

Guilt — Real and Unreal

Bhante Bodhidharma · A Foundation Course in Buddhism · 24:32

Foundation Course 2. Talk 2.

Guilt, real and unreal.

Guilt and feelings associated with guilt are sometimes a great problem for meditators. They can be very insistent. Some say it's to do with their Christian upbringing, or guilt only arises because of the concept of a vengeful deity. But guilt is a human phenomenon, and each individual suffers their own particular amount of it, depending on their understanding and the offense committed.

If the search for pleasure and the self-identification with pleasurable things brings about a syndrome of emotional responses, guilt also creates such a one, but a wholly different set of reactions.

Guilt itself is just the knowledge of having done something against one's conscience. Conscience here means simply knowing, but a knowing of a particular kind. It is the knowing of what is right and what is wrong. In Buddhism, it is better to talk of what is right and wrong in terms of skillfulness or wholesomeness. Everyone has a conscience, and every conscience is different. Even though there is a broad agreement about such things as murder and theft, when it comes to the outer reaches of our definitions, the edges get frayed. Is it right to execute someone who has killed another? At what point is abortion the killing of a human being?

Our conscience tells us what is wholesome for us, or what is unwholesome for us. This conscience, then, is our moral wisdom, and therefore contains within it right or wrong understanding. This understanding determines our intentions and acts of will, which in turn determine our karma, so it is obviously very important to investigate conscience closely. We need to question all our understandings and opinions about morality, good and bad.

The Buddha makes it quite clear that ignorance is no excuse. Being ignorant will not save us from the consequences of an unwholesome act. This is a verse from the *Dhammapada*: "A fool, while he performs unskillful deeds, does not know them to be unskillful. But that fool still suffers for his unskillfulness, just as one burnt by fire." In other words, a child, just because she doesn't know what matches do and still plays with them even after parental warnings, will still be burnt. She may even burn the house down.

We are not isolated individuals, we are an integral part of an interrelated world. If we do harm, harm comes back to us. So knowing what is unwholesome and unskillful is of great importance to us if we want to put an end to the suffering we cause ourselves and unjustly to other human beings.

So having a conscience means that whenever we do something we know it to be wholesome, unwholesome or neutral. When we know that what we have done is wholesome, pleasant feelings arise. Our self-esteem grows. The proverbial helping of the old person across the road makes one feel good. To do good is to feel good about oneself. It dispels feelings of self-hate, self-belittlement.

On the other hand, if while driving my car, an old person steps onto the zebra crossing and screeching to a halt, I wind down my window and shout abuse to the effect that all old people ought to be done away with as kindly as possible, afterwards, if I am truthful with myself, I shall know myself to have been cruel. I have gone against my knowledge of what is wholesome and skillful. I have crossed my conscience. This knowing that I have transgressed a moral law is guilt.

The dictionary definition talks of failure to do one's duty, the fact of having committed an offense, the state of having willfully committed a crime. Now we can see what guilt is. It is simply knowing one has done what one ought not to do. It is perfectly right and proper in such a case to feel and know oneself to be guilty. Knowing oneself to be guilty is just awareness of having done something harmful.

Now this knowledge is accompanied by two feelings in Buddhist psychology: shame and dread. Shame is just those varying degrees of embarrassment, plus the knowledge that one has lost the respect of others and self-respect. If I'm caught shoplifting a battery for my Walkman, I feel so small. I feel humiliated. I know people now see me not as a worthy citizen, but as a petty thief. Shame can be a very painful experience. Knowing this sets a barrier, a protection against me doing such things.

You used to hear parents say to young people, "Have you no shame? Don't you feel ashamed?" It's gone out of fashion now because of our general rejection of guilt as a good thing, and the fear of creating a guilt complex. But in Buddhist understanding, guilt has a proper role to play, and it is entwined with self-esteem and self-respect, and the esteem and respect others have of us. Perhaps we ought to say to our children, "Have you no self-respect? Don't you want to be respected?" It may be a more positive way of saying the same thing.

Now, at the same time as feeling ashamed, I also feel afraid. For when I'm caught red-handed, dread also arises. I fear the consequences of my act. I know I can be prosecuted or fined. I may even lose my job. Knowing there are inescapable consequences for what I do also creates a barrier, a protection against my doing unskillful, unwholesome acts.

