

Triratna Dharma Training Course for Mitras

Year Two – Teachers' Notes

Module 2: The Nature of Existence 1 – Conditionality *Prepared by Dhīvan and Sāgaraghoṣā*

Introduction

The following notes consist of two parts:

Part 1: Chapter-by-Chapter notes – a chapter-by-chapter (i.e. week-by-week) discussion of themes, together with some discussion on the questions provided in the book; reflections, meditations or experiential activities are also provided for each chapter. These can be used at the beginning of sessions to help mitras turn their minds to the topic.

Part 2: Conditionality and Sangharakshita's Teaching – a short discussion of the relationship of the book to Sangharakshita's teachings.

As a preliminary to each session, you might like to chant with the group:

imasmiṃ sati idaṃ hoti,

imass'uppādā idaṃ uppajjati;

imasmiṃ asati idaṃ na hoti,

imassa nirodhā idaṃ nirujjhati.

Part 1: Chapter-by-Chapter Notes

Chapter 1: The Principle of Conditionality

The aim of this week's study is to introduce Mitras to the idea of conditionality. As well as giving them the Buddha's teaching on conditionality in terms of ideas and concepts, we also show how it can be relevant to people's lives by exploring a practical example.

Experiential activity

You can illustrate how conditions can change mind-states by doing a simple experiential exercise such as the following:

1. Starting by settling into becoming more relaxed and alert.
2. Spending a minute or two noticing your current mental state however it is.
3. Then choosing someone you appreciate and spending a few minutes reflecting on their positive qualities.
4. Now spending a minute or so noticing your mental state. Has it changed?

Notes on questions

1. Draw a diagram to show which conditions lead you to feel more stressed and the relationships between them. Which of those conditions can you most easily change?

Note: You might like to explore the conditions leading to more stress interactively using a flip chart. Some useful points to bring out when discussing such a diagram include:

- There are many factors contributing to stress.
- The factors mutually reinforce each other; for example, insomnia leads to stress.
- Stress reinforces insomnia.
- The contributing factors interact; for example, being unwell can lead to insomnia, so they tend to form a web of conditions.
- So this means that if you can alleviate any one factor that will tend to alleviate all the others.

You may want to point out that sometimes certain factors are stressful because of the way that we think about them. For example, 'having too much to do' is a

judgment, and more accurately might be expressed as ‘finding it hard to fit in all you want to do’. Of course, this is longer and harder to fit on a diagram, but it makes it clearer that there is an element of choice in how much we do. With a different state of mind, the same number of things to do may just be experienced as having a rich and varied life.

2. Reflect on some positive change you have made in your life. It might be something quite mundane, such as learning to drive a car, or some change in behaviour such as starting to meditate regularly. Draw a diagram to show the conditions that contributed to that positive change. Draw arrows to show the relationships between those conditions.
3. Reflect on some positive change you would like to make and the conditions that would contribute to making that change. Draw a diagram to show the relationship between these conditions. Which of the conditions is it easiest for you to bring into being or cultivate more?

There is a danger when looking at changes we want to make in our lives that we become discouraged about what is wrong with ourselves at the moment. So the aim of questions 2 and 3 is to focus on a positive change in order to build confidence in making further changes in the future.

Chapter 2: The Scope of Conditionality

This chapter involves a long discussion of Sangharakshita’s teaching of the reactive and creative mind. His lecture on this topic can be found reprinted in *Buddha Mind*, published by Windhorse:

<http://tinyurl.com/kk53vn>

Free transcript: <http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/texts/read?num=031>

The questions at the end of the chapter focus mainly on personal responses to the various topics discussed in the study materials.

Experiential activity

1. Here is a possible activity to explore the difference between a mind based on craving and one based on generosity:
2. Starting by taking up a meditation posture and tuning into your current experience – thoughts, emotions and bodily sensations.
3. Allowing your attention to settle on the sensations of breathing for a few minutes.

4. Now, reflecting on something you want, turning it over in your mind and getting a sense of what is desirable about it.
5. Noticing what craving feels like.
6. Now, remembering a time when you were generous, perhaps giving money or perhaps giving your time to help or listen to someone. As best you can, taking yourself back to that time: where you were and what you did.
7. Noticing what generosity feels like.
8. What is the difference in feeling tone between craving and generosity?

