

1
FWBO Dharma Training Course for Mitras – Foundation Year
Part 4: Exploring Buddhist Practice – Wisdom

Week 2: Conditionality, Karma, and Rebirth

Text purpose-written by Vadanya

Conditioned co-production

The central concept that the Buddha used to try to communicate his Insight is often described as ‘conditioned co-production.’ This is one of several translations of the Sanskrit term *pratītya samutpāda* (Pali *paṭicca samuppāda*) – others include ‘dependent origination’, ‘mutual causality’ and ‘mutual co-arising’. *Pratītya samutpāda* literally means something like ‘existing on account of arising together’. The Fifth Century commentator Buddhagosa defines it as the way “phenomena arise together in mutual dependence”. It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of this idea in Buddhism.

Western approaches to *pratītya samutpāda*

This idea points out that all things and events come about because of conditions, and exist only as long as the conditions that keep them in being exist. All phenomena constantly condition and interact with a host of other phenomena, so that nothing exists independently, as a thing-in-itself, separate from everything else. In the West this is often explained in terms of material things and processes, so it is pointed out for example that we ourselves depend on an enormous number of conditions for our existence – the atmosphere, the sun, the water in the seas, the whole ecosystem we are part of, all the people who grow our food and provide us with necessary goods and services, and so on. We could never finish the list. Through thinking about things in this way we can begin to get an idea of how interconnected and interdependent we are with all other phenomena.

This is a valid understanding, but it is not the whole story. We need to beware of thinking we have completely understood the Buddha’s insight. He described this teaching as:

‘Deep, hard to perceive, hard to understand... beyond logic, subtle, intelligible only to the wise.’¹

The concept of *pratītya samutpāda* is pointing to a vision of reality that is deeper and more far-reaching than we can imagine at the moment. So conditioned co-production is not just causality, and not just that phenomena in the material world are governed by complex networks of interactions, so that everything affects everything else. This is not “beyond logic” and we can understand it quite easily while not counting ourselves among ‘the wise’.

We Westerners have a tendency to see Buddhist teachings through the lenses of our materialist conditioning, and to interpret Buddhist ideas as though they were scientific theories about the material world, rather than attempts to convey a vision of reality that transcends our current materialist understanding. Conditioned co-production is not just about material things, it is about how our mind and the world we experience mutually condition each other and evolve together. To quote a modern author, Joanna Macy:

‘Integral to the concept of dependent co-arising is the belief that the preconceptions and predispositions of the mind itself shape the reality that it sees. This runs counter to commonsensical notions of a world ‘out there’ distinct from and independent of the perceiving self. A genuine understanding of mutual causality involves a transcendence of conventional dichotomies between self and world...which amounts to an overhauling of one’s most ingrained assumptions.’²

The law of karma

In the early Buddhist scriptures *pratītya samutpāda* was mainly seen as describing how we evolve as spiritual beings. The Buddha was not trying to explain the world to us, he was trying to help us to follow a path of growth and development that would allow us to see reality for ourselves. The aspect of conditioned co-production that the Buddha emphasised overwhelmingly, and the one that is most important to us, is the law of karma (Pali *kamma*). Karma means action. Essentially the law of karma tells us that the way we choose to act, speak and think now has a powerful influence on the sort of person we will become in the future, and therefore on our experience of the world around us. Traditionally it is said that a belief in the law of karma is the one ‘right view’ that is completely essential for our spiritual progress, while not to believe in the effects of karma is the one wrong view that will completely stop us from following the Buddhist path.

There are good reasons for this. The Buddhist path works by the law of karma. The Buddhist path works by using the fact that the way we act, speak, and use our mind now helps to create the person we will become in the future. So it advises us on the types of action, speech and thought that are ‘skilful’ – meaning that they help us to evolve in a positive direction, towards more integrated and positive states of heart and mind, towards greater understanding, and ultimately towards the complete liberation of Buddhahood.

Because the law of karma is the mechanism by which the Buddhist path works, if we do not believe in it we will not understand the nature of the path, and we will not follow it in a way that is effective. We will not see the point in acting skilfully, so we are unlikely to practice the first stage of the path – ethics – with any conviction or energy. We will not understand that the path involves a process of change in our inner being, brought about by ‘regular steps’ – so we will probably try to jump right to the end, ignoring the fact that we are still close to the beginning. To be a Buddhist who does not believe in the law of karma is like being an architect who does not believe in the basic laws of physics – we will

ignore the supporting framework of our structure, and try to build towers and roofs before there is anything to hold them up.

