

Round About the Cauldron Go

If the history of Buddhism were scaled down to a month, it would only be for the past day or so that English translations of its texts have begun to appear. Precise translations still elude us for even some of the most basic Buddhist concepts. In *What the Buddha Taught*, the respected Buddhist scholar-monk Walpola Rahula leaves the First Noble Truth in its original Pali as *dukkha*, explaining that he could find no one English word to embrace the whole meaning. As concepts, “the three poisons” are not as rich and deep in meaning as *dukkha*, but there are still a good many variations in how they have been translated. We in Zen most often hear them articulated in the repentance ceremony, in which everyone together recites the *gatha*, or verse, three times running, as follows:

All evil actions committed by me since time immemorial,
Stemming from greed, anger, and ignorance,
Arising from body, speech, and mind,
I now repent having committed.

The first problem here is in using “ignorance” instead of the other most common translation, “delusion.” Until recently, I had equated these two terms, and wondered why ignorance, the primal cause of suffering, would be categorized as one of the three poisons when it also gives birth to them. In Pali, the original written language of Buddhism, the third poison is *moha*. The various other translations of *moha* in Mahayana, Vajrayana, and Theravada sources include “confusion” and “folly,” followed by “stupidity,” “blindness,” “dullness,” and even “deception,” “temptation,” and “infatuation.” One source sums it up as “the inconsistency of a thought or action with reality.”

In Buddhism ignorance, however, really means being unenlightened regarding the essential nature of reality. The Pali word is *avijja*, nonknowing, and it is the closest thing we have in Buddhism to “original sin.” Strictly speaking, *avijja* is not a “prima causa,” or metaphysical cause of existence, but one element that arises within a circle of mutual causality. It is just one of the twelve links in the chain of dependent co-origination, or co-arising. But it is generally singled out, in our enlightenment tradition, as the prime culprit in the dirty dozen that make up this samsaric lineup.

The three poisons are the three phenomenal forms of ignorance. This explains their more academic terms: the three “root causes,” or “unwholesome roots.” For the first of the three poisons (*lobha* in Pali), we seem in the Mahayana to have settled on “greed.” Greed must be distinguished from *tanha*, or craving, which, like ignorance, is one of the twelve-fold factors of dependent co-arising. Ignorance dooms us to an egocentric perspective, which naturally results in craving, or thirst. When this craving is thwarted, it begets a two-headed monster: greed, or intensified longing for the object we crave, and the second poison, anger, or aversion toward what we don’t want. Thus greed and aversion are two sides of the same force, i.e. craving. And clinging, whether through greed or aversion, is binding us ever anew to that cycle of continuity.

The Pali term which is generally translated in Mahayana sources as “anger” or “hatred” is *dosa*. *Dosa* literally means “fault-finding” or “accusation,” words which point to the essence of the second poison: blaming another for one’s desires not being fulfilled. Our language bristles with words that express the reactive feelings that arise in such contexts. Many of them are too extreme, and thus can let us off the hook – “Well, it’s not hatred I’m feeling, so it’s all right.” Nix, then to “rage,” “fury,” “repugnance,” “loathing,” “revulsion,” “rancor,” and “spite.” *Dosa* is also sometimes translated as “hostility,” “enmity,” or “ill will,” but these, like “antagonism,” “resentment,” and “malice,” have connotations, according to the dictionary, of either bitterness or active wishing of evil. Thus, in not exactly matching up with the particular quality of our fault-finding, these words may still allow us to feel innocent.

That leaves “anger,” by default. Even it allows wiggle room, since many of us think of it in its sharp, hot sense, as a flare-up of mood, and thus we can overlook its more entrenched and subtle, its cold and brooding forms. The dictionary describes anger as “usually showing itself in a desire to fight back at the supposed cause,” as well as “applicable to feelings of resentful or revengeful displeasure.” These are conditions that may not always be present, and even when they are, may lie outside awareness. Nonetheless, its basic definition is “a feeling of displeasure resulting from injury, mistreatment, opposition, etc.,” which may be the closest match-up we have for *dosa*. It is also one of the shortest and simplest of our word-choices, and flows nicely (as nicely, that is, as anger can flow!) when sandwiched between “greed” and “delusion.”

