



**The Three Poisons of Mind**  
*transcript of a teaching given October 24, 1997*

**Geshe la:** The three poisons of mind are greed or attachment, hatred, and ignorance. The reason why they are called three poisons is because these three are the root cause that destroys the calmness of our mind. It is clear that whenever one of these poisons arise in our mind it destroys the calm and peace of mind at that very moment, and makes no room for inner peace, a calm state and pleasant atmosphere within the frame of mind.

Ignorance is like a field where the plants of attachment, greed, anger, and hatred grow.

First let me tell you this, generally people don't know how and from what cause attachment and hatred or aversion arises. Since people don't know the actual cause of arising attachment and so on people tend to blame external situations, conditions, circumstances and other behaviors. According to Buddhism the actual root cause for arising attachment and hatred are within one's mind. We are born with this cause right at the beginning, the moment we are conceived in mother's womb. So the actual cause is the innate arising thoughts of 'I' and thoughts of 'others'. This notion makes 'oneself' very distinct from 'others'. Between these two thoughts there arises the attachment and hatred. As a result, there arises all other emotional psychological pain and suffering.

The thoughts of 'I' cause us to see ourselves as more important than others. We protect and satisfy the sense of 'I' and 'mine'. This 'I' desires after the objects of the five senses, and sensual pleasure. We become attached and totally infused with the sense of 'I' and 'mine'.

According to Buddhism, the sense of 'I' and 'mine', and concern only for the welfare of oneself, ones 'I' interest, is called self-cherishing or a self centered attitude which is a very narrow and weak state of mind. This is the most serious of obstacles for the cultivation of bodhicitta (enlightened mind).

Attachment and hatred or anger arise from one's mental happiness and mental unhappiness. That means mental unhappiness gives rise to the anger; mental happiness gives rise to attachment. Therefore, according to Buddhism, we have a great opportunity to stop the arising of attachment and anger at the moment one is experiencing mental unhappiness or happiness. Buddhist practitioners always try to live with mindfulness and awareness, which helps to bring all of our focus and attention to the present moment. This enables the practitioner to escape from arising anger and attachment by dealing with and working with mental happiness and unhappiness. Since the primary cause of attachment and hatred are within us, there is no particular reason to blame others when we experience anger and hatred.

The three mental poisons make us unhappy, cause us mental pain, and leaves us with no power to find a positive solution to deal with the situation. It is important to understand the negative effects and disadvantages of these three poisons and try to see the positive effects

and advantages of patience, a sense of contentment and the clear perfect view to see things as they are, not as they seem to be.

So if one is truly seeking inner peace, a sense of contentment, a wish to accept the harms and injuries caused by others and to be free from inner confusions then one must gain deeper levels of understanding by combining meditation with the adoption of sound ethical way of life by restraining from the ten negative actions and cultivating the ten positive actions.

These practices consist of three higher trainings; training in ethics, morality, and samadhi or meditation and the insight or correct view, which refers to the deepest inner understanding of wisdom.

Attachment is an unhealthy quality of mind, which causes you to not let things go easily and causes you to tightly cling to objects of desire. In its second phase, attachment causes tremendous psychological pain when the object of desire separates from you. This is not a mistake of the object of desire itself, it is the mistake of our weak mind.

One important thing to understand here is that whenever we see anything we apply or project some quality on that object from our point of view. In fact, that quality does exist from the side of the object and then we become attached to that fake quality. Since it is a fake quality projected from our side and it will definitely diminish or change when our mental state and mood changes we then become frustrated and disappointed. This, then leads to further problems such as anger, hatred, and confusion.

**Student:** Geshe la, people would say we are not human if we did not feel loss over the death of a relative or the loss of a loved one in a relationship. What is it about our feelings in this?

**Geshe la:** This is because of attachment not because of a true sense of love therefore we feel loss because we are unable to accept letting go of something.

**Student:** Geshe la, it is often pointed out that the model for a bodhisattva's compassion is that of a mother for an only child. Surely this love is also one of attachment. How can we reconcile the two views presented here? Given that this is so, would we then say that this love/compassion of a mother based on attachment, is in fact not 'true'? Or can we say that attached love and compassion, even though defiled, still has some positive benefit for beings in a limited way due to our limited samsaric conditioning?

**Geshe la:** When we talk about compassion primarily there are two types. One type of compassion is directly influenced by normal attachment the second is the compassion that is free from normal attachment. The first type of compassion is limited and easily decreases or deteriorates when the situation changes. The second type of compassion is unlimited it is not possible for it to decrease even though the situation changes. The phrase that the Bodhisattva's compassion is like a mothers towards an only child, refers to the nature intensity of compassion.

The second type of compassion is different from the compassion of mother towards only child because it is completely free from influence of normal attachment. It is not true that the comparison is accurate in all aspects. It is only referring to the intensity of the love and compassion. But still the attached love or compassion, though it is defiled, has some positive benefits and we human beings have to survive on the basis of this compassion.

**Student:** The second compassion is uncovered after attempting to develop the first, correct?

**Geshe la:** Yes that's correct.

**Student:** I practice non-violence by being aware that others are motivated by the same samsaric desire for immediate gratification but I become acutely aware of the suffering that motivates others and this can make me very depressed, is there some help for this state of mind?

**Geshe la:** Yes, generally depression can be removed by gaining understanding of the second and third types of suffering. This suffering usually cannot be understood as a suffering by ordinary mind. Therefore it causes us depression when we think of the suffering of others. It is important to try to gain a clear understanding of the sufferings of pervasive conditioning, that which equally exists in every sentient being regardless of rich, poor, powerful, healthy or unhealthy, ranging from beggars to kings. Understanding of this suffering helps to keep us from becoming overwhelmed and depressed when we think of and are aware of the suffering of others.

**Student:** What if we have strong aggressive tendencies which, even though motivated seem to arise over and over. Often it seems like there is no progress since there is so much that just comes back up?

**Geshe la:** According to Buddhism, these things will not diminish by their own accord unless we consciously apply antidotes within one's mind. If you don't apply an antidote it will be always there. If you don't move some junk things from your mind there will be no room to bring beautiful things to your mind. We get rid of our bad habits by replacing them with cultivated good thoughts and a warm heart.

**Student:** What does Buddhism have to say about physical pain such as daily headaches and such?

**Geshe la:** Physical pain such as headaches, which are caused by one's negative state of mind can be alleviated by cultivating positive states of mind. The mind's capacity to cure or heal our physical body is one of Buddhism's important aspects that was discovered 2600 years ago. For the illness that is caused by an imbalance of inner 5 elements one needs to see doctor, take medicine and follow a proper diet.