

Taming the Tiger: Techniques for Transforming Anger

Anger may be bitter, but there's something sweet about the high that comes when we express it. The power it gives us overrides, at least temporarily, the fear and/or shame that it's masking. But when we express our anger in its raw form, it can be hurtful and the words we speak, the signals we send and/or the violence we inflict can never be taken back. Words and behavior stemming from blind anger can destroy property, relationships, and sometimes even lives.

If we don't act out our anger, we can hold onto it so long that it becomes resentment. And we savor resentment as if it were a glass of fine champagne. We lick our lips, tasting the memory of old grievances that bubble up in the shadows of our minds. We savor the salty taste of old wounds, the bitterness of feeling wronged, and the sweetness of revenge as we imagine humiliating and destroying the one(s) we blame for our suffering.

Resentment's bouquet is both intoxicating and addictive. Once we open its bottle, we can focus on it for hours, days, even years. But, the buzz it gives us comes with a cost. Not only does it steal our precious time, it eats us up from the inside. And while we're focusing our energy on them, they are out there eating a sandwich, getting on with their life. In the words of the Buddha, "*Holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else; you are the one who gets burned.*" Swallowing the resentment, pretending not to be angry when we really are, doesn't help either. Eventually the pressure builds and comes out sideways. We displace our anger onto our families, friends and pets, snapping at them for inconsequential things. We take passive aggressive swipes at people in our worlds and generate a reputation for being untrustworthy. We rage at drivers who cut in front of us or the computer for taking too long to boot up. Sometimes, instead of taking it out on others, we take it out on ourselves. This strategy isn't really any better because it harms us at an even deeper level and sometimes drives us to eat mindlessly, drink or ourselves into oblivion, cut ourselves or get lost in a suicidal spin.

Anger is powerful energy and needs to be handled in a skillful way. And as with most things, awareness is key. The instant you notice yourself feeling anger (or the first instant you hear yourself snapping at someone or engaging in other angry behavior), stop. Give yourself some time to get present. Tear your mind away from your anger and tune into your breath. Breathe deep into your belly, letting it rise and fall and notice the sensations you feel breathing in and breathing out. When you notice a thought popping into your mind, let it go and gently bring your focus back to your breath. If you are struggling with watching your breath, scan your body. Feel your feet on the ground. Notice the energy in your hands. The point is to bring your awareness to your body and away from the stories you are spinning in your mind.

Sometimes the simple act of refocusing your attention is enough. Sometimes it's not. If you notice yourself engaging in the behaviors associated with swallowing your resentment, you need to find a more focused way to release your anger. Here are a few strategies to help you let go of it. An important aspect of each of these strategies is that the focus is on releasing the anger rather than merely watering its seeds.

1. Visualization – Burn it out: Begin by watching your breath as described above. After a few breaths, imagine a fire burning inside you. Every time an angry thought or sensation creeps

into your mind, let the fire burn it up. Do this until there is nothing left to burn. When the fire is out, imagine rain falling over the ashes, cooling down the coals and washing away the ash and debris.

2. Write it out: Write a letter that you do not intend to send to the person, group or entity you're angry at. Tell them what they did to hurt you, describe how their action (or inaction) has affected you, and tell them how you feel. (It's ok if you spend a page or two writing nothing but swear words. The idea is to get the poison out of you.) When you've said all you need to say for now, burn the letter or tear it into shreds so that you don't spread the anger any further. In some cases, it is helpful to forgive the person or group when you're done. In all cases, it's helpful to forgive yourself for whatever you've been beating yourself up about.
3. Pound it out. Get a noodle (the long colored tubes that children use to float in the swimming pool). Make sure to take off any jewelry that might get snagged such as bracelets, watches or earrings. Stand in front of your bed, your couch or a sturdy chair. Ground yourself by placing both feet on the ground, hip distance apart. Bend your knees, take the noodle in both hands above your head and swing it down like you would swing an axe to chop wood and bang the noodle on the bed, couch or chair. Sound helps move energy out so as you swing the noodle downwards, growl like an angry bear, or yell something simple, perhaps your favorite swear word. Make sure to reground your feet and pay attention to your breath after every swing. Do this until it feels like the anger has left your body. When the anger is gone, send love to yourself. Remember a time when you felt loved unconditionally or imagine what it might feel like to have this experience. Let this feeling fill your heart. When you feel your heart brimming over with love, let the love spread throughout the rest of your body until your entire body is filled with love.
4. Give your anger to Mother Earth. The idea behind this ritual is that while we are too small to handle anger's powerful energy, the earth is bigger. The earth can transform anger's energy into something life sustaining, much like it transforms compost into fertilizer. Dig a hole in the ground big enough to hold your anger. When you're finished digging, yell your anger into the hole. When you think you're done, check in with yourself to see if there's any more. Check again. Most of us are so used to holding on to our anger, we don't notice it. But if you sit a moment, it's likely to bubble up again. If there is, yell that into the hole as well. Do this until there's nothing left to yell out. When you're sure there's nothing left, refill the hole and trust mother earth to transform it.

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