

Straightening the Arrow

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There's a passage in the Canon where the Buddha uses the image of straightening an arrow to describe the practice. As long as the arrow isn't straight, you have to put it between two flames. But then, when the arrow is straight, you don't have to put it between the flames anymore.

The image was used in response to an attack coming from the Jains, about Buddhist monks not sticking with a harsh practice all the way to death. The Jains felt that you have to burn away all of your past bad karma through pain. When all your past bad karma was burned up, you would die, and that would be it. That was the only way out of the cycle. So from their point of view, the fact that the Buddhist monks stopped pushing themselves so hard was a sign that they had failed in their task.

But as the Buddha said, as long the arrow needs straightening, you still have to put it next to the flame. In other words, as long as the mind is still untrained, as long as it still has its defilements, with unskillful states arising, there are times when you have to practice with pain. You have to practice with restrictions. You have to make an effort. But then when you've freed the mind from those unskillful states, you don't have to put so much effort into the practice. You don't have to practice with the pain anymore.

Nowadays, of course, the attack comes from the other side. Why should there be flames? Why can't we just appreciate the beauty of the unstraightened arrow? Why place restrictions on yourself? The answer, of course, is that if you have an arrow that's not straight, you can appreciate it as a natural piece of artwork, but it's not going to fly straight. You can't shoot anything with it. So there is a need for restrictions in the path.

Some people complain that all this effort we do—judging what's skillful and unskillful, being careful about the friends you keep, being careful about restraint of the senses—doesn't seem very enlightened. Well, you can't clone awakening. The path is not the same as awakening. The path is a process you have to put the mind through in order to come out on the other side. So you do have to choose the friends you hang around with. You do have to choose what you're going to look at and listen to, and *how* you're going to look at it and *how* you're going to listen to it—and all the way down to the other senses. You do have to place restrictions on yourself.

This is important. We're in training. Just as an athlete in training has to avoid certain foods and activities, there are things we have to avoid as well.

When you look at the path, it's largely one of developing the right perceptions: seeing the value of generosity, seeing the value of virtue. Getting the mind in concentration, the Buddha said, is a perception attainment. You have to maintain the perception of breath and choose the proper perception of breath so that the mind can settle down with it, so that you don't forget and wander off someplace else. The perception is the marker that keeps you here with the breath and allows you to remember, that allows mindfulness to remember that this is where you want to stay.

Then there are the perceptions of the three characteristics: looking for the inconstancy in things, looking for the stress, seeing them as not-self. When you're developing concentration, you don't apply these perceptions to the concentration. Instead, you apply them to anything else that would disturb the mind. Even when you're not in concentration, you often find that thinking about the impermanence or inconstancy of things helps get you through some difficult situations.

Suppose you're sitting here and something comes into the mind. You can remind yourself, "Okay, that's inconstant, and if you're going to fool around with inconstant things, there's going to be stress. Is it really worth it?" The perception of not-self is when you say, "No, it's not worth it." You can let it go. Ultimately, of course, you'll apply the same perceptions to the concentration. But in the meantime, you want to learn how to look at the world that pulls you away from the concentration in these terms.

Then there are what might be called the positive perceptions. The Buddha has you keep in mind the perception that nibbana really is the true happiness that's going to satisfy any desire the mind would have for well-being or security or peace. It's a Good Thing. As the Buddha once said, if you perceive nibbana as something unpleasant, that perception is really going to get in the way of your practice. You've got to see this as the most worthwhile happiness there is, and that it really is worthwhile putting yourself through the practice, through all the difficulties involved in the practice.

How does this relate to your friends? Well, how many of your friends have these values? How many of your friends perceive things in these ways? I read someone say the other day that choosing your friends, judging your friends as to whether they're helpful or harmful for the practice is a horrible thing. It doesn't seem very enlightened. Well again, we're not enlightened yet. We're working our way there.

To get there, you have to remember that you have certain weaknesses. If you're still influenced by the perceptions advocated by your friends, you have to ask yourself, "What kind of perceptions do they have? Are they the kind of people whose perceptions I should pick up?" You hang around people and you may not be consciously picking up their perceptions, but it's a subliminal kind of thing. Dogen had the comment that being with other people is like walking through the fog. There's no one point where you say your robes are getting drenched—of course, Dogen was a monk, so he was wearing robes—but you do find after a while that you're wet. So what kind of fog do your different friends churn out? Is it the kind of fog you want to pick up? You may decide that you have to put some friendships on hold for the time being because they're pulling you off in the wrong direction.

It's the same with restraint of the senses. An awakened person can see, hear and smell all kinds of things and not be affected by them, but again, we're not there yet. Our work isn't yet complete. So when you're looking at something, you have to keep asking yourself, "Why am I looking? What's the result of my looking?" Those are the two sides of restraint. One is your motivation in looking, and the second one is what effect it has on your mind. This applies to all six of the senses.

You have to learn how to see these things as part of a causal process and not simply as what you want to look at and what you don't want to look at, or what you like and don't like. If your defilements have free rein in directing your eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind when you're out walking around, dealing with other people, they're going to have the same power as you're meditating. They get more power because they're given more free rein. And of course, the things they choose to look at and the way they choose to look is going to have an impact on your mind.

You have to keep watch over these things. If you notice yourself looking for trouble—i.e., looking for something that's going to excite your lust or anger—then as Ajaan Lee says, turn your eyes around. Something that normally incites your lust: Look for its unattractive side. Something that normally excites your anger: Look for its good side. You have to keep watch. This is why heedfulness is the basis for all skillful qualities, the realization that what you do—and this is not only how you deal with other people, but how you look at things and listen to things, your *choices* in where you direct your senses, your *choices* in what to do and say and think—will really have consequences. You have to be careful. You have to watch.

This could get very confining if it weren't for the fact that we're also developing concentration, and we're protecting our concentration because it's an expansive state of mind. All the Buddha's images for concentration in the Canon are of full-body awareness. You gain the pleasure and rapture of seclusion, the pleasure and rapture of concentration, and let them spread throughout the whole body to the point where there's no part of the body that's not saturated with these things. It's a nice state to maintain. It's subtle and it's very easy to drop it when other concerns suddenly come jumping into the mind. You want to take the time needed to protect it, as this is your nourishment. This is the sense of inner spaciousness that allows you to place restrictions on other things, other activities, without feeling too hemmed in.

So even though there may be elements in your outside world that are beyond your control, the way you look and listen to things *is* under your control. The way you direct the mind, the perceptions you hold in mind as to what's worthwhile and what's not: Those things are under your control. Use that fact to nurture the development of your mind.

This is a practice you can do anywhere. Here in the monastery, it's easier because our basic values are different from those of the world outside. But even in places where it's harder, it's still possible. You have to ask yourself what's really important in life. What has essential worth in your life? Take that perception and hold to it. That's what will see you through.