1.4 Exploring Buddhist Practice

Wisdom
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The importance of ideas, and this part of the course
We all have a model of the world in our heads. Whether we are aware of it or not, we have a set of ideas, concepts, images, analogies and metaphors that we use to make sense of the world and guide our actions. It is as though we each had our own map of reality that we use to find our way around. This map is highly simplified, because reality is far too complex for us to hold in our heads. Our map bears a similar relationship to reality that a road map of France – say – bears to the actual country. If it is accurate, it is useful for finding our way around, but it leaves out almost all of the richness, beauty, complexity, mystery and wonder of the reality. If it is inaccurate, it is worse than useless, and will lead us into a succession of dead-ends, wild goose chases, and unpleasant experiences. So although our map is only ever a poor approximation to reality, it is still vitally important. Our beliefs and ideas about the nature of reality have a major effect on the way we feel, and on the way we live our life. Our beliefs can liberate us, or they can keep us stuck, and even trap us in downward spirals of negativity.

So we need to look at our beliefs and ideas about the world if we want to make spiritual progress, or even if we just want to live an emotionally healthy and productive life. For this reason examining and refining the way we think about the world is an important part of Buddhist practice – just as important as practising ethics or meditation. Refining our ideas about reality is an important aspect of the third part of the threefold path – wisdom – and it is this that we will be focussing on in this part of the course.

Wisdom and ‘Right View’
The word ‘wisdom’ in Buddhism often refers to a direct seeing into the nature of reality, beyond all words and concepts. This is part of the ultimate goal of Buddhism, but for most of us it is still a little way off. Certainly most of us do get partial glimpses of something like this direct insight as our practice unfolds, and we need to value and nurture these. But for the time being we also need to concentrate on developing what is called ‘Right View’. This means making sure that our concepts and ideas about the world are aligned with reality, and that they allow us to live a meaningful life in which we can make spiritual progress. We need to make sure that the maps we are using are accurate enough to get us where we want to go.

‘Right View’ can sound rather rigid and dogmatic. But working towards Right View does not mean signing up to a creed, taking on a set of beliefs by blind faith, or rigidly sticking to any body of dogma. (At its best Buddhism encourages us to take all ideas with a pinch of salt, recognising that until we are enlightened any concept we use to explain the inconceivable and mysterious reality we are part of will be partially true at best.) What working on Right View does mean is honestly looking at the way we have been conditioned to think about the world,
owning up to where our current beliefs keep us stuck or don’t match reality, and giving open, objective consideration to some time-tested ideas that might at first seem too radical and revolutionary to fit in with the beliefs we have been bequeathed by our society, which operates on a very different world-view and set of values. Finally it might also mean being willing to try some of these new ways of thinking out – maybe adopting them for a while as ‘working hypotheses’, to see whether they do in fact open gateways to new levels of experience we had previously closed ourselves off from.

“All worldlings are mad!”
Most of us almost instinctively think that our present maps of reality are pretty much right. Unconsciously we think that maybe they could do with a bit more detail, and a bit more accuracy in places, but generally they are not too far from the truth. But the Buddhist view is more radical. According to the Buddha, if we see the world in anything like the ‘normal’ common-sense way that most humans do, then our maps are completely wrong in some important ways. And as a result just about the whole procession of humanity is lost, blundering about, looking for happiness in completely the wrong place, getting into a worse and worse mess, experiencing ever more and more suffering.

The Buddha once said that “all worldlings are mad.” ‘Worldlings’ here means not the inhabitants of planet earth, but those beings who try to get their happiness and fulfilment from the fleeting phenomena of this transient world, rather than from spiritual development. In other words it means ‘normal’ people, and, to some extent at least, you and me, and the great majority of other Buddhists. (Traditionally the state of no longer being a ‘worldling’ and becoming one of the ‘Noble Ones’ is seen as a very high attainment indeed.)

To quote Sangharakshita:

This is the Buddha’s statement. Everybody who is not spiritually enlightened or very near to it is mad. And the Buddha isn’t exaggerating. If we look around we see that we are living in the midst of a vast hospital, because everybody is sick. Living in the midst of a vast lunatic asylum, because everybody is mad. And everything, we may say, that everybody does, in this world, is the action of a madman or a mad woman. And we see only here and there some gleams, some glimpses, of sanity.1

The Buddha said we are mad because our worldly way of seeing things is ‘topsy turvy’ – upside-down – and he went on to describe several ways in which this ‘normal’ view of things was completely the opposite of the way things are. It isn’t that we could make some improvements, but that overall we’re on the right track. About the really important things, we are completely in the dark. This is a difficult idea to accept – in fact it already requires a certain amount of wisdom to accept it!

Because in certain important areas ‘normal’ ways of seeing the world are completely upside-down, and Buddhist ways of seeing things are the exact opposite, Buddhist ideas are revolutionary. They turn our currently upside-down world-view on its head. If we truly make such ideas a part of ourselves they will revolutionise our whole being and our whole life – they will completely change our goals, the way we think and feel, and the way we speak and act. The reason this doesn’t happen as soon as we read a Dharma book or hear a Dharma talk is that the process of making an idea a part of ourselves is normally a long one, even when we

1 Zen and the Psycho-Therapeutic Process, Sangharakshita.
have understood it intellectually and agreed that it is true. There is an enormous difference between understanding an idea as it is expressed in words, and making the truth behind that idea a constant part of the way we see the world, the way we feel about the world, and the way we respond to the world.

Working on wisdom

The process by which we make Dharmic ideas so much a part of ourselves that they can radically transform our life and our approach to the world is summed up in the teaching of the Three Levels of Wisdom. This has already been discussed in the very first session of this course, but it is so central to the Wisdom aspect of the Threefold Path – which we will be exploring over the next few sessions – that it is worth looking at from a slightly different angle as a foundation for what follows.

The Three Levels of Wisdom according to the Sarvāstivādin tradition are:

1. Hearing (or reading) – Śruta mayī prajñā.
2. Thinking or reflecting – Cintā mayī prajñā.

To use a metaphor, the process these ‘three wisdoms’ describe is very like what happens when we eat: firstly we take the food into our mouth and taste it, then we chew it and digest it and process it in a variety of ways to change it into a form we can use, and finally we make the food a part of ourselves – it becomes us, and we become it.

Stage 1: Hearing or reading

It might seem obvious that the first step in making Buddhist teachings our own is simply to hear or read the words in which they are expressed. But there is much more to this stage than that, and we need to pay close attention to how we approach this stage, by being aware of our response to the teachings and the attitude with which we approach them.

According to the Pali English dictionary, the word suta, which is the Pali equivalent of Śruta in Śruta mayī prajñā, means “heard in a special sense, received through inspiration or revelation, heard, taught.” On this basis Ratnaguna2 has described this stage as the way we “receive the message from the Enlightened mind through the medium of concepts.” Sometimes the Enlightened mind might seem to use an odd vehicle to transmit its concepts – a not-very-well-written book or an ordinary-seeming Dharma teacher – but often our response to hearing the Dharma even from these apparently not very impressive sources can have this quality of being special, it can have the quality of inspiration or revelation. Often people say that their first response to hearing certain Dharma teachings was an immediate sense that “this is important” or “this is right”, perhaps along with a sense that they have somehow always known this, or a leap of joy and a sense of expectation, a feeling that this is the doorway to something important. We can even have something like this response to a teaching we don’t really understand yet – people often have a strong sense that, for example, the Heart Sūtra is saying something powerful and important, without really understanding it in any detail.

Śraddhā

This response is an aspect of a quality we refer to by the Sanskrit name of śraddhā, which is often translated, rather misleadingly, as faith. Śraddhā is certainly not faith in the sense of

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2 Reason and Reflection in the Spiritual Life, Ratnaguna

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blindly believing something that doesn’t make sense. Śraddhā could be described as a sort of heart-knowledge, coming from a union of thinking and feeling. It often manifests as an intuitive sense of rightness and importance, combined with a more down-to-earth confidence that the teachings do make sense intellectually. If we have even a slight sense of this response to hearing or reading the Dharma we should pay attention to it and nurture it, because it is important. The Dharma is not just an ordinary teaching, it is a “message from the Enlightened mind through the medium of concepts.” Our felt sense of the rightness and specialness of the teachings is our link with the Enlightened mind. It is our link with our own potential. Speaking poetically, we could say that it is our higher self, or the future self we could become, speaking to us, telling us that what we are hearing is vitally important for our future fulfilment. It is no small thing to have a link to the Enlightened mind, or to our own higher self. We need to pay attention to it and respect it, so that we keep it in good working order. It is all too easy to get blasé about the Dharma after a while, to treat it as just another part of the clutter of ideas we have been exposed to, on the same level as our other opinions and enthusiasms and bits of information. But if we do this our link to the Enlightened mind will get weaker and weaker. To counteract this we need to remember and revisit our response of śraddhā, to keep it alive and fresh, and to nurture it so that it can grow into something that has a sustained and powerful effect on our lives. In the words of one of the earliest and most influential Mahayana texts, the White Lotus Sūtra: “If he hears [the Dharma] but for a moment, then let him joyfully congratulate himself, [saying] ‘I have now obtained a great benefit!’”

