

1. Conditionality (*pratitya samutpada*)

Introduction

The Buddha taught many types of people. He gave them different teachings according to their temperaments and needs. Sometimes he emphasized one thing and sometimes another. But underlying all his teachings there is a generalized truth known as “conditionality” (*pratitya samutpada*). The principle of conditionality (sometimes translated as “conditioned co-production” or “dependent origination”) says that all things occur on account of definite conditions. They do not occur randomly; nor on account of the caprice of a creator God.

This applies to everything in both the physical and mental worlds - from a wave on the ocean to a city, from a passing thought to a system of government. Anything that happens has countless contributory causes, not just one cause.

Parable of the poisonous arrow

The Buddha did not try to explain all events that take place in the universes, or all the causes of the events he did explain. He focused on those things that we can influence and can lead to more wholesome states of mind. The fact that the Buddha did not try to explain all the causes of things is illustrated by the parable of the poisoned arrow. He said that if somebody is wounded by a poisonous arrow they will immediately want the arrow removed, rather than wasting time discussing who shot the arrow, what kind of arrow it is, what sort of poison etc. The Buddha said that in a similar way human beings are poisoned by greed, hate and delusion, and the sensible thing to do is to remove this poison rather than trying to explain everything in the universe.

Typical example of conditionality from the scriptures

A verse in the Dhammapada says:

“Month after month for a hundred years somebody may worship the sacred fire in the forest. But if they, only for a moment, were to pay reverence to a self-conquering person, that reverence would be of greater value.”

This may take a bit of unravelling, but at bottom it is just a typical example of the teaching of conditionality.

A self-conquering person is someone who has overcome the mental poisons of greed, hate and delusion. In other words it is a spiritually mature person. If we reverence this type of person, who has golden qualities, it will put us in-touch with the seeds of the same qualities within ourselves. It will therefore have a very beneficial effect on us. So in recommending this practice the Buddha was giving an example of how we can use the principle of conditionality to work in our favour. He was pointing out something we can do that will lead us in the direction of Buddhahood.

The verse suggests that in comparison with reverencing a self-conquering person, fire worship is useless. In the Buddha’s day fire worship was practiced by the Brahmin caste, and it still is. The practice is dedicated to the fire god Agni. Ancient scriptures (the Vedas) prescribe in detail how fire worship is to be undertaken.

The Buddha did not agree that following the prescribed rituals would, in itself, lead to holiness. Having seen into the heart of conditionality, the Buddha understood that the only way to become holy was to generate wholesome states of mind. If we just go through motions of a ritual in an external way, then no real benefit will come from it.

Of course there could be circumstances where doing a Buddhist ritual is unhelpful: for instance if we were made to feel obligated to do it and this fostered feelings of resentment. And conversely a ritual involving fire could be positive and inspiring. Fire can be very beautiful, and watching it could be a way of increasing our awareness of impermanence.

Conditionality operates in different spheres

According to a formulation known as the “five *niyamas*” there are five levels or spheres in which the principle of conditionality operates:

1. physical, inorganic. (the laws of physics and chemistry)
2. biological / organic (eg the growth of plants)
3. mental processes that are not consciously determined (eg. feeling nauseous from fumes)
4. human volition / choice. (the realm of *karma*)
5. the Transcendental realm.

Although conditionality is operative in each of these *niyamas*, obviously these five levels are not mutually exclusive. What happens may be due to causes generated from several different *niyamas* at once. Take the example of enjoying a cup of coffee with a friend. With a little thought you can probably think of all sorts of causative factors from various different *niyamas*. For example causality in the biological sphere (*niyama* 2) would be required to grow the coffee beans, and the intention to drink the coffee (*niyama* 4) would be another factor.

The five *niyama* classification is useful because it makes it easier to explain how some things that effect us, like an earthquake, are not necessarily a direct consequence of our karma (which is covered by *niyama* 4). The earthquake could be purely due to factors within the first *niyama*. (However, in an indirect way our *karma* is a factor in us experiencing an earthquake, because our karma led to us taking on a human body.)

The same external circumstance is likely to produce different effects on the mental level in different people. This is well illustrated in the novels of Alexander Solzhenitsyn who portrays environments like prison camps and cancer wards. While most of the people there are acutely miserable, some are fairly happy.

