

## THE THREE POISONS

Ancient sages long ago identified the root causes of human suffering and vice as three basic states of mind that tend to dominate human thinking: attachment, aversion, and ignorance. Obviously these are three very basic psychological conditions. They could be defined simply as “wanting”, “not wanting”, and “not knowing what to think”. Attachment is the mental gesture of grasping or holding to something. Aversion is the gesture of rejecting or renouncing something. Ignorance, the state of not knowing, is often described as confusion or not knowing what to make of the ideas and experiences we have.

Grasping, rejecting, and being confused are natural states of mind. They come with being human and having the mental apparatus to react to the world around us. As a child grows, he learns to select and reject among the sensory and mental experiences with which he is confronted. He quickly learns to distinguish himself and his choices from the rest of his environment and experiences. Identifying himself with his choices, his likes and dislikes, the child constructs a personality, a set of habitual reactions to the outer and inner worlds.

As people age, their habits of identification and reaction solidify. They often become more rooted in their likes and dislikes. Most people go through a maturation process in which they begin to learn that tastes are relative and develop some tolerance for the choices of their neighbors which differ from their own. Often we become more flexible about certain preferences while we become less flexible about others. In different mental settings we may tolerate either more or less uncertainty about our beliefs.

Regardless of shifts and evolutions in habitual reactions, the selections and discriminations made by individuals always condition their experiences. If one has decided, consciously or unconsciously, that he values or wants something, then he will be gratified to get it and disappointed when he doesn't get it. If one has decided, consciously or not, that he dislikes something, then he will be relieved when he is free of it and unhappy when it is at hand.

The attachments and aversions that we create, embellish, and modify throughout our lives have far-reaching consequences. They shape the framework of conditions that determine our reactions to our experiences. Our distaste for pressure or uncertainty, for example, will condition our reactions to these phenomena. Our desire for gratification or justification will create corresponding behavior patterns, and so forth.

Aversion and attachment can be seen as two similar kinds of ignorance. Many people have noticed that both impulses tend to disappear when one stops distinguishing so much between “self” and “other”. If separate identity is only an illusion, then holding or avoiding things can become pointless, and the urge to do so may fade. Attractions and repulsions that produce undesirable results can often be traced to bad judgments, inaccurate beliefs, and other deficiencies of knowledge or skill; so that even from a less metaphysical point of view, it is easy to see that various kinds of ignorance give rise to unfortunate attachments and aversions of all kinds.

Tibetans have long described attachment, aversion, and ignorance as three poisons which

cloud the mind and lead it into cycles of unhappiness and suffering. These “mental foes” are often symbolized in Tibetan tradition by a pig, a rooster, and a snake circling around at the center of a “Wheel of Life”.

Seeing how attachment and aversion both arise from ignorance, spiritual teachers have often condensed the three poisons into one, namely the fundamental confusion of the self-aware mind trying to conceptualize experience. This fundamental confusion, though generating all manner of ideas, actions, and problems, is always thoroughly natural to our species. It is intrinsic and unavoidable. Apparently it can be transcended in what is called gaining of insight or enlightenment.

Those able to speak from experience about this kind of insight say that the enlightened mind is not different from the ordinary mind. They say that the perceiving faculty itself, what seems to become confused, is the core of consciousness, and that its intelligence cannot be stopped. They say that the appearances constructed by our senses, our ideas, our feelings, and all the other conditions of our thinking can be known as confusion and chains of linked causation, or else they can be known as their underlying nature, the essential processes of perception. Experiencing the underlying nature of consciousness and the underlying processes of perception, conception, and other mental actions is said to end the confusions of dualistic thought, grasping, avoiding, and so forth. Then, even as one feels the attractions, repulsions, and confusions of human existence, he feels also the force, the clarity, and the peace of the innermost mind.

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