Receptivity

Sometimes, however, our initial response to some Dharma teachings is anything but śraddhā – sometimes it is scepticism or even dislike. Certainly we need to think critically about the teachings to make sure that they make sense. But thinking critically is not the same thing as being closed to new ideas because we think we already know the truth. There is an oft-quoted story about a Professor who goes to visit a Zen master. The Professor is full of his own theories and his own present understandings, yet, for some reason, he is still drawn to visit someone who he knows has a kind of knowledge he lacks. After they have been talking a while the Zen master pours tea. He fills the Professor’s cup, and then keeps pouring. Tea goes everywhere, but he just keeps pouring, until the Professor shouts out in disbelief, “Stop! Can’t you see the cup is full?” At which point the Zen master says, “You are just like the cup. You are already full of your own opinions, and there is no room for anything new or fresh to enter. Why have you bothered to come here?”

Sometimes we can all be like that Professor. At one level we know there is something inadequate about our present understanding of life – otherwise we would not be looking for what is missing from the Dharma. But at another level we think we know it all. We have a world-view we have picked up from our family, our society, the country we live in, our friends, our education, the media, and so forth. And often without even being aware of it we dismiss any ideas that don’t fit in with the world-view we have inherited. Even if an idea has been espoused over a long period by many people who are clearly wiser and more intelligent than ourselves, if it doesn’t fit in with the assumptions we’ve been conditioned to make, our immediate reaction is all too often to reject it out of hand. (Many Westerners’ responses to Buddhist ideas that don’t fit easily with so-called ‘scientific’ materialism are often an example of this phenomenon.)

To make room for something new and fresh we maybe need to remember that, according to the Buddha, many of our ‘normal’ ways of looking at things are upside down. We need to remember that we are looking for something that is beyond our present understanding of
things – otherwise we wouldn’t need to look for it. We need to make some space in our cup, so that we can be open and receptive. In the words of Sangharakshita:

Receptivity is the first requisite of the disciple, and indeed of anyone who wants to learn anything. We can be anything else we like: we can be wicked, we can be stupid, we can be full of faults, we can backslide...in a sense it doesn’t matter. But we must be spiritually receptive, we have to be ready to learn. When we know that we do not know, everything is possible.\(^3\)

The first stage of the first stage of wisdom is to know that we don’t know.

**Stage 2: Thinking and reflecting**

Once we have heard and understood an aspect of the Dharma, and even gladly accepted and welcomed it, this is just the start of a longer process. We have probably all come across ideas that seemed useful and important, and been convinced that we would put them into practice, but found that in fact we quickly forgot about them. (An excellent example of this often happens on work-related training courses – after a weekend course we come away full of ideas about how we are going to revolutionise our time management, say, but by Monday afternoon we are lapsing back into old habits, and by the next week we have completely forgotten about the training.) The human mind is like a sieve, a fact acknowledged in a Buddhist saying: “Non-repetition is the canker of the spiritual life.” Unless we go over and over what we have heard and read, we probably won’t be able to bear it in mind amid the hectic rough-and-tumble of daily life, and over time it is likely to drift out of our consciousness altogether.

The White Lotus Sūtra, which we have already referred to, urges us to “receive and keep, read and recite, expound and copy” the teachings. We “receive and keep” the teachings by accepting them as our own, by taking them to our heart and keeping them close to our heart. Then we “read” the teachings, not just once, but exposing ourselves to them over and over again. Traditionally, we also “recite” – learning and chanting a teaching has often been seen as an important practice. Learning by heart is an excellent way of imprinting a teaching on the mind and understanding it, and it allows us to carry our own Dharma around with us, so that we can reflect on it whenever we are idle, and remember it even in difficult situations. Then, having understood the teachings and immersed ourselves in them over a period of time, we can also “expound.” Once we have a certain amount of understanding, teaching the Dharma to others is an excellent way of engraving it on our mind, relating it to our own and others’ experience, and deepening our understanding – as well as being an important practice of generosity in its own right. Finally, at the time the Lotus Sūtra was written down, “copying” was also an important practice for making the Dharma more widely known. Although we no longer need to hand-copy books to make them available, the act of rewriting is still a good way of getting to grips with a text and immersing ourselves in it deeply.

We see from traditional texts like the White Lotus Sūtra and many others that this stage of ‘thinking and reflecting’ has always been an important practice for Buddhists. We may not approach it in quite the same way as the Lotus Sūtra suggests, but the principles are the same – we need to immerse ourselves thoroughly in the Dharma, so that it gradually soaks into us. Over the course of our involvement with the Dharma we will probably come across the important ideas of Buddhism again and again, from slightly different angles and expressed in slightly different ways. We will probably read a number of books, hear many talks, take part in

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\(^3\) *Wisdom Beyond Words*, Sangharakshita, p70.
many study groups and discussions, reflect on many occasions and in many different ways, and come across many symbols, myths and stories, all rounding out and deepening our understanding. Then we may also pass on the Dharma to others, formally or informally, in a large or small way. And just as, when we go out for a walk in heavy mist we may get soaked without realising it, these ideas will soak into our being, perhaps without us noticing that anything dramatic is happening. But when we look back we will see that our approach to life has changed radically, and that we seem to be living in a more open world, with many more possibilities.

### Stage 3: Meditating

The Sanskrit word bhāvanā in the term bhāvanā-mayī-prajñā means meditation: at this level of wisdom we in a sense have a direct experience of the wordless truths that the concepts of the Dharma point to, by meditating deeply upon them.

We approach this by reflecting deeply while in a higher meditative state – traditionally the first dhyāna, or at least access concentration. In such a state of calm focused alertness, integrated energy, and positive emotion, we begin to see behind the words or symbols in which the Dharma is expressed, to the experience beyond. We begin to have a direct wordless perception of the truth, which we call insight. Such insight is very different from a conceptual understanding – it is no longer an idea, it is a part of the very way we see the world. We can perhaps imagine, for example, that knowing intellectually that all beings are somehow interconnected – which most of us probably accept at some level – would have much less impact than living in a direct experience of interconnectedness as a concrete reality, so that we could no longer take our own sense of separateness seriously, and never feel any temptation to act just for our own benefit.

We may tend to think of such insight as an all-or-nothing, once-and-for-all experience, which at its highest level we are told it is. But we are all likely to get glimpses of insight if we meditate wholeheartedly while exposing ourselves to Buddhist ideas, and these can have a strong cumulative effect. Such glimpses behind the curtain may be intense, but, until we are well along the path, they do not seem to last. To build on them we need to revisit them, and to do this we need to turn them into a form we can remember and think about. This probably means putting them into words, although some people may prefer to use images or other symbols. We can then treat these glimpses of reality as another form of ‘hearing’, on which again we need to reflect, so that they can contribute to another cycle of meditating and becoming.

### Questions for reflection and discussion

1. “All worldlings are mad” – The Buddha. “...common-sense: the inherited stupidity of the race” – Oscar Wilde. What is your response to these statements?

2. What was your emotional response when you were first exposed to the Dharma? How has your response changed now that the Dharma is more familiar to you?

3. Which aspects of the Dharma have given you the strongest sense of śraddhā?
4. Have you come across any aspects of the Dharma that you tend to reject? Is your response a ‘cool’ intellectual questioning, or does it have a ‘warm’ emotional flavour – and if so, what sort of emotion do you experience in response to the teaching?

5. Have you ever radically changed your opinion about something? Do you find it possible to imagine that your existing world-view might be faulty in some areas?

6. “Non-repetition is the canker of the spiritual life.”
   Are you happy to keep revisiting and reflecting on the same Dharma teachings from different angles, or do you tend to want novelty?
1.4.2
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 \textit{pratītya samutpāda} (Pali \textit{paṭicca samuppāda}) – others include ‘dependent co-arising’ and ‘dependent origination’. \textit{Pratītya samutpāda} could be translated as meaning something like ‘existing on account of arising together’. The influential fifth-century commentator Buddhagosa says that it describes how the world we experience ‘arises as a togetherness, thus it is a co-arising…. The total of causes is a condition for the total of states produced from that conditionality.’\textsuperscript{4} It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of this idea in Buddhism.

Western approaches to \textit{pratītya samutpāda}
In the Pāli Canon the Buddha gives a number of different examples of the way conditioned co-production can work in our spiritual lives. Historically the most important of these has been the Twelve Nidānas, or links, of the reactive process of conditionality which keeps us trapped in Śaṁsāra, as illustrated by the Wheel of Life. (This will be discussed later in this module.) For the purpose of our everyday practice as Buddhists, this formulation, along with the corresponding twelve positive links in the spiral path leading to Enlightenment, are the aspects of conditioned co-production that we need to focus on.

However in the West there has also been a great deal of interest in the more general implications of \textit{pratītya samutpāda} for the way we see the world. At a general level, the 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.

