Breaking the Arrows

September 20, 2013

The chant we had just now on aging, illness, death, separation, and then the reflection on action or karma: That reflects the Buddha's own path. As a young prince, he looked around him. He had all the pleasures you could imagine that a prince in India would have at that time. But it struck him that all those pleasures would be subject to aging, illness, death, and separation. In other words, whatever the story was, it was going to end in suffering.

His question was: Is there something you can do so that you can experience aging, illness, death, and separation and not suffer? That was why he went off into the forest to really look into his mind, because he realized the *doing* here would primarily be a mental doing: looking at the mind and seeing why it caused itself to suffer around these things. There might be a way to put an end to that.

When you read the story of his quest, you realize that there were things he began to notice—habits he had, ways of thinking, ways of focusing his mind, ways of understanding things—that were causing him to suffer, sometimes on very subtle levels. The question always was, is there another way to do that? Are there other habits? He went all the way to six years of self-torture to realize that that didn't work. Then he thought of a time when he was younger, sitting under a tree, and his mind naturally entered concentration. He asked himself: Could that be the way? He decided it was worth trying.

So he ended the self-torture, ate enough to regain the strength of body needed to do concentration practice, and from that he developed the mind to the point where he discovered that there are other factors to the path in addition to concentration. But all the time, he was looking at his actions and the results of his actions—particularly the way he thought, the way he understood things—and changing what he was doing until he had a complete path that led to something free of aging, free of illness, free of death, free of separation. He realized that it is possible to experience these things and not suffer, because there is this other dimension in the mind that's not touched by them.

That's why we're meditating: to find that dimension, or if not to get all the way there, at the very least to develop in the mind the strengths needed to withstand the fact that aging, illness, death, and separation are going to happen. We don't know exactly how or when, say, death will come. But following the Buddha's example, we know that if we develop good qualities of mind, we're going to suffer a lot less. So here we are developing those qualities.

We begin with mindfulness, which is the ability to keep something in mind—in this case, reminding ourselves that even though the body may age, there may be something in the mind that doesn't age. The Buddha said there is, and one of the things we want to do as we practice is to find if that's true. It's the same with illness and death.

There's a dimension in the mind that he says is free of these things, so keep that in mind as a possibility. Don't abandon the possibility. People who abandon that possibility end up really miserable, saying, "We've just got to learn how to take the good with the bad, and then we're all snuffed out at the end." And they're the ones who call Buddhism pessimistic. Actually, the Buddha placed a lot of trust in the potential of human action.

Those are things to keep in mind.

Then you want to be alert to watch your mind to see what it's doing. This alertness, too, is a quality that can help you. When pain comes, you have to notice how you react to the pain. How do you make the pain worse? The Buddha's image is of a person struck by an arrow who then turns around and shoots himself or herself with another arrow. In other words, there's the physical pain, but then on top of that, there's all the worry and distress around the pain—and that hurts a lot more.

So you want to be alert to see what ways you're acting and thinking and relating to things that make them worse. If you see you're doing something to make them worse, then your response is to be ardent. That's the third quality: You're ardent in trying to learn how to drop that habit. No matter how old the habit may be, there's no need to hang on to it.

We learn how to bring the mind to concentration so that we can develop these qualities. When you're focusing on the breath, these are precisely the qualities that get strengthened: the ability to keep the breath in mind, the ability to be alert to what's going on with the breath right now, and the quality of ardency to do this well. We develop all these qualities as we relate to the present moment because it's in the present moment where we're going to be meeting aging at some point, illness at some point, death at some point. They're all going to come right here. The better you know the present moment, the more likely you'll be able to slip past those things without suffering.

It's like knowing that you can very easily get mugged on a particular street corner, so you go down and you check out the corner to see what escape routes there are. The escape routes are all right here. They're subtle, which is why we have to spend a lot of time looking right here and developing our powers of alertness and ardency. But this all lies within the potential of human beings to do.

