



Transforming the Three Poisons: Greed, Hatred, and Delusion



In Buddhist teachings, greed, hatred, and delusion are known, for good reason, as *the three poisons*, *the three unwholesome roots*, and *the three fires*. These metaphors suggest how dangerous afflictive thoughts and emotions can be if they are not understood and transformed. Greed refers to our selfishness, misplaced desire, attachment, and grasping for happiness and satisfaction outside of ourselves. Hatred refers to our anger, our aversion and repulsion toward unpleasant people, circumstances, and even toward our own uncomfortable feelings. Delusion refers to our dullness, bewilderment, and misperception; our wrong views of reality. The poisons of greed, hatred, and delusion are a byproduct of ignorance—ignorance of our true nature, the awakened heart of wisdom and compassion. Arising out of our ignorance, these poisonous states of mind then motivate non virtuous and unskillful thoughts, speech, and actions, which cause all manner of suffering and unhappiness for ourselves and others.

Greed, hatred, and delusion are deeply embedded in the conditioning of our personalities. Our behavior is habitually influenced and tainted by these three poisons, these unwholesome roots buried deep into our mind. Burning within us as lust, craving, anger, resentment, and misunderstanding, these poisons lay to waste hearts, lives, hopes, and civilizations, driving us blind and thirsty through the seemingly endless round of birth and death (*samsara*). The Buddha describes these defilements as bonds, fetters, hindrances, and knots; the actual root cause of unwholesome karma and the entire spectrum of human suffering.

Although this teaching may appear negative or unpleasant, indeed, a wise understanding of the three poisons of greed, hatred, and delusion is ultimately positive and empowering. With this sublime understanding we can clearly see and feel the factors that are causing confusion, unhappiness, and suffering in our lives. And with this clarity and insight, we can make the choice to eliminate those factors! The teaching of The Four Noble Truths clearly explains that when we embrace and understand the exact causes of our suffering and dissatisfaction, we can then take the necessary steps to extinguish those causes and liberate ourselves. This is certainly positive and empowering. In addition, it is important for us to realize that the Dharma teachings regarding defilement and purification are not just rigid, restrictive, or authoritarian theories regarding morality, but are real and solid facts essential to our correct understanding of reality and eventual awakening.

Greed

Our greed is a burning desire, an unquenchable thirst (*tanha*), craving, and lust; we want the objects of our desire to provide us with lasting satisfaction so we feel fulfilled, whole, and complete. The poison of greed creates an inner hunger so that we always seem to be striving towards an unattainable goal. We mistakenly believe our happiness is dependent upon that goal, but once we attain it, we get no lasting satisfaction. Then once again, our greed and desire will arise, looking outside of ourselves for the next thing that will hopefully bring satisfaction. Influenced by greed, we are never content. Another common face of our greed shows up as a lack of generosity and compassion toward others. Even a moment of honest and mindful introspection will reveal how deeply-rooted our greed can be. We can experience the symptoms of our greed appearing in even the most trivial instances, and of course, greed can manifest itself in even more compulsive and destructive ways as well. We always seem to want more, we want bigger and better, we want to fulfill our insatiable inner hunger and thirst (craving). This type of greed affects our personal lives, our professional lives, and the domain of international business and politics. Global conflict and warfare, as well as the destruction of our precious environment are obvious symptoms of our corporate and political greed. Our greed, craving, and thirst affects each of us on a personal and global level. Our greed is an endless and pernicious cycle that only brings suffering and unhappiness in its wake.

Hatred

The symptoms of hatred can show up as anger, hostility, dislike, aversion, or ill-will; wishing harm or suffering upon another person. With aversion, we habitually resist, deny, and avoid unpleasant feelings, circumstances, and people we do not like. We want everything to be pleasant, comfortable, and satisfying all the time. This behavior simply reinforces our perception of duality and separation. Hatred or anger thrusts us into a vicious cycle of always finding conflict and enemies everywhere around us. When there is conflict or perceived enemies around us, our mind is neurotic, never calm; we are endlessly occupied with strategies of self-protection or revenge. We can also create conflict within ourselves when we have an aversion to our own uncomfortable feelings. With hatred and aversion, we deny, resist, and push away our own inner feelings of fear, hurt, loneliness, and so forth, treating these feelings like an internal enemy. With the poison of hatred, we create conflict and enemies in the world around us and within our own being.

Delusion

Delusion is our wrong understanding or wrong views of reality. Delusion is our misperception of the way the world works; our inability to understand the nature of things exactly as they are, free of perceptual distortions. Influenced by delusion, we are not in harmony with ourselves, others, or with life; we are not living in accordance with Dharma. Affected by the poison of delusion, which arises from ignorance of our true nature, we do not understand the interdependent and impermanent nature of life. Thus, we are constantly looking outside of ourselves for happiness, satisfaction, and solutions to our problems. This outward searching creates even more frustration, anger, and delusion. Because of our delusion, we also do not understand the virtuous, life-affirming actions that create happiness, nor do we understand the non virtuous, negative, and unwholesome actions that create suffering. Again, our delusion binds us to a vicious cycle where there does not appear to be any way out.

