

# The Arrows of Buddhism

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So thank you all for coming today and meditating together. I don't take it lightly that people come together in this way. And it sets the context for us to have meditated this during this time for this talk, both for you to listen to it and also for me to offer this talk. And there's much more going on here than the talk. There's the context and the subtleness and the receptivity. And also, hopefully, that somehow my having meditated for these 35 minutes before, that somehow I'm connected to the practice in a way that I wouldn't if I'd been running around, you know, taking care of, I don't know, all kinds of things in a hurry and sitting down and giving a talk.

Right. So I'd like to first maybe dedicate the talk to Joanna Macy. Joanna Macy died a week ago or so, and she was one of the great elders for our Buddhist community. I'm not sure exactly if she considered herself Buddhist, but she was deeply involved in Buddhism. She wrote a dissertation on Buddhism, on using kind of systems theory, kind of the idea of ecosystems, how they all, it's not direct cause and effect, but it's how the whole systems work together in unison. And took, and used that to understand Buddhist teachings.

And had a conversation between this philosophy of systems theory and Buddhism. It was a profound dissertation and became a book. And that's how I first learned about her. And then over time she kind of became a bigger and bigger part of our kind of elder in our community. And she, one of the big things she did that I think brought her international prominence was she was invited to go to Russia after the Chernobyl explosion to tend to the trauma, tend to the despair that people there experience from being living in the zones that was poisoned with the radiation of the explosion.

And some people had to leave their homes where they lived for generations and couldn't return because there was so much radiation. And she went there and did kind of empowerment work for them. Despair and empowerment, where she had them really look at their

despair, look at their anger that they experienced from their disruption. They lost so much. And some people resisted it. They'd never done this before. They thought they were going to... somehow be made feel better, and she made them feel worse.

But it was only because it was by facing the despair that something different can happen. And something did for some of them. They broke their hearts open, and a whole new vision about how to live was born after they resisted this kind of despair work. And out of that work, when one village she worked with came a dance called the Elm Dance. And that was together with a group of 30-some people this last week, kind of in the woods, living in the woods for a week. And we danced the Elm Dance. We were taught to dance that came out of that village. And Joanna Macy's work still does. So that was kind of cool.

So, and she came to a retreat. She said she's had a retreat with me at Spirit Rock, a month-long retreat, and I was so inspired with her as a practitioner. And so one of the things that people who knew her well said this last few days when we were talking about Joanna Macy... was no matter how terrible the world got, and in some ways it's progressively gotten worse, or couldn't have been worse than what it was, but it just may be a different shape now or something. Apparently she would, when people would go see her at her home, she would say, oh, it's so exciting to be alive now. What? Exciting in this kind of time and age when things are so terrible?

And as I understood it, it's exciting because it gives life purpose. And I mean, when things are falling apart, then there's purpose. And for her, the purpose was to create this new turning, she called it, this new society, a new civilization. In Buddhism, there's an idea that there were three big turnings in Buddhism, three big kind of tectonic shifts of Buddhism in the history of Buddhism. And she says, we're living now through the fourth turning. So we get to be part of it.

And then she had apparently this idea that in the Buddhism, there's this idea that there's all these, there's a bodhisattvas. Bodhisattva is someone who is dedicated their life to practice and to awaken and liberate all beings. And so she had this idea that right now, she's all excited, right now, there are all these beings waiting to be born. Because in Buddhism, you kind of choose your birth, where you get born, and at time and everything. There's all these beings up there, whatever they are, waiting to be born, lining up, kind of in line, crowded, to come down here and be a bodhisattva in this age, in this time. To, you know, things are falling apart, then, oh, oh, okay. You know, and so I love this idea that no matter how bad it gets, no matter what the despair, we can always take from it a sense of purpose, compassionate purpose to make the world better, to do what we can.

