

Jinshin Inga (Deep Faith in Cause and Effect)

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“The principle of causality is obvious and impersonal” is a familiar phrase that was adopted into the “General Introduction” to *The Meaning of Practice and Verification* (*Shushogi*). This phrase originally appeared in the “Deep Faith in Cause and Effect” chapter of *The Treasury of the True Dharma Eye* (*Shobogenzo*). When I chant this phrase, the image of the inorganic relationship between cause and effect that pervades this whole world like the mesh of a net always comes to mind. The word “impersonal” gives me a cold feeling because it implies that once the relationship between cause and effect has been generated, it isn’t possible for a person’s selfish interpretation to approach or intervene. Where can we find significance in the relationship between cause and effect? How is meaning given to (this principle of) cause and effect? How will the cause and effect that we have drawn to ourselves develop? These questions are related to our own motivation and action.

The concept of dependent co-origination or the doctrine of causes and conditions is a foundational idea of Buddhism. The relationship of cause and effect is the viewpoint from which to perceive all things. This is the content of Shakyamuni Buddha’s enlightenment; Shakyamuni Buddha was liberated through his realization of the principle of cause and effect. The foundation of this liberation was the idea of the never-ending cycle of birth and death, also known as samsara or reincarnation, which was a traditional religious view in India. Since ancient times in India, it was thought that a person’s soul is immortal and that, depending on the energy (karma) created by one’s conduct in this life, one would be reborn into one of the realms of hell, hungry spirits, animals, fighting demons, human beings, or celestial beings.

Buddhism as a religion aspired, through awakening, to liberate human beings from transmigration by ending the creation of the karma which is its cause. In that sense, Buddhism had a revolutionary meaning in the context of the traditional religious view in India. This fundamental form of Buddhist thought was not different in Chinese Zen, nor for Dogen Zenji, who inherited that teaching from China. In a dharma hall discourse requested by his disciple, Egi, for her deceased mother, Dogen Zenji quoted from a dharma hall discourse of his teacher, Nyojo Zenji.

Life does not appear from any certain place. It is like putting on a *hakama* (a formal men’s divided skirt). However, our face is dignified. Therefore it is said, the ten thousand things return to one. Death has no place to go. It is like taking off a *hakama*. However, all traces are cast off and fall away. For this reason, it is said, where does the one return to? At this very moment, how is it?! After a pause, Dogen Zenji continued, from the beginning life and death do not interfere with each other. Wrongdoing and happiness are both empty with no place to dwell.

(From *Dogen’s Extensive Record*, volume 5, discourse 391)

Here, Dogen Zenji instructs us that bad karma as well as fortunate karma are both empty and have no substance. For that reason, neither of them remains anywhere.

What does Keizan Zenji have to say regarding this matter? In the chapter on Jayata Sonja, the Twentieth Ancestral Master, in the *Transmission of Light (Denkoroku)*, we find the following passage:

If you want to see your original mind, give up all deluding relationships and set everything aside. Do not think of good or bad and, for some time, keep your eyes fixed in the tip of your nose and look at your original mind. When you have become single-mindedly still, all forms come to an end. Since this fundamental ignorance is already destroyed, then the branches and leaves – karma and its results – no longer exist. Therefore, you do not stay in the realm of non-discrimination nor are you confined to the sphere of not thinking. It is neither permanent nor not permanent; it is neither ignorance nor purity. There is no separation from the buddhas and no separation from ordinary beings. When you arrive at this realm of pure, clear, complete illumination, then for the first time you will be a true monk (a disciple of the Buddha). If you are like this, then you are no different from the buddhas.

In this passage, Keizan Zenji teaches that when we sit in shikantaza giving up all deluding relationships and separate ourselves from dualistic values of good, bad, and so forth, we are the same as all the buddhas who are free of basic ignorance and karma. There is no difference between the Two Founders, Dogen Zenji and Keizan Zenji, on this point of extinguishing karma.

As the above-mentioned passage from *Dogen's Extensive Record* pointed out, the reason it is possible to be liberated from the sufferings of samsara by means of enlightenment lies in the principle that all karmic hindrance is empty. However, there is an element of danger in relying on the principle of “karmic hindrance is essentially empty” if we forget the law of karma itself and deny cause and effect.

Dogen Zenji discusses this problem of karma and causality in connection by telling the story of “Hyakujo’s Wild Fox” in two chapters of the *Shobogenzo*, “Great Practice,” a chapter from the seventy-five-chapter version of the *Shobogenzo*, and “Deep Faith in Cause and Effect,” a chapter from the twelve-chapter version of the *Shobogenzo*. He also discusses karma in the “Karma of the Three Times” chapter of the twelve-chapter edition.

The story of “Hyakujo’s Wild Fox” is that long ago in the time of Kashapa Buddha a certain priest lived on Mt. Hyakujo. One day, a student/practitioner asked him, “Do even people who have cultivated great practice fall into cause and effect?” He answered, “They do not fall into cause and effect.” Since that time, he had been reborn as a wild fox for five hundred lifetimes. Finally, this reincarnated priest from Kashapa’s time sought help from Hyakujo Ekai. Hearing Hyakujo’s response – “Do not ignore cause and effect” – he had great enlightenment and was liberated from the body of the wild fox.

