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Nonaggression and the Four Maras

All the maras point the way to being completely awake and alive by letting go, by letting ourselves die moment after moment, at the end of each out-breath. When we wake up, we can live fully without seeking pleasure and avoiding pain, without re-creating ourselves when we fall apart.

ON THE NIGHT on which he was to attain enlightenment, the Buddha sat under a tree. While he was sitting there, he was attacked by the forces of Mara. The story goes that they shot swords and arrows at him, and that their weapons turned into flowers.

What does this story mean? My understanding of it is that what we habitually regard as obstacles are not really our enemies, but rather our friends. What we call obstacles are really the way the world and our entire experience teach us where we're stuck. What may appear to be an arrow or a sword we can actually experience as a flower. Whether we experience what

happens to us as obstacle and enemy or as teacher and friend depends entirely on our perception of reality. It depends on our relationship with ourselves.

The teachings tell us that obstacles occur at the outer level and at the inner level. In this context, the outer level is the sense that something or somebody has harmed us, interfering with the harmony and peace we thought was ours. Some rascal has ruined it all. This particular sense of obstacle occurs in relationships and in many other situations; we feel disappointed, harmed, confused, and attacked in a variety of ways. People have felt this way from the beginning of time.

As for the inner level of obstacle, perhaps nothing ever really attacks us except our own confusion. Perhaps there is no solid obstacle except our own need to protect ourselves from being touched. Maybe the only enemy is that we don't like the way reality is *now* and therefore wish it would go away fast. But what we find as practitioners is that nothing ever goes away until it has taught us what we need to know. If we run a hundred miles an hour to the other end of the continent in order to get away from the obstacle, we find the very same problem waiting for us when we arrive. It just keeps returning with new names, forms, and manifestations until we learn whatever it has to teach us about where we are separating ourselves from reality, how we are pulling back instead of opening up, closing down instead of allowing our-

selves to experience fully whatever we encounter, without hesitating or retreating into ourselves.

Trungpa Rinpoche once asked a group of students, "What do you do when you get squeezed? What do you do when things are unbearable?" We all sat there, wondering what to say. Then he called on us one by one. We were so scared that we answered very genuinely. Almost all of us said something to the effect that we just completely fell apart, forgot about practice altogether, and became totally habitual in our reactions. Needless to say, after that we noticed very clearly what we did when we felt attacked, betrayed, or confused, when we found situations unbearable or unacceptable. We began to really notice what we did. Did we close down, or did we open up? Did we feel resentful and bitter, or did we soften? Did we become wiser or more stupid? As a result of our pain, did we know more about what it is to be human, or did we know less? Were we more critical of our world or more generous? Were we penetrated by the arrows, or did we turn them into flowers?

Traditional teachings on the forces of Mara describe the nature of obstacles and the nature of how human beings habitually become confused and lose confidence in our basic wisdom mind. The maras provide descriptions of some very familiar ways in which we try to avoid what is happening.

There are four maras. The first mara is called *devaputra mara*. It has to do with seeking pleasure. The

second one, called *skandha mara*, has to do with how we always try to re-create ourselves, try to get some ground back, try to be who we think we are. The third mara is called *klesha mara*. It has to do with how we use our emotions to keep ourselves dumb or asleep. The fourth one, *yama mara*, has to do with the fear of death. The descriptions of these four maras show us four ways in which we, just like the Buddha, are seemingly attacked.

Devaputra mara involves seeking pleasure. It works like this: when we feel embarrassed or awkward, when pain presents itself to us in any form whatsoever, we run like crazy to try to become comfortable. Any obstacle we encounter has the power to completely pull the rug out, to completely pop the bubble of reality that we have come to regard as secure and certain. When we are threatened that way, we can't stand to feel the pain, the edginess, the anxiety, the queasiness in our stomach, the heat of anger rising, the bitter taste of resentment. Therefore, we try to grasp something pleasant. We react with this tragically human habit of seeking pleasure and trying to avoid pain.