And that's what Joanna Macy's life was based on. And she supported many thousands and thousands of people to go out into the world to make this world a better place. So one of our great elders died. She was 96, and her work continues in the lives of the people she touched. So with that as a dedication for the talk, I want to start by saying that if you want to have grape juice, don't press gravel. You won't get grape juice.

If you want grape juice, you have to press grapes. And then you have some chance for grape juice. So if you go about doing spirituality, Buddhist practice, trying to press, trying to work, trying to change the wrong thing, then you're not going to get the wonderful nectar and lexer of the Dharma to fill you and nourish you and support you in this world. So you have to know how to recognize where the practice center is. And that takes sometimes a long time in practice. People can practice for a long time. They can get a lot of benefit from it. But they haven't really discovered the grape yet. You know, where are the practice, the source of the practice that has the greatest benefit.

And then many of you know the metaphor of the two arrows. And probably many of you have even told friends about it and stuff. So I want to develop a little bit more. So the metaphor that the Buddha gave of the two arrows is that if an archer shoots you with an arrow, that certainly hurts at a minimum. But if you get struck by a second arrow, that hurts even more. It causes more injury. And then the Buddha said that the first arrow is inevitable, in one way or the other, through this human life that we have. Not that it's another person that shoots us, but rather we get sick or we get old. We die. All kinds of things happen.

Our car has a flat tire. All kinds of things will happen, some pretty simple and mundane, some more serious area. The weather changes and... and there's flooding. Maybe that's the first arrow. And then the second arrow is what we contribute to it. We add suffering on top of suffering. We actually make the situation worse by how we react to it, respond to it, deal with it. And so if we respond with hostility, then we're kind of shooting an arrow at someone else. The Buddha talked about verbal daggers that people throw at each other.

But not only that, if you respond with hostility, you're actually harming yourself. You're shooting that second arrow into yourself. And so we want to be very careful about that second arrow. And not assume that, or not kind of be blind to the fact that we're harming ourselves through our behavior, that we reduce second arrows. And sometimes it's obvious because maybe the hostility is directed to oneself. And then it has this kind of terrible thing where both the hostility is an arrow, but the fact that we have the hostility, it's like a third arrow. I don't know which is first or second, third, second or third, but it's like kind of compounded. And so can we be careful how we respond to anything? And not add suffering atop of suffer-

ing, not make the situation worse.

And I see that in the, you know, with so many horrible things going on in the world that we want to change and see different and somehow be agents of change. It's bad enough what's happening in the world for some of us. We kind of contribute to making it worse. If we get caught up in our anger and our despair and our... fear. It's almost like there's people who are trying to get you to be afraid, trying to get you to be angry. And then we participate in that by being angry at them, or afraid of them. And then, which there we are, contributing more arrows, second arrows to ourselves and maybe to the world.

So there's another story of arrows where the Buddha talks about someone who is struck not just by an arrow, but pierced by a poisonous arrow. And so a wonderfully skilled doctor comes along and offers to pull the arrow out. And the person says, well, no, wait. Before you pull it out, I need to know who shot it, what clan they came from, their name, how old they are. I need to know what kind of wood the arrow was made from. And I need to know exactly what poison they used. Go find those things out first, before you take the arrow out.

So I think the idea behind this story is that by time you find out all the information about in the background for this arrow hitting you, you're dead. That some things you want to just take out, let the doctor do the work. Maybe it'll save your life. But there's something else, and the Buddha doesn't talk about this, but I'd like to add this. That how the doctor takes it out might make a difference. If you are, you know, completely anxious, upset, yelling, take it out, do it now, and you're, maybe the arrows in your arm, and you're waving your arm, and I'll take it out now. You know, the doctor will cause you a lot of damage because you're moving so much. You have to be calm. You have to slow down, hold your arms still. Okay.

