

The Cause-and-Effect Concept in Buddhism

As far as the impression of cause and effect is concerned, an average person would say, like the statement of a celebrity: “You get what you grow.” A “cause” seems like a seed to be planted. Going through a period with appropriate conditions, it would naturally grow into the corresponding fruit, flower, plant, or tree; this is the stereotypical understanding about cause-and-effect of an average person.

From the viewpoint of Buddhism, we have not only this life, we also have countless previous lives as well as countless future lives where they continue in terms of time; therefore, “cause-and-effect” connects the three lifetimes together: the previous life, the current life, and the future life. The karmic cause created in the previous life possibly reaches this life to play its influence and to show its karmic retribution. For example, if one was very stingy and greedy for money in the previous life, he would possibly get a poor karmic retribution in the current life. Thus, he might be very poor and living in a difficult situation in this life. In this case, besides needing to examine or inspect the conduct and deeds of this current life, he also needs to include the deeds of the previous life as a consideration, so that he would not be full of remorse, or blame the gods, or accuse others.

Many people believe that there must be a one-to-one relationship between the kind of original causes and the kind of results that are received. But the rule taught in Buddhism includes the cause, condition, fruit, and retribution. A cause created in the previous life is exactly a karmic cause. The relationship between a karmic cause and its supporting condition is like a glass of sugar water in that if some other substance is added to it, the taste changes. If some lemon juice is added, the taste would be like a glass of sweet-sour lemonade. Or if some coffee powder is added, it would become a glass of sweet-bitter coffee drink. Of course, the situation encountered in this life is primarily determined by our karmic causes, but the supporting condition also contributes to a level that can change the retribution supposed to be presented by the karmic causes. For instance, if an evil cause was created in the past life, one would have the chance to alter the main karmic cause by the effort to be merciful, and even repenting for one's previous misdeeds while learning Buddhist Dharma in this life. Because the strength of the supporting condition is very powerful, it makes the entire karmic cause, even a powerful one, change so that the situation of punishment, which would otherwise be very serious, becomes a mild one. For another example, imagine someone is publicly known as a good and kind person, but unfortunately, he is killed in a traffic accident. This outcome is not the deviation of cause-and-effect. Perhaps, because of a bad deed in his previous life, he was supposed to have a very serious and long-term punishment in this life; however, due to having a good nature in this life as well as devoutly bearing the name

of Buddha in mind, he can make use of a traffic accident to write off the evil karma; in other words, a very serious punishment becomes a mild one.

As in the sutra text of *Mahāratnakūṭa Sūtra*, it states: “Even going through a hundred eons, the impact of a deed a person commits will not be gone. When the cause and the supporting condition come together, the karmic retribution would be received by the person who committed it.” In other words, no matter how much time has passed, the karma action created in the past is not gone. Whenever the cause and the condition come together, the karmic retribution would appear. This is due to tathāgatagarbha, which is an unchangeable [diamond] mind existing in every sentient being. This unchangeable mind goes through everything but it isn’t affected; furthermore, it is still able to smoothly carry out the karmic retribution tied to its cause and condition. Because this mind exists, it makes the karmic retributions in which we get involved continue to appear, even going through a hundred eons. In addition, it faithfully carries out one by one the karmic retributions which are generated by all the related karmic causes and supporting conditions.

Karmic causes have different natures such as good, bad or morally neutral, as well as different levels such as light or heavy. At the same time, supporting conditions also have different natures such as good, bad, or morally neutral, as well as different levels such as light or heavy. Therefore, the relationships of the multiple combinations of the

different natures of causes and conditions appear to create an abundant variety of outcomes. A person understanding how causes and conditions work would know how to set up the best arrangement for this life.

When one creates whatever cause, he would certainly bear the appropriate outcome. But those who practice Buddhism are not fatalists. They do not accept blindly that “such a cause results in such an outcome”, but believe that differences and changes exist due to all kinds of supporting conditions. Due to the influence of supporting conditions, we are able to have a certain degree of change on the retribution otherwise induced by karmic causes. If one could seize this point, he would realize that whatever he does in this life is very meaningful; in other words, the merits of whatever we do stay forever!