

Week 3 on Virtue/Morality/Ethics: A reading from Sharon Salzberg and a reflection at the end.

Sometimes when we take up looking at the Parami of Virtue, it can be difficult to face some of the ways that we may all fall short of our ideals. How do we look back on our mistakes and hold ourselves with the very qualities of non-harming and non-cruelty (kindness and compassion) that we are trying to practice? This article by Sharon is a good discussion of this topic.

Excerpts From *Getting Over Guilt* by Sharon Salzberg

(Original source: <https://onbeing.org/blog/getting-over-guilt/>)

A hope to not be ruled by guilt is not to say that there is never a time and a place for recognizing things we have done wrong.

According to Buddhist psychology, there is a distinction that can be made between the feelings of remorse and guilt. If I were to get in an argument with a friend and say something hurtful to him or her hastily, feeling remorse after the conversation would be productive. Remorse does not look like guilt. It is not prolonged ruminating fueled by self-hatred but a pang of feeling that invites us to reflect. Remorse is thought to be a skillful state of mind, a byproduct of mindfully reviewing our actions, leading to a realization that we have said or done something that has harmed someone else. When we revisit our words or actions to experience our sense of regret, we are not necessarily self-flagellating with a barrage of negative thoughts (though, of course, that is possible — and unadvisable — too).

Remorse is not “good” and guilt “bad,” but it is seen as skillful because it allows us to experience pain as a response to harm we’ve caused another person. It comes from a place of compassion and mindfulness; we feel remorseful because we see someone else in pain, someone whose pain we caused, and we react with remorse because we recognize our fundamental connectedness. I said something that hurt you and now I am hurting. From there, we have created recognition and permission for ourselves, and then we can let go. When we let go, we don’t repeat the same mistakes.

Guilt is not seen as skillful because it is primarily driven by self-hatred. We do something we regret, say something that hurts someone we love, make a mistake. Then we then get lost in stories about what could have been, what we should have said or not said, or what we should have done or not done. This is conjured pain, which most often leads to a cycle of self-judgment and further guilt: *Why am I feeling guilty? Why did I not feel guilty last time something like this happened?*

On some level, we become addicted to guilt because we think ruminating repeatedly over a harmful statement or action will somehow absolve us of the negative experience we’ve caused another. But torturing ourselves is not a form of atonement. It merely makes us weary and more likely to act out in other facets of life as a result of feeling self-deprecated and inadequate.

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Compassion is actually the most powerful form of atonement, despite the fact that our culture may teach us that it’s merely “sweet” or “weak.” This is likely due to the fact that we’re conditioned to believe that being hard on ourselves is a virtue, a precursor to excellence. If we crack the whip on ourselves, we can get more done, we can be better and stronger and more powerful, right?

Wrong. As psychologist Dr. Kristin Neff recently explained in an interview with *The New York Times*, “the biggest reason people aren’t more self-compassionate is that they are afraid they’ll become self-indulgent.” It’s true, and I’m sure most of us can relate to this. We tend to think that feeling guilty for an action we regret will be a successful form of self-punishment, and somehow make things better. Ultimately, anger impairs our judgment and causes us to exert energy all at once in unsustainable bursts. Compassion is fierce, motivating, and a sustainable source of energy. It allows us to connect to ourselves and to others, and create a stronger foundation for skillful thoughts, words, and actions.

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We’re conditioned to view ourselves as having faults, as being incomplete, imperfect — things for which we should feel guilty. We could easily spend our lives in a terrifying struggle to become (finally) good enough. When this pressure makes us overwhelmed, we get angry at ourselves — in the form of guilt. The Buddha said:

“Anger with its poisoned source and fevered climax is murderously sweet.”

We become overcome by anger, which, in the case of guilt, looks a lot like the sponge filling with toxicity. We fixate on the mistake or “bad” situation unrelentingly, and develop tunnel vision. We cannot see alternatives or imagine a sense of perspective larger than our circumscribed pain.

The trouble with a feeling like remorse — and the reason we confuse it with guilt — is because it’s uncomfortable. We often tend to immediately notice discomfort and suffering, and believe that having a rough time means there’s something wrong with us. Nothing is wrong with remorse, or anger, or sadness, or jealousy. They are all feelings, and we can recognize and allow them without zeroing in on them and losing them to guilt — a form of self-punishment. We can show ourselves compassion and give ourselves permission. This is loving ourselves. This kind of love is not the same as narcissism or egotism. It’s a tender space of caring. It is compassion — strong and creating the foundation of how we come into harmony with life.

Reflection

We’ve all somehow caused harm or hurt someone’s feelings. Looking back on some of these incidents, what is your experience with each of these kinds of responses:

1. feeling self-hatred, guilt, blame and shame
2. acknowledging responsibility, feeling remorse, making amends and learning from mistakes