\textsuperscript{4} The \textit{Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)}, Buddhaghosa, trans. Bhikkhu Ñañamoli, pp.596–7, Singapore Buddhist Meditation Centre.
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.⁵

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 one modern author:

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.⁶

The Five Niyamas

Later commentators on the Buddha’s teaching identified five strands – called niyamas – within pratītya samutpāda, five types of processes operating within the overall flux of conditioned co-production. In Sangharakshita’s recent thinking these five niyamas have taken on a new importance as a way of clarifying our view of the spiritual life. The five niyamas as reinterpreted by Sangharakshita are:

1. Inorganic physical processes (Pali: utu-niyama).
4. Processes arising from ethical and unethical actions (Pali: kamma-niyama; Skt: karma-niyama).
5. The progressive order of conditionality whereby higher states of being unfold spontaneously to produce even higher states (Pali: dhamma-niyama; Skt: dharma-niyama).

The first three of these niyamas need not concern us here, but some understanding of – and belief in – karma-niyama and dharma-niyama processes are crucial to a Buddhist spiritual life. However interesting we may find conditioned co-production from a philosophical point of view, the Buddha’s goal in teaching it was less to try to explain the nature of reality in words, than to help us to follow a path of growth and development that would allow us to see the nature of reality directly for ourselves. In the early Buddhist scriptures pratītya samutpāda

⁵ Dīgha Nikāya II. 36
⁶ Mutual causality in Buddhism and General Systems Theory, Joanna Macy.
was mainly seen as describing how we evolve as spiritual beings, and the aspect of conditioned co-production that the Buddha focused on was the law of karma. 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. To grow towards Enlightenment we need to consciously use the law of karma to grow towards higher states, while at the same time opening ourselves up to dharma-niyama processes which may seem to us like influences ‘from beyond’.

**The karma-niyama – or the Law of Karma**

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 using karma-niyama processes. It uses the fact that the way we act, speak, and use our mind at every moment of our existence 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 towards states that open us up to dharma-niyama processes that can take us beyond our limited selfhood 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 may not see the point in acting skilfully, so we are unlikely to practise the first stage of the path – ethics – with any conviction or energy. We will not understand that the path involves a progressive process of change in our inner being, akin to the growth of a plant, 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.

**The dharma-niyama**

Dharma-niyama processes take place – to put it simply – when, in the spiritual life, one good thing leads to something better, and then to something better again, in a progressive, positive process. Dharma-niyama processes equate roughly to the creative conditionality described in Week 3 of this part of the course, and the spiral path described in Week 4 is an example. Unlike karma-niyama processes, dharma-niyama processes do not depend on the volition of the individual, so that the effects may be experienced as an influence coming from outside the self, from something higher that we can open ourselves up to, but not control. This aspect is closely related to the Bodhicitta discussed in the last week of this part of the course.

**Karma and rebirth**

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 next week. 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 – paving the way for the teaching of the Five Niyamas. For example in the Moliyasivaka Sutta he states categorically that the view that all suffering and pleasure are the results of past karma is wrong, and spells out some other causes, 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.

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 saṁskāras 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 irritating 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 unskilfully 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. Do you believe in the law of karma – i.e. that the way we speak, act and think at every moment has a major influence on whether we experience happiness or suffering in the future? Do your actions of body, speech and mind always reflect this belief?

4. Describe how karma has shaped your parents’ character and lives.

5. "It is a cliché that virtue is its own reward, but it is still true."
   Do you agree? Why, or why not?

6. "In an important sense, our world is a creation of our mind."
   Do you agree? Has your experience of the world ever changed in response to your mental states? Can you think of people who seem to inhabit quite different worlds from you?

7. 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?

8. Do you think you need to believe in rebirth to be a Buddhist?
1.4.3
The Wheel of Life

Text purpose-written by Vadanya

Introduction – reactive and creative conditionality
In the last session we saw that conditionality is the central concept that the Buddha used to communicate his vision of reality. Conditionality can work in two ways, which Sangharakshita has called the reactive and creative modes. In the reactive mode, things go round in circles, and nothing new ever happens. In the creative mode, on the other hand, each event builds on the one before it, unfolding ever more new possibilities.

The reactive mode
When we are in the reactive mode we behave like machines, doing what our past conditioning has programmed us to do. We see the cake, and reach for it. A comment annoys us, and we snap. We feel bored, so we turn on the TV. The world pushes one of our buttons, and we respond, like a machine, in our usual way. Each time we react automatically in this way we strengthen our old pattern. Next time the button is pushed we are a little more likely to do the same old thing again, and we find it a little more difficult to do anything else. The classic example of this is an addictive pattern like smoking, but the same thing is true of any behaviour, of body, speech or mind.

So in the reactive mode we go round in circles, deepening our old ruts. The circles we go round in can be simple, like the smoker’s endless round of craving and cigarettes. But they can also be much more complicated, and involve other people and the world around us. Relationships can go round in circles, one person reacting to the other, who reacts back, both in their usual way. Lives can go round in circles, as our usual reactions to people and events bring the usual results from the world around us, which elicit the usual reactions from us – and so on, perhaps for a whole lifetime, even though the results might be painful, self-defeating, or just deeply boring.

The creative mode
We move into the creative mode when we don’t do the usual thing, but instead make conscious choices to do what is skilful, and what opens up new possibilities. So for example we don’t reach for the chocolate, or the beer, or the remote control, but we meditate or go for a walk. Or we apologise to the ‘difficult’ person at work for our side of the pattern between us, and ask them round for dinner. Or we stop putting energy into complaining thoughts, and instead start looking at how we contribute to the situation we are complaining about. When we do something new, new things start to happen. The old cycle gets a little weaker, we become a little freer, and new possibilities open up. After the initial discomfort of doing something new, we start to experience more positive mental states, which, if we persist, evolve into states that are more positive still – and so on, to a future we can’t imagine.
The Wheel and the Spiral
The Wheel of Life is a powerful symbol for the reactive type of conditionality. In the Triratna Buddhist Community we tend to use the image of the Spiral Path to symbolise the creative mode. In this session and the next we will look at the Wheel and the Spiral in more detail – and also at the doorway that leads from one to the other.

The Wheel of Life
The Wheel of Life is a visual description of the process of reactive conditionality. It is a sort of combined map and user’s manual of samsāra. The world it describes is like a computer game, in which we are imprisoned in a castle. Within the castle we can find ourselves in all sorts of different chambers, where lots of apparently interesting things can happen, where we can seem to score lots of points or accumulate lots of treasures. But none of this is the object of the game – the object is to escape from the castle. The Wheel of Life tells us how the game works, it tells us how to get from one chamber to another, it describes the various distractions in the
different chambers – and most importantly, it tells us how to find the door that leads us out of the castle, to freedom.

**The inner circle: what drives the Wheel**
The Wheel of Life consists of four concentric circles. In the centre are the forces that drive the wheel in its never-ending cycles – and that drive us, when we are in reactive mode. These forces are usually called delusion, greed, and hatred, and are pictured as a pig, a cock, and a snake. Delusion means our basic unawareness and ignorance about the nature of reality. In our dazed state of delusion, on the one hand we try to escape from our existential discomfort by grabbing hold of whatever gives us a pleasant feeling – here called greed. On the other hand we try to push away whatever gives us an unpleasant feeling – our reactions of dislike, anger, anxiety and fear are summed up by the term ‘hatred’. The words ‘greed’ and ‘hatred’ are perhaps too strong for what we normally feel – ‘attraction’ and ‘aversion’ might be more accurate – but these are still what drive us round the Wheel.

**The second circle: going up and down**
Working outwards, the next circle of the Wheel is divided into two halves, one light, and one dark. In the light half, beings are shown going upwards, with expressions of joy on their faces. In the dark half, beings are shown falling, with expressions of fear and sorrow on their faces. This indicates that we can seem to be getting somewhere within the wheel, but ultimately this is beside the point. Unless we find our way out to freedom we will always fall back, and any gains we seem to make will be lost.

**The third circle: the six realms of existence**
The third circle of the Wheel is divided into six segments, which represent different ‘realms’ of existence we can spend time in during our stay on the Wheel. Traditionally these are seen as different worlds in which we can be reborn, but each is also the expression of a state of mind, so the six realms represent psychological states that we experience here and now, in this life.

**The god (deva) realm**
At the top of the third circle of the Wheel is the realm of the gods. This is often shown as an idyllic parkland dotted with palaces, in which beings enjoy a life of enjoyment and delight, without having to make any effort, and with no suffering. At the lower levels of this realm beings enjoy sensory pleasures, but of a refined type. At the higher levels they enjoy pure aesthetic delight, or the bliss of meditative states. This world is like some ideas of heaven, but with one important difference – it is not permanent. Eventually the gods use up the positive karma that put them in this realm, and they fall to a lower, coarser level of existence.

In our world, perhaps some celebrities spend time in the god realm, along with some rich people who devote themselves to having a good time in a fairly healthy way, perhaps splitting their time between their yacht and the ski resorts. Some people even spend time in rather higher parts of the god realm, feeding off the delights of beauty, or enjoying the bliss of meditative states. If we are healthy and lucky, and we make it our aim, then it is possible for some of us to spend at least a while in the god realm. But the catch is that these states do not last. And when they end, then the gods do experience suffering. With no practice at dealing with even minor discomfort, they can’t stand experiences that would not even be felt as unpleasant by dwellers in other realms.

