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Practicing with Greed

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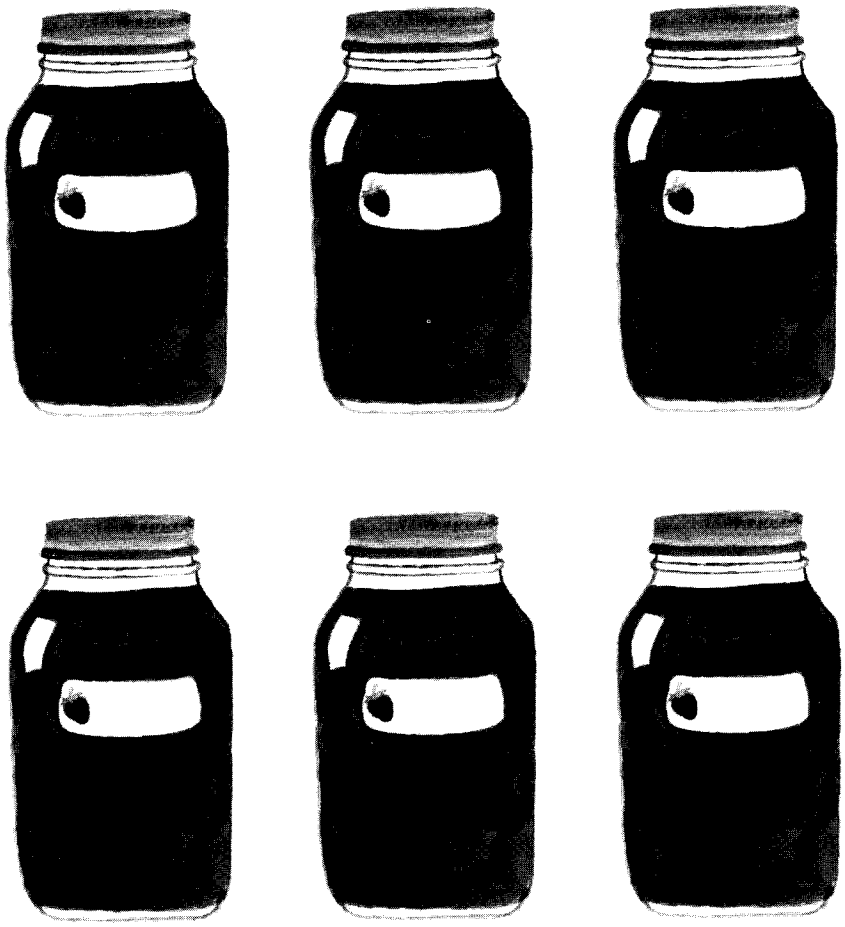

Last night in the early evening hours, I scuttled along rows of plump organic strawberries, juicy and sweet with the day's ripening. Only the day before I had been dreaming of strawberry jam, yearning for the summer's first harvest. I plunged my hands into the foot-high greenery, grabbing one ripe red berry after another. Some ancient hunter-gatherer greed took over and I couldn't resist. I plucked fat berries, small berries, perfect berries, gnarled berries, until my fingers were stained and my baskets filled to overflowing. I needed two quarts for a batch of jam; I left with over twelve pounds. Even the pesky mosquitoes could not deter this surge of self-providing greed. It seemed completely natural.

What is this greed? Buddhist psychology explains greed in simple terms of attraction and aversion. In Buddhist terms, all emotions can be boiled down to three fundamental tendencies—wanting more of something (greed), wanting less of something (hate), and wanting something that doesn't exist (delusion). The first emotion cluster can be understood as the biological drive to go toward what is useful, the second as the desire to back away from what is harmful, and the third to be confused by what is deceptive. Taken

together, they are known as the Three Poisons, the source of all human suffering. The Buddhist path of liberation is based on the study and release of desire, cultivating a state of equanimity free from these three poisons. Greed is not seen so much as a sin, but rather as a driving force affecting all beings. Sometimes it is useful, as when animals gather food stores for the winter; sometimes it is harmful, as when resources are exhausted under pressure. Greed cannot be eliminated; it is part of the very process of life that sustains us. But the person on the path of liberation can make the effort to study greed in its infinite manifestations and cultivate restraint and awareness.

