

THE WISDOM WITHIN THE POISON

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Our conflicting emotions, what the Tibetan Buddhists call the Five Poisons (anger, desire, ignorance, pride, and jealousy) are said to contain the Five Wisdoms within them. Better than that, they are the five wisdoms in disguise, the inverse of one another. How many years have I read that, and what on earth does it mean?

Since we all will eventually have to realize the five wisdoms in the poisons for ourselves, this means we are not about to simply eradicate these poisons and, you know, somehow stamp them out. And that is the point; we don't just surgically remove the five poisons and that is because they are also the five wisdoms. It is not as simple as that one is the baby and the other the bathwater. They are identical and we need the wisdoms. Therefore we have to transform the poisons, and the operative word here is "we." It is something we each must do for ourselves, but just when and how?

Let me paint a picture here. These five poisons or conflicting emotions (like anger) are not nothing. For most of us they are huge disruptions in the mindstream that (on occasion) tear the envelope of the mind and can shatter the self, leaving it in pieces. Fully enraged anger is like a tornado that totally takes us over and we come out of it sometime later, usually worse for the wear. So, on radar maps of the mind, anger and the other four poisons are large red storm clouds in the general fog of things. You can't miss them or they you. So what at heart are they?

Of course we know that anger is "anger," but what kind of vortex-energy is behind what we call anger? I mean, what is it really? This is exactly what each of us has to find out for ourselves. I can tell you something about it and you can read about it, but ultimately we each have to go look and clearly see what anger is for ourselves, aside from just being swept up in it. And no one can do that for us.

So I am distinguishing here the difference between the content of anger (what we are angry about) and the anger itself. In dharma practice we learn to stop following the content or supposed reason of the anger, and instead begin to identify the true nature of the anger itself, what it is. This is not easy, and I am not qualified to point out the true nature of anything, including these five poisons. However, I can try to tell you something about this process of seeing the true nature, if only that it exists. So I apologize that I, like many of you, am just a student in some of these things.

The five poisons (anger, jealousy, etc.) are so powerful that we can't just run out and confront them all at once. One tiny distraction and we are swept away by them. Don't believe me? Just check your own mind in regard to your anger, over-arching desires, ignoring what is good for you, pride, and jealousy -- that kind of stuff. Still active? If those five are transparent to you

(don't affect you), then you don't need to read any further.

However, if you are still wrestling with the five poisons, then you have to work up to them, come at them from the side, so to speak, and this is what takes practice. By discovering and examining all of our lesser reactions, we begin to build up the skills necessary to take on the various poisons at full strength. But for the time being, we are not prepared for that. And here is what I find helpful.

Learning to recognize our small reactions, how they work, and begin to see into their true nature is the place to begin. Our knee-jerk reactions, positive or negative, are not something to ban or keep at arm's length, except perhaps at the very beginning. We need to get to know and acknowledge our reactions and patiently disarm them from obscuring us -- get to know what they are. Ultimately, we want to discover their true nature (not just their content) for ourselves, not as an understanding, but as an experience.

And here is what you need to know: the true nature of our tiny reactions is identical to the true nature of the five poisons, so what I call reactive-tonglen is very practical as a groundwork dharma practice for looking at the larger five poisons (like anger) down the line. If we can look at the nature of small reactions, we can gradually learn to look at the larger ones like anger.

These five poisons, as mentioned, have a silver lining, the five wisdoms. And this concept is not all that hard to understand. When we finally reach the point where we can look a poison like anger in the eye (without blinking) and see at least somewhat into its true nature (what it is), we can start to see the wisdom in it, and I don't mean the wisdom in being angry. When the clouds of anger force themselves upon us but can't stick, they vanish, and we are left with a lot of energy on our hands and also real clarity.

We didn't get angry and (in that same moment) we began to understand how to handle anger, and at least something about the true nature of anger. And the true nature is also the wisdom of it. Instead of subduing us, the anger is itself subdued or tamed within ourselves. And when that happens we have clarity about this. The wisdom in anger is said to be the mirror-like clarity.

As mentioned, we can start small with observing our moment-to-moment reactions and graduate to the five poisons after we have practiced awhile. It takes time, but it can be a distinct turning point in confidence when we spot the vortex of an anger-tornado heading straight for us and it just passes through as if we were invisible. We saw through it and are no longer as vulnerable to that poison; it actually is invigorating and makes us smile inside. And it opens wide the door of our mind training. We experience how valuable that training is.

I hope this has been at least somewhat helpful.

