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Skillful Anger

We want to be good. We want to be kind. When we're really stretching, we want to do no harm. O, the spiritual path is perilous!

Mahatma Gandhi wrote,

I know the path; it is straight and narrow.
 It is like the edge of a sword.
 I rejoice to walk on it.
 I weep when I slip.
 God's word is: "The man who strives never perishes."
 I have implicit faith in that promise.
 Though, therefore, from my weakness I fail a thousand times,
 I shall not lose faith.

It is no secret that one of the most challenging parts of the spiritual path is ... other people. If only they were more enlightened! Remembering that they feel the same way about us is probably the first step toward our own enlightenment.

American Tibetan nun, Pema Chödrön, asks, "... Who is this other person who can trigger me like this? What is this praise and blame that hooks me like a fish, that catches me like a mouse in a trap? How is it that these circumstances have the power to propel me like a Ping-Pong ball from hope to fear, from happiness to misery?"

Apparently, this is not a new problem. In eleventh-century Tibet, the Kadampa Buddhist masters taught several methods for walking a spiritual path on which we smooth out those ricocheting emotions and, especially, learn to work skillfully with our anger. Their very first directive is translated as "not setting up the target for the arrow."¹

¹ Pema Chödrön, *The Places That Scare You*, p. 112, 109

Before we unpack that, here's a good story from my inbox (interesting if true!):

After a week of business back east, a woman named Mary Jane was on her way home to Denver. At the Omaha airport, she bought a newspaper and a small package of cookies for the layover, then took a seat at her gate and began to peruse the news.

Another passenger sat down, pulled a book out of his briefcase, and began to read. She heard a rustle and noticed over the edge of her paper that he was opening a package. Actually, she couldn't believe it; he was opening her package, the one with her things on the seat between them. *Her* package. *Her cookies*. He took two.

She was speechless. She reached over and took out a cookie, making sure he saw her. Maybe he thought the package had been left there. But no. He munched away, and then took another one. She reached over and took another, thinking surely he'd realize what he'd done. There was only one cookie left now. She could hardly believe it when he pushed the near-empty container toward her, implying it was hers for the taking. *The gall!* And then he got up, and walked away toward the place where she'd bought the cookies.

Imagine her surprise when she boarded the plane, opened her bag, and found the unopened package of cookies.

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Don't you just hate that story? It's kind of like those very bad dreams where you're, like, sitting for an exam for a class you didn't take, or naked where you shouldn't be. Maybe those are good metaphors for the spiritual path.

Here's what Pema Chödrön says about not setting ourselves up as the target:

"... If we have not set up the target, it cannot be hit by an arrow. This is to say that each time we retaliate with aggressive words and actions, we are strengthening the habit of anger. As long as we do this, ... plenty of arrows will come our way. We will become increasingly irritated by ... others...."

“Each time we act on the anger or suppress it, we escalate our aggression; we become more and more like a walking target.... [It] will continue to hurt us and others forever, if we let it.... As the years go by, almost everything makes us mad.

“This is the key to understanding, at a completely real and personal level, how we sow the seeds of suffering.

Pema Chödrön concludes, “... Each time we are provoked, we are given a chance to do something different.... Remember that *we* set up the target, and only we can take it down.... Understand that if we [sit still] when we want to retaliate ... we are starting to dissolve a pattern.... Each time we sit still with the restlessness and heat of anger, we are tamed and strengthened.

“This is instruction on cultivating the root of happiness.”²

This is echoed in that iconic question from *A Course in Miracles*:
Would you rather be happy, or would you rather be right?

Not setting up the target isn't about being a doormat. It's about being skillful with our anger. Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh says, “Just because someone hands you a hot rock doesn't mean you have to take it.”

In his book *Being Peace*, he tells this story:

“A man was rowing his boat upstream on a very misty morning. Suddenly, he saw another boat coming downstream.... It was coming straight at him. He shouted, ‘Be careful! [Watch out!]’ But the boat [ran] right into him, and his boat was almost sunk. The man became very angry, and began to shout at the other person, to give him a piece of his mind. But when he looked closely, he saw that there was no one in the other boat. It turned out that the boat just got loose and [drifted] downstream.

“All his anger vanished, and he laughed and laughed.”³

² Pema Chödrön, *op cit*, p. 110

³ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Being Peace*

This story was originally told by Chuang Tzu, one of the great figures of early Taoist thought. Catholic mystic Thomas Merton, wrote this translation, with the lesson at the end:

The Empty Boat

If a man is crossing a river
 And an empty boat collides with his ... skiff,
 Even though he be a bad-tempered man
 He will not become very angry.

But if he sees a man in the boat,
 He will shout at him to steer clear.

If the shout is not heard, he will shout again,
 And yet again, and begin cursing,
 And all because there is somebody in the boat.
 Yet if the boat were empty,
 He would not be shouting and angry.

If you can empty your own boat,
 Crossing the river of the world,
 No one will oppose you,
 No one will seek to harm you....⁴

If we can empty our own boats.... Let this, then, become a mantra, another shorthand way of remembering to not set up the target: *empty boat*. Empty boat: empty everything. We are not a target for arrows to hit.

Beloved spiritual companions,
 The spiritual path is perilous.
 May we choose being happy over being right,
 share those cookies that aren't ours,
 and remember: just because someone hands us a hot rock
 doesn't mean we have to take it.
 We set up the target, and we can take it down.
 Crossing the river of the world, may we empty our boat.

⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (New Direction Publishing Corporation, 1965)