

Kamma

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Tips of the Day · 2 min read

Kamma (karma in Sanskrit) is part of the Buddha's law on cause and effect. Every action (of body, speech or mind) generates kamma which causes a resulting effect that sooner or later comes back to us. Although there isn't an exact equivalence in Christianity, the notion of kamma is reflected in western culture with sayings like "As you sow, so shall you reap"; "What goes around, comes around". I once heard it described as "For every towel you pinch from a hotel, you lose another sock in the laundry!" This reflects the first part of the Buddha's law on cause and effect: When this exists, that comes to be. When we give a gift with good-will, happiness comes our way. When we pinch a towel from a hotel, some shade of misery comes our way. To live happily we need to think, speak and act based on good-will, generosity and compassion. But even a blameless, happy life with lots of good friends ends up in sickness, old age and death. The Buddha's spiritual quest was to make peace with that reality. He discovered a form of kamma which loosens attachment to the world, paves a way to a realm without birth or death. This he called the kamma that ends kamma: When this does not exist, that does not come to be. It doesn't mean that we stop giving gifts, stop speaking, thinking, acting. The Buddha lived an active life for 45 years after enlightenment, interacting with society at many levels. But obviously there was something not happening in all his actions. The word 'this' refers to what is immediate, present. It could be this pen I'm holding, this car I'm sitting in, this anger I'm feeling. In contrast, 'that' refers to what is objective, can be pointed at, not part of me - that pen you're holding, that car you're sitting in, that anger I might feel tomorrow. When this exists, that comes to be. This anger leads to that result - more anger, more misery. When this does not exist, that does not come to be. Could anger lose its 'this-ness'? When we think about anger, the notion 'this anger' is useful. This anger I'm feeling now makes me want to burst. When we stop thinking, just feel the sensations, the tightness, the energy, we can't also describe the experience. It's too fluid. It keeps changing. It loses its 'this-ness'. Very unsatisfactory! When it was 'this anger' at least I could blame 'that idiot who caused it'. When it's just shifting sensations, I lose the sweet notion of someone to blame. We learn, first hand, that anger is hurting me, not the person I'm angry at. To enact the kamma that ends kamma, to open ourselves to Nibbana, we drop below the level of conceptual thought. We sense the sensations, feel the feelings. We lose the notion of 'this' and 'that', 'me' and 'you'. In a strangely familiar, uncharted world we follow the path to freedom.

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