Transforming the Three Poisons

For countless eons we have been influenced and motivated by our greed, hatred, and delusion. Therefore, this work of purification and transformation cannot be effected hastily, in obedience to our impatient demand for quick results. This work requires patience, care, persistence, and deep compassion for ourselves and others. The Buddha taught us that the poisons of greed, hatred, and delusion, which cause so much suffering, can indeed be purified and transformed. We can break the chain of suffering and negative karma and live a happy, fulfilling life. The Buddha's excellent teachings tell us that enlightenment is our true nature, and will naturally shine forth through the purified mind and heart. Therefore, the goal of our spiritual practice is to liberate ourselves from the defilements that obscure the natural clarity, radiance, and joy of our enlightenment. So how do we encounter the three poisons and transform them in a way that leads to genuine liberation?

We must begin this work of purification in the precise place where the poisons originate—in the mind itself (the conditioned ego or personality). This purification and transformation begins with the challenge of calming the mind and seeing deeply into ourselves. In other words, to eliminate the poisons of greed, hatred, and delusion, we must first learn to recognize them when they first appear. Being mindful and aware, we can then discern how these deep-seated poisons influence our everyday thoughts, feelings, speech, and actions. This mindful awareness, this seeing deeply into ourselves, is the beginning of understanding; the beginning of our ability to transform these defilements. To accomplish this awareness, we train our mind through meditation. We learn to concentrate on our breathing at the tip of the nose (or the abdomen in Zen training), allowing all thoughts and feelings to arise and pass without reacting to them or evaluating them. Through this practice, we become much more aware of ourselves in everyday situations. We are able to notice when thoughts and emotions arise and begin to disturb us. In this way, we can be conscious of these thoughts and emotions and work with them skillfully before they get out of control, causing harm to ourselves and others.

The Antidotes

In addition to meditation practice, there are also the *antidotes* or *alternatives* to the three poisons. The Buddha has given us the antidote for every defilement; the method whereby we eliminate unwholesome mental attitudes and replace them with virtuous, wholesome attitudes which benefit ourselves and others. Therefore, the entire aim of spiritual practice is to gradually subdue the poisons of greed, hatred, and delusion by cultivating the alternative mental factors that are directly opposed to them. These antidotes are called the *three wholesome roots*: non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion.

To antidote and overcome greed, we learn to cultivate selflessness, generosity, detachment, and contentment. If we are experiencing greed, strong desire, or attachment and we want to let it go, we can contemplate the impermanence or the disadvantages of the objects of our desire. We can practice giving away those things we would most like to hold onto. We can also practice acts of selfless service and charity, offering care and assistance to others in any way we can, free of all desire for recognition or compensation. In truth, there is no objection to enjoying and sharing the beauty, pleasures, and objects of this material world. The problems associated with greed and attachment only arise when we mistakenly believe and act as if the source of our happiness is outside of us.

To antidote and overcome hatred, we learn to cultivate loving-kindness, compassion, patience, and forgiveness. When we react to unpleasant feelings, circumstances, or people, with hatred, anger, or aversion, we can use these sublime antidotes to counteract the poisons. Here we learn to openly embrace the entire spectrum of our experiences without hatred or aversion. Just as we practice meeting unpleasant experiences in the outer world with patience, kindness, forgiveness, and compassion, we must also practice meeting our own unpleasant feelings in the same way. Our feelings of loneliness, hurt, doubt, fear, insecurity, inadequacy, depression, and so forth, all require our openness and loving-kindness. Our challenge in spiritual practice is to soften our habitual defenses, open our heart, and let go of hatred, aversion, and denial. In this way, we can meet and embrace ourselves, others, and all inner and outer experiences with great compassion and wisdom.

To antidote and overcome delusion, we cultivate wisdom, insight, and right understanding. Learning to experience reality exactly as it is, without the distortions of our self-centered desires, fears, and expectations, we free ourselves from delusion. Deeply sensing and acting in harmony with the interdependent, impermanent, and ever-changing nature of this world—realizing that all living beings are inseparably related and that lasting happiness does not come from anything external—we free ourselves from delusion. As we develop a clear understanding of karma, knowing the positive, wholesome actions that bring happiness and the negative, unwholesome actions that bring suffering, we cultivate the wisdom, insight, and right understanding that free us from delusion.

By studying the Dharma and applying the teachings properly in our lives, we will gradually wear away even the most stubborn habitual behaviors, fully liberating ourselves from stress, unhappiness, and suffering. The Buddha calls this the “taintless liberation of the mind.” When the three poisons of greed, hatred, and delusion have finally been extinguished, the sublime peace, wisdom, unity, and bliss of Nirvana shine forth as our essential nature.