

The Second Arrow

Some pain arrives on its own. Some we hand ourselves. Learning the difference is the practice.

In one of his earliest teachings, the Buddha described a person struck by an arrow — and then struck by a second one. The first arrow is the pain itself. The second is everything we add to it. The first arrow we rarely choose. The second, with practice, we can learn to set down.

— adapted from the Sallatha Sutta (“The Dart”), Samyutta Nikaya 36.6

The First Arrow

The event. The thing that happened.

The injury itself, before anything is said about it. A diagnosis. A loss. A hard conversation. The look on someone’s face. The flush of embarrassment before you can stop it. This arrow lands on its own, and it lands on everyone. It is not a failure, it is not weakness, and it was never a choice.

The Second Arrow

The stories we tell ourselves about it.

Not the event, but what we make it mean. That it will always be this way. That it says something about you. That you should be handling it better. The story builds our emotional relationship to the first arrow — which is why two people struck by the same arrow can live very differently afterward.

How the second arrow tends to sound

“Why does this always happen to me.”

“This is going to ruin everything.”

“I can’t handle feeling like this.”

“I should be over this by now.”

“What is wrong with me.”

“Everyone else seems to manage fine.”

Four moves, when you notice it

- 1 Notice** Name the pain plainly, without explaining it. This is grief. This is fear. This hurts.
- 2 Separate** Set what actually happened apart from the story about what it means.
- 3 Ask** What part of you is firing the second arrow — and what is it afraid would happen if it stopped?
- 4 Return** Come back to the first arrow. Let it be only what it is, for as long as it needs to be.

You will fire the second arrow. Everyone does — it isn’t a character flaw, it’s a nervous system trying to protect you. The practice was never “never.” It’s noticing sooner, and being gentler with yourself when you do. And some pain keeps arriving on its own — that isn’t a second arrow either, and it isn’t yours to think your way out of.

This week, notice: which arrow has been louder?

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Sallatha Sutta (“The Dart” / “The Arrow”), Samyutta Nikaya 36.6. Translations: Nyanaponika Thera, Bhikkhu Bodhi, Thanissaro Bhikkhu.