

Slings and Arrows of Ordinary Fortunes

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There's a line in Shakespeare about the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. But from the Buddha's point of view, there's nothing particularly outrageous about these things. They're ordinary everyday fortune. Ordinary everyday life. There are a lot of slings and arrows. Pain is an arrow, as the Buddha said. We have one pain—one arrow—but then we shoot ourselves with more arrows around the pain. This applies not only to physical pain but also to mental pain. As it turns out that it's the extra arrows—the Buddha says there's a second arrow, but actually there are a lot more than that because we just keep shooting ourselves again and again and again: Those are the arrows that really pain the mind much more than the first arrow.

In a way, that's good news because we can learn how to stop shooting those extra arrows. We find that when we do, it's a lot easier to bear living in the world with those single arrows that come our way. We should think about somebody shooting him or herself with an arrow. Imagine what kind of posture that would be like. You've got the bow aimed right at you. You've got the arrow aimed right at you, and there's already an arrow there in your chest. Imagine: Just the fact that you're holding the bow to shoot yourself would create extra pain. This is why we train the mind so that it can see things and just leave them be, hear things and just leave them be.

Of course, the mind has the tendency to go out and run after these things, so we have got to give it something better to run after. This is why we turn around and work with the breath. Create a comfortable space inside, a comfortable sense that this is where you belong and the arrows don't have to reach here. You can be aware of them but they don't stick all the way inside. They don't reach in here, so you've got at least a safe place. And it's having this safe place, this sense of well-being, a sense of spaciousness inside, that makes it a lot easier to put up with difficulties outside. And even with the secondary arrows that you shoot as you're trying to learn not to shoot them, at least you have got some place where you can rest, maybe not all the time but you get better and better at it. Having this inner sense of well-being is what makes patience and endurance possible.

In other words, you learn to focus not just on the things that are difficult. You could bang your head against them, but instead you focus on where there's a source of strength inside. And this can be physically with the breath and it can also be mentally, with the attitudes you bring to things. This is what the Dhamma

is for. It's all for putting an end to suffering. It's also something we can use. The reflections on aging, illness, and death are not meant to make you discouraged. They're meant to make you realize that these things are universal. Reflection on separation, again, is supposed to make that point that it's universal, realizing that everybody goes through this. That's not particularly outrageous. It's something normal.

The Thai translation of that chant we do often—"We are subject to aging, illness, and death—they translate as, "Aging is normal, illness is normal, death is normal." When we can have that attitude, it relieves a lot of the pain.

So the teachings are all here—the skills of concentration, the skills of mindfulness, the skills of discernment—for helping us master this skill of knowing how not to suffer, how not to shoot ourselves with those extra arrows. It's something we can do. We can catch ourselves in the midst of doing it and ask ourselves why. That ability to ask yourself why is the beginning of your way out. "Why am I doing this?" No one is telling you that you have to do it. You may have picked up some ideas from society outside, from family, friends, about how this is the way you're supposed to react to the world, but it's good to have alternative patterns.

This is why we have teachers. This is why we have books on Dhamma: to show you that there are other alternatives. Even though the world is full of arrows, you don't have to shoot yourself with the arrows. You can create your space inside where the arrows can't reach. And as you work with this, you find that there's something even deeper still inside that you don't have to create and that's totally immune.

So we live in a dangerous world, but the big dangers come in our own minds. Fortunately, the way out of that danger comes from within as well.

The first step in meditation is to get settled in with the breath, settled in with the body. The more consistently you can stay with the breath, stay with the body, the more the mind will settle down. Mindfulness leads naturally into concentration this way. The concentration gives you a sense of well-being. And if you find yourself getting worked up about how the mind is not settling down tonight, tell yourself there must be someplace inside here where things are at ease.

If you don't like focusing on the breath, if the breath is getting all tangled up—the more you try to adjust it, the worse it gets—just be with the bones. You don't have to do anything with the bones. They just sit there. Try to be as patient as the bones. Holding that perception in mind helps you deal with a lot of things. And it's not just the power of concentration but also the power of discernment that allows you to be with things but not bring them in to make yourself suffer. You

can be with the awareness; you can be with the bones. You can be with something, anything in your range of awareness that seems solid, unaffected by things. This doesn't mean that you're insensitive, simply that you've found a safer place to watch things, a safer perspective from which to watch things. Don't bring them in to shoot yourself in the heart.

So patience is possible. But it requires having the right attitude and the right skills, and these are things we can master.

There are these qualities in the mind. You dig down, you find them, and they're not harmed by anything. They're not engaged with the suffering; they're not engaged with the cause of suffering. As part of the path, you nourish them. And when you reach the goal, you don't have to do anything more. Even less of a burden. You look back and you see the way you were constantly feeding on things outside. That's why you shoot yourself with arrows. You're actually feeding on the arrows. No wonder it hurts.

But the concentration gives yourself something better to feed on. Then the way you used to go running out to lay claim to things, the way the mind would flow out to lay claim to things: You don't have to go there. You'd be exposing yourself to danger. There would nothing to show for it aside from a lot of arrow wounds.

So stay right here, with a sense of well-being right here. This way, you can live with the arrows but you don't have to suffer from them.

This is the Buddha's special skill, his special gift to us. You think of all the different things he could have taught after his awakening: all the visions he'd had of the worlds and all the rest of the things he'd come to understand the night of his awakening and the 49 nights and days afterwards—and of course, in the course of his many years after that. Instead, he taught something that's for our well-being: a skill that we can use that can be passed on from generation to generation—how you can live with the arrows but not suffer from the arrows. This is how you remove those arrows from your heart.

The Buddha had that level of compassion. So it's only appropriate we try to have at least the same compassion for ourselves. That's how we keep the teachings alive so that they can get passed on to the next generation. So it's not just about ourselves, but this is where it begins.