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A Brief Introduction on the Law of Cause and Effect in Taoism Classic *Taishang Ganyingpian*

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Respected provost, Miss Deng, good morning. My name is Manyu Yang. Today I would like to share with you a brief introduction on the law of cause and effect in Taoism classic *Taishang Ganyingpian*.

The presentation is divided into four parts. The first part is the introduction, second to fourth parts are three basic principles of the law of cause and effect. Finally, I will sum up the presentation with a concise conclusion. Let us start with the introduction first.

1. Introduction

You must have heard of the expression ‘cause and effect’ in different scenarios. According to the oxford dictionary, it means ‘the principle of causation’.¹ People normally relate it to a visible phenomenon, for example, watching TV for a long time causes poor vision. Excessive intake of fat causes obesity. However, in Taoism classics, the law of cause and effect has special explanations. It is about how doing good or evil deeds affects a people’s fate.

It may be hard for us to believe immediately since when we trace back to our life experience, we may find many examples which seem to be against the law of cause and effect. Sometimes, we can be seriously questioned about things that happen around us. Why does that unscrupulous businessman earn good money through cheating on customers? Why does that cunning colleague get promoted through

¹ Oxford University Press, 2020, Lexico.com online dictionary,
https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/cause_and_effect, accessed 2 April 2021

playing tricks? Is it the society in which the honest man is destined to suffer losses? However, the success based on hurting others is temporary. If we observe carefully, it is not difficult to discover the examples of ‘you reap what you sow’.

Ancient Taoists wrote a book called *Taishang Ganyingpian Huibian*, it recorded hundreds of true stories which support the law of cause and effect. Simply like Newton’s Law of Motion says, ‘For every action, there is an equal but opposite reaction.’² Our minds contain energy, our thoughts contain energy, through people thinking and doing things, the energy goes around and would finally come back to who have sent them out. However, sometimes it is also important to learn some basic rules of the law of cause and effect. After knowing these principles, we will feel less questioned about the events that happened around us.

2. Reincarnation and the evidence

When speaking of the law of cause and effect, the topic of reincarnation can hardly be avoided. In the *Taishang Ganyingpian Huibian*, reincarnation is treated as an important and serious fact for people to think of. People who know about reincarnation understand that the law of cause and effect does not only apply to the present life, it also applies to the previous and future lives. Hence it suggests that people should not only enjoy the present moment, they should also consider what they do will affect their lives in the future.

According to *Taishang Ganyingpian Huibian*, every time life ends, the body decays and the soul leaves to find its next body. The soul may not always rebirth to be human beings, it can become an animal, a ghost. It can go up to heaven or descent into hell.³ Next destinations for souls are decided by their hearts —— are they kind

² Van Riper A. Bowdoin, *Science in Popular Culture: A Reference Guide* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002), 314.

³ *Taishang Ganyingpian Huibian* 太上感應篇彙編 [The assembled annotations of Taishang Ganyingpian] (Taipei: Huazang Jingzong Xuehui, 2013), 70

or evil during their lifetime. Hence, sometimes people cannot see bad people be punished by the law of cause and effect, is because they do not know things happen after death.

The phenomenon of reincarnation also caught the attention of modern scientists. Ian Stevenson is the pioneer in this field. He had taken forty years to study the subjects who claim to remember their previous lives and had achieved remarkable success. In 2000, he stated the number of cases which had been received is huge and over 2,500 of them had been investigated.⁴ The way he conducted research is prudent, including ‘independent verification’ of the statements reported by children, examined written documents, and repeated interviews,⁵ making his research results faithful. What is more, these cases had also shown that the experience of the previous life has connection with this life. For example, ‘a child who claimed to remember a life that ended in drowning would have a phobia of being immersed in water’.⁶

Not only that, in the researcher Antonia Mills’s studies, a young girl called Reena ‘identified herself as a married woman’, insisting on seeking contact with her previous-life husband and children. She then told her mother the colleague of her father who had come to their home is her previous-life husband. That man had had a wife who died years ago, leaving their young children behind. After she grown up, she had refused her marriage arrangement since she was still in love with her previous-life husband.⁷ These cases have shown that people’s feelings and intentions in this life, can be caused by their previous-life experience.

