

Shame and Guilt

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Sundari: Note: This is in answer to an inquirer who does not wish for their side to be published, so I have left only my replies.

Shame exists to keep us objectified, even to ourselves. And of course we all internalize it. Shame is the water we learn to swim in as children and in which some of us drown. It seems to be more of a problem in the West, where we have the luxury of neurosis. People who are focused on survival do not have that luxury. For those of us whose main concern is not survival, we cannot talk about privilege without encountering shame. The important thing to understand about shame is that it is not the same as guilt. Shame is highly destructive in every way, while guilt can be constructive if we act on it appropriately. Guilt is only ever useful as an indicator that *dharma* (the natural laws of life) has been broken and appropriate actions must be carried out to remedy the situation. However, the ego also uses guilt as a way of “punishing” the mind for breaking *dharma* when it has no intention of taking stock of or rectifying bad behaviour. We will feel bad for a while, get over it – and do it again. Unless guilt is understood and dealt with appropriately, it almost never works to prevent breaking *dharma* in repetitive cycles. A highly dull, *tamasic* ego using guilt as a manipulation strategy gets others to do what it wants them to do apologizes profusely and says things like, “I feel so bad!,” never meaning it, repeating the same pattern of abuse. Guilt is often the underlying cause of depression caused by suppressed anger we believe we do not have the right to express, which causes more suppression and more depression in a vicious cycle.

While shame and guilt invariably manifest together, there is a big difference between them. Shame is a focus on the small egoic self. Guilt is a focus on behaviour. Shame says, “I am bad.” Guilt says, “I did something bad.” Guilt says, “Sorry, I made a mistake,” Shame says, “Sorry, I AM a mistake.” Shame is directly and highly correlated with self-punishing behaviour, such as unhealthy relationships, addiction, violence, depression, aggression, bullying, suicide, eating disorders, social isolation. You name it, if it’s self-punishing, shame is probably behind it or part of it. Guilt is inversely correlated to all those things.

Where does shame come from and why does it affect almost everyone? Psychologists tell us that between the ages of three to five we develop the moralistic part of the psyche, the “superego,” which is a conglomeration of the positive and negative values we have absorbed from the people in our lives responsible for raising us and the environment we grew up in. The superego is meant to keep the childish ego in check. Even if we were never indoctrinated by religion, shame somehow finds its way into the psyche of most people because it’s universally part of the human (dualistic) condition. The only people who never experience shame at all are people who have no capacity for empathic connection with others – sociopaths and psychopaths.

Guilt can serve a purpose sometimes, but shame is self-negation at its worst. There are many reasons why we feel ashamed and all of them are destructive to peace of mind originating from and building on the lie that we are “flawed” and unworthy, the scourge of duality. It causes an ugly, dark and thoroughly negative psychological condition attaching itself like a parasite to everything good about life or about who

we think we are.

Unknown to us, shame becomes the filter through which we experience life. It whispers constantly in our ear with the “voices of diminishment,” sucking us dry of confidence, of trust in ourselves and life, of goodness, of joy, gorging itself like a leech on our mental lifeblood. We can boil the voice of shame down to two basic voices: “you are not good enough” – and if that does not work, “who do you think you are?” Shame so often goes undetected because it is very good at masking itself, either through self-aggrandizement or its complement, self-debasement. It imprisons the mind in the vice-like grip of highly destructive patterns of self-hatred which play out negatively in every aspect of life, alienating us from those we love and could be there for us. We push them away because we feel so unworthy.

Many of us are so paralyzed by the fear of shame and the shame of fear that we engineer smallness, insignificance, in our lives. We do not take chances or put ourselves out there for fear of criticism, failure or worse, ridicule. It is not worth it to us to step into our power and play big, because we don't know if we can literally withstand the criticism and judgments that are bound to come our way when we stick our necks out. Our voices become mute and rage boils inside us. When we try for so long to stuff ourselves into the smallest possible idea of who we are, it is like a pressure cooker in the psyche. It is impossible to be brave in such cases, because true bravery involves a willingness to face shame and be vulnerable. We can always measure how brave we are by how vulnerable we are willing to be. The myth that vulnerability is weakness is insidious in our culture, and it is profoundly dangerous, especially, but not exclusively, for men. I know many amazing women who deliberately hide their light under a bushel for fear of being seen.

What you will see if we face our shame is that we always have two choices:

We can accept our vulnerability and face shame with discrimination born of Self-knowledge, which of course requires the ability to take an honest look at our mental/emotional patterns and baggage. It also requires the courage to see “our” baggage from the vantage point of self-acceptance, not blame. Or we can run from it, and it owns us. But there is no escape from shame that way. Shame is like our shadow and cannot be outrun. It is the swampland of the soul and it kills, if not the body, our mental health. It corrodes everything it touches, eviscerating self-esteem and killing any possibility of joy, of creativity, of healthy loving relationships, let alone a peaceful mind or happy life. It destroys our belief in change, that we can be more, that we are more.

