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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 *asaṃskṛta*. *saṃ* means 'together', *ṛta* is 'made' or 'put', and *a-* is a negative prefix, so *asaṃskṛta* literally means 'not put together' or 'uncompounded'. 'The conditioned' is therefore