The End of Guilt

Bhante Bodhidhamma · A Foundation Course in Buddhism · 25:21

Foundation course two, talk three. The end of guilt.

Guilt can be a real problem for us and it can become a major cause of our disease. Whenever we satisfy our desires, be they desires to have something or desires to do away with something, if these desires are satisfied at the expense of another, guilt arises. The knowledge of having done harm arises, and with it, in differing degrees, shame and dread.

Although these days we've come to see this in a very negative light, actually this is a healthy reaction, for the fact that guilt, shame and dread have arisen means that the doer is still in contact with the heart, that inner compassionate part of us that knows such things cause suffering and cannot bear it. If these reactions do not arise, what is there stopping us behaving in harmful ways?

If society did not have moral code or moral law, a basic agreement among its citizens on how to live together without doing each other harm, it would certainly be a case of dog-eat-dog. The whole system of law is about being able to judge impartially any case of harm that arises so that the aggrieved can be compensated and the doer checked. The idea of a society protecting its citizens from the harm of others is accepted unequivocally. This is a pure reason, shall we say, for a police force to stop society eating itself.

The inability to accept guilt causes individuals a lot of problems. The idea that we shouldn't feel guilty causes us a lot of problems. They both repress what is a perfectly natural response of the heart. Just as a good heart responds to acts of cruelty with horror, so it responds to a person's own acts of cruelty with horror. When we read in the newspapers that a woman or a boy had been murdered or sexually abused, feelings of shock and intense dislike arise. When we ourselves do something against our own moral code, the same sort of horror emotions arise directed towards ourselves. This sort of guilt reaction and the ensuing shame and dread of consequences are our internal guardians, stopping us doing what we know to be harmful.

But things do go wrong. Ever since we were children, we have been told in varying degrees how bad we are. We are variously cheeky, naughty, selfish, cruel, called nuisances, good-for-nothings, liars, thieves, and so on. This sort of labelling really gets into the child.

The famous French writer and playwright Jean Genet writes how when he was a boy, he was told he was a thief, so he said to himself, yes, that's what I am. He ended up in jail.

I remember myself going into a newsagent as a young boy, ten years old or so, and asking for my father's newspaper. I must have pushed in the queue or asked with some imperious tone in my voice, because the

assistant said, "You're presumptuous." I felt really embarrassed about it, I felt so humiliated. Worse, because I couldn't give a cheeky answer, since I didn't know what it meant. Though I did realise it was belittling. I harboured a great grudge against that assistant, and often fantasised situations where I turned the tables and gleefully exclaimed, "Aha, you see, you're the one who's presumptuous!"

Both these two factors of accusations and labeling, judgments by others of our personalities, become internalised. We believe them. So that later on in life, these self-accusations, derogatory self-definitions, denigrating self-judgments, all go to create a very uncomfortable feeling within ourselves, feelings of inadequacy, of being naturally no good, evil, rotten to the core.

It doesn't help much either if you've been brought up in a religion where a wrathful God, devilish demons and hellfire have dominated. Luckily, I was brought up in a Christian religion that stressed the love, compassion and forgiving nature of Jesus and his Father. So personally, I didn't have any problems that way.

This is not to say that guilt is not known in Buddhist countries. Far from it. Often the doctrine of *kamma* is taught only in its negative aspects. The evil consequences are inescapable. This also can lead to an inordinate fear of consequences. Although the scriptures are full of tales of the most horrific consequences, the Buddha says in the Dhammapada, if a person does what is good, he should do it again and again. If a person does what is good, she should delight in it. The accumulation of merit leads to happiness. We need to bring such thoughts to mind whenever we are thinking of unwholesome results of our actions. We can affect the future by the good we do now.

So we can say that there are two types of guilt. The one, a natural response to wrongdoing. The other, an unrealistic response caused by underlying accusatory self-definitions and unresolved guilt.

How do we overcome this? What can we do about such states of mind? The importance of this lies in the fact that restlessness and anxiety caused by guilt are both great hindrances in the meditation practice. When we are restless and anxious, the mind is said to be like a turbulent pool. We are unable to see beyond the surface of waves and splashes. If our insight is to grow, we need very much to bring peace to this pool, to clear the mind of all guilt. Remember, the moral laws of Buddhism are also rules of mental health.

Let us return to little Lily, whom we left glum, unable to have ice cream she wanted. Lily wanted to have ice cream, but it was too near lunchtime. She got angry and very depressed about it. Even though her parents did get her some ice cream in the afternoon, she still felt aggrieved. Children have their own thoughts, they're little persons. No matter what parents do, they can never be totally responsible for the child's behaviour. Such total responsibility presumes total control of the child's development and environment. But not only are there other factors at play, such as friends, other adults, the media, and so on, there is the indomitable little mind of the child herself.