In the chapter “Great Practice,” Dogen Zenji reproaches the foolishness of accepting without carefully considering, that “not falling into cause and effect” is “to deny cause and effect” and that “does not ignore cause and effect” is “deep faith in cause and effect.” At the same time, Dogen Zenji also presents his doubt about the very contents of this story of “Hyakujo’s Wild Fox” by taking apart the stereotypical interpretation of the story. If “they do not fall into cause and effect” is a mistake,

then “do not ignore cause and effect” might also be a mistake. In this passage, Dogen Zenji says that essentially these two statements are not different. In the chapter “Great Practice,” Dogen Zenji affirms both “not fall into cause and effect” and “not ignore cause and effect” on the basis of the emptiness of karmic hindrances.

However, in the twelve-chapter version’s chapter “Deep Faith in Cause and Effect,” Dogen Zenji criticizes the idea that “not fall into cause and effect” is “to deny cause and effect” and discusses the imperishability of karma. At the same time, he affirms that “not ignore cause and effect” is “deep faith in cause and effect” and thereby acknowledges the confrontational perspective of these two statements. On the mere face of it, these words seem to contradict the passage mentioned above from the Chapter of “Great Practice.” in seventy-five chapter version. Buddhism assumes the Indian view of religion which is based on samsara and the constraints of karma and aspires to go beyond them through liberation from them. In the same way, the chapter “Great Practice” re-confirms the existence of “cause and effect” and “karma” with the assumption that we can overcome them. The reason for this is that if one negates cause and effect and forgets about karma, the enlightenment which one attains through overcoming these things will also disappear.

In “Karma of the Three Times,” the chapter in the twelve-chapter version of the *Shobogenzo* which follows “Deep Faith in Cause and Effect,” there is the following passage:

The World-honored One said, “Once good and bad karma are created, they will never perish even after a million eons. You will receive the results when causes and conditions meet. However, bad karma disappears or turns into lighter results through repentance. Good karma increases by means of doing good actions. This is called “never perish.” It is not that they do not have effects.

Karma “never perishes” means that if we repent of our bad deeds this karma will disappear or become lighter. If we do good actions, then good karma will increase more and more. Karma is not static or substantial thing. This is precisely because karmic hindrance is empty.

In this same chapter, “Karma of the Three Times,” Dogen Zenji harshly criticizes Chosha Keishin for the heretical view he expresses in his understanding of the words, “Karmic hindrance is essentially empty.”

Not moving the subject of karmic hindrance and talking about its emptiness is a heretical view. Sentient beings who believe in the original emptiness of the hindrance of karma and who self-indulgently create karma will not have the moment of liberation. If there were no moment of liberation, there would be no emergence of buddhas.

Here, the criticism concerns an idea of emptiness which does not move the subject of karmic hindrance. Moving the subject of karmic hindrance is nothing other than doing Buddhist practice. We can plainly see this in the above-mentioned passage from chapter twenty of Keizan Zenji’s *Transmission of Light*.

At this point, it is necessary to speak about karma and causation from a modern perspective. Karma is a concept that was passed down in India prior to Buddhism. It was a theory of behavior concerning people's actions. It was a way of thinking, a viewpoint, a way of seeing a person in the present moment as a product of the accumulation of his or her past actions. This view became a hope that it is possible to change the future through one's own actions; that a self-revolution is indeed possible. It had the power to overcome fatalism.

If we can provisionally call this "a correct theory of karma," when we look back over the 2,600 years of Buddhist history, it can be said that unfortunately this theory of karma has come to be used primarily as way of explaining unhappiness and misfortune in this life. In other words, it has come to be "a bad theory of karma." This way of thinking imposes the notion that we must resign ourselves to accepting that the bad karma from previous lives about which we can do nothing is the cause of the unjust and irrational things that have befallen us in this life. Furthermore, while superficially teaching the morality of rewarding good and punishing evil, it sometimes happened that handicapped people or those who are socially vulnerable or disadvantaged were discriminated against because their differences were considered the result of bad deeds in the past. In some cases, this idea of karma is even used to say that discrimination brought about by social system is caused by karma from previous lives.

We must not forget that there is a long history in which the Buddhist teachings of karma and causation have served as theories to affirm this sort of threatening or frightening of people and discriminating against them. Since these teachings are used even today by some cults as means to terrorize people, they have not lost their negative effectiveness.

Our karma is not something which should be spoken about by other people, nor is other people's karma something we should discuss. This is a basic principle. When we look back over our own lives up to the present moment and when we think ahead to how we would like things to be from now on, it is only reasonable to think of karma as the accumulation of our actions throughout our life. Since the good and bad of karma is something subjective, it can change within ourselves by means of the way we live. When we aspire, as a person, to live a better life and begin to act differently, it becomes possible to turn the bad karma we have accumulated so far into good karma because it, as a result, awakened us to a correct way of living. Karma is a concept and it is empty in its own nature.

At times, karma is thought of and described as a tangible entity as if it were an impurity or defilement which could be perceived and discussed by others, making the notion of karma a tool for making people fearful. The role of present-day Buddhist priests is to prevent this abuse of karma and to liberate people from unjust dread and fear.

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