

Fairness and Equality

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Tips of the Day · 2 min read

Children often have an acute sense of fairness. ‘It’s not fair!’. They feel they’ve been treated unjustly. There’s indignation and anger and often tears. And we take this into adulthood. But what do we mean by fairness in a world that is manifestly differentiated. We talk about equal opportunity. But that presumes that we are all starting on the same line. In the hundred metre dash, it would not be ‘fair’ if the starting blocks were unevenly spaced; if in the 1500 metre race the curves were not taken into account. But that’s not real life. We manifestly don’t all begin on a ‘level playing field’. Consider our educational system; banking system; the pays awarded in the celebrity system and indeed now to CEO’s of charities; the whole capitalist system. That’s when the doubt gives us some idea that fairness has also to do with some understanding about equality. This morphs into we should all have the same, even though we are not the same. It seems the concept of equality came about in the West with the idea of an all-powerful, but ethical God. Although he made everyone different, i.e. not equal, in His justice we are all equal. And this is enshrined in our law – we take into consideration mitigating circumstances. After all that’s only fair. There is something about fairness that strikes true for it is such an enduring concept. In the Buddha’s teaching as to why things happen, there is the concept of unknowability and uncontrollability. Things happen because of causes from the past and in the very present which we could neither foresee nor influence. Life is a series of happenings. A series of events over which we do not have total control, or only minimal control and sometimes no control at all. Sometimes we win a jackpot and at others we get hit by a kipper – out of nowhere. However, the Buddha does point to a fundamental justice, a fairness, an ethical law – the law of kamma. When we think, speak or act with harmful intent, we do harm to ourselves and others and there are consequences. And vice versa- goodness will produce goodness. This law applies equally to all. But this tells us nothing about how consequences unfold. For whenever we think, speak or act, we do send a force into a matrix of relationships both out into the world and inwardly into our interior world. Eventually, though it might not seem so at first, our virtuous empowered intentions will begin to manifest in better inner and outer worlds. But our final goal is a happiness not dependent on these inner and outer worlds, Nibbana. And that also is equally available to us all. Fair enough! But it does mean we have to tread carefully, wide awake and ready to take spiritual advantage of the unexpected, both fortunate and unfortunate.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.