

Shame & Compunction

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You look around at the world outside, and it seems an awfully precarious place. Institutions that used to seem very solid begin to reveal themselves as more rickety than we thought they were. Supply lines break down, and the basic fabric of society seems to be torn. So how can you live safely in a place like that?

There's one thing you can depend on, and that's the Dhamma.

The Buddha teaches us how to find refuge, how to find safety through developing good qualities in the mind. That's another meaning of the word dhamma. There's the Dhamma of the teachings, but also the dhamma of the qualities you build into the mind, and those are your real protection. The teachings point the way to the reality that you want to develop inside your mind. What you want to protect is your determination always to do the right thing, the skillful thing, and to avoid whatever is unskillful, to avoid harm.

The Buddha points to two qualities in particular that are useful, that are important for providing protection: He calls them guardians of the world. They're shame and compunction—*hiri* and *ottappa* in Pali.

“Shame” is a word that's gotten a lot of bad press in the West, but it's important to realize there are two kinds of shame. One is the shame that's the opposite of pride, which can be debilitating. Then there's the shame that's the opposite of shamelessness. In other words, you look at a particular action and you realize it's beneath you. That kind of shame is not a sign of low self-esteem. It's related to high self-esteem, and whatever sense of self is involved in it is very useful. You want to maintain your honor. You want to maintain your goodness, your ability to find happiness in the world, to find happiness inside, without harming anybody.

Now, shame particularly means wanting to look good in the eyes of other people, and you have to choose the right people whose eyes you want to look good in. The Buddha provides us with the right people: the noble Sangha, in addition to himself. Whenever you do something, it's always good to think: What would Ajaan Lee think, or Ajaan Mun? How would they look at you?

These are people who don't want to look down on you. They want to see you do well, but they'd be disappointed if you did something that was beneath their standards. They want you to live up to high standards for your own good. So it's good for you if you want to please them by maintaining high standards. That's what this healthy sense of shame is all about.

It goes hand in hand with honor. You do the honorable thing even when it requires a fair amount of sacrifice, even when it requires a lot of sacrifice. You realize that the things you'd be sacrificing outside to do the right thing are not nearly as valuable as the realization that you did the right thing, in spite of the difficulty.

Having that sense of honor and shame, directed at looking good in the eyes of the right people, really does protect you. It lifts your sense of self-esteem, that you've lived in this world without harming it. And though the world may be falling apart, and people are doing all kinds of dishonorable things, you're not going to stoop to their level.

As for *ottappa*, compunction, that's more impersonal. It's related directly to the realization that your actions are going to have consequences, and you care about the consequences.

It's the opposite of apathy and the opposite of callousness. Apathy is when you give up on the idea of doing good. Callous people do what they want, and they don't care what the consequences are going to be. In other words, they don't care about other people for sure, but they really don't care about themselves, either. That's because they haven't stopped to realize that whatever they do comes back at them.

When you have a sense of compunction, you realize that your actions will have consequences both affecting other people and coming back to affect yourself. You care about wanting to do this well. So it's a combination of right view and right resolve—right view in the principle of kamma, and leading to the deeper right view of realizing what causes suffering in the mind comes from our own actions. But the way to the end of suffering also comes from our own actions.

Then you have the right resolve of goodwill. Given that you have this power to have an impact on yourself and on the world, you want to act in a way that's

conducive to happiness. And given the principle of kamma, that means conducive not only to your happiness but also to the happiness of people around you.

Compunction, *ottappa*, is often paired with *ātappa*, or ardency. You care enough to live your life well: Your actions—you want to have skillful actions. Your speech—you want to have skillful speech. Your thoughts—you want to have skillful thoughts.

Try to approach life the same way that you would approach a craft: You want to perfect your skills. And given that you've developed a certain level of skill already, you don't want to be sloppy in your work. You care.

This is a principle you see throughout Asia. I've been to Japan, I've been to Thailand, and people in both places will point out when someone did a good job in making an object, especially in terms of a craft, and they say that they really admire the attitude that went into the object. They can actually sense the attitude in the object. Well, try to approach your life that same way.

As the Buddha said, we're aiming at actions that are skillful and blameless. They come from good intentions, but not just good. You want to make those intentions skillful.

This is where it's useful to take into consideration how things look in the eyes of other people. If people criticize you, take their criticism seriously. Don't be too quick to brush it off. Ask yourself: Is it true? If it is true, then you've got something you can work on.

But thinking of the eyes of other people also mean thinking of the eyes of the *ajāns*, the noble ones: that you'd like your actions to look good in their eyes, because their eyes are the eyes of compassion. They want you to do well.

So try to guard yourself with these attitudes. As I pointed out, compunction contains the seeds for two of the factors of the noble path: right view, right resolve. From those two factors you can develop the remaining factors of the path.

So these two qualities, shame and compunction, really are basic to the practice. They're not just nice ideas tacked on here and there. They're built into the structure of the four noble truths, the noble eightfold path—all the really basic teachings.

When the Buddha taught, he didn't simply want to describe reality *out there*.

He wanted to show a path, a path of action. He wanted his words to perform, to inspire you to follow that path, a path that leads to true happiness. He cared about your true happiness. So it's up to you to have that same level of care. Let his care inspire you.