

Bright Guardians of the World

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Sometimes, when we've done something wrong and we know it, we feel like we're living with a police officer inside us. It puts us on edge, but we may not really understand that we're suffering, or why. That's often the nature of dukkha, encased in ignorance about it.

In my youth – back in the Middle Ages – most offices had walls devoted to cubby holes, where important things were filed, where they were easy to access. Our minds are like that. We have some cubby holes we share with most other humans.

There are two cubby holes in our minds that can keep us a bit on edge. They've been translated from the Pali words hiri and ottappa as shame and guilt. They're like cops that live with us, all the time, wherever we go. Sometimes we think all cops are bad, but not these, when you understand them.

These mental cubby holes can serve us well. Why do we yell, "Shame, shame, shame" at powerful people who've done terrible things? Well, it's for several reasons. We're mad at them, and we want them to feel shame. The feeling of guilt may be the only punishment their bad deeds will get.

It may keep them from doing it again. And most importantly, it broadcasts to society as a whole that behavior like theirs will not go unnoticed. Just look at the Me Too movement. It's been incredibly powerful. It's one of the most abrupt cultural pivots in history, and definitely the most influential in my memory.

It took away from men the privilege to abuse women without having any consequences. It gave women much more protection, and power to not have to put up with abuse from people or organizations that are capable of being shamed.

I've always been fascinated with the way cultures regulate the behavior of their members – I almost got a PhD in it. Law is an important way to maintain order, but police and judges can't be on hand all the time. And even if they were, they might not be entirely honorable.

So there have to be other ways the rules are communicated to people, and enforced. Parents teach the rules, sometimes by negative example. A parent who's always in trouble can vividly demonstrate the lines we're supposed to stay in. We also learn rules from peers, the media, and many other sources in our highly communicative society.

Rules can be taught and enforced gently or harshly – by the carrot or the stick. When I realized I wanted to live a spiritual life, I encountered some lists of rules. It took me a while to fully accept them. Now that I’ve paid close attention to them for decades, they’re almost a natural part of how my mind works.

I remember the first time I attempted something like a Buddhist retreat at the posh guest house at Green Gulch. On the drive there I realized I was really nervous because I didn’t know the rules. I was frightened of inadvertently doing or saying something outrageous. A gaffe, you might call it. Finally, I said to myself, “Relax. They’re Buddhists, they’re not going to be unkind.”

Still, something inside me yearns to live honorably and meet the approval of others. All my study indicates this is universal with the exception of people who show no signs of a conscience, no shame, or fear of the consequences of what they do.

For several decades, shame and guilt have had negative connotations in our culture. I once made a mistake while working at Zen Hospice and admitted, “That was bad.” Some experienced practitioner said, “No, no, don’t feel guilty.” After thinking about that a little I said, “Yeah, no, I don’t *feel guilty*. But I need to know when I do something wrong so I won’t do it again.”

This is exactly the point of the Pali words “hiri and ottappa” and the teachings about them. The Buddha called these mental capacities, “the bright guardians of the world.” It’s hard for me not to feel uplifted when I hear that phrase.

That’s far from the way I usually felt before I undertook to live according to Buddhist ethics. Most of my life I experienced shame and guilt as a form of self-hatred. There are countless books and public speakers who disparage guilt as a kind of psychological rot.

But imagine a society where no one had either of these moral compasses. Would you want to expose your life, your loved ones, your daily endeavors, to people like that? Together, hiri and ottappa function as your *conscience*. That’s a word for them together that’s still respected. The bright guardian of the world.

Hiri comes from our sense of honor, our respect for ourselves. It’s a form of love for the person whom our deeds have fashioned over the course of our lives. Yes, there are actions we regret. We often hesitate to remember them, and hope they remain private, not exposed to public view.

Or, perhaps we've taken steps to "cure" those deeds by making amends to the people affected by them. That often means exposing what we did, at least to those people. It takes humility to do this. It shows the *character* of a person who becomes willing to atone for their misdeeds. This is someone with integrity. This is someone able to love themselves enough to do what it takes to keep their conscience clear. They're able to care enough about others to make amends and to avoid doing hurtful things in the future.

That is the goodness that comes from shame and guilt. The Buddha said that someone without shame could not follow His teachings. *But*. Have you been waiting for that "but..."? I have. But, the goodness of hiri and ottappa comes from seeing them not as sticks but as carrots.

In the sutta called the Conch Trumpet, or in Pali the *Saṅkha Sutta*, the Buddha explained to the follower of a different religion that past misconduct doesn't have to condemn us forever. Karma is not indelible.

He used the example of someone who breaks a precept, perhaps by stealing. That person might say to themselves, "That was not right. That was not good. But if I [just] become remorseful ..., that evil deed of mine will not be undone."

