

# *The Buddha's Arrows*

*about the Buddha, Wittgenstein and Matisse*

We only have limited control in life. Even in the most modern, rich and well organized societies, life keeps surprising us. We don't mind if those are pleasant surprises. It is easy to accept such events. We can enjoy them, they produce happy feelings that we gladly experience, even welcome and pursue, and try to repeat.

Life is neutral, our reactions are personal

But life is neutral, that is to say: even events that we call pleasant, are in essence "only events". We strive to experience them and call them pleasant, but that is not an innate property of the event. It is a label, our interpretation of the event. "What a beautiful sunshine", "I took a pleasant stroll in the park", "That is great music": these are (positive) labels that we stick on something that in itself is neutral. The sun is a star that shines for billions of years, walking is a physical exercise and music is a series of soundwaves. No more, no less.

Our labels are therefore subjective, conditioned and time bound: another time we might not enjoy the sunshine (for instance at the end of a heatwave that caused devastating forest fires), don't like the walk (we got lost and sprained our ankle) or curse the music (the neighbor played loud and dreadful music on his ghetto blaster – though he himself enjoyed it very much). The same principle applies to feelings that we might have – often as a result of the events that happen. More so: the feelings are what gets to us the most, positively or negatively. What label we stick on an event, is often determined by the feeling that the event caused us to have. A positive feeling causes a positive label, a negative feeling makes us dismiss the event. This rejection then leads to more negative feelings, etc.

The Buddha's two arrows

That means we can distinguish at least two instances when something happens to us: the event itself and our emotional reaction to it. (And in addition there are our reactions to that reaction, the reactions of others etc. that will complete the process). Particularly if they are uncomfortable feelings, we should be closely aware of this. In this respect, from Buddhism we know the expression: the first and second arrow that hit us.



In life we will be confronted with all kinds of events. One could even say that this is the very meaning of life, to experience. We could see such an event as an arrow that hits us. We can't always control that first arrow. But the arrow in itself is neutral. Even if someone tries to hurt us deliberately, this is still a neutral fact. The malice only exists in the intention of the other, we don't have to absorb it as well. But to keep it simple, let's take an event that really is neutral: we ride our bicycle and get a puncture. That is the first arrow that hits us. If we merely consider this neutrally, it means that we will be late for our appointment, we might get dirty hands trying to fix the puncture or we lose money when we have the puncture repaired professionally. We need not take all this personally. It

could have happened to anyone. The tire did not blow in order to bother us. If we label the event in this way, we stay in the now. We don't fabricate stories, don't place the event in time, we accept what happened as it happened (it is here anyway) and we take action. That is being mindful (aware).

Now what about the second arrow? If we don't take care of our feelings and reactions mindfully, the event might "happen" to us again: not only we are delayed, we get annoyed. Not only the puncture costs us money, we pity ourselves for not being able to spend that money on the present we planned to buy ourselves for some time. Not only our hands get dirty, we also damage our beautiful expensive shoes. Now the event suddenly isn't neutral anymore, it gets personal: it triggers all kinds of negative emotions and has a much larger impact on our wellbeing. Before we know it, we not only have a puncture, we have "a terrible day". If we continually react in this way to neutral events in our life, we might suddenly have "a horrible holiday", "a lousy job" or even "a rotten life". Coming from an attitude like that, we will find it much more difficult if not impossible to get in the right track again.



Although we can't always duck the first arrow (that's life), we can try to avoid the second one from hitting us. For the second hit we have caused ourselves by our thoughts about the event: rejection, resistance. By being aware and with self-reflection, both to obtain with mindfulness training, we can learn to notice and control this inner process better.

If we are mindful, we even get a second chance

Of course we are only human and we may be overcome by feelings before we know it. Even that is life. It would be abnormal not to experience feelings when major events happen. Perhaps a mindfulness training will get us through the punctured tire unscathed, but major events in life like birth, death, disease, divorce etc. will not be always overcome with merely a meditative attitude. These kinds of arrows will also hit us, sooner or later. It will not always be possible to prevent the second arrow from hitting us. We will be sad, angry, afraid, even have self-pity, be depressed etc.

Miraculously so: acceptance will also be a great recipe for this! If we can accept the emotion, enlightenment will follow. We just have to accept the pain, the loneliness, the sorrow etc. for what it is. This is what life presents us right now. We don't reject our emotional reaction but we accept it. Even embrace it. This also belongs to life. But we stay alert and watch ourselves and our reactions. That creates some space around the emotion. We notice how, why and that we are sad or have pain. And we take it for what it is: a normal and appropriate human reaction to a major life-event. We accept this reaction. This is the form that life wants to take now. But we don't make it larger. We stay aware. We do not fabricate stories around the event and the feelings we have. We don't create or allow thoughts that have nothing to do with the present situation. For instance thoughts like: "this will never pass", "I will never find a partner again", "this is unbearable and it will only get worse", "what if the medication doesn't work anymore" etc. We will notice if those thoughts come up, and with meditation we will be able to let them be, we will simply not pursue them and see them drift away again – and again, and again if necessary.