The Buddha, again in the *Dhammapada*, warns us: "Not in the sky, nor in the middle of the ocean, nor in a cave of a mountain, nor anywhere else is there a place where we can escape from the consequences of an unwholesome deed."

There's a story concerning this verse. It was the answer the Buddha gave to some monks who told him about this strange event. They had been traveling on a boat which suddenly stopped mid-water and apparently refused to move. The people on the boat drew lots, and three times it fell to the wife of the

skipper. He decided he didn't want so many people to suffer on account of his wife, so he had a sandbag tied round her neck and had her thrown overboard. Now, to our modern ears, this might seem highly suspicious, and a clever way of ridding himself of a troublesome wife. But the commentary goes on to say that this was the consequence of having drowned a pet dog, because she had been made to feel ashamed of it. A heavy consequence indeed, though it's nice to see animals being given the high regard they deserve as fellow beings.

In Buddhist understanding, these two reactions to doing harm—shame and dread—are not only the guardians that prevent someone from committing an unskillful act, but also the guardians of order in a society. If people felt neither shame nor dread of consequences, what would stop them from doing harm? In fact, such people are often described as psychopathic, mentally ill.

The fact about hardened criminals is that personal gain seems to get the better of discretion, of shame and dread, even though their actions may make others suffer a great deal and bring great suffering to themselves. In the case of violent political actions, all such considerations are discarded in favor of the ideology. The ends justify the means. It's right and proper to kill opponents.

Now, if there is such a thing as a balanced conscience whose guardians are shame and dread, and if there is such a thing as a moral code of behavior that is the foundation of social and interpersonal harmony, why has guilt become such a great problem for us?

Let's take a typical case. Billy, a lively lad, found an easy supply of comics and sweets. He just makes sure no one's looking while he helps himself. When Billy's finally caught, his parents are very upset and the first thing they tell him is that he's a thief. Being a thief is bad, very bad. Therefore, Billy comes to understand that he's a thief and he's bad.

Billy has been told he's bad, off and on, every time he upsets his parents. He's alternatively selfish, cruel, lazy, good for nothing, a nuisance, a "why we put up with you I'll never know." A part of Billy knows himself to be Bad Billy, Big Bad Billy. It becomes a self-definition, and with it, low self-esteem, low self-respect—that is, self-hate.

Identifying the action with the actor creates a wrong identity. No doubt, the act of stealing is not something to encourage in children, but one theft doesn't make a thief. In fact, a million thefts don't make a thief, if by thief we mean someone who is a thief by nature. Once we're taught as children to get into these traps of self-definitions, it's very difficult to find an escape.

This sort of guilt is not the proper guilt about an action committed, but a neurotic guilt about the person who committed the action. So my fear of consequences is compounded by the fear that that's the sort of person I am and I can't do anything about it.

The understanding that humans are somehow essentially evil, some more than others, bad at the core, so to speak, is a chief cause of mistaken self-definition and later leads to all our problems with guilt. The

Buddha taught that we were born in ignorance, that because of our ignorance we acted with wrong intention, but always with the idea of fulfilling our desires. Not knowing what desires led to suffering for ourselves and others, and what desires lead to happiness, is the essential problem.

At fundament, the human is wise, is enlightened, is a Buddha, meaning someone who has the potential to be enlightened. If we truly grasp this point—that it is our ignorance that must be dispelled, that we are not essentially evil—then in our meditation we must allow these damning self-definitions to emerge. These voices must be listened to: "You're useless, you're inadequate, you're wicked and evil, you're terrible, no one can love you, you can't love anyone," and so on.

Through the power of our intuitive wisdom, we see these as disembodied voices, voices we have taken into ourselves. The personality is but a collection of such habits, and just as habits are formed, so they can be unformed. Meditation should help us to confront these often painful self-definitions, see them as mere opinions, as changeable, and by not indulging them, through this understanding allow their power over our thinking to die out.

Meanwhile, poor Billy, although he was caught, didn't take the opportunity to clear his heart of all the offenses. He swore in tears that he had only ever taken one comic and one bag of sweets. That's why he was let off lightly with warnings of lashings and thrashings, if ever he should even think of doing such a thing again.

Unfortunately for Billy, guilt feelings, especially of the fear of being found out, sit uncomfortably in his mind. Since no one does find out, Billy represses those feelings and begins to see this as a clever ploy. He's now compounded his stealing with lying, and both have been fairly successful in satisfying his desires. But the result of this is to laden his mind with all sorts of unresolved guilts.

