

BACK TO THE BASICS
THE GODS SAME BIRTH AND SAME NAME
BY DAVE MCNEILL
WEST HILLS, CALIF.

Cause and effect is strict,” we often hear. Usually it is intended as a warning (“If you do that bad thing, you’ll get a bad effect”) or as an I-told-you-so (“I knew he would get that bad effect after what he did”).

While such statements can be silly — or even harmful — if taken to the extreme, cause and effect *is* strict in this make-a-bad-cause-get-a-bad-effect way. But the opposite is just as true. Every good cause also gets a good effect. And even the smallest good that you do registers in your “karmic bank” to produce benefit for you. Nothing is ever forgotten.

When Nichiren Daishonin wanted to emphasize this “good side” of cause and effect, he sometimes cited the story of two gods, Same Birth and Same Name. These two gods, or heavenly messengers as they are sometimes called, are said to be the personification of the Mystic Law of cause and effect. They are mentioned in various sutras.

The story goes that these two, one male and one female, sit on your shoulders and each time you make a cause, one of them reports it to King Emma, the lord of hell, who judges you when you die based on your deeds while alive. According to the Ten Kings Sutra, Same Birth, the male on your left shoulder, reports all your bad causes; Same Name, the female on your right, reports all the good ones.

And they are always there. They get their names, according to the Great Teacher Miaolo, because Same Birth is born at the same time as you, and Same Name has the same name as you do. There is no escaping cause and effect.

Such personification, of course, is simply myth, but mythology plays an important role in human society; such a vivid illustration can help us keep in mind the ever-abiding law of cause and effect. In America, with our distrust of any Big Brother-esque watchdog, we may think that Same Birth and Same Name are here only to catch us doing the bad things, to make us “pay” for even the slightest digression. But as the Daishonin repeatedly points out, they are really here to protect us: “Same Birth and Same Name, the two heavenly messengers who have been with each of them since birth on their shoulders, will guard them” (*The Writings of Ni-chiren Daishonin*, p. 778). “A person’s body has a left and a right shoulder, on which there are two gods, one called Same Name and the other Same Birth. These are two deities whom Brahma, Shakra, and the gods of the sun and moon have assigned to protect each person” (WND, 464).

Same Birth and Same Name protect us by making sure that heaven, or the universe, “knows” about each one of our good deeds, even the smallest ones. For if the Buddhist deities, the universe’s protective forces, know what good we’ve done, they cannot fail to come to our aid at the crucial moment. In a time when simply practicing the Lotus Sutra correctly could get you persecuted or killed, such an image could give great peace of mind.

The Daishonin’s Buddhism is called the Buddhism of the True Cause, because we emphasize the importance of each moment as we strive to make causes toward the desired effect. We continue to make such causes even when we do not see the immediate effect, because we believe that every cause, even the smallest, is important. No cause is wasted in Buddhism. No action, unimportant. Yes, cause and effect is strict, and we are sure to reap the rewards. The god and goddess on our shoulders deserve our thanks.