



Why Shoot Yourself in the Foot?

Let's say you are relatively new to zen practice. During sitting, your ability to maintain awareness is increasing; with helpful techniques and assists, you more often meet the challenge of observing your mind, rather than wandering aimlessly in thought; and it's gradually growing easier to reside in the flow of sensory experience. For the most part, you are enjoying practice.

And yet, despite your best intentions, you find that most of the day you operate on automatic pilot. Hours go by when it doesn't occur to you to be aware—to feel your feet on the ground or notice when you're hooked by reactive thinking. And really, this isn't surprising, given that you've accepted your ideas about who you are and how life should be for longer than you can remember, and you live out of them so readily they fit you like a second skin. Over and over, awareness is slow to kick in: before you know it, you're grumbling about housework, or you've eaten a half bag of chips all in one go.

2025 Sesshin Dates

June 18-22, 2025

September 18-21, 2025

December 27-31, 2025

<https://www.zencentersandiego.org/schedule/sesshin.php>

Wednesday Programming for June

<https://www.zencentersandiego.org/>

The Sexual Misconduct
Complaint Procedure and Code
of Ethical Conduct for

Because we slip easily into habitual patterns of thought and behavior, we need training—techniques and aids that can help us wake up. Since practice asks us to live with awareness—to live *as* awareness—we must recognize the power of sleep, the power of habit, that resists this. Without reminders, we forget to remember. We forget reminders, too, but they help!

Let's look at a valuable lesson from the Buddha. This is the parable of the first and second arrows, a parable that helps us distinguish between pain in life and the suffering we add that makes pain worse. It's a teaching that helps us notice when we begin to move from pain into suffering. And that is key, because if we can catch that shift as it's happening, it's possible to put the suffering down—as the poet Rainer Maria Rilke said, to “decline the fight”—and to choose instead to open to the present moment.

In his parable, the Buddha described someone being shot by an arrow. This first arrow is a metaphor for the pain that is inevitably experienced in being alive: the child learning to ride a bicycle falls and scrapes a knee; the young girl reaching puberty experiences cramps for the first time; a driver rear-ends you, causing whiplash; arthritis makes it painful to remove lids from jars; you lose a loved one, and the heartache is deep and genuine. Pain shows up in all sorts of ways.

So, the first arrow is part of life. We can be careful, but we are not exempt.

Buddha then spoke of a second arrow—an arrow that flies into the very same spot as the first one. And this arrow he warned his students about, because this is the arrow of suffering that we add to discomfort, by objecting to our lot, by running from pain, by amplifying our difficulties with stress and bodily tension. If I break an arm and can't do the things I love to do, stewing about it won't help the arm heal faster—but it *will* make my recovery miserable.

Sometimes we see a reaction brewing before a thought has time to form, and practice can start even

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then. But often, the first reflexive reaction arises so fast, it's there instantly. That's okay: it signals the need for attention, and by choosing not to latch onto the reaction, we allow the shift into awareness. If we miss that opportunity, then we're likely off to the races.

Meet Jim, a good-natured, intelligent, dedicated practitioner who has been denied a promotion he really wanted. In the moment he hears that news, his practice goes out the window: *How come he got that job and not me? Don't they know how much I've done this for this company? He swans in here, he's here three months, and now he's going to be my boss! I don't even want to be around him.* Jim skips right over the pain of disappointment, and instead, straight as an arrow, plunges into anger and grievance.

Here's another one:

"Aaah! I've burned the potatoes! I walked away—I know I can't do that. I'm so stupid." Okay, there are burned potatoes. All the rest is the second arrow. Sure, you messed up, but it's not a major incident, not an international crisis.

Learning to discern between the two arrows and to recognize each of them quickly is very helpful in practice, particularly when there's potential for emotional upset. If things have not progressed, it may be simple to decline the upset before it gains traction. And if there's already energy there, and you've worked up a head of steam, then the practice is to detangle the mess.

The second arrow is the insult added to the injury of the initial pain, the initial experience that we don't like. *Why does it have to be this way? Life isn't supposed to be like this. People are not supposed to treat me that way.*

We are so good at shooting ourselves with this second arrow that we do it even when there's no first arrow! Let's say we've been on a date or we've spoken up in a meeting at work or an old friend has

called us out of the blue, and afterwards, the mind is unsettled and there's tension in the body—we notice an uncomfortable flutter of anxiety in the throat or belly, and thinking goes into overdrive: *How did that go? Was it okay, what I said? What about that one comment? Could she have taken it the wrong way? Maybe I should call and say something. That could seem weird, though.* We feel exposed, and we want to feel safe again.

Practice can spare us the distress of the second arrow—and it can also spare others that distress, because we shoot second arrows into others, too.

If you are looking for a way to “remember” to be aware in the coming weeks, why not make it a practice to notice those moments in the day when your bow is drawn and the urge to shoot a second arrow is strong, moments when you really don't want to be present and would rather attack, exaggerate, hide or take offence? Then the practice is to climb down from the drama and open to the fullness of life just as it is, resistance and all.

—Myoku

Training is exercising the mind so it doesn't have so many automatic pathways to jump into.

—Joko Beck