



The Poisoned Tree, by Jack Kornfield

The maturity we can develop in approaching our difficulties is illustrated by the traditional story of a poisoned tree. On first discovering a poisoned tree, some people see only its danger. Their immediate reaction is, "Let's cut this down before we are hurt. Let's cut it down before anyone else eatsÂ the poisoned fruit." This resembles our initial response to the difficulties that arise in our lives, when we encounter aggression, depression, or sorrow in ourselves and others. Our initial response is to avoid them, saying, "These poisons afflict us. Let us uproot them; let us be rid of them. Let us cut them down."Â

Other people, who have journeyed further along the spiritual path, discover this poisoned tree and do not meet it with aversion. They have realized that to open to life requires a deep and heartfelt compassion for all that is around us. Knowing the poisoned tree is somehow a part of us, they say, "Let us not cut it down. Instead, let's have compassion for the tree as well." So out of kindness they build a fence around the tree so that others may not be poisoned and the tree may also have its life. This second approach shows a profound shift of relationship from judgment and fear to compassion.

A third type of person, who has traveled yet deeper in spiritual life, sees this same tree. This person, who has gained much vision, looks and says, "Oh, a poisoned tree. Perfect! Just what I was looking for." This individual picks the poisoned fruit, investigates its properties, mixes with other ingredients, and uses the poison as a great medicine to heal the sick and transform the ills of the world. Through respect and understanding, this person sees in a way opposite to most people and finds value in the most difficult circumstances.

[...]

In each and every aspect of life, the chance to turn the straw we find into gold is there in our hearts. All that is asked is our respectful attention, our willingness to learn from difficulty. Instead of fighting, when we see with eyes of wisdom, difficulties can become our good fortune.Â

When our body is sick, instead of fighting the disease, we can listen to the information it has to tell us and use it to heal. When our children whine or complain, instead of shutting them out, we can listen to what is their deeper need. When we have difficulty with some aspect of our lover or partner, we might inquire how we treat that part in ourselves. Difficulties or weaknesses often lead us to the very thing we need to learn.