Since boyhood, Billy hasn't stolen a thing, but feelings of guilt still dog him. Whenever a policeman should appear, panic arises. Worse, whenever he does do anything wrong, the proper guilt he ought to feel is fueled by all the unresolved guilt, so that he feels overly guilty and anxious, and has to apologize profusely even when he inadvertently steps on someone's toe.

It is also possible that such is the store of unresolved guilt, coupled with self-definition of being a bad person, that his worldview is so distorted he sees all sorts of people out to get him, conspiracy everywhere, paranoia at worst.

Again, it is in meditation that these phantom guilts can be dealt with. Let them come to the attention. Feel them fully. Accept them fully. Don't criticize or look for excuses and scapegoats. Don't get into conversation with them. Let them be. Just let them disclose themselves and sit equanimously within all the discomfort. Slowly, their strength declines. Their power dissolves.

Unfortunately, yet again, Billy is to be pitied, the more for his parents have told him that even bad thoughts are something he should be ashamed of and feel guilty about. The Buddha's teaching is very

clear on this. Thoughts and images that arise in the mind are the consequences, the results of past actions. When Billy walks into a newsagent, the idea arises of stealing a book, to slip one inside his coat. That idea has been conditioned by Billy's past actions. It has become a conditioned response whenever he sees books. Up to this point, what Billy is suffering from is the karmic results of past actions, the *vipāka*. He has not yet committed any new karma.

What happens next is crucial. If Billy is taken to the idea, it will obsess, possess his mind. He will make a decision to take the book. Billy, by this decision, has only reinforced the thought, the intention of stealing. On the other hand, he may exert himself. He may even put the book in his coat and then decide against it. If he takes his action up to this point, he has reinforced his inclination to steal, but we cannot yet say he has stolen, or that he has created any new karma in the sense of a completed unwholesome action.

It is only when these three components all come together can we talk of a karmic action: the intention, the effort or exertion, and the actual completion of the act. In this case, when Billy walks out of the shop with the book. Up until this actual moment of taking, Billy is only reinforcing his state of mind, the mental habit, which will have the unwholesome result of making further temptations harder to overcome. These are the consequences of intention and exertion.

But upon the actual completion of the act, the stealing itself, not only is there the inner consequence, but the outer consequence too. At some point in time, because we are all interrelated, interfused, a result will arise from that harmful, unskillful action.

In the *Dhammapada*, the Buddha warns us: "Even an unskillful person may still find happiness, so long as his unskillfulness does not bear fruit. But when his unskillfulness does bear fruit, he will meet with unwholesome consequences."

Let us recap a moment. Firstly, we can say that unwholesome actions have the same root cause as sensual pleasure. We do them because we think they will bring us pleasure and happiness. A biting remark fulfills our desire for revenge, and our self-esteem is restored. Robbing a bank will bring us all that lovely lolly, and we'll be happy for the rest of our lives. Sometimes we do things harmful for the sheer sake of excitement, such as driving in a dangerous way. Whatever the pleasurable satisfaction we gain, it is gained at the expense of ourselves and quite unjustly at the expense of others.

Secondly, we can see that there are two rounds involved. The first is unskillful actions with guilt feelings that bring success and lead to repetition. The second is unskillful action that arouses no guilt feelings but lead to painful consequences later.

Thirdly, we cannot say that an unwholesome karmic action is fully completed till the three ingredients are there: intention, exertion and completion of the act.

Fourthly, these guilt rounds with their attendant feelings of shame and dread subsist the pleasure syndrome and go to make life harder for us. Making money to get rich is one thing. Making money out of

the sale of arms to get rich is another. Worse still, when all this is fueled by unresolved guilt, it all adds up to create greater anxiety, worry, fear, and restlessness.

In meditation, this now becomes a great hindrance. When restlessness and anxiety arise in the mind, we need to see if they are coming from guilt. To our surprise, we may find memories there of unwholesome actions we've done, even as children.

In my own case, when I was about twelve years old, I caught a mole and took it to my teacher. It was a great catch. It caused a sensation, and I was for a while a celebrity. But after everyone had seen it, the teacher told me to take it back, for it was impossible to keep. Moles eat a lot of worms, it seems.