**The realm of the Titans, or Āsuras**
Moving round in a clockwise direction from the realm of the gods we come to the realm of the Titans, or Āsuras. The Āsuras are big, fierce, and ugly, and their life is a constant struggle for
power. There are a lot of āsuras in business and politics, or in any situation that is dominated by strong, un-self-critical people who like power and thrive on conflict.

The state of the Āsuras – in our world at least – is just as impermanent as that of the gods. To be a successful Āsura we need to keep winning, and that is not possible for long. Eventually every Āsura loses an election, is forced to retire, ends up in court, or something else happens to knock them off their pedestal. They become vulnerable, and they fall down into another state of being. And, because of their big egos, when they find themselves in a humble state where they don’t get much respect, they suffer a great deal.

The realm of the hungry ghosts, or pretas
The pretas, or hungry ghosts, are traditionally shown as having enormous bellies and tiny mouths, symbolising that they have an enormous appetite and thirst, but can never get satisfaction. They live in a desert where there is little water or food, but when they do find water it turns into fire in their mouths, and when they find food it turns to knives in their stomachs. What they crave so much causes them suffering instead of satisfaction. The pretas are beings who are dominated by neurotic desire – craving for things that don’t bring any real satisfaction, but instead cause harm and increase dissatisfaction. Pretas have a sense of inner emptiness, and they try to fill their sense of lack – symbolised by their huge stomachs – by consuming through their tiny mouths. In our world pretas try to fill their inner emptiness by consuming sweets, cigarettes, alcohol, junk food, sex, entertainment, pornography, and the toys of the consumer society.

There are many pretas in our current world, and there is even an industry devoted to producing them – the advertising industry. The most extreme examples of the preta realm in our world are addicts of drugs like heroine, but most of us have our own little addictions. And many people who lead what is regarded as a ‘normal’ existence actually live a life dominated by consumption, and even seem quite happy to be referred to as ‘consumers’.

The hell realm
At the bottom of the third circle we see a realm of suffering, a hell. This is not a hell to which beings have been condemned by any god, it is simply a reflection of the fact that some ways of being are, in themselves, states of intense suffering. The hell realm is a place of strong negative emotions, intense negative mental states, and mental illness. Many of us have spent at least a short time in the suburbs of the hell realm.

The animal realm
The world of animals is often shown as a natural landscape with herds of wild beasts roaming through beautiful scenery. At first sight it could look idyllic, but the reality is not so pleasant. Animals lack foresight, language, knowledge, and culture, so they are at the mercy of their environment, human beings, and their own instinctive drives. As a result they suffer. We live in the animal realm when we exist at the level of our biological appetites and natural instincts. This might seem like fun for a while, but as a long term state it is very limiting, and inevitably leads to suffering. While in the animal realm we are almost completely trapped in the reactive mode, with little ability to make conscious, creative choices.

The human realm
The human realm is the world we exist in when we live as reasonably mature, responsible, and emotionally healthy human beings. This is traditionally seen as the most auspicious realm, where it is easiest to make spiritual progress and find the door that leads out of the Wheel,
freedom. In the human realm we don’t experience the overwhelming suffering of the pretas or
hell-dwellers, but we aren’t lulled to sleep by the apparently endless pleasures of the gods.
Instead we experience a useful mixture of pleasure and discomfort. We are not completely cut
off from others like the āsuras – we can relate to others without always needing to be top dog.
And we aren’t trapped in the world of our bodies and instincts, like the animals, but have
access to the worlds of the intellect, music, and the other arts.

It is possible to gain liberation from within any of the six realms, but for practical purposes
most of us should aim to establish ourselves firmly in the human state. The god realm is –
maybe surprisingly – not the place we should be aiming for. If we make our spiritual life a
quest for effortless pleasure, this intensifies our egotism rather than eroding it, and makes us
weak and prone to anxiety. Certainly we need to make space in our lives for solitude,
meditation, the enjoyment of beauty, and for just doing nothing, but we also need to take on
challenges and responsibility if we are to grow. When we get this balance right it is a sign that
we are in the human realm.

The Buddhas of the six realms
Each of the six realms has its own Buddha, who offers the beings there what they need to
progress. To the extent that we exist in these realms, these Buddhas will also tell us what we
need in order to move on from our present state.

In the god realm the Buddha plays a musical instrument, making the music of impermanence.
The gods will only listen to what is beautiful – they would turn away from anything harsh –
but this music also carries a message, reminding them that their current state can’t last, and
they too need to look for the way out of the Wheel. In the realm of the Āsuras the Buddha
carries a sword – he meets the Āsuras on their own terms. But this sword is also the sword of
wisdom, that cuts through deluded, sloppy thinking. There is a connection between the fierce
competitiveness of the Āsuras and a sharp, no-nonsense intellect, so the Āsuras may be
affected by wisdom teachings, while they are not likely to respond to calls for love and
compassion. In the world of the pretas the Buddha offers food and drink that really satisfies,
which stands for what will really fill the preta’s sense of inner emptiness, including the
 teachings and support that will help them regain a sense of inner richness and self-esteem. In
the hell realms the Buddha offers a soothing balm – what the beings in hell need is simply to
escape from suffering for a while, so that they are no longer overwhelmed by it. In the animal
realm the Buddha holds a book, symbolising learning and culture. What beings in the animal
state need is something to lift them above their focus on their bodily drives and immediate
physical experience.

The outer circle: the process of becoming
The outermost circle of the wheel is divided into twelve boxes, which illustrate the most
common description of the process of conditioned co-production in its reactive mode – the
chain of the Twelve Nidānas, or links. (There is another set of twelve nidānas describing the
spiral path.)

The Twelve Nidānas describe how our inner world and the outer world mutually influence
each other, together creating the reality we experience as they both evolve over time. The
twelve steps they describe are usually seen as taking place over three lifetimes, describing how
the person we were in our last life has conditioned what we experience now, and how this in
turn conditions what we become in our next life. Some scholars have suggested that the
Twelve Nidānas were originally a description of the process of ‘becoming’ that is happening all
the time, and were not necessarily seen as happening over three lives. So whether or not we
believe in rebirth, we can see the nidānas as a description of how our past creates our present, which in turn creates our future – which becomes our past, and so on round the wheel.

At this point it is the principle behind the nidānas that is important, rather than all the details. However there is one section of the Twelve Nidāna formulation that is particularly important to us, because it explains where we can find the door that leads us out of the wheel, and on to the spiral path.

**From contact to becoming**

*Contact (Sanskrit: sparśa)*
The first link in this particularly relevant part of the nidāna chain is contact between one of our sense organs and a stimulus (illustrated by a man and woman embracing.) Our eye sees an object, our tongue tastes a flavour, or our mind thinks a thought. (In Buddhism the mind is seen as one of the sense organs, so contact also includes remembering a past event, or imagining something that might happen.) Contact is happening to us all the time – we experience a constant succession of stimuli, from the world around us, from other people, and from our own minds.

*Feeling (Sanskrit: vedanā)*
Conditioned by the stream of stimuli that register on our senses and come up in our mind, we experience a continuous flow of responses, or feelings. This is illustrated by a man with an arrow in his eye, to communicate the overwhelming strength of the responses we can experience. Vedanā is translated as feeling, but it does not mean emotion – it is simply our response of pleasure or pain (or neither.)

*Craving (Sanskrit: tṛṣṇā)*
Conditioned by our feelings of pleasure and pain, we either grasp at things and events and thoughts, trying to perpetuate them and make them ours, or else we push them away, trying to make them stop. Both of these responses are covered by the shorthand term, ‘craving’, and illustrated by the image of a woman giving a man a drink. So the sight of chocolate gives us a pleasant feeling, and we want to eat it, and then carry on eating it – although more calories are the last thing we need. Or the harsh sound of our ‘difficult’ person’s voice gives us a painful feeling, and we react with irritation, trying to get them out of our experience – although it is this very response that causes them to talk to us in the tone we dislike.

*Attachment (Sanskrit: upādāna)*
Conditioned by our patterns of grasping and pushing away, we develop attachment, illustrated by the image of someone picking fruit from a tree. We develop likes and dislikes, which also turn into views and opinions. One person likes Fred, and another hates him. One person likes – say – peanut butter, or rainy weather, or shopping, and another hates it. One person holds one opinion, while someone else just as informed and intelligent holds the opposite. Obviously, if people’s responses are so different, there is usually no absolute objective truth behind our attachments – but that doesn’t stop us taking them totally seriously.