Notes on questions

1. Sāriputta was clearly very excited by what he heard about the Dharma from Assaji, more so than by anything he had heard from other teachers. Is there any aspect of the Dharma that particularly excites you?
2. What are the characteristics of the reactive mind and what are the characteristics of the creative mind?

Sangharakshita gives the characteristics of the reactive mind as being mechanical, predictable, repetitive, habitual, pessimistic, unaware and asleep. He says that the creative mind is spontaneous, optimistic, free, original, productive, emotionally positive, connected with others, aware and alive. He also talks about the reactive mind being conditioned and the creative mind unconditioned, and by this he means that the conditioned mind is limited by external conditions, whereas the creative mind has choice.

3. The second of the four noble truths teaches that craving is the origin of *dukkha*. How do you experience craving in your life? What conditions lead you to experience more craving? You may like to draw a diagram to show them and the relationships between these conditions.

The Noble Eightfold Path can be regarded as a web of conditions that leads to the ceasing of the *dukkha* caused by craving. It might be interesting to explore the connections between the various limbs of the path in order to investigate how the limbs are interconnected.

4. Reflect on what conditions might help you maintain a creative mind in the face of the tendency towards craving. Does meditation help? Draw a diagram to show how these conditions work. How do they compare to the noble eightfold path?
5. Write down some ways of completing the following sentence, ‘I am a person who ...’ Are you always that way? With everyone? Everywhere? To the same degree?

Notice how it feels when you notice that something you have said about yourself is not always true.

Even more potent than questioning thoughts is to realise that thoughts are simply mental events and so step back from being so involved in them. This is explored in Chapter 8.

Chapter 3: The Twelve Links of Dependent-arising

This chapter provides two ways of interpreting the 12 *nidānas*: the three-life interpretation and a more present-moment psychological interpretation. The first of these interpretations is the one usually given by Sangharakshita and it is a useful spur to a discussion of rebirth. Such a discussion might be useful as a way to confront students' materialistic views (if they have them), of the sort that are prevalent in our society. However, the three-life interpretation was developed several centuries after the Buddha lived. The more psychological interpretation we give is based on the teachings about the *nidānas* given in the Pāli discourses, which present the twelve *nidānas* as bases for reflection. This second interpretation may well be more useful to Mitras in thinking about their own practice.

Experiential activity

It is possible to explore habitual ways of reacting to unpleasant feeling. You might want to do this meditation without encouraging people to take up meditation postures in order to make it more likely that they will experience some discomfort! You may want to emphasise that the point of this activity is not to try to have a focused mind, but to explore what the mind tends to do.

1. Starting by tuning into experience, particularly bodily sensations, perhaps starting with the sensations of contact with the chair and floor.
2. Then letting your attention move to any areas of discomfort. If you are not experiencing any discomfort then you may like to recollect an unpleasant event, focusing on the unpleasant event and noticing what happens in the mind.
3. Does the mind go wandering off onto something pleasanter?
4. Does the mind start trying to find ways to make the unpleasant sensation or event go away?
5. Now bringing the mind back to the bodily sensations and bringing a kindly, curious awareness to whatever is happening there. As much as possible, allowing the sensations to be as they are without trying to change them. Does this feel any different to before?

Notes on questions

1. What is your response to the three-life interpretation of the twelve nidānas? In what ways do you think it might be helpful for modern westerners?
2. Describe some specific examples of how ignorance can give rise to formations. For example a belief that you always like chocolate might lead you to habitually eat it, even when you don't really want it.
3. Are there any ways in which you already limit contact in order to guard the gates of the senses? Are there any further ways in which it might be useful to do so?
4. Spend five minutes looking for pleasant feeling in your experience, five minutes looking for unpleasant feeling and five minutes looking for neutral feeling. Which of these is easiest to find? Which is hardest?

You could do this question within the class with people in pairs taking turns to describe experiences that are pleasant, unpleasant and neutral. If you do it in this way, you will probably want to give a much shorter time to it than five minutes to each person and each type of feeling.

5. Reflect on some way in which your sense of identity has changed in your life. What conditions contributed towards this change?
6. How would you like to change your sense of identity in the future? How might you go about it?

