

Remorse

August 30, 2016

When you sit down to meditate and settle down with the breath, the mind becomes very sensitive. Sometimes things you did in the past that you don't feel right about will come up. And they hurt.

At times like that, it's all too easy to start feeling remorse. Remorse is not an attitude or a feeling that the Buddha recommended. Because, as he noticed, it weakens you.

We usually feel remorse for one of two reasons: One is the childish belief that if you feel bad enough about having done something, then the punishment will be mitigated. And the other, of course, is the feeling that if you don't feel badly about something, you'll probably repeat the mistake again.

In the first case, feeling bad about it is not going to make any difference. Noticing that it was a mistake and resolving not to repeat it: That's the best that can be expected of a human being.

As for the fear that we've got some suffering awaiting us in the future as a kind of punishment: The Buddha recommends that, if you want not to suffer from the results of past bad actions or past unskillful actions, you develop the brahmaviharas—and particularly equanimity, along with the ability not to be overcome by pain and not to be overcome by pleasure. Pleasure and pain go together: If you get overcome by pleasure and try to hold onto the pleasure, it can turn into pain. And it's already got you overwhelmed

It's like catching a fish. You discover that you have a huge fish on your line that can either dive way down into the ocean or jump out of the water. You see it leap up and you say, "Ah, this is pleasure," and you hold onto the line. But then it dives down to the ocean and pulls you down with it.

So if the mind is overcome either by pleasure or pain, there's going to be suffering.

But as for the question of whether you "deserve" to suffer or not, it's interesting: The Buddha never talks about people deserving to suffer. He simply says that certain actions lead to certain results. But he's here to cure our problem of suffering whether it's "deserved" or not. He never said, "I'll teach you the end of suffering only if you don't deserve to suffer." The end of suffering is there for everyone, whether they "deserve" to suffer or not. That point should be underlined many, many times.

The teaching on karma is not meant to explain the horrible things that happen to people or to justify meting out misery to them. It's supposed to be used to explain how you can find a way out—so that whatever you did in the past, there's a way out for you.

Think of Angulimala. He killed 999 people and yet he was able to become an arahant.

So the question of fear over deserved suffering: The Buddha's not here to tell you that you deserve to suffer. He's here to say, "This is the way you act skillfully so that you don't have to suffer." And if you've done unskillful things in the past, note the fact, note that it was a mistake, resolve not to repeat it, and then develop the brahmaviharas.

Goodwill for yourself, goodwill for others, goodwill for everyone.

Compassion for yourself, compassion for everyone.

Empathetic joy for yourself, empathetic joy for everyone.

Equanimity for yourself, equanimity for everyone.

Yet he also says you have to develop discernment. After all, sometimes you can do very unskillful things based on what you think is the compassionate thing to do, but you can't simply trust your loving heart to tell you what to do in a given situation, thinking that where there's a lot of love, that'll take care of it. We can do some awfully unskillful things based on love.

So what is the proper motivation to make sure you don't repeat a mistake? The Buddha lists two qualities: One is heedfulness and the other is samvega.

Heedfulness is simply realizing that whatever you do will come back in one way or another, and so you want to be very, very careful about what you do.

And samvega is the attitude that looks at life as a whole and sees how scary it is. That's one of the meanings of the word samvega. The other meaning is dismay. You think of how we are born again and again and again. We all want happiness but we can do some really unskillful things based on our desire for happiness. We find people whom we love and we can do unskillful things based on our love.

In other words, as long as we're living under the power of delusion, then no matter how good things get, there's always an under side. There's always the possibility that everything will fall apart. No matter how much we understand about the Dhamma, there are times when we forget.

Thinking in this way gives you the motivation to want to get out of the cycle. And the path of meditation is the most skillful way out. Some people say that it's selfish that you're just pulling yourself out. But think about what samsara means. Samsara's not a place. It's an activity, something we do: We keep wandering on. We get this body and we wander through life with this body. When we can't use this body anymore, the mind goes wandering off to find something else.

And it's driven by craving and clinging. And you know what the mind is like when it's driven by craving and clinging. Especially when it's being pushed out of something where it's used to being. It's going to look for something new and just grab onto anything. It's like being pushed out of your house. You'll take the first house that appears on the market.

So this is an activity. And we actually create our worlds of becoming through the activity of wandering-on, through craving. We're creating our individual worlds to feed on. So it's like

an addiction. And the best thing to do with an addiction is to learn how to end it. You'll benefit, the people around you will benefit, too.