*Becoming (Sanskrit: bhāva)*
Conditioned by our likes and dislikes and opinions, we behave in certain well-worn patterns, and we become a certain sort of person. This is illustrated by the image of a pregnant woman – in the next part of the Wheel she is about to give birth to our future self, the person our conditioned responses have turned us into.
The point of freedom
The process we have just described goes on automatically, and we can’t do anything about most of it. But there is one place in the sequence where we can make choices, and stop the process in its tracks. This is the so-called ‘Gap’ between feeling and craving – the ‘Point of Freedom’. This is where we can find the door to escape from the Wheel, onto the Spiral Path.

To open this door we need to pay close attention to the way we respond to the feelings, or vedanās, that stimuli produce in us. We have no choice about the vedanās our experiences give rise to – this is the result of our past. But we do have a choice about how we respond to these feelings, and this choice is the dividing of the ways between the Wheel and the Spiral. If we respond semi-automatically to pleasant and unpleasant vedanās, grabbing at what we like and pushing away what we don’t like, then we move on to craving, and take another turn round the Wheel. But if we face up to our discomfort, experience our feelings, and decide to do the skilful, creative thing whatever our vedanās push us to do, then we have opened the door and stepped onto the Spiral Path.

Our first experience of doing this is likely to be discomfort, or worse. It can be very uncomfortable to act, speak or think in new ways. Seeking to avoid discomfort is what keeps us going round the Wheel. So it is not surprising that the first step of the Spiral Path is dukkha – suffering, dissatisfaction, or discomfort. But when we face our discomfort, rather than running from it by grasping and pushing away, we can start to deal with it. And when we start to act skilfully and creatively, we begin to set up the conditions that mean we will experience many more pleasant feelings, and less dukkha, in the future – as we will see in the next session.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Do you tend to be more motivated by attraction or aversion? How might these two give rise to different approaches to life on the Wheel?

2. Which of the Six Realms have you spent time in in the past? Which do you spend time in now? Does the Buddha of the realm you spend most time in – apart from the human realm – have anything to say to you about how you need to practice?

3. What fascinating aspects of life on the Wheel most keep you distracted from looking for the door to freedom?

4. Do you have any tendency to see the spiritual life as a quest for the god realm? Do you think this is harmful or helpful in your case?

5. Do you think that a man with an arrow in his eye is too strong an image for our vedanās, or responses to stimuli? What stimuli – from the world, other people or your own mind – tend to create the strongest vedanās in you, and how do you respond?

6. Remember one occasion when you switched from the reactive to the creative mode by being in ‘the gap’. What did it feel like, and what effects did it have?
1.4.4
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 unskilful states, which can be the impression given by some interpretations of the Pali Canon.

The Spiral Path
Text condensed from What is the Dharma?, 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 sraddhā 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
Wisdom / Spiritual Growth and Creative Conditionality

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 pīti.”
   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?
1.4.5
The Conditioned and the Unconditioned

Introduction
Over the last few sessions we have emphasised that conditionality and conditioned co-production are at the heart of the Buddhist vision of reality. But in the last session Sangharakshita also referred to ‘The Unconditioned’ – a mysterious ‘beyond’, we can say almost nothing about. In the following text Sangharakshita explores the relationship between the conditioned and The Unconditioned in more detail, looking at the traditional ‘marks’ or characteristics of conditioned existence, and explaining how these are doorways to the Unconditioned – which might be the same thing as conditioned existence anyway!

The Two Realities
Text condensed from What is the Dharma?, Sangharakshita, Chapter 3, with small amounts of additional material from Chapter 5, and from Wisdom Beyond Words, Sangharakshita, pp128-131.

Reality in Buddhism is often described as being of two kinds: conditioned reality and Unconditioned reality, or more simply the conditioned and the Unconditioned. ‘The Unconditioned’ is the usual translation of the Sanskrit asaṁskṛta. Sam means ‘together’, kṛta is ‘made’ or ‘put’, and a- is a negative prefix, so asaṁskṛta literally means ‘not put together’ or ‘uncompounded’. ‘The conditioned’ is therefore saṁskṛta, ‘put together’ or ‘compounded’. In this way the idea has developed that the conditioned is also the artificial, whereas the Unconditioned is the natural, the simple, that which has not been artificially put together. The distinction between the conditioned and the Unconditioned is fundamental to Buddhist thought.

In the Pali Ariyapariyesanā Sutta the Buddha tells how he decided to leave home and become a wandering ascetic. He describes himself as reflecting, ‘What am I? What am I doing with my life? I am mortal, subject to old age, sickness, and death. And yet, being myself subject to old age I pursue that which likewise will grow old. Being myself subject to decay, I pursue that which is subject to the same decay. And being myself subject to death, I pursue that which also must die. Suppose I were to go in search of that which is immutable? Suppose I were to go in search of that in whose perfection there is no diminution? Suppose I were to go in search of the deathless, the eternal?’

Siddhārtha realized that he was a conditioned being, and that he was spending all his time and energy in pursuit of conditioned things – that is, in the anariyapariyesanā or ‘ignoble quest’. He realized that he was binding himself to the endless round of existence, the wheel of life. So he decided to turn round completely and go in search of the Unconditioned instead, to take up the ariyapariyesanā, the ‘noble quest’. This simple description of the first great insight of the Buddha-to-be contains the essence of the spiritual life. Here we put our finger on the spring
that works the whole mechanism. This spring is the conditioned in pursuit of the Unconditioned, the mortal seeking, not immortality of the self, but a self-transcending immortality.

**The Unconditioned**
The Unconditioned is also ‘the transcendental’. This is not an ideal expression, but it does duty more or less adequately for the Sanskrit and Pali word ‘lokuttara’. ‘Loka’ means ‘world’ and ‘uttara’ ‘higher’ or ‘beyond’, hence the transcendental is that which is above or beyond the world. It is not above or beyond in a spatial sense, but in the sense that it is not conditioned. It is beyond all suffering, beyond transience, beyond the sense of self. It is above and beyond anything we can think of, or imagine, or begin to conceive. Contemplating it, the mind stalls and fails. It is almost as if there is only a great blank before us, an unconfined and inapprehensible plenitude. This is the Unconditioned, the transcendental reality, the goal of the spiritual life, of the ariyapariyesanā, the ‘noble quest’.

**The three lakṣaṇas – or marks – of conditioned existence**
What exactly do we mean by the conditioned? According to Buddhist tradition, that which is conditioned bears three characteristics, or lakṣaṇas, by which it may be recognized. The three characteristics of conditioned existence are that all conditioned ‘things’ or ‘beings’ are:

1. Unsatisfactory.
2. Impermanent.
3. Devoid of self.

**Duḥkha: ‘unsatisfactoriness’**
The usual translation of the Sanskrit word duḥkha is ‘suffering’, but a better one – if a bit cumbersome – is ‘unsatisfactoriness’. Duḥ- as a prefix means anything that is bad, ill, wrong, or out of place; and kha is supposed to be connected with the Sanskrit chakra, meaning ‘wheel’. So duḥkha is said to have meant originally the ill-fitting wheel of a chariot, suggesting a bumpy, jarring ride, a journey on which one could never be comfortable or at one’s ease.

So much for a general picture of duḥkha. But unease or suffering comes in many different forms – the Buddha usually speaks of seven. First, he says, birth is suffering; it is very unpleasant to be thrust from the harmony of the womb out into a cold, strange world. Secondly, old age is suffering, as it involves physical weakness, loss of memory and intellectual flexibility, and dependency on others. Thirdly, sickness is suffering. Whether it is a toothache or an incurable disease like cancer, no sickness is pleasant, and it seems that no sooner do we get rid of one disease than another comes along. Fourthly, death is suffering. We suffer when those dear to us die, and we suffer in the knowledge of our own dissolution. Death is a horrifying prospect for many people, which they do their best not to think about. Fifthly, contact with what one dislikes is suffering. You just have to live with people, places, things, and conditions that you don’t altogether like. Sixthly, separation from what one likes is suffering. This can be a very harrowing, especially when it takes the form of bereavement – permanent separation from those we love. Some people never get over such suffering, and brood over their loss for the rest of their lives. Seventhly, not to get what one wants is suffering. Some people experience a lifetime of disappointment, frustration, and bitterness if they feel that life has short-changed them in some way. But even in small ways this is something we all experience every day.

Now most people would say that this is going a bit far. They will admit that birth, sickness, old age and death are indeed painful. Yes, there is a certain amount of suffering in the world, but
on the whole it’s not such a bad place. Why be so negative? And of course we do have pleasant experiences as well as painful ones. But the Buddhist view is that even the pleasant experiences are really only suffering concealed, glossed over, deferred – a whistling in the dark. And the extent to which we can see this depends on our spiritual maturity, because unless we are very aware, a lot of suffering is hidden from us.

Edward Conze has identified four aspects of concealed suffering. Firstly, something that is pleasant for oneself may involve suffering for other beings. We don’t tend to consider this of course. The most common example is the enjoyment with which people eat the flesh of slaughtered animals. They merrily ply knife and fork without thinking about the suffering of the animals. But the unconscious mind is not so easily fooled. You may never be consciously aware of the unpleasant fact, but it will exert an influence on your mental state that is all the more powerful for being unseen. In this way we develop an ‘irrational’ feeling of guilt, because in the depths of ourselves we know that our own pleasure has been bought at the expense of the suffering of other living beings. This guilt is the source of a great deal of uneasiness and anxiety.

