

Triratna Dharma Training Course for Mitras – Foundation Year

Part 4: Exploring Buddhist Practice – Wisdom

Week 4: Spiritual Growth and Creative Conditionality

Introduction – reactive and creative conditionality

In the last session we saw that reactive and creative ways of dealing with life can be symbolised by the Wheel of Life on the one hand, and the Spiral Path on the other. We also saw that the ‘gap’, or ‘point of freedom’ between feeling and craving in the outermost circle of the Wheel is the point where we can stop the reactive cycles, and begin to set up the positive train of events symbolised by the Spiral. The Wheel and the Spiral can be imagined visually as a circle lying in the horizontal plane with a spiral joined to it, which instead of revolving endlessly at the same level, leads upwards to ever greater heights.

In the following text Sangharakshita looks at the process of creative conditionality – which here he calls ‘progressive’. To do this he uses the formulation of the twelve positive nidānas, to contrast with the twelve reactive nidānas of the Wheel of Life. The teaching of the twelve positive nidānas is an important part of Triratna’s approach to the Dharma, which Sangharakshita has emphasised because it shows the path as a positive process of growth, rather than as a negative process of suppressing unskillful states, which can be the impression given by some interpretations of the Pali Canon.

The Spiral Path

(Text condensed from ‘What is the Dharma?’ by Sangharakshita, Chapter 7)

As we have already seen, the law of conditionality functions in two ways, one ‘cyclical’ and the other ‘progressive’. Spiritual development takes place by the progressive mode of conditionality. Just as out of the bud grows the flower, and out of the flower the fruit, so out of one spiritual experience there grows another, and out of that yet another, each one higher, more refined, more beautiful, a little nearer to nirvana. All versions of the Buddhist path – the Noble Eightfold Path, the six pāramitās, and so on – are spiral paths, because they are all based upon the progressive type of conditionality. The concern of Buddhist practice is to break the endless cycle of action and reaction illustrated by the process of conditioned co-production on the Wheel of Life, and to set this process of progressive conditionality in motion. But where does this spiral path begin? It begins at the crucial point of our experience of vedanā, the feelings that befall us in the course of life.

The Stages of the Spiral Path

Unsatisfactoriness

Some of the feelings we experience are pleasant, some are painful, and some are just neutral. And our reactions to them are usually pretty automatic. We want to grasp the pleasant experiences and escape from the unpleasant ones. We can't cling on to a pleasant experience forever, it's invariably interrupted, and that usually causes us pain too. So we oscillate between pleasure and pain, and in this way the Wheel of Life continues to revolve. Fundamentally this is unsatisfactory. Yes, there are pleasant experiences. But there is nothing which is deeply and permanently satisfactory. This is the sense in which Buddhism says that life is 'suffering'. The Sanskrit word being translated as 'suffering' is *duḥkha*, 'ill-fitting': the sort of discomfort that arises when things don't work or fit together properly, the jarring quality that we experience in the course of our everyday life in this world.

We all know that things are never one hundred per cent right. There's always something that goes wrong. Nothing quite lives up to our expectations – at least for long. And this is what is meant by *duḥkha*, unsatisfactoriness or suffering. Once one has become sufficiently aware of this, eventually one starts becoming dissatisfied. One may have tried all sorts of things: one may have sought worldly success, or pleasure, or comfort and luxury, or learning. But in the end they are all unsatisfactory. It's not that you're actually experiencing pain all the time, but you're not really happy. You feel a vague discomfort; you can't settle down, you don't feel that you belong. It is a common experience that, in the words of the Bible, 'here we have no abiding city'. It is as though right in the middle of one's heart there is a terrible empty space.

Analysis of the problem of suffering produces two widely divergent views. Most of us take the attitude, consciously or unconsciously, that happiness must consist in the full satisfaction of our desires, and suffering is the opposite. But the Buddha came to a different conclusion. Whatever we enjoy cannot last. So our suffering cannot be avoided through the satisfaction of desire. That solution to the problem is really no solution at all. Many of us, sooner or later, have an inkling of this. Of course, we do our best to ignore it. We try to convince ourselves that we must be happy, because we've got all the things that are supposed to make people happy. But a whisper from deep within our heart keeps on saying, 'But you're not really happy'. We put our fingers in our ears and go off to drown our sorrows in one way or another, smothering this nagging feeling. But it's there underneath, building up. Stifling it only makes it worse. Rather, we should cherish our dissatisfaction, because it is this that makes us go in search of something higher, something more satisfying, some greater happiness.

