

The Two Arrows

The teaching of the **two arrows** comes from early Buddhism, but in Mindfulness it can be understood in a simple, everyday way. The idea is:



The first arrow is the unavoidable pain that comes with being human. Things happen that hurt — you stub your toe, a relationship ends, you lose your job, or you fall ill. This is part of life.

The second arrow is what we add on top of that pain with our thoughts and reactions. We might ruminate, blame ourselves or others, imagine the worst, or replay the hurt in our minds again and again. That second arrow often hurts even more than the first, yet it's one we fire at ourselves.

Modern psychology sometimes talks about this in terms of **primary and secondary suffering**. Primary suffering is the raw sensation or feeling of what has happened. Secondary suffering is the mental chatter, resistance, and emotional spirals we build around it. The key insight is that while we can't always avoid the first arrow, we often have a choice about the second.

A simple example:

Imagine you're out walking and get caught in the rain without a coat. That's the first arrow — you're wet and uncomfortable. Then your mind kicks in: "*Why didn't I check the forecast or at least put an umbrella in my bag? I always mess things up. Now the whole day's ruined.*" That's the second arrow.

If you notice what's happening, you might simply think: "*I'm wet, I'll dry off soon.*" The rain is still there, but you haven't added the extra layer of self-criticism and drama. You've dodged the second arrow.

The Wisdom of "It's Not My Fault: Finding Freedom When We are Caught in Self-Blame". Adapted from the Blog: Tarabrach.com Aug 9th, 2017.

Tara Brach is a well-known mindfulness teacher and psychologist, she builds on the ancient Buddhist idea of the **two arrows** in a warm, down-to-earth way. She tells us in her book *Radical Acceptance* that when we stop being at war with ourselves, we are free to live every precious moment of our life.

In her talk "*It's Not My Fault: Finding Freedom When We're Caught in Self-Blame*", she explains that we often shoot ourselves with the **second arrow** through shame and self-criticism — especially when something painful or disappointing happens. She explains it like this:

The first arrow - This is what life throws at us — loss, illness, rejection, conflict, or a mistake we've made. It's the unavoidable pain of being human. That first arrow is part of life's fabric; we all get pricked by it sooner or later.

The second arrow - This one is **self-blame** — the voice that says, "*I shouldn't have done that,*" "*I've messed everything up,*" or "*It's my fault things are like this.*"

We turn the first arrow of pain into a deeper wound by believing there's something fundamentally wrong with us.

"It's not my fault"

When Tara says, "*It's not my fault,*" she doesn't mean we're never responsible for our actions. Rather, she's pointing to the difference between **responsibility** and **self-condemnation**.

She encourages a kind of **wise understanding**:

- We are shaped by countless causes and conditions — our upbringing, culture, brain chemistry, stress levels, and the pressures of the moment.
- Recognising that doesn't excuse unhelpful behaviour, but it *softens the harshness*. It lets us respond with **compassion** rather than attack ourselves.

From that kinder space, we're actually freer to make amends, to learn, and to live more wisely.

The practice

When you catch yourself in that inner blame spiral — “Why did I do that again?” — Tara suggests pausing and bringing mindfulness to the feeling:

- Notice the first arrow — the discomfort or disappointment.
- Spot the second arrow — the voice of self-judgement.
- Offer kindness — perhaps with a gentle inner phrase like, *“It’s not my fault; I’m doing the best I can right now.”*

That shift from punishment to compassion is what she calls freedom from the second arrow.

For example - Let’s say you forget a friend’s birthday.

That’s the **first arrow** — the uncomfortable jolt of realising you’ve slipped up. You feel a pang of guilt and maybe a touch of embarrassment. It’s not pleasant, but it’s a normal human mistake.

Then comes the **second arrow**: *“I’m such a terrible friend. I can never get anything right. They probably won’t want to see me now.”*

Before you know it, a small oversight has turned into a full-blown story about your worth as a person.

That second arrow is what Tara Brach is talking about — the extra suffering we create when we confuse a moment of forgetfulness with being fundamentally flawed.

If you paused there and remembered *“It’s not my fault”* in her sense — that you’re a human being with a busy mind and a full life — you could respond differently.

You might simply send a warm message:

“I can’t believe I missed your birthday! I hope you had a lovely day — teas on me next time. “The first arrow still stings, but you’ve skipped the second one. No inner lecture, no guilt spiral — just a touch of honesty and kindness.

