

The Law of Karma

In Buddhist teaching, the law of karma says only this: **“for every event that occurs, there will follow another event whose existence was caused by the first and this second event will be pleasant or unpleasant according as its cause was skillful or unskillful.”** A skillful event is one that is not accompanied by craving, resistance or delusions; an unskillful event is one that is accompanied by any one of those things. (Events are not skillful in of themselves, but are so called only in virtue of the mental events that occur with them.)

Therefore, the law of Karma teaches that responsibility for unskillful actions is born by the person who commits them.

Let's take an example of a sequence of events. An unpleasant sensation occurs. A thought arises that the source of the unpleasantness was a person. (This thought is a delusion; any decisions based upon it will therefore be unskillful.) A thought arises that some past sensations of unpleasantness issued from this same person. (This thought is a further delusion.) **This is followed by a willful decision to speak words that will produce an unpleasant sensation in that which is perceived as a person. (This decision is an act of hostility. Of all the events described so far, only this is called karma.)** Words are carefully chosen in the hopes that when heard they will cause pain. The words are pronounced aloud. (This is the execution of the decision to be hostile. It may also be classed as a kind of karma, although technically it is an after-karma.) There is a visual sensation of a furrowed brow and down turned mouth. The thought arises that the other person's face is frowning. The thought arises that the other person's feelings were hurt. There is a fleeting joyful feeling of success in knowing that one has scored a damaging verbal blow. Eventually (perhaps much later) there is an unpleasant sensation of regret, perhaps taking the form of a sensation of fear that the perceived enemy may retaliate, or perhaps taking the form of remorse on having acted impetuously, like an immature child, and hoping that no one will remember this childish action. (This regret or fear is the unpleasant ripening of the karma, the unskillful decision to inflict pain through words.)

If there are no persons at all, then there is no self and no other. There is no distinction between pain of which there is direct sensual awareness (which is conventionally called one's own pain) and pain that is known through inference (conventionally called another person's pain). Whether pain is known directly or indirectly, there is either an urge to quell it or an urge to cultivate it. Whether joy is known directly or indirectly, there is either an urge to nourish it or to quell it. **In the conventional language of speaking of events personally, the urge to quell all pain and to nourish all joy is known as being ethical or skillful or (if you like) good. The urge to nourish pain and quell joy is known as being unskillful, unethical or bad.**

Being fully ethical is said to be impossible for those who make a distinction between self and other and show preference for the perceived self over the perceived other, for such perceptions inhibit being fully responsive. Being fully ethical is possible only for those who realize that all persons are empty, that is, devoid of personhood.