

## LAW 39

### STIR UP WATERS TO CATCH FISH

#### JUDGMENT

*Anger and emotion are strategically counterproductive. You must always stay calm and objective. But if you can make your enemies angry while staying calm yourself, you gain a decided advantage. Put your enemies off-balance: Find the chink in their vanity through which you can rattle them and you hold the strings.*

#### ITAKURA SHIGEMUNE GRINDS HIS OWN TEA

*The Kyoto Shoshidai Itakura Suwo-no-kami Shigemune was very fond of Cha-no-yu (the tea ceremony), and used to grind his own tea while sitting in the court as judge. And the reason was this, He once asked a friend of his who was his companion in Cha-no-yu, a tea merchant named Eiki, to tell him frankly what was the public opinion about him. "Well," said Eiki, "they say that you get irritated with those who don't give their evidence very clearly and scold them, and so people are afraid to bring lawsuits before you and if they do, the truth does not come out." "Ah, I am glad you have told me that," replied Shigemune, "for now that I consider it, I have fallen into the habit of speaking sharply to people in this way, and no doubt humble folk and those who are not ready in speech get flurried and are unable to put their case in the best light. I will see to it that this does not occur in the future." So after this he had a tea mill placed before him in court and in front of it the paper-covered shoji were drawn to, and Shigemune sat behind them and ground the tea and thus kept his mind calm while he heard the cases. And he could easily see whether his composure was ruffled or not by looking at the tea, which would not fall evenly ground to the proper consistency if he got excited. And so justice was done impartially and people went away from his court satisfied.*

CHA-NO-YU: THE JAPANESE TEA CEREMONY A. L. SADLER, 1962

## TRANSGRESSION OF THE LAW

In January of 1809, an agitated and anxious Napoleon hurried back to Paris from his Spanish wars. His spies and confidants had confirmed a rumor that his foreign minister Talleyrand had conspired against him with Fouché, the minister of police. Immediately on arriving in the capital the shocked emperor summoned his ministers to the palace. Following them into the meeting right after their arrival, he began pacing up and down, and started rambling vaguely about plotters working against him, speculators bringing down the stock market, legislators delaying his policies—and his own ministers undermining him.

As Napoleon talked, Talleyrand leaned on the mantelpiece, looking completely indifferent. Facing Talleyrand directly, Napoleon announced, “For these ministers, treason has begun when they permit themselves to doubt.” At the word “treason” the ruler expected his minister to be afraid. But Talleyrand only smiled, calm and bored.

The sight of a subordinate apparently serene in the face of charges that could get him hanged pushed Napoleon to the edge. There were ministers, he said, who wanted him dead, and he took a step closer to Talleyrand—who stared back at him unfazed. Finally Napoleon exploded. “You are a coward,” he screamed in Talleyrand’s face, “a man of no faith. Nothing is sacred to you. You would sell your own father. I have showered you with riches and yet there is nothing you would not do to hurt me.” The other ministers looked at each other in disbelief—they had never seen this fearless general, the conqueror of most of Europe, so unhinged.

“You deserve to be broken like glass,” Napoleon continued, stamping. “I have the power to do it, but I have too much contempt for you to bother. Why didn’t I have you hanged from the gates of the Tuileries? But there is still time for that.” Yelling, almost out of breath, his face red, his eyes bulging, he went on, “You, by the way, are nothing but shit in a silk stocking.... What about your wife? You never told me that San Carlos was your wife’s lover?” “Indeed, sire, it did not occur to me that this information had any bearing on Your Majesty’s glory or my own,” said Talleyrand calmly, completely unflustered. After a few more insults,

Napoleon walked away. Talleyrand slowly crossed the room, moving with his characteristic limp. As an attendant helped him with his cloak, he turned to his fellow ministers (all afraid they would never see him again), and said, “What a pity, gentlemen, that so great a man should have such bad manners.”

Despite his anger, Napoleon did not arrest his foreign minister. He merely relieved him of his duties and banished him from the court, believing that for this man humiliation would be punishment enough. He did not realize that word had quickly spread of his tirade—of how the emperor had completely lost control of himself, and how Talleyrand had essentially humiliated him by maintaining his composure and dignity. A page had been turned: For the first time people had seen the great emperor lose his cool under fire. A feeling spread that he was on the way down. As Talleyrand later said, “This is the beginning of the end.”

## Interpretation

This was indeed the beginning of the end. Waterloo was still six years ahead, but Napoleon was on a slow descent to defeat, crystallizing in 1812 with his disastrous invasion of Russia. Talleyrand was the first to see the signs of his decline, especially in the irrational war with Spain. Sometime in 1808, the minister decided that for the future peace of Europe, Napoleon had to go. And so he conspired with Fouché.