Chapter 4: The Spiral Path

The topic which caused most discussion in Sagaraghosa's group was how dukkha gives rise to faith. One way to explore this question is to ask what brought people to Buddhism. Often the reasons can involve developing values and so may seem simply positive. However these values only seemed important because they were not fully present and there was therefore some dissatisfaction.

Reflection

The aim of this reflection is to cultivate faith. Progress is not uniform, so there may need to be some sensitivity if someone is having a bad day, and encouragement to take a broader view.

1. Sitting in a way that is relaxed and alert.
2. Taking a few moments to experience current experience: thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations.

3. Recollecting why you started to follow the Buddhist path and the concerns that you had at that time.
4. Now, for a few minutes, reflecting on any skills you have developed in meditation and in your practice and how these have been helpful in bringing about positive changes overall.
5. Now reflecting for a few minutes on any positive changes you have noticed in friends in the spiritual life.
6. Then taking a few minutes to be present with your experience once again.

Notes on questions

1. Draw a diagram of a similar form to the one in chapter 1 for stress to show which conditions help you to feel happier and more contented. Which of these conditions are easiest for you to influence?
2. Describe your experience of faith based on thinking, faith based on an emotional response and volitional faith. Has the balance changed over time?

Belief can involve accepting as true on authority something that one can never verify, whereas faith in Buddhism is not contrary to reason – or even beyond reason. Faith includes both reason and emotions. Subhuti gives a full account of faith in his talk in the *Mind and Mental Events* series.

<http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/series/details?ser=X38>

A very approachable and moving discussion of faith is given by Sharon Salzberg in her book, *Faith*.

<http://tinyurl.com/6aorym7>

3. What is the difference between faith and beliefs?
4. What conditions started you on your spiritual quest? What conditions have been helpful to you as you have gone deeper?
5. In your experience, what are the conditions that aid concentration in meditation?
6. Are there any things that you used to crave but do so no longer as you have realised that they are not worth the effort of striving to obtain them?

Chapter 5: Karma, Conditionality and Ethics

Reflection

This reflection aims to give a taste of the difference between unskillful and skillful mental states, in particular anger and appreciation. It could be done with other mental states too, such as confusion vs. clarity or anxiety vs. contentment.

1. Sitting in a way that is relaxed and has dignity.
2. Starting by becoming aware of thoughts, emotions and bodily sensations.
3. Now bringing to mind some event that has led you to feel anger, irritation or frustration. Turning the circumstances of that event over in your mind for a few moments.
4. Then taking your attention to how that emotion feels in your body.
5. Now bringing your mind to some kind deed someone has done which you appreciated, taking time to recollect the circumstances and remembering as much as possible the details of the experience.
6. Then taking your attention to how that emotion feels in your body.
7. How do the two different states compare?

Notes on questions

1. Why do you think that skillful actions give rise to pleasant experiences and unskillful actions to unpleasant experiences? Have you ever seen this process happening in your own experience?
2. The word 'karma' is used with different meanings in Buddhism and in popular culture. What are the different ways it is used and how are they related?

'Karma' can be used in popular culture to mean fate or destiny following as effect from cause. But this is not the meaning of karma in Buddhism.

3. We can explore further the extent to which our lives are determined by what we do. Think of something in your life over which you feel that you have control; for example, where you go on holiday, or on how you do your job, or how you spend your free time. Now draw a diagram (as in chapter 1) to show all the factors that influence your decisions and what happens. Do you have complete control?

Now choose something over which you feel you have no control, for example, climate change or some aspect of your job. Again, draw a diagram to show all the factors that contribute. Do you have influence over any of them?

Is there anything in your life over which you have complete control? Is there anything over which you have no influence?

4. The 4th c. BCE Greek philosopher Aristotle also recommended the cultivation of virtues as habits, as part of cultivating the best and happiest kind of life. In a work on ethics he writes:

Moral goodness is the result of habit... The moral virtues are engendered in us neither by nor contrary to nature; we are constituted by nature to receive them, but their full development in us is due to habit... we acquire the virtues by first exercising them, just as happens in the arts. Anything we have to learn to do we learn by the actual doing of it: people become builders by building and instrumentalists by playing instruments. Similarly we become just by performing just acts; self-controlled by performing self-controlled acts; brave by performing brave ones.

(Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II, trans. J.A.K. Thompson, rev. Hugh Tredennick, Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1976, pp.91–2).

According to Aristotle, justice, self-control, wisdom and courage are the four ‘cardinal virtues’. What do you think might be Buddhist ‘cardinal virtues’? Reflect on one virtue that you would like to develop. What small acts could you do to make this virtue a habit, and thus a part of you?

According to the Abhidharma tradition discussed in *Know Your Mind*, the eleven positive mental events are confidence-trust (or faith) (*śraddhā*), self-respect (or shame) (*hrī*), decorum (or respect for wise opinion) (*apatrapya*), non-attachment (*alobha*), non-hatred (*adveṣa*), non-deludedness (*amoha*), diligence (or energy in the pursuit of the good) (*virya*), alertness (or tranquility) (*praśrabdhi*), concern (or non-heedlessness) (*apramāda*), equanimity (*upekṣā*) and non-violence (*avihiṃsa*). You may wish to mention these, although there are, of course, other Buddhist virtues, such as compassion and fearlessness.

Chapter 6: Conditionality as Middle Way

One obvious question is how the noble eightfold path is a middle way between indulgence and self-mortification, as the Buddha taught in his first sermon. One way to go about exploring this is to look at examples of the middle way, such as attitudes to food and money, as explored in the questions after this week’s study. A middle way approach to food, for example, would involve being mindful about what you eat (right mindfulness), being vegetarian (right action), and being content rather than indulging in cravings (right intention/emotion). You could discuss how other limbs of the path would be relevant too. Historically, what the Buddha meant was probably that the last factor of the Eightfold Path, right *samādhi*, is the middle way between the attitude of a

householder and the attitude of a renunciate to the path that leads to happiness, so a discussion of meditation would be particularly relevant. The questions aim to explore what eternalism, nihilism and the middle way might look like in practice.

Reflection

It is easy simply to focus on the extremes of indulgence and self-mortification. This reflection aims to give a taste of the middle way between the two, a life that is based on values.

1. Sitting in a way that embodies wisdom and compassion, at least as much as you can.
2. And bringing compassion and understanding to whatever you are experiencing right now: allowing it to be there.
3. Then settling your attention on the sensations of breathing for a minute or so.
4. Bringing to mind a moment that felt more than usually positive or meaningful for you – perhaps you felt contented, in tune with the world, more fully alive and energetic:

Remembering the place – the sights, smells and sounds.

And how you were feeling.

5. If you were to live on the basis of that:

How might you think? What would you say was important?

What would be your attitude towards life and other people?

What would it seem important to do?

Is there any symbol or image that might help you to remember?

Notes on questions

1. How different do you think the ordinary household lifestyle of a contemporary westerner might be from someone of the Buddha's time and place? Can you think of contemporary kinds of lifestyle that are polarized rejections of ordinary life? How do you envisage a contemporary Buddhist lifestyle that is a middle way between ordinary life and a rejection of it?
2. What do indulgent and self-mortifying attitudes towards food look like in our culture? Which one of them do you tend towards? What would be a middle way?

An indulgent attitude towards food might involve eating for pleasure when you are not hungry or seeking out particularly tasty foods. A self-mortifying attitude is likely to involve dieting to lose weight when it is not really necessary, or following a dietary fad. Suggestions about a middle way might well include eating

when you are hungry and stopping eating when you are full; taking notice of the provenance of what you eat and ensuring that it is vegetarian, fair trade and perhaps organic; and noticing any cravings and dislikes and working towards being content with whatever is available.

3. Do you tend towards eternalism or annihilationism? How do you think that someone's views on whether or not we exist after death affect how they will live their life?

Most of us are not consistent about being eternalistic or nihilistic, so our tendencies regarding money might be different than those towards food. The middle way concerning money is likely to involve generosity and taking reasonable steps to provide for the future of yourself and others, while spending in a way that supports your values.

Chapter 7: The Nature of Existence

Meditation

The most obvious meditation to lead here is one that involves observing thoughts and the changes in experience, rather than being entangled in them. The following suggestions may help.

