A Boxing Lesson

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My brother Galen tells the story of when he was young. He was about to enter school, start first grade. My grandfather took him aside. My mother liked to give unusual names to her sons. Grandpa didn’t think much of it. As he told Galen, “The kids at school are going to make fun of your name.” “You’ve got to learn how to box.” Grandpa had been a boxer when he was younger. So he got down on his knees in front of Galen and started tapping him on his face. And he got a little bit more aggressive and more aggressive. And Galen lost his temper and started flailing. Grandpa put his hand on Galen’s head. And said, “Stop.” You may notice that the more you get angry, the easier it is for me to hit you. What you’ve got to do is learn to grow cold, focus on what you have to do, and take out the other guy. And so Galen was able to defend himself at school. This is a story I like to tell in Buddhist centers because it shocks people. But it teaches an important lesson. It’s very similar to the lesson the Buddha teaches in two of his suttas. The one on the simile of the saw, and one where, actually it’s not the Buddha talking, sorry, the Buddha is talking, but he calls to mind the simile of the saw again. In the simile of the saw, you’ve got bandits who have pinned you down. They’re cutting you up in little pieces. And the Buddha said, “If you have ill will for them, you’re not following my teaching. You have to have good will starting with them, and for yourself, and then for the whole universe.” That’s how you protect yourself. In that case, you’re helpless. You’re paying them down. They’ve overpowered you. So the best you can do is just have good will. But you have to have equanimity as well. You have to be equanimous about what they’re doing to your body. If you allow yourself to get upset about that, then the good will is going to be impossible. So you have to grow cold, focus. In this case, you don’t take them out, you take out your own defilements. But it teaches an important lesson that equanimity and good will have to go together. You have to have equanimity about the way the world wounds you. Then based on your good will, for your own good and for the good of others, what has to be done. Focus on what has to be done. The other day we were talking about how the Buddha taught duties. It’s an aspect of the Dhamma that a lot of people slip over. They tell us the Buddha was a very open-minded kind of guy, and he was perfectly fine with whatever people might do to his teachings, which is certainly not the case. His duty as a teacher, as you saw, was to teach you what should and shouldn’t be done for your own good, for the sake of your long-term welfare and happiness. If you don’t want long-term welfare and happiness, then his shoulds have no power over you. He’s not trying to force them on you. But as you saw, the nature of how things work in the world, this is what has to be done. The discourse in which that simile of the saw appears makes the same point in several other images as well. It talks about how there are different ways that people can criticize you, sometimes with a mind of goodwill, sometimes with a mind of ill will, with what’s true or what’s false, what’s helpful and what’s not helpful. That’s the way of human speech. And on the one hand you have to have some equanimity towards what they’re saying about you, so you don’t get upset. Realize it’s not outrageous that they’re saying these things, because these things are being said all over the world all the time. But you still have to maintain your goodwill. Some of the images are goodwill as being like earth, the whole earth. You want your goodwill to be that large, that solid. And a man comes along with a bucket and a hoe, and he’s decided he wants to make the earth be without earth. So he digs here, digs there, spits here, spits there, urinates here, urinates there, saying, “Be without earth, be without earth.” But the earth is so much bigger. His puny efforts mean nothing. You want your goodwill to be that large, you want your equanimity to be that solid. So at the very least, the way the world digs into you and spits on you and urinates on you doesn’t get you upset, because you have things you’ve got to do. You have to figure out what is for your own true well-being and what is for the true well-being of others. So you don’t let their misbehavior become an excuse for your misbehavior. Another image is your goodwill as being large and cool, like the river Ganges. Someone can come along with a torch and try to set it on fire, but it’s not going to set on fire. You want your mind, you want your sense of yourself to be that cool, that resistant to being set fire to. Because again, it’s so easy when people do outrageous things, your fire sparks up, and it’s going to burn away all your goodness. So you have to be equanimous about the way the world tries to set fire to you, realizing that your mind is not susceptible to that. And you can still maintain your sense of what should be done, in line with your attitude of goodwill for all. Another image is like space. Your goodwill is like space. People can come and try to write things on space, but space has no service. Nothing sticks, because there’s no place for it to stick to. So again, what people write about you, what people say about you, don’t let it stick in your mind. That’s a sign of real equanimity. These things just fall away. And then your goodwill has achieved a chance to thrive. So then to see the two of these is going together. It’s not the case that you start with goodwill and compassion and empathetic joy, and then you drop them when you go to equanimity. Equanimity is there to make sure that they’re strong. But your duty to do what is for your true well-being and the well-being of others, that stays. And the other sutra where Sariputta is calling this image to mind, the image, similar to the saw, he says that you reflect on the fact that your body is made out of physical elements. There’s earth, water, wind, fire. And because of that, you’re exposed to sticks and stones and knives and being hit. And you have to keep that simile of the saw in mind. Now there are passages in the Canon, in the Vinaya, where they say that if someone attacks you, if a monk is being attacked, he has the right to defend himself. No right to kill, of course. But it’s okay to defend yourself. But still you want to maintain your goodwill and equanimity at the same time. So you can continue doing your duty. It sounds very stoic, but you have to realize that having a strong sense that you’ve mastered your duties and can do them well in all kinds of situations, there’s a strong sense of well-being that comes with that. A strong sense of self-worth and the happiness that comes with that. So the Buddha’s not saying to forego happiness. He’s just saying look for happiness in places where you might not expect it. Look for it in mastering the skills of the path. So although the world may hit you and stab you and piss on you and spit on you and saw you up into little pieces, you don’t let it get to your mind. You don’t let it get in the way of doing your duty. Which is to act on goodwill. So the teachings on equanimity are not telling you just be equanimous about whatever’s happening, accept whatever’s happening, and say I can’t make any change. The Buddha is not the sort of person who would not make changes. Look at all the changes he made in the world. First he made changes in himself. He was a prince who was very delicately brought up, had only the best food, only the best lodging, and yet he trained himself to live out in the wilderness. He even trained himself to undergo austerities, trained himself to find the right path, and then to spend 45 years after finding true happiness to put up with all the difficulties of trying to establish the Dhamma. In a world that was very much opposed to the Dhamma in many ways. It’s because of him that we have this Dhamma, we have this Vinaya, we have the Sangha. That’s a huge gift to the world. So he was resilient and equanimous about the criticisms that were sent his way. But his equanimity didn’t stop him from making big changes in the world. So equanimity is not a do-nothing equanimity. It’s simply a strength. It goes together with endurance, and it goes together with goodwill. When you realize that, then it’s a lot easier to practice in a way that’s beneficial for you and everybody around you.

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