It is possible that the conspiracy was never anything more than a ploy—a device to push Napoleon over the edge. For it is hard to believe that two of the most practical men in history would only go halfway in their plotting. They may have been only stirring the waters, trying to goad Napoleon into a misstep. And indeed, what they got was the tantrum that laid out his loss of control for all to see. In fact, Napoleon's soon-famous blowup that afternoon had a profoundly negative effect on his public image.

This is the problem with the angry response. At first it may strike fear and terror, but only in some, and as the days pass and the storm clears, other responses emerge—embarrassment and uneasiness about the shouter's capacity for going out of control, and resentment of what has been said. Losing your temper, you always make unfair and exaggerated accusations. A few such tirades and people are counting the days until you are gone.

In the face of a conspiracy against him, a conspiracy between his two most important ministers, Napoleon certainly had a right to feel angry and anxious. But by responding so angrily, and so publicly, he only demonstrated his frustration. To show your frustration is to show that you have lost your power to shape events; it is the helpless action of the child who resorts to a hysterical fit to get his way. The powerful never reveal this kind of weakness.

There were a number of things Napoleon could have done in this situation. He could have thought about the fact that two eminently sensible men had had reason to turn against him, and could have listened and learned from them. He could have tried to win them back to him. He could even have gotten rid of them, making their imprisonment or death an ominous display of his power. No tirades, no childish fits, no embarrassing after-effects—just a quiet and definitive severing of ties.

Remember: Tantrums neither intimidate nor inspire loyalty. They only create doubts and uneasiness about your power. Exposing your weakness, these stormy eruptions often herald a fall.

*If possible, no animosity should be felt for anyone.... To speak angrily to a person, to show your hatred by what you say or by the way you look, is an unnecessary proceeding-dangerous, foolish, ridiculous, and vulgar.*

*Anger or hatred should never be shown otherwise than in what you do; and feelings will be all the more effective in action in so far as you avoid the exhibition of them in any other way. It is only the cold-blooded animals whose bite is poisonous.*

ARTHUR SCHOPENHAUER. 1788-1860

## OBSERVANCE OF THE LAW

By the late 1920s, Haile Selassie had nearly achieved his goal of assuming total control over Ethiopia, a country he felt needed strong and unified leadership. As regent to the empress Zauditu (stepdaughter of the late queen) and heir to the throne, Selassie had spent several years weakening the power of Ethiopia's various warlords. Now only one real obstacle stood in his way: the empress and her husband, Ras Gugsa. Selassie knew the royal couple hated him and wanted to get rid of him, so to cut short their plotting he made Gugsa the governor of the northern province of Begemeder, forcing him to leave the capital, where the empress lived.

For several years Gugsa played the loyal administrator. But Selassie did not trust him: He knew that Gugsa and the empress were plotting revenge. As time passed and Gugsa made no move, the chances of a plot only increased. Selassie knew what he had to do: draw Gugsa out, get under his skin, and push him into action before he was ready.

For several years, a northern tribe, the Azebu Gallas, had been in virtual rebellion against the throne, robbing and pillaging local villages and refusing to pay taxes. Selassie had done nothing to stop them, letting them grow stronger. Finally, in 1929, he ordered Ras Gugsa to lead an army against these disobedient tribesmen. Gugsa agreed, but inwardly he seethed—he had no grudge against the Azebu Gallas, and the demand that he fight them hurt his pride. He could not disobey the order, but as he worked to put together an army, he began to spread an ugly rumor—that Selassie was in cahoots with the pope, and planned to convert the country to Roman Catholicism and make it a colony of Italy. Gugsa's army swelled, and some of the tribes from which its soldiers came secretly agreed to fight Selassie. In March of 1930 an enormous force of 35,000 men began to march, not on the Azebu Gallas but south, toward the capital of Addis Ababa. Made confident by his growing strength, Gugsa now openly led a holy war to depose Selassie and put the country back in the hands of true Christians.

He did not see the trap that had been laid for him. Before Selassie had ordered Gugsa to fight the Azebu Gallas, he had secured the support of the Ethiopian church. And before the revolt got underway, he had bribed

several of Gugsä's key allies not to show up for battle. As the rebel army marched south, airplanes flew overhead dropping leaflets announcing that the highest church officials had recognized Selassie as the true Christian leader of Ethiopia, and that they had excommunicated Gugsä for fomenting a civil war. These leaflets severely blunted the emotions behind the holy crusade. And as battle loomed and the support that Gugsä's allies had promised him failed to show up, soldiers began to flee or defect.

