

Fighting Spirit

December 22, 2013

You know about the Buddha's image of the two arrows. You get shot by a physical pain – that's one arrow. Then you shoot yourself with another arrow, your reaction to the pain. It's important to realize that second arrow is optional.

Think about it for a minute. Suppose you were shot right in the chest by an arrow. Just picking up a bow and arrow to shoot yourself again – that would make the first arrow hurt even more. And then when you do the shooting, you've got the added pain of the second arrow. The important thing to remember is that we have the choice of whether to shoot ourselves with that second arrow or not.

In fact, that's one of the most important lessons we can bring to the meditation: realizing that a lot of what we're experiencing right now, particularly in terms of the level of pain or pleasure in the mind, is the optional part. It's unnecessary. It's the result of choices, some of which we made in the past, but a lot of which we're making right now—and we're not even aware of the ones we're making right now. The whole purpose of the meditation is to make ourselves more aware of those choices. This opens up the possibility of making different choices – the choice not to shoot yourself with the arrow – and to realize how that can be done.

You even choose how you breathe: long breathing, short breathing, deep, shallow, heavy, light. There's a whole range of ways you can breathe. You can choose how you conceive of the breath, what's called perception, or *saññā* in Pali. As you're breathing right now, where do you think the breath is coming in? What sensations do you think are the ones that tell you that you've got to breathe in this particular way to get the breath in?—that you've got to tense this muscle, change the position of this part of the body, that part of the body...? Can you choose to perceive in a different way, as energy permeating all the blood vessels, permeating all the nerves going throughout the body out to every pore? Can you think of it as a whole-body process? And what about the direction the breath takes when it comes in? Does it go up; does it go down?

Ajaan Fuang once mentioned an interesting perception. To use the breath, he said, think of a channel running right down the middle of the body – a long line from the head down to the base of the spine and from the spine down both legs to the feet. As you breathe in, think of the energy coming in to nourish that channel; and as you breathe out, think of it going out from that channel in all directions, clearing out the body. If you hold that perception in mind, what does it do to the breathing?

Hakuin, the old Zen master, talked about getting Zen sickness, which was basically a strong headache when he was meditating. To cure it, he would hold in mind a perception to counteract it, which was to think of a big ball of butter on top of his head melting and flowing down. In other words, Zen sickness probably came from thinking of the breath energy coming up as you breathed in, and the counteracting perception was to think of it flowing down.

So if you feel any discomfort from the breath, think of different ways of breathing in. Even if you're not sure that the discomfort is actually coming from the breath, think about different ways of breathing to test it; and think about different ways of perceiving the breath to test that as well. Then look at what the Buddha calls verbal fabrication – the comments you're making on things as you're doing them. Are you making good comments or bad? Oftentimes the comments we're making on things are the worst part of the mind's suffering. If there's a pain, a difficulty – your mind's not settling down and you're chattering to yourself about it in ways that just get you more upset – you've got to learn how to stop the chatter.

One way I found really effective is trying to locate where, in the body, there's a little pattern of tension when you think a particular thought. And when you stop thinking that thought, where does the tension go away? The next time you think that thought, think of little knives going into that part of your body and just chopping everything up. Shred those thoughts, those patterns of tension, to bits. Then be on the alert to see the next time a disruptive thought like that comes up, and just chop it up wherever it appears.

That doesn't mean you stop thinking entirely; just learn how to think in better ways. The Buddha lists one of the customs of the noble ones as learning how to delight in abandoning and delight in developing. In other words, learn how to enjoy the process of fighting off your defilements and developing strong qualities in their place.

A lot of times, we're sitting here and we think, "Why do I have to sit here for the whole hour? Why do I have to go through the pain of the practice?" That's just for one hour. Other places, they force you to do two hours, four hours at once. If you sit there just complaining about it, you don't learn anything. You're developing precisely the wrong attitude. The right attitude is to say, "Okay, here's a challenge. How long could I sit here without moving, and without suffering from it?"

If you just sit there without trying to develop any discernment, it doesn't really accomplish much aside from, on the one hand, developing more patience, but also developing some either skillful or unskillful qualities that nourish or hinder that patience. You have to be on the lookout for that. But the whole purpose of sitting here and watching pains arising and passing away is to learn what your mind is doing to make them arise and what you can do to make them pass away.

