

9. Turn things around.

My restatement of the traditional form of this slogan—Three objects, three poisons, three seeds of virtue—is simple: **Turn things around.** Where there's confusion or pain in your life, make use of it instead of trying to get rid of it. Trying to get rid of it usually doesn't work anyway. It only makes things worse. (Of course, if your painful situation can be resolved somehow, resolve it. The practice is not encouraging us to accept bad situations that can be improved; it is addressing the pesky facts and emotional states that are not so simply removed: grief, fear, and so on.)

To discuss how this works, I will refer to the traditional statement of the slogan, "Three objects, three poisons, three seeds of virtue." This Buddhist language requires some explanation. *Three objects* refers to three categories of objects. According to Buddhist thought, every object falls into one of these three categories. And *object*, interestingly, doesn't refer merely to physical objects. Thoughts and feelings are also "objects," objects of consciousness, just as all so-called physical objects are objects of perception. Early Buddhist thought, which is almost entirely concerned with liberation for the human mind and heart rather than with dispassionate investigation of truth, is remarkable in its anticipation of many of the insights of contemporary cognitive science. In this case, what's being highlighted is the fact that in terms of human life and experience, the world "out there" is really the world "in here," that is, the world of our perception, feeling, and thought. "Green" is not a substance that inheres in an object: it is an experience that takes place in our brain when it is stimulated by an object bathed in light. And similarly, our mind may have as its "object" the inner feeling of anger or love, which arises in response to outer or inner events or objects.

The three categories into which all objects fall are attractive, unattractive, and neutral. That is, the objects themselves do not have these

qualities but our reactions to the objects do. Buddhist psychology posits that our minds cannot be objective. Even perception is not objective. Whatever comes into our consciousness will spur a reaction in us, and this reaction will be, in its simplest form, one of these three: we will either like, dislike, or be neutral to the object (or have both like and dislike, which amounts to neutrality).

This is what is meant by the phrase “three objects”: three sorts of reactions that, for our experience, seem attached to all objects. The “three poisons” (greed, hate, and delusion) are the emotional activities we indulge in in response to the three objects. We are greedy for objects we like (*greed* here meaning, basically, we want to go toward the attractive object), aversive to objects we don’t like (hatred), and confused or indifferent about objects to which we are neutral (delusion).

The three objects and three poisons describe basic ordinary daily life. “Objects” constantly arise, and we are constantly trying to grab them and make them stay or push them away as soon as possible, depending on the style of our reactivity and emotion. The flow of these objects and emotions goes on constantly, usually below the level of conscious awareness. We wake up in the morning and feel too cold or too hot or just right. This makes us feel pleasant or irritated or neutral. Our coffee is tasty or not so

tasty, and we're slightly pleased or annoyed. Our thoughts are pleasant or not so pleasant. All day long objects appear to our perception, feeling, and thought, and all day long we are reacting in simple, basic ways to each and every object: wonderful, let's keep this one; terrible, let's get rid of this one; neutral, I don't care about this one.

All day long this flows on, usually without much discernable problem. But occasionally our likes or dislikes become strongly activated by objects, and then we become powerfully happy or miserable, overcome with lust or desire or anger or fear.

All day long, based on this flow of experience, we are making tiny and sometimes large choices. We never choose the things we don't like; we choose the things we like. To some extent, we have control over our choices—unfortunately, ultimately, and sadly for us, not enough control. Quite often we cannot avoid losing what we find attractive and having to put up with what we find unattractive. And in the biggest picture of our lives, we always end up losing what we want (our loved ones, our health) and having to put up with what we don't want (our aging, our illness, our death, and the loss of our loved ones). Our efforts to control the world to suit ourselves will ultimately be unsuccessful, and if we insist on trying desperately to control things we can't control, we eventually become

very desperate and unhappy; the world begins to seem like a very hostile and unjust place, and we can become quite paranoid and upset about almost everything. Because once you decide that the world is a hostile and inhospitable place and the people in it untrustworthy and venal, things begin to get worse and worse and worse. So the three objects and three poisons are lamentable realities. If we don't pay attention to them, if we don't figure out a way to cooperate with rather than resist their pressure, they can ruin our lives.

Against this background, the slogan is startling. It's saying that contrary to what we might think, the three objects and three poisons are not problems and traps; they are three seeds of goodness, three seeds of virtue. In other words, the basic human mess of likes and dislikes, in which we seem to be trapped and which seems to be so dangerous and troublesome, is actually wonderful, a real treasure. Our messes and our problems are our treasures! Zen master Shunryu Suzuki wrote, "For Zen students, a weed is a treasure." Our suffering, our troubles, our problems, the things that we really don't like and want to get rid of but can't, or the losses we feel, the things we wanted to keep and sadly cannot—all of this is a treasure to us if only we can understand it in the right way. Everything painful and difficult has the potential to bring us great joy and deep spiritual riches.

Knowing this, we can **Turn things around**. We can turn toward and appreciate our suffering, our problems, and the suffering and problems of others.

These relative bodhicitta slogans are deep and difficult. They require cultivation over time, persistence, diligence, and strength. As if in acknowledgement of this, the last slogan in this section is a simple one that requires no explanation. It reminds us to keep on with our effort all of the time, in everything we do:

10. Always train with the slogans.