

An Explanation on the Uniqueness of the Law of Cause and Effect over “Three Time Periods”¹

Author: Venerable Yinshun

Source text: 《福慧隨身書》 No.008 《論三世因果的特勝》

Translated by Yinshun Cultural & Educational Foundation Translation Team

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Knowing Clearly the Purpose of This Human Life

In our present era, we are well aware that human beings are facing the threat of annihilation and that there is terror and persecution all around. This situation has a suffocating effect, so much so that most humans are unable to breath freely. Why is it that this world has deteriorated to such a state?

According to the Buddha-dharma, the main reason is because humans have lost sight of the purpose of this life. People neglect their own value and live their lives in a mood of despair and disillusionment. Accordingly, the situation is becoming either corrupt or violent; that is, people are often engrossed in material desires, or madly pursuing violent revenge. The craving

¹ The “three time periods” refers to past, present and future lives.

for material pleasures and the psychological states of envy and hatred have brought our world to the gloomy brink of destruction.

[You may think,] what exactly do I mean when I say that humans have lost sight of the purpose of this life and are neglecting their own value? Regarding this point, I would like to provide a simple explanation.

Human beings generally have three different views regarding their own existence: that they have a single lifetime, two lifetimes, or live a continuous cycle, otherwise known as the three-life cycle. In the current era, the concept of a single lifetime, which is claimed by materialism, has been pervasive in many people's thinking.

The Claim of Materialism: One Single Lifetime

Humans are greatly influenced by the material world, and regard this material world as the only true existence. Materialists believe that human existence is as follows. First, birth arises only from the union of one's parents; that is, it is purely a result of physical intimacy. Consequently, death is simply the result of the deterioration of the body, after which there is absolutely nothing. [In the view of materialists,] human existence in this universe is just like this: they recognize the present life and reject the existence of past and future lives.

Such a view, which destroys the idea that one can do something in this life for a better future [life], causes one to fall into extreme despair and immeasurable misery. This life is filled with toil. What is the purpose of this life? If it is the case that we work hard just for ourselves, then what meaning is there when this life is so simple and, once dead, there is nothing? If it is the case that we work for our family, country, or the world, then what connection do we really have with them? In this way, materialists are inclined to think only for themselves, and thus everything revolves around their own benefits. Thus, the more education one obtains, the more cunning one becomes; the more kind speeches a materialist makes, the more bad deeds they commit. The older generation [of materialists] pursue short-sighted self-profit or fall into despair. As for the younger generation [of materialists], who are filled with ideas and vitality, they become fanatical under the influence of enticements and form a harsh and brutal world in which they focus heavily on the collective and neglect the individual, and are willing to employ improper methods for the sake of attaining their goals.

[The notion that] death is the end of everything denies the true meaning of being human. This is the view of human existence that the materialists hold. Such a view of human existence is related to the theory of having one single lifetime. The world is infected by this poisonous idea and this has caused [many people in] this world to become radical. There are some people who think of themselves as being opposite to materialism and communism, yet they do not realize that their own view of life is actually the same as that of the materialists. That is, they also subscribe to the theory of a single lifetime and believe that death is the end of everything.

Theist Theory of “Two Lifetimes”

The theory of “two lifetimes,” is the general view of theism: whether one god or many gods are claimed [to be the savior(s) of the world]. Theism states that there is only one continuous life after death. According to Chinese traditional beliefs, after death people transform into “spirits.” Among these spirits, those who have accumulated virtues and merits will be reborn in the realm of the deities, while those who have committed evil deeds or have no descendants will become wandering spirits. However, since the Song and Ming dynasties, atheistic inclinations have become pervasive and, among the literati, many have adopted the materialist’s theory of having one single lifetime.

The theory of the “two lifetimes,” no matter if it is regarded as superstitious, does provide something for the inner spirituality of humans that encourages people to have determination, both in the past and within the present times. This theory can provide humans with a bright and promising future, and can help people to tolerate and even overcome difficulties that they are facing in the present. In terms of the development of personal character and morals, this theory offers a great contribution. However, in this present day the theist theory of “two lifetimes” is gradually becoming less popular. This is because theists claim that there is an independent soul that continues on from this physical life to the next life after death. This is just like the situation in which a person moves from one house to another house. This soul, or intrinsic self, which is separate from the physical body and the psychological mind, is something that people in contemporary times find hard to accept, and this is why the theist idea of “two lifetimes” is declining in popularity. Another reason is that the monotheistic religions in the Western world (e.g. Christianity) talk about the two lifetimes as being from the present to the next life, in which there are only the options of Heaven or Hell. Yet, they are unable to provide a satisfactory explanation for the cause that led to this life. If they claim that [this life] is created by God and we come to this world due to God’s will, then this explanation is in stark

contradiction to God's love. Of the tens of thousands of people born every day, how many can actually gain rebirth to Heaven? [The answer is that] a large number of His creations will go to Hell. If God is all-knowing, then He should know this situation. Assuming that God gave humans the freedom to decide for themselves, and God delights in the fact that humans are willing to serve him according to their free will, then God is cruel. [The factual situation is that] humans are ignorant, which shows that they are like young children, and God places these young children in such a dangerous situation and delights that only a few of them are able to escape. How cruel this is! Does God really enjoy seeing this situation? [A real and similar example is given here.] The Communist Party urged millions of young people to fight [in the Korean War], and these young people were used as a human shield to combat artillery fire. Those who survived the artillery fire and returned were commended and glorified as heroes. However, would you consider the Communist Party as being compassionate? If there is a God and He definitely knows that many people will fall into Hell but he continues to create more people, then this has to be a god that is crazy or just plain cruel.