When the battle came, the rebel army quickly collapsed. Refusing to surrender, Ras Gugsä was killed in the fighting. The empress, distraught over her husband's death, died a few days later. On April 30, Selassie issued a formal proclamation announcing his new title: Emperor of Ethiopia.

### THE MONKEY AND THE WASP

*A monkey, whilst munching a ripe pear, was pestered by the bare-faced importunities of a wasp, who, nolens volens, would have a part. After threatening the monkey with his anger if he further hesitated to submit to his demand, he settled on the fruit; but was as soon knocked off by the monkey. The irritable wasp now had recourse to invective—and, after using the most insulting language, which the other calmly listened to, he so worked himself up into violent passion that, losing all consideration of the penalty, he flew to the face of the monkey, and stung him with such rage that he was unable to extricate his weapon, and was compelled to tear himself away, leaving it in the wound—thus entailing on himself a lingering death, accompanied by pains much greater than those he had inflicted.*

FABLES, JONATHAN BIRCH, 1783-1847



## Interpretation

Haile Selassie always saw several moves ahead. He knew that if he let Ras Gugsa decide the time and place of the revolt, the danger would be much greater than if he forced Gugsa to act on Selassie's terms. So he goaded him into rebellion by offending his manly pride, asking him to fight people he had no quarrel with on behalf of a man he hated. Thinking everything out ahead, Selassie made sure that Gugsa's rebellion would come to nothing, and that he could use it to do away with his last two enemies.

This is the essence of the Law: When the waters are still, your opponents have the time and space to plot actions that they will initiate and control. So stir the waters, force the fish to the surface, get them to act before they are ready, steal the initiative. The best way to do this is to play on uncontrollable emotions—pride, vanity, love, hate. Once the water is stirred up, the little fish cannot help but rise to the bait. The angrier they become, the less control they have, and finally they are caught in the whirlpool you have made, and they drown.

## DITCH HIGH PRIEST

*Kin 'yo, an officer of the second rank, had a brother called the High Priest Ryogaku, an extremely bad-tempered man. Next to his monastery grew a large nettle-tree which occasioned the nickname people gave him, the Nettle-tree High Priest. "That name is outrageous," said the high priest, and cut down the tree. The stump still being left, people referred to him now as the Stump High Priest. More furious than ever, Ryogaku had the stump dug up and thrown away, but this left a big ditch. People now called him the Ditch High Priest.*

ESSAYS IN IDLENESS, KENKO, JAPAN, FOURTEENTH CENTURY

*A sovereign should never launch an army out of anger,  
a leader should never start a war out of wrath.  
Sun-tzu, fourth century B.C.*

## KEYS TO POWER

Angry people usually end up looking ridiculous, for their response seems out of proportion to what occasioned it. They have taken things too seriously, exaggerating the hurt or insult that has been done to them. They are so sensitive to slight that it becomes comical how much they take personally. More comical still is their belief that their outbursts signify power. The truth is the opposite: Petulance is not power, it is a sign of helplessness. People may temporarily be cowed by your tantrums, but in the end they lose respect for you. They also realize they can easily undermine a person with so little self-control.

The answer, however, is not to repress our angry or emotional responses. For repression drains us of energy and pushes us into strange behavior. Instead we have to change our perspective: We have to realize that nothing in the social realm, and in the game of power, is personal.

Everyone is caught up in a chain of events that long predates the present moment. Our anger often stems from problems in our childhood, from the problems of our parents which stem from their own childhood, on and on. Our anger also has roots in the many interactions with others, the accumulated disappointments and heartaches that we have suffered. An individual will often appear as the instigator of our anger but it is much more complicated, goes far beyond what that individual did to us. If a person explodes with anger at you (and it seems out of proportion to what you did to them), you must remind yourself that it is not exclusively directed at you—do not be so vain. The cause is much larger, goes way back in time, involves dozens of prior hurts, and is actually not worth the bother to understand. Instead of seeing it as a personal grudge, look at the emotional outburst as a disguised power move, an attempt to control or punish you cloaked in the form of hurt feelings and anger.

This shift of perspective will let you play the game of power with more clarity and energy. Instead of overreacting, and becoming ensnared in people's emotions, you will turn their loss of control to your advantage: You keep your head while they are losing theirs.

