

Guilt

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Tips of the Day · 2 min read

Like shame, the Buddha calls guilt a guardian of society. That guilty feeling means we know we are at fault. We know we have done some harm. This leads to the fear of consequences. This is not the same as existential guilt which someone may suffer from if they are brought up in one of the Abrahamic religions. For we are told we carry the sin of Adam. From an early age, we may have been told that we were essentially sinful. This is not the fundamental reason for our transgressions. The Buddha said wrong doing is secondary. The prior reason is non-culpable ignorance that causes us to fall into a delusion. We are essentially ignorant of the 'way things really are'. Because of this we commit errors based on acquisitiveness, aversion and fear. But paradoxically it is all done to make 'me' happy. Even so this leads us into actions of thought, speech and deeds that harm us and harm others. And that is when we feel guilty. If we did not feel guilty; if we did not perceive that we were a cause of another's suffering and of our own (how easy it is to blame our unhappiness on others!); if we are not worried about the consequences, what then would stop us doing harm? Guilt like all our unwholesome states must be faced. In our meditation we open up to its tremors. The fear of being caught. The dread of consequence. Now it may be that the guilt we feel is inappropriate. To be unable to sleep because you purposely took a pen from the office, criticised your boss to someone whom you suspect might tell them or swatted a fly out of irritation may point to a guilt ridden conscience. A conscience full of scruples and qualms (the bug bear of the monastic life with all its 227 rules!) is a sign of imbalance. It is often relieving to talk to a friend whose judgement you trust to give you a wiser perspective. On the other hand when we feel no or little guilt after committing what society and ordinary people would consider wrong tells us we need to contemplate the consequences of what we have done. I knew someone who stole from a small book shop on the grounds of Marxist critique of a capitalist society, regardless of the effect on the struggling owner. However, when guilt is justifiable, we do need to turn into the feeling of guilt to really see how painful it is. Really opening up to the misery of that mental state is a departure for reflection. 'I would not be suffering this tormented heart, if I had not behaved unskillfully'. If we can put right what we did wrong, all well and good. Sometimes a simple apology. A gift. But if an occasion for reconciliation does not arise, then it may be possible to do something by way of reparation. Here is a rather extreme example. When a Hindu confessed to Gandhi he had murdered a Muslim child, Gandhi told him to find a Muslim orphan and bring him up as a Muslim. But if even that is not possible, then we have no option but to sit with the guilt and express our remorse and sorrow within ourselves. And, of course, a fierce determination not to behave in a similar manner again. When we experience within ourselves the suffering of guilt, realise it is the product of deluded unwholesome action, then we are more able to forgive others who do harm, for they will also suffer the same. Guilt, then, is also a first step towards compassion.

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