The theory of two lifetimes claimed by theists is becoming increasingly unbelievable to humans. [As a result], people's minds are falling into a state of despair, and they lose their spiritual support. This causes people to fall into the materialist ideology of believing in a single lifetime and so on; that is, to fall into the kingdom of the Devil. What has been described here is the main reason for the [general] decline in world civilization over the past century or so.

Perfect and Correct Theory of Three-Life Cycle

The theory of the continuous three-life cycle is a key feature of Indian religions, and the Buddhist explanation of the theory is the uppermost. Humans and all other sentient beings are in a state of endless continuum, from one life to another. Sentient beings' existence is neither created by a god nor is it something that has arisen spontaneously, and death is not the end of sentient beings' existence. Sentient beings' existence is like flowing water that stirs up waves, one after another. Sentient beings' births and deaths are simply the arising and cessation of an activity in a particular cycle. Based on the conviction of the theory of the continuous three-life cycle, a person can be free from the view that rewards and punishments are given by a god, and then can establish the [correct] view that they reap what they sow. Accordingly, a person can affirm the true meaning of life.

In our past lives, if our views and behaviors were wholesome without unwholesome deeds, and we benefited both others and ourselves, then in this life we can reap the joyous results. According to the law of cause and effect, if in this life we do not continue to work hard to undertake wholesome deeds, then once this life ends, we will fall into a future destiny that is bleak and filled with suffering. When we have confidence that the law of cause and effect spans three continuous time periods, we will certainly not complain about anything being unsatisfactory and we can be content with our lives, because we know that all the difficulties we face this life are significantly related to our past lives. Moreover, for the sake of a bright future, we will be diligent in improving ourselves and we would not be lazy and reckless. Such a view of human existence can help us to be content and diligently to create our own future. This benefit is unique to the theory that cause and effect spans three continuous time periods.

Furthermore, when we understand the endless continuum of life, [we will see that] suffering and happiness are all the result of undertaking unwholesome or wholesome deeds, respectively. The effects of causal forces from wholesome or unwholesome deeds are not unlimited, and so our suffering or happiness is not permanent. The causal force from wholesome or unwholesome deeds is merely effective at a certain stage in the endless cycle of life. No matter what type of difficult situation it may be, even in the hells, there is no need to feel despair because when that causal force is exhausted even the hell-beings will be liberated from that situation. Similarly, whatever joyous state is encountered, even though it may be commensurate with the heavenly realms, one should not be complacent. This is because, when the karmic force of that wholesome deed is spent, one can still regress [from that favorable state]. Therefore, true practitioners of the theory of the continuous three-life cycle are filled with hope, no matter what situation they are in, and they are continually working to improve themselves.

From the observation through history whereby a person bears what they sow, we can see that collectively we bear what we sow, which applies to every family and country. What we observe is in accordance with the natural law of cause and effect. The weakness in the theory of two lifetimes no longer exists in the theory of the continuous three-life cycle. In terms of the pitfalls of the worldly and materialistic theory of a single lifetime, people can be free from the pitfalls only when they accept the view of cause and effect that is based on the theory of the three-life cycle, and regard this view as an indisputable and common conviction.

Appendix: Right View on the Existence of Past and Future Lives

Some people believe that karma created in this life will also ripen in this life. They do not believe that after death a person will have another life. However, the cases in which people bear the results of wholesome or unwholesome deeds undertaken in this very life are seldom. Accordingly, these people inevitably harbor the misunderstanding that “natural law is useless.” Moreover, some people believe that parents’ wholesome or unwholesome karmas will result in good or bad outcomes for their descendants, just like the [Chinese] saying, “a family that accumulates merits will bring their descendants prosperity; a family that accumulates vices will bring their descendants many misfortunes.” When Chinese people commonly talk about the invisible process between cause and effect, this is largely related to these two beliefs. In terms of the latter, what they do not realize is that in this world there are many cases in which parents are virtuous while their children are not, and vice versa. In addition, if a person has no descendants then would it not be the case that their good and bad karma are pointless?

Some people believe in only this life and the next life, while rejecting the notion of a past life, such as those who follow Christianity. Although such a belief is able to cause people to give up bad ways and improve themselves, the inability to understand past lives means that they cannot explain the differences experienced in this present life. This is a shortcoming and cannot cause people to develop right faith that is reasonable. Jesus said that the reason a person was born blind is because God wanted to use such a case to display His powers.² In truth, Jesus was not really able to answer this question [of why the person was born blind]. The reason is that there are many people in this present world who are born blind [the number is more than what God needs to prove His powers].

