Shame Yes, Guilt No

April 9, 2024

There was a famous Olympian swimmer one time who was expected to sweep all of the events that he swam in, and he didn’t win the first. The commentators were predicting that he would go into a slump and probably lose all the rest as well. But his coach said to them, “You don’t know him.” And sure enough, he went on to win all the remaining events he swam in. In other words, he didn’t let a defeat get him down. He didn’t let a mistake get him down. This is an important principle to keep in mind as you think about your precepts. That they’re basically training rules. That’s what Sikkhapada means. The name of the precept is training rule. And think of being an athlete. You lose something, you lose a game, does that mean you’re going to lose all the games? Well, no. Does it mean you’re bad? Not necessarily. You have to reflect. What did you do wrong? And then learn from that. If you let yourself get eaten up by remorse, that just makes it harder and harder to stick with the precepts. Because on the one hand you have that voice that’s hounding away at you, saying, “See, see, see, you made that horrible mistake.” And you can listen to that voice only for so long. And then there will be the reactive voice that says, “I don’t care.” Then it goes back and forth like that. Because you don’t care, then you break the precept again, and then the hounding voice comes back. So as you keep listening to that voice of remorse, and it sounds like the voice of the Dhamma, remind yourself there are things that sound like the Dhamma. That are not Dhamma at all. This is one of them. What I said, you recognize it’s a mistake, and you make up your mind you’re not going to repeat that mistake. And then you spend lots of goodwill around. Goodwill for yourself, so you have the energy to keep on practicing. Goodwill for the people you’ve wronged, so you’ll be motivated not to repeat that mistake. And then tell yourself, this is the best a human being can do. We’re fortunate in Buddhism that it was founded by someone who had made mistakes, and admitted them, and learned from them. You can imagine what Genesis would be like if after seven days God looked to the world and said, “Whoops, let’s start all over again.” A world in which beings have to feed off of beings. Even Kurt Vonnegut could think of a better world than that. So the Buddha knew what it’s like to make a mistake, but also knew how to learn from them. And an emotion that he never recommends is guilt. He does recommend shame. It’s a very different one. And the shame he recommends is not the kind of shame that says, “You’re a horrible person. You should be ashamed of yourself. Don’t show your face around anyone.” It’s more the shame of realizing, “Okay, I’m a good person, but I slipped.” The healthy sense of pride is that there are certain actions that you realize you’d be ashamed to do them. And if you do slip and do them, you say, “Okay, I’ve got to be more careful the next time.” And that’s the appropriate way to learn from a mistake. Learning that you’ve got to be more careful. One of the reasons why we take the precepts is we have some clear standards to hold by. You hear some people saying that the Buddha wouldn’t have hard and fast rules, so we take them as general recommendations. But no, they’re meant to be followed as rules. Training rules. Because your mind needs to be trained. One of the things you’ll find very quickly is that your mind can be very quick in breaking the precepts, especially if you’ve lived without the precepts before. Then suddenly you find yourself having to follow them. You can see how quick the mind is to want to break them and not even think that they’re breaking. Just saying, “In this situation, I’ve got to say this. In this situation, I’ve got to do this.” Speech is the most difficult of them, because it is so quick. A thought comes into your head, and sometimes the checkpoints between your brain and your mouth open all the doors, and it just slips right out. There was a thought in there, there was an intention in there, that was not in line with the precepts, and you missed it. You let it slip right through. This is a lesson that you’ve got to be more alert, you’ve got to be more mindful. Because the things that are going to happen in your mind are a lot quicker than that. And they can be pretty devastating. Think of someone on his or her deathbed, and the mind starts thinking about this, thinking about that. All sorts of thoughts are swirling through the mind. And if you’re not really clear about what’s going on in the mind, what the mind is saying to itself, as you leave the body, you can go all kinds of places. I read a novel one time in which one of the main characters is dying toward the end of the novel. And all of a sudden, she fastens on a tree outside the window. Now, if the author were Buddhist, that would be a sign that she’s probably going to be reborn as a tree, Deva. Which is not too bad. Or she might be born as a bug in the tree, who knows? But the mind is very quick, slithery, it’s kind of like mercury. Nowadays they don’t let kids play with mercury, but I remember when I was small, if the thermometer broke, we got to play with the mercury. It was amazing how it could slip around. Well, the mind is slipperier than that. And so if you find that all the effort is required to turn a thought into actual speech, is too quick for you to catch, what about the thoughts just on their own? Do you take it as a warning? You’ve got to be more careful, you’ve got to be more alert. This is why the precepts are a good practice for concentration practice. You need to be mindful, alert, and really take it seriously, not in a grim sense. The more grim you are about the precepts, the less the likelihood that you’ll stick with them. But serious in the sense that this is something you want to master. So think of it as a game that you want to get good at. There is a sense that it is enjoyable to learn how to get some control over your actions. It’s an attitude a lot of us have trouble learning, but it really is important. And the Buddha keeps recommending that. He says you want to have a sense of well-being, a sense of gladness to bring to the concentration. One of the best ways of doing that is to learn how to stick with the precepts. You get more and more used to thinking in skillful ways, more and more used to seeing the times when you really stick with the precepts where you hadn’t before as a victory, and you take joy in that. This is when you learn how to enjoy the training, that you can keep it alive, and you’re more likely to get quicker and quicker at catching yourself. So if you find that you have that voice of guilt, and our culture, the religion in which our culture is based, really advocates guilt as a good spiritual emotion. From the Buddha’s point of view, it’s not. It’s actually a barrier to the kind of training that he wants you to take on. Of course, the people who advocate guilt as a good thing, they’re trying to tell you that you’re basically a bad person. This is the difference between shame and guilt. Healthy shame comes from a sense that you are a good person, you have good qualities, and you want to maintain those good qualities as best you can. Guilt basically tells you that you’re rotten to the core, and that’s not going to help you. It’s the kind of emotion that makes you more and more dependent on others. The Buddha’s trying to teach you that you’ve got to learn how to be dependent on yourself, and part of self-reliance is a sense of confidence. He has this “I can do this. I am capable. I slipped every now and then, but that doesn’t mean I can’t learn from the slips.” That’s the attitude you bring. Then the training does become a joy, as you’re up for the challenges that come, both inside meditation and out. (waves crashing)

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2024/240409_Shame_Yes,_Guilt_No.mp3>