The devaputra mara is a good description of how we are all addicted to avoiding pain. When pain arises, we reach again and again for something that will blot it out. Maybe we drink or take drugs or just chew gum or turn on the radio. We might even use meditation to try to escape from the more awkward,

unpleasant, and penetrating aspects of being alive. Someone has just shot an arrow or raised a sword, and instead of allowing it to change into a flower, we run, trying to escape in all kinds of ways. There are, of course, endless ways of seeking pleasure and avoiding pain.

However, we don't have to consider seeking pleasure as an obstacle. Rather, seeking pleasure is an opportunity to observe what we do in the face of pain. Instead of trying to avoid our uneasiness and off-centeredness by running away, we could begin to open our hearts to the human dilemma that causes so much misery in this world. We could realize that the way to turn this devaputra arrow into a flower is to open our hearts and look at how we try to escape. With enormous gentleness and clarity, we could look at how weak we are. In this way we can discover that what seems to be ugly is in fact the source of wisdom and a way for us to reconnect with our basic wisdom mind.

Skandha mara is how we react when the rug is pulled out from under us. We feel that we have lost everything that's good. We've been thrown out of the nest. We sail through space without a clue as to what's going to happen next. We're in no-man's-land: we had it all together, working nicely, when suddenly the atomic bomb dropped and shattered our world into a million pieces. We don't know what's going to happen next or even where we are. Then we re-

create ourselves. We return to the solid ground of our self-concept as quickly as possible. Trungpa Rinpoche used to call this “nostalgia for samsara.”

Our whole world falls apart, and we’ve been given this great opportunity. However, we don’t trust our basic wisdom mind enough to let it stay like that. Our habitual reaction is to want to get ourselves back—even our anger, resentment, fear, or bewilderment. So we re-create our solid, immovable personality as if we were Michelangelo chiseling ourselves out of marble.

Instead of a tragedy or melodrama, this mara is more like a situation comedy. Just as we are on the verge of really understanding something, allowing our heart to truly open, just as we have the opportunity to see clearly, we put on a Groucho Marx mask with fluffy eyebrows and a big nose. Then we refuse to laugh or let go, because we might discover—who knows what?

Again, this process does not have to be considered an obstacle or a problem. Even though it feels like an arrow or a sword, if we use it as an opportunity to become aware of how we try to re-create ourselves over and over again, it turns into a flower. We can allow ourselves to be inquisitive or open about what has just happened and what will happen next. Instead of struggling to regain our concept of who we are, we can touch in to that mind of simply not knowing, which is basic wisdom mind.

The *klesha mara* is characterized by strong emotions. A simple feeling will arise, and instead of simply letting it be there, we panic. We begin to weave our thoughts into a story line, which gives rise to bigger emotions. Instead of just sitting in some kind of openness with our uncomfortable feeling, we bring out the bellows and fan away at it. With our thoughts and emotions, we keep it inflamed, hot; we won't let it go.

When everything falls apart and we feel uncertainty, disappointment, shock, embarrassment, what's left is a mind that is clear, unbiased, and fresh. But we don't see that. Instead, we feel the queasiness and uncertainty of being in no-man's-land and enlarge the feeling and march it down the street with banners that proclaim how bad everything is. We knock on every door asking people to sign petitions until there is a whole army of people who agree with us that everything is wrong. We forget what we've learned through meditation and know to be true. When really strong emotion comes up, all the doctrines and beliefs that we've held on to seem kind of pitiful by comparison, because emotions are so much more powerful.

So what began as an enormous open space becomes a forest fire, a world war, a volcano erupting, a tidal wave. We *use* our emotions. We *use* them. In their essence, they are simply part of the goodness of being alive, but instead of letting them be, we

take them and use them to regain our ground. We use them to try to deny that in fact no one has ever known or will ever know what's happening. We use them to try to make everything secure and predictable and real again, to fool ourselves about what's really true. We could just sit with the emotional energy and let it pass. There's no particular need to spread blame and self-justification. Instead, we throw kerosene on the emotion so it will feel more real.

