

Fo Guang Shan
International Translation Center

# Cause and Effect

**Buddhism in Every Step** A9
（英文版）

Venerable Master Hsing Yun

© 1999, 2007, 2010, 2011, 2015, 2018, 2025
by Fo Guang Shan
International Translation Center

All rights reserved.

Written by
Venerable Master Hsing Yun

Translated by
Amy Lam

Edited and proofread by
Fo Guang Shan
International Translation Center

Printed in Taiwan

# Table of Contents


**I. Looking at Cause and Effect in Everyday Living** **4**

**II. Looking at Cause and Effect in Our Relationships with Others** **8**

**III. Looking at How Cause and Effect Play Out in the Past, Present, and Future** **13**

**IV. Looking at Cause and Effect as a Guide to Actions** **20**


Fo Guang Shan International Translation Center

Fo Guang Shan
International Translation Center

# Cause and Effect

Some Buddhists believe that the law of cause and and effect is simply a tool used to prod them into doing good deeds. This is not entirely correct. The law of cause and effect according to the Buddha's teachings is not so simplistic.

Cause gives rise to effect—this is an inherent fact of life. The teachings of cause and effect are profound and operate with unfailing precision, more accurate than even the most advanced computers. Not only can we human beings not change the workings of cause and effect, even the gods cannot alter its path. The workings of cause and effect encompass everything in the universe and are the birthing ground of all conditions—past, present, and future. *The Nirvana Sutra* says categorically that the effects of helpful and harmful actions follow us like a shadow. Cause and effect spans the threefold dimension of time: past, present,

and future. A cause once generated will always produce its appropriate effect.

If the workings of cause and effect govern all things in the universe, then who or what governs cause and effect? Cause and effect are inherent in the interdependencies of all phenomena and the multitude of forces thereby created. This is not unlike the balancing act of building a tower of cards; when we add or remove a card, the repercussion of any one such action permeates throughout the whole system. The way cause and effect are linked is both profound and unique. When we say we human beings cannot alter the laws of nature, we are saying that we cannot alter the workings of cause and effect. The workings of cause and effect are most intricate, and unless we are fully enlightened, we cannot even come close to comprehending them in their entirety. While we may not fear death or the unknown, we should always maintain a healthy respect for the workings of cause and effect.

In Buddhism, there is a very profound saying: "Bodhisattvas fear causes; sentient beings fear effects." The difference between bodhisattvas and human beings is the difference in perspective on cause and effect. Bodhisattvas refrain from creating ill causes, for they know

an ill cause will bring an ill effect. Their understanding of this law is complete, and they always examine the effects of causes before they act. Sentient beings, on the other hand, are impulsive and often act without thinking through the consequences. While we do not show any fear of creating ill causes, we dread the ill effects they bear on us. Time and time again, we act out of delusion and end up paying dearly for our foolishness.

From a sociological standpoint, culture, ethics, and laws are the main forces that give society its structure. The scope of a society's laws is finite, and the ability of a culture to curtail behavior is limited. The effect of these externally imposed boundaries cannot compare to the impact that an understanding of cause and effect would have on us. If we are always mindful of cause and effect, we can use this to guide our actions. We will understand that our circumstances, be they good or bad, are our own doing. If all of us can come to this level of understanding regarding cause and effect, we will always be mindful of our thoughts and actions, and the world will be a much better place.

Regardless of whether we believe in the teachings of cause and effect, we are all subject

to its workings. No one can take our place in the workings of cause and effect. This is true from the very small, inconsequential causes to the life-changing ones born of our thoughts and actions. When a little boy plays with a knife and cuts himself, even the most loving mother cannot experience the pain that the child must feel. We all have to bear responsibility for our thoughts and actions; no one can stand in our place when the effects unfold.

In the first two sections of this discussion, we are going to look at cause and effect from the standpoint of everyday living and our relationships with others. In the last two sections, we will examine how cause and effect play out over time and how it can be a guide to our actions.