The impact of human activity on the natural world has been well documented by many observers across many regions of the earth. Soil erosion, species decimation, habitat destruction, water depletion—there is no shortage of evidence for the powerful nature of greed. In some cases greed is driven by profit motivation, in others by hunger. Environmentalists have made careers out of documenting the scale of its impact and fighting this biological drive run amuck. Most of the time they point their fingers at others, associating greed with capitalism or economic globalization. But what about other forms of greed? Do environmentalists experience greed, and if so, how? What can we learn about greed through studying its presence in our own lives?

For starters, let me suggest five types of greed that seem common in environmental work. Each type manifests as a desire for more of whatever it is we want. To support that greed, we may engage in aggressive action or denial, or perhaps even emotional abuse of ourselves or others. If we are busy locating greed in our enemies, then we are less likely to notice it in our own lives. This, then, is an exercise in self-reflection to open the conversation and see what we might learn about greed in the field of environmentalism.

For me and my colleagues, it seems the first greed is often for **more time**. No matter how many hours we work in a week, there is never enough time to write all the letters, make all the calls, or take all the actions we see as necessary to save the ailing planet. Even with efficient lists and fast email communication, there is always more to do. Some forego mating or raising families just to get more time for their committed work. Others work 80 hour weeks, spending evenings and weekends for the cause. Often the greed for time takes its toll on the body, leaving it starved for rest and rejuvenation. This greed is driven by anxiety that things are disintegrating at an extremely threatening rate. This concern is reinforced by a sense of inadequacy to the task that can often turn to despair when battles for time are lost. Caught in a cycle of greed for time, the environmentalist can be perpetually anxious and out of touch with sustaining sources of joy (such as fresh strawberries). In the face of unending challenges this is not a recipe for stability or equanimity.

A second form of greed is the greed for **more knowledge**. In public debates and court hearings, critical issues are skewered on the all too common critique that "we need more information." Academics like me labor under the responsibility of creating that knowledge. Protective measures regarding genetically engineered foods, low-level nuclear radiation, or oil spills are often stalled by the conclusion, "we don't know enough to take action at this time." Environmentalists are easily hooked on this showstopper and dutifully return to their desks to find more research that will prove their concerns. In some cases more knowledge is helpful and can be persuasive in shifting the balance of opinion in favor of environmental caution. But very often seeking more knowledge is a distraction, a way of delaying progress on an issue. Consider the prolonged history of debate on global climate change. The U.S. demand for more knowledge has become a political joke in Europe, where states are moving ahead with climate action plans.

In response to national foot-dragging, environmentalists lobby actively for **more**

citizen engagement. Some wish everyone would become activists on behalf of the planet. "If only more people would get involved," we say, "then they would pay attention to us." Yes, we know this works—that building community supports life, that citizen groundswells can make a difference. But in some cases a single policy or regulation could reduce environmental impact much more effectively. How much is our yearning for citizen engagement based in loneliness or burnout? Taking up the study of greed in this manifestation presents opportunities for emotional honesty. I have certainly spent my own share of run-down weekends wishing others could take up the charge. I still find myself blurring personal emotional needs with ideological standards and political strategies. Even the most community-minded person can be blinded by greed and lose the capacity to function with equanimity, no matter how their company holds up in the fight.

A fourth form of greed is the desire for **more status**. Environmentalists have suffered repeated attacks by the conservative right for being anti-business, subversive, or on the radical fringe. Despite steady well-documented public support for environmental initiatives like those for clean air, recycling, and land protection, environmentalists are given relatively little status or respect for their hard efforts. Even my students reflect this social trend when they report others on campus call them "crunchies" and "enviro-geeks." Who would want to become an environmentalist, they ask, when social status is so limited? Instead of seeing environmentalists as healers, caretakers, guardians, or rights workers—all of whom would carry higher status—we are often labeled terrorists, traitors, the lowliest of the low. Desperate to remain effective in the heart-rending fights before us, it is no wonder that we desire more status.

