

2. The concepts of cause and effect and samsara

In following the Buddha Dharma, the primary driving force for transforming your mind is the in-depth contemplation and understanding of the concepts of cause and effect and samsara. Many who do not understand the Buddha Dharma, once they hear the words cause and effect and samsara, may turn away and keep their distance, thinking these concepts amount to superstitions. Many beginners on the path of the Buddha Dharma may have an unstable faith due to the lack of understanding and acceptance of these concepts. Even many who have been on the path for years may not progress much, as they lack an in-depth understanding of them.

The concept of cause and effect

Many people mistakenly think that once they believe in the law of karma or cause and effect they will be trapped and punished when they do something wrong; on the other hand, if they do not believe in it, they consider that they have the freedom to get away with doing anything they desire. Some think cause and effect is a concept that only exists when you believe in it. Therefore, although they may see and experience cause and effect, and examples of it are happening around them, they do not wish to give it in-depth contemplation.

In fact karma, or cause and effect, is a natural law. It was not conceived by the Buddha only for Buddhists but is universal. The wise Buddha saw that all mental and material phenomena in this world comply with the law of cause and effect: with the cause, together with the right conditions, the effect will manifest itself. This means that cause and effect, or karma, is a process of cause, condition, and effect.

This process is just like cooking rice. The rice is the cause but we cannot cook a meal only with rice. We still need additional conditions such as a pot, a stove, water, and a fire. With all the causes and conditions in place, the rice will be cooked, which is the effect. No matter whether you believe in it or not, accept it or not, when the causes and conditions are complete, the rice will be cooked. The law of karma, or the process of cause, condition, and effect, does not only apply to outer circumstances, it also applies to inner thoughts. The karma of the conscious mind is like traces imprinted on your mind: it will follow the flow of your continuous mind stream. Much like something we did during the previous day, in the next morning when we wake up, we still remember it from the day before. This memory is like a trace in the mind, it can reappear when the right conditions come together.

We create various positive, negative, or neutral karma due to the motivations of our different discriminatory thoughts. The seeds of karma are stored in the Alaya-vijnana, the eighth consciousness of the mind, waiting to germinate with the right conditions. This is the way karma functions in the mind.

Everything is compounded by various causes and conditions. Nothing in this world happens outside of the law of cause and effect, or interdependent arising. All beings' feelings of happiness and pain also comply with this rule. The feeling of happiness is a result of positive deeds, and the feeling of pain is a result of negative deeds. Although the effect may not necessarily show instantly, it will manifest for certain once the right conditions come about.

Although the effect of happiness or pain originates from positive or negative deeds, this does not mean actions cannot be taken to change the result. On the contrary, we can utilise the rule of cause, conditions, and effect to change the results by changing the cause and conditions. Therefore in the sutras it is stated, "If you want to know about your previous lives, look at your current experiences. If you want to know about your future lives, look at your deeds in your current life." This is the positive aspect of learning about the law of cause and effect.

For example, there are ways of not letting the rice be cooked. You can turn off the stove, or remove the pot from the stove, which is changing the conditions, in order to change the result. When we realise that we have created negative karma, we can try to change the relevant conditions through repentance, by evoking Bodhicitta, or by practicing the wisdom of emptiness, in order to stop the result from coming to pass or to reduce its effect. If the cause is altered, then the result will also be changed. Another way is to change the result through changing the cause: if you replace the rice with sand, there will be no cooked rice no matter how much you boil it.

By utilising the law of cause and effect we can change our present and future destiny by changing our behaviour, by ceasing negative actions and adopting positive ones. If you do not believe or do not accept the law of cause and effect, and therefore do not take any action, then you will be unavoidably trapped in the causes and conditions, and you are simply waiting to experience the subsequent results.

The above teachings of cause and effect are from the point of view of ordinary beings' relative truth.