Tibetan Children's Village
International Translation Center

## I. Looking at Cause and Effect in Everyday Living

The workings of cause and effect are not confined only to the arena of religious activity. Even in our everyday lives, there are infinite examples that attest to how it functions. Take the simple act of eating. We eat everyday. Why? We eat because we are hungry. Hunger is the cause, and eating is the effect. After we eat, we no longer

feel hungry. In this instance, eating is the cause, and the sense of fullness is the effect. When the weather turns chilly, we put on more clothes to keep ourselves warm. One cause leads to another as inevitably as day turns into night.

Look around you; some of us are born into families of wealth while others are born into more humble circumstances. We all live in different countries. Why do some of us live in prosperous places, while others live in countries that are plagued by poverty and turmoil? Some of us live long lives, while others die tragically young. This is not because there is some god playing favorites or that life is simply unfair. All of our circumstances are due to the varying causes and conditions we have planted in the past. Depending on our past causes, we now reap their effects. Causes breed effects, and the two cannot be separated.

In Buddhist literature, there is a verse about the role conditionality plays in determining our future rebirths:

*My flesh is the flesh of sentient beings;*
*The names differ, but the essence does not.*
*We all share in having the same nature;*

*We merely vary in bodily form.*
*If I leave others to suffer in pain,*
*For the sweet and tender are what I want,*
*No need to await Yama's judgement;*
*I know myself what such deeds will cost.*

For just a moment of satisfaction for our taste buds, we cause the deaths of many animals, taking the young from their mothers or the parents from their young. The collective karma[1] of these killings may well be the future cause of an awful war. Additionally, the desire for ever more exotic food has driven many species to the edge of extinction, indirectly upsetting the balance of our ecological systems. We only have one earth; knowing that we may be reborn into this world many times over, it is in our own interest to preserve what we have.

Though the workings of conditionality may not be immediate and transparent, we should not doubt its functioning. Causes always yield effects. It is this interlocking web of causes and effects that gives rise to all phenomena. Our actions, or karma, are stored in our alaya

1. Karma means actions and gives rise to causes and effects.

consciousness[2] and become the seeds of future results. Our circumstances, whether they are fortunate or not, are the result of previous causes: there is no element of luck involved. Here is a verse that sheds some light on our common predicament:

*Longevity comes from compassion;*
*Early death comes from acts of killing.*
*Dignity comes from patience;*
*Poverty comes from being miserly and greedy.*
*Status comes from being respectful;*
*The lack of status comes from pride.*
*Muteness comes from slander;*
*Blindness and deafness come from lack of faith.*
*Impaired faculties and deformities come from violation of the precepts;*
*Wholeness in the body is the result of upholding the precepts*

The moral of this verse is that we determine who we are. On the one hand, we should treasure our present blessings and not take things for

2. Storehouse of consciousness

granted. On the other hand, we should always sow the seeds of good effects. Along the same line, Zhuzi (an ancient Chinese philosopher) used to teach his children with this verse:

*A bowl of porridge, a bowl of rice—*
*contemplate, they do not come easily.*
*A bit of silk, a piece of thread—always*
*appreciate how precious they are.*
*Plan before a storm; do not start*
*digging a well when thirsty.*

In this world, there is no effect without a cause, and there is no cause that does not yield an effect. Additionally, there is no effect that is inappropriate for its cause, and there is no cause that will not yield its due effect. Ultimately, we determine cause and effect.

## II. Looking at Cause and Effect in Our Relationships with Others

Look! We all live in different countries and various places. I may not know you, and you may not know me. On the surface, it seems there is a lot of random disconnectedness in this world.

Actually, we all share some common causes and conditions. In the sutras, it is said that if one has the ability to look into the past and the future, one will see the multitude of sentient beings who were or will be our parents, siblings, or relatives during our many lifetimes.

The following story illustrates how related we are. Once, there was a family celebrating a wedding. The house was filled with guests: family members, relatives, and close friends. Tables spilled out onto the street, and music filled the air. Everyone was in a festive mood. It happened that a monk walked by. He stood by the door, shook his head and sighed. Some of the guests were baffled and asked him why. The monk answered with the following verse:

*Cows, sheep animals sitting at the table:*
*Grandmother from a past life is now the bride;*
*Beating drums in the hall, hitting*
*grandpa's skin;*
*Cooking in pots, the aunts.*

In this verse, the monk looked at familial relationships in the context of conditionality. The bride was once the grandmother in a past life. Many family members and friends sitting at

the table were cows and sheep in their previous lives. The skin of the drum was made from the skin of a cow who was once the grandfather of the mother. The animals that were being cooked in the pots were the aunts from a previous life. When we pass away, our individual cumulative karmic force determines the realm of existence into which we are reborn. While we are of the same nature, each person's delusions differ in form and severity, giving each of us a different phenomenal existence. In our infinite rebirths, we meet and part. While we may be related in one life, we may be total strangers in the next.

