

THE HUB: THE COCK, THE SNAKE, AND THE PIG

The Three Poisons

Craving, aversion, and delusion chase one another round and around the hub of the Wheel, which represents the fundamental driving forces of Samsara, or worldly existence. The red cock, a symbol of both greed and lust, constantly scratches about in the earth looking for food. The green snake glares with venomous, hate-filled eyes, and the black pig wallows in the mud of ignorance. Each bites tightly the tail of the one in front — greedy, hateful, and blind.

These ‘three poisons’ — craving, aversion, and delusion — are inextricably linked. When we act from greed we hate what stands in our way and reinforce our fundamental ignorance. This is ignorance of the fact that the mundane world can never completely fulfill our desires, that all our suffering is caused by our craving, that happiness comes from the ending of craving, and that there is a path we can follow that leads to the cessation of craving.

Ignorant of these facts, unable or unwilling to bear them in mind, we constantly act, speak, and think in ways that simply do not help us. Dissatisfied with my current state of boredom, I switch on the television and mindlessly take in a few moments of soap opera before wandering down to the kitchen to put on a bit of surplus weight for the sake of a fleeting sense experience (toast and honey). Then I drift back to the sitting room to make a phone call to a friend where I speak sarcastically of a mutual acquaintance who irritates me. And so it goes on. Over and over, round and around. Craving, aversion, craving, aversion. Fleeting mental state after mental state. Acting like this I keep myself mildly anaesthetized, taking in this, pushing out that, driven from moment to moment by an underlying sense of dissatisfaction that I am unwilling fully to face up to.

We are not fixed and separate

The Buddha never condemned craving, aversion, and delusion as sinful. They are simply a part of the way things are, a part of the way *we* are, but, he said, if we wish to escape from suffering we must free ourselves from their bonds. This is not easy, for the three poisons lie at the very root of Samsara.

For any organism to exist at all, two essential factors must be present. The organism must have a boundary around it, so that we can say ‘this, the organism, is what is inside the boundary, the rest of the world is outside of it.’ Then it must have the capacity to keep this boundary more or less intact by taking

into itself what it needs for its survival and by pushing away from itself anything that threatens it. This is true of all organisms whatsoever: human beings, giraffes, goldfish, and single-celled amoebas, as well as cities, countries, and public corporations. Animals that cannot feed or defend themselves become food for other animals. Countries that cannot do so are absorbed by their stronger neighbors. Taking in what is needed and pushing out that which threatens are intrinsically necessary to all forms of existence.

But what of the boundary? This, in a sense, is the essence of the unenlightened human problem. For although, in order to survive in an ordinary way, we need to take in nourishment and push out what threatens, we end up taking our own boundaries far too seriously. We treat them as if they were fixed and unchanging, and so we live our lives confined entirely within the boundary of our skin, as if we were somehow essentially separate from all the rest of life. And thus the three poisons have us in their thrall.

Experiencing ourselves as fixed and separate, cut off in some deep sense from other people and from the rest of our environment, consciously or not, we feel threatened and insecure. We are just one tiny, insignificant, changing being adrift in a vast universe of potentially threatening otherness. We are small and relatively powerless, what is not us is immense and hugely powerful. Seeing ourselves in this way, our natural tendency is to overemphasize the process of taking in and pushing out. We try to take into ourselves as much as we can of whatever we think will give us security — food, comfort, and status — and to push away from ourselves whatever appears to threaten these. We do all of this under the delusion that we *are* ultimately fixed and separate, that getting more of Samsara is better, and that we can preserve our imagined separateness from the rest of life by constantly keeping threats at bay.

Understanding our conditioned existence

This process is intrinsically unstable, for we are not fixed and unchanging entities. Like everything else in the universe we are constantly changing, even from instant to instant. Our vain attempts to resist change by leading our lives in safe, familiar ruts, or by pursuing neurotic habits like comfort eating and leisure shopping, dam up our energies and generate suffering for ourselves and others. Even if we own the latest style trainers and always drink great cappuccino, as long as we depend on these experiences for our sense of inner worth and psychological security, our position will remain fundamentally untenable. Even those who live their lives at the very pinnacle of fashion will one day sicken and die.

The secure sense of ourselves as somehow fixed and complete — separate from the rest of life — that we constantly try to achieve, is impossible to attain in the face of reality. For ultimately we can never be separate. From moment to moment we affect and are affected by everything else in our environment. The air we breathe, the food we eat, the impressions and ideas that we take in, all come from outside

ourselves. There is nothing within us that is not affected by the continual process of exchange between ourselves and our environment.

The world we move in is a constantly swirling mass of change. But having constructed for ourselves a fixed sense of the world where we, as more or less bounded and unchanging subjects, interact with a stable world of objects, we experience a constant friction between things as they are and the world of our delusions. Bumping up against reality but unwilling to face up to it, we suffer time after time. Only by letting go of our delusive clinging will we ever be free from suffering.

Transforming the Poisons

Craving, aversion, and delusion have deep roots within our psyche. The cock, the snake, and the pig drive the very hub of the Wheel. Between them they condition much of the way in which we see the world and much of our behavior. They are the source of all our suffering but, the Buddha assured us, they can be transformed. Greed can change into generosity, hatred can change into compassion, and ignorance can change into wisdom.

To make such changes takes consistent effort over time, perhaps even over lifetimes, but it can be done. Not only that; it can also be done by degrees. As soon as we start to make a serious effort to undermine the roots of the three poisons within us by practicing the Buddhist path of ethics, meditation, and wisdom, we will immediately begin to progress. Craving, aversion, and delusion are not our only motivations; we also have within us a desire for the good, and when we give rein to that desire then the driving force at the hub of the Wheel begins to slow down. Less driven by blind craving and aversion we become increasingly conscious of the prospect of true liberation, and our hearts come to yearn more for this than for the familiarity of craving.

Cultivating generosity, kindness, and clarity, we can begin to tread the path of the Buddhist spiritual life, the altruistic path that the Buddha indicates when he points to the hare in the moon. Our progression along that path may be swift, or it may be slow, but one thing we can be sure of — so long as we make an effort, progress itself is assured.