

Guilt & Shame

February 17, 2023

Back during WWII, when it looked like America was going to be defeating Japan and occupying the country, the armed forces were concerned about how the Japanese would respond to the occupation.

So they got in touch with an anthropologist to do a study of Japanese culture. They chose Ruth Benedict. Her specialty was the raising of children in different cultures. So she did an analysis of Japanese culture, even though she herself was not a specialist in that culture, based on their ways of raising children. She came up with a theory that there are two types of culture in the world: guilt cultures and shame cultures.

It has to do with how parents reprimand and punish their children, the arguments they give when they punish the children. In a shame culture, the child is told, "Don't do that. It embarrasses us in front of the neighbors." In a guilt culture, you're told "Don't do that. It hurts me when you do that."

Buddhism is basically a shame culture. The West up until recently was a guilt culture. And the dynamic of the two is very different: Shame cultures can tend to give rise to people who, if they become mentally unstable, go into psychosis. Guilt culture's mentally unstable people tend to go into neurosis. But everybody internalizes something of both.

In some cases, it has to do with how your parents raised you. In other cases, it has to do with your karmic background as you come into this life. Two children can live in the same family and yet pick up very different messages from the parents. The important thing is that you learn how to examine feelings of guilt, feelings of shame, to see where they're useful and where they're not.

Buddhism doesn't have much use for guilt. This may have to do with the fact that it also doesn't talk much about justice.

There was that *Onion* article years back that quoted a threat from a member of the radical Kammatṭhāna sect. Where they got the name Kammatṭhāna, I have no idea, but they placed it in Tibet, of course. And they said there was a video that was released by this radical sect threatening to unleash waves of peace and harmony around the world. In the video it said, "You cannot stop us!" And of course, the US Defense department said they were going to do

the best they could to stop this.

But the article made a point, an important point: In the guilt cultures that we have, especially in monotheism, there's the sense that justice has to be done one way or another. Whereas Buddhism doesn't talk about justice at all—it talks about being skillful in your behavior. Now, sometimes skillfulness does involve punishing people who are wrong, but you're not necessarily trying to get justice done.

Think of the case of Aṅgulimāla: all those people he'd killed, and yet the Buddha saw that he had a potential. So he taught him. Aṅgulimāla was able to give up his murderous ways and become an arahant. The karmic consequence of all the killing he'd done was simply that, as he was on his alms rounds, there were people who were probably upset that he'd literally gotten away with murder and they would throw things at him: sometimes tearing his robes, sometimes bashing his bowl, sometimes bashing his head. But as the Buddha said, that was a lot less than the consequences would have been if he hadn't gained that attainment.

So the whole purpose of Buddhism is not to settle scores and to bring about justice, which is why the question of guilt doesn't come in. Feelings of guilt are not encouraged. There's a passage where the Buddha says that when you recognize that you've done something wrong, the proper response is: one, to recognize that it's wrong; two, to resolve that you don't want to repeat it; and then three, to develop lots of goodwill. Develop all of the brahmavihāras, but start with goodwill: goodwill for the person you've wronged, goodwill for yourself, and then goodwill for everybody.

Goodwill for yourself is to remind yourself that by punishing yourself you don't gain anything. Part of the psychology of guilt is the feeling that if you punish yourself a lot, then others who might want to punish you will hold back. So you can pre-empt them.

But from the Buddha's point of view, karma doesn't necessarily have to bring about justice. There are consequences, but there is an out: You practice the noble eightfold path, you gain awakening, and you don't have to meet up with all the possible karmic consequences of what you've done in the past.

There's that image the Buddha gives of throwing a hunk of salt into a river.

He starts out by saying that if everything bad you did had to be punished tit for tat, there would be no way anyone could gain awakening. But the actions you do will give results *of the sort* that they are. In other words, unskillful actions will give rise to pain; skillful actions will give rise to pleasure. But the pain will get greatly reduced as your mind gets more expansive—

again, more expansive with goodwill.

Here the image is of throwing a large crystal of salt into a river of water. You can still drink the water because there's so much more water than there's salt. Whereas if you don't have an expansive mindset, haven't developed the mind in virtue and discernment, and you haven't learned how not to be overcome by pleasure or pain, then your mind is like a small cup of water. You throw that large crystal of salt in, and you can't drink the water. It's too salty.

