

## *The Poison Blowfish*

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The Buddha didn't say that life is suffering but there is a lot of suffering in life. Birth, aging, illness and death, being separated from those we love, having to stay with things we don't love, don't like, not getting what we want: There's a lot of pain in life. This is why the Buddha's teaching is such a gift. He spent 45 years telling people how they could learn not to suffer in spite of all the pains and difficulties and separations in life.

So it's appropriate that we receive his teachings with gratitude. As he points out, when we're suffering we're, one, bewildered and, two, we're looking for someone to show us a way out. That's one of our first questions: Is there someone who knows a way out of this suffering? It's the most primal question in the mind. Even before we know words, that's a question that gets formed when we suffer as children: Can somebody help?

And so the Buddha, after all those many lifetimes of trying to find awakening, saw that this was the best use of his time: to show people how they're causing themselves to suffer and what they can do to change that so they don't have to suffer, even though there is birth, aging, illness, death, and separation—all the things we don't like about life. It is possible to experience these things and not suffer.

That's the essence of the skill that he taught. And it is important to see it as a skill. He said that he taught two categorical teachings, two teachings that were true across the board. One was that unskillful behavior should be abandoned, and skillful behavior should be developed. That's an activity. He didn't just say, "This is skillful; this is unskillful." He went on to say that this is what you should do: If you want to put an end to suffering, you should learn how to see where you're doing things that are unskillful, saying things that are unskillful, thinking things that are unskillful. Learn how to give those unskillful ways up. Replace them with more skillful behavior.

The other categorical teaching is the four noble truths, which point directly at the problem of suffering, what's causing it, and what can be done about it. For each of these truths there's a skill. You want to comprehend the suffering so you can see what's causing it. When you see what's causing it, you let it go. You develop the path so you can realize the end of suffering. Those are all skills that have to be mastered.

It's so easy to get those tasks mixed up. We see something we don't like and we try to push it away, push it away. Either that, or we feed on our suffering and actually develop our suffering. In other words, we're applying the wrong tasks. You want to look at how you're suffering so as to understand exactly what's going on. There's the simple pain of the fact that things change, but that pain doesn't have to make inroads into the mind. There's something about the mind that takes it in, feeds on it, and then gets sick.

That's what the Buddha's teachings on clinging are all about. Clinging is a kind of feeding. We keep feeding on these different activities, hoping that they're going to give us

some sort of satisfaction. And it's like having a poisonous food and telling yourself, "Well, if I fix it this way, it's not good. How about I fix it in another way or how about another way?" And we just keep trying all these different ways of fixing that poisonous food in hopes that it's not going to poison us. And it turns out there's no way you're going to fix it so that you won't poison yourself—except one. And that's turning the poison into the path. That way of fixing your food is going to strengthen you to the level where you don't need to feed anymore.

This is an important point. They talk about comprehension as being the duty with regard to suffering. In another passage the Buddha defines comprehension as developing dispassion. In other words, you understand something so thoroughly that you know you don't want to eat it anymore, you don't want to feed on it anymore. But the mind has to be strong before it can stop its feeding. Otherwise, it just keeps going back to its old ways. So you take these aggregates, you take the events of life, and you try to turn them into the path so you can gain that strength. And particularly, the strength of mindfulness, the strength of concentration, the strength of discernment. These are the things that enable the mind to stick with the path and work with it and develop it.

The discernment here is not just the discernment that comes at the end of the path when you finally realize, "Oh, I've been feeding on this stuff and it's not nourishing at all, I don't need it." Prior to that time, you have to develop the discernment that motivates you to start along the path and to stick with it. And that takes a lot of wisdom right there.

I was reading today someone saying that, "Well, you know, the Buddha in the Pali Canon: We don't really know if that's the true Buddha. You can't really trust it." But how would we know about the Buddha if we didn't have the Pali Canon? And how are we going to know whether we can trust it or not unless we try the teachings? Because that's what the teachings are for: If they help put an end to suffering, then they're genuine Dhamma. The thing is that testing them requires an awful lot. You have to be generous, you have to be virtuous, lots of things you have to give up, lots of things you have to do. So if you decide beforehand, "We can't trust those texts, we'll just pretend that they're not there, treat them as stories, leave them at that": That's basically an excuse not to put them to the test.

Of course, everyone is free to do that, but the question is: Are you missing out on something important? You look around and how many teachings can you see that really promise to put an end to suffering in a way that makes sense?

This is one of the reasons why we have the reflection on the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha as a way of giving strength to the mind and motivating you on the path. Here's a teaching that says it's within your capability to put an end to suffering; this is how you do it. And you have the example of many people, many people who seem very reliable, who've put these teachings to the test and found that they passed the test.

