

## **Safe Enough to See the Truth** Rev. Jundo Gregory Gibbs

What is it that is necessary to see the Truth, the Dharma, and to act in harmony with it? Constant interference comes from the poisonous behaviors: Greediness, Hatred and Delusion. These poisons are often described as intoxicants. A drunk cannot see the truth (say a red light) nor can he act reliably in accord with what is there to be seen (he will likely not stop and wait for the signal to change). Similarly, if we are drunk with the intoxicants of compulsive desire, anger and ignorance we will not perceive the causes and conditions in our lives clearly nor will we act effectively amidst them. What are the factors that keep us imbibing these poisons? Allow me to investigate a few.

### *Reasons We Drink the Three Poisons*

**It tastes so good** – In English-language discourse the first of the three poisons is usually described as greed. The original Sanskrit term, *trishna*, actually means “thirsting”. The meaning is a kind of desiring that is totally absorbing, compulsive, dominating one’s every thought. The problem with such desiring is that, as long as it looks like it might be fulfilled, it feels good. This poisonous intoxicant tastes good to the palate that has been jaded by addictive behavior, by hatred and self-deception. Overcoming the dominance of such thirsting is usually achieved by developing an alternative taste for kindness and peacefulness. The once-jaded palate can be retrained to, as Shinran puts it, “prefer at all times the medicine of the Buddha’s Vow.”

**We think our energy comes from our anger** – Anger actually depletes our energies and clouds our minds. Anger is an emotion secondary to the more primary “irritability.” Buddhist philosophers tell us that any stimulus can invite either pleasure or displeasure or be of a neutral flavor. If we are irritable we can escape our irritability by getting mad and justifying our anger. Why would we do so? Usually anger is a way of escaping a much more primary feeling, a real passion – Fear.

**We told ourselves its really all right in this circumstance** – This form of delusion reinforces itself and the other two poisons (obsessive desire and hatred). Rationalization is so basic to how we think that we usually cannot distinguish it from a genuine process of reasoning. It is never all right to hate. Thus, for a Buddhist, the old Bob Dylan line describes more than a mere verbal paradox: “I knew a man who didn’t hate anything, - except hatred.” Hatred is always bad. Obsessive longing never brings fulfillment. If we catch ourselves making up excuses for behavior that the Buddha taught us is poisonous we should know that we are sinking in the quicksand of self-deception.

**We are afraid** – As noted above, anger is one escape from fear. Intoxication, properly so called, is another. Obsessing about objects of desire also takes our attention away from our fear. Fear is not classed as one of the poisonous behaviors for a number of reasons. For one thing, we cannot totally eliminate it. For another, it is sometimes quite wholesome. Just about everyone I know who is of my own generation has a fear of hypodermic needles. If only Jimi Hendrix, Jerry Garcia, Nico, Rick Danko, Jim

Morrison, Janis Joplin and other such stars of the 60's had shared this fear with their fans they might still be around. Buddhism has many strategies for keeping our fears from tying us in knots. I would like to discuss a few below.

### *Ways of Feeling Safe Enough*

**Deconstructing the Self** - One way of undermining our fears is to undermine the fixed notion of ourselves. You don't need to be afraid of what might happen to you if you no longer believe in you. This approach is used in Hinduism and Taoism as well as in Buddhist tradition.

**Our Ultimate Destiny is Secured** – Shinran Shonin's interpretation of the Larger Sutra on Amida Buddha clarifies that our ultimate destiny is established in the one moment of faithfully saying the Buddha's Name. On the one hand there are no objective criteria for confirming that one thought-moment. On the other hand, the more we realize the deep compassionate intent of the Buddha, the more realize that Amida Buddha is a manifestation of the deepest aspirations of Reality itself the more we are certain that if it didn't happen yesterday that moment of true entrusting will occur any moment now. With our final destiny being that of a Buddha what is there to worry about.

**Death is a Certainty so why fear it?** – Some religions that developed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century actually promise their followers eternal life in their current biological forms. Sane, educated people do not adopt those religions. We will die one day so why worry so much about it? There is a great scene near the end of the Kurosawa film "To Live" (Ikiru) where the protagonist, Mr. Watanabe has decided that the greatest fulfillment he can find in the waning days of his terminal illness is to build a playground for the children in his neighborhood. A Yakuza Godfather (Oyabun) has other plans for the property and tries to intimidate Watanabe. Diminutive, elderly and terminally-ill Mr. Watanabe looks up into the Yakuza's face with a smile and stands unwavering. What can a Japanese mafiosa do to a terminally-ill man without a family? Each of us can have that same sort of courage before intimidators if we just realize they can only hasten what is inevitable for both us and our intimidators.

**Buddha on the Tip of our Tongues** – "Namo Amida Butsu" is the very presence of Amida Buddha. That which is worthy beyond our ability to express is in the back of our minds and in the depths of our hearts as these simple vocalizations: "Namu Amida Butsu," "Namanda," "Kimyo Jin Jippo Muge Ko Nyorai" etc. With the Sacred always on the tips of our tongues our worries and obsessions seem much less important. Our anxieties cease to discomfort us. We are safe enough to see what is before us as-it-is. We are safe enough to see the truth.