

The Law of Karma

By Eknath Easwaran

...every act or thought has consequences...

Literally, the Sanskrit [word] *karma* means something that is done. Often it can be translated as “deed” or “action.” The law of Karma states simply that every event is both a cause and an effect. Every act has consequences of a similar kind, which in turn have further consequences and so on...

This refers not only to physical action but to mental activity as well. ...There is... an essential relationship between mental and physical activity. Given appropriate conditions to develop further, thoughts breed actions of the same kind, as a seed can grow only into one particular kind of tree.

Baldly put, the law of karma says that whatever you do will come back to you. If Joe hits Bob, and later Ralph hits Joe, that is Joe’s karma coming back to him. This sounds occult because we do not see all the connections; but the connections are there, and the law of karma is no more occult than the law of gravitation. It states that the blow has to have consequences; it cannot end with Bob getting a black eye. It makes an impression on Bob’s consciousness--predictably, he gets furious—and it makes an impression on Joe’s consciousness as well.

Let us trace it through Bob. He might take revenge on Joe then and there, simply by hitting him back: that is “cash karma,” where you do something and pay for it immediately. In these times, however, it is more likely that Bob will suppress his feelings, so that the consequences of Joe’s blow do not show up until later—probably in ways that seem to have nothing to do with Joe or his fist. Karma is rarely so simple as this illustration, but in any case it should be clear that Bob’s anger at Joe will have repercussions throughout his relationships. Those repercussions will have repercussions—say, Bob goes home and explodes at his wife, and his wife gets angry at Ralph’s wife, who takes it out on Ralph, who works with Joe; and the next time Joe irritates Ralph, Ralph lets him have it. Poor Joe, rubbing his chin, can not have the slightest idea that he is being repaid for hitting Bob. All he feels is anger at Ralph: and so the chain of consequences continues, and Joe’s karmic comeuppance becomes the seed of a new harvest.

Most people have no idea how many others are affected by their behavior and example. It gives some idea of how complex the web of karma actually is. No one, of course, has the omniscience to see this picture fully. But the idea of a network of such connections, far from being occult, is natural and plausible. The law of karma states unequivocally that though we cannot see the connections, we can be sure that everything that happens to us, good and bad,

originated once in something we did or thought... It follows that we can change what happens to us by changing ourselves; we can take our destiny into our own hands.

The physical side of karma, however—hitting and hitting back—only touches the surface of life. To get an inkling of how karma really works, we have to consider the mind.

Everything we do produces karma in the mind. In fact, it is in the mind rather than the world that karma's seeds are planted. When Joe hits Bob, I said, there are effects on Bob's face and consciousness. But there are also effects on Joe's consciousness. For one, by indulging a hot temper, Joe has made it more likely that he will indulge that temper again. He is a little different because of his action; he has made himself an angrier person. Over the years, if he keeps giving in to his moods, he will grow more belligerent. He may find himself swinging his fists more and more often; and by some quirk of human nature, he will find himself in situations that cry out for fists to be swung. Sooner or later he will get into a fight where he is repaid in kind; that is one way in which his karma with Bob might be reaped.

The Buddha says that we are not punished for our anger; we are punished *by* our anger. Anger is its own karma. Joe may think he feels better for having hit Bob, but a physician would observe what happens while Joe is getting heated up—watch his blood pressure soar and his heart race, measure the adrenaline and other hormones dumped into his body, and so on—and conclude that he is putting himself under serious physiological stress. Even if Ralph never gets to hit him, Joe is hitting himself from inside. If his anger becomes chronic, he will live in a world of constant stress, predisposing him to heart disease, ulcer, migraine, and other physiological problems. These too are routes by which the karma of anger can be reaped.

Further, Joe's aggressiveness and irritability make him harder to live with. His relationships deteriorate. Perhaps his friends start to avoid him; perhaps his co-workers respond to him with increasing resentment. All of this is likely to provoke him even more. Life in such circumstances can be miserable, and Joe might find himself drinking or smoking heavily or seeking escape in high-risk activities like skydiving or stock car racing—all of which provide more ways in which karma can be reaped. The analysis could go on; these are only illustrations.

One more fascinating point about karma: even if Joe does not actually strike anybody, the karma of anger is still generated in the mind and body. To the extent he gets angry, his blood pressure will still shoot up, his stomach get tense, his heart race, and so on. Thoughts have concrete consequences: they shape the way we see life, which in turn affects our health, our behavior, our choice of work and friends—in short, everything we do.

Aptly, Indian philosophy compares a thought to a seed: very tiny, but it can grow into a huge, deep-rooted, wide-spreading tree. I have seen places where a seed in a crack in a pavement grew into a tree that tore up the sidewalk. It is difficult to remove such a tree, and terribly difficult to undo the effects of a lifetime of negative thinking, which can extend into many other people's lives. But it can be done...

The Bhagavad Gita: Translated With A General Introduction, by Eknath Easwaran, Nilgiri Press, 1985,
pages 16-19