



Stop Shooting Arrows, by Thanissaro Bhikku

The Buddha compares pain with being shot by arrows. Physical pain is like being shot with one arrow, but then on top of that you shoot yourself with another arrow, the anguish you build up around the pain, is totally optional. When you've got a body, there are going to be pains. Even the Buddha had physical pains after his Awakening, but the difference is that he knew how not to shoot himself with those unnecessary second, third, fourth, and fifth arrows. And as it turns out, those are the ones that really hurt. Those are the ones causing the problems.

But you can't just go marching in and say to yourself, "Okay, you! Out! Stop! Stop shooting arrows!" You've got to learn to see where the dividing line is between the physical pain and the mental pain. You do that by experimenting with the breath, experimenting with the labels you put on the pain, asking yourself questions about the pain — and sometimes the strange questions are the ones that ferret out the strange attitudes you've built up around the pain. For instance, you can ask, "What shape does the pain have?" It sounds like a strange question, but when you pursue it you find that your imagination has actually given the pain a shape. What happens when you don't give it a shape? How does the pain move around? Is it moving around on its own or is it moving around because you're pushing it around? These are things you have to learn through experiment. It's only through experimentation that things begin to divide out on their own. In other words if you go in with preconceived notions, "The dividing line has to be here, or there," it turns out that that's not the case at all. You're forcing your ignorance onto the pain which, of course, just makes it worse.

So you've got to learn how to experiment. How do changes in the breathing change the pain? How do changes in your concept of the pain change the pain? How about changes in your concept of how the mind relates to the body: Is the mind in the body? Is the body in the mind? Where in the body is the mind? These may seem like strange questions, but you begin to realize that the mind on an unarticulated level actually does think in those terms. And a lot of our basic assumptions of where the center of our awareness is, where the pain is in relation to that center, and how it affects that center: These play an important role in how we experience the pain and how we make ourselves suffer unnecessarily from it. So you have to experiment and test things.

