. There is an old Chinese proverb that says, “Forego your anger for a moment and save yourself a hundred days of trouble.”

Once we have achieved some clarity, then we can more clearly articulate the issue in a thoughtful, constructive manner. A powerful and healing moment occurs when the anger can be shared between two people with awareness, compassion and love by using “I statements”, and not “you statements”. For example, “ I feel angry when _____ happens”, or for a more concrete example, “I feel annoyed when I am promised something and it does not happen”. When anger is articulated as an “I statement” these feelings can more easily be heard by the other person. Anger, when emphatically, strongly and yet lovingly shared, can be even more powerful than explosive, volcanic anger.

The next step in dealing with anger is to realize that anger is like an onion – with many layers. When we peel back the layers and truly explore our anger, we realize that it is often a result of subtler feelings that lie just beneath the surface anger. The underlying layers of feelings are often those I call the “enemies of the spirit” – shame, doubt, fear, and longing – or even more subtle feelings such as sadness and loneliness. Because anger contains such powerful energy, it is often the first feeling to be recognized and is therefore the “skin”, or the coating that covers over the more subtle feelings. Once we peel away the tough skin of anger by effectively dealing with it, we are free to discover the softer layers of feeling hiding beneath the surface. Once we understand this, we can say, “I feel angry as well as (scared/hurt/lonely) when _____ happens”.

Anger is important, but in order to change our relationship to that which is driving the anger, we must understand exactly what is making us angry. Access to that information lies in these subtler layers of feeling. Going back to my earlier example, Emma was finally able to recognize her anger. However, in order to truly understand and work with it in her marriage, she had to peel back the layers to discover specifically what she was angry about. Upon doing so she realized that she was very lonely and had a tremendous longing for an intimate relationship. Underneath that longing, she was also experiencing sadness because she didn't have an intimate relationship, which resulted in hurt and a feeling of hopelessness – hopeless that it could ever be achieved.

An important part of our spiritual journey is to have an awareness of all our feelings – including anger. By embracing all feelings as a valued part of ourselves, we feel united within

ourselves and in turn will experience a stronger union with the world around us. Being true to ourselves about what we feel also helps us present a true self to others. This enhances all forms of the connections we have with others.

With a lot of hard work, Emma learned to state her feelings in a healthy way when she told Hal, "I feel very angry with you because I am longing for an intimate relationship and do not feel that I am receiving it from this marriage. As a result I feel sad, lonely, and hurt and am afraid that I will never have the intimacy I desire with you." Anger stated in this manner – particularly if done with a very emphatic, yet loving voice – is powerful and does not carry with it the shaming, hurtful content of volcanic anger. When Emma and Hal were able to exchange their anger in this constructive way – with both the verbalizing and the listening component – their marriage began to heal. They could then begin the problem solving required to develop a true intimacy.

Emma began to focus her energy toward learning about herself, and because she began to know herself better, she could present her true Self in the marriage. This helped her move toward a closer intimacy with Hal. As she did so, her depression lessened, her blood pressure medication was reduced and the marriage became more nourishing.

Hal needed to acknowledge and understand his anger toward his father. He also needed to admit the hurt and sadness he felt at never having a loving father. Even though his father had passed away, when these feelings were appropriately expressed to Emma, he began to heal. Then Hal needed to let go of his controlling manner and focus his energy on constructive ways to get his needs met. A male mentor from work modeled new values and a way for Hal to redefine his priorities regarding marriage and work. Ultimately, he was able to be more emotionally available to Emma.

Once anger is verbalized, it must be let go of – whether the other person truly hears it or not. Holding onto anger is destructive. If the anger is acknowledged, it can be healing for the person experiencing the anger. It also has the potential to improve a relationship. However, if the anger cannot be heard or acknowledged then perhaps the message is that the relationship may not be a healthy one, and the angry partner must use the energy to make new choices and move on. Whatever the outcome, the anger is an important message that must be dealt with so it can be utilized in an emotionally and spiritually congruent way.

Sometimes the anger we experience is not the result of a relationship, but more about a circumstance, like being angry at work. Perhaps you find yourself not wanting to go to work and resenting the daily grind and routine of your life – so much so that when you think about going to work you feel angry. This form of anger is difficult because there is no one to blame – no one to yell at. Often this type of anger is acted out passive-aggressively, that is the anger is acted out in a passive way, such as by frequently calling in sick, or not getting work done on time. Once again it is a necessary part of our spiritual, emotional journey to recognize that these messages from our inner selves are extremely important messages. For example, if work is the source of anger, maybe the job is no longer fulfilling and it's time to seriously look at alternatives.

When the energy in anger is not recognized, dealt with, or is expressed in an abusive or passive-aggressive manner, it leaves an emotional hangover —i.e. feelings of shame and guilt – and

creates a spiritual void. Whether the energy from the anger is blocked or expressed as an explosion, it creates a residual vigilance. The individual will feel as though they must always be on guard and protect themselves against anything that might make them angry. On the other hand, when the energy in anger is discharged productively and completely, (and hopefully acknowledged) that is when the energy is used toward a higher good, then we feel whole, expansive and trusting of the world around us. We also become aware of our emotional and spiritual power.

When we harness our anger, it becomes like a horse held in reins by its rider. With an experienced rider, the horse becomes focused, directed, powerful – full of positive energy. Once our anger is harnessed by us as the experienced rider, an acceptance of “what is” and a vision of the path we must take becomes clear. We can then focus this anger in a construction manner.

The true growth derived from anger is about our ability to embrace our anger and then incorporate it into our being as a truly honored part of ourselves. To grow as emotionally and spiritually mature individuals, we must grab the brilliant fire, and potent energy embodied in anger, and utilize it as a source of eternal energy and positively directed power.

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