Therefore, not only must we understand the karmic retribution of wholesome and unwholesome deeds, we must also further develop firm understanding and confidence in past and future lives, and strengthen that understanding and confidence as our right view [regarding the law of cause and effect]. Sentient beings are caught in cycles of birth and death. In such a continuing situation, they are not free but are controlled by their karmic forces. When this

² Book of John (9.2): New International Version

His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

“Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.”

current life experiences the phase of death, a new life will begin; that is, heading into the next existence. In the cycle of birth after death, a sentient being continues on in a way in which the previous life is neither the same nor different from the present one. Also, the process of continuation is neither ceasing nor lasting. Such a process of cyclic existence is indeed very profound and not easy to see in the present. For sages [who have awakened to the truth], there is no doubt about [the fact that] karmic forces will bring future results, and the cycles of birth and death continue endlessly. This is especially true for those who have attained the divine eye.³ This is because they can see the process of cyclic existence even more clearly. The divine eye can also be attained by other non-Buddhist practitioners, and so they too believe in and understand, to some small extent, that karmic results from past lives yield results in future lives. However, ordinary people who do not have pure wisdom understand nothing about past and future lives, just as a person sees nothing in a completely dark room.

Although there is a small number of people who are not blind to past causes and who can understand about past lives [through reasoning], these people have been rejected by the followers of the superficial materialists [and they begin to doubt their understanding of previous lives]. Therefore, the best path is to attain pure wisdom and develop the divine eye in reliance on the Buddha-dharma. In this way, someone can personally confirm this truth [regarding karma and three-life cycle]. If the person is unable to confirm this for themselves, then the only other option is to have faith in the Buddha's teachings [regarding karma and three-life cycle], and then to understand the teachings through reasoning. It is not easy to explain this teaching so that beginners can comprehend the process of cyclic existence. Here, I will try to give the analogy of keeping a fire alive to explain the process of cyclic existence. Zhuangzi⁴ said, "when continually adding wood to keep a fire going, the fire will not cease." Master Huiyuan⁵ from Mount Lu once used the idea of keeping a fire alive as an analogy for the principle of continuing cycles of birth after death.

³ Divine eye is one of the five eyes in Buddhism that reflect the level of wisdom a practitioner has developed. It is also one of the six supernatural abilities attained through meditation practice. The divine eye enables one to see clearly into all the different realms of existence. It is also called the heavenly eye because this is the natural vision with which heavenly beings are born.

⁴ Zhuangzi is the name of a book on Taoism and also its author, who was a Chinese philosopher living in the late 4th century BCE.

⁵ Master Huiyuan (334–416 BCE) is the founding patriarch of the Chinese Pureland sect.

The prior firewood is not the same as the new firewood, and the latter fire is not the same as the earlier fire, but it cannot be said that the latter fire is independent of the prior fire. What this means is that when the previous life's activities come to an end another new life will begin. The previous life is not the same as the following life, but the following life certainly arises dependent on the previous life's karmic forces. However, after this death there may be a gap in time and distance until the next birth. Therefore, there is still a need to clarify how life continues during the time after this death and before the next birth.

According to the underlying meaning of the Buddha-dharma, the activities of the body and mind represent the apparent form of life. At the time of death, the functions of the body and mind cease immediately; that is, the apparent activities of the body and mind (of this present life) stop at that moment. Though the activities of the body and mind have passed, they are not completely non-existent. This is exactly [the meaning of] "karmic actions have passed, but their [karmic] forces still exist" (which can be considered as the potential for life). When the causes and conditions ripen, the karmic forces that formed in the past [and have not been exhausted] will give rise to new activities of the body and mind, which is the start of a new life.

Now, let us again look [at birth after death] using the fire analogy. When fire burns fuel it gives off heat and light, which is like the apparent activities of life. When the fuel is fully consumed, the fire that appears to give off light is no more. This is like the ending of a single lifespan; that is, death. It seems that the fire is out and the ashes have cooled. However, if new fuel becomes available at some later time and there are winds fanning the embers at the same time, then burnt ashes can give rise to a new fire, giving off heat and light. This analogy [represents the following factual situation.] That is, when the right causes and conditions come together, then again the karmic forces that formed in the past will give rise to a new life. The light from the new fire is not the same as that of the previous fire, but it has an inseparable relationship with the previous fire. Likewise, the next life is not the previous life, but the next life has a connection with the previous life's karmic actions. From the previous fire to the new fire, there may be a gap in time. Similarly, it is possible that there is a gap in time from the past life to the next life, [moreover] there can be a gap between two lives in terms of time and space. Nevertheless, this is just an analogy. If we look at it from the [underlying meaning of] Buddha-dharma's teachings, under the illusion-like, empty nature of dharmas, the karmic forces caused by past actions essentially cannot be said to have the aspects of time and space [when bringing about a new life]. As long as the [right] causes and conditions come together (for example, life

needs the union of the father's sperm and mother's egg etc.) then in a so-called other time and place, suddenly a new life arises [accordingly]; that is, the activities of the body and mind will have a new start.