Of course, we don't know at first what we are looking for. There's just this vague restlessness, a groping around in all directions for we know not what. And eventually, if we go on looking long enough, we come into contact with something which, for want of a better term, could be called spiritual. We come into contact

with a glimpse of something higher, something which is not of this world. It may be a symbol, an echo, a reflection: a book that speaks to you, a picture, a person. And when you come into contact with it, whatever the circumstances, you respond. In the depths of your heart you get a feeling, or at least an inkling, that this is what you have been searching for all the time, even though you didn't know it.

Faith

In the Buddhist tradition this response is called *śraddhā*. And this is the next step of the spiral path: in dependence upon unsatisfactoriness arises *śraddhā*. We translate *śraddhā* as faith, but it isn't faith in the sense of believing something which cannot be rationally demonstrated. *Śraddhā* can also be translated as confidence or devotion, and it refers to the whole emotional side of the spiritual life. The word comes from a verb which means 'to place the heart on'. So faith in the Buddhist sense means the placing of one's heart on the Unconditioned, on the Absolute, rather than on the conditioned. It is the reorientation of one's whole emotional life. It is, in other words, the ethically wholesome counterpart of *tṛṣṇā*, craving. In dependence upon feeling – in this case feeling the unsatisfactoriness of the world – there arises not craving but faith – faith in something above and beyond the world, a sensitivity to a higher dimension of truth and reality.

Perhaps the best definition of faith is that it is the response of what is ultimate in us to what is ultimate in the universe. Faith – this intuitive, emotional, even mystical response to something higher, something supreme, something of ultimate value – is the very beginning of the spiritual life.

Then, in dependence upon faith, arises joy. This is the next step. You have found what you were looking for. You may not have been able to seize hold of it, but at least you've had a glimpse of it, like the sun through a cloud. So naturally, after perhaps a long period of searching, you are pleased. More than that, this contact with higher values has begun to transform your life. It isn't just a theoretical thing. Your heart has actually been lifted up; this is what the word *śraddhā* literally means – a lifting up of the heart. You have been lifted up to something higher, have touched something higher, have experienced, if only for a moment, something higher. And on account of that contact a change begins to take place. You feel that you now have a definite aim in life: to develop your contact with the higher dimension to which you have become sensitive. Of course, it isn't usually all plain sailing. Faith may arise but it may also subside. After an initial rush of enthusiasm for the spiritual life, and a phase of reading everything we can lay our hands on, and going to talks and meditation classes, we may suddenly lose interest. Perhaps our interest is caught by something else, or perhaps we get fed up with trying to be 'spiritual', and feel like living it up for a while. The pendulum may swing back and forth for quite some while, but as time goes by it swings less and less violently until it comes eventually to rest.

As one's faith strengthens, one gradually becomes a little less self-centred. One's egoity has been shaken up, and as a result one becomes just a little more generous,

a little more outward-going. One tends not to hang on to things quite so tightly. What may be described as the lower part of one's nature, the part which is chiefly interested in things like food, sleep, and sex, starts coming under the conscious control of the higher part of one's nature. One begins to live more simply and harmlessly, and this makes one happier and more contented. More at ease within oneself, one doesn't rely so much upon external things. You don't care if you haven't got a beautiful house, a flashy car and all the rest of it. Sitting loose to all those things, freer and more detached than you were before, you are at peace with yourself. You may not have explored fully what you have discovered, but you've made contact with it, and that contact has begun to transform your life. You naturally start living a more ethical life, observing the five precepts. You have a more or less good conscience. And so you feel joyful. Joy is the next stage of the spiral path.

Joy

The Buddhist attitude is that if you're leading a spiritual life you should be happy, open, and carefree. If you have found the precious thing that you were looking for, and if it has really begun to transform your life, why shouldn't you be happy? If you're not happier than other people who haven't found this source of inspiration, what's the use of being a Buddhist? Joy is the hallmark of the true Buddhist. Buddhism attaches great importance to this stage of feeling happy and carefree and at peace with oneself, having a clear conscience, being able to go about with a song on one's lips.

Rapture

In dependence upon joy arises rapture; this is the next stage of the path. 'Rapture' is the nearest we get in English to translating the Sanskrit *prīti*. *Prīti* is an intense, thrilling, ecstatic joy, which is so powerful that you feel it in your body as well as in your mind. When we listen to a beautiful symphony, or watch the setting sun, or have a heart-warming communication with a friend, we are sometimes so deeply moved that we experience not only an emotion, but also a physical response. We may be so greatly affected that our hair stands on end, or we shed tears. This is *prīti*.

