

In the Eyes of the Wise

The Buddha's Teachings on Honor & Shame

THANISSARO BHIKKHU

Several years back, I led a retreat in Santa Fe on the topic of karma. One of the readings was a passage in which the Buddha teaches his seven-year-old son, Rahula, how to examine his actions, as he would his face in a mirror, to make sure that he harmed no one—neither himself nor anyone else. One of the retreatants was a therapist who, the day after the retreat, was scheduled to hold the final meeting of a therapy group she had organized for some of her clients. She decided to Xerox the Buddha's teachings to Rahula and share them with the group, to get their opinion on the Buddha's parenting skills. Their unanimous verdict: "If our parents had taught us like that, we wouldn't be needing therapy groups like this."

What was striking about their verdict was that they arrived at it even though the Buddha's teaching emphasized the need for Rahula to develop a sense of shame around his actions: If he didn't feel shame at telling a deliberate lie, he was as empty of goodness as an overturned dipper was empty of water. If he realized that he had engaged in thinking that had harmed himself—or could lead to harm to others—he was to feel ashamed of those thoughts and to resolve not to repeat them.

And the Buddha didn't teach shame only to Rahula. In his more general teachings to the public, he called shame a bright guardian of the world, in that it kept people from betraying the trust of others. He also called shame a noble treasure, something more valuable than gold or silver in that it would protect you from doing things you'd later regret.

The high value that the Buddha placed on shame contrasts sharply with the way it's regarded in many segments of our culture today. In business and in politics, shame is all too often viewed as weakness. Among therapists, it's commonly seen as pathological—an unhealthy low opinion of yourself that prevents you from being all that you can. Book after book gives counsel on how to overcome feelings of shame and to affirm feelings of self-worth in their place.

It's easy to understand this general reaction against shame. The emotion of shame—the sense that you don't look good in the eyes of others—is a powerful one. It's where we allow the opinion of other people into our psyches, and all too often unscrupulous people take advantage of that opening to trample our hearts: to bully us and force on us standards of judgment that are not in our genuine best interests. It's bad enough when they try to make us ashamed of things over which we have little or no control: race, appearance, age, gender, sexual orientation, level of intelligence, or financial status. It's even worse when they try to shame us into doing harm, like avenging old wrongs.

But efforts to avoid these problems by totally abolishing shame miss an important point: There are two kinds of shame—the unhealthy shame that's the opposite of self-esteem, and the healthy shame that's the opposite of shamelessness. This second kind of shame is the shame that the Buddha calls a bright guardian and a treasure. If, in our zeal to get rid of the first kind of shame, we also get rid of the second, we'll create a society of sociopaths who care nothing for other people's opinions of right or wrong—or who feel shame about all the wrong things. Businessmen and politicians who see no shame in lying, for instance, feel shame if they're not at least as ruthless as their peers. And for all the general dismissal of shame, advertisers still find that shame over your body or ostensible wealth is a powerful tool for selling products. When all shame gets pathologized, it goes underground in the mind, where people can't think clearly about it, and then sends out tentacles that spread harm all around us.

This is where the Buddha's teachings on healthy shame can be a useful antidote, helping to bring the topic into the open and to show that, with proper training, shame can be a great force for good.

To begin with, the Buddha couples healthy shame with a healthy sense of honor: a sense that you deserve respect for holding to a high standard of conduct. In this sense, shame is a sign of high, rather than low, self esteem.

Honor, like shame, begins with the desire not only to *be* good, but also to *look* good in the eyes of others, which is why it, too, comes in both healthy and unhealthy varieties. Duels, feuds, gang wars, and honor killings—based on the belief that respect is earned by your ability to do violence—have given honor a bad name. But honor can be redefined and made healthy so that it's earned through integrity. A society without this sense of honor would be as bad as a society without healthy shame.

The Buddha's insights into healthy honor and shame came from his own experience in searching for, and finally finding, awakening. His initial search for the right path had taught him that honor and shame had to be treated with discernment, in that he couldn't always trust the opinion of others. If he had been swayed by the honor shown him by his early teachers, he would have stayed stuck in the practice of concentration without developing discernment. If he had been swayed by the disdain shown by the five brethren when he abandoned his austerities, he would have died without ever finding the goal.

But as he realized after his awakening, the problem with shame and honor is not that you want to look good in the eyes of others. It's just that you want to look good in the wrong people's eyes. If you can focus on the right people, shame and honor can be an enormous help in developing what the Buddha identified as the most important external factor in gaining awakening: admirable friendship. He was now in a position to give others the guidance he had lacked in his own quest, and to teach his disciples to be admirable friends to others. This is why the Buddha set up the monastic sangha: to keep the lineage of admirable friends alive.

But admirable friendship involves more than just making friends with admirable people. You also need to emulate their good qualities. This is where a sense of shame and honor comes into the equation. Your desire for your admirable friends to think well of you is a crucial incentive to follow their good example.

The good qualities of admirable friends are four:

- conviction in the Buddha's awakening and in the principle of karma;
- virtue, in the sense of not breaking the precepts or encouraging others to break them;
- generosity, and
- discernment.