Karma works in this one life

The Buddhist law of karma tells us that if we behave in skilful ways, our experience in the future will be more pleasant, happier and more bright: whereas if we behave in unskilful ways, our experience in the future will tend to be unhappy and dark. Traditionally the idea of karma is closely connected with the idea of rebirth, so that a skilful life leads us to be reborn in beautiful, happy states of existence, whereas an unskilful life leads to rebirth in painful states of suffering. This does not happen as a reward or punishment, but simply because the world we experience around us is a reflection of our state of being. If we make ourselves into a heavenly being by acting in a way that leads us to evolve in that direction, we will experience a heavenly state. If we make ourselves into a hellish being by our unskilful acts and thoughts, then our experience will be hell. This is often illustrated by the image of the Wheel of Life, which we will explore later in this part of the course. The Wheel of Life depicts six realms of being we could be reborn into, some very pleasant, some mixed, and some full of suffering. Each realm is not only an outer world, it is also a manifestation of an inner state – ultimately these inner and outer aspects cannot be separated.

Because the law of karma and the idea of rebirth are often so closely connected in people's minds, they can become confused. Some Western Buddhists find it hard to fully believe in rebirth, which goes against so much of our conditioning. (We will discuss this later in this text.) For those who find this to be the case, it is important to understand that the law of karma does not depend on the doctrine of rebirth. The law of karma operates just as much in this life as in future lives. Even in this one lifetime the way we act now has a major influence on the world we will experience in the future.

We all experience a mixture of skilful and unskilful motivations and mental states. If we choose to cultivate the positive aspects of our being, by acting and speaking in skilful ways, and by cultivating skilful states in meditation, then the positive aspects of our being will become stronger, and the negative strands will weaken. Over time we will become more aware, more whole, more connected with other beings and the world around us, and less tormented by craving and ill-will. Our experience of ourselves and of life will be more positive, and because we see the world through the lenses of our mental states, our experience will be that we live in a better, more beautiful world. And in many ways the circumstances we find ourselves in may actually change for the better – for example, people will tend to like, appreciate and trust us, so they will be more helpful, our relationships will improve, and new opportunities may open up that we could not have imagined in our previous, less positive mental state.

Of course the opposite is also the case. If we act, speak and think in unskilful ways then we cultivate and strengthen the negative sides of our being. Looking through the lenses of darker and more negative mental states, we come to see the world as

a darker and ever darker place. Other people become more antagonistic to us, and we may eventually find ourselves feeling quite alone, cut off from others and the world around us, experiencing our own small version of one of the less pleasant realms on the Wheel of Life. This downward process is frighteningly depicted in Oscar Wilde's story, "The Picture of Dorian Gray." In this story the main character has a portrait of himself painted when he is a young man, and it is widely admired. He begins to behave in more and more craving-driven and dishonest ways, a process that starts with minor unskilful acts, but which leads him into a downward spiral from which eventually he cannot escape. In the early stages of this process he seems to see small changes happening to his face in the portrait, which seems to be becoming subtly less open and attractive – although he cannot be sure. But as time goes by, when he can no longer escape from the downward spiral, the changes in the picture become so obvious that they are a constant rebuke to him, and he hides it from the world as his private guilty secret. By the time of his death the picture shows the unlikeable portrait of a coarse, degraded man.

Luckily or unluckily, most of us most of the time do not seem to be taking either of these two extreme courses – towards Enlightenment, or in the direction taken by Dorian Gray. We are sometimes moderately skilful, and sometimes moderately unskilful. So changes in our character are slow to happen, and we may appear to stay fairly much the same for periods of time. But in our world of constant change nothing can ever truly stay the same. We are all either going forwards or going backwards, evolving or devolving, and the choice is in our hands. The consequences of going in one direction are inspiring, and the results of going in the other could be very frightening.