Conze’s second kind of concealed suffering is a pleasant experience which has a flavour of anxiety because you are afraid of losing it. The traditional Buddhist illustration of this is a hawk flying off with a piece of meat in its talons, knowing that dozens of other hawks will fly after it to try and seize the meat for themselves. Any pleasure that involves any element of power or status is contaminated by anxiety, by the sense that others would like to replace you at the top of the dunghill.

The third concealed suffering indicated by Dr Conze is something which is pleasant but which binds us to something that brings about suffering. The example he gives is the human body. Through it we experience all sorts of pleasurable sensations that make us very attached to it; but we experience all sorts of unpleasant sensations through it as well. So our attachment to that which provides us with pleasant sensations also binds us to unpleasant sensations. We can’t have the one without the other.

Lastly, Conze suggests that concealed suffering is to be found in the fact that pleasures derived from the experience of conditioned things cannot satisfy the deepest longings of the heart. In each of us there is something that is Unconditioned, something that is not of this world, something transcendental, the Buddha-nature – call it what you like. Whatever you call it, you can recognize it by the fact that it cannot be satisfied by anything conditioned. It can be satisfied only by the Unconditioned. So, whatever conditioned things you may enjoy, there is always a lack, a void, which only the Unconditioned can fill. Ultimately, it is for this reason that all conditioned things are unsatisfactory. It is in the light of the Unconditioned that duḥkha is clearly seen as characteristic of all forms of conditioned existence.

Anitya: impermanence
The second fundamental characteristic of conditioned existence, anitya, is quite easily translated. Nitya is ‘permanent’, ‘eternal’, so with the addition of the negative prefix you get ‘impermanent’. It is also quite easily understood – intellectually at least. It can hardly be denied that all conditioned things, all compounded things, are constantly changing. They are by definition made up of parts – that is, compounded. And that which is compounded can also be reduced to its parts again – which is what happens, of course, all the time.

The laksṇa of anitya points to the fact that the whole universe from top to bottom, in all its grandeur, in all its immensity, is one vast congeries of processes of different types, taking place
at different levels – and all interrelated. Nothing ever stands still, not even for a fraction of a second. We do not see this though. When we look up we see the everlasting hills. Houses stand from generation to generation. Even our own bodies seem much the same from one year to the next. It is only when the increments of change add up to something notable, when a house is burnt down, or when we ourselves take to our deathbed, that we realize the truth of impermanence, that all conditioned things – from the minutest particles to the most massive stars – begin, continue, and then cease.

Anātman: emptiness of self
The third laksana, anātman, encapsulates the truth that all conditioned things are devoid of a permanent, unchanging self. So what does this mean? When the Buddha denied the reality of the idea of the ātman, what was he actually denying? The most common view in the Buddha’s day, the one with which he appears to have been most concerned, asserted that the ātman, or self, was individual, immaterial, conscious, unchanging, blissful, and sovereign – in the sense of exercising complete control over its own destiny. The Buddha maintained that there was no such entity, and he did so by appealing to experience. He said that if you look within, at your own mental life, you can account for everything you observe under just five headings: form, feeling, perception, volitions, and acts of consciousness. Nothing in these categories can be observed to be permanent. There is nothing sovereign or ultimately blissful amongst them. Everything in them arises in dependence on conditions.

However it is appropriate at this point to remind ourselves of Candrakirti’s warning: it is better to have a belief in the self as high as Mount Meru than to have a false view of the emptiness of the self. He is saying that it is better to believe in the Absolute Self than to believe that you are an illusion. We can have a great time as Buddhists knocking down the ultimate truths of other religions, saying ‘there’s no God’ and ‘there’s no soul’, but these things at least symbolize something above and beyond the material. We have to be careful never to allow a reduction of Buddhism to a form of materialism or nihilism through a misunderstanding of the emptiness of the self.

The ātman that is being denied by this doctrine is our present being conceived as something ultimate, which we are never going to transcend. What the doctrine is getting at is that beyond our present mode of existence there are other dimensions of being we can grow towards that are inconceivable to our present sense of individuality. In denying the soul the anātman doctrine is not denying something deeper. It is saying that we shut ourselves off from anything deeper by asserting, ‘no, this is me.’

The law of anātman could be stated thus: the self is illusory to the extent that it claims to be absolute and expects the universe to revolve around it – which is what causes neurotic craving and hatred. It is this self which is to be regarded as illusory. It is neither helpful nor healthy to attempt to destroy the empirical self. A better model for our practice is one that involves the refining of the empirical self until it evaporates (as it were) in some higher dimension. We are on altogether safer ground if we speak not in terms of the classical anātman doctrine, but in terms of growth. We can even speak of ‘something’ that grows, and sort out the metaphysics of that ‘something’ afterwards. At the appropriate time we will appreciate that this development of consciousness involves transcending our present individuality, and becoming part of something much larger.

Insight
Seeing conditioned existence as subject to suffering, impermanence, and emptiness of self is called vipaśyanā (Sanskrit) or vipassanā (Pali), which translates into English as ‘insight’. Insight
is not just intellectual understanding. It can be developed only on the basis of a controlled, purified, elevated, concentrated, integrated mind – in other words, through meditative practice. Insight is a direct intuitive perception that takes place in the depths of meditation. A preliminary intellectual understanding of these three characteristics is certainly helpful, but ultimately, insight is something that transcends the intellectual workings of the mind.

**The three liberations**

At this point we have to guard against a misunderstanding. The conditioned and the Unconditioned are not two different entities. It isn’t like that. They are more like two poles. Some Buddhist schools even say that the Unconditioned is the conditioned itself seen in its ultimate depths, or in a new, higher dimension. The Unconditioned is reached by knowing the conditioned deeply enough, by going right to the bottom of the conditioned and coming out the other side. The conditioned and the Unconditioned are two sides of the same coin. This important perspective is brought into focus by the teaching of the three vimokṣas, or ‘liberations’, also sometimes called the three samādhis, or the three ‘doors’ through which we can approach Enlightenment.

**The unbiased**

The first of these liberations is apraṇihita, the ‘unaiming’ or ‘unbiased’. It is a mental state without likes or dislikes, perfectly still, perfectly poised. It is an approach to the Unconditioned by way of not going in any particular direction. You only want to go in a particular direction when you have a desire. If there’s no particular direction in which you want to go, then you stay at rest. This state can be compared to a perfectly round sphere on a perfectly flat plane. Because the plane is absolutely level the sphere doesn’t roll in any direction. The ‘unbiased’ or ‘wishless’ vimokṣa is like this. It is a state of absolute equanimity in which one has no egoistic motive for doing – or not doing – anything. So this is an avenue of approach to reality, to Enlightenment.

**The signless**

The second liberation, the second door to the Unconditioned, is animitta, the ‘signless’. Nimitta literally means a sign, but it can also mean a word or a concept; so the animitta is the approach to the Unconditioned by bypassing all words and all thoughts. When you have this experience you realize that all words, all concepts, are totally inadequate. Not that they’re not very adequate, but that actually they don’t mean anything at all. This is another door through which one approaches the Unconditioned, through the vimokṣa or samādhi of signlessness.

**Emptiness**

The third liberation is śūnyatā, voidness or emptiness. In this state you see that everything is, as it were, completely transparent. Nothing has any own-being, nothing has any self-identity. Śūnyatā is a deep mystery not because it is an abstruse theory, but because it’s not a theory or a philosophy at all. Śūnyatā is the word we use to label a spiritual experience which we have no way of describing. It is a mystery because it is incommunicable. Whatever we may learn about Buddhism, and particularly about the philosophy of śūnyatā, it is always essentially a mystery to be experienced.

**The lakṣaṇas as gateways to the Unconditioned**

The three liberations represent different aspects of the Unconditioned. They show the Unconditioned from different points of view, which are also different ways of realizing it. You can penetrate into the Unconditioned through the unbiased, through the signless, and through voidness. But, as we have already said, you attain the Unconditioned by knowing the
conditioned in its depths. You penetrate to the three liberations through attention to the three lakṣaṇas. In this way the three lakṣaṇas themselves are doors to liberation.

If you look deeply enough at the essentially unsatisfactory nature of conditioned existence, then you will realize the Unconditioned as being without bias. You lose interest in the goals and aims of conditioned existence. You are quite still and poised, without inclination towards this or that, without any desire. Hence when you go into the conditioned through the aspect of suffering, you go into the Unconditioned through the aspect of the unbiased.

Alternatively, when you concentrate on the conditioned as being impermanent, transitory, without fixed identity, then going to the bottom of that – and coming out the other side – you realize the Unconditioned as the signless. You realize the emptiness of all concepts, you transcend all thought; you realize, if you like, ‘the eternal’ – though not the eternal that continues through time, but the eternal which transcends time.

And thirdly, if you concentrate on the conditioned as devoid of self, devoid of individuality, devoid of I, devoid of you, devoid of me, devoid of mine, then you approach the Unconditioned as śūnyatā, as the voidness.