In other words, shame and guilt are important guides to our conduct, but they alone don't cure what we've done wrong. The hypothetical person in the sutta recognized this and right then resolved to change their ways. This, says the sutta, is how evil deeds are abandoned. This is how they're transcended.

What those books and professional speakers criticize is the effect of getting *stuck* in shame and guilt. In their inactive form, shame and guilt are worse than worthless. When we're stuck in them, they become corrosive.

Remorse and self-criticism do not by themselves undo what we've done. But as active forces, where hiri and ottappa motivate us to act with integrity, they shine. They move us ahead on the Path.

The Conch Trumpet Sutta goes on to discuss every ethical precept and how by training the mind with the aid of hiri and ottappa, one becomes "devoid of ill will" and acquires the Wise Understanding that begins the Eightfold Path.

Deeply studying things we've done that trouble our conscience offers us priceless lessons about dukkha. It shows us what suffering is and how it's caused, both for ourselves and for others. It reassures us that suffering can be ended; we don't have to carry the guilt of our past

misdeeds around with us or continue to commit them in the future. We can stop causing dukkha to ourselves and other beings. We can live with a spotless conscience.

When we observe our thinking about our conduct like this, it leads to a broader perspective, which the sutta calls “an awareness imbued with goodwill – abundant, enlarged, immeasurable, without hostility, without ill will.” In other words, our every deed is guided by metta. We live with compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity, keenly aware of our connection to all living beings. We see how we intersect with this planet and the universe in which it moves.

That’s a big carrot.

The moments when we have this awareness are filled with a bliss that explodes our sense of a limited self, separate from others. Willingly harming others becomes inconceivable. Every moment guided by kindness is happiness. How do we get to this mental state? By following our conscience, which actually is, in positive terms, metta.

When we deny this bright possibility, and see hiri and ottappa only as bad cops, we grab the stick and not the carrot. We just batter ourselves with that stick, causing more dukkha. If we try to stop this self-punishment by firing our moral police, we end up living in a kind of anarchy where nothing really matters and we have no sense of honor, no integrity. Worst of all, we feel no link to others, just an isolation without real love.

Instead, we can choose to pay attention to our conscience – close attention. We can study past actions that “don’t feel right” from the point of view of the Four Noble Truths: was there suffering? Did our conduct cause it? Can it be ended? How? As the sutta proclaims, that study produces Wise View.

The Conch Trumpet Sutta says that this mental state imbued with lovingkindness reaches all directions, just like the sound of a trumpet, undoing all the suffering of all misdeeds – to all beings, past, present and future. Ultimately, we can live in harmony with our internal good cops, our shining guardians of the world.

It's unthinkable that I could end this discussion of conscience and good or bad cops at this point, after this week’s historic event. A bad cop was brought to justice for murdering a black man. Finally.

After many centuries and countless victims, our justice system finally worked for a black man killed by a bad cop in broad daylight in front of a crowd that videotaped every 9 minutes and 29 seconds of his murder.

My wife and I laughed and cried when we heard the verdict. Guilty, guilty, guilty. But it took such an outrageous incident for there even to *be a trial*, and we had not been confident there would be a conviction.

Too often we've seen America just go on without any conscience about how people of color are treated. Finally, in these extreme circumstances, the people who marched by tens of thousands all over the country and a dedicated legal team achieved justice. And then there were no riots, just peaceful, tearful celebrations.

When I was in high school in the nineteen sixties I competed in original oratory – a one-hour speech that I researched, wrote and delivered about the reasons the Civil Rights Movement became the Black Power Movement, which for the first time overtly expressed the rage felt by African Americans. At the time, there were riots going on all over this country, including some of the venues where I went to deliver this speech.

My speech explained why this was happening by telling the history of America's crimes against black people. It's a long and sordid story, which I told with vivid examples of enslavement, torture, rape and lynching – so many generations living without any rights, justice or economic opportunities.

It's been four hundred years that blacks have had no recourse against the power structure that rules their lives. On Tuesday, April 20th, 2021, we saw the first opening of that wall between people of color and justice. May that wall continue to crumble. May all Black, Indigenous, and People of Color come to wake up *each day* without fearing the random cruelty of white people.

This is a matter of conscience for us all. We need to hear and reject the voice inside that tells us this is a task for others to assume, that we're personally powerless. We're not. We are responsible. We need to listen with metta to the voice inside that says it *is* up to us to do all we can to keep American culture changing, to overcome racism.

First, we need to examine our own consciences about systemic racism. If you haven't studied Black history or taken a course on white supremacy, now would be a good time. Let yourself feel the shame and guilt of what white America has done to people of color, and then work for change by keeping faith with your conscience – the bright guardians of the world.