The first step to healing shame is to acknowledge its presence, having the guts to bring it out from the shadows directly into the light of day, in all its warped ugliness. Though shame is always a lie about who we are, no matter what caused it, when it is the root cause of a deeply buried mental/emotional pattern, it is very difficult to eradicate by transforming it into Self-love. But it can be done when we have the courage to face it through discrimination, the understanding that all thoughts, however toxic, come from the collective unconscious, or causal body, and not “from” us. Nobody makes themselves think negative *tamasic* thoughts – they just appear in the mind from buried mental patterns. Shame is an ugly hidden secret which never stays hidden.

Outwardly shame may be masked by humour, aloofness or other subterfuges which hide a mind that is always judging, beset by dark, mean-spirited thoughts, always looking for the flaw in “others,” filled with self-loathing. And it creates a mind that is

always suspicious that others are judging it, and fears criticism. Shame also masks a mind which seeks criticism because it believes it deserves punishment while defending its fear of “being discovered” as unworthy, useless, having no value to anyone. Shame will prevent us from ever experiencing healthy relationships and in fact will make us seek out bad ones and push away any chance of accepting love from the people that do care for us or could care for us. Shame and guilt always hurry towards their complement, punishment. Only there does satisfaction lie.

Whenever we are prepared to stand up in our greatness, shame is the gremlin, the ever-present voice of whispering in our ear - “You will fail, you are useless, you are bad - you are _____” (fill in the blank). And when we are in pain, it is so much easier to cause pain to others than to feel our own pain, so we work out our shit on others, which is why the world is so full of broken relationships, of haters, judgment and criticism. People hurting hurt others. But we only ever hurt ourselves. We are stuck in a vicious cycle of shame and shaming. So many people’s identity has been shaped by shame, by smallness, and it is very sad indeed.

When that strong shame/guilt pattern arises, if we get hooked by the dark, turbulent thoughts and emotional patterns which are inherent in being the small, limited, messed-up person, even in seemingly small day-to-day issues, we will never be free of the shame/guilt pattern. Yet the mind will try to defend this position even though the ever-changing and limited idea of whom we are trying to keep alive is nothing more than a thought, a toxic mental program. If we want to be free of it, we must be prepared to do battle with this formidable foe.

The first step towards freedom from this program is to see it for what it is, where it originates from, that it does not come from “me” or my past, however flawed or imperfect it was. Everyone is a product of their *karma* and conditioning, until and unless Self-knowledge obtains. There is no blame; we all do our best or worst with the self-knowledge we have (or don’t have). Taking responsibility for our actions does not require blame. It is another opportunity to assume the ability to respond appropriately to what the field of life has presented to us. If reparations can be made, we must make them. If not, we must forgive ourselves and everyone involved. Self-forgiveness brings out the only antidote to shame: self-empathy. Self-forgiveness is not about justifying anything. It’s about having the courage to love your (small) self, warts and all. On that level, we are all flawed, that’s life. But we are so much more than the small self.

Shame needs three things to grow exponentially: secrecy, silence and judgment. If you douse it with empathy, shame cannot survive. Most of us don’t have much empathy for ourselves and construct all sorts of coping mechanisms in place of self-acceptance and love. We practise self-empathy when we say NO! to the voices of diminishment with the *karma yoga* attitude. *Karma yoga* is an attitude of gratitude to life, consecrating all our actions to the field, knowing that the results are not in our control and taking what comes as a gift. *Karma yoga* is existential burnout insurance and the only way to objectify the ego. Just do it. There is no law against this, because the voices of diminishment never speak the truth about who we are. We must be vigilant and keep doing practising *karma yoga*, no matter how long it takes. One thought at a time. Never give up.

What price freedom? When the guilt/shame pattern rears its ugly head, douse the fire of shame with the healing waters of self-empathy and practise *karma yoga* immediately by giving all the thoughts and feelings to the field, or to God. Don’t identify with them. Practise the opposite thought and take a stand in wholeness,

even if you must fake it till you make it. It's not really faking, because the truth about you is much more than you are willing to accept. Take small steps but keep at it. It can take a while to beat a lifetime of negative thinking patterns into submission. The first law of *dharma* is non-injury in thought, mind and deed, and that applies to us first. Aim for peace of mind by managing the thoughts and emotions that constantly and repetitively appear unbidden in the mind with Self-knowledge. Do not listen to the neurotic voice of the ego.

We need to treat shame as we would deadly toxic radioactive waste. The only difference is that while radioactive waste is almost impossible to eradicate, shame is not. When we understand how this energy works and we pounce on it every time it raises its ugly little head, we will kill it with Self-knowledge.

~ *Om*, Sundari