



Karma: a Zen story

Bankei was a popular Zen master. Whenever he held meditation retreats many of his students would gather from many parts of Japan to attend. During one of these gatherings, one of the students was caught stealing. The matter was reported to Bankei with the request that the student be expelled immediately, but Bankei brushed off this request and ignored the case.

Later on, the same student was caught stealing again, and once again Bankei ignored the matter when it was brought to his attention. This angered some of the older students who were responsible for organising the retreats and helping to keep discipline. They met together to discuss the problem, and they decided to act as a group and draw up a petition asking for the thief to be dismissed with immediate effect. In their petition, they stated that if this was not done they would all leave the retreat place together in protest, as one body.

When Bankei read the petition he responded by summoning everyone who was gathered to a special meeting. “You are wise brothers,” he told them. “You know what is right and what is wrong. You may go somewhere else to study if you wish, but this poor brother does not even know right from wrong. Who will teach him if I do not? I am going to keep him here even if all the rest of you leave.”

The student who had stolen was present and heard these words. He was so moved that a torrent of tears washed down his face and, in that instant, all desire to steal vanished.

This story can be found in Soul Food by Jack Kornfield and Christina Feldman, HarperOne, 1996, p.201.



Questions for study

Does belief in karma naturally lead to harsh judgement of those who act unethically?

How do you understand the relationship between discipline and compassion in the context of teaching people to act well?