

A Full Range of Archery Skills

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There's the discernment that comes from listening and reading. There's the discernment that comes from thinking things through. But the real discernment comes from developing qualities in the mind. This is one of the reasons why we're practicing concentration—both because as the mind gets more still you see things more clearly, and also because as you deal with your defilements and get your mind to settle down, you learn an awful lot: which defilements you have to put off for a while, which defilements you have to deal with right away, and of course, learning how to recognize defilements as defilements.

All too often we take them as our friends. As the Buddha said, we go through life with craving as our companion. We think it's our best friend. And all too often it's the kind of friend who gets us to do something really bad and then, when the police come to catch us, the friend runs away. We're the ones left holding the bag. So as you get the mind to settle down, as you notice other things come up, don't feel too frustrated. You're giving yourself a chance to dig them out and not follow them. And, as you learn to see through these things, you'll also see through their rationale: why you fell for them to begin with. That way, things become clearer and clearer in the mind.

There's a passage where the Buddha compares the skills you learn through doing concentration to the skills of an archer. You can shoot long distances, fire shots in rapid succession, and pierce great masses. Those are three very different skills. Firing shots in rapid succession means that you're alert to see things quickly, to recognize what's going on, to observe what's going on as it's happening. As for shooting great distances, that means that you can see the long term as well. These two skills sometimes seem to be going in opposite directions. You want to see something quickly, come to a quick judgment and act on it, but at the same time you have to think about the long term, which means you can't jump to conclusions. Often you have to withhold judgment, and you can't just go on your first impulse. You have to think about the long term consequences. So those are two skills that pull in different directions. But to be a good meditator you have to learn both.

It's like when I was first translating Ajaan Lee, I asked Ajaan Fuang whether I should try for a literal translation or for one that really got to the meaning of the text. His reply was, "Both," which forced me to become a better translator, trying to keep both goals in mind at the same time. So you want to be quick and you also

want to take the long view. This means that when you're in the heat of a job or of a difficult situation, you can't simply go with your impulses. Even in a situation like that, you've got to think about what would be for the long-term well-being of the job, the long term well-being of the group, the long term well-being of your own goodness and your own happiness. That's a tall order. But working on your concentration, getting to understand what it means to get the mind to settle down, and to choose its thoughts: That's a skill that's going to help to give you the strength to look for the long term, along with the powers of observation that allow you to see things quickly: to recognize when something's going wrong, to recognize when something's going right, and not to give in to your greed, aversion, or delusion.

That way, you can develop that third skill, which is to pierce great masses. This the Buddha says, corresponds to piercing ignorance, where you really see how you're causing unnecessary suffering. You see that the problem lies inside, and you can see precisely which movements of the mind are causing the suffering. You understand what their allure is, but also see their drawbacks, so you can gain some escape from them.

So remember, as we're meditating, we're developing a wide range of skills here. Also remember that, in stilling the mind, it's not simply a matter of beating them mind down. If you beat it down, when the beating down ends, then it springs right back to its old ways. You want to develop some insight into your mind as it settles down: the insight that sees both what the mind would like, what skillful objects the mind would like, and how to produce those conditions. You can work with the breath, you can work with the elements in the body, whatever the mind finds intriguing and enjoyable here in the present moment.

But at the same time, you have to gain some insight into your different hindrances, the different distractions that come up. Sometimes you can give them a quick karate chop and they're gone. Other times, when they come back, you actively have to think about where they would lead you. And when you think about where they would actually lead you, you find part of the mind says, "Well, don't they also lead here?" That's a lead showing you some of the mind's reasons for wanting to think those thoughts, so that you recognize them more and more quickly.

That way, even when you're not meditating, when you're in the heat of a day or the heat of a job and something comes into the mind, you're better at judging where it comes from. And even then you have to put it to the test. If something seems okay, you act on it, but then you have to be frank with yourself about the results. If it didn't lead to good results, you have to go back and say, "Okay, I

thought I understood things. I've got to go back and reassess my powers of judgment."

This is how you grow. This is how the Buddha grew. He went into his practice with some preconceived notions. He studied with some teachers who he thought would be good, and then he discovered that there were limitations to their teachings. They didn't lead to the deathless happiness he wanted. So then he decided he would have to do self-torture. Well, that turned out to be a dead end as well. It taught him some good things about powers of endurance, but he realized it would ultimately kill him and he wouldn't gain the results he wanted. So he had to try something else.

So this is the model he sets for us. It's all in the trial and error. We use our powers of judgment and then we have to assess our past judgments to see how good they were. Learn to be quick and, at the same time, to be more penetrating, a little bit more patient when you're not fully sure of things. That's how you can develop that full range of skills, taking the long term and also being quick to observe things right now. Learning how to balance those out, so that the strength you develop in firing shots in rapid succession is the same strength that will help you shoot long distances and to pierce great masses. At the very least, you can teach these skills how to work together. And that's when you can be complete in your mastery of the skills of meditation.