

# *Shoot Your Pains with Wisdom*

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There's a passage where the Buddha describes how a wise person and a foolish person differ in the way they react to pain. They both feel pain. Awakened people get sick, they grow ill, and they die just like regular people. But they react in a different way. The foolish person, when struck by a pain, reacts in a way that adds more pain. The classic analogy is of being shot by one arrow and then turning around to shoot yourself with another arrow—although it's always struck me that the classic image is too weak. Actually, you shoot yourself with your whole quiver. Whatever arrows you've got, you shoot yourself with them all, and no wonder you suffer. The wise person, however, doesn't fire those extra arrows at all.

What this means is that when you find yourself suffering over something, you've got to look at which arrows are coming from outside and which ones are the ones you're shooting. This comes down to a fairly abstract principle that the Buddha mentions in another passage—that when you experience a feeling of any sort, pleasant or painful, part of it is just a potential for the feeling coming from your past karma; the rest is the way you actualize that potential with your present intentions, your present karma. You fabricate the potential into an actual feeling of pleasure or pain.

In other words, we're not totally passive in our experience of pleasure and pain. Life is not a TV show, where you passively watch whatever's going to happen, and the show will go on whether you watch it or not. It's more like an interactive video game. Only when you participate can the game progress. Some things you can't change in the game, such as the ground rules, but some things you can.

So as a meditator you want to focus on what you *can* change. You want to take advantage of your ability to fashion your experience in a positive way. In fact, a lot of the path of the practice is learning how to shoot yourself not with arrows but with pleasure, to shoot yourself with wisdom. One of the ways we fabricate our experience is with the way we breathe, so you can shoot yourself with pleasant breathing. You can change your experience of the body by consciously breathing in ways that feel good and gratifying. The other way we fabricate our experience is through the way we think, so you can shoot yourself with skillful thoughts. Learn to think about the breath in a way that makes it easier to breathe. For example, you can try holding in mind the perception that your body is like a big sponge, and the breath is coming in and out every pore of the skin. Think of the breath as an energy field that fills the body, and see what that does to the way you actually breathe. This way you begin to see how your perceptions shape the feelings you feel.

One of the lessons you learn as you watch your breathing is that when a pain comes up in the body, you don't have to just sit there and put up with it. You can try breathing around it, breathing through it, changing the rhythm of your breathing in different parts of the body. This will have an impact on how you experience the pain. Sometimes there will be little germs or seeds of an actual

physical cause for the pain, but if you change your attitude toward the pain, it's like shooting it with pleasure, shooting it with mindfulness, shooting it with good breath sensations, so that the germs don't spread, the seeds don't grow.

Sometimes by changing the way you breathe, changing the way you think about what your body is doing as it breathes, you can actually change the physical cause of the pain. At other times the physical cause is still there, but as you surround the pain with comfortable breath sensations, the pain won't spread, won't grab hold of your body or of your awareness. You're on top of the process of fabrication. Instead of shooting yourself with more arrows, you're shooting yourself with good breath sensations, with new perceptions of how the breath moves in the body.

This principle applies to issues outside as well, such as your relations with other people. How many arrows do they shoot you with, and how many times do you shoot yourself with your whole quiver of arrows? They may say one thing that gets you upset. They say it once, but then you say it over and over and over in your mind. If you could fire arrows in rapid succession with the speed with which you can think these harmful thoughts, you'd be a great archer.

So you've got to learn how to replace that tendency to shoot yourself with more pain, more arrows, and to shoot yourself instead with some wise perceptions. Get some perspective on that other person; get perspective on what happened. Instead of focusing on all the sorrows and pains and difficulties in your life, you might look at where things are going well right now. This is not to say that you don't have to deal with the negative issues, but you do need to learn how to put things into perspective so that you're not shooting arrows. You're shooting wisdom. You're shooting discernment.

The purpose of all this is not simply to make life livable but also to put yourself in a position where you can really practice. You're not focusing all your energy on adding to your pains. You're getting the mind in a position of inner strength where it doesn't feel the need to go out and straighten out the world before it's going to practice. If you had to straighten out the world before you could practice, nobody could practice on the human plane.