⁴ Stevenson Ian, The Phenomenon of Claimed Memories of Previous Lives: Possible Interpretations and Importance, *Medical Hypotheses*, vol.54, 04(2000), 652

⁵ Stevenson Ian, The Phenomenon of Claimed Memories of Previous Lives: Possible Interpretations and Importance, 652

⁶ Stevenson Ian, The Phenomenon of Claimed Memories of Previous Lives: Possible Interpretations and Importance, 653

⁷ Mills Antonia, Back from Death: Young Adults in Northern India Who as Children Were Said to Remember a Previous Life, with or without a Shift in Religion (Hindu to Moslem or Vice Versa), *Anthropology and Humanism*, vol.31, 12(2006), 145

3. It takes time to form effects from causes

After understanding that death is never the end, we can look at the second principle of the law of cause and effect is, it takes time to form the results since the causes had been made. Just like after a seed is planted, it will not become the fruits immediately. It needs sunlight, water, and time to grow up. Effects do as well. Hence sometimes people do not see corresponding retribution of behaviours, it is because the opportunity has not yet arrived. If people who do not understand this principle, attempting to do bad deeds to gain profits, the gains can never make up for the losses.

For example, being stingy to those who need help is not kind, but people may be unwilling to donate since they think that they will lose the money which they give away. However, according to the law of cause and effect, what you give to others will finally come back to you, hence being stingy leads to poverty. Nie Yuntai wrote a book called *Baofu fa*, the way of keeping fortunes, in the early years of the Republic of China. In this book, he had recorded some stories he experienced which show ‘what goes around comes around’.

One of these examples is a rich man called Zhou, he lived in Jiangxi and had been acquainted with Nie many years ago. One time, Nie saw Zhou came to his friend’s home in a great rage. It was because one of his managers respond to the call of the government, donated 500 liang silver which equals 11,000 pounds to Hunan province, to support the victims of the natural calamity that happened there. However, Zhou was very angry because he thought this manager gave away too much money. Although at that time, he was already a billionaire. He had also said that his secret of success is simply accumulating fortune and never give them away. He had died in his middle eighties, left 30 million liang silver, which equals 660 billion pounds to his sons. However, those fortunes were squandered by his sons very quickly after his death.⁸

This story has shown that it takes time for the cause to become the result. Zhou

⁸ Yuntai Nie 聶雲臺, *Baofu Fa* 保富法 [The Way of Keeping Fortunes], to see *Zhongguo Xiandai Sixiangshi Ziliao Jianbian* 中国现代思想史资料简编 [A Collection of the Modern Chinese Intellectual History] (Hangzhou: Zhejiang Renmin Press, 1982), vol.4, 758

was a stingy and heartless person, but he still accumulated a huge amount of fortune. This success is not caused by him being stingy, it is the result of the kind deeds he had done in his previous life. However, when he stopped acting kindly, though he seemed to be a fortunate person in this life. When the time has come, his business and property still cannot be kept, and the end of his family is tragic.

4. A small cause leads to a huge effect

The third principle for the law of cause and effect is that cause will finally grow and develop into a huge effect. Simply like planting an apple seed, after it grows up, people will harvest thousands of apples instead of only getting one apple for one seed. If people understand this principle, they will know even doing a little bad thing will cause unpredictable effects. Not to mention trade their morality for limited enjoyment.

Taishang Ganyingpian Huibian recorded a story of a prime minister called Li Linfu back in the Tang dynasty. Li was an insidious and cunning person, he had murdered and framed up a lot of loyal and upright officers to strengthen his power and obtain profits. He had enjoyed the prosperous fame and profits for a short period. However, as *Huibian* records, his retribution was horrifying.

When he about to fail, he saw a ghost with sharp teeth and claws. There was beast fur on its body, and its eyesight was very sharp. The ghost attacked Li, and a few minutes later people saw Li died with bleeding from the nose and mouth.....In the early years of Chunxi in the Nansong dynasty, a woman in Hanzhou got struck by lightning and died. There were red characters written beside her body, saying ‘Li Linfu was an unfaithful minister. He had murdered and framed up many kind and upright officers. His punishment is being a prostitute for three lives, being an ox for seven lives. After all these, he shall become an aquatic animal for infinite times.’⁹

Even though Li had been enjoying for a short time, what he had done completely against ethics. Although he had obtained what he wanted at that moment, he was

⁹ *Taishang Ganyingpian Huibian* 太上感應篇彙編, 434

unaware of the retribution waiting for him is way crueler than what he had done to those kind people. This is the example that shows how the small causes develop into huge effects.

5. Conclusion

To summarise, people who know about these three principles of the law of cause and effect can understand why sometimes we cannot see kind people be rewarded, and bad people be punished. First of all, the law of cause and effect is founded on the concept of reincarnation. The facts which people can observe are limited since we only know about the things happen in the present life. Reading classics is a good way to understand more about the reincarnation, and to analyse the cause and effect of things correctly. Secondly, the cause will not become the result immediately, it needs time to grow and mature. After the causes developed and effects formed, they are going to be more tremendous than the original causes. If we send out negative energy, it will come back to us multiplied. Therefore, we should be responsible for what we do and think, and practicing good deeds is always the way to make our lives better.

6. Bibliography

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