

The Arrow in the Heart

August 17, 2012

A Thai poet, Sunthorn Phu, once wrote an adventure tale as a favor to a young princess. The princess liked the tale so much that she asked for more installments. Originally Sunthorn Phu had planned to end the poem after a couple of adventures, but she wasn't willing to have it end. She kept asking for more. And so the tale went on and on and on. Instead of having a nice narrative arc, it started to sprawl. And if I remember correctly, the only reason it ended was because the princess died.

When you read the poem, it's not like a regular story. It's more like life: just one thing after another. It keeps on going and going and going. If the princess hadn't died so soon, it probably would have *kept* on going.

That's the way life is. It doesn't have a nice arc. It doesn't have a nice, series of closures. The human mind just keeps going on as long as there's craving and clinging. Even when this body ends, craving and clinging can create a bridge to a new body and a new life. When major events happen in our life, we often look for closure, but the world just doesn't have any real closure to offer. The only place we can find closure is inside.

If someone passes away, we do want to honor that person. At the very least, make a statement of the goodness that that person had, because we don't want to see it disappear. We don't want to have it go unstated. The memory of other people's goodness helps to nourish more goodness in the world, so we want that goodness to be remembered. And that's an honorable thing. But we have to realize that things don't stop there. Our lives have to go on. The other person's life is going on someplace else. We have no idea where.

This is why the Buddha said that there is no closure until you can find a way to become, as in the sutta we just chanted now, "through lack of clinging, released." The clinging and craving are what keep us going. Only through the practice can we gain release and find refuge. Only in the Dhamma can all boats can find harbor, and all hearts find rest.

Otherwise there's that impetus in the mind and impetus in the heart that just keeps going, looking for: What's next? What's next? And we plow our way through one life, and then it's not enough. We kept on going for another one to plow through, and then for another one and another one. As the Buddha said, it's very hard to meet someone who hasn't been your mother or your father, your sister or your brother, your son, or your daughter in the course of all these many, many lives. Our relationships have been shuffled around so much that it's overwhelming.

Note that the Buddha never used that reflection as a reason for arguing that we should love everybody because they'd been our mother at some point. He used it more as a reflection to give rise to a sense of terror—*samvega*. Craving just keeps going on like this, to who knows where. And there's so much of it, it's terrifying. But along with *samvega*, this reflection can also give rise to a desire for release.

This is why we come to the practice, realizing that this is the only place where we're going to find any refuge. We talk about taking the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha as our refuge. We do that in the sense of taking the life of the Buddha, the life of the members of the noble Sangha, as our example. We take the Dhamma as our guidance, so we can give rise to the qualities in the Buddha's heart, in the hearts of the noble Sangha, within *our* heart, within our own lives. Those qualities will provide our genuine refuge.

So drop all your other thoughts. Come to find rest right here: the breath coming in, the breath going out. Even though there's still clinging and craving in the process of staying with the breath, it's the kind of clinging and craving that will lead you out. As we create a sense of concentration, a sense of being settled and established here, it's called a state of becoming. As that word *becoming* indicates, it doesn't stop. It's a process; it keeps going. But this kind of becoming is quiet enough so that you can look into your mind and see: Where is that arrow that keeps us from settling down?

There's a really poignant passage in the Canon where the Buddha said that prior to his awakening he looked at life and he saw it as a puddle of water. The water was drying up, drying up, and it was filled with fish fighting one another for that last little gulp of the water. All he could feel was *samvega*. Then he asked himself, "Where is the source of

this problem?” And it wasn’t that we should have more water. The problem came because there was an arrow in the heart, the arrow that keeps pointing forward, pointing forward, for further becoming, and stabbing us at the same time. That’s what we’ve got to pull out. And as he said, that’s what he pulled out with his awakening.

So what’s the first thing you’ve got to do when you’ve been wounded by an arrow and you want to pull it out? You have to relax around the arrow. The more you fight and tense up around it, the more damage it does. The more it pains you. This is why we get the mind into a state of concentration. It’s like relaxing around an arrow so as to minimize the pain in the mind and make it easier for us to pull it out.

Even though concentration is not the ultimate ease and it’s not the ultimate happiness, still it gives us a period of rest and the ability to gather our strength to deal with all the things that keep coming at us.

So take rest right here. Learn to cultivate a sense of well-being even around this arrow that’s stabbing your heart: the arrow of clinging, craving, and all the specific clingings and cravings we have right now. Try not to shoot yourself with extra arrows. Learn how to relax around that arrow that’s there so that you can learn how to recognize it for what it is. When you recognize it, then it’s a lot easier to pull it out and not grab it as your own, not grab it as an essential feature in your heart.

Learn to find what other potential there is for ease in the moment, respite in the moment, and cultivate that. That’s our duty with regard to the path. It’s not the case that, when concentration comes, you just watch it come and watch it go and say, “Oh, yes, we’ve learned something about impermanence or inconstancy.” Your duty with regard to concentration is to develop it. You should make it strong enough to be your refuge. You cultivate it: You try to make it come and to keep it from going.

To make it come, you find where your potential for stillness is—in the body, in the mind. Then you apply appropriate attention to cultivate or appreciate that potential and make the most of it. Even though it isn’t your ultimate refuge, it is your resting spot along the way. You can rest, gain nourishment, renew your strength, so that you can continue in the right direction. Otherwise, life is just a wandering on: lost in the forest.

Wounded and lost in the forest. Whereas if you're on the path, there's a way out and the arrow can be removed.