Even if physical pain doesn't go away, you really want to focus on the mental pain. That's the difference between the suffering in the three characteristics and suffering in the four noble truths. In the three characteristics, the simple fact that things change leads to stress. As long as you're experiencing a body and experiencing the human world around that body, there's going to be change, and there's going to be stress coming from that. But the question is, does that stress have to weigh on your mind? That's where you have the choice. That's the second arrow. The first arrow is the suffering or the stress of the three characteristics; the second arrow is the suffering of the four noble truths, which comes from craving, ignorance, and all the other unskillful fabrications that are based on those qualities.

So here's your opportunity to learn some new habits—and learn how to *enjoy* learning those new habits: identifying your old bad habits and separating yourself from them, in the sense that you realize you don't have to follow them any more. You can develop new habits.

When they talk about developing a fighting spirit in the meditation, this is what they're talking about: seeing the problems that arise as you're sitting here as challenges and realizing that you can figure out how to deal with those challenges. It may take some time – it may take more time than you want – to learn how to not make the amount of time an issue. So be very careful about the thoughts that arise when you meditate.

One of the reasons they try to tell you not to think at all is so that you notice when you're thinking, and begin to notice which thoughts are actually helpful and which ones are not. As you work with a fighting spirit, seeing things as challenges that you're up for, you're a lot more likely to find the solution to the problem. You won't find it by complaining or just sitting there and telling yourself not to think at all, trying to squelch every thought – because a certain amount of thinking has to go into figuring things out.

Now if you find that you're thinking and thinking and thinking and can't figure things out, then stop for a bit. Watch for a while. See if you can see the connection between something you're thinking – or any movement in the mind at all – and the level of stress going up or down in the mind. That will give you a clue as to where you should turn your attention so that you can figure out which kind of thinking is helpful, which kind of thinking is not; and then eventually, figure out what the problem is. Learn to identify exactly which movements of the mind are causing the problems. When you see that they are choices, you realize you don't have to make those choices. You can make other choices.

The fact of choice is so important that it's one of the few issues the Buddha would actually go and search out other teachers to argue with them – the ones who were teaching that you didn't have any choice in the present moment in terms of the pleasure or pain that you experience—either because pleasure or pain were determined totally by your past karma, or because it was determined by some creator or some other impersonal force; or because everything was totally random; that you had no idea of how to connect cause and effect because there *were* no connections between cause and effect. Whoever taught those things, the Buddha would seek them out to argue with them because what they were teaching was simply the most virulent and pernicious form of wrong view.

It's a shame that we see that so much of these wrong teachings in modern Dhamma. A Buddhist magazine years back ran a whole issue on the connection between Dhamma and science. The feature article basically said that science teaches determinism and so does the Dhamma: You just learn to accept, accept, accept that things are the way they are, and that's all you can do. But what the Buddha actually has you accept is that there's a certain connection between cause and effect that you can't change. It's built into the way things work. But once you

understand that connection, you can use that connection to change the causes so that you can get better effects.

That's what true acceptance means. You're trying to figure out the way things are and you have to accept that okay, there are certain causes you like, but they're not going to lead you to happiness. You can learn how to recognize that. They're the causes, the choices you make that will lead to suffering. You like doing those things, but you have to face up to the fact that they do lead to suffering. That's what you have to accept.

Once you've accepted that, then you can figure out how to choose instead to do the things you ordinarily don't like to do, but will lead to pleasure in the long term, and not to do the things that you like to do that will lead to pain in the long term. And learn how to enjoy learning these new lessons.

This is where image of the fighter comes in. You've got an enemy. Here, the enemy is inside and it's an old trusted friend – or a friend you thought you could trust. Ven. Sariputta's image is of a servant who's seemed loyal and true, but has been plotting your murder all along. Now, though, you've got to do battle with it, and part of you misses the old friendship, or what you perceived as loyalty. But when you realize that it was a false friendship all along – you've been deceived by these thoughts all along – that makes it easier to fight them off and to enjoy the fact that you can finally get past the subterfuges and the tricks these false friends used to play on you.

So learn this part of the customs of the noble ones: to really enjoy being up for the challenge of learning how to abandon unskillful qualities and to develop skillful ones. That gives you the energy that will make all the difference in the practice.