

Wandering On, Shooting Arrows

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When the Buddha explains the causes for suffering, he traces them back to ignorance—ignorance of the four noble truths. When that ignorance is ended with knowledge (*vijjā*), he says, all the causes of suffering come to an end. The question is: How do you get from ignorance to knowledge?

There's a passage where he explains how. He describes the steps of dependent co-arising: starting with ignorance, and going up through craving, clinging, birth, aging, death—and the suffering that comes from these things.

Then the next step is conviction—conviction in the Buddha's teachings, conviction in the Buddha's awakening. Based on conviction comes joy, and from joy there comes concentration, from concentration comes discernment, through discernment you finally get to release, and then to the *vijjā*—the knowledge—that cuts through everything.

So, it's that switch to conviction that makes the difference. Ordinarily, the Buddha says, when we encounter suffering, there are two responses. One is bewilderment: "How does this happen? Why is this happening?" And then there's a search: "Is there someone who knows a way to put an end to this suffering?"

The search is what leads us ultimately to conviction. We've looked at other ways to putting an end to suffering and seen that they don't work. This, however, makes sense—so we give it a try.

Again, the fact that it makes sense is no proof, which is why this is conviction. It's not yet knowledge. We have to keep that in mind all the time. Even our understanding of the four noble truths, right view, all the other right factors of the path, have to be first built on conviction. Conviction includes the desire to put an end to suffering. That's why we're convinced. This is why the Buddha said that passion for the Dhamma is one of the things that leads to happiness.

A question came up the other day, "What's the difference between passion and will?" With passion, you're feeding on your desire. With will, you have desires that things come out a certain way, and you want them to be a certain way.

The distinction, of course, would be in the case of an arahant or Buddha. People of that sort have no more passion, but they can still will things to happen. They've simply learned how to will in such a way that it doesn't have any karmic consequences in the mind. And they're not feeding on it. In other words, their happiness has already been taken care of.

But for us, it hasn't been taken care of yet. So we have to bring some passion to the practice. We have to really want this to be the way in which the end of suffering is going to happen. It's through our reflection on what we're doing that keeps this act of wanting from simply being blind desire.

We look at what we're doing. That's a key element in the path, because after all, the Buddha said, everything comes from the heart. When he illustrates that principle, it's through showing how your desire to act in a certain way, either skillfully or unskillfully, is what will lead to good results or bad results. You have to keep looking inside, inside, based on that desire to abandon the unskillful things the mind is doing.

Think of the Buddha's image of the arrows. Things outside shoot us with pains, with unpleasant situations. That, he says, is like being shot with one arrow. But then we shoot ourselves with a second one. And you might say that he's not counting all the many, many arrows with which we shoot ourselves.

So, when you realize that the problem here is in the mind, you've got to really look, look right here. You have to *want* to look right here, to want to see what you're doing wrong, to want to figure out a way to stop doing that wrong.

Not with the sense of laying blame, but simply seeing: "Where is the cause for the suffering here? Let's dig it out, and if it's in something I'm doing," you tell yourself, "then I want to know. And as long as I don't yet see, I'm going to keep on looking."

This is why we meditate—to look into what the mind is doing wrong. That willingness to accept the fact that, yes, the mind is sometimes lying to itself, and sometimes hiding things from itself: That's what keeps us honest.

It's not the case that the mind is a total liar. If it were, then there would be no chance of practicing at all. The mind does have its moments of clarity, and as we practice, we're trying to maximize those moments—to extend them. Which is why

our focus has to be continually inside, inside.

We look around at the world, and the best lesson to gain as you look around at the world is to see that there's so much suffering, there are so many people squabbling over the best way the world should be run—and the squabbling never ends.

I know a monk in Thailand who had a following of people who were politically very powerful. They belonged to different parties, different sides of different issues. They'd come to him, and he said they were like little children, always upset about “what so-and-so did to me.”

As long as we're trying to straighten out the world, we're like little children, because the world doesn't want to be straightened out. Or if you do straighten it out, it's not going to stay that way. Other people won't like your way of straightening out the world, and they're going to come in and try to straighten it out their way.

Those are the lessons you gain from looking at the world, and they point you back inside. If there's going to be a solution to the problem of suffering, it's going to be in here.

And we say that with conviction. Again, it's not yet knowledge until you've actually gotten results, and even with stream-entry, the results simply confirm you in your conviction all the way up to the point where you finally do totally put an end to suffering. Only then will you have knowledge. So you have to do what you can to nurture your conviction that looking inside is the right way to go about solving the problem of suffering. Keep nurturing your desire to put an end to suffering. The point of that conviction is that there is an end, but it has to come through our own efforts. This is why we have to be heedful.

A few days back, I mentioned a sutta where a Buddha of the past goes up with one of his disciples to visit a Brahma world. And just to show off the power of his disciple, he tells the disciple to make his voice such that the whole universe can hear it. So the disciple recites two stanzas that reverberate through the universe. I talked about the one stanza about putting in effort, being committed to the practice—sweeping away your defilements as an elephant would a hut of reeds. Well, there was a second stanza as well: “Those who remain heedful in this

Dhamma and discipline, doing away with the wandering on, will put an end to suffering.” What is it that wanders on? The mind.

So, look at how the mind wanders from moment, to moment, to moment. Learn how to bring that wandering under control. This is one of the reasons why we practice concentration—to settle in and watch the mind’s movements, because it’s in the mind’s movements that we can make a difference.

We go about shooting arrows in all directions, and they all come back at us. They’re like boomerang arrows. So we have to watch out for this mind that likes to keep on shooting arrows, shooting arrows. That’s what we’ve got to put an end to.

The arrows that are shot at us by the world, you have to learn how to take those in stride. But this tendency we have to keep on shooting arrows, that’s what we’ve got to watch out for.

There are a lot of people in the world who would say, “No, that’s not the problem. The problem is with the world.” But if you’re really convinced that there’s an end to suffering and that the Buddha taught the way to the end of suffering, this is where you’ve got to look.

It’s in putting an end to these habits of the mind, the wandering on shooting arrows: That’s how we can put an end to suffering.

Of this we’re convinced, and we should have the courage and the desire of our conviction. This is not a path for people who simply dabble. It’s a path for people who are willing to commit—who’ve seen the danger that comes when you can’t commit to a path like this—and they’re willing to give their all to finding the way out.