During an important battle in the War of the Three Kingdoms, in the third century A.D., advisers to the commander Ts'ao Ts'ao discovered documents showing that certain of his generals had conspired with the enemy, and urged him to arrest and execute them. Instead he ordered the documents burned and the matter forgotten. At this critical moment in the battle, to get upset or demand justice would have reverberated against him: An angry action would have called attention to the generals' disloyalty, which would have harmed the troops' morale. Justice could wait—he would deal with the generals in time. Ts'ao Ts'ao kept his head and made the right decision.

Compare this to Napoleon's response to Talleyrand: Instead of taking the conspiracy personally, the emperor should have played the game like Ts'ao Ts'ao, carefully weighing the consequences of any action he took. The more powerful response in the end would have been to ignore Talleyrand, or to bring the minister gradually back to his side and punish him later.

Anger only cuts off our options, and the powerful cannot thrive without options. Once you train yourself not to take matters personally, and to control your emotional responses, you will have placed yourself in a position of tremendous power: Now you can play with the emotional responses of other people. Stir the insecure into action by impugning their manhood, and by dangling the prospect of an easy victory before their faces. Do as Houdini did when challenged by the less successful escape artist Kleppini: Reveal an apparent weakness (Houdini let Kleppini steal the combination for a pair of cuffs) to lure your opponent into action. Then you can beat him with ease. With the arrogant too you can appear weaker than you are, taunting them into a rash action.

Sun Pin, commander of the armies of Ch'i and loyal disciple of Sun-tzu, once led his troops against the armies of Wei, which outnumbered him two to one. "Let us light a hundred thousand fires when our army enters Wei," suggested Sun Pin, "fifty thousand on the next day, and only thirty thousand on the third." On the third day the Wei general exclaimed, "I knew the men of Ch'i were cowards, and after only three days more than half of them have deserted!" So, leaving behind his slow-moving heavy infantry, the general decided to seize the moment and move swiftly on the Ch'i camp with a lightly armed force. Sun Pin's troops retreated, luring Wei's army into a narrow pass, where they ambushed and destroyed them. With the Wei general dead and his forces decimated, Sun Pin now easily defeated the rest of his army.

In the face of a hot-headed enemy, finally, an excellent response is no response. Follow the Talleyrand tactic: Nothing is as infuriating as a man who keeps his cool while others are losing theirs. If it will work to your advantage to unsettle people, affect the aristocratic, bored pose, neither mocking nor triumphant but simply indifferent. This will light their fuse. When they embarrass themselves with a temper tantrum, you will have gained several victories, one of these being that in the face of their childishness you have maintained your dignity and composure.

Image: The Pond of Fish. The waters are clear and calm, and the fish are well below the surface. Stir the waters and they emerge. Stir it some more and they get angry, rising to the surface, biting whatever comes near—including a freshly baited hook.

Authority: If your opponent is of a hot temper, try to irritate him. If he is arrogant, try to encourage his egotism.... One who is skilled at making the enemy move does so by creating a situation according to which the enemy will act; he entices the enemy with something he is certain to take. He keeps the enemy on the move by holding out bait and then attacks him with picked troops. (Sun-tzu, fourth century B.C.)

## REVERSAL

When playing with people's emotions you have to be careful. Study the enemy beforehand: Some fish are best left at the bottom of the pond.

The leaders of the city of Tyre, capital of ancient Phoenicia, felt confident they could withstand Alexander the Great, who had conquered the Orient but had not attacked their city, which stood well protected on the water. They sent ambassadors to Alexander saying that although they would recognize him as emperor they would not allow him or his forces to enter Tyre. This of course enraged him, and he immediately mounted a siege. For four months the city withstood him, and finally he decided that the struggle was not worth it, and that he would come to terms with the Tyrians. But they, feeling that they had already baited Alexander and gotten away with it, and confident that they could withstand him, refused to negotiate—in fact they killed his messengers.

This pushed Alexander over the edge. Now it did not matter to him how long the siege lasted or how large an army it needed; he had the resources, and would do whatever it took. He remounted his assault so strenuously that he captured Tyre within days, burned it to the ground, and sold its people into slavery.

You can bait the powerful and get them to commit and divide their forces as Sun Pin did, but test the waters first. Find the gap in their strength. If there is no gap—if they are impossibly strong—you have nothing to gain and everything to lose by provoking them. Choose carefully whom you bait, and never stir up the sharks.

Finally there are times when a well-timed burst of anger can do you good, but your anger must be manufactured and under your control. Then you can determine exactly how and on whom it will fall. Never stir up reactions that will work against you in the long run. And use your thunderbolts rarely, to make them the more intimidating and meaningful. Whether purposefully staged or not, if your outbursts come too often, they will lose their power.