Last Night as I was Sleeping. By Antonio Machado translated by Robert Bly.

Last night, as I was sleeping,
I dreamt — marvellous error! —
that a spring was breaking
out in my heart.
I said: Along which secret aqueduct,
O water, are you coming to me,
water of a new life
that I have never drunk?

Last night, as I was sleeping,
I dreamt — marvellous error! —
that I had a beehive
here inside my heart.
And the golden bees
were making white combs
and sweet honey
from my old failures.

Last night, as I was sleeping,
I dreamt — marvellous error! —
that a fiery sun was giving light
inside my heart.
It was fiery because I felt
warmth as from a hearth,
and sun because it gave light
and brought tears to my eyes.

Last night, as I was sleeping,
I dreamt — marvellous error! —
that it was God I had
here inside my heart.

Antonio Machado (1875-1939) was a **Spanish poet** and one of the leading figures of the Spanish literary movement known as the Generation of '98.

Connecting Machado's poem to the two arrows – which in Mindfulness would be considered to be a lesson on Self- Compassion.

Antonio Machado's "*Last Night as I Was Sleeping*" can be read as a poetic description of **awakening from self-blame into compassion** — the very movement Tara Brach and Buddhist psychology talk about when we stop firing that *second arrow*.

The "marvellous error" is the poet's astonished discovery that, even amid all his ordinary human failings, something tender and life-giving is quietly growing inside him — **a spring, a beehive, a sun, even God**.

Each image symbolises what's found when we stop punishing ourselves and instead open to what's already flowing beneath the noise of self-criticism:

- The **spring** — renewal, the flow of life that continues despite mistakes.
- The **beehive** — the heart transforming "old failures" into "sweet honey."
- The **sun** — warmth and awareness, lighting up what we once judged harshly.
- The **presence of God** — or in secular terms, an experience of deep inner wholeness.

We could say Machado dreamt of the moment when we **stop believing our self-blaming thoughts** — when we lay down the second arrow. *Then something shifts*, what once felt like brokenness begins to feel like growth. The very places that hurt the most become sources of wisdom and compassion.

So, in the same way that the Buddha teaches, "Pain is inevitable, but suffering is optional," Machado is whispering:

"Within the ache, there's a hidden sweetness — if only you stop fighting yourself long enough to taste it."

Meditation: The Sweetness Beneath the Sting,

Make it any length that suits you, just add space to breathe, you could record it if you prefer audio.

Settle into a comfortable position. Allow your body to rest naturally — shoulders soft, hands relaxed in your lap. Take a slow breath in... and out.

Begin by noticing the simple rhythm of breathing — no need to change it. Just breathing in... and breathing out.

Let your awareness spread gently through the body — from the crown of your head down to your feet — like sunlight touching still water.

Now bring to mind something small that's been bothering you lately — perhaps a forgotten appointment, a harsh word you spoke, a moment of confusion or forgetfulness. Nothing too heavy — just something that still tugs a little at the heart.

Notice what it feels like in the body — maybe a tightness in the chest, a heaviness in the stomach. This is the **first arrow** — the natural sting of being human.

We all feel it. It's perfectly normal.

Now see if you can sense the **second arrow** — the voice that piles on top of the pain:

"I should've known better."

"I always mess things up."

"I'm losing it."

That's the arrow we shoot at ourselves.

See if you can recognise it... and gently put it down.

Take a slow breath in, and as you breathe out, silently say to yourself:

“It’s not my fault. I’m doing the best I can.”

Now imagine — as Antonio Machado dreamt — that beneath all this, something kind is stirring in your heart.

Perhaps it’s a **spring** bubbling softly with renewal...

or a **beehive**, where golden bees turn old mistakes into honey...

or a **small, glowing sun**, warming every shadow inside you.

Let that image come alive for a few breaths.

Feel its warmth. Its quiet sweetness.

This is the place in you that doesn’t blame — that simply loves.

Rest here for a few moments, breathing gently.

Let the heart be soft. Let the mind be kind.

When you’re ready, return to the room — to the sounds around you, the weight of your body, the feeling of the ground supporting you.

And as you open your eyes, perhaps whisper softly:

“First arrow stings, second arrow sings — and I’m not dancing.”