1. Starting by bringing awareness to sounds and noticing how little effort it takes to hear them.

Then bringing that same kind of attention to thoughts and allowing the thoughts to come and go in the same way that sounds come and go.

2. Using metaphors, such as watching clouds come and go in the sky, imagining sitting by a stream and placing thoughts on leaves that are passing by, standing behind a waterfall of thoughts, listening to thoughts like listening to the radio, watching thoughts as if they are on a cinema screen.
3. Bringing particular attention to the way that thoughts and emotions interact, for example a feeling of anxiety bringing about anxious thoughts as well as dwelling on anxious thoughts increasing the feeling of anxiety.

Notes on questions

1. To what extent do you notice that your experience is constantly changing? Do you tend to notice more the arising or the passing away of what you experience? Is this different for pleasant and unpleasant experiences?

2. The Scottish philosopher, David Hume (1711–76), is known for a ‘bundle theory’ of the self that is very similar to the teaching of Buddhism:

When I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception. When my perceptions are removed for any time, as by sound sleep; so long am I insensible of myself, and may truly be said not to exist. And were all my perceptions removed by death, and could I neither think, nor feel, nor see, nor love, nor hate after the dissolution of my body, I should be entirely annihilated, nor do I conceive what is farther requisite to make me a perfect non-entity... man is a bundle or collection of different perceptions which succeed one another with an inconceivable rapidity and are in perpetual flux and movement.

(David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book 1, part 4, section 6).

Do you agree with David Hume? When you look into your experience, what do you find?

3. Try observing your own mind thinking. Is it possible to observe thoughts arising, and leading to other thoughts through a process of association? Is this process conscious or unconscious or something else? Is it you thinking, or is thinking just happening of its own accord?

You may wish to explore this practically during the session. For example, you might like to encourage Mitras to observe their thoughts as if they were a photographer waiting to see a wild animal emerge from the undergrowth. When thoughts appear, they could notice whether they are located in front of them, behind them, to one side or within. Are they aware of a sort of observing self or awareness that watches the thoughts?

Chapter 8: Emptiness and Interdependence

Reflection

This reflection brings together ideas of the importance of conditions and how these conditions bring about changes in the self.

1. Sitting in a way that is upright, poised and relaxed.
2. Acknowledging whatever you are experiencing now: thoughts, feelings and sensations.
3. Now reflecting on the conditions that have led you to this point in your practice:

Thanking yourself in the past for the efforts you made then.

Appreciating the people who have helped you.

And the other conditions which have given you the opportunity to pursue your practice.

4. Now imagining yourself in the future looking back on yourself now:

Reflecting on how yourself in the future will have benefitted from the efforts you are making now.

Picturing yourself then having developed more wisdom and compassion and other qualities you are moving towards.

Imagining yourself in the future thanking yourself now for the efforts you are making.

Imagining yourself in the future being grateful for the conditions you are putting in place now that are helping you to develop.

Notes on questions

1. What might it mean to see your thoughts and emotions as *śūnya*, empty? How would that affect your relationship to them? How might you come to see them more in this way?

Here are a couple of ideas to try for stepping back from thoughts and seeing them more as mental events.

- Bring to mind a thought that you are tending to obsess about and thinking it for a few seconds. For example, 'I am not good enough'. What does that feel like?

Now turning over in your mind several times, 'I am having the thought that...', for example, 'I am having the thought that I am not good enough.' What does that feel like?

Now turning over in your mind several times, 'I am noticing that I am having the thought that...', for example, 'I am noticing that I am having the thought that I am not good enough.' What does that feel like?

A similar sequence can be used for emotions.

- Try singing a troubling thought to yourself to the tune of Happy Birthday.

People usually experience themselves as progressively stepping back from their thoughts when they do the first exercise and the second helps to stop them from being taken so seriously. This increased distance can help in

making choices on how to act in accordance with values rather than being caught up in emotions.

2. Let us explore ways in which seeing interdependence might be useful. In what ways might it be helpful to realise how you are dependent on others? In what ways might it be helpful to realise your influence on others? How might you encourage yourself to realise interdependence in these helpful ways?
3. Miguel is the 10 year-old son of a small-scale independent coffee grower in a poor South American country, and he would like to work with computers when he grows up. Thinking about interconnectedness in a practical sense, what is our connection with Miguel, and what might be our ethical responsibilities towards him?

