

Cause *and* Effect

‘Renge, the lotus flower, symbolises the wonder of this Law. Once you realise that your own life is the Mystic Law, you will realise that so are the lives of all others.’

The future is unknown. What is our destiny and what causes it? Some people believe that it is influenced by the stars, some that it is a matter of chance. Others think that fate is not ours to question. Whatever we choose to believe, anxiety is caused by uncertainty about the future.

Everyone wants to live a long, healthy and fulfilled life. It is very difficult to do this if we do not have an understanding of how destiny is created. Much as we may try to improve our circumstances, an unexpected misfortune can throw us off course. This makes us feel as if we are being carried along by our changing destiny, like flotsam and jetsam on the currents of the ocean.

Buddhism explains destiny through the concept of karma. Karma originally meant action. Later, it came to be understood as the destiny one had created through these actions. Every thought, word and deed is a cause which creates an effect. On a simple level, if we go to work, we will get paid. If we exercise, we will become fit. Buddhism therefore teaches that our fate is not arbitrary, neither is it imposed by supernatural forces. We create our own destiny:

If you want to understand the causes that existed in the past, look at the results as they are manifested in the present. And if you want to understand what results will be manifested in the future, look at the causes that exist in the present.¹

The workings of cause and effect may not be immediately obvious. Very often life seems unfair. How is it that an unscrupulous and selfish businessman can become so rich? Why is it that the nice woman down the road has cancer? Why are people born in such different circumstances? Surely a child has had no chance to make the causes to be born into poverty and hunger?

The concept of karma is based on the understanding that life is eternal (see p.73). Circumstances of birth are therefore determined by causes made in previous lifetimes. The law of cause and effect is exact. We may be able to escape detection from the laws of society but there is no escaping this law of causality, which is etched indelibly in our

lives. Although it is strict, it cannot be said to be unjust. It certainly gives a logical explanation for our differing circumstances of birth. Furthermore, it is an optimistic teaching, because the power to create our destiny lies in our own hands.

On its face value, the law of causality may sound moralistic, but it is much more complex than a straight moral code. Science, of course, recognises cause and effect. However, science has discovered that the effect of a cause cannot be predetermined: the effect of a particular cause depends on the influence of many other factors. In a similar way, we cannot say that the nice woman down the road getting cancer is a result of her being a terrible person. It may be that she is very caring and helps others, but she is also extremely worried and, in her case, this unease of mind and body has manifested itself as cancer.

It is impossible, also, to look at effects and label them as good or bad. Some people who discover they have cancer develop a fighting spirit and a new appreciation of life. These people are truly creating their own destiny, through their spirit to live now and for the future. This is the spirit of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism.

In the West, we may have received the impression that karma is fatalistic and fixed. However, the reverse is true. Because we take full responsibility for our own actions, and therefore our own results, we are empowered to seize our own destiny and change it for the better.

The nine consciousnesses

Buddhism defines nine layers of consciousness. This doctrine helps to explain how karma is stored and how it can be changed. The first five consciousnesses are the five senses of sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell. The sixth level is the thinking mind which integrates the information we receive from these five senses. For instance, when you see a rose in blossom and smell its fragrance, your sixth sense integrates what you have seen and smelt to identify it as a rose.

The seventh consciousness is where we form judgements about what action to take. It corresponds to the thinking and aware self which

THE NINE CONSCIOUSNESSES

- 1-5 THE FIVE SENSES - EYES, EARS, NOSE, MOUTH, SKIN
- 6 INTEGRATION OF SENSES - REASON AND LOGIC
- 7 ABSTRACT OR SPIRITUAL THOUGHT, SELF-AWARENESS
& INTUITION
- 8 STOREHOUSE OF KARMA
- 9 FUNDAMENTAL PURE CONSCIOUSNESS - BUDDHAHOOD

discerns value. 'Shall I pick this rose?' you think. 'No, better not, it's in someone else's garden.' This seventh level is the area of motivation and intention, much of it subconscious.

The eighth (*alaya*) consciousness is the storehouse of our karma. *Alaya* literally means 'accumulation', as in the name Himalaya mountains which means 'accumulation of snow'. All of our experiences are filtered through the initial seven layers of consciousness and stored in the eighth, which exists as an unconscious memory of all our previous actions and reactions. This influences our reactions at any given time, based on our past experiences, including those of previous lifetimes.

You may recognize repetitive patterns in your behaviour. You may find, for instance, that someone at work always makes you angry. Much as you reflect and determine that next time it happens you will rise above it, you find that you are stuck in the same pattern of behaviour. Or you may find that after having had an unhappy relationship, you get together with a new partner, but that soon the same problems start to occur in the new relationship. These kinds of behavioural patterns are all included in karma.

These patterns of behaviour are also perpetuated in family groups. People whose karma is similar are drawn together in families. For example, research has shown that children who are abused are, in turn, more likely to abuse their own children. On the face of it, one

would think that a person who has suffered abuse is the least likely person to abuse others. The doctrine of karma clarifies why it is that people behave in these repeating cycles.

Psychology recognises the existence of conditioned responses such as are stored in the eighth consciousness and seeks to help people change these through understanding or self-awareness. Although it undoubtedly helps to understand our behaviour with our rational minds, our most deeply ingrained karma cannot be changed in this way, because the eighth consciousness lies deeper than the rational mind (seventh consciousness). Our thoughts are therefore constantly influenced by our karma.

In order to change karma fundamentally, we have to get beyond its influence into the realm of the ninth consciousness, which is pure and undefiled, free of karmic impurities. Nichiren Daishonin defined the ninth consciousness as Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, the universal law of life. When we chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, we are expressing our Buddhahood. As we do this more and more, we become aware of those karmic tendencies which are restricting us. As our confidence grows, we feel able to challenge these tendencies and establish a new direction in our lives, based on our ever-emerging Buddhahood.

The Buddha discovered a mystic law which simultaneously contains cause and effect, and designated it as *myoho-renge*. The single law of *myoho-renge* is perfectly endowed with all phenomena in the universe. Therefore, those who practise this law simultaneously acquire the cause and effect of Buddhahood.²

Cause and effect are simultaneous

Nichiren Daishonin taught that negative karma can be overcome in this lifetime, overturning the traditional belief that this would take many lifetimes. He revealed the simultaneity of cause and effect as expressed in *renge*, of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

Renge means lotus flower. The lotus flower produces flowers and seeds at the same time, indicating that the effect is simultaneous with

the cause. Again, this can be difficult to understand, because we see cases such as a rich man who got where he is by stepping on other people, seemingly escaping cause and effect. To this, Nichiren Daishonin says:

The reason I see it this way is that hell is in the heart of a man who inwardly despises his father and disregards his mother, just like the lotus seed, which contains both flower and fruit at the same time. In the same way, the Buddha dwells inside our hearts.³ True happiness depends on what is in our hearts. No matter what we may gain materially from manipulating others, if we are hating or disrespecting them, then *at that moment* we are suffering, as well as making the cause to suffer in the future.

Buddhist theory explains that there are actually two effects, one of which is invisible and one which is visible. The visible effect, called the manifest effect, may take time to appear. However, the invisible, or latent effect, is felt immediately. So in the case of the rich man who is misusing others, the manifest effect may take time to appear. He may, for instance, be born into a poor family in his next lifetime. However, the internal effect is immediate: inside he is suffering deeply.

Just as there are two effects, there are two causes. One is internal and arises from our karma; the other is external. External causes are everyday events which each of us respond to differently, depending on our own particular internal cause, stored in our karma. For example, an angry person will always tend to react hastily and irritably. However, if we base ourselves on the Buddha state, the ninth consciousness, our responses are not conditioned by our karma and we can break free of our habits and past conditioning. Josei Toda, the second president of the Soka Gakkai (see p.108) said:

We common mortals need a supreme law which will enable us to break through the shell of the more immediate causes and effects and open the Buddha nature innate within us. It is Nichiren Daishonin who, responding to this need, established the law with which we, while leading our everyday lives, can demolish the

destiny which has continued from our past existences and rebuild it for the better... Devoting oneself to the Gohonzon [see p.85] and chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo [see p.79] is the way to change one's destiny for the better. All the causes and effects in between disappear, and the common mortal since time without beginning emerges.⁴

The implication of the doctrine of karma is that we cannot blame anyone else for our suffering. Of course this does not mean that others are not accountable; they will reap the rewards of their own actions. The important point is that our suffering comes from inside us, not outside. Again, this may seem strict, but in fact it is extremely liberating. After all, we cannot change other people. Or rather, the only way we can change other people is to change the way we relate to them, by first of all changing ourselves. When we open our Buddha nature through chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, we react differently to others, based on wisdom and compassion rather than anger or greed. Because of this, people respond to us differently.

When we practise Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, there are no stages to go through. We can experience Buddhahood immediately because of the simultaneity of cause and effect, as expressed in *rengé* of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. Although, as explained above, it may take time for the external effect to appear - to overcome poverty or illness, for example - we can feel supreme joy immediately. This kind of joy is profoundly different to the satisfaction of physical desires; it is the joy of freedom. At the same time, we can also be sure that our physical and material circumstances will improve.

This does not mean that when we practise we avoid the effects of our karma. In fact, we find that those hidden things that cause us to suffer start to surface. This means we are changing them. They surface because we are tapping into the ninth consciousness, underneath the storehouse of karma. The flaws have to come to the surface in order to be purified, as in the process of forging iron. This can be quite unsettling and sometimes very difficult. There is, however, no such

thing as karma which cannot be overcome.

At difficult times when we are wrestling with the effects our karma, it is important to remember that the causes we made in the past are not important. Rather, what we are doing now is creating the best possible causes for the future. Practising Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism makes us much stronger and better able to deal with difficulties. Furthermore, we feel both joy and gratitude because we are able to revolutionise our lives fundamentally.

Karma is not a matter of oneself alone. As well as individual karma, we also share karma with our families. Likewise, we share it with our communities and society at large. There have been many attempts to improve society through various revolutions: the industrial revolution, the class revolution and so on. However, unless we have a way to achieve a revolution in our own lives, we cannot hope to achieve lasting peace and a constructive society. Unless we can overcome our own anger, for instance, how can we hope to stop war? In overcoming our own karma, therefore, we start a chain reaction to change the karma of our families, communities and the world.

We, living beings, have dwelt in the sea of the sufferings of birth and death since time without beginning. But now that we have become votaries of the Lotus Sutra, we will without fail attain the Buddha's entity which is as indestructible as a diamond, realising that our bodies and minds that have existed since the beginningless past are inherently endowed with the eternally unchanging nature, and thus awakening to our mystic reality with our mystic wisdom.⁵

1 *The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, Vol. 2, p. 172.

2 *Major Writings*, Vol. 7, pp. 65-6

(The translation here has been simplified for ease of understanding).

3 *Major Writings*, Vol. 1, p. 271.

4 *Toda Josei Zenshu* (The Collected Works of Josei Toda), Vol. 3, p. 394.

5 *Major Writings*, Vol. 2, pp. 55-6.