So regardless of what you've done in the past, you can develop your mind so that you can mitigate the results of past bad karma. Which means that the proper response is not guilt. As the Buddha says, you can't go back and erase what you did by feeling really guilty. And it's not a question of preventing punishment by punishing yourself. Instead, just realize that the best that can be asked of a human being is to recognize a mistake, to resolve not to repeat it, and then actually carry through with that resolve.

Thoughts of unlimited goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity all help to strengthen that resolve. So when you find your mind in a spiral of guilt, remind yourself that even though some ways of thinking would encourage that and tell you that it's a good thing, but the Buddha's way is not one of them. Because again, the question of justice doesn't come up, the question of guilt doesn't come up.

He does, though, recommend shame of a particular sort.

There are basically two kinds of shame. There's the shame that's the opposite of pride, and there's the shame that's the opposite of shamelessness. These are two very different things even though they have the same name. Both of them are related in that basically you want to look good in the eyes of others—like those Japanese parents who told their children, “Don't do that. It makes us embarrassed in front of the neighbors.”

But the Buddha says, you have to be careful to choose whose eyes you want to look good in. Think of the noble ones: Ajaan Mun, Ajaan Lee, Ajaan Maha Boowa, Kee Nanayon. What would they say of your behavior? If you want to look good in their eyes, the Buddha would *encourage* that, because that sense of shame, he says, is what protects the world.

When people are shameless, they can do anything they want. They don't care what other people say. If we look around us, we see the damage that can be done by shameless people. The people who lie and have no sense of shame, the people who kill and have no sense of shame, or order others to kill and have no sense of shame about it: Those are the people you wish would have some more shame.

But you can't spend your time worrying about other people. You've got to worry about yourself. You look at your behavior and ask yourself, "What can I do to follow the precepts in a way that's pleasing to the noble ones, that would look good in their eyes?"

There's what the Buddha calls having the world as a governing principle. When your thoughts are going astray, away from the path—and here you are, you're on a path that leads to true happiness, and yet you stray away from it: When the noble ones who can read minds would see that, what would they think? The Buddha actually encourages you to think about these things. And again, think about what their eyes are like—they're the eyes of compassion. They're not out there trying to punish people who do wrong. They have a lot of compassion for people who are doing wrong, but their compassion is not just being nice. Sometimes their compassion can come down pretty strong, saying, "Hey, this is really not the kind of behavior you want to be engaged in." But still, it's for the sake of your own happiness. Those are the kind of people whose eyes you want to look good in.

That kind of shame is one of the treasures in the path. The Buddha calls it a treasure. He calls it a protection. In his image of the practice as being like a fortress, shame and compunction are the road that surrounds the fortress, the moat that surrounds the fortress, to keep out the enemy. In the list of treasures, shame and compunction come together as noble treasures. The Buddha calls them guardians of the world.

It's because of this kind of shame—i.e., the shame that's the opposite of shamelessness, and is actually a correlate of pride—that we behave well.

Think about that time when the Buddha was teaching his son Rāhula to regard his harmful actions as shameful. Both of them were members of the noble warrior class. They had a strong sense of pride, and the correlate is that they wouldn't want to do anything that was beneath them. It's a quality you would want to have in leaders of society who have a sense of nobility, and the healthy shame that goes along with that: the shame that would make them ashamed to do anything lowly or mean.

Again, this is a quality that we could use a lot more of in this world, and each of us could use a lot more in our own behavior. Have high regard for yourself, and part of having high regard is recognizing that some things are beneath you, and you'd be ashamed to do them.

If you want to look good in somebody's eyes, choose the noble ones. They're wise, compassionate, they have your best interests at heart. As you internalize their attitude, you can learn how to have your own best interests at your own heart.

So when you see yourself getting involved in unskillful thoughts—and the Buddha regards thoughts of guilt as unskillful—learn how to step back. You have that ability to step back. This is what makes human beings special. We're not just embedded in instinct. We can step back and look at our actions.

Even when unskillful thoughts are pretty strong and we haven't figured out how to stop them, at the very least we can step back from them and say, "I'm not going to get involved. I'll watch. I'll stay separate."

Learning how to maintain that sense of the separate observer puts you in a position where you really *can* do something about your thoughts—direct them in a much better direction.