So you develop a lot of wisdom in learning how to motivate yourself on the path, to keep yourself on the path, to keep going on the path. In that way, even though the mind is

still feeding, it's feeding on something good. It's learning how to take those aggregates and feed on them in a way that's not poisonous.

It's like that blowfish they have in Japan. If you take out certain organs, it's not going to be poisonous. The thing is that the cooks that are really considered skillful are the ones that leave a little bit of the poison in so you get a little bit of numbness on your lips, so you have the thrill of getting a little bit close to death. But that's not the way the Buddha taught. If he were to cook the blowfish, he'd leave that organ out entirely. He wanted to leave behind a teaching that's totally safe—not totally foolproof, but totally safe. He'd say, "Look this is the safe way you practice. Feed on the aggregates by getting the mind into concentration." In order to do that, you have to gain a sense, kind of a hands on sense, of how you relate to form as you bring the mind to concentration, how you relate to feeling, perception, fabrication, consciousness, because these are the raw materials for getting the mind into concentration and getting it to stay there. Focusing on the breath requires a sense of the form of the body from within, how your body feels when you're sitting here with your eyes closed, how you inhabit it. And then there's the perception, the mental label that keeps you there. And the mental fabrications that direct your thinking to the breath and evaluate the breath, work with the breath. If you notice there are fabrications that go off someplace else, you have to learn how to say No to them and how to avoid them whenever possible. And then there are the feelings that come as a result of the breathing. There are the parts of the body that are in pain that sometimes the breath can't help and there are the parts that the breath can make really comfortable, really refreshed, satisfied, full. These are the things you deal with when you're bringing the mind into concentration.

Getting the mind concentrated gives you hands-on experience in distinguishing among these aggregates and learning how to feed on them in a skillful way so that you really do strengthen the mind. And you avoid the poison that comes when you really cling or identify them as you or yours. If you find the mind trying to leave concentration and go off to feed in other directions, you will realize, "Wait a minute. I don't need to feed that way, that doesn't really get anything, gain anything of any worth. It's not worth the effort." Because remember, you're not just feeding. You have to fix the food. So why fix poison for yourself?

This is how you begin to develop dispassion for things that used to hold a lot of interest for you, the things that you used to like to fix and then like to eat—either simply for the pure pleasure of it, or out of the thrill of doing something forbidden, or else out of a sense of obligation. We have all kinds of reasons for justifying that kind of effort while ignoring the pain and suffering that it causes. But it's when you're finally willing to look at it for what it is and see, "Okay, I've got something better here; there's a better way of feeding that doesn't have all that poison," and when it really hits you that there's nothing to be gained by that poisonous eating: That's when you learn how to let it go.

And it's only when you've let go of a lot of your other attachments that you can start looking at the process of the path itself and begin to realize that this, too, involves a lot of fixing of food. There comes a point where you say, "Have you had enough?" This requires

that you learn how to fix it really well and that the mind be really strong so it finally is willing to let go and stop that kind of feeding. To realize, “Okay, enough. I don’t need any more of that kind of nourishment.” That’s when there’s *nibbida*: the sense of disenchantment or distaste, basically the sense that you’ve had enough of that feeding. And when you no longer want to feed on it, you begin to ask yourself, “Do I want to fix that kind of food?” When you feel no more passion for fixing that food, then the food supply stops. That’s why dispassion follows on disenchantment, and why cessation—the cessation of food-fixing—follows on dispassion. If you’re not going to eat it, why spend all that time in the kitchen? That’s when you can let go and that’s when you’re really free.

But even before you reach that point, you use the skills and insights you’ve gained from concentration, from seeing feelings and perceptions and fabrications and the ways in which they create all kinds of trouble or in which you create all kinds of trouble around them. You can start seeing how they function in your daily life as you deal with other people, as you deal with birth, aging, illness, death, and separation. You begin to see some of your feeding habits for what they are, that they’re really unhealthy. This isn’t easy because we have a lot of attachment to these habits. But as we stick with the path, we begin to reach that point where something in the mind says, “Enough.” A huge sense of freedom comes with that.

It’s amazing how the mind resists that freedom, which is why we have to keep at the practice again and again and again. But it’s only through the practice that we get to the point where we can finally admit to ourselves, “Okay, I’ve had enough of that. I thought it was clever, I thought it was good, I thought it was...” whatever you used to justify all these activities to yourself. And then you can finally let them go.

So work on strengthening the mind as much as you can. Learn how to feed on the aggregates in a way that you don’t have to get poisoned by them. Then you find that even just being on the path, you see a lot of the ordinary suffering of life just falling away, falling away. The path doesn’t save all of its good things for the end. There’s a lot of good in staying on the path. Sometimes it’s difficult but the difficulties are all worth it. If you’re really sensitive, you see that there is suffering falling away while you’re staying on the path. You’re avoiding a lot of ways that you could create trouble for yourself, for the people around you. It’s a good path to be on.