The cyclic form of conditionality

Sometimes the principle of conditionality works to reinforce existing habits and patterns. For instance the more often someone takes an addictive drug, the more likely they are to want to keep on taking it. Conditionality working to reinforce current patterns has been coined “cyclic conditionality” because it is not leading anywhere new. This type of conditionality is illustrated by the set of twelve miniature pictures on the outer rim of the Wheel of Life. Each of these miniatures represents one of the twelve (cyclic) “*nidanas*”. These twelve *nidanas* or links are:

1. ignorance (*avijja* in Pali)
2. karma-formations (*sankharas*)
3. consciousness (*vinnana*)
4. name-and-form (*nama-rupa*)
5. the six senses (*salayatana*)
6. contact (*phassa*)
7. feeling (*vedena*)
8. craving (*tanha*)
9. attachment (*upadana*)
10. becoming (*bhava*)
11. birth (*jati*)
12. death and decay (*jara-marana*)

Some people find this formulation useful as a basis for meditating on cyclic conditionality.

Spiral conditionality

Conditionality does not just operate in a way that keeps us in a rut. It can also operate in a way that supports our spiritual growth. The term “spiral conditionality” has been coined to refer to conditionality that supports spiritual growth, and eventually leads to Buddhahood.

The difference between cyclic and spiral conditionality is illustrated by the example of someone who is addicted to cigarettes, but would like to give them up. Suppose they are unexpectedly offered a cigarette. The

more impulsive side of their nature will be inclined to accept and have another smoke. This is cyclic conditionality at work. On the other hand they might be prompted to reflect on the consequences of accepting a smoke. This impulse, which encourages greater awareness, stems from spiral conditionality.

Spiritual breakthroughs are also a result of spiral conditionality. Although breakthroughs may come quite suddenly, they are founded on previous activities such as ethical conduct, meditation and reflection. It is not always possible to trace even the main threads that lead to a particular spiritual experience. Sometimes they seem to come out of the blue.

The twelve spiral (positive) *nidan*s

There are various images or models of spiritual life. One of these models is that of walking along a path that leads to the goal of Buddhahood. Along the path we pass various milestones, which can be described as the stages of the path. Although this way of viewing spiritual life has its limitations, descriptions of the stages of the path can provide a useful indication of what is actually involved.

There are various lists of stages of the spiritual path. The simplest is perhaps the “threefold path”:

- 1) ethics,
- 2) meditation (in the sense of higher states of consciousness), and
- 3) Transcendental wisdom.

This list tells us that ethics provides a foundation for meditation, which in turn provides a basis for Transcendental wisdom. The list helps explain how spiral conditionality works.

There is a set of 12 spiral (positive) *nidan*s:

1. suffering (*dukkha*)
2. faith (*saddha*)
3. joy (*pamojja*)
4. rapture (*piti*)
5. calm (*passaddhi*)
6. bliss (*sukha*)
7. concentration (*samadhi*)
8. knowledge and vision of things as they really are
9. withdrawal (*nibbida*)
10. dispassion (*viraga*)
11. freedom (*vimutti*)
12. knowledge of the destruction of the biases (*asavas*)

In this context the English terms, such as “suffering”, “faith”, “joy” and “calm” have slightly specialised meanings. The linkages between some of the higher *nidan*s, such as the link between “withdrawal” and “dispassion”, are likely to be beyond our personal range of experience. However study of the first few linkages in the sequence could be helpful. For example ask yourself how suffering (*nidana* 1) can lead to faith (*nidana* 2), and to whether suffering always increases our faith. Then ask yourself how faith (*nidana* 2) lead to joy.

A deeper appreciation of conditionality

It is one thing to grasp a Buddhist teaching on an intellectual level, but quite another to intuitively appreciate it in the midst of our everyday activity. Although intellectual understanding of conditionality is a good start, we need a deeper type of wisdom to really appreciate it.

It is unlikely that we will gain a deep appreciation of either the spiral or cyclic forms of conditionality through thinking about them as abstract concepts in an algebraic sort of way. After all, the abstract terms do not have an independent existence. For instance there is no such thing as suffering (the first *nidana* in this sequence), there are only beings that suffer. For this reason it is helpful to consider specific examples of how, within the web of life, one thing leads to another.

There are many ways we can imbibe a sense of the workings of conditionality. Through studying history we can see it working itself out across the sweep of decades and centuries. Reading good novels (such as Tolstoy's "War and Peace") and then reflecting on their content imparts a sense of how life keeps rolling on, and of how peoples' happiness or misery comes about in dependence on various factors. We can also observe cyclic and spiral conditionality by looking closely at our personal life, and the lives of people we know.