

Building a Bright Future Now: The Principle of Causality

To know what will happen to you in the future,
closely observe what you are doing now.

Nothing is Coincidence

Buddhism helps us see the world as it really is. One of its basic teachings is the principle of causality, which describes a fundamental aspect of nature. It states that every phenomenon comes into being due to various causes and conditions. When the right causes and conditions come together, the corresponding result or phenomenon arises. However, when conditions change, things will also change. This is the way of all life.

Nothing in life happens by accident but are always causally related. Scientific laws describe the causal relationships of physical phenomena; Buddhism widens the scope to deal with both physical and mental phenomena.

Keep things in Perspective

*To know what you've done in the past, observe what is **happening** to you in this life. To know what will happen in the future, observe what you are **doing** in this life.*

(欲知過去因 · 今生受者是 · 欲知未來果 · 今生作者是。)

This Buddhist verse contains the key to understanding the course of our life that, as with all phenomena, it also follows the principle of causality.

Whatever happens to us in this life is the result of previous causes and conditions, of the actions we have performed

ourselves or together with others. Whenever we act, we create *karma*, which is a Sanskrit word meaning action. Every action we perform will have some kind of effect on us and the rest of the world. Beneficial effects are called good karma; harmful effects are called bad karma.

In other words, actions lead to reactions. When we benefit others, we generate good karma and will receive blessings in the future. When we hurt others, we generate bad karma and will be hurt in the future. This is the law of causality explained in the simplest way. Put differently, what comes around goes around.

This law may sound simple, but it has deep implications in our life—it is a strong reminder that we are responsible for the outcome of our own lives.

Therefore, when bad things happen, complaining, despairing, feeling that life is unfair, or seeking vengeance will only prolong our suffering. It is far more rational and healthy to accept what is happening. The sooner we can accept it, the less time we spend in pain.

Acceptance, however, does not mean that we are powerless, that life is deterministic. In fact, depending on what actions we take when things are happening to us, the potential to affect our future at any moment is always there. If we react in our habitual way, then our future will be very much like the present, and we remain trapped in *samsara*³. On the contrary, if we are awakened

³ Samsara: A Sanskrit word meaning the endless cycle of birth and death in which sentient beings are trapped. In this present life, when we act and react in the same mistaken way out of ignorance, we will suffer the same consequences over and over again—this repeated cycle of suffering is also samsara—samsara on a daily or even moment-by-moment scale.

to causality and act differently and positively—for example, acting with tolerance toward prejudice, acting with compassion toward hatred, acting with restraint toward craving—then we immediately begin to change our future. Thus, karma is an on-going and dynamic process.⁴

Awaken to a Brighter Future

At this very moment, we can choose to be ignorant of causality and to depend on our habitual reactions, allowing our lives to be driven by outer circumstances. Or, we can choose to live a life awakened to causality, being conscious and responsible for our own actions and never blaming others for what happens to us. This is what it means to act in an enlightened manner. When we work on the right causes and conditions that are necessary to achieve our goals, we immediately begin to build true happiness in our present lives and create a brighter future.

Reflection:

From what you have learned about causality, what can you do at this very moment to begin changing the direction of your life? e.g., begin to build a healthy, harmonious relationship with your family.

⁴ The story of how Mr. Liao Fan of the Ming dynasty (in China) changed his life is a good illustration of this process.