Environmentalists most often want **more power**—to do good, to turn the tide, to drive the political agenda toward sustainability. Wanting a healthy planet does not in itself seem to be a persuasive argument in the political economic realm. While most environmentalists would prefer to think of themselves as above the unprincipled games of power waged in high stakes boardrooms, dealing with power is a pragmatic necessity in caring for the Earth. The desire for more power can manifest as desire for more academic degrees, a higher job title, a bigger salary, more clout as an organization—whatever it takes to triumph over those who seem bent on "doing evil." This competitive urge is deeply wired in our evolutionary inheritance, and thus is critical to study carefully. Some questions you might take up: How do I use power to try to take down my enemies? Does power abuse underlie my speech or actions? How does greed for power undermine my capacity for stability and equanimity under rapidly changing conditions?

Certainly there are many more forms of greed. Each person has endless opportunities to ask these questions of themselves in each unfolding moment: What do I want more of here? How is greed impacting my actions? How can I be mindful of this desire in my body and mind right now? How does greed separate me from others? From a Buddhist perspective, the practice of gratitude is not really an answer to greed. It may produce a greater sense of contentment, but it cannot eliminate greed or provide structural solutions to destructive behaviors. Gratitude as a spiritual or ethical practice is derived more from western religious traditions, in which it is directed toward an all-powerful and all-creating God. In eastern religious traditions greater emphasis is placed on personal agency and responsibility. Thus practices that cultivate awareness and restraint are seen as valuable in reducing greed, hate, and delusion. Zen Buddhism, the tradition I practice and am most familiar with, urges students to take up a path of practice, using vows of commitment to affirm one's intention and effort against the ever-present minefield of desire.

At least two practices common to all Buddhist traditions can be easily adapted to a range of situations where environmentalists face

experiences of greed. The first is the practice of mindfulness—cultivating awareness in the present moment. The Buddhist text on mindfulness describes four objects of attention—the body, the feelings, the breath, and the mind. In meditation, one studies the range of responses to become familiar with one's own experiences and perceptual faculties. Regarding greed, one can develop a moment-by-moment checking on these four arenas to see how one might be leaning into desire for more of something. Rather than banishing greed or judging it, Buddhists advocate analytical investigation of greed as an ongoing process. If you are tasting the desire for more time or more rest, how does that show up in the body? What feelings go with these desires? How does the breath change? What thoughts reflect these desires? Each sensation or indication of greed can be acknowledged with bare noting: naming the greed and then letting the sensation go. This study of greed increases one's self-awareness, making it more likely that one will act with restraint rather than aggression.

A second practice is the time-honored ahimsa or non-harming, also spoken of as nonaggression or nondualism. In today's world, which seems to thrive on violence, it can be extremely difficult to cultivate an orientation of nonaggression. Because so much greed results in aggression, it is crucial to see the link between these two poisons. Where corporate profit relies on resource plunder, aggressive defense may be rationalized. How many of this century's wars will be fought over oil or water? When battles for threatened places heat up, are aggressive tactics necessary? Non-harming, sometimes expressed as "reverence for life," seems to be a natural response among most Earth-lovers caring for their piece of the planet. From a Buddhist perspective, the practice of non-harming is to be extended to all beings, including our enemies and ourselves. Understanding interdependence deeply, one sees how harming one element of life reverberates across the entire web. Zen, in particular, places strong emphasis on nondualism—seeing no separation between self and other. Working with non-harming offers an antidote to the greed for power and knowledge. Accepting interdependence can counter the greed for citizen engagement.

These practices are not simple, nor are they easy fixes. They represent an inner commitment to work with greed that is central to the path of liberation. Given the omnipresent impacts of greed and aversion in all human lives, there will always be plenty of opportunity for practice. Environmentalists have their own versions of greed to study and engage. From the Buddhist perspective, each encounter with the three poisons of desire offers an arena for liberation from suffering. Thus, practicing with greed is a good thing. In observing our own desires, we become more able to see and meet others fully. This can only yield more beneficial friendships and initiatives on behalf of the Earth.

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