Misunderstandings of karma

The Buddhist law of karma is often misunderstood. In particular it is often confused with the Hindu understanding of karma, which differs in several important ways. On several occasions the Buddha pointed out that these misunderstandings can be harmful to our spiritual development.

For example Hindus, along with many Tibetan Buddhists, take the view that all our experiences, good and bad, are the result of our past karma. (Buddhism arrived late in Tibet, by which time it had been strongly influenced by Hindu ideas.) This view of the law of karma can lead to the conclusion that anyone who suffers in any way – from social injustice, exploitation, disaster, illness, or whatever – has somehow brought this on themselves by their past actions. This can lead to lack of compassion and failure to right social wrongs – such as the evil of untouchability, whereby some people are condemned to a lifetime of poverty and exploitation because of their caste, which is held to be a deserved result of their past karma. It can also lead to fatalism and apathy – we may not act to improve our situation if we think we deserve it because it is 'our karma'.

The Buddha refuted the idea that all our experiences are the result of past karma. For example in the *Moḷiyasīvaka Sutta* he states that this view is wrong, and spells

out some other causes of pleasure and suffering, which include illness and the effects of the environment. The same issue is tackled in the Questions of King Milinda:

“Whoever says, 'It is only kamma that oppresses beings... is wrong... The ignorant go too far when they say that everything that is experienced is produced as the fruit of kamma.’”

To round this teaching out, later Buddhist thinkers classified five types of conditionality – known as the five niyamas. These are as follows

1. Physical or inorganic – if a tsunami kills large numbers of people, this is likely to be due to geological events under the sea, not to the victims’ collective karma.
2. Biological – if we get ill in a flu epidemic, this is likely to be due to the arising of a virus we have no resistance against, not to our past actions.
3. Psychological – we may experience mental states that are due to past experiences we had no influence over, and which are not due to our own karmic choices.
4. Karmic – the karma-niyama specifically refers to the effects of ethical and unethical actions that we have some choice about.
5. Spiritual or Dharmic – this is seen as the apparently miraculous and ‘undeserved’ influence exercised by Enlightened beings; we might relate it to the action of what is called the Bodhicitta, which is explored in the last session of this part of the course.

In practice these five aspects of conditionality interact in complex ways, and any event may be influenced to some extent by all of them; so it is risky to blame any event on karma alone. One teacher has suggested that when something bad happens to someone else we should never think it is due to their karma, but when something bad happens to ourselves we should always think of it as due to our own past actions – in this way we avoid lack of compassion on the one hand, and complaining, ill-will and blaming on the other.

Rebirth

Although it is easy to see that the law of karma operates within one lifetime, in traditional Buddhism it is closely linked to the idea of rebirth. And if our actions not only affect us in this life, but affect us in a potentially infinite series of other lives as well, lived not only in the one environment we know in this life, but in other world-systems and planes of existence as well, then the possibilities for karma to produce changes in the very nature of our being become that much greater – and that much more inspiring, or frightening, as the case may be.

From the Pali Canon there seems little doubt that the Buddha taught rebirth, and all traditional Buddhist schools seem to accept rebirth as a fact. But it would be easy to misunderstand what this teaching means. The Buddhist idea of rebirth is a subtle one, in keeping with the truth that beings have no permanent and independent self-nature. It is not the same as the Hindu idea of reincarnation, with which it is often confused. The Hindu idea is that a permanent and unchanging soul – the ātman – takes on a series of different bodies, effectively as a sort of reward or punishment for good or bad actions. The Buddhist idea is that a constantly changing stream of psycho-physical energy is shaped and transformed by the lives it lives and the actions it takes, and in successive rebirths manifests in forms and worlds of experience appropriate to it. (At a public talk a woman once asked Sangharakshita, "Are you telling me that I could be reborn as a chicken?" He replied, "No madam, only if you think like a chicken." The answer illustrates the point: that woman could not be reborn as a chicken – first she would have to become a chicken, in her inner being, and by then she would have long ceased to be the woman who asked the question.)

So in the Buddhist idea of rebirth there is no unchanging soul that passes from life to life. What continues after death are our karmic tendencies, the karma-formations or saṃskāras of the being who died. This is the deep volitional energy that drives us to live as a certain sort of being, in a certain sort of body, in a certain sort of world. The person who is reborn is neither the same as, nor completely different from, the person who died – they are the continuation of the same process of change. What happens is traditionally likened to lighting a new candle from one that is going out. The new flame is not the same as the old one, nor is it different. It is the continuation of a process.