Again, we do not have to consider this process an obstacle or a problem. If we can look at and see the wildness of emotion, we can not only begin to befriend and soften toward ourselves, but we can also begin to befriend all human beings and indeed all living beings. By becoming aware of how we do this silly thing again and again because we don't want to dwell in the uncertainty and awkwardness and pain of not knowing, we begin to develop true compassion for ourselves and everyone else, because we see what happens and how we react when things fall apart. That awareness is what turns the sword into a flower. It is how what is seemingly ugly and problematic and unwanted actually becomes our teacher.

I think maybe all of the maras arise from fear of death, but *yama mara* is particularly rooted there. When we talk about a good life from the usual samsaric point of view, what we mean is that we've finally gotten it together. We finally feel that we're a good

person. We have good qualities, we're peaceful, and we don't get thrown off balance when arrows are shot at us. We're the person who knows how to turn an arrow into a flower. We feel so good about ourselves. We've finally tied up all the loose ends. We're happy. We think that that's life.

We think that if we just meditated enough or jogged enough or ate perfect food, everything would be perfect. But from the point of view of someone who is awake, that's death. Seeking security or perfection, rejoicing in feeling confirmed and whole, self-contained and comfortable, is some kind of death. It doesn't have any fresh air. There's no room for something to come in and interrupt all that. We are killing the moment by controlling our experience. Doing this is setting ourselves up for failure, because sooner or later, we're going to have an experience we can't control: our house is going to burn down, someone we love is going to die, we're going to find out we have cancer, a brick is going to fall out of the sky and hit us on the head, somebody's going to spill tomato juice all over our white suit, or we're going to arrive at our favorite restaurant and discover that no one ordered produce and seven hundred people are coming for lunch.

The essence of life is that it's challenging. Sometimes it is sweet, and sometimes it is bitter. Sometimes your body tenses, and sometimes it relaxes or opens. Sometimes you have a headache, and some-

times you feel 100 percent healthy. From an awakened perspective, trying to tie up all the loose ends and finally get it together is death, because it involves rejecting a lot of your basic experience. There is something aggressive about that approach to life, trying to flatten out all the rough spots and imperfections into a nice smooth ride.

To be fully alive, fully human, and completely awake is to be continually thrown out of the nest. To live fully is to be always in no-man's-land, to experience each moment as completely new and fresh. To live is to be willing to die over and over again. From the awakened point of view, that's life. Death is wanting to hold on to what you have and to have every experience confirm you and congratulate you and make you feel completely together. So even though we say the yama mara is fear of death, it's actually fear of life.

We want to be perfect, but we just keep seeing our imperfections, and there is no room to get away from that, no exit, nowhere to run. That is when this sword turns into a flower. We stick with what we see, we feel what we feel, and from that we begin to connect with our own wisdom mind.

Without the maras, would the Buddha have awakened? Would he have attained enlightenment without them? Weren't they his best friends, since they showed him who he was and what was true? All the maras point the way to being completely awake and

alive by letting go, by letting ourselves die moment after moment, at the end of each out-breath. When we wake up, we can live fully without seeking pleasure and avoiding pain, without re-creating ourselves when we fall apart. We can let ourselves feel our emotions as hot or cold, vibrating or smooth, instead of using our emotions to keep ourselves ignorant and dumb. We can give up on being perfect and experience each moment to its fullest. Trying to run away is never the answer to being a fully human being. Running away from the immediacy of our experience is like preferring death to life.

Looking at the arrows and swords, and how we react to them, we can always return to basic wisdom mind. Rather than trying to get rid of something or buying into a dualistic sense of being attacked, we take the opportunity to see how we close down when we're squeezed. This is how we open our hearts. It is how we awaken our intelligence and connect with fundamental buddha nature.