

## *Compunction*

*May 18, 2020*

You've seen that Buddha image on the other side of the pad, where the Buddha seems to be counting something on his fingers. It's symbolic of one of the basic ways he taught. He would teach things in terms of lists. And there were two qualities that tended to show up in many of his lists: shame and compunction. They form a list of their own, where the Buddha calls them the guardians of the world. It's because of shame and compunction that people behave. Otherwise, he said, they'd be promiscuous, like animals.

These two qualities are also listed in the five strengths of a person in training—in other words, the strengths of someone who's given rise to the Dhamma eye, the first taste of awakening. These are qualities that get built into that person's character from that point on. They're also listed as treasures, and in the Buddha's image of the practice like a fortress, where they form an encircling road and an encircling moat around the fortress. Shame and compunction are mentioned often together, and because shame is such a controversial issue in the West, we've spent a lot of time explaining how there is such a thing as healthy shame, to the point where compunction gets put off to the side.

The Pali word for compunction, *ottappa*, is closely related to *atappa*, which means ardency. *Ottappa* has an element of ardency, but it also has more. It contains a sense of the dangers that come from unskillful behavior, along with a strong sense you don't want to cause any of those dangers, so you put forth the effort to prevent yourself from doing that. It's a difficult term to translate into English. One translator has recommended moral dread, which is pretty dreadful.

To get a sense of the meaning of *ottappa*, it's good to think of its opposites, one of which is apathy, where you really don't care. You don't have the energy and you don't want to put forth the energy to think about what the consequences of your actions are going to be. Then there's callousness, where you don't care about other people—what their feelings are. And then there's defiance, where you're sick and tired of having inhibitions placed on your behavior, and you'd prefer to be free to act in whatever way you wanted to, and let the results do what they want. It's one of the reasons why some people enjoy seeing people in power who are basically acting against the interests of ordinary people and yet ordinary people take some vicarious thrill in seeing someone who's uninhibited—their idea being that if they had power, they could be defiant, too. But that kind of behavior leads to a lot of harm.

Some people say, “I don’t care about other people. I’m tired of caring about other people.” But the Buddha’s making the point that when you care about other people, it’s going to be good for you. Caring about other people is caring for yourself. It’s not just that you’re putting out effort for them, for them, for them. It’s basically for you that you take care.

The Buddha teaches this principle in several places in the Canon.

There are some stories about when he’s on his own, encountering little kids who are harassing animals. In one case, the kids are fishing; in another, they’re beating a snake with a stick. He asks them, “Do you like pain?” “No.” Then why are you causing pain to another animal?” Then he goes on to speak in terms of the principle of karma—that the harm you do to other beings is going to come back at you. And, as he said, it’ll chase you down even as you run away. It’s that persistent, that insistent.

There’s another case when he’s talking to a king. He points out that you could search the whole world over and you’d never find anyone you love more than yourself. But then from that he comes to an interesting conclusion: that you should never harm anybody or cause anyone else to harm, because, after all, they love themselves just as fiercely. If your happiness depends on harming them or getting them to cause harm, they’re going to do what they can to destroy your happiness. At the same time, there’s the simple principle of empathy. You realize there are certain things you don’t like to have done to you. Other people feel the same way. You empathize with their desires because they’re the same as your own.

So in these ways, the Buddha is teaching reasons for caring, as alternatives to callousness, apathy, and defiance. Belief in the principle of kamma, fear of retaliation, and empathy can inform your compunction.

When you realize it really is in your own self-interest to take care, you also realize that it requires energy. This is why we practice meditation, because there are some forms of putting yourself out where you feel depleted and other forms of putting in energy where you get more energy back, and meditation is one of the latter. So when you’re beginning to feel apathetic or don’t care, it’s a time to meditate.

Here again, it’s a principle of looking after yourself and looking after others at the same time. That, the Buddha said, is the most skillful way to look for your happiness. In this case, you train the mind to be with one object and you look after the conversation that’s going on in the mind. Whatever it’s saying that might pull you away from the breath, learn how to put that aside. Whatever complaints it has, this is where you can use the term, “I don’t care. I don’t care about the complaints. I’m just going to keep doing my work.” And if the results seem to be

coming slowly, you say, “I don’t care about that, either. I’m going to do my work until the results come.” We live in a world where, if we’re mature, we’ve had to learn the lesson that you can’t expect things to come your way right away. And you’re not necessarily entitled to things coming your way before you put out some effort of your own.