On the one hand there is no 'self' that transmigrates from life to life. On the other hand the Buddha was able to remember former lives, and warned his disciples that they would reap the fruits of their actions in lives to come, just as if the person who would be reborn was the same as the one he was talking to. This is perhaps not quite such a paradox as it seems – in a world that is one vast process of change, none of us is exactly the same person that we were last week or last year; yet we have no difficulty in thinking of ourselves as benefiting in the future from the actions that we take now.

Rebirth and the Western Buddhist

Many Buddhists in the West have an intuitive sense of the rightness of the doctrine of rebirth, or else accept it because it is part of a tradition that they know from experience is a manifestation of a wisdom that is deeper than their own. Others see rebirth as a metaphor, pointing to the fact that in our interconnected world the effects of our actions spread in all directions, and continue, effectively, forever. Yet others see rebirth as a metaphor in a deeper sense, as a teaching we can understand that points to a reality that is beyond our human understanding and imagination, limited as this is by thinking in terms of space and time, and through language and other systems of symbols. For them the teaching of rebirth is as close as our limited understanding can get to the truth, and if we accept it and live

as though it were literally true this is the wisest way we can behave, and will benefit us a great deal. (An analogy might be the well-known map of the London underground, which is a simplified and distorted representation of reality. If we refuse to use it because the scale and geometry is not exactly right we will find it difficult to find our way in London. Buddhist ideas are about helping us to find our way – from where we are now to Enlightenment – rather than to exactly describe a reality that is beyond our comprehension at the moment.)

But many Westerners experience a knee-jerk response of disbelief in the idea of rebirth, because it does not fit in with the prevailing world-view of our times, which is sometimes called ‘scientific materialism’ – although in view of some of the discoveries of twentieth century physics, its so-called ‘scientific’ basis is now very out of date. According to this materialistic view, matter is what is ‘real’, and consciousness is merely an accidental by-product that is produced when matter is arranged in certain complex ways. Our consciousness is produced by the working of organs in our body, and when our body ceases to function, that consciousness will end forever. Many of us have been strongly conditioned by our education to see this so-called ‘scientific’ materialism as the only sensible view of the world, and we tend to view anything that does not fit in with it as impossible – whatever the evidence.

And of course according to this view rebirth is one of the things that is simply impossible. There is no obvious materialist mechanism by which it could work, so it must be false. But no mental model of the working of the world – which is what materialism is – can possibly do justice to the complexity of the miraculous phenomenon we are part of, which we call the universe. Our rational intellect – which cannot even beat a small computer at chess – cannot understand this reality. All it can do is to make highly simplified models of it that work for a particular purpose. The materialist model works very well for certain practical purposes, but if we think that this means it completely sums up the nature of reality we have shrunk our vision of the awesome wonder of the universe down to the size of our intellect – and we will live a smaller, greyer life as a result.

So if our knee-jerk reaction to the idea of rebirth is disbelief, we could ask ourselves whether this says more about our conditioning than it does about the nature of reality. It might be a step forward in wisdom if, instead of thinking “I do not believe in rebirth”, we were to think the more accurate thought, “I have been conditioned not to believe in rebirth, but I accept that reality is more complex and mysterious than my understanding of it, so I will keep an open mind.”

Of course it is not possible to prove the reality of rebirth. But there are many facts that might make us think. There is the existence of child prodigies, like Mozart and many others, who even as small children have talents and skills that are beyond most adults. There is the fact – obvious to most parents – that young children within the same family have very definite and distinctive characters and personalities, from the cradle onwards. There are the examples of people who seem to remember former lives, and – if we trust those who write about them – have knowledge about people and places which it is difficult to see how they could have acquired except by living the life they claim to remember. There is the fact

that so many of the Tibetan ‘tulkus’, such as the Dalai Lama, who are supposed to be advanced practitioners reborn, do in fact turn out to be remarkable people – though some do not, and of course they all do have a very special education. There is the fact that so many different peoples through the ages and around the world have believed in some form of rebirth, including many of the ancient Indians, Egyptians, Greeks, and Celts, as well as many African tribes – which may point to a widespread intuitive sense of the truth of rebirth. There are the many great thinkers who have believed in rebirth, from Pythagoras onwards. There is the fact that many of us as children had an intuitive sense that this was not our first time around, and had a gut level belief in rebirth before we had ever heard the word.