The discernment of admirable friends can be seen in two things: the *standards* by which they judge you, and their *purpose* in judging you. If they're really discerning, they'll judge you by your actions—not by your appearance, wealth, or anything else over which you have no control. They'll judge your actions both by the intentions on which you act and on the results of your actions. In both cases—and here's where the Buddha's sense of honor inverts the military sense of honor in which he was trained as a young prince—the standard of judgment is that you can find happiness

in such a way that your intentions and actions harm no one: not you or anyone else.

The purpose for which admirable friends judge you is not simply to arrive at the judgment. They want to help you recognize *why* your mistakes are mistakes, so that you can learn not to repeat them. In this way, they're encouraging you to develop the true source for your happiness: your ability to act with more and more skill.

If they judge you in these ways, your friends show that they've developed both of the discernment factors of the path: right view—in seeing the importance of action—and right resolve, in extending goodwill to you. If you internalize their standards, you're internalizing the path as well.

This is why the Buddha taught Rahula how to internalize those standards by examining his own actions. That way, even if the society around him was falling apart and he was separated from his admirable friends, he could still live by their values. That would be for his long-term welfare and happiness.

The Buddha prefaced his instructions with the image of a mirror: Just as you use a mirror to see how you look to other people, Rahula was to look at his actions to see how he appeared in the eyes of the wise. And the wise would have him judge his actions like this:

Whatever he did in thought, word, and deed, he was first to examine his intentions: If he anticipated that the act he planned would cause any harm inside or out, he was not to act on that intention. If he didn't anticipate harm, he could go ahead and act. While acting, he was to check the results of his action. If he was causing unanticipated harm, he should stop. If not, he could continue with the action. After the action was done, he should look at the long-term results of the action. If it turned out that he had caused harm in word or deed, he should talk it over with a trusted friend on the path who would advise him on how to avoid causing that harm again. Then he should resolve not to repeat that action. If his thoughts had caused harm, he should feel shame around that type of thinking and resolve not to repeat it. If he had caused no harm, though, he should take joy in his progress on the path, and keep on training.

In this way, the Buddha didn't simply tell Rahula to cause no harm. Instead, he told him, in effect, "Try not to cause harm, but if you *do* cause harm, this is how you go about learning from your mistakes." This shows the element of practical goodwill that pervades these teachings.

As does the Buddha's recommendation for joy. After all, joy is what healthy shame and honor are for: to help you see for yourself the well-being that comes from mastering higher levels of skill and harmlessness in your actions. When this becomes your source of happiness, you grow up, with less need for the approval and affirmations of others. In seeing the power of your actions and really wanting to act in harmless ways, you make right view and right resolve your own.

One of the dangers that can come from shame and honor in admirable friendship is that, out of a desire to look good in your friends' eyes, you might want to show off your good qualities. To counteract this tendency, though, the Buddha warned that if you do, your good qualities immediately get ruined. One of the signs of integrity, he said, is modesty—to speak as little as possible of your own good qualities, and never to exalt yourself over others who lack them.

The other danger of shame and honor is that you might want to hide your mistakes from your admirable friends. This is why the Buddha stressed that, if you've made mistakes in the past but have now learned not to repeat them, you brighten the world like the moon when released from a cloud. And it's also why the Buddha prefaced his instructions to Rahula with a teaching on truthfulness, letting him know that making a mistake is much less shameful than making a mistake and not admitting it. If you hide your faults, you not only lose the trust of your friends, but you also close the way to making progress on the path. Or even worse: In the Buddha's words, if a person feels no shame in telling a deliberate lie, there's no evil that that person won't do.

The Buddha illustrated this point with the image of elephants in battle. If an elephant goes into battle and uses his feet and tusks, but holds back his trunk, the elephant trainer knows that the elephant hasn't given his life to the king. But if an elephant uses his feet and his tusks and his trunk, the elephant trainer knows that the elephant has given his life to his king. There's nothing it won't do.

This image is a good lesson in the Buddha's revolutionary sense of honor. At first glance, it would seem that the elephant who doesn't hold back would be the hero of the image—after all, that's the kind of elephant a king would want to send into battle, and it represents the kind of honor often extolled in warrior cultures. But the Buddha is actually presenting the image in a negative light: The elephant's willingness to risk its trunk is a sign of its servility to the king. In effect, the Buddha's telling Rahula that if, like the

elephant who protects his trunk, he's heedful to protect his truthfulness, it's a point of genuine honor: a sign that he's a servant to no one, neither to anyone outside nor to his own defilements inside.

This inversion of the old military sense of honor is echoed in the Buddha's comment that better than victory in battle over a thousand-thousand men is victory over one person: yourself.

The Buddha's instructions in training Rahula to develop a healthy sense of honor and shame eventually bore fruit. Instead of taking pride in the fact that he was the Buddha's son, Rahula showed a willingness to learn from all the monks. And after he gained awakening, the Buddha extolled him for being foremost among the monks in his desire to learn.

Of course, at that point Rahula didn't need the Buddha's praise. He had already found a deathless happiness that was beyond the reach of other people's respect. Actually, the Buddha was praising Rahula for our sake, to let us know that shame and honor can be useful tools on the path. If you're careful in choosing whose opinions you let into your psyche, and internalize the qualities that make shame and honor healthy, you'll not only look good in the eyes of the wise. Your eyes will become wise as well.