

Triratna Dharma Training Course for Mitras – Foundation Year Teachers' Notes

Part 4: Exploring Buddhist Practice – Ways of Thinking

Week 2 – Conditionality and Karma

Most of the questions are self-explanatory.

Question 3 is designed to make people think, and to bring out the fact that the niyamas aren't completely separate, but overlap and interact. If it any help here is my attempt at answering it.

A meteorite drops on Fred's car. (Physical/inorganic.)

To buy another car he takes a highly paid but stressful job. (Karmic cause.)

Due to stress his resistance drops and he gets a cold. (Psychological cause leading to biological effect.)

While ill he stops meditating, and gets out of the habit. (Biological cause conditioning a karmic action.)

His old irritability reappears, and he has a row with his partner. (Karmic effect.)

In a temper about the row, he walks into a low doorway, and knocks himself out. (Karmic effect.)

While out cold he has a vision of Avalokitesvara, who point out how stupid he is being. (Dharmic level intervention?)

He apologises to his partner and starts meditating again. (Karmic.)

Of course it's more complicated than that.

Week 3 – The Wheel of Life

Notes on the questions:

Question 1: Perhaps obviously, this points to the difference between 'hate types' and 'greed types.' Seeing the extent to which we lean towards one or other of these poles can be a valuable step forward in self-knowledge; so helping people to do a bit of self-examination here could be worthwhile. Here are some ideas about the characteristics of the two types:

Greed types:

- Create a pleasant environment for themselves
- Eat slowly, savouring their food
- In discussion, prioritise keeping harmony over getting at the truth
- When thinking about the day ahead, tend to focus on what might be enjoyable
- Are patient and placid, (as long as they aren't deprived of pleasure for too long)
- Tend to notice what they agree with in texts, and may be gullible
- Tend to notice what they like in people
- Feel content when there is nothing that needs doing, but may get lazy
- Find it easier to develop metta than wisdom

Hate types:

- Are in too much of a hurry to create a pleasant environment
- Eat quickly, to get on to the next thing
- In discussion, prioritise getting at the truth over keeping harmony
- When thinking about the day ahead, tend to focus on the unpleasant things that might happen
- Tend to be impatient and irritated by obstacles
- Tend to notice what they disagree with in texts, and may be sceptical
- Tend to notice what they don't like in people
- Feel discontented when there is nothing that needs doing, wanting a challenge
- Find it easier to develop wisdom than metta

Obviously that's a caricature, and it's much more complex than that. You will no doubt have your own ideas, but the above may help some people to get a discussion going.

Question 4: We might need to bring out here that spending time in the god realms – say by enjoying the dhyanas, or the arts – is no bad thing, and can be a valuable part of our path, as long as we don't get too attached to 'blissful' states, or see this as the purpose of the spiritual life. Some people whose experience of life has been

very unpleasant no doubt benefit a great deal from a few visits to the god realms, and perhaps we shouldn't discourage them from getting pleasure say from meditation, even if this takes a rather self-indulgent, bliss-bunny form for a while. Question 5: The idea behind this question is to get people to connect with just how intense our vedanas can be, and therefore why it can be so hard not to react to them. We might get people to think about what it feels like when, for example, we are sexually or romantically attracted to someone; when someone criticises or blames us harshly; when we experience loss or disappointment; when we are embarrassed or shamed; when we are anxious or frightened; and so on.

Question 6: We might be able to bring out here that we usually have to face down some unpleasant vedanas for a while to be creative, but in the longer term the results feel highly positive. (The path starts with duhkka.)

Week 4 – Spiritual Growth and Creative Conditionality

How to talk about 'The Unconditioned'?:

In this text and in other parts of this 'Wisdom' section, Sangharakshita uses terms like 'The Unconditioned' as an important part of his exposition, saying things like:

“So faith in the Buddhist sense means the placing of one's heart on the Unconditioned, on the Absolute, rather than on the conditioned.”

or

“...piercing through the unsatisfactoriness of the conditioned, you see the perfectly satisfying nature of the Unconditioned.”

Some people will find it hard to relate to this language – after all, how do we imagine or get our head round something as vague-sounding as 'The Unconditioned'? Some people may even react to these terms as having theistic overtones.

However Sangharakshita has been clear that we need to have an idea of something completely beyond our present understanding and experience. For example in 'The Survey' p36 he says:

“Much less can we agree that someone who refuses to accept the existence of a transcendental Principle, whether in the Buddhistic sense or some other way, can ever hope to understand a doctrine whose sole concern is with the realization of such a Principle. It may even be said that a student belonging to a non-Buddhist tradition which affirms the existence of a spiritual world beyond the physical senses and the mind, in however crude and exclusive a form...has sometimes a better chance of understanding the Dharma than a conscientiously impartial person who has no belief in the reality of such a world.”

One approach to dealing with this with sceptical mitras might be to say something like:

“Using meaningless words like ‘The Unconditioned’ or ‘The Transcendental’ is a way of pointing to something we can’t understand rationally, which is beyond our present experience. Yes, there is a theoretical danger that we will reify ‘The Transcendental’ into God, but there is a much greater danger that we will try to reduce the Dharma to something that can be contained within a basically nihilistic 19th Century Rationalist Materialism, which is the worldview most of us have been indoctrinated with.”

