

hurts so good

It's time to take responsibility for our own pain and suffering, says **Fiona Hoban**

The Buddha once asked: "If a person is struck by an arrow, is that painful?" Yes. The Buddha then asked: "If the person is struck by a second arrow, is that even more painful?" Yes, of course.

He went on to say, that as long as we are alive, we can expect painful experiences – the first arrow. When we condemn, judge, hate, resist or deny the first arrow, it is like being struck by a second arrow. We don't realise that much of the suffering we experience is down to how we relate to the first arrow. Life may well throw the first arrow, but it is us that throws the second (and third and fourth and fifth). If we can deal with the pain of the first arrow, we can avoid the suffering caused by the second arrow.

Think about any person or situation that you find difficult or challenging. Be honest: how much of the

difficulty is made up of your judging, condemning or resisting this person or situation? The saying goes: "If it's already happening, why resist it?" Nobody is saying that your experience of the person or situation is not painful, but the judging, condemning and resisting adds suffering to the pain. Rather than alleviating the pain for ourselves, we complicate matters by adding in a layer of suffering on top.

Of course, it is not only a situation or person that we judge or condemn. We also judge and condemn ourselves for having the emotional reaction in the first place. It's like a double whammy – not only are we angry about something, we feel angry for being angry. Or we are guilty for feeling jealous and so on and so on. We relate quite harshly to our emotions as they arise in us. We say we hate feeling a certain way, or we are ashamed or afraid of feeling a certain way. We even measure our self-worth by the presence or absence of an emotion.

Mindfulness advocates the practice of unconditional acceptance of our emotions. This does not mean expressing the emotion, but letting the emotion move through us without any resistance or encouragement. The emotion is neither condemned nor condoned. It is simply recognised and named. This helps strengthen our capacity to develop a non-reactive awareness of a whole range of emotions. We become familiar and comfortable with emotions and are less inclined to get overly caught up in them or overly identified with them. There's a big difference between saying: "I am so angry" and being aware of a feel-

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ing of anger coming up as a response to a particular person or situation. This simple practice of awareness can help create space between the emotion and ourselves. In this space we can then choose to respond appropriately (deal with the pain of the first arrow) rather than react in emotional turmoil (create suffering by throwing the second arrow).

In that sense, emotional maturity does not come from the absence of emotion or the ability to control emotion – it comes from the ability to recognise and experience emotion without judging or getting caught up in it. It also comes from realising that when an emotion comes up in me (eg, anger), the emotion is mine and mine alone. How many times do we blame others for making us feel a particular way? It's like when the arrow strikes – we go looking for the archer. We demand an apology, seek revenge, do tit for tat, etc. As if that's going to do anything to alleviate the pain. Insight is about dealing with the pain without acting through it. When the pain has been dealt with, then we may well need to have a conversation with the archer, or maybe not. The arrow strikes – my decision to deal with the pain has nothing to do with whoever threw it in the first place.

There's a story told about a monk who suffered with depression. After many years he declared that he had finally achieved enlightenment. People were curious about this and asked him: "And what has happened to your depression?" He told them that he still had the depression, only now it didn't bother him.

Sounds like he was able to tolerate the pain of the first arrow and thereby avoided suffering the second one. Now for us to follow suit. ✪

