

BUDDHISM IN DAILY LIFE THE SIMULTANEITY OF CAUSE AND EFFECT

Why do things happen as they do? How can we explain the apparent arbitrariness of people's fortunes? Why is it that in some instances we can see clearly how an action leads to an inevitable result, while in other cases there is no obvious link between events? How, in short, does life "work"?

Some put everything down to blind chance; others explain that all events are determined by the will of a supreme being. Some believe that our fate is fixed by the positions of the planets at our moment of birth; others argue that everything, from the length of our hair to a weakness for chocolate, is genetically determined, and therefore beyond any conscious control.

Many philosophies teach the existence of a law of cause and effect, whereby whatever is done in the present determines the future, just as whatever was done in the past has determined present circumstances. The Bible states, "As ye sow, so shall ye reap," and in the 17th century, the English scientist Sir Isaac Newton proclaimed, "for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction."

The clear, logical principles of Newtonian physics enabled human beings to transform the world through invention and discovery, just as the often stern injunctions of Biblical teaching have given numerous people a body of valuable moral guidance, as well as an understanding of the consequences of their behavior.

Early forms of Buddhism also taught the strictness of cause and effect, and the importance of making "good" causes for the sake of future reward. However, if we think of cause and effect as being a simple case of one cause followed by one effect, like billiard balls knocking against each other, we soon find that as an explanation of the complexities of life, this concept is far from adequate.

Throughout the last hundred years, scientists have traveled light years beyond the mechanistic certainties of classical physics into a realm where the very idea of causality can appear highly dubious, with the result that many thinkers have tried to devise theories of existence which dispense with any reference to cause and effect altogether. But such theories, intellectually stimulating as they might be, certainly do not provide the majority of human beings with any clarification of how life actually works.

The explanation of cause and effect offered by Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism resolves the problems practically as well as philosophically, in a manner which makes equal sense both of the billiard balls and the most intricate of phenomena. This explanation clarifies that cause and effect operates simultaneously, at two distinct but inseparable levels: manifest (visible) and latent (invisible).

Within each of us is an accumulation of internal, or latent causes. These are lodged deeply within us as the result of karma created in the past. For example, we may have a tendency to behave arrogantly toward others, always seeking to assert our superiority. This tendency will remain latent, or invisible, until an appropriate external, or visible cause is encountered, perhaps during a discussion among friends.

The manifest, or visible, effect of our propensity toward arrogance may be that we lay down the law so dogmatically that we turn a friendly conversation into a heated argument. Everyone else is upset and we are left feeling self-righteous and triumphant. The effect of this, created immediately but invisibly, might be the tendency to destroy opportunities for

normal, friendly relationships with others.

For various reasons, this invisible, or latent, effect may not become completely apparent for some time. For example, we may no longer be invited to join conversations about anything, and become increasingly isolated. This effect, though taking so long to become clear, was created the moment we made the initial cause.

Buddhism teaches that it may be years, or even lifetimes, before a latent effect, created by a combination of internal and external causes, actually becomes manifest, but when the circumstances are right, it must inevitably appear. This does not mean that Buddhists sit back indifferently and ignore the sufferings of others because “they must have made the cause for it.” On the contrary, understanding this principle leads to a natural feeling of responsibility and compassion, and the desire to enable others to free themselves from the sufferings they have created.

Understanding the simultaneity of cause and effect is fundamental to Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism. Indeed, this principle is a component of the Universal Law of life. It is expressed by the word *renge* of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo (the literal meaning of *renge* is lotus—a plant that bears both flowers and seeds simultaneously).

For those of us who base our lives on this Universal Law, the most important aspect of this principle is that the moment we chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, we are manifesting both the cause and effect of Buddhahood. Unlike earlier forms of Buddhism, in which the experience of Buddhahood was the result of long training and preparation involving the gradual purification of one’s life, the practice of chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo enables us to draw upon, and express our Buddha nature instantly.

Of course, our lives are also imbued with the causes to experience many other states of life as well, and we have probably had more practice in these than we’ve had in experiencing Buddhahood. Nevertheless, we can be confident that every time we chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, we are making the supreme cause for enlightenment and fulfillment, the result of which will be engraved within us eternally.

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