It has been suggested, in a Pali source, that each of us by nature is disposed toward one of the three poisons more than the other two. When the greed type walks into a room, he instinctively relates to the occupants and setting with an acquisitive bent, using intimidation, charm, and other strategies to get information, recognition, approval, and whatever else there is to be gotten. The person most susceptible to anger will reflexively find fault, reacting critically to the people, what’s going on, even the furnishings. And the delusion type will tend to be confused, torpid, dull, or withdrawn, and vulnerable to every kind of influence. None of us is a “pure” type, of course, but we do seem to lead with one poison or another.

An activity that may accentuate even more the poison to which we are prone is driving. There is something about the armored separation and privacy of a car that brings out our most unwholesome tendencies, especially under stress. Thus it would be natural for the greed type to habitually drive fast: “I want to get there – the sooner the better!” When frustrated by slow traffic or other impediments, he might or might not get angry. The anger type, though, would always tend to find fault with other drivers, even to the point of road rage. And the driver who meanders along, changing speed unpredictably, rubber-necking and oblivious to other drivers, would be showing his proclivity toward delusion -- and his knack for provoking the anger type. Other contexts especially likely to reveal the poison to which we gravitate are competitive sports and games, organizational meetings, and close relationships.

By far the best all-purpose antidote to the three poisons is *awareness*. Take the case of anger. Our tendency when gripped by enmity toward another is to get so focused on him or her that we forget ourselves. We're absorbed by the object of our ill will. If we're not venting our accusations aloud, we are silently plotting our retaliation, rehearsing our comeback, or just awash in judgmental thoughts. We're so riveted on the other that we're not actually conscious of *being* angry, as bizarre as that is.

A great evolutionary shift occurs when we *notice* that we're angry – that *I'm* angry – and acknowledge it. It opens up a space in which some measure of detachment takes place. That still leaves work to do to resolve the aversion, but at least now we know there's aversion to resolve. What daily zazen does over time, is reduce the time-lag between the arising of our fault-finding and our noticing of it. In really experiencing it, we get out from under it. The same process works with the other two poisons. Our greed can be directed toward an infinite number of objects, both material and immaterial, but a breakthrough occurs at the moment we realize *that* we're being greedy. Likewise with the many varieties of delusion; once we recognize it as delusion, we're no longer caught by it in the same way. Insight makes all the difference.

One of the pitfalls of Zen practice is that of merging with phenomena in the wrong way – i.e., unconsciously. This is a crucial point to grasp: we need to overcome the illusion of egoistic separation that is the cause of suffering, but to get swept up blindly in worldly phenomena leads to further suffering. Now, the kicker is that zazen, by dissolving our self-consciousness, causes us to be more easily absorbed in worldly phenomena. Indeed, “absorption” is a common translation of *dhyana*, the Sanskrit root of both “Zen” and “Ch’an.” A seasoned Zen practitioner will have developed the mindfulness to refrain from indiscriminately merging with unhealthy mind states and situations, but a less experienced sitter can get lost in them. At this stage of practice, when our fledgling no-mindedness has not yet been integrated into the world of causation, we are especially vulnerable to acting out of our base impulses, oblivious to manners, convention, even morality. We can be brusque, rude, pushy, reveling in our focused “Zen” energy – and mistaking it for spiritual progress. So it is that a half-baked Zen student, as a result of having quieted somewhat the censoring, self-judging mind, may fall prey even more easily than before beginning practice to an ice cream “samadhi,” an Internet “samadhi,” a romantic fling. I once read an article about another Zen center where it was not unusual for participants at a 7-day sesshin to go out to a disco the night the sesshin ended and “turn the place upside-down.” It's no spiritual feat to be able to lose oneself in the pursuit of pleasure, and such states are hardly the “one true samadhi,” alluded to by Zen Master Hakuin, that “extinguishes evils.”

Thus zazen, by freeing us somewhat from the mediating influence of our thoughts, leaves us more vulnerable to our primitive conditioning. The more intense and sustained the sitting, the faster this confrontation with the three poisons occurs. It is in sesshin, then, that these “unwholesome roots” are most likely to be exposed. In that stripped-down silence we begin detaching from “outer” things, and at a certain stage of this withdrawal process find ourselves more easily absorbed by mental phenomena, including the three

poisons. These mind-states may be considered *makyo* (lit., “devilish phenomena”) because of their power to bedevil us in our practice.