Lily is not a scheming child. She's just decided that if she wants ice cream, she should have some. Why not? That afternoon, Mum also bought a whole box of vanilla ice cream and put it in the freezer. Next day, during a quiet afternoon, the image of that box rose in the mind of little Lily. She quietly slipped out of the sitting room, looking very busy, went to the freezer, doled herself out a goodly portion, and crept upstairs to her bedroom, where she feasted in paradise with her dolls.

It never occurred to her that the hole in the ice cream would be noticed. Well, of course, that evening, when Mum went to get the dessert, half was gone, and the alarm went out. Lily was commanded to report immediately. Lily arrives looking innocent enough, though inwardly trembling. When that sort of alarm goes up, it means she's done something really wrong. She knows it's got to be the ice cream.

It is at this point that Lily is beginning to suffer the karmic results of her actions. Up till now, she's been enjoying the karmic results of satisfying her desire for ice cream. But she got it by unlawful means. The product of those unlawful means is now her trembling as she meets the female deity in her wrathful aspect, the angry mum.

What happens from now on is going to be crucial to Lily's future behaviour and her attitude concerning the moral law. Will mum reinforce her feelings of fear by giving her a slapping? Will she turn the accent onto naughtiness and evil, calling Lily a do-no-good-little-thief? Will she give Lily room to explain herself? Will she appeal to Lily's better nature, to her sense of remorse? Will she demand Lily pay a price, that she be punished in some way? Will she forgive Lily totally, and ask her never to do such a thing again? Will she ask Lily to make such a resolution? Will she forgive Lily, but with dire warnings of what will happen the next time such things happen?

Mum's options are varied. She could have even decided to ignore it. She could even have slapped Lily hard for what she did, but told her, if she wants to steal, she should do it from the shops and not from home. There's honour amongst thieves.

However Mum has reacted, my bet is that she has done so exactly as her mother and father did to her. She has internalised, made her own, her parents' way of handling immoral conduct. In fact, she treats herself like that.

Before we can investigate further, we need to be clear what the place of punishment is in the law of kamma. The Buddha stated that the consequences of our actions, good and bad, were inescapable. But they are consequences, not rewards or punishments. No divine law, no god, punishes or rewards us. It is simply a matter of results. If I turn up late for work, fail to do a good job, I get sacked. I can't say the boss or the system punished me. The sacking is a result of my working practices. If I mindlessly handle a boiling kettle and scorch myself, I can't say the kettle has punished me. Punishment is something invented by human beings to inflict upon each other.

Punishment is either getting even, an eye for an eye, or it's to slake our thirst for revenge, or it is out of a

mistaken understanding that punishment is a deterrent which will stop the wrongdoer without unwholesome side effects. Whatever reasons are given for punishment, as far as the Buddha's understanding goes, it's something human beings lay on the wrongdoer as an extra. For whether the punisher or the wrongdoer likes it or not, the unwholesome consequences of the wrong action will manifest themselves in the goodness of time.

The Buddha appeals to our better nature. All are afraid of the stick. All fear death. Putting oneself in another's place, one should not beat or kill another.

The concept of punishment is alien to Buddhism, and unlike other religious systems or secular codes of law, you will not find in the scriptures any lists of appropriate punishment for crime. For it is understood that when we do harm to another, even if it is legal or socially acceptable, it can only be done with aversion in the mind. There is no such thing as righteous retribution.

Whatever person A does that is unskilful, he will reap the painful consequences. The consequences themselves will be the just desert. Person B, who wants to exact punishment, a further suffering, who calls for the cat, the gallows, solitary confinement, does it for unwholesome reasons. The righteous punisher will also receive their just deserts for their cruelty.

But there is a deeper reason, still, why punishment is inimical to the Buddha's path. And that is because what is at root fault is not an evil nature, but sheer ignorance. A wrongdoer, perhaps better termed a mistaken doer, must be approached with compassion, with firmness, no doubt, but with the intention of showing that person the unwholesome consequences of their action.

Now, mum has done a lot of meditation and given a lot of thought to this whole problem. Although she is a fire with divine wrathfulness, within this great display lies a heart of compassion, the heart of wisdom.