The three lakṣaṇas, the three characteristics of conditioned existence, are of central importance in the Buddhist spiritual life. According to the Buddha, we don’t really see conditioned existence until we see it in these terms. If we see anything else, that’s just an illusion, a projection. And once we start seeing the conditioned as essentially unsatisfactory, impermanent, and empty of self, then we begin to get a glimpse of the Unconditioned – a glimpse that is our essential guide on the Buddhist path.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. What does Sangharakshita describe as “an unconfined and inapprehensible plenitude”? What do these words mean?

2. Think of some more examples, preferably from your own experience, of Conze’s first three types of concealed suffering: a) when a pleasure causes suffering to other beings; b) where a pleasure is tinged with anxiety because it may end or be taken away; c) when a pleasure makes us attached to something that also causes us suffering.

3. “Whatever conditioned things you may enjoy, there is always a lack, a void, which only the Unconditioned can fill.” 
   Do you agree?

4. Do you think that facing the fact that life contains an inescapable element of suffering makes us happier or more unhappy? Why? Do you think that recognising that conditioned things can’t bring us real satisfaction makes us happier or more unhappy? Why?

5. Is there a positive side to impermanence? What would the world be like if everything was permanent and unchanging?
6. Is there a positive side to anātman, emptiness of self nature? What might this idea imply for the way we live and act?

7. If you experienced the ‘unbiased’ liberation (sometimes called the ‘wishless’), would you ever do anything? Why didn’t the Buddha just sit still under a tree after his enlightenment?
Introduction
During the past few sessions we have explored the Buddhist vision of the conditionality of all phenomena, and in the last session Sangharakshita introduced the idea of a mysterious Unconditioned, or Nirvāṇa. We have also seen that conditionality can work in two ways – it can be reactive or creative.

However the idea that all physical, mental, and spiritual phenomena evolve by a process of conditionality from other pre-existing phenomena seems to pose a difficult question. If everything we do, say, feel and think is conditioned by what went before, how can we ever begin to break free? How can we do anything but live out what the past has made us?

In the following text Sangharakshita introduces a central concept from Mahāyāna Buddhism – the Bodhicitta, or ‘Will to Enlightenment’ – which throws some light on this problem. The ‘relative’ Bodhicitta is the Unconditioned acting on the conditioned – in Sangharakshita’s words, it is “the manifestation, even the eruption, within us, of something transcendental.” The need to open ourselves to the action of the Bodhicitta is an important part of Triratna’s approach to the Dharma, and in the following text Sangharakshita not only explores the nature of the Bodhicitta, he also gives us some advice about how we need to live the spiritual life to allow the Bodhicitta to manifest in us.

The Arising of the Bodhicitta

The Bodhisattva and the Bodhicitta
A Bodhisattva is one whose whole being is orientated towards Enlightenment, not for his own sake only, but for the sake of all sentient beings. Now there arises a most important, practical question: how does one become a Bodhisattva? How does one embark upon the realization of this sublime spiritual ideal? The traditional answer to this question is quite short and straightforward, but it demands considerable explanation. It is that one becomes a Bodhisattva upon the arising of the Bodhicitta.

Let us go back for a moment to the original Sanskrit term, which is bodhicitta-utpada. Bodhi means ‘spiritual Enlightenment’ or ‘spiritual Awakening’ and it consists in the seeing of Reality face to face. Citta means ‘mind’, ‘thought’, ‘consciousness’, or ‘heart’. Utpada means simply ‘arising’ or, more poetically, ‘awakening’.
The nature of the Bodhicitta

Bodhicitta-utpada is one of the most important terms in the whole of Buddhism, certainly in the Mahāyāna. It is usually translated into English as ‘the arising of the thought of Enlightenment’, but let me say at once that this is exactly what it is not. You could hardly have a worse translation. It is not a ‘thought’ about Enlightenment at all. The thought about Enlightenment has undoubtedly arisen in our minds as we sit here, but the Bodhicitta has not arisen – we haven't become transformed into Bodhisattvas. The Bodhicitta is something very much more than a thought about Enlightenment. Guenther translates it as ‘Enlightened Attitude’. I personally sometimes translate it as ‘Will to Enlightenment’ or as ‘Bodhi Heart’. Although all these alternative translations are considerably better than ‘thought of Enlightenment’, none of them is really satisfactory. This is not altogether the fault of the English language. It is perhaps the fault of language itself. We might say that ‘Bodhicitta’ is a very unsatisfactory term for the Bodhicitta.

The Bodhicitta is, in fact, not a mental state (or mental activity, or mental function) at all. It is certainly not a thought which you or I can entertain. It is not even an ‘act of will’, if by that I mean my personal will. The Bodhicitta is none of these.

The Bodhicitta basically represents the manifestation, even the eruption, within us, of something Transcendental. In traditional terms – I am thinking of Nāgārjuna’s exposition of the Bodhicitta in a short but profound work which he wrote on the subject – the Bodhicitta is not included in the ‘Five Skandhas’. This is a very significant statement indeed. Nāgārjuna’s statement, representing the best Mahayana tradition, requires a great deal of pondering.

The Five Skandhas of conditioned existence

Skandha is another of those untranslatable terms. It is usually translated as ‘aggregate’, or something equally unsatisfactory. It literally means ‘the trunk of a tree’, but that doesn’t get us far. Dr Conze delights to call the Five Skandhas the ‘Five Heaps’, which again doesn’t help us much. However, the Five Skandhas are one of the basic doctrinal categories of Buddhism.

The first of the Five Skandhas is rūpa. Rūpa means ‘bodily form’. Secondly, there is vedanā, which means ‘feeling’ or ‘emotion’ – positive or negative. Thirdly, there is samjñā, which is, very roughly, ‘perception’. Samjñā is the recognition of something as ‘that particular thing’. When you say, ‘that’s a clock,’ that is samjñā. You've recognized it as that particular thing. You've identified it, labelled it. Fourthly, the sanskāras. Some German scholars translate this term as ‘steering forces’. We may translate it, very roughly, as ‘volitional activities’, i.e. acts of will. Fifthly, there is vijñāna, which is ‘consciousness’. These are the Five Skandhas: rūpa (material form), vedanā (feeling or emotion), samjñā (perception), sanskāras (volitional activities), and vijñāna (consciousness). If you want to make anything of Buddhist metaphysics and philosophy, you must know these Five Skandhas inside out.

“Something transcendent”

In Buddhist thought the Five Skandhas are regarded as exhausting our entire psychophysical existence. In the entire range of our psychophysical existence, there's nothing – no thought, no feeling, no aspect of our physical existence – which is not included under one of the Five Skandhas. This is why, at the beginning of the Heart Sūtra, the text says that the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, coursing in the profound Perfection of Wisdom, looked down on the world (on conditioned existence) and saw the Five Skandhas. He saw that the whole of psychophysical conditioned existence consists of these five things alone; nothing exists on the conditioned level of existence which cannot be included under one or another of the Five Skandhas.
But the Bodhicitta is not included in the Five Skandhas. As the Five Skandhas comprise all that is of this world, and the Bodhicitta is not included in the Five Skandhas, it means that the Bodhicitta is something altogether out of this world, something transcendental. It is not a thought, nor a volition, nor an idea, nor a concept, but a profound, spiritual or transcendental experience, an experience which re-orientates our entire being.

**An illustration**
Perhaps I can make this matter clearer with the help of a comparison – it is only a comparison – from the Christian tradition. You can imagine someone in a Christian context talking about ‘thinking of God’. You might think of God as a beautiful old gentleman seated in the clouds, or as Pure Being, but ‘thinking about God’ would be just thinking about God. You wouldn’t describe it as a profound experience. Suppose, however, you were to speak of ‘the descent of the Holy Spirit’, this would be a very different matter. Thinking about God is one thing, but having the Holy Spirit descend upon you, and into you, so that you are filled by the Holy Spirit, is a quite different thing. If the thought of Enlightenment is analogous to thinking about God, the arising of the Bodhicitta is analogous to the descent upon one, in full force, of the Holy Spirit. Now this comparison is just for the purpose of illustration. There’s no question of equating these two different sets of doctrinal and spiritual concepts. I am concerned only to try to make clear the nature of the difference between thinking about Enlightenment and the arising of the Bodhicitta. The Bodhicitta is not just a thought about Enlightenment, but a profound spiritual experience, even a profound, spiritual, transcendental ‘entity’.

**Something transpersonal**
Not only is the Bodhicitta transcendental, but the Bodhicitta is not individual. This is another point that Nāgārjuna makes. We speak of the Bodhicitta as arising in this person or that person, and one might therefore think that there are a number of Bodhicittas arising in different people, making them all Bodhisattvas. In fact, it isn’t so at all. The Bodhicitta is not anybody’s individually, so there is no plurality of Bodhicittas arising in different people. Your thought of Enlightenment is your thought of Enlightenment, my thought of Enlightenment is mine; there are many thoughts. But your Bodhicitta is my Bodhicitta, and my Bodhicitta is your Bodhicitta; there is only one Bodhicitta.

