



Karma and blind faith

There is a traditional story about a time when the Buddha was wandering from village to village in northern India and met a Jain. Jains, like the followers of the Buddha, broke away from orthodox Hinduism. But unlike Buddhism their religion was characterised by asceticism. That means they deliberately underwent various physical hardships to purify themselves and attain liberation.

The practice of this particular Jain follower consisted of standing for long periods of time on one leg. The Buddha asked him, “Would you tell me why you are doing this? What benefit will this practice bring you?”

The Jain replied, “Through this practice I am working out my karma, it will free me of all past karma.”

The Buddha probed further. “How much karma have you worked out so far?” he asked. “I could not say,” was the reply. The Buddha then asked, “How much karma do you still have left to work out?” “I do not know,” replied the Jain. Finally, the Buddha asked him, “But how will you know when you have finished working out your karma?” The Jain could only answer again, “I don’t know.”

The Buddha then spoke to him gently. “It is time you set aside this practice and you learn about the path that leads to the end of suffering. It lies within the truth of each moment, here and now.”

This story can be found in Soul Food by Jack Kornfield and Christina Feldman, HarperOne, 1996, p. 241-2.



Questions for study

How do you understand the Buddha's message in this story? How is his approach different from that of the Jains?

Can you think of examples of religious or other practices that people engage in today without really understanding why, or how they work?

Do the Buddha's teachings explain things clearly or do they, too, rely on blind faith?