Part 2: Conditionality and Sangharakshita's Teaching

The following notes are designed to indicate the relationship of our book to Sangharakshita's teachings, as given in his books and lectures. Much more could be written, but the point here is simply that we thought it might be advantageous for teachers of the *Dharma Training Course for Mitras* to know how our book fits in with Sangharakshita's doctrinal teachings, so they can clarify any questions that students might raise.

Sangharakshita came to most of his conclusions about what he generally calls 'conditioned co-production' by 1949 (as evident in his booklet *Buddhism as Philosophy and Religion*), and has not seen any reason to change his mind since.

Buddhism as Philosophy and Religion (transcript): <http://tinyurl.com/nan338>

This becomes clear from reading and listening to his teachings on conditionality, as what he says and writes are firmly established on certain repeated themes. It is a clear and unambiguous approach to interpreting the central teaching of the Buddha and the Buddhist tradition. It is admirably summarized in Subhuti, *Sangharakshita: A New Voice in the Buddhist Tradition*, pp.61–71.

There are three aspects of Sangharakshita's teaching on conditioned co-production that we have explicitly preserved and explained in our book, because they are so important:

1. Paṭicca-samuppāda is a transcendental principle, and should not be confused with exemplifications and applications of this principle such as the twelve nidānas and the four noble truths.
2. Paṭicca-samuppāda applies to the whole of conditioned existence, that is, to samsara and to the path to nirvana.
3. An important application of paṭicca-samuppāda is that of the 'positive nidānas' leading from dukkha to awakening, as taught in several versions by the Buddha, but not given much attention in the Buddhist tradition.

However, there are two aspects of Sangharakshita's teaching on conditioned co-production that we have not preserved and explained in exactly the way that Sangharakshita has taught. It would not have been appropriate in a book offered as study materials at Mitra level to present scholarly arguments concerning the interpretation of doctrine, so our differences of approach are implicit. To be explicit here, however, there are two presentational changes we have made:

1. Sangharakshita generally understands the twelve nidānas of paṭicca-samuppāda as applying over three lifetimes as an explanation of the rebirth process according to karma. This interpretation of the twelve nidānas belongs to the later Abhidharma

traditions of the Buddhist tradition, and is not found in the Pali sources. Therefore, alongside this Abhidharma version of the twelve nidānas we have introduced a more experiential interpretation based on the suttas.

2. Sangharakshita's approach to conditionality includes the teaching that there are two modes of operation of paṭicca-samuppāda, one cyclical and one progressive. Sangharakshita derives this teaching from a paper by Beni Barua, who derives it from his interpretation of the Culavedalla Sutta. But a close reading of the Culavedalla Sutta suggests that Barua's scholarship is not reliable. The Buddha did not appear to distinguish two modes of paṭicca-samuppāda. Sāgaramati's paper in *The Western Buddhist Review*, Vol.5, explores this:

Dharmacārī Sāgaramati, *The Strange Case of the Beni Barua and the Therī Dhammadinnā*, 2010:

<http://www.westernbuddhistreview.com/vol5/index.html>

However, we have used Sangharakshita's distinction of reactive and creative mind instead to explore the two ways in which conditionality operates in experience.

As a result of this, our presentation of conditionality is slightly different from the usual one found in Triratna Buddhism. We present the 'spiral path' not in terms of the 'progressive mode' of conditionality, but simply as a series of factors that exemplify the unfolding of the creative mind.

Our presentation of conditionality also involves us in a discussion of karma, and it might have seemed appropriate to include a full discussion of Sangharakshita's teaching of the five niyamas. However, the teaching of the five niyamas is not found in the Pali canon, but is based on later commentarial tradition. Sangharakshita's ideas about the niyamas are also very much his own ideas. Since our book is designed primarily as a guide to the Buddha's teaching, it would have been difficult to relate Sangharakshita's ideas about the niyamas to early Buddhist doctrine. Hence the list of five niyamas just gets a quick mention in our book, with some pointers for students to explore further if they wish.