

The Arrows of Emotion

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There's a famous discourse when the Buddha talks about pain, how the wise person experiencing pain feels it as the pain that comes from being shot by one arrow. The person whose mind is not trained turns around and shoots himself with another arrow. But it's not really just one arrow—there are lots of arrows. There are all the emotional pains and the distress that we feel over physical pain. And an important part of the practice is learning how to recognize that first arrow and not start shooting ourselves up with all the other ones.

The same principle applies to emotional pain. A thought will come into the mind and spark a reaction, but then we choose to keep repeating that reaction, repeating the pain, piling on more and more problems, more and more arrows, with the various ways that we comment on the pain itself, the original impulse, and the processes that the mind is going through. These are more and more arrows that we keep shooting at ourselves. Particularly when the emotion has a strong hormonal reaction, it starts getting into the body. And then we take the body as evidence that that emotion is still there, the feeling is still there, that pain is still there. And so we keep shooting ourselves again and again based on that reaction as well.

So an important part of the meditation is learning how to separate these things out, so that you see the initial impulse and realize that it's basically old karma. We have this brain that has neurons firing all the time, so thoughts are bound to come up. Every now and then you trip over a thought that's really painful. There's nothing much you can do about that, it's just what happens. But it's what you do next: That's your karma in the present moment, your new karma.

This is where training the mind can make a big difference, helping you to see how you're shooting yourself. And again it comes down to that old issue of seeing yourself do things that you know are not quite wise, but you don't know how to act in a different way. Or there's a stubbornness that refuses to act in a different way. That's what requires patience, so that you don't merely jump on top of yourself and make things worse.

We have to remember as we're meditating that we're here to learn about the mind in hopes that someday our knowledge will enable us to develop more and more skillful habits. But sometimes you have to watch yourself doing something really stupid over and over again before you can catch sight of why you're doing it. That's where patience comes in. It's not just accepting things as they are and

telling yourself, “Well this is the way they’re going to be for the rest of my life.” It doesn’t accomplish much to simply sit there and watch yourself get angry for 20 years, or upset or lustful or whatever for 20 years, and just accept the fact that that’s the way it’s going to be. That doesn’t accomplish anything. You have to learn how to watch the mind so that you can finally figure out: “Why am I doing this? It’s painful, it’s piling more and more suffering on top,” until you can finally see: “Oh, this is why.”

This is one of the reasons why, when the Buddha was going to teach Rahula breath meditation, he didn’t start out with the steps of breath meditation. He started out by saying: Make your mind like the earth, meditate to make your mind in tune with the earth—in the sense that people will throw disgusting things on the earth, but the earth doesn’t react. Train your mind to be like wind. Wind blows disgusting things around, but the wind doesn’t get upset. Train it to be like fire. Fire burns garbage, but the fire doesn’t feel distaste at the garbage. Make your mind in tune with water. Water washes dirty things away, but the water itself isn’t repelled by those dirty things. This is a quality of mind you want to develop so that you can face whatever comes up in the meditation, both the initial arrow, and all the other arrows that you shoot at yourself.

Try to develop some endurance. Say: “If I’m going to get past this, I have to understand it. If I’m going to understand it, I have to watch it. And to watch it with any kind of precision, I have to develop patience.” A lot of the forest ajaans discovered that this is the quality they had to develop in their Western disciples before they could teach them anything else. Learn patience, a certain level of acceptance—not that that’s the endpoint or the goal of the practice, but it’s a means, it’s a very important means for allowing us to observe the mind with more detachment, without self-incrimination.

In other words, we don’t keep shooting more and more arrows at ourselves for shooting arrows at ourselves, in the way the mind tends to get stuck in a hall of mirrors. It reacts to its reaction to it to its reaction. The reflections just keep going on and on and on. That doesn’t accomplish anything. We’re here to learn. Whatever sense of self we’re going to develop around the meditation, make it the sense of self that’s willing to learn and is patient enough to see what’s going on.

And to look at things we don’t like to look at. Because after all, what’s the duty with regard to stress and suffering? To comprehend it. How are you going to comprehend it? You have to watch it for long periods of time. In other words, you have to learn how to sit with it. That helps you to develop dispassion. Because that’s what comprehension means: You understand something to the point where you feel dispassionate toward it. After all, we do have a lot of passion around our

emotions. Even the unpleasant ones: We really like them in a strange way. So to understand our passions, we have to learn how to step back a bit.

This is what the concentration is for. This is why we try to develop mindfulness and alertness, and particularly to learn how to get a sense of well-being that goes with getting the mind in stillness, so that we can have the nourishment and strength to deal with the unpleasant things that are bound to come up. That way, even though there are arrows being shot, we keep watching, looking, trying to figure out: What's going on here? Why does the mind feed on these emotions? Why is it so quick to keep on shooting those arrows? We have to develop not only the patience to sit with these things, but also the clarity so that we can be faster than the arrows, so that we can see when an arrow is about to be shot and we know why.

So a lot of interesting things going on here. That's the attitude we have to take towards these pains: to see them as interesting, a puzzle. Sometimes we sit here meditating, and when things are going well we get bored. All of a sudden there seems to be lots of space to do other things, as if nothing were happening right now. But a lot of things are happening. The breath is coming in and out, having an impact on your body. You're thinking and evaluating things. That, too, has an impact. Your internal speech, your feelings, and your perceptions are flashing in the mind. We stitch these things together and we forget what the raw materials are. We just look for the finished product. And we have a real talent for just keeping on stitching and stitching and stitching.

And what is the stitching? The Buddha says the stitching is craving.

This is all happening all the time, even when the mind is in a relatively peaceful state. One of the purposes of evaluating and playing with the breath is to bring that aspect of verbal fabrication up to the fore, to be clear about what you're thinking about and how you're fashioning your thoughts. You deal with the breath right here so that when the breath changes with an emotion, you're aware of it. You're on top of it.

So all these factors—breath, directed thought, evaluation, feelings and perceptions: We're trying to do them with as much knowledge as possible, so that when they go off into a different direction, we're sensitive to those functions of the mind. And as we develop sensitivity to these functions, we begin to see more and more clearly what's going on. We come to realize that there's a lot of complex stuff happening in the present moment. Even when things seem relatively calm, and nothing suspicious is happening, you have to be on your guard. You have to watch carefully so that when something painful happens, you'll be prepared for it.

You can see: This is how the mind takes a pain and then makes more pain out of it.

So try to take an interest in these processes. Get well acquainted with them. Because learning how to see these things as processes in the mind helps you deal with the pain when it comes. This way, not only do you have the patience and the endurance to sit with the pain and watch how it's happening, you've also got the right framework for figuring it out.

The more knowledge you bring to the process of fabrication, the less you suffer. And if you can learn why you're shooting yourself with arrows, you can finally see through to the point where you realize you don't have to do that anymore. You've got better things to do.