You need to get some perspective on this issue. There are crazy people out there; there are insane people out there. A lot of them have power. But you don't have to allow that power to extend into your mind. You can learn how to keep your attitude as much under control to the best of your ability.

Again, it's like an interactive game. There are some things you can't change in your situation, but there are a lot that you can. Sometimes you make one choice in the interactive game and it changes the whole plot. Other times it can simply dispose of one or two of the bad guys. But at least you can play an active role. You can get the mind into a position where it's able to practice, able to turn around and look inside and see that the real cause that makes your pains burdensome is what you're doing right now.

This again connects with the Buddha's insight that feelings of pain and pleasure are not necessarily a given. We're not simply passive recipients of these things. We take an active role in forming them. And the best way to understand that active role is not to try to be passive and say, "I'm not going to do anything at all. I'm just going to accept what happens." Because what really happens is the active role you're playing then goes underground where you don't see it.

Bring it up into your conscious awareness: that you have at least some ability to fashion that pain, to fashion that pleasure. What direction are you going to fashion it into? Are you going to shoot it with more arrows or with wisdom? You've got the choice.

As you develop skill in this process of fabricating your experience, you gain more insight into the role that fabrication plays in your life as a whole. You're in a better position to decide how to fabricate things: which areas are worth getting involved in, which ones are not. Learn how to fabricate good states in the mind—the pleasure, the rapture of right concentration—for those are good fabrications. The directed thought and evaluation that bring those feelings about: Those are good fabrications because they bring you to a point where ultimately you see that there is something unfabricated, that doesn't arise, doesn't pass away; it's just there. As the texts say, you can touch it with your body, *see* it with your body—i.e., sense it with your entire awareness. That's when you can stop all your shooting because the awareness of what you've totally touched is so totally overwhelming. It's such a total form of happiness that doesn't require you to do anything with it at all.

Some people think that the deathless is just a nice spacey feeling around your sensations, that you tend to miss it if you don't look for it, but it's there: a neither-pleasure-nor-pain kind of space around things. But that's not the deathless; it's just another kind of feeling: the neither-pleasure-nor-pain of equanimity, of the dimension of space. Dressing it up as the deathless is not a skillful way of dressing it up. It may make you feel good for a while, but it gets in the way of your seeing through the process of fabrication. After all, that sense of space that you create around things is something you've fabricated. You were the one who turned your attention there and highlighted it in your awareness. You were the one who tried to make something out of it, tried to shoot it with fancy labels. The fancy labels may seem reassuring, but they're not the skillful shooting that the Buddha has in mind.

He wants you to shoot yourself with the pleasure and bliss of concentration, with the directed thought and evaluation; to shoot yourself with discernment so that you can really understand how even a state of equanimity is fashioned. He wants you to see what you're shooting yourself with as you hang out in a state of equanimity, so that you ultimately can see through to what's not fashioned at all: "not-made-of-that-ness," as the Pali word for "non-fashioning," *atammayata*, literally means. You're not making anything out of it. You can get there, not by simply telling yourself not to fashion anything, but by mastering the process of fashioning: learning how to shoot yourself skillfully, shoot your pain, shoot your pleasures, shoot your feelings of equanimity with insight—until you get so skillful and thorough in your shooting that that there's nothing left to shoot. You can stop. The bows and arrows fall from your hands.

But even before you reach that point, take advantage of the fact that your pains and pleasures are partly the result of past karma, partly a result of what you're doing right now. So look at what you're doing right now. Get really sensitive to that. You'll find that even though you're living in the same place as you were before, it's like being in a different game, a different world entirely. The external situation may be the same as it was, but your experience of it is very different. Even though other people can shoot at you, you learn how not to get

hit. Even though there are pains in the body, you don't let them hit your mind.

So learn to use these factors and perceptions—i.e., the ways you label things, the narratives you build up around them, the things you focus on as important, the things that you put aside as unimportant. You've got a lot of choices here, so make sure that you make them well.