But also the doctor should be that way. Doctor will do better work if the doctor is calm, centered, focused on the work, and not trying to take care of your distress and anger and all kinds of things at the same time. And so it might be that you would say to the doctor, Thank you. Yes, please take it out. But let's together take three breaths first. So that I can be a little bit calmer, so you can be calmer, and so you can know that I'm here ready for you and not flail around or make it harder for you. And then the doctor maybe can do better work. How we are makes a huge difference.

Now I want to apply this directly to meditation. When we sit down to meditate, I've certainly done second arrows, third arrows, lots of arrows. Because I don't like what I see, what goes on. I don't want it to be this way. I want it to be different. And I'm upset because I can't make it different. And it's not what it's supposed to be. And there's a whole... I've done this for 50 years, so I've had my share of doing things like this in meditation. And shooting

second arrows, making it harder. I've also tried to, in my meditation, to get that grape juice by squeezing the wrong thing, by pushing against the wrong thing, not understanding where the practice center should be.

So from all these years of experience, I'll describe to you what I often do when I first sit down to meditate. I first sit down, And I try not to do anything else, but check in with myself. Check in with what's actually happening here and now. I'm not rushing ahead to get concentrated. I'm not trying to change anything. I'm allowing myself to be exactly the way I am. And then trying to discover what is here? How do I feel? What are the sensations in my body? What are the emotions that are here? Where's the energy? What's activated in me?

And it's fascinating to kind of do this tour of my inner life just to check it out, see what parts, where the sensations are that are more activated. Sometimes it might be the belly, sometimes the chest, sometimes the face, sometimes the arms and hands. There's different... and it's always fascinating to look at what's going on in the mind. Not just what I'm thinking about, which that's sometimes interesting to notice, and say, wow, I didn't know that. I was so concerned about that. But the sensations of thinking, the pressure of thinking, the tension associated with thinking that might be there. And the spirit of it is to allow everything to be the way it is. No second arrows. Just let it, let's discover it. Let's make room for everything to be there.

And so that kind of way of being mindful is often taught as a non-reactive mindfulness. We're not trying to change anything. Sometimes it's described as just a receptive mindfulness. We're not actively involved in trying to do something. We're just staying receptive and open, just allowing things to come. And that's all very nice. Something settles, something, it's nice to check in with myself. Generally something settles, something opens and all that. In some way. But then comes the magic, or the more significant time.

And that is, I've been checking, I've been being aware of myself, seeing what goes on. And at some point, I turn around and say, look at myself and say, how am I being aware? How am I aware of over-eager? Am I aware from tension? Am I trying too hard and even just being mindful like this? Is there a place of being aware that has no tension in it? Is there a place of being aware where the tension of self, me, myself and mine, what I want, what I'm afraid of, is not part of being aware? Is there a different source for the mindfulness practice within?

And I can't do this too quickly. I have to wait until things are settled and wait until I've kind of become aware and familiar with what's here. And what I've learned is that there's a steeper source within for awareness that is kind of impersonal. I can't quite identify it with that place inside that I associate with me, myself and mine. That place where, because that's a little

bit, tends to be a place where there's tension, there's pressure. And it doesn't have to be, but I think for many of us, if we really are sensitive and careful, we see that the whole kind of kind of center of me that we're operating under, that often is 90% kind of swirling around with thoughts that are about me, myself, and mine, that there's either some subtle or some strong tension associated with that, pressure associated with that. And that's the grape press pushing gravel. It doesn't work. You don't get grape juice. By pushing the self-thing, the self-tension, the self-pressure, the self-kind of agitation, where that often if you're really sensitive, you might even feel there has a locus, a place inside or an emotion. And if we're operating from that place, pushing against that place, pushing with that place, we don't get the dharma juice.

And so is there a different location within? Is there a different source within it? That is not the source of me, myself and mine. I'm the hero, I'm the doer, I'm the competent one, I'm the, you know, I'm the one who's supposed to do better, I'm the failing one, I'm the one who can't do this. That whole complex of self and self-preoccupation that is so many second arrows, is there a different source? And some of you might remember the talk I gave yesterday, last week about sources. Yeah. That we have these different operating systems within. And one of the operating, Dharma operating system that the Buddha points to is this profound source within. And, you know, that he uses the ancient word for womb for the source of this other place that come from.

