

The Easy Way Out

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As the Buddha said, we're all born into this world with an arrow stuck into our hearts: the arrow of suffering, greed, aversion, delusion. We all want to find a way to take the arrow out.

Some of us, of course, don't realize that the arrow is there. We feel the pain but we think that it's coming from something else.

When we grow up is when we really realize that, okay, the arrow is here. And we're the ones who are shooting ourselves.

There's another discourse where the Buddha says that whenever physical pain comes, it's like one arrow being stuck in us—and then we shoot ourselves with another arrow. Or actually it's more arrows than that: a whole quiver of arrows. Being upset about the pain: "Why is this happening to me? Why is this suffering happening to me? Why can't I get rid of it right away?" And all those arrows just make the problem worse.

So, as he said, there is a path for the extraction of arrows—which is the noble eightfold path. He says this is the only one. Sometimes you look at the path and it seems long and difficult. And we'd like to see a shorter path, an easier path. And we'd like to find the easy way out.

But this *is* the easy way out. And if we can strip away all the complications that we add to the path, we find that it actually is an easy path: easy for the good side of the mind. It's asking you to do things that are honorable, things that are noble, things that feel really good deep down inside when you do them.

So ask yourself, "What obstacles are you putting in your own way?" And be patient but persistent in learning how to put them aside.

The difficulty, of course, is that a lot of these obstacles are things that we identify with.

I was reading a Dhamma talk by Ajaan Maha Boowa the other day and he was talking about how the problem with the defilements is we think they're us. And the idea of removing any of those defilements is like cutting off an arm, taking out your liver, taking out things that you think are vital to you. An important part of the skill of the meditation is learning to see them as something separate, that they really aren't you.

So you want to develop a part of the mind that doesn't identify with them. Learn how to identify with the part that wants to be on the path and is not looking for shortcuts. Because all too often the shortcuts short-circuit everything.

You've got this breath then you've got the next breath. We can't take a shortcut to the last breath of the hour without going through all the breaths in-between. If you try to find some other way, you're just creating more and more difficulties for yourself. And yet this is what the

mind likes to do: It finds other things to think about, other places to go—anything but staying right here.

As a result, it doesn't get anywhere new. After all, this is a path that not only takes out the arrow in the heart but also helps you to realize things you haven't yet realized, to see and experience things you haven't yet seen or experienced, to attain something you've never attained before. It takes you to someplace that's really special.

So sometimes it requires learning some patience; other times it requires learning persistence. All the unglamorous but good qualities of the mind get to play their role.

It's like the house-elves in *Harry Potter*. They're not very glamorous, they seem to be very minor. But it turns out that they're essential to the plot.

The same with patience, persistence: sticking with this breath and then this breath. And, oh, here comes another breath: Well, stick with that one too. And then, here's another one. There may not be that much difference among them, but if you stay with them you begin to see there are differences.

And this is an important element in the practice in learning how to develop your own discernment. You can take other people's beautiful concepts—emptiness sounds wonderful, oneness sounds wonderful, interconnectedness all sounds wonderful—but they're just words, ideas, perceptions. You've got to learn how to question perceptions as part of the practice—and you need to develop your own sensitivity if you're going to see things as they are actually happening.

That means looking at things that may not seem all that different to begin with and getting used to them until you can see, "Oh, this is different. This breath was different from that one. This mind state is different from that one." You want to be able to see when there's more stress in the mind: Okay, what did you just do? Sometimes what you just did was a very subtle thing.

This is why the path is gradual. The Buddha's analogy is of the continental shelf off of India. It gradually, gradually, gradually slopes down, and then finally there's a sudden drop-off. The sudden drop-off happens because the Deathless is always there. What makes the process gradual, though, is the fact that your ability to discern these things can develop only gradually with patience, with practice, as your sensitivities develop.

We tend to think of wisdom as concepts but it's actually a matter of sensitivity, noticing when something has happened, noticing when something has been different, seeing minor distinctions. What's the difference between a desire that's part of the path and a desire that's a cause of suffering? You can probably describe it in words if you've been reading the texts, but actually to see it acting in the mind: That's a different matter entirely.

And so the purpose of this practice is to make you more sensitive. When the Buddha describes the steps of breath meditation in all the different tetrads, that's basically what it is: training in sensitivity. First you sensitize yourself to a particular aspect of your experience. Then you ask, to what extent are you fabricating this element of your experience? Then you try to

notice, okay, when you're fabricating that aspect—such as with the breath or with feelings or with your mind states—which ways of fabricating are more stressful and which ones are less? Which ones add a burden to the mind and which ones take a burden off? Then you calm down the fabrication to move in a direction of less and less stress.

It's sensitivity training. You're becoming sensitive to the actions in your mind: things you've been living with all along but you don't really see clearly because you've been looking at them in another way or just looking past them, looking through them.

These events that come up in the mind: They're like signs, a finger pointing someplace. And for most of us, when we see the finger pointing, we look in the direction the finger's pointing. But as we meditate we're learning to turn around and look directly at the finger: What is that finger? Who's pointing? Why? And is it good to follow the finger or not?

These are things you need to learn how to perceive for yourself. The instructions are there and they're all complete. You can't look for any hidden teachings that would make them easier. The Buddha laid everything out as clearly as possible and as simply as possible.

This is the easy way out. Just make sure that you don't add any unnecessary complications.