One could say that rapture comes about as a result of the release of blocked energy – energy that is short-circuiting itself, or locked up. In the course of one's spiritual life, especially in meditation, these blocks get dissolved. One uncovers depths within oneself; little complexes are resolved, so that the energy locked up in them is released and surges up. It's due to this upsurge of energy, felt throughout the nervous system, that one experiences *prīti*.

Calm

Then, in dependence upon rapture there arises calm or peace. The Sanskrit word, *praśrabdhi*, means 'calm, tranquillity, serenity', and it is the calming down of the

physical side effects of rapture, so that you're left with a purely mental and emotional experience.

Bliss

In dependence upon calm, there arises bliss, sukha. Sukha can have various meanings. Here it means the feeling of intense happiness that wells up due to the complete unification of all our emotional energies. Our energies are not divided, they are all flowing together strongly and powerfully in a single direction, like a great river. Whatever energy you had invested in negative emotions now flows positively in the form of bliss.

Samādhi

Then, dependent upon this intense happiness, arises samādhi. This word has several meanings, but here it means concentration – not a forcible fixation of the mind on a single object, but a concentration which comes about naturally when, in that state of intense happiness, all one's emotional energies are flowing in the same direction. When we are completely happy, when all our emotional energies are unified, we are concentrated in the true sense. A concentrated person is a happy person, and a happy person is a concentrated person. The happier we are, the longer we shall be able to stay concentrated; and conversely, if we find it difficult to concentrate for very long, the reason will be that we are not happy with our present state. If we were truly happy we wouldn't need to do anything else – we could just stay still. But we are unhappy, dissatisfied, so we get restless and go searching for this or that, looking for some distraction, some diversion.

It's significant that concentration in the sense of samādhi arises halfway up the path. It's only then that we can really begin to concentrate, because our emotional energies have been unified, and we are now, perhaps for the first time in our lives, happy. One's whole life needs to be a preparation for meditation. But however elevated our meditation practice, at this point we are still on the level of the mundane. We're on the spiral but we're still subject to the gravitational pull of the round. However, with the arising of the next stage in the series we come to the second part of the spiral, from which there is no possibility of regression.

Knowledge and vision of things as they really are

In dependence upon samādhi, there arises yathābhūta-jñānadarśana: 'knowledge and vision of things as they really are'. The concentrated mind sees things as they really are. When the mind is full of thoughts, when it isn't calm or harmonized, but pulled this way and that, it can't see things as they are. When the waters of a lake are still, they can reflect the face of the moon without distortion. But when the wind blows, making ripples and waves, the reflection of the moon is broken up and distorted. The usual way we see things is like that – all in bits and pieces, broken up, twisted.

This stage is of the utmost importance, because it marks the transition from meditation to wisdom. Once we've reached this stage there can be no falling back, the attainment of Enlightenment is now assured. One way of putting it is to say that this 'knowledge and vision' is insight into the 'three characteristics of conditioned existence'. One sees that all conditioned things are impermanent, unsatisfactory – they can't give permanent and absolute happiness – and insubstantial, or ultimately unreal.

This stage represents a direct perception: you actually see through the conditioned to the Unconditioned. Piercing through the impermanence of the conditioned, you see the permanence of the Unconditioned; piercing through the unsatisfactoriness of the conditioned, you see the perfectly satisfying nature of the Unconditioned; and piercing through the insubstantial, the unreal, you see that which is eternally and everlastingly real. When you begin to see things in this way, your whole outlook changes radically. You are not the same as you were before. Once you've glimpsed something beyond, once you've seen through the passing show, once you've had a glimpse of that higher dimension, call it what you will, higher reality, the Absolute, even God if you must, once you've had a glimpse of that – not just an idea of it, not a concept, not a speculation, but a real glimpse, a real contact, a real communication – then you'll never be the same again. A permanent change takes place in your life. You've 'turned about in the deepest seat of consciousness.'

Withdrawal

Dependent upon knowledge and vision of things as they really are, there arises nirveda. This is sometimes translated as 'revulsion' or 'disgust', but that's too strong, too psychological; at this level you're far above psychology in the ordinary sense, because you're above the mind in any ordinary sense. This stage represents the clean, serene, withdrawal from involvement in conditioned things. It's like seeing a mirage in the desert. At first, seeing an oasis, you may hasten in its direction. But when you see that it's a mirage, you stop. There is no point in going towards what isn't really there. Similarly, when you see, on the basis of your experience of samādhi, that conditioned things, all the things of everyday experience, are unsatisfactory, that they're going to pass away, and that there's no real reality in them, you become less and less attached to them.