Anyone who has survived a full-blown *makyo* of greed, anger, or delusion in *sesshin* knows how extended sitting can expose and even unleash these three poisons. Anger may be the most flagrant of them, sometimes reaching an intensity or duration all out of proportion to the cause. A carelessly worded note from one’s work supervisor; an habitual sniff or cough by one’s neighbor in the *zendo*; an infraction of table manners; a presentation rejected by the teacher; a correction from one of the monitors – each of these can propel one into hours of fuming, or days of smoldering annoyance. And then there are the long stretches one can spend focusing on one’s own shortcomings, mentally flogging oneself – malevolence in full blossom. *Sesshin* veterans learn to recognize their instinctive fault-finding and neutralize it through attention on the breath or koan, but they usually have to undergo trial by fire from many such experiences before catching on to this.

Greed can arise in more subtle disguises. Cravings for food, sleep, and comfort are common enough, but far more consuming may be the thirst for approval and recognition. The process of going to *dokusan* may lay bare a ferocious competitiveness – i.e., greed. A Head Monitor of old, in the days when the *dokusan* bell often provoked stampedes, once commented wryly that before some *dokusan* rushes he silently chanted the *Kannon Gyo* – for the sake of all those hungry ghosts craving their “share.” And then there is the avarice that may pollute our practice most of all: the greed for awakening. In my first seven-day *sesshin* I worked myself into a fever of desperation in the closing hours. Slaving for *kensho*, I began asking for the stick repeatedly (this was back when it was used only at the sitter’s request), in uninterrupted sets, without the monitor so much as moving his feet. (This got the monitor himself increasingly exercised, his blows gaining in force, until *Roshi* wandered over to see what the brouhaha was about and put a stop to

it.) Such is the power of a focused mind misdirected. Among the three poisons it is delusion that seems to parade itself most colorfully before the teacher in dokusan. The states of self-deception, of confusion and folly, that people bring in are spectacular enough in themselves, but then the degree to which the participants remain unaware of them is astonishing. As they matter-of-factly describe their florid delusions about themselves, they might as well have a neon “MAKYO” sign flashing on and off over their heads, yet when told they’re in the thick of such an episode, they often blink with disbelief, stunned, and murmur, “Makyo? Really?” Then they usually snap out of it and get back on track with their zazen. This is why I always encourage sesshin participants to check in for dokusan at least occasionally, even if they have no reason of their own to do so.

Not all sesshin participants in the grip of a delusive mind-state get to dokusan as soon as they should. What could be the Guinness Book record for most outrageous makyo in the delusion category would have to go to the young man in a 1969 Rochester sesshin who suddenly got it into his head that he had to get to Boston. He actually walked out of sesshin, took a cab to the airport, bought a ticket, and boarded a plane. Halfway there, the clouds in his mind parted (“Oh-h . . . sh-h-hit . . .”) and the realization of his temporary insanity came crashing in on him. Upon landing he turned around and immediately flew back to Rochester, took a cab to Arnold Park, and, the story goes, slipped into the kinhin line without anyone having noticed him gone.

Why would you want to undergo sustained, intensified zazen knowing that it will expose you, sooner or later, to storms of greed, anger, and delusion? Because you can’t neutralize the three poisons without flushing them out first. It takes courage, and sometimes a strong stomach, to press on in zazen when in the throes of one of these cyclones, but each time we weather it, we are less likely to be thrown by the next one. For that matter, even daily sitting outside sesshin will, in time, reveal these “unwholesome roots,” though not as dramatically. Only through directly encountering and moving through these shadows of our mind do we come to see their insubstantial nature. We get wise to them, discovering that they are not essential to us, but come and go, like guests. Ghosts!

Greed, anger, and delusion are but the faces of primal ignorance, which leaves every one of us stuck with them, to one degree or another, until full enlightenment. So we need to make peace with them, even as we remain on guard against their poisonous influence and resolute in not capitulating to them. Meanwhile, the pain that they cause us fuels our practice: “Endless blind passions, I vow to uproot!”

—*Roshi Bodhin Kjolhede*