

There is This

September 30, 2008

There's a famous simile in the texts where a man is suffering from pain. He gets tied up in anxiety and misery around the pain. And the Buddha says it's like being shot with an arrow and then shooting yourself with a second arrow. The physical pain is the first arrow; the mental pain is the second one. And it's the mental one that's important. As the Buddha says, the enlightened person, the awakened person, may still get shot with those first arrows but doesn't shoot him or herself with the second.

The second arrows are important because they get shot right into the heart, into the mind. The first arrow can only go as far as the body. The arrows that go into the mind are the ones that really hurt. They are the subject of the four noble truths. That's the suffering in the first noble truth: the suffering that craving and ignorance shoot into the heart.

So our training is learning how not to shoot ourselves with that second arrow. Although it's always struck me that there's more than just one second arrow. Lots of arrows get shot into the mind. The question is: How do we learn not to do that?

The clue to the answer is given in another passage where the Buddha talks about a person who has gained very exalted states in meditation and responds by saying, "I am at peace. I am released." As the Buddha comments, the "I am" in those statements is what's causing the problem. It shows that this person still has some connection, still has some clinging. After all, craving combined with clinging is what causes the suffering. And the "I am" that you build around things is one of the four types of clinging: doctrine-of-self clinging—your idea of who you are. You impose that on all kinds of experiences. You like to impose it on the ones where things are pleasurable, but once you set up the mold of the "I am" and stick in a nice pleasurable feeling, that pleasurable feeling can change and be replaced by an unpleasant feeling. So there you are. You've still got that sentence "I am this," but suddenly the "this" is something unpleasant. You've got a pain in the mold that you had created to contain pleasure.

This is where the teaching on not-self comes in to help. Learn how to view things without creating that sense of self—because after all, that sense of self is something that we do. We make this sense of self. And it does have its functions. As the Buddha said, when you want to understand something, you have to see both its allure and its drawbacks. You don't just watch it arising and passing away. You want to understand when it arises why you hold onto it? So if you want to understand why you make a sense of self, you have to look for its allure. And the allure here is that the sense of self is useful in a lot of contexts. When you're eating food, you know which mouth to put it in. You know how to plan for the future. You know how to anticipate future dangers: that if you don't practice now, you're going to have trouble down the line. In that way the sense of self is useful.

But as with any activity, you've got to see when it's skillful and when it's not. And particularly if you find yourself shooting your heart with arrows, you've got a problem. To indicate the solution, the Buddha compares the case of that

meditator placing the words “I am this” around his meditative experiences, with someone else who simply says, “There is this.” When there’s the perception of the infinitude of space, he doesn’t equate himself with the infinitude of space, doesn’t create a sense of pride around it. He simply says, “There is this: infinite space. There is this: nothingness. There is this: neither perception nor non-perception,” or whatever the state may be. That’s one of the tools for getting around this habit of building a self all the time.

This is a theme that recurs many places in the Canon. The monk who’s dwelling in emptiness and practicing concentration looks at the perception in his mind—it might be the perception of the breath or whatever—and notices that there are these disturbances here, but also that there is a lack of disturbance compared with other perceptions. For instance, if you’re sitting here with a perception of all the people sitting around you, you start thinking about the stories of what this person said today, and what are you going to have to do with that person tomorrow. There’s a lot of disturbance connected with the perception of “people.” But if you can hold onto the perception simply of “breath,” the “people” disturbances go away. And you notice that. There is a level of disturbance with the breath because you still have to maintain it, you still have to work with the breath. So you notice, “There is this.” As for what’s not here, you notice, “Okay, that’s absent.”

When you’re working with the frames of reference, you want to build up to the ability to simply notice, “There is the body; there are feelings; there are mind states; there are mental qualities,” without building a lot of stories around them. And you can work in that direction. You’re sitting here; it’s warm tonight. And you could be thinking about the fact that it’s a lot warmer tonight than it was last night and what does that mean for tomorrow? How am I going to get through the night? How am I going to get through tomorrow? You may even think up some project that requires you to go down to the library, to find some air conditioning, and off your thoughts go in that direction. But then you realize you can’t do that, so you start suffering. You could simply say, however, “There is this,” and then look at what you’ve got here.

