

**BUDDHISM IN DAILY LIFE
CHANGING POISON INTO MEDICINE
BY BEA ALLEYNE**

‘We all want “good fortune in this life” and many believe this means having no problems. But true happiness lies in the unshakable knowledge of being able to deal successfully with each problem as it arises and to get satisfaction from the process of solving it.’

When the psychologist and writer Ken Wilber met his wife Treya, they felt an immediate affinity and married within four months. But almost immediately Treya began a five-year battle against cancer, culminating in her death. A distressing story? By no means. Ken Wilber’s book, *Grace and Grit*, gives an inspiring account of triumph over overwhelming adversity and crippling setbacks. Treya decided to use her illness as an opportunity to work at improving every aspect of her life, physically, mentally and spiritually, and to contribute to the knowledge of the care and treatment of cancer patients. She even used some of her final lucid moments to describe the sensations she was experiencing, so that other patients’ reactions would be better understood.

We have all read similar stories of individuals who inspired others by their manner of living and dying. Are these people exceptional? Only in the sense that they are demonstrating natural Buddha wisdom.

Life poses an endless series of problems, which many of us spend our time trying to avoid. But having a problem does not necessarily mean being unhappy. Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism teaches that strong faith in the power of the Gohonzon can transform any suffering into benefit. This concept is known as changing poison into medicine.

The phrase *changing poison into medicine* was first used by Nagarjuna, a renowned Buddhist scholar who is thought to have lived between 150 and 250 AD. His “Treatise on the Sutra of the Perfection of Wisdom” comments on the Lotus Sutra, in which Shakyamuni described his enlightenment to the truth of life. Nagarjuna compares the sutra to ‘a great physician who changes poison into medicine’, because Shakyamuni reveals that all people—even those ‘who had scorched the seeds of Buddhahood’ have the potential to attain enlightenment, or Buddhahood, in their present lifetime.

Buddhism teaches that the effects of our actions (karma) inevitably return to us. “Bad karma” is a vicious circle of deluded desires leading to misguided actions that create bad karma and suffering. This suffering further aggravates deluded desires, prompting more misguided action, and so on, poisoning our lives. The Daishonin teaches that we can transform these ‘three evil paths’ into the three virtues: the property of the Law; the wisdom to perceive this Law; and emancipation, or freedom from suffering. He says, “a lesser physician cures illness with medicine, a great physician cures grave illness with virulent poison” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 946). Illness, or misfortune, is an opportunity to change our karma for the better, because we have the ‘great physician’ of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo available to us.

So, whenever we experience loss, pain or failure, instead of bemoaning our fate or blaming other people, we turn to the Gohonzon to look deeply into our own lives. In this way we gain a profound understanding of the tendencies and patterns of behavior which

contributed to the problem and change these tendencies, thereby ‘changing poison to medicine.’ Thus everything in life becomes a source of learning and development.

Suffering is a powerful incentive for spiritual progress. It is possible to create value from every situation; it does not have to be as dramatic as triumphing over cancer. Our daily problems provide the challenge through which we can reveal the qualities of the Buddha—wisdom, compassion, courage and life force.

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As we develop our faith and practice, we become increasingly aware that by chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo we can transform anything and everything into a great source of happiness. As the Daishonin explains: “The single character myo of the Lotus Sutra is like a small spark. When a small spark is set to a large expanse of grass, not only the grass but also the big trees and large stones will all be consumed. Such is the power of the fire of wisdom in the single character myo. Not only will all offenses vanish, but they will become sources of benefit. This is what changing poison into amrita means” (WND, 949).

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