Now, I don't know whether it was because it had bit me when I caught it, or whether I was angry at the teacher, or whether it was the result of past conditioning in cruelty. But, without really thinking about it, I took a large piece of wood and battered it to death. When that memory came back to me, I was filled with horror. I felt a certain panic. Even though I've meditated on it for years now, it still makes me feel uncomfortable. Such wanton cruelty. It's no good me arguing that perhaps the mole was getting its comeuppance. I did it. I performed the foul deed.

What the outer consequences are, I don't know. Perhaps I've already suffered them. I hope so. But I'm painfully aware of the inner consequences. But having observed all this in meditation and reflecting upon it, in time, the emotional power of the memory has decreased. This has been my karma.

The first steps, then, in overcoming guilt feelings is to face up to them, and there's no better place than in the meditation. The second is to reflect on the act.

There is a mistaken understanding that you can put things right, but the spilt milk is spilt, it is gone. That little mole cannot be resurrected, nor can its suffering be wiped out of history. All we can do is accept the consequences. Now in truth there's great relief in that, because now we can stop worrying. What will be, will be, though I can undermine unwholesome *kamma* coming my way by doing wholesome things.

One of the incidents in Mahatma Gandhi's life illustrates this well. A distraught Hindu came to him saying that he had killed a Muslim child during one of the riots. What bad karma! Gandhi told him to adopt a Muslim orphan and bring him up as a Muslim. This good deed would go a long way to counteract the earlier unskillful one.

This is a very important point to grasp in the Buddha's teaching on karma. Nothing is preconditioned. We can assuage unwholesome consequences in the future by doing what is good now. There are further steps to purifying the mind of guilt, but this is dealt with in a later talk. Enough it is to say here that the first step is acceptance.

If upon reflection we understand guilt to be unreal, an overreaction, we will still have to suffer from it. We will still have to patiently allow it to rise up into our consciousness. However, in the process of letting

go of such guilt, we can say that some part of the store of unresolved guilt is being expended.

This needs a little further explanation. Although I've used terms like "store of guilt," in Buddhist understanding this isn't quite right. What is more correct is to talk of a disposition, a tendency, which has been conditioned by past actions. If I tend to feel overguilty, then by allowing it to pass, that tendency will be weakened.

Let us end with two salutary tales from the *Dhammapada*. First is the story of the careless monk. One of the rules of a monk's life is to put back whatever has been used. Now it was the habit of this monk that no matter what he used—table, stool or mat—he would leave it out in the open, exposed to the sun or the rain. When monks pointed this out to him, he just shrugged his shoulders, saying little damage was done, and anyway, he meant no harm. But he was warned that small faults are in the habit of growing large. He was a wise fellow after all, for he took their good counsel.

When the Buddha heard this, he said: "One should not think lightly of an unskillful deed, imagining, 'A little will not affect me.' Just as a jug of water is filled by falling drops of rain, so also the fool is filled up with unwholesome conditioning by accumulating little by little."

The second is the story of Billa Lepadika, a rich man who was ready to kill the organizer of a community offering of food to the Buddha and his monks. Billa Lepadika had been annoyed by this organizer for asking him and others to give. He noticed his small offering was kept apart and thought the organizer was doing this to show him up. That's why he was going to kill him. But in fact, the organizer put a little of what he had given in every bowl, thereby hoping to increase Billa Lepadika's merit. Billa Lepadika was repentant and apologized to the organizer for not supporting him properly.

The Buddha overheard this and said: "One should not think lightly of doing good, imagining 'A little will not affect me.' Just as a water jar is filled up with falling drops of rain, so also the wise one is filled up with merit, accumulated little by little."

So there we have the Buddha's teaching. Be scrupulous about unskillful deeds. Do good no matter how small. It all counts. So when it comes to guilt and guilt feelings of low self-esteem, low self-respect, self-hatred, by doing what is wholesome, these are counteracted by feelings of high self-esteem, high self-respect, self-acceptance, self-care and self-understanding.

By observing and sitting patiently with guilt feelings in meditation, we will purify the mind of anguish, remorse, anxiety and sorrow. And by doing what is wholesome and skillful in our daily lives, we will re-establish that sense of wholesomeness and innocence, which is the joy of being at peace with ourselves and at peace with the world.

I hope you found this talk interesting and helpful. May all of you be happy and peaceful. May all of you attain the *nirvanic* peace within.

