

## *Wise About Mistakes*

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One of the distinctive features of Buddhism is that it was founded by someone who made mistakes—and admitted his mistakes. So he knows what it's like to make a mistake. Can you imagine how different Genesis would be if on the seventh day God looked at the world he'd created and said, "Whoops"? Genesis would have come out very differently.

But the Buddha, in telling of his life story—how he sought awakening, and how he was able to remember many, many lifetimes—told the story as a story of making mistakes, admitting them, and learning how to make fewer mistakes. So, when he teaches the principle of karma, his attitude is that people do make mistakes, and there's a healthy way to respond to them, and lots of unhealthy ways to respond to them.

The unhealthy ways include saying that it doesn't matter at all. That's a way of sustaining a person's self-image. That's very unhealthy because people like that just keep on making mistakes. They don't learn. The opposite extreme is to say, "Well, anybody who makes a mistake is going to go to hell." You reflect back on the fact, "Well, I've made mistakes," and, as the Buddha said, if that's your attitude, it's as if you're in hell already even before you die.

The ideal attitude is to realize that you recognize the mistake, and that it does have consequences, so you resolve not to repeat the mistake. Then you try to create the right state of mind for not repeating the mistake, by learning from it. That attitude starts with goodwill for yourself, goodwill for all beings; compassion for yourself, compassion for all beings; empathetic joy for yourself, and for all beings; equanimity for yourself, and for all beings. The equanimity, of course, is for realizing that you can't go back and change things. It doesn't mean that you're indifferent as to what you're going to do after that.

Two other emotions the Buddha recommends are shame and compunction. Shame here, it's important to understand, is a healthy shame. There are basically two kinds of shame. Even though we have one word in English, there are two types. One is the opposite of pride, where you feel really bad about yourself and have no self-esteem. The other is the opposite of shamelessness, where you don't care what other people think, you don't care about what's right or wrong. The shame he's recommending is the second one, the opposite of shamelessness.

Think about the Buddha's instructions to Rahula. On reflecting, if you look back on your actions and you realize you've made a mistake, you cultivate a feeling of shame. Then you go talk it over with someone else. You have to remember that the Buddha and Rahula were members of the noble warrior

caste, which was a very proud caste. They didn't go for false humility. They didn't go for low self-esteem. Their shame was the shame of a proud person—someone who realizes that certain actions are really beneath him or her. That person doesn't want to stoop down, to lower his or her self-esteem. So this is the shame of someone who wants to maintain high self-esteem. And an attitude of goodwill maintains that, supports that.

An unhealthy sense of shame would say, "Well, I'm a bad person. I don't deserve to be happy." The Buddha's reminding you that happiness is not a question of deserving it or not deserving. Think about his instructions. He didn't say he would teach the end of suffering only for people who didn't deserve to suffer. We've all done things that would lead to suffering and have led to suffering. He wants to show us the way out.

This is one of the reasons why Buddhism is not so much concerned with justice. It's more concerned with learning how to be skillful. So the judgments that are made are not final judgments on how good or bad a person was or is. The judgments are of a work in progress. Think of a carpenter working on a chair. He's using a plane and he realizes, "Whoops, made a mistake." He doesn't just throw the chair away, doesn't give up as a carpenter. He has his tricks in the trade for how to compensate for a mistake. If it's a gash that can't be undone, well, what do you do to make it look like it's not a mistake? You make other changes in the chair. So, use your judgment to make adjustments as you go along.

Here shame plays a role in that you wouldn't want a bad-looking piece of furniture to come out of your workshop. We can think of shame as the desire to look good in the eyes of others. The Buddha recommends looking good in the eyes of the noble ones, people who've attained awakening. If they were to look at your actions, what would they think?

You have to remember they're looking at you through the eyes of compassion, but their compassion is not simply the compassion of wanting you to feel good. It's the compassion of wanting you to actually create the causes for happiness and to abandon the causes for suffering. So they have your best interests at heart—and they want *you* to have your own best interests at heart. A healthy sense of shame protects that.

The other quality is compunction. It's a hard word to translate into English—the Pali word is (*ottappa*)—but it basically means concern about the results of your actions. Its opposite would be callousness or apathy, where you don't really care: You do what you want, you don't care about the results. You just want to do what you feel like doing. With compunction, your attitude is, "I want to act in a way that will lead to long-term happiness and avoid any kind of long-term suffering." So you care about the impact of your actions.

When you have these two emotions working together in a skillful way—shame and compunction—you reflect on the Buddha’s teachings on karma, that certain actions will lead to unfortunate consequences, other actions will lead to better consequences, and that the working out of that particular principle is very complex. As he said, there are cases where people do good things in this lifetime but then they start doing bad things and they die with wrong view. This would get in the way of those good things yielding their results. They will at some point in time, but it’s going to be delayed, sometimes quite a bit. Who knows where you’re going to go in the meantime?

But the opposite is also true. If you’ve done unskillful things but then you have a change of heart and start doing skillful things, develop right view, and maintain right view all the way through death, then you’re bound for a good destination. Of course, with the possibility of going to that good destination, you can continue to practice the Dhamma. One of the results of practicing the Dhamma to a high level is that the results of your past bad actions get weakened and weakened, and have less of an impact on the heart and mind.

Think of the case of Angulimala. He killed a lot of people, but the Buddha saw that he had potential. So, through his psychic powers, he was able to subdue Angulimala’s pride. Angulimala came and practiced the Dhamma under the Buddha until he became an arahant.

Now, there were a lot of people who were not happy with this. They may have been the relatives of people who had been killed by Angulimala. So when he was on his alms round, they would throw things at him—stones, other things—tearing his robes, breaking his bowl, sometimes gashing his head. He’d come back from his alms round, and the Buddha would say, “Bear up with it. This is much less than it would’ve been otherwise if you hadn’t had this attainment.”

So it is possible to gain awakening even with bad karma in your background. But that means you have to have a change your heart, that you don’t want to do anything unskillful. You’re motivated by shame, motivated by compunction, because you realize that even though there is the possibility that, with the complexity of karma, some of your bad actions will have only weak results, you don’t really know for sure because you don’t know what else you’ve got in your karmic past. So you do your best right now.

This is why even though the Buddha recognised that there are some actions that are both skillful and unskillful at the same time, in other words, not very skillful but not very unskillful, he said they could lead to anything from a human birth to a lower birth. But it’s a gamble, which is why he said categorically, “Don’t kill, don’t steal, don’t have illicit sex, don’t lie, don’t take intoxicants.” That was out of his compassion, because he had seen the results

of these actions. Given his memory—and it was a long memory—he could see where these actions would go.

So, he's concerned for our well-being and he wants us to be concerned for our well-being too, so that we learn from our mistakes. He shows you how to adopt the right attitude for your mistakes so that you can learn how to stop making them. That's the protection he offers as a teacher. And from him we can learn how to protect ourselves.