Terms like ‘The Unconditioned’ remind us that there is something beyond – which we can only get glimpses of through intuition – while leaving its nature completely undefined, as it needs to be to avoid eternalism. However some Order members have a problem with this language. If that is you, in case anyone picks up on this aspect and wants to go into it, you might need to think about how you can present this aspect of Sangharakshita’s approach to the Dharma, but without being dishonest to yourself.

Suggestions about specific questions

Question 1: Some people – usually the most able and successful – don’t like the idea that they might be in any way ‘unhappy’, as they associate this with being a ‘loser’. Such folk will tend to say that they were happy before they started practising, but that they wanted ‘something more’. They will tend to see the spiritual life as a positive process of looking for greater fulfilment, rather than a negative process of escaping from unhappiness. Fair enough, but they can probably be helped to see that this wanting ‘something more’ is itself a form of dissatisfaction – if they were perfectly satisfied, they wouldn’t want anything more. However for them it might be easier to think of the ‘voice’ as whispering ‘there’s something more’, rather than ‘you’re not really happy’.

Question 3: The usual list of things that increase people’s shraddha might include meditation, retreats, reading and studying the Dharma, contact with fellow Buddhists, and spiritual friendship. If the first step on the path is shraddha, perhaps the most important aspect of practice is to do the things that nurture it! However the question is also getting at a more general point. Many people observe that they experience more shraddha when they are in a good mental state, while negative states and unethical living tend to erode shraddha and encourage sceptical doubt. The point might be drawn out that shraddha is an integral part of positive mental and emotional states – it is a feature of being spiritually healthy – and that it is therefore a sort of clear-seeing in its own right, like a prefiguration of insight. So our sceptical doubt is a form of distorted vision arising from negative mental states, not the rational clarity that some people think!

Question 7: There may be no ‘right’ answer to this question. But how about:

Ethics: Dukkha, faith, joy;

Meditation: Rapture, calm, bliss, samadhi;

Wisdom: All the rest from 'Knowledge and Vision' onwards.

Week 5 – The Conditioned and the Unconditioned

Comments on the questions

Question 1: This is how Sangharakshita describes The Unconditioned on page 2 paragraph 3, under the heading 'The Unconditioned.' We might bring out the point that The Unconditioned is not just 'inapprehensible' – ie inconceivable – it is also a 'plenitude'; ie it is not a blank emptiness or a merely abstract principle, but it is "a radiant spiritual reality" (Sangharakshita) full of positive qualities.

Question 2: Other examples I can think of include the following. No doubt you can think of more – the list is almost endless:

- Apparent pleasures that cause suffering for other beings
- Enjoying wealth whose creation involved exploiting others
- Using products produced by people working in harsh conditions, eg in 'developing' countries
- Using, consuming, or owning things whose production or use damages the environment – ie just about anything we buy

Apparent pleasures that cause anxiety because they may be taken away:

- Wealth
- Power
- Status
- Fame
- Health
- Just about all sensory pleasures!

Apparent pleasures that bind us to something that causes suffering:

- Drug and alcohol use
- 'Neurotic' sexual relationships
- Consumer lifestyles, which require us to work constantly and subject ourselves to stress to earn money

Question 4: The aim of this question is: (a) to bring out that facing up the inevitable element of suffering in life helps us be happy and fulfilled – trying to run away from it or distract ourselves just makes it worse, whereas when we face it isn't usually that bad;

and (b) to bring out that seeing that conditioned things can't give us lasting satisfaction allows us to look for happiness where it can actually be found, in spiritual development, in having a rich inner world and experiencing positive mental and emotional states; otherwise we're constantly looking for happiness where it can't be found, in outer things, which over time leads to deep unhappiness.

Question 5: The positive side of impermanence is growth and transformation. If everything were fixed and permanent, no development would be possible. Because of transience, new phenomena are constantly coming into existence, as well as going out of existence. We tend to focus on the negative aspect of impermanence because of our egocentric grasping, but if we moved beyond this we would see impermanence as positive.

Question 6: The positive side of anatman is interconnectedness. Nothing has self nature because everything is inextricably linked to everything else. Again, we can tend to see anatman as negative because of our egotism. If we really saw our interconnectedness with all other phenomena we would lose our sense of isolation, and our sense of being in conflict with other people and the world; our interactions with other beings would be characterised by metta and a sense of solidarity.

Question 7: The aim of this question is to bring out (a) that moving from the conditioned to The Unconditioned is not an escape into quietism or selfish indifference; and (b) that wisdom and compassion are two sides of the same coin.

This question could also serve as a link to the next session, which deals with the Bodhicitta.

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Feedback on the Dharma Training Course

Once you've finished the module, please consider leaving feedback on the DTC on-line forum – a dedicated place for Mitra group leaders to make comments, suggestions, and corrections to the new course. This will have two big benefits:

1. It collects ideas and information needed to improve the course over time
2. It will also be a place where group leaders can find out how others have led or approached a particular module, share good ideas, and so on.

Each group leader needs to get their own username and password to access the forum. If you are a Mitra group leader and would like to participate, please e-mail Vajrashura (who has kindly set up the forum) and he'll set up an account for you, usually within a day or two. His e-mail is: vajrashura@gmail.com, and the URL of the forum is: www.dublinbuddhistcentre.org/DTCforum.