

No Arrows, Nothing

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There's a passage where the Buddha talks about the sense of the world that gave him *samvega*. It inspired him to leave home and find a way out of the cycle of death and birth and more death and more birth.

He said the world was like a puddle of water that was drying up, and the puddle was filled with fish struggling for that last little gulp of water and pushing one another out of the way to get it. But then they were all going to die anyhow. It just gave him a sense of despair. But then he asked himself, "Where's the real problem?" He looked inside his heart, and he saw that there's an arrow in the heart. If you learn how to pull that arrow out, then that would be the end of the problem. And the arrow, as he pointed out in another passage, is something we shoot ourselves with.

The fact that you have a body means there's going to be pain. When they talk about intelligent design, Mark Twain had a great comment on that. He says to look at the way the world's put together. It's put together with intelligence—pure intelligence—but with no compassion, no heart.

Look at all the sufferings that we're made subject to simply because we have a body. You look at every part of the body, and there's a disease that goes with that part of the body. The body is designed to function for a while, and then it's not going to function. Just when you feel that you can depend on it, it starts to betray you. Of course, it's not really betrayal. It didn't enter into any agreement. The mind comes into the body, grabs hold of it, animates it, and tries to get what it wants, using the body. The body will work for a while. But then this part doesn't work and that part doesn't work.

It's inevitable there's going to be aging, illness, and death. That, the Buddha said, is the first arrow that we're shot with. But the one that goes into the heart is the second arrow: the way we get worked up over the pain. And that's the arrow you can remove.

It's important to keep this in mind as we work with the breath. It does help to alleviate a lot of the pains in the body, and you want to work with it properly. But it can't take care of everything. Even Ajaan Lee, who was a master of the breath, suffered from a lot of pain that came with his heart disease. Ajaan Fuang was another master of the breath. He had some pretty painful conditions in his body as well. But we use the breath to soothe things as much as possible to get the mind in a position where it can look into the process of how it adds unnecessary pain on

top of the pain of the body: in other words, how it shoots itself with that second arrow, and the third, and the fourth, and the fifth, and all the other extra arrows in our quiver. That's what we want to change, because you find that when you remove those arrows and stop shooting yourself with them, there's no pain that weighs down on the mind.

This is an important lesson in our practice: that even though our past karma may be such that we have a body that has all these disease—some of us have more diseases than others—we don't have to suffer from them. That's the difference between past karma and present karma. The present karma is what makes all the difference. If your present karma is unskillful, you can suffer from even really fine conditions. If your present karma is skillful, then no matter how bad the situation in the body, the mind doesn't have to suffer. The minds of arahants are totally free from suffering. They're like the rest of us in that their bodies have pain and pleasure and neither-pleasure-nor-pain, but none of these things make inroads into the mind.

So the trick lies in training the mind. We train the breath—focus a lot of attention on the breath—because it's one of our main tools in helping us settle down. But ultimately, the real issue is what the mind is doing. We mentioned this a little last night: the way the mind puts together sensations, puts together thoughts, puts together feelings—glues everything together. And then the things we glue together get so big and unwieldy that they weigh us down. What we have to do is to see them as distinct moments or movements of the mind and keep them distinct. Don't let them stitch together.

At first, you have to stitch together the concentration in order to get your awareness to settle down so that you can see the movements of the mind that are weighing you down, that are stabbing or piercing you. Then you can see the way you stitch them together, glue them together to give them meaning and make stories out of them.

This is what fabrication is, and when you see it in action, you can cut through the stories. Every story is made out of words, and each word is a distinct thing. We put them together, and they have meanings. But if you stare at a particular word for a while, even if it's a word in your own language, it gets pretty strange. It helps to be able to take things apart like that in order to notice: What are the individual moments? What are the individual bits and pieces that you glue together? Just see them as individual pieces. You find that when they're individual like that, you can't use them to stab yourself or to shoot yourself.

We shoot and stab ourselves with the stories we build up around things. Our concern about gain, our concern about status, our concern about praise, criticism;

our concerns about pleasure and pain become huge stories. But if you learn how to take them apart, you realize there's nothing there that needs to weigh the mind down.

This is how we begin to learn how not to shoot ourselves because of our attachment to things, our clinging to things, our sense of possession—this is mine, that's mine—both inside and out. We accumulate all these things, and then they bury us. The Buddha talks about the mind that's awakened as a mind with nothing. It doesn't need anything, so it doesn't have to carry things around.

So try to look at where you're carrying unnecessary burdens and shooting yourself with arrows where you don't have to shoot yourself. And ask yourself: "How am I putting this story together? How am I putting this picture of the body sitting here together in such a way that it's adding to the suffering?" This is one of the reasons why we work with the breath: to see that we're actually fabricating even the way we breathe in a way that can cause suffering.

When the Buddha talked about what sound like very abstract concepts—for example, that ignorance is a condition for fabrication—he's actually talking about something very immediate and intimate. We have to put our experience together to make sense out of it, but we don't have to keep it together. We can learn how to take these things apart and question the meanings we've given to things. Look at the things from which we create that sense of meaning. In other words, bring knowledge to the process of fabrication, and a lot of them begin to de-fabricate.

Instead of thinking about our thoughts in terms of their meaning, just look at them as movements in the mind. Try to look at what sponsors them, what causes them, and what supports them to the point where you realize you'd rather take them apart. Then take all these things apart. You begin to realize that the things you thought you needed, you don't really need. You're better off without them.

That mind that has nothing: It's not poverty. It turns out that when you need anything, it's there. You don't have to carry it around. Ajaan Lee's analogy is nice. He says you have all this wealth in your house, but you don't have to carry it around. You know that if you ever need it, it's there. You don't have to place it on your shoulders and carry it around. This is the inner wealth that, instead of dragging you down, floats behind you. Even though you have nothing, you have access to all kinds of things.

So if you have any stories that are weighing the mind down, learn how to take them apart bit by bit by bit. See how much lighter things are when they're not all glued together with meanings and storylines. And you find that the mind with nothing has everything it needs.