Because as we feed off our worlds, we're often feeding off of the same food sources that other people are because our worlds overlap, which means there's competition. So simply pulling yourself out of the cycle really helps to at least take one mouth out of the feeding cycle.

And you're setting a good example. Because the things we do in order to get out are not just a matter of running away. We have to be generous. We have to be virtuous. We try to develop good qualities.

One of the motivations for doing this is compassion. As the Buddha said, the people who help us with our practice: If we really do get out, then they benefit greatly.

So it's important to realize that no matter how good things get, no matter how much you've learned about things, if you haven't reached any of the noble attainments there's always a possibility of backsliding. That's what's scary; that's what's terrifying about all this.

So the proper response when you've realized that you've made a mistake, you've harmed somebody, is not remorse. It's heedfulness and samvega.

And it's interesting that, in the Buddha's analysis for both of our reasons for wanting to go for remorse, his antidotes for remorse in both cases are the brahmaviharas: attitudes of limitless goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity.

But he also requires discernment because, as I said, compassion can sometimes be misleading. That's where compassion gets scary. This is why discernment is so important. What does it come down to? An understanding of the principles of what's skillful and what's not.

The Buddha gives some basic examples in the precepts. But then there are the subtler things, and those require a lot of discernment, a lot of mindfulness, a lot of alertness to see how the mind can lie to itself about what's skillful and what's not, and to learn how to see through those lies.

This is why we meditate: to strengthen our powers of mindfulness, to strengthen our powers of alertness, so that we can see what we're doing and what's actually coming about as the result of our actions. And then remembering that.

Again, you don't have to use remorse in order to pound it into the mind that something was a mistake. Heedfulness and samvega are enough.

So basically what the Buddha is doing is having us react to our mistakes as adults. One of the things you've learned as an adult is that mistakes are very easy to make, but you can learn from them. And that's the important thing: learning from them—while being mature enough to know how not to repeat the mistake without having to beat yourself up over your past mistakes.

At the same time, you prepare yourself: You know that you've got some past mistakes. There's going to be some pain coming in the future. This shouldn't be news. So you develop the qualities of mind that can guarantee that pain and pleasure won't overcome the mind. In other

words, you develop concentration; you develop discernment. Having concentration as an alternative to sensual pain and pleasure puts you in a safe place, so that when pains come, you have an alternative place to go. That way, the pains don't have to drive you around.

And as you've learned in getting the mind to settle down: If, when you're working with the breath, there's a sense of ease, then if you leave the breath for the sense of ease, everything falls apart, blurs out. You get into what's called delusion concentration, where things are very nice and very still, but you don't really know where you are. When you come out, you're not really sure whether you were asleep or awake. That's not the path.

So you have to learn that even though there's pleasure coming up as you're working with the breath, you can still stay with the breath, you don't get waylaid by the pleasure. In this way, getting the mind properly into concentration helps you overcome your attachment to sensual pleasures and also helps you not to be overwhelmed by the sense of pleasure that comes from getting the mind to settle down and be still.

Now this, of course, includes discernment, because that ultimately is what's going to free you from pleasure and pain. And notice, the Buddha's discernment works whether the pleasures or pains are deserved or not. You realize that you've had enough of that back-and-forth. You want to go to something better.

And so you can pull the mind out of both pleasure and pain. You see the mind, or awareness, as something separate from pleasure and pain. This is one of the skills you develop as you meditate. And this is a really important skill. Because as that chant said just now, "We're all subject to aging, illness, and death." We have these things lying in wait and we want to be ready for them.

As someone once said, the most amazing thing about human beings is that we all know we're going to die but we all act as if we didn't.

Well, you know. Act as if you take it to heart. You can prepare. You can get the mind ready for times when there'll be aging, illness, and death. And yet you don't have to suffer from them because you've learned how to separate the concern for pleasure and pain, and the pleasure and pains themselves, from your awareness. You let these aspects of the present separate themselves into three separate things. That way, the pleasures and pains, and your concerns about pleasures and pains, don't have to weigh the mind down. They're there, but they're not having an impact on the mind. That's when you're really safe.

And you get to that safe place not through remorse but through heedfulness and a sense of samvega. Those are two emotions that you can really rely on. Of course, you don't want to just sit in samvega. You want it to propel you to act. As with that chant just now with aging, illness, death, separation: That's all about samvega.

But the reflection on karma: That's actually *pasada*, confidence that there's a way out. It's through your actions that you can find the way out. Always keep that in mind. Things don't end with samvega. They move onto *pasada*, confidence, and from there onto release.

So meditate with confidence. Think of your past mistakes with confidence, that you're not going to have to repeat them. Because you're the type of person who learns.