

Transforming Poison

by Sally Clay



What is the color of depression? What shape is your anger?

It's not often that we meet a therapist who asks these questions. Yet to work with our feelings—to deal with our anger or get over our grief—we need to look at emotions for what they are. We need to be able to describe them. If we can recognize our fears, then we can express them with words or pictures. If we can put them into colors and shapes on a page, then we can transform ugly feelings into a work of art. If we can do that, then we are one step closer to transforming painful emotions into positive qualities.

Buddhist psychology is based on the idea that all of our suffering is caused by three basic tendencies—ignorance, attachment, and aggression. These are the conflicting emotions, and are sometimes called the Three Poisons, for they pollute the basic goodness of life and are the cause of all misery and affliction, including mental illness.

Ignorance is the first poison, and is the source of the other conflicting emotions. It can be denial, a kind of deliberate “not knowing,” or shutting out, of information that we do not want to deal with. “I don't want to think about it,” might describe an attitude of ignorance. Stigma and prejudice are a kind of ignorance, for they are possible only when we shut out the humanness of other people. Ignorance has an empty quality—if it is a shape, it is fuzzy, and if it is a color at all, it is white, which is the absence of other colors.

The second poison is attachment, or grasping. This emotion includes any feeling that wants to hold onto something or pull it toward us. Greed is a kind of attachment, as are dissatisfaction and possessiveness. We want our friends and lovers to fill our needs, to be what we want them to be. We hold onto our beliefs and belongings for dear life, even when they make us unhappy. We can never get enough; we are always hungry for more. “I want it, I want it now, and I want to keep it,” might describe an attitude of attachment. Attachment has a warm quality, soft and often pleasurable—it has a rounded shape, and its color is red.

Aggression is the third conflicting emotion. This emotion includes any feeling that rejects something, or wants to push it away. Hate and anger are the obvious types of aggression; but fear and anxiety fall into this category as well, for they also involve a movement of avoidance

or rejection. We strike out against what we fear. We reject what threatens us. “Go away, I don’t want it,” might describe an attitude of aggression. Aggression has a cold quality, hard and energetic—it has a sharp and linear shape, and its color is deep blue.

These three poisons—ignorance, attachment, and aggression—are at the center of the well-known Buddhist diagram called the Wheel of Life. They are represented by a pig, a rooster, and a snake, each holding on to the tail of the other. The Wheel of Life represents the vicious circle of suffering that we all experience, and which Buddhists call *samsara*. The diagram shows scenes of daily life and spiritual activities. All of the scenes are interconnected and dependent on each other, and all revolve around the three conflicting emotions at the center. We see that the pig bites the tail of the rooster, showing that ignorance leads to attachment. The rooster represents attachment, and is connected to the snake, which symbolizes hate. The snake, in turn, bites the tail of the pig, and the circle is perpetuated. These three emotions affect all the events of our lives. The entire Wheel of Life is held by a wrathful monster, representing the impermanence of all existence. Standing apart from the tableau is the Buddha, demonstrating that it is possible to escape the vicious circle and attain freedom.

The Dharma goes on to teach that not only are our emotions the cause of our suffering—they can also be our means of liberation. The same poisons that cause suffering to ourselves and others can be transformed to qualities that bring enlightenment and happiness. For example, the “shut down” quality of ignorance creates a space of rigid simplicity. In the alchemy of transformation, a subtle change in attitude can take the dull space of ignorance and turn it into the open universe of wisdom. The fuzzy quality is still there, and the quality of simplicity is still there. The lack of color has become clear light, in which all the colors can be seen as they are.

A similar “flick of the switch,” or subtle change of attitude, can transform attachment into delight. The hunger for possessions becomes a warm appreciation of the beauty around us. No doubt this explains why, around the world, a red heart symbolizes both the yearning of infatuation and the light of love. Loving kindness has the same softness, and the same round quality, as attachment; only the pain has been removed. Likewise with hatred and aggression: When the painful aspects are removed, the essential qualities of sharpness and single-mindedness remain. When anger is transformed, its energy is revealed to be one of clarity and intelligence. In the end, our emotions can be described as a rainbow of colors, and a family of shapes and qualities. The goal of Dharma practice is to gradually wear away the negative aspects of our emotions, so that what is left are only the enlightened qualities.

The value of art is that it allows us to take the raw materials of emotions and to translate them into words or graphics. Art is a spiritual medium—a means of learning to appreciate and work with the emotions that afflict us. We can take our blackest depression, and smear it on the page for all to see. We can draw our anger with sharp lines and angles, and put it into a design with the cloud of the depression. Added to that, we can portray our deepest yearnings with waves of color. If we allow ourselves to express these feelings honestly and creatively, our work will at the same time reflect our pain and become something beyond it, something good and beautiful. We can take the actual cause of our suffering, the conflicting emotions, and by expressing their essential qualities transform them into liberation.