Watch out for the third arrow!

So, we should embrace our feelings of discontent. But we should not get overboard with this. Acceptance is good, but we should not start to cherish, exploit or stall our feelings. For instance, to



attract attention with “our story” is a well-known trap. The situation, although uncomfortable, presents us with a new identity and this new identity will manipulate us. We show it to anyone who will listen (or can’t escape us). We become “the patient”, “the widow/widower”, “the poor schlep”, “the underdog” etc. If we keep complaining about our misfortune long time after it actually happened to us, this is a clear sign of such a process of identification taking place. In fact, we are creating a kind of “third arrow”. We get attached to our own sorrows and don’t want to part

from them, even if we say we do. This process of identification has occurred with many people. How often don’t we hear someone complaining in conversation? First about the weather (too cold, too hot, too dry, too humid), then a mutual exchange of diseases follows, holiday-disasters, conflicts at work or at home, the current world situation etc.

Complaining like this, we are projecting our own unhappy identities to everything and everyone that surrounds us. If we take care of our second arrow(s) more wisely, this identification needs not happen and we will suffer shorter and less. Then we can start to talk about our ideas, our inspirations and the things and people we care about and become much better company to those we know and love, not to mention to ourselves.

How to embrace and let go

So we have to accept our pain, sorrow, our negative emotions, we should not resist them. At first glance, this feels contra-intuitive: we feel badly and we should embrace that feeling even? We would rather get away from it, get rid of it, let it go. We prefer a quick fix. But feelings don’t want to be put



aside that easily. They want to stick for a while. Big feelings have a sort of momentum: they keep turning around in our heads, in waves, or slowly declining. The only thing that we can do right then, is accept them. Patiently and compassionately. We should observe the feeling with attention, preferably without getting caught in it too much. We will not succeed in this equally well every day. But if we acknowledge the feeling without judgement (and without feeding it,

making it into an identity), we can create some space, some distance between us and the feeling. We will find out that there is always more space in us than pain, sorrow or anger. Like the Universe holds more space than matter and energy.

In that way, we will be able to let it go after all. Letting go is different from getting rid of it. It is: creating space between you and the feeling. In your own universe. At the same time, we allow the feeling to be there too. We allow it to slowly loose its momentum, without being overwhelmed by it totally. We allow the feeling, make space for it and try to sit it out.

That doesn’t mean that we should be passive and just let the storm go by. Every feeling, no matter how strong, is a wave and it comes and goes. As soon as possible, when the wave is at its low, we try to get focus on new impulses and more easy, “good” experiences and feelings. That will slowly balance our situation. Perhaps these “good” experiences are a result of the bad ones. We lose our job, but start something else that fulfills us much more than our old job. Our declining health limits our possibilities,

but it also invites us to try other ways of self-development. As long as we resist the situation, we will reject the invitation or go about it halfheartedly, but from acceptance we will be able to start this inquiry with an open mind.

#### Wittgenstein and Matisse

The concert pianist Paul Wittgenstein (brother of the famous philosopher Ludwig) lost his right arm in the first world war. At first he was feeling very depressed of course, but later he started to rework existing piano compositions for left hand playing. Also, he commissioned other composers (like Ravel and Prokofjev) to compose piano concerts for the left hand only. In this way, he could pursue his career and he initiated a large volume of such piano compositions to play for pianists like him.

Due to a bad surgery the artist Matisse had to spend the last part of his life in a wheelchair. Being unable to paint standing up, he started to work with painted strokes of paper that he cut in different forms and turned them into big collages. He referred to this last 14 years of his life as “Une seconde vie” (A second life), a burst of creativity that produced his “gouaches découpés”, belonging to the most well-known products of his work.

There are many stories like these, some of them we know from our own friends. Often these “explorations” broaden our horizon, as well as give a deeper meaning to our existence. Hardship and adversity will stimulate our creativity and bring us closer to ourselves and our loved ones.

(Even) considered in this light, all events are neutral: life is both so complex and surprising, that we can never say a priori whether an event is good or bad. Often our own judgement and assessment is the most defining aspect of our experiences. The more we are aware of that, the better we are up to the Buddha’s Arrows.

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