And so at some point as I'm sitting then, and I've done my kind of checking out, discovering what's here, allowing what's here to be here, Then I'll ask myself, you know, where's that more profound source from which awareness arises, knowing arises, practice arises? That I'm not exactly the doer of the practice, but I certainly have an important role. And at some point in the practice, the role is to allow for this deeper source to emerge, to allow awareness to allow... knowing to allow joy, to allow care, compassion, to flow from a place inside that I can't identify as in that same usual place of me, myself, and mine. It's not someone else's. You know, it's part of this psychophysical system here, this ecosystem here that I'm somehow a caretaker for. But to then feel, is there a place that allows and holds, creates a context, creates an opening, creates an atmosphere? That allows for something deeper inside that is not my acquisitiveness, it's not my despair, it's not my reactivity, but actually some deeper kind of flow, a source of wisdom, of care, of understanding, of intelligence, that is somehow coming from deep air inside.

And for me, it's often arising out of my belly. And I don't know if that's because it's universal, that there's something, there's intelligence in the belly, or I spend 50 years hanging out in

my belly. Starting with Zen practice. Zen has this idea of the hara. So I was trying to kind of keep myself rooted here in this lower hara, about two inches below the belly button and about an inch in. And just didn't breathe from there. And then when I went to Burma, the breath meditation kind of we were taught there, again, was about the belly. So I'm home. Through all these years of Zen practice, I felt, oh, great, I love it, that the Burmese told me to stay there too. So, I don't know if that's why, you know, this place where the womb is for some people, that's where, you know, I feel it. But it shifts sometimes. Sometimes it's in the heart. And some people might feel much more the source is their heart. That's their home. That's the kind of place. There's no reason why it can't be different places at different times. And there are times when I kind of feel like there's this deeper source, that's the wellspring of the practice, the wellsprings of awareness, wellsprings of mindfulness, it doesn't have any location at all. And that's pretty cool. If someone says, where is it? I probably would just go like this with my arms, as if it's everywhere, but everywhere or nowhere or something.

So this is, so... If we're pressing against the wrong place, if we're trying to practice with the wrong state of mind, if the practice we learn, we're very good and we learn the so-called technique of mindfulness, but the way we're doing it is from this acquisitive place, this selfish place, this self-concerned place, this aversive place, this tense place, reactive place inside. Then it might have some benefit. It's not like wrong to do it necessarily, but you're not really going to get the Dharma juice flowing. The Dharma juice really flows when we're opening up. And the sense of practice is we're allowing it to surface, allowing it to come and fill us, allowing it to come and emerge. From a deeper place. And where is that deeper source inside of you? What's the source of wisdom? What's the source of gratitude? What's the source of love in you? What's the source of peace? What's the source of kindness and friendliness? Have you ever thought of this? And is there a source that is, it may or may not be connected to thinking? But here too, the Buddha distinguished, you don't want to dismiss thinking, but the Buddha made a distinction between the thinking from the reactive mind and the thinking from this deep, profound place, profound contemplation. And so it's not about getting rid of anything, but about coming from a different attitude, a different place, a different source within us for how we can operate and how we can live.

So... Be careful you're not pressing gravel. Find where the Dharma juice can flow. And now the nectar, the ambrosia. One of the wonderful coincidences, or maybe not coincidence, of the Dharma practice, the language is that the ancient Sanskrit word for ambrosia also means deathless. That which doesn't die, that which is without death. Because we're talking about a very different place inside that doesn't really fit the usual logic for how we want to put our

life together. So something that, what is it that has no death within us without making it a thing? What's this source? So those are my thoughts for today. And... And partly because we have, some of you will come to the potluck and partly because these talks are not meant to just be abstract ideas. They're meant a little bit for each of us to kind of realize this.