Taiwanese newspapers once carried the following story, from which you can draw your own conclusion, about how cause and effect influence the relationships we have with others. The story began with a young man who had a terrible fall while mountain climbing in Taitung. Because of the severity of the fall, he suffered a serious concussion. In order to save the young man, the medical personnel on the scene decided to call in a renowned neurologist from Taipei, which is quite a distance from Taitung. The doctor was at first most reluctant, but out of compassion he finally decided to make the trip. He packed his car

with the necessary medical supplies and headed south. Unexpectedly, half way into his drive, a middle-aged man in a leather jacket stopped the car and ordered the doctor out, saying, "Get out. I need the car."

The doctor immediately explained, "You don't know what you are doing. I am a doctor on an emergency call to save a patient." The carjacker did not wait for the doctor to finish and pulled him out of his car. The doctor had no choice but to hitch a ride from strangers. When he finally arrived at the scene of the accident, many hours had passed, and the young man had already died. The medic on the scene was very angry with the doctor for his tardiness and told him that he was about an hour late. When the doctor approached the victim, he saw a middle-aged man beside the dead man crying, "My son, my son." The doctor took a look at the middle-aged man and immediately recognized him as the person who had carjacked his car earlier. He grabbed the man by his jacket and said, "It is you who caused your son to die."

The man in the leather jacket was the victim's father. In trying to get to the scene to see his son, he indirectly caused his son's death. Our relationships with others are governed by the law of cause and effect, which often works in

mysterious and complicated ways. Sometimes, in trying to love our children, we unknowingly put them in harm's way. A famous scholar in ancient China, Si Mawen, once wrote, "Save a fortune for your heirs; they may not get to enjoy it. Collect books for your heirs; they may not be able to read them. In the dark and unknown, the ultimate answer is to accumulate merit and set a good example for your children." This is food for thought regarding our relationships with our children.

The realm of enlightenment and Buddhahood is beyond our comprehension; the workings of cause and effect are equally profound and wondrous. When we truly understand the deep meaning of cause and effect, in essence we understand the Dharma. Cause and effect pervade all our relationships, and as such, it behooves us to treasure them all. When we comprehend the meaning of cause and effect, we will not hesitate to practice love that is grounded in oneness. When we help others, we are in fact helping ourselves. This is the joy of the Dharma.

## III. Looking at How Cause and Effect Play Out in the Past, Present, and Future

From the point of view of time, cause and effect span the threefold dimension of time, linking us from the past to the present and from the present to the future. Some causes produce effects in the present life, while others produce effects in the next life, and some others still produce effects many lifetimes later. Actually, this is not hard to visualize. For example, some plants that are seeded in the spring yield fruit in the fall. This corresponds to producing effects in the present life. Some plants take a year to bear fruit. This is similar to producing effects in the next life. Then there are some plants that will take years before beginning to bear fruit. This is analogous to producing effects many lifetimes later. A Chinese proverb says, "[Not that causes] are without effects; the time just hasn't come yet." The workings of conditionality never misfire; it is just a matter of time before the effect becomes apparent.

When we observe the world around us, we may sometimes wonder if life is nothing but a series of random events. We may have heard people say, "Mrs. Zhang is such a nice lady. She is a vegetarian, practices the Dharma religiously, and

gives to all kinds of social causes. Unfortunately, however, she is also the most unlucky person and has experienced a great deal of misfortune." This is most unfair—why do so many bad things happen to such a nice person? How can anyone believe in conditionality? At other times, we may come across this type of comment: "That person is such a crook. You would think that he should have to pay for all the horrible things he has done, but instead he is rich and powerful. People look up to him. Will he ever have to pay?" True, when we see bad things happen to good people, or vice versa, our faith may be called into question. Actually, there is nothing here that is inconsistent with the law of cause and effect. Let us go back to the example of Mrs. Zhang. The reason that she does not yet have a chance to enjoy any good fortune is because of her "karmic debts" from the past. Once her "karmic debts" are burned up through the process of doing good, good fortune will await her. As to those who seem to be able to forever evade the retribution of their bad actions, it is because they have stores of merit from their past lives. When their store of merit is consumed, then the effects of their unwholesome actions will come knocking at their doors.