There was that time when Ajaan Suwat was teaching meditation in Massachusetts. After a couple of days, he turned to me and said, “Have you noticed how grim these people are?” I looked out across the room, and he was right. They looked very grim. He went on to add, “It’s because they haven’t had good practice in generosity and virtue.” Now, the training in generosity and virtue teaches you, to begin with, that you have to give before you’re going to get. And it’s teaching you at an age, if you’re learning this when you’re a child, where it’s a counterintuitive message, that happiness comes from giving. Happiness comes from putting yourself out. Energy comes from putting yourself out, thinking about the results of your actions rather than thinking about what you feel like doing.

We think of the Buddha as a defiant person, defying many of the norms of his time. But there was one principle that he learned to respect, that he would bow down to, and that was the principle of causality: that when you act in certain ways on certain intentions, the results are going to be bad. Think about his teachings about how you cause harm to yourself and how you cause harm to others. You cause harm to yourself by breaking the precepts. You cause harm to yourself by giving in to greed, aversion, and delusion. You might think of breaking the precepts as harming other people, because after all, you’re killing them or stealing from them, lying to them. But he said, no, that’s where you’re harming yourself. If you want to harm other people, you get *them* to do these things, because then that becomes their karmic load.

So think in terms of cause and effect, and be willing to submit your preferences to that principle for your own good. That way, you get the protection that comes from compunction. As I said, the word *ottappa* is very similar to *atappa*, and *atappa*, as you remember, is part of the practice of mindfulness. It’s the wisdom faculty in mindfulness practice, where you’re wise enough to see that if you want happiness, there are things you’ve got to do. If you don’t do them, the happiness is not going to come.

We tend to think of wisdom and intelligence as having to do more with book learning. But from the Buddha’s point of view, intelligence lies in the realization that you’ve got to put yourself out. You’ve got to put forth an effort. Sometimes

you don't feel like doing it, but why give in to your feelings? Where are they going to lead you? You've got to think about the long term.

So you make some sacrifices. But then you get repaid: That's the message over and over again. When you help other people, you're going to benefit. That's the image of the acrobats, or the opposite of the image of the acrobats—that sutta that talks about how, in looking after your own mind, you're helping other people. But then it goes on. Unfortunately, it doesn't have a striking image to go with the other principle, which is that in looking out after other people, you benefit. You develop qualities of goodwill that are going to be good for you; qualities of kindness that will be good for you. Patience and equanimity: These things are all good for you. These become your perfections. They become your treasures. They become your protection. These are the good qualities you build in the mind. They don't go anywhere else. They stay with the mind.

And that's the paradox, that the goodness you leave behind in the world is the goodness that goes with you. The goodness that you try to grab to yourself—in other words, the pleasures you're trying to grab to yourself—leave you, whereas the goodness you leave behind stays in the mind. It becomes a quality of the mind that stays with you for a long time.

So you have to ask yourself, "What do you want to take with you?" Then develop those good qualities. And learn particularly, as the Buddha always begins, with generosity: being generous with your time, being generous with your energy. Realize that you've already benefited from other people's generosity. You remember what the Buddha said, "Stingy people can't get their minds to concentrate. Stingy people have no way of gaining awakening."

You have to look for that part of the mind that's willing to share, happy to share. At first it may not be all that willing, but as you do it again and again, there does come a sense of self-worth. And that becomes a source of happiness, a source of self-esteem, the kind of self-esteem that doesn't have to compare itself with other people. It's just good in and of itself. Those are the kinds of values you want. The self-esteem that has to compare itself with others: That the Buddha calls conceit. And although there are healthy forms of conceit, still, the part that goes around comparing—Ajaan Maha Boowa has a nice phrase for it. He calls it the fangs of ignorance.

So look for a goodness inside that doesn't have fangs, the sense of self-worth that doesn't have to compare. If you're going to compare, compare yourself now to where you used to be, realizing that the extent to which you submit to the practice, you benefit. The extent to which you have a sense of compunction, you

benefit. So try to develop an appreciation for this quality because it is for your long term welfare and happiness.