There are aggregates, there are sense media, and the properties of the body: earth, water, wind, fire. Okay, we’ve got more fire tonight than normal. Is your body all fire? Well, no. It’s got other elements as well. There’s liquidity, there’s the motion of the breath. And there are the solid parts. Things are feeling too warm. Is everything warm? No there’s still some water in there; some sensations in the body are cooler than others. Where are those cool sensations? Which part of the body feels cooler than the others? Focus on that.

As you stay with that sense of coolness, notice: Can you spread it around? This way you learn how to make use of what’s there. There is this, there is warmth, but there’s also the “this” that’s not so warm. Or you can forget about the issue of hot and cold all together, and focus on the breath: how is the breath moving? Is the breath moving in a healthy way? Is it obstructed? Is it unobstructed? You can look at that.

As long as you stay simply on the level of elements, you’re not shooting yourself with those second arrows. You’re simply staying on the level of, “There is this.” You’re not creating stories around it. More precisely, you see more clearly what is there when you say, “There is this.” You begin to see that you’ve

taken a few details from the present and were stitching them together in a story that was making you suffer. You can ask yourself, "Thy should I do that?"

You've got the choice of what you're going to focus on, which give you a lot of freedom right there. And as you sense the "I" building up around planning for tomorrow, or thinking about what happened today, you can cut through it. There is the thought of "I," but is it helpful now? No. If you're not carrying around the assumption that you're something, if you're not objectifying yourself, things are a lot lighter. Stay on the level of, "There is this" and explore, "Well, what is the "this"? How many thises are in here right now? There are lots of thises. And you've got the choice of which this you're going to focus on.

So the sense of self you have: Learn how to use it appropriately. Realize that it's an optional storyline, an optional concept that's helpful in some circumstances and harmful in a lot of other ones. Practice looking at the "There is this," to see what's going on, to see what role your present intentions are playing in shaping what's going on. The storylines, the assumptions, all the other things you tend to cling to: What do you have to let go of in order to stop that suffering?

When you look at things on this level, simply arising and passing away without carrying the storylines around all the time, it's a lot easier to let go of the things that the storylines would require. If you don't have to identify something as "me," then you don't have to worry about what's going to happen to me tomorrow. If the thought of "me" and "I" tomorrow comes up, you realize that's optional. It's not built into the way things are.

This is one of the reasons why we get the mind concentrated because as the Buddha said, once the mind is concentrated, you can see the aggregates as they arise, as they're originated by conditions. You can see events at the sense spheres. You can analyze your sense of the body into aggregates and properties. When the mind is still in the present, you can simply look at things as they present themselves to your awareness here in the present moment. You get to see what's really there and what's not. If you take it just on this level, you can see that what's really there is not nearly as oppressive as the stories made it out to be. Even when there's severe pain, it's a lot easier to take when you're taking it just as what's right here right now. You're not weighing yourself down with thoughts of how long you've been in pain and how much longer you are going to be in pain, or that it's been caused by somebody else, why is that person causing it.... You simply look at, "Here is the pain, here is the sensation, what can be done about it? Where should I focus my attention so I don't have to suffer?"

One thing you could do is watch the pain pass away, pass way, because from moment to moment, it just keeps passing away. It's like the difference between riding in a car facing forward and riding the car facing backward. Facing forward, you seem to take on everything coming at you; you become weighed down by everything that's coming in, coming in, coming in at you. But if you turn around and face the back of the car as you're riding along, just see things passing away, passing away, passing away. The actual impact is the same, but your attitude has changed. You see things passing away; you're not gathering them in.

Ajaan Lee gives the example of a person plowing a field. Stupid people try to take the dirt as it falls off the plow and stick it in a bag. Of course they're going

to get weighed down. But if you simply watch the dirt as it falls off, falls off, falls off, you're not carrying anything around with you. You don't get weighed down. You can complete the plowing.

So that's the other thing to think about as you're watching pain as, "There is this." You want to say, "This is passing away." You don't have to collect the pains, or gather them up to store them anywhere. And if that's the way you can see things, that first arrow is really not so painful at all.