At the same time, when you develop these qualities, you're going to be less of a burden on other people. One of the hardest things in life is to see someone you love going through the process of aging, illness, and death—particularly as they're approaching death, and there's nothing you can do to help at that point. You see them suffering, but there's nothing you can say to them. They may not be able to hear you. Or they're so overwhelmed by the pain that they can't understand even when they *can* hear you. So don't be that person yourself.

When you're developing these strengths, you're not the only person who benefits. The people around you will benefit as well.

So this is an important skill. You want to learn how to do it right. Each time you see the mind wandering off, you bring it right back; that's part of ardency. No matter what the thought may be, you just don't continue weaving it. Let the frayed ends blow in the wind, but you come back.

The thing is, you don't have to pull the mind back. As soon as you drop the thought, you're back here with the breath automatically. Each you come back, reward yourself with a comfortable breath. And then, why stop with one breath? Make it two, three, four. Ask yourself, what would be a particularly gratifying way to breathe? This helps keep you balanced here in the present moment with a sense of belonging here.

Whenever a problem comes up, remember what's worked in the past or any instructions you've received that are relevant to what you're doing right now. At the very least, if you find yourself wandering off, remind yourself—"Oh. This is not why I'm here. I'm here to stay with the breath to develop these good qualities"—because these qualities are the things you'll be able to depend on. Even with other issues not as serious as aging, illness, or death, such as worries about the future, you can remind yourself: These are the qualities you'll need—regardless. Don't be the person who's prepared for one war and suddenly finds himself fighting a different war. Develop the skills that are useful in all wars—mindfulness, alertness, and ardency—and then you'll be safe all around.

There's a concept in Buddhism called refuge. They talk about taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, which means is that you take refuge in their example. The Buddha was someone who found a way to experience aging, illness, and death without suffering. The Dhamma he taught was the body of instructions that he left behind: This is how you do it. And the Sangha is composed of those who followed his instructions and showed that it didn't work just for the Buddha; it works for everybody who puts those instructions into practice. So we look at their example; we try to learn from their example; and then we develop their qualities within us. That's when you get an internal refuge—the

refuge that protects you from your own unskillful actions. It also protects you from ideas outside that may say: "Oh, human beings can't do this." You know from your experience that human beings can.

Finally, there's the ultimate refuge, the refuge of the deathless dimension that can be found in the mind. The Buddha talks about touching it with the mind and also seeing or touching it with the body. In other words, it's not just an idea. Where you're experiencing your body right now is where you're going to be experiencing the deathless. So everything you need to find is right here. Everything you need to develop, the tools you need to develop to find what's really valuable, are right here as well—in a potential form. It's just up to you now to develop them, to make them stronger.

This is how we protect ourselves from the dangers all around us and from the even bigger dangers inside—all those extra arrows we could be shooting ourselves with. That image of two arrows is actually not really adequate. We get shot by one arrow, and then we shoot ourselves with a whole quiver. Meditation is all about learning how not to shoot yourself, because it's those extra arrows that really hurt. They go deep into the mind; the external arrow just goes as far as the body. That's the first arrow, while all the other ones go into the mind.

The qualities of mindfulness, alertness, and ardency—when they're properly applied—show you how you don't have to shoot yourself any more. And it turns out that the suffering you cause yourself unnecessarily like this is the only suffering that really weighs the mind down. When you learn how not to identify with the pains in the body or with the body itself, the pain that goes only as far as the body goes doesn't seep into the mind.

The Thai ajaans talk about the perceptions we have that this body is *mine* or the pain is in *my* leg or the pain is aimed at *me*—all these misconceptions we have about the pain: These perceptions, these labels we apply to pain are the bridge between the body and the mind. As you meditate, you're learning how to break the arrows and to cut the bridge, so that aging, illness, and death go only as far as the body. They don't have to touch your awareness. That's a skill you can develop —the skill we're working on right now.