

Wise Enough to Care

Pay attention when the Buddha is teaching children. He's not giving them pacifier Dhamma, to be discarded when they outgrow it. Instead, he's teaching them important principles in clear language that will serve them—and you—well throughout life.

Once, when he was on his alms round, he came across a group of boys catching little fish. He asked them, "Do you fear pain? Do you dislike pain?" "Yes," they answered.

So he recited a spontaneous verse:

If you fear pain,
if you dislike pain,
don't anywhere do an evil deed
in open or in secret.
If you're doing or will do
an evil deed,
you won't escape pain
 catching up
 as you run away. — *Udāna* 5:4

He was teaching them a quality called *ottappa*, or compunction: the fear of doing wrong and of suffering bad consequences as a result. In his verse, he's basing the sense of compunction on an impersonal principle: the way kamma acts. Just because the beings you're harming may be powerless to get back at you right now doesn't mean that the kammic results are powerless at all.

The Buddha used a similar argument when, on another day's alms round, he came across a group of boys beating a snake with a stick. He told them:

Whoever hits with a stick
beings desiring ease,
when he himself is looking for ease,
will meet with no ease after death.

Whoever doesn't hit with a stick
beings desiring ease,

when he himself is looking for ease,
will meet with ease after death. — *Udāna 2:3*

But the Buddha also used more interpersonal arguments to teach compunction. Once, when teaching a king, he offered another reflection: Just as you will never find anyone you love more than yourself, other people love themselves just as fiercely. Then he concluded:

So you shouldn't hurt others
if you love yourself. — *Udāna 5:1*

The reasoning here seems to be that if your happiness depends on harming others, it won't be safe. Given that it violates their self-love, they'll try to destroy it. If you really want lasting happiness, you can't cause other beings any harm.

Compunction is rarely discussed in modern Buddhist circles, even though it appears in many of the Buddha's lists of qualities to be developed along the path. He calls it a guardian of the world in that it keeps people from violating trust and behaving promiscuously. In a simile where the Buddha compares different qualities needed on the path to features of a frontier fortress, compunction is a high and wide road encircling the fortress, to ward off unskillful qualities that would damage the skillful qualities—such as mindfulness and right effort—that inhabit the fortress. It's also a treasure that thieves can't steal, fire can't burn, and floods can't wash away.

In many of these lists, compunction is paired with a healthy sense of shame. Together, they make up your sense of conscience. Healthy shame—the opposite, not of self-esteem, but of shamelessness—is a disinclination to do wrong, motivated by your desire not to look bad in the eyes of people you admire. Compunction is more impersonal. You sense that, given the way causality works over the long run, you're not immune to the consequences of your actions—and you care.

In this sense, compunction is the opposite of callousness—the attitude that you'll do as you please, and you don't give a damn about the consequences. It's also the opposite of apathy, the defeatist attitude of not caring about anything at all. When you feel compunction, you actively care about your long-term well-being and will try your best not to jeopardize it.

This active quality of caring may be one of the reasons why compunction is also paired with ardency in descriptions of meditators wiping unskillful thoughts out of their minds.

“If, while he is walking, there arises in a monk a thought of sensuality, a thought of ill will, or a thought of harmfulness, and he does not quickly abandon, dispel, demolish, or wipe that thought out of existence, then a monk walking with such a lack of ardency & compunction is called continually and continuously lethargic and low in his persistence. [Similarly if he is standing, sitting, or lying down.]” — *Itivuttaka 110*

But compunction is not just a quality for beginners in the Dhamma or in meditation. It’s also listed as one of the strengths of a “learner,” someone who has attained at least the first noble attainment, the first taste of the deathless. It’s a quality that will strengthen that person all along the path to total awakening.

It’s good to contemplate why.

One reason is that compunction contains, in embryonic form, both of the discernment factors of the noble eightfold path, which a learner has also developed: right view and right resolve. It’s related to right view in that it understands the importance of your actions in determining whether you will suffer or not. Pleasure and pain arise and fall away, not randomly, but because of things you have done and are doing.

Compunction is related to right resolve in that it wants to avoid suffering, so it resolves to avoid any action that would cause suffering. It’s a direct expression of one of the forms of right resolve: goodwill, the determination not to cause harm. As we’ve seen, compunction starts with the determination not to cause harm to yourself, and then—based on its understanding of kamma—it grows into a desire not to harm any being at all. That’s the foundation of universal goodwill.

Compunction’s dual relationship to discernment here—as an understanding based on a view of reality and as a form of resolve—highlights the dual aspect of discernment, an aspect that’s often overlooked. The right-view side of compunction is based on a conviction in the way things work: a conviction that, when you become a learner, is confirmed. Actions yield results in line with the quality of the intention that motivates them. This is a fact that has to be accepted.

But discernment doesn’t stop with acceptance. After all, what it accepts is that there are basically two types of action—skillful and unskillful, leading to well-being and leading to harm—and it’s possible to choose one over the other. Seeing the options opened by this possibility, the right-resolve side of compunction arrives at a value judgment: Skillful is better than unskillful, so harmful actions should be avoided. The pleasure they may bring in the short term is not worth

the long-term pain they will cause. This judgment applies not only to blatant actions, like beating snakes with sticks, but also to more subtle ones, such as clinging to views and ways of defining your self that will lead to suffering and stress. Even when the Buddha talks about the motivation for the final stages of insight practice—perceiving all phenomena as empty of self—he explains it in terms of the suffering that’s avoided when you do.

In other words, from the beginning of the practice to its final steps, it’s wise to care: about what you choose to do, and about the consequences of your choices. You realize that, with freedom of choice, you have power in your hands—the power to shape your own experience of pleasure and pain, along with the pleasures and pains of others—and you care about using this power well.

When you comprehend this point, it goes a long way to correcting a lot of common misconceptions about Buddhist insight: that it doesn’t pass judgment, that it ends with acceptance of the way things are.

The lessons of compunction also help you to understand the modern Dhamma principle of not being attached to the outcome of your actions. It doesn’t mean that you don’t care about the outcome. It simply means that you don’t insist that just because you choose to do something, its outcome will have to be right. If you see that an action actually caused harm, you’re willing to accept the mistake as a mistake so that you can learn from it, and you make up your mind not to repeat it. This is another point of wisdom that the Buddha taught to a child—his own son. It’s the direct opposite of not caring. You care so much about the consequences of your future choices that you try always to be mindful of what you’ve learned from your choices in the past.

To care in this way is an immediate way of developing wisdom on a day-to-day basis. It may sound simple in the beginning, but just because a principle sounds simple doesn’t mean that it doesn’t have deeper implications. It’s when you’re willing to listen to the Buddha’s simple messages—and to act on them—that you can develop an intuitive sense of how to understand truths that are harder to see.