And of course there is the fact that the Buddha and the great figures of the Buddhist tradition taught rebirth – if we think we have a better understanding of reality than they do, it is not obvious why we would want to be Buddhists! In view of all this – and although it is certainly possible to be a Buddhist and practice the Dharma effectively without believing in rebirth – it might be well to at least keep an open mind.

Types of karma

There are traditionally said to be four types of karma when it comes to determining how we will be reborn. These are listed in descending order of importance.

The first and most important of these is weighty karma. This comes from ‘weighty’ acts that have a major impact on us and others, and are associated with powerful emotions. Such actions have a strong and lasting impact on the mind of the person who performs them. One example of a weighty karma is murder – clearly such an act would have a potent effect on our emotions and mental states, which would continue for a very long time. On the positive side, another weighty karma is meditation – an effective meditation practice sets up a strong positive current in the mind, and will have a major effect on our future experience.

The second type of karma is death-proximate karma. ‘Death-proximate’ means ‘near to death’ and this refers to acts of body, speech and mind that we perform when we are close to death. Because such acts will still be echoing in our mind as we pass from one life to the next, they are thought to have a major impact on our rebirth.

Habitual karma is produced when we do something regularly over and over again, so that it wears a deep groove in our being. Even comparatively minor skilful or unskilful acts can have a powerful effect when they are habitual. Small addictions, small untruths, small irritable thoughts, or on the other hand regular small acts of generosity, have an effect that is sometimes likened to dripping water. Each drip is insignificant, but over time the cumulative effect fills up a large, heavy container of karma.

The last and least important sort of karma is residual karma which is anything that does not fit into the first three categories. Residual karma has a minor effect on our rebirth, and only becomes significant in the absence of the other three types.

If we are mainly interested in the effects of karma in this life we can still draw some conclusions from this classification: the actions, words and thoughts that will produce the strongest karmic effects are those that have weighty consequences, those where intense emotions are involved, and those that are repeated regularly over and over again, so that they become a part of the structure of our life.

Are the results of karma inevitable?

Some Buddhist schools and teachers warn us that we will inevitably reap the results of our karma; but this does not appear to be what the Buddha taught. For example in the Sankha Sutta the Buddha says that we are not bound to experience the results of past actions, and he tells us how to wipe out our negative karma – or at least that which is not too heavy. He says that mere remorse and regret is useless, and that no-one else can get rid of our karma for us. But if we definitely decide not to act unskillfully in the future, and fill our heart with mettā, compassion and other positive emotions, sending love and goodwill to all beings in all directions – if we do the last stage of the mettā bhāvanā at all times and in all places – then “any deed done to a limited extent no longer remains.”

Questions for reflection and discussion

- 1) How would you describe the idea of conditioned co-production?
- 2) Consider the following course of events: A meteorite drops on Fred’s car. To buy another car he takes a highly paid but stressful job. Due to stress his resistance drops and he gets a cold. While ill he stops meditating, and gets out of the habit. His old irritability reappears, and he has a row with his partner. In a temper about the row, he walks into a low doorway, and knocks himself out. While out cold he has a vision of Avalokiteśvara, who points out how stupid he is being. He apologises to his partner and starts meditating again. Which niyamas might be involved in this sequence, and where?
- 3) Describe how karma has shaped your parents’ character and lives.
- 4) “It is a cliché that virtue is its own reward, but it is still true.” Do you agree? Why, or why not?
- 5) “In an important sense, our world is a creation of our mind.” a) Do you agree? b) Has your experience of the world ever changed in response to your mental states? c) Can you think of people who seem to inhabit quite different worlds from you?

- 6) What is your response to the idea of rebirth? To what extent do you think this response is conditioned, for example, by the society you have been brought up in?
- 7) Do you think you need to believe in rebirth to be a Buddhist?

Notes

1. Dīgha Nikāya II. 36
2. Mutual causality in Buddhism and General Systems Theory, by Joanna Macy