The Bodhicitta is only one, and individuals in whom the Bodhicitta has arisen participate in that one Bodhicitta, or manifest that one Bodhicitta, in varying degrees. The Mahāyāna writers liken the Bodhicitta to the moon. The Bodhicitta is reflected, as it were, in different people, just as the moon is reflected variously in different bodies of water. There are many reflections, but only one moon; in the same way, there are many manifestations, but one Bodhicitta.

What is known in the Mahāyāna tradition as the ‘Absolute Bodhicitta’ – the Bodhicitta outside space and time – is identical with Reality itself. Being identical with Reality, the Absolute Bodhicitta is beyond change or, rather, is beyond the opposition between change and non-change. But this doesn’t hold good with what is known in the tradition as the ‘relative Bodhicitta’. The relative Bodhicitta is an active force at work. This is why I prefer to translate Bodhicitta as ‘Will to Enlightenment’ (bearing in mind that one is speaking of the relative, as distinct from the Absolute, Bodhicitta). This Will to Enlightenment, though, is not an act of will of any individual. The Bodhicitta is no more an act of anybody’s individual will than it is anybody’s individual thought. We might in fact think of the Bodhicitta as a sort of cosmic will at work in the universe, in the direction of what we can only think of as universal redemption: the liberation, the Enlightenment, ultimately, of all sentient beings.
We might even think of the Bodhicitta as a sort of 'spirit of Enlightenment', immanent in the world, and leading individuals to higher and ever higher degrees of spiritual perfection. This being the case, it is clear that individuals do not possess the Bodhicitta. If you possess it, it is not the Bodhicitta, it is something else – your own thought or idea perhaps. The Transcendental, non-individual, cosmic Bodhicitta you have missed. Individuals do not possess the Bodhicitta. We may say that it is the Bodhicitta that possesses individuals. Those of whom the Bodhicitta 'takes possession' (in whom the Bodhicitta arises) become Bodhisattvas. They live for the sake of Enlightenment; they strive to actualize, for the benefit of all, the highest potentialities that the universe contains.

**The Bodhicitta, the spiritual community, and helping others**

The Bodhicitta is something that supervenes upon individual spiritual effort when it reaches a very high degree of purity, positivity, and openness. You surrender to it, open yourself to it, become a channel for it. You are no longer 'you' in a narrow egotistic sense. There is something higher working through you. You are still recognizably there as an individual functioning in the world, but it is not just you functioning – it is the Bodhicitta moving in the direction of the Enlightenment of all beings.

That is why I have sometimes said that the Bodhicitta manifests within the context of the spiritual community. The spiritual community, especially to the extent that it is a transcendental community, is an embodiment of the Bodhicitta. Members of the spiritual community can act in the Bodhisattva spirit to whatever extent they are capable. Just as the Bodhisattva aspires to give whatever support he can to the beings of the whole cosmos, so on our own level, if we are trying to practice the Bodhisattva ideal, that should naturally involve giving whatever support we can to those within your immediate environment, our spiritual community. If we just regard the spiritual community as a convenience for our own spiritual development, we are living in accordance with a very narrow spiritual ideal. This narrow ideal becomes self-defeating, because you cannot really help yourself without helping others. If you think in terms of helping yourself to the exclusion of helping others, you have a very rigid idea of self and others, and as long as that fixed view is there you can’t even gain Enlightenment for yourself.

**How the Bodhicitta arises**

The Bodhicitta is said to arise as a result of a coalescence between two trends of experience which are generally considered to be contradictory. We may describe these as the trend of withdrawal and the trend of involvement.

**The trend of withdrawal and renunciation**

The first trend represents the movement of withdrawal from mundane things, which is renunciation. One withdraws from worldly activities, worldly thoughts, worldly associations. This movement of withdrawal is aided by a particular practice, which is called ‘Reflection on the Faults of Conditioned Existence’. You reflect that conditioned existence, life within the round of existence, is profoundly unsatisfactory. It entails all sorts of experiences of an unpleasant nature: things one wants but can’t get, people one likes whom one is separated from, things one doesn’t want to do which one has to do. There is the whole wretched business of earning a living. There is attending to the physical body—feeding it, doctoring it when it gets sick. There is looking after one’s family—husband, wife, children, relations. You feel that all this is too much and you have to get away from it all, out of it all. You desire to escape from the round of existence into Nirvana. You wish to get away from all the fluctuations and vicissitudes of this mundane life into the peace and rest of the Eternal.
The trend of involvement
The second trend, the trend of involvement, represents concern for living beings. One thinks, 'Yes, I would like to get out. But what about other people? What would happen to them? There are some who can't stand it even as well as I can. If I abandon them, how will they get out?' This trend is aided by a practice called 'Reflection on the Sufferings of Sentient Beings'. In the trend of withdrawal, you reflect on the faults of conditioned existence only far as they affect you, but here you reflect on them as they affect other living beings.

You just have to look around at the people you know, and reflect on all the troubles they have. There may be someone who has lost their job and doesn't know what to do. Another person's marriage has broken up. Someone else has perhaps had a nervous breakdown. Someone has been bereaved, has maybe lost their husband or wife or their child. If you reflect, you realize that there is not a single person you know who is not suffering in some way. Even if they are happy in the ordinary sense, there are still things that they have to bear: separation, illness, the weakness and tiredness of old age, and finally death, which they certainly don't want.

If you cast your gaze wider, you can reflect on how much suffering there is in so many parts of the world. There are wars. There are catastrophes of various kinds, such as floods or famines. People die in very horrible ways. You can cast your eye further still and think of animals, how they suffer, not only at the hands of other animals but at the hands of man. You can thus see that the whole world of living beings is involved in suffering – so much of it! When one reflects on the sufferings of sentient beings in this way, one thinks, 'How can I think simply in terms of getting out of it all? How can I think of getting away myself to some private Nirvāṇa, which may be very satisfactory to me personally, but which doesn't help them?'

Breaking through the conflict
One thus experiences a sort of conflict – if one's nature is big enough to embrace the possibilities of such a conflict. On the one hand, one wants to get out; on the other, one wants to stay here. The trend of withdrawal is there; the trend of involvement is there. To choose either alternative is easy: it is easy either to withdraw into spiritual individualism or to remain involved in a worldly way. Many people do in fact take the easy solution. Some choose to get out into spiritual individualism, private spiritual experience. Others remain in the world, but in a purely secular sense, without much of a spiritual outlook.

Although they are contradictory, both the trend of withdrawal and the trend of involvement must be developed in the spiritual life. We might say that the trend of withdrawal embodies the Wisdom aspect of the spiritual life, and the trend of involvement embodies the Compassion aspect. Both of these are to be developed. That joint development is helped by what is known as 'Recollection of the Buddha'. One constantly bears in mind the ideal of Perfect Enlightenment, Enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings, as exemplified most perfectly by Gautama the Buddha.

What one has to do is not allow the tension between these two trends to relax. If one does that, then in a sense one is lost. Even though they are contradictory, one has to pursue both simultaneously. One has to get out and stay in, see the faults of conditioned existence while at the same time feeling the sufferings of sentient beings, develop both Wisdom and Compassion. As one pursues both of these trends simultaneously, the tension builds up and up (it is, of course, not a psychological tension but a spiritual tension). It is built up until a point is reached when one can't go any further. When one reaches that point, then something happens. We might describe it as an explosion. As the result of the tension generated by following these two contradictory trends simultaneously, there occurs a breakthrough into a higher dimension of
spiritual consciousness, where the two trends of withdrawal and involvement are no longer two, not because they have been artificially amalgamated into one, but because the plane on which they were seen as two different things has been transcended.

When one breaks through one has the experience of being simultaneously withdrawn and involved, 'out' of it and 'in' it at the same time. Wisdom and Compassion have become non-dual. When the explosion occurs, when for the first time one is both withdrawn and involved, having both Wisdom and Compassion, not as two things, but as 'one' thing, then one may say that the Bodhicitta has arisen.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. "The Bodhicitta basically represents the manifestation, even the eruption, within us, of something Transcendental."
   Do you like or dislike this idea? How far might your response be determined by your past conditioning?

2. Have you ever felt that you were helped in your spiritual life or prodded in a particular direction by 'something' that seemed to come from outside your normal self? If so, do you think this could relate in any way to what Sangharakshita describes as “a sort of ‘spirit of Enlightenment’ … leading individuals to higher and ever higher degrees of spiritual perfection”?

3. How does Sangharakshita’s description of the Bodhicitta differ from the God of Christianity and other theistic religions?

4. What might the “near enemies” of withdrawal and involvement be?

5. What form would the desire for withdrawal and personal liberation take for you? In other words, if you were just thinking of yourself, what would be your ideal spiritual lifestyle, your spiritual daydream?

6. Do you tend more towards being too “spiritual” and withdrawn from “worldly” activity, or too worldly and involved? Which do you therefore need to emphasise more – withdrawal or involvement – to set up the balanced tension recommended by Sangharakshita? What could you do about this in practical terms?