

If there is no self, who bears the karma?

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Tips of the Day · 2 min read

Every moment arises dependent on past and present conditions. This is no less true for the self, the sense of being a person. Nowhere does the Buddha say – there is no self. It is patently obvious to all that there is a self. What he says is that it has no substance; it does not last more than a moment. There is only the process of I-making (ahamkara). There is, therefore, a ‘person’, conscious and sentient arising and passing away all the time – even in sleep there is a sliver of consciousness and sentience or the alarm bell would not wake us. The self or person is but a collection of habits and the body and a consciousness of it all. There are also moments of self-consciousness where the person perceives and feels themselves to be a person. Karma has become everyday speak for consequence. The consequence within a person is the habits they have formed, both wholesome and unwholesome. Now a person can only be in the present moment. Yet past editions of persons of both today, all our yesterdays and even before that, have created acts of thought, words and deeds - all of which have continuing consequences. If this person now feels unhappy, it’s to a greater or lesser extent because a past person did something and this person now is bearing the consequences. There is also this person now making acts which may make for worse consequences for a future person. Similarly should this person now experience happiness, because of right intention, this will determine happier persons in the future. On the presumption that I will continue to arise as a momentary person for some time yet and possibly after death, if I want the future person whom I shall be, although only for a moment, to be happy, I have to start doing and creating habits now that will make for future happiness. This is loving oneself. When I’m happy, I really love being me! Because a lot of this happiness is also dependent on my outer circumstances, I have also to try to steer that towards happiness. That means I engage with people and the environment in whatever way I can to enhance the happiness of myself and others. Depending on the situation, I shall want to express my empathy in joy, compassion, love, patience and so on. This is loving the other. So it is that an ethics born out of the desire to make oneself happy is developed. And you can’t do it without a self, without being a person. Our task as human beings is to develop a continuous flow of happy selves. And help others do the same. An added consequence: it’s so much easier to make spiritual progress when we are happy.

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