I'm Debbie. When harvesting grapes, it's a seasonal process. Event. And I was thinking, is this, can we extend the metaphor? Yes. And also the tools. The ones that came up for me were the banquets, the unborn. Is that like the deathless? Yes. The unborn is that similar to the deathless, and also *jhānas*, if those... *Jhāna*. *Jhāna* practice? Yes. Yeah, yeah, *jhāna* practice, a metaphor, one of the metaphors is a deep wellspring bubbling up from inside. Thank you. Great to do.

Hi, Gil. Thanks for the session today. The metaphor or analogy you mentioned about going to a doctor to take the arrow out. So I was thinking more like most people, not most, like at least some people that I've met usually try to be a doctor. I don't need a doctor. Yeah. So like what's, because you know they think they know more than a doctor, you know, or some person, psychologists or whatever. I don't know if you can elaborate on like how not to be a doctor. Well, I'd rather not answer the question first as you asked it. Okay. I don't know about fixing people. But just feel sorry for them. Yeah. They sound like empathy. And so the reasons feel sorry for them, and it's not have compassion for them, is for two reasons. It could be that they care. And so to appreciate their care, that's partly where it's coming from. The other is that it's also then coming from the wrong place. It's coming from probably some tension inside of them. Maybe their own discomfort, they want to make it go away. Their own discomfort sometimes. Sometimes they feel like responsible and they have the sense of responsibility. That's the inner tension they're living with. Sometimes it's egotistical. And that's the inner tension they're living with. And so, you know, to give them the benefit of the doubt that there's probably some care, they're making a connection, and at the same time, you know, kind of care for them, and they're operating from some level of tension or suffering themselves. And so how can you care for that suffering they have? And that's a bit of Aikido, not changing, not changing, not changing. You know, mostly it's a keto of caring for them so that something in them can relax. Yeah, definitely.

One thing I kept like, it's reoccurring to me is like the concept of surrendering when you're in the right place, you know, like when you're with the doctors, you surrender, like know that, just trust that they have enough wisdom to treat you. Maybe, sometimes trusting, yes, but when someone's doing this inappropriately, being, you know, then maybe there's a wonderful magic of kind of doing the opposite what you want to do. So you might just lean for-



ward and say, thank you. Thank you. Oh, I see that you care for me. It's nice to be... That's medicine. Just that. It's good. Thank you. And that might disarm them. Because you're not responding to what they told you. You're responding to the way they did it. And that creates a connection. Maybe they just drop the whole idea of you telling you you should take more ibuprofen. Yes. Yes.

Our group, I think, managed to connect two parts of your talk that I found very enjoyable. One was I was struck by the description of the world having lots of bad things happening, but also that being in some sense exciting. And I was distracted, actually, by the notion that I know a lot of people feel like there's a lot of bad things in the world, but they have no meaning. And then in some sense that's inconsistent, that if there's lots of bad things in the world, then you might have a purpose in addressing those. One of the gentlemen in our group mentioned that in some sense might be because you're trying to press the whole vineyard rather than the grape. Yes, exactly. I think this is a huge problem for many of us, is that this huge problem. Problem is exists and we think we have to solve the whole thing and press the whole, not just the vineyard, but everyone's vineyard. And our arms aren't big enough for that. So yeah, I think that's a, so, but sometimes meaning and purpose can come from starts, what is our gift? What is our contribution that we can make? And maybe it's not directly at Washington, D.C. or in Gaza or Ukraine, but maybe by caring for the neighbor kid, you're preventing actually the next big war, because who knows what the kid who's not supported growing up might have dysfunctional life later. But there's a kid who gets even one person who loves them and respects them, it might settle them in a way that, who knows, you might be preventing a war in 30 years. So there's always meaning to be had in doing what we can to make this world a better place, even if you can't take care of the whole vineyard. Well, thank you.