First, there is the great owning up, "I did it," the acceptance. Then, Lily has to be shown the consequences of her deed. Not enough ice cream to go around, hardly a spoonful each. How does Lily feel about that, depriving everyone else of their ice cream? Slowly, Lily is coaxed to a position of seeing the harm she's done. She's allowed to offer mitigating circumstances. She didn't know she was taking everybody else's ice cream. Remorse abounds, perhaps a few tears, but Mum can't stop there. These tears could be tainted with relief, for Lily knows from her Mum's tone she won't be slapped. Or tainted with sympathy-seeking. Who cannot be softened by the tears of a child? Children are clever.

No, the consequences must be faced. She is asked to agree not to have ice cream so that others can have a proper share. Lily agrees. But still there's an important ingredient missing, which will allow Lily to move towards wholesomeness. All right, she's made good the obvious consequences of her deed, but how does her heart know that she has done enough? She knows everything is back to normal when her mother forgives her. Lily's heart is greatly relieved, for now she sees the wrathful deity in her benign aspect of forgiveness and radiant love. A hug and a cuddle heals the internal wound, but still the process is not

complete.

Lily has confessed. She's been remorseful. She's accepted the consequences. She will make good reparation. She has received forgiveness, but what will stop her doing it again? Right understanding is not enough. Right intention must also be made. In the midst of that forgiving embrace, Lily finds it easy to make a firm and unshakable resolution never to do such a thing again. How important it is for the goddess to say she believes Lily will never do it again. Later on at the dinner table, when the sad tale is retold to explain why Lily is not having ice cream, everyone is moved to share their ice cream, and Lily learns that her good deed of making good has other wonderful consequences.

Now, I apologise if I've been pulling the heartstrings a bit here. I know it's never quite so easy. I know wonderful endings are miracles. But at least here we have a model we can work on to develop our own strategies. All the steps are important. And it is all important we not only treat children like this, but adults and ourselves.

To overcome the horror of guilt, the shame and the dread in whatever degree, there has first of all got to be an open acceptance of the fact and the realisation of the ensuing consequences. Then remorse arises and sorrow and with it the apology. Next we need to do something about the consequences and if nothing can be done, then we must learn to console ourselves with the fact that it is not within our powers to do anything and that we must readily accept the results of what we have done with patience, a willingness to suffer them gladly.

Then comes forgiveness. It's a great help in healing our hearts if the victim forgives us. But if that is not forthcoming, we have to be able to forgive ourselves. If we are dogged by thoughts of, "I can't forgive myself, not for that," then we must turn the stream of compassion inwards. We need to ask ourselves why we can't forgive ourselves. After all, what does forgiveness mean but, "All right, I've done wrong, I've done what I can to put things right, I've learnt my lesson, so I'm going to be kind and pardon myself."

If when we talk to ourselves like this, feelings of self-hate arise, these must be observed and not entertained. We also need to be aware of our inverted pride which is subtly saying, "I won't forgive myself till they forgive me."

This inability to pardon ourselves, to be unforgiving towards our own faults, needs to be constantly tackled with the practice of loving kindness directed inwards. Slowly, these self-accusatory, unforgiving voices will trouble us less and less until they disappear altogether. If we fail to do this, we have simply internalised the wrathful deity. We become our own punishers and executioners. The consequences of our wrongdoings are painful enough. There's no need to load it with self-inflicted wounds.

Finally, what seals the wound? The firm resolution to abstain from such actions in the future, to determine to be forever on our guard. This resolution gives us confidence, and success builds on success. "Yes, I used to do things like that, but I don't now." This returns our self-respect and self-esteem.

At last, our hearts, split into all sorts of conflicting emotions, return to their pure base of balance and tranquillity.

The ability to move through these stages becomes increasingly more important the more we travel along the spiritual path. The Buddha was forever talking of the importance of moral behaviour that a whole third part of the Tipiṭaka is devoted to the higher morality of the monastic life. The Tipiṭaka is what the Buddhist scriptures are called and means literally the three baskets. The first being the discourses, the second being the monastic discipline, and the third the Abhidhamma.

The higher morality of the monastic life is meant to speed the ardent towards liberation. There are 227 rules at base, but these are compounded with refinements and later commentarial additions, on top of which each culture and each monastery adds its own rules. The whole idea is to keep the monastic on the straight and narrow.

This is very important for lay Buddhists to know, because often they support monks unwisely, tempting them with things they ought not to have. For instance, a monk is not supposed to wear any sort of jewellery. Now, it's a moot point as to whether a watch can be considered so. A lot of monks overcome the problem by having pocket calculator watches. But there is a great difference between buying a monk a simple timepiece and giving him a gold watch.

Now, it may not come as a great surprise to you, but the community hold what is called a *pātimokkha* ceremony every 8th and 13th, 14th day of the lunar month. The whole set of rules are recited, and monks confess to each other any transgressions they have committed. Some are serious enough to cause expulsion from the order. The consequences of breaking a more serious rule is to suffer isolation from the community for six nights, during which time the monk is meant to reflect on his actions and the community to reflect on how to respond. Confiscation is also carried out if a monk owns up to having something he ought not to have. But the vast majority of transgressions are forgiven on the telling.

Do you think such a thing is possible in families, where members own up to bad temper and so on, and are forgiven and exhorted to change?

There is also a formula monks use when they hurt another monk in any way. Its formula may interest you. "Forgive me, venerable sir, for my wrongdoing, done carelessly to the venerable one, by way of the three doors, of mind, speech, and body." "I forgive you." "You should forgive me." "I forgive you, venerable sir." The interesting thing in this formula is the magnanimity asked of the victim. He also forgives. It takes two to quarrel, and it takes two to forgive.

Perhaps mum and dad were wrong to buy the ice cream and store it so obviously, knowing little Lily's predilection, her little problem. Perhaps they should have warned her not to take any, or told her when she would get some. We often unwittingly lay traps for others and then expect them to take all the blame. How much of our present-day violence, for instance, can we apportion to social policies and how much to

personal responsibility?

The reason why we must be able to handle our unskillful behaviour is because we shall keep on tripping over the moral law, keep on creating unwholesome *kamma*, no matter how insignificant, till the very day of our total liberation. Not until we become *Arahats*, when the root causes of our unwholesome actions – greed, hatred and delusion – are eradicated, will we eventually stop doing unskillful things. Many times we're going to give in to desire, to aversion, to harmfulness, and if we can't forgive ourselves, we're simply going to go on accumulating self-hate with its crushing effects on our hearts.

We must know how to take refuge in the Dharma, the Truth, and especially the Lord of Karma. And we must learn how to take refuge in ourselves. We must learn how to forgive ourselves. We must realize there are going to be countless times we're going to give in, but our deepest resolution is never to give up. Battles will be lost, but the war must be won. This must be our life strategy.

One very important tactic within this strategy is the routing of guilt, of shame, of dread, of worry, of restlessness, by the means of accepting responsibility, making amends, self-forgiving, and resolving to guard against recurrence, and so maintain a general balance and tranquillity of mind.

There is one other problem we need to deal with, that was hinted at in the first talk on guilt. What happens when we do something unwholesome but don't know it to be unwholesome? Take, for instance, daydream and indulgent fantasy. We once thought them to be all right, but now, through the meditational experience, we've come to see them as quite corruptive. Eventually, we will come to suffer, for these fantasies lead to insatiability. Fantasies grow and grow until they've developed our desires to a point where they cannot be satisfied, such as dreaming about what we would do if we had a million pounds. That causes us to be dissatisfied and brings suffering.

So here again we are back to the law of *kamma*. When we do something harmful, harmfulness will arise. This suffering makes us reconsider what we are doing. More often than not we stop, though sometimes we need to suffer a little more until the suffering becomes greater than the pleasure. Not until there have been endless mornings of hangovers, sometimes not until the liver tweaks, does the dedicated drinker think of stopping. But this is how wisdom dawns on us and the balance of tranquillity of mind is regained.

Lily might not have thought she was doing anything particularly wrong, but when Mum came down on her like a ton of bricks, her ideas about what she could do with things that belong to her and things that belong to the family and others were sharpened. This was Lily's growth in wisdom. It also shows us how the Lord of Karma is always working for our benefit.

This is the essential hope in the Dhamma. Everything in the universe, in one way or another, is conspiring to lead us to the end of suffering and the perfect peace of *Nibbāna*.

A final word. It's no good worrying about actions. What is done is done. All we can do is deal with the ongoing effects till they pass away. We need to cultivate patience. The Buddha gave us a wonderful image:

What would you think of a man shot by an arrow, who, when his friends came to help, would not allow them to pull it out until he had found out who shot it, who made it, and so on? He'd be dead before he knew. The arrow is the problem. Deal with the arrow. This is our freedom. We can deal with the present problems.

Let's finish on a high note, the Buddha again in the *Dhammapada*: "Rare in the world is the kind of person who, out of a sense of shame, refrains from wrongdoing and keeps himself awake, like a good horse that gives no cause to be whipped. Like a good horse stirred at the touch of a whip, be diligent, be alarmed at the endless rounds of rebirth. By faith, skilful conduct, effort, concentration and right understanding, endowed in this way with wisdom, good practice and mindfulness, leave this immeasurable suffering behind."

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.

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