

## Vaccine Hesitancy and the Parable of the Poisoned Arrow By Rev. Blayne Higa

Discerning what is wholesome and unwholesome is central to the Buddhist way of life. The Buddha taught that our spiritual path is founded upon having a wholesome view which opens up the doorway to wisdom and compassionate action. According to the Buddha, the best kind of person is one who practices for their own welfare and the welfare of others. Understanding our profound interconnectedness with others is the basis for wholesome view.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has made us realize this truth of interdependence and how our actions matter and impact the lives of others. We cannot and will not be able to control the spread of COVID unless we take the necessary steps to care for each other.

Vaccine hesitancy is a major public health concern as we strive to control the pandemic. While vaccination rates have increased in response to a recent surge in cases caused by the Delta variant, it is estimated that about 90 million Americans who are eligible for the vaccine still have not gotten it. This lingering hesitancy is negatively impacting not only individuals but our collective welfare and our ability to get a handle on the pandemic.

The COVID-19 vaccine has been proven to be safe and effective in preventing serious illness, hospitalization, and death. The Food and Drug Administration recently fully approved one of the vaccines currently in use with others soon to follow. Getting vaccinated is all about caring for self and others.

Fear of the unknown has been one of the various reasons for not getting vaccinated. In the Parable of the Poisoned Arrow, the Buddha skillfully offers guidance for reducing fear of the unknown and for discerning what is most important in life. According to the Buddha,

Suppose a man were pierced by a poisoned arrow, and his relatives and friends got together to call a surgeon to have the arrow removed and the wound treated.

If the wounded man objects, saying, "Wait a minute. Before you pull it out, I want to know who shot this arrow. Was it a man or woman? Was it someone of noble birth or was it a peasant? What was the bow made of? Was it a big bow or a small bow that shot the arrow? Was it made of wood or bamboo? What was the bow string made of? Was it made of fiber or of gut? Was the arrow made of rattan or of reed? What feathers were used? Before you extract the arrow, I want to know all about these things." Then what will happen?

Before all this information can be secured, no doubt, the poison will have time to circulate through his body and the man may die. The first duty is to remove the arrow and prevent the poison from spreading. (Majjhima Nikaya)

The Buddhist path encourages critical thinking and rigorous self-reflection. However, focusing only on intellectual curiosity detracts from resolving the most important concern of relieving our suffering. This parable reminds us to remain focused on the immediate problem of removing the poisoned arrow and treating our spiritual wound.

Similarly, with COVID-19, we need to keep focused on what is truly important—the health and welfare of our loved ones and our community. The vaccine offers hope for our collective future by addressing our most pressing concern—controlling the spread of COVID and saving lives. Let's reflect on the Buddha's profound insight into the nature of suffering and live with a sense of urgency.

The Dharma is the antidote that neutralizes the poisons of greed, anger, and selfishness and helps us to discern fact from fiction, truth from lies, and what is wholesome and unwholesome in life. Let's endeavor to live the Buddha's path of awakening wholeheartedly for the sake of ourselves and others.

Namo Amida Butsu.