This stage of withdrawal is a sort of sitting loose to life. You still play the games that other people play – or some of them – but you know they're games. A child takes his game very seriously because to him it is real, but the adult can join in while knowing that it's a game. If the child wins, the adult doesn't get upset. In the same way, once you've seen through the games people play, you can go on playing them, but you know that they're just games and you can withdraw from them, at least inwardly. You may be doing what is necessary objectively, but subjectively you're not caught up in it.

Dispassion

In dependence upon withdrawal arises *vairāgya*, which can be translated as 'dispassion'. This stage differs from the previous one in that while withdrawal is the movement of detachment from conditioned existence, dispassion is the state of actually being detached. In this state you can't be moved or stirred or touched by any worldly happening. This isn't hardness or insensitivity, but a state of serene imperturbability.

Freedom

In dependence upon dispassion there arises spiritual freedom, *vimukti*. The Buddhist conception of freedom in the earliest teachings is twofold. Firstly there's *ceto-vimukti* – freedom of mind – which means complete freedom from all subjective, emotional and psychological bias, from all psychological conditioning. And secondly there's *prajñā-vimukti* – the 'freedom of wisdom' – which means freedom from all wrong views, all ignorance, all false philosophy, all opinions. This complete freedom of heart and mind at the highest possible level is the aim and object of Buddhist life and practice.

Knowledge of the destruction of the āsravas

But this freedom is not quite the culmination of the spiral path. Dependent upon freedom arises 'knowledge of the destruction of the *āsravas*', (or 'mental poisons'). It isn't enough to be free. The next stage is to know that one is free. And one knows that one is free when one realizes that the mental poisons have been destroyed. When these poisons are extinct, and when one knows that they are extinct, then at last craving, the emotional counterpart of spiritual ignorance, has been destroyed. In dependence upon feeling there no longer arises any craving whatsoever. And at that stage you have reached the end of the spiral path, you have gained Buddhahood.

A natural process of growth

The spiral path shows us that the spiritual life is a natural process of growth, each stage arising from the overflow of the preceding one. As soon as one stage reaches its fullness, it inevitably passes over into the next. It's quite useful to have a theoretical idea of what lies ahead, but one doesn't need to bother about it too much. Once one stage is fully developed it will automatically pass over into the next.

The principle of conditionality isn't just an idea. Being aware that this is how life works can have a transforming effect on every aspect of the way we live. When any experience befalls us – when someone says something to us, or we read something, or we experience something through the senses – we can always ask ourselves whether our reaction is cyclical or progressive. If there's a cyclical reaction – say from pleasure to craving – then we go round and round on the Wheel of Life. But if there's a progressive response, however faint – say from an

experience of the unsatisfactoriness of life to a feeling for something higher – then at that very moment we place our foot, however hesitantly, upon the first step of the path to Enlightenment.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. ‘...a whisper from deep within our heart keeps on saying, “But you're not really happy”. We put our fingers in our ears and go off to drown our sorrows in one way or another, smothering this nagging feeling.’ Have you experienced this whisper? If so, when did you first become conscious of it, and how has it developed? If not, why are you studying Buddhism?
2. ‘We come into contact with a glimpse of something higher... It may be a symbol, an echo, a reflection: a book... a picture, a person. And when you come into contact with it ...in the depths of your heart you get a feeling that this is what you have been searching for.’ What first gave you this response of śraddhā? How has your śraddhā changed and developed over time?
3. What circumstances or activities tend to strengthen your śraddhā? How could you get more of these, whatever they are? On the basis of your experience, do you think you are more likely to experience śraddhā when you are in positive or negative states of mind?
4. ‘Joy is the hallmark of the true Buddhist.’ Have you become happier and more joyful since you started practising the Dharma? If so, in what ways? If not, why do you think this is?
5. ‘We may be so greatly affected that our hair stands on end, or we shed tears. This is prīti.’ Have you ever experienced anything like this? When? Do you think this could only be a short-lived experience, or might it be possible to experience this as a continuous state?
6. Have you become even a little calmer, more concentrated, more clear-sighted, and more detached from the ‘games people play’ since you started practising the Dharma? In what ways? Does this give you confidence that the Spiral Path is describing a real process?
7. How might the positive nidānas match up with the stages of the Threefold Path of ethics, meditation, and wisdom?