Once, there was a monk who pledged to build a temple at a certain location. In ancient China, the method used to raise funds was different from that used today. Instead of asking for donations, the monk would sit or stand at the site of the future temple and recite sutras or teach the Dharma, hoping to move the community to action. For three months, this elderly monk sat at the location and recited the sutras, but no one paid him any attention, except for a young boy selling hotcakes on the street for a nearby shopkeeper. The young boy could not bear to see the elderly monk unable to realize his vow, and compassion arose in him. He thought to himself, "This poor monk. Maybe if I give him the money from the hotcakes, I can help him realize his vow." The boy offered the money he got from selling hotcakes to the monk. When news of this boy's gallant action spread, the villagers reflected on their own nonchalance and felt embarrassed about their stinginess. By word of mouth, people came from all over to offer help to the monk. In no time, the monk collected enough money to start construction. The monk was very moved by the boy's compassion and said to him, "My little friend, your compassion today has had an enormous impact. You are a

great Dharma friend to our temple. If there is anything I can do, please do not hesitate to ask." The young boy just smiled and went his way.

When the boy returned to the store, he did not have the money to give to the shopkeeper. The owner was livid and fired the boy on the spot. With such short notice, the little boy was not able to find another job and had to beg for a living. Things went from bad to worse; not only was he poor, he came down with an infectious disease and consequently lost his eyesight. With nowhere to turn, he suddenly recalled what the monk had said to him and decided to go to the temple for help. Now, this monk had attained the ability to see into the future and knew beforehand that the little boy would come to him for help. During the night, he gathered all of his followers together and left word saying, "Tomorrow, our great patron will be here. I want you all to be ready to receive him and show him the utmost respect."

The next day, everyone got up early in the morning to clean and dust. They waited and waited, but no one of importance came to the temple. Later, the elderly monk asked the monk in charge of hospitality, "Did our great patron grace us with his presence?"

"I did not see any great patron come to the temple today."

The elderly monk asked further, "Are you telling me that no one came today?"

"No one. Oh, only a small blind beggar boy called. He insisted on coming in, but I was afraid that he would be in the way when the great patron arrived. So I gave him a few pieces of bread and asked him to leave."

The elderly monk was flabbergasted and said, "You've made a great mistake. That little boy is our great patron. Please hurry and see if you can catch up with him and invite him back." The young monk did as he was told and quickly caught up with the little beggar boy. He invited the boy back to the temple and prepared a guest room so that the boy might stay in the temple for a while. Unfortunately, one night when the little boy went to the outhouse to relieve himself, he fell into the latrine pit and drowned.

When people in the village heard what had happened to the boy, they discussed among themselves, "Look, how can we say that the law of cause and effect is functioning here? Everything was going along just fine when the boy sold hotcakes for the store owner. His luck took a turn for the worse ever since he gave money to

the monk to build the temple. First, he became a beggar; then he became blind. Just when he thought things were looking up, he drowned in the temple's outhouse. How can we believe in the law of cause and effect?"

Comments like this quickly reached the elderly monk. He gathered everyone together to address their concerns. He said, "Because of his past karma, this little boy had to lead three difficult lives. In this lifetime, he was faced with poverty. In his next life, he was destined to be blind, and in the third lifetime, he was destined to die an accidental death in an outhouse. His compassion in helping to build the temple earned him great merit, and he was able to burn off his karmic debt in one lifetime. In this way, he did not have to suffer through two more unfortunate rebirths. He is now being reborn into one of the heavens. We are the creators of our own circumstances; cause and effect follow us like our shadows. Due to our ignorance of the past and future, we tend to look at our turn of events out of their proper context. How can we say that our actions will not yield their corresponding effects!" After the monk had spoken, everyone was moved, and they began to see the wondrous workings of cause and effect.

In the sutras, we come across this saying: "Hundreds and thousands of kalpas may pass, but our karma does not disappear. With the right causes and conditions, we will reap its effects." What this means is that the seeds we sow with our actions, whether good or bad, will not disappear regardless of how much time has passed. Like a seed that sprouts under the right conditions, our causes will bear effects when the right conditions come to pass.

The workings of cause and effect span the past, present, and future. Even though we are not able to see into the past or future, we can see what happens in the present. The sutras say, "If we want to know the causes we have planted in our past lives, our experiences in this life are the effects. If we want to know what our circumstances will be in the next life, just look at the causes we are planting in this life." While we may not be able to do anything about our past causes, we are in control of the present and the future. If we understand that our circumstances today are the effect of past causes, we stand a better chance of accepting our circumstances with grace. Moreover, we can chart our future through our actions today. In this way, we soften our past causes and plant wholesome seeds for

the future. We should all take charge of the present and practice the Buddha's teachings. When we plant good seeds today, we will have a bountiful harvest tomorrow. Using this analogy, the following Chinese verse can help to spur us into immediate action:

*Every one of us knows the next year*
*will come;*
*All families plant for next year's food.*
*Every one of us knows there is a next*
*life;*
*Why don't we all plant causes for good*
*fortune in the next life?*

Fo Guang Shan
International Translation Center

## IV. Looking at Cause and Effect as a Guide to Actions

Some people have misguided notions and expectations regarding cause and effect. A person who had been a vegetarian for a long time once complained to me, "There's no point in being a vegetarian. Look at me, I have been a vegetarian for over twenty years, and I am not any healthier. Since the Buddha has not been looking after me, why should I continue to be a vegetarian?" I guess he became a vegetarian

because he thought that the Buddha would become his personal physician and look after his health. Another person grumbled to me, "Dharma teacher, I am going to stop reciting Amitabha's name. For years I have dutifully recited his name, yet I lost all my money in business. If Amitabha is not going to take care of me, why should I recite his name?" Ah, he recited Amitabha Buddha's name not to be reborn into the Pure Land but because he wanted Amitabha to provide him with financial stability. All of these are unreasonable expectations of the Buddhas.

We must understand that each cause has its respective effect. If we want good health, we should exercise and maintain a calm mind. If we want to be wealthy, we should first plant the seeds of wealth by giving alms. We also need to provide the right conditions for wealth to grow by working hard, being trustworthy, and helping others whenever we can. We have to help ourselves first. We cannot simply hope for wealth by praying to the gods. If we pray to Amitabha Buddha to help us get ahead while at the same time we selfishly take advantage of others, we are essentially asking Amitabha to stoop to our level, which is most absurd.

Some people bring a few pieces of fruit to a temple and expect to strike a bargain with the Buddhas to bless their families with fame and fortune. If this were how the world operates, would we all not want to make such a trade? Such a belief is not in accord with right view, but rather is characterized by greed and delusion. In this world, you cannot get something for nothing, but any religion that is worth its name would not teach its followers to be so opportunistic.

Bai Juyi, a scholar of the Tang dynasty once asked Chan Master Niaoke to teach him the Dharma. The Chan master replied, "Refrain from all wrongs; practice only good."

Bai Juyi answered disappointedly, "Is this what the Dharma is about? It is so simple. Even a three-year-old toddler knows this!"

With joined palms, the Chan master answered smilingly, "Yes, a three-year-old toddler may know this, but even an eighty-year old man has difficulty practicing it. It is one thing to speak of the Dharma; it is another to put it into practice."

While we instinctively know that we should do good and refrain from evil, it is very hard to put this into practice. Often, we act impulsively without thinking through the consequences of

our actions. If we can truly internalize the law of cause and effect, we will constantly be reminded to think before we act. Sometimes, when we see bad things happen to good people, we may begin to lose our trust in conditionality. Seeing good things happen to bad people, we end up thinking that we may be able to evade the effects of our actions. Little do we know that while we may be able to temporarily escape the laws of society, we will never escape the effects of conditionality. The following verse reflects the way many of us may look at the world:

*Before unwholesome karma bears fruit,*
*The ill-doer thinks his pursuits bring*
*him happiness.*
*When the effects of karma ripen,*
*The ill-doer then realizes the destructive*
*nature of his actions.*
*Before wholesome karma blossoms,*
*The good-doer looks at his efforts as*
*burdensome.*
*When the effects unfold,*
*The good-doer begins to see the*
*goodness of his actions.*

Fo Guang Shan
International Translation Center

If we can channel the energy we expend perpetrating harm into performing wholesome actions instead; if we can maintain resolve when problems arise; and if we can do what is right and not what is easy, we will one day reap the fruits of our labor.

During the Warring States period in Chinese history, there was a general by the name of Liu Bei. On his death bed, he left these words of advice with his son: "Do not commit a wrongful act thinking that it is only minor; do not skip doing a good deed just because it is small."

The sutras explain this idea, taking it a step further: "Do not be lulled into thinking that a minor unwholesome act does not bear any ill consequence. A trickle of water, though small, can gradually fill a large container. Do not look down on a minor wholesome act, thinking that it will not yield any blessings. A small blessing like a trickle of water can accumulate into great blessings." Thus, in daily life, we need to be mindful of every thought and action. If we look around and observe the world, we will see how conditionality applies even to the most minute detail.

When we see others who are more fortunate than ourselves, we may long for their good luck and wonder why we are not equally blessed.

Actually, if we understand the law of cause and effect, we will realize that the circumstances in which we find ourselves is the product of our own minds, and luck has nothing to do with it. Not only is the mind the generator of karma, it is also the sole agent of karmic change. If we are continually vigilant of the mind and keep it focused on right thoughts, then even misfortune can be changed for the better. If we let our minds run wild with ill thoughts, then whatever blessings we have cannot last.

Venerable Cihang was a well-respected monk during his time. Before he passed away, he left behind this verse, which puts the interplay between the mind and karmic conditions into perspective:

*Here's a word of advice to all:*
*It's imperative to continually reflect on*
*Activities and thoughts each day.*
*Take stock of how much good and harm*
*You have caused.*
*As long as you have peace of mind,*
*North, east, south, west are all good.*
*As long as one person remains to be*
*liberated,*
*We must not run away.*

*Dharma nature is inherently empty and*
*serene.*
*No cause planted is ever lost.*
*We reap what we sow;*
*No one can stand in our place.*
*Places of practice—like a flower in the*
*sky, moon in the water—*
*Build them everywhere and ceaselessly.*
*I hope you all will do good,*
*Fostering many good conditions.*
*Without delay, work toward liberation*
*For yourselves and the world.*

While conditionality never fails, its effect is not always instantaneous. However, we should not let short-sightedness get in the way of better judgment. Here is a verse from which we can draw a lesson.

*Wholesomeness is like a green pine.*
*Unwholesomeness is like a flower.*
*Gazing at it now, [the green pine]*
*pales in comparison.*
*The morning after a day of frost*
*The green pine remains, but not the*
*flower.*

While a blooming flower is a feast for the eyes, it is also fragile and cannot withstand the test of weather. On the other hand, a tall pine may be plain, but it is also strong and sturdy. When a storm hits, it is the green pine that remains standing. The many choices we make everyday are like choosing between a pretty but short-lived flower and a plain but sturdy pine. How we choose is entirely up to us.

Fo Guang Shan
International Translation Center

Fo Guang Shan
International Translation Center

Fo Guang Shan International Translation Center is dedicated to translating and distributing quality translations of classical Buddhist texts as well as works by contemporary Buddhist teachers and scholars. We embrace Humanistic Buddhism and promote Buddhist writing that is accessible, community oriented, and relevant to daily life. On FGSITC.org, you can browse all of our publications, read them online, and even download them for FREE as well as request printed copies for you or your organization.

All of Fo Guang Shan International Translation Center's publications are offered for free distribution, funded by the generous donations of our supporters. Thank you to all who donated to support the printing and distribution of this booklet, especially the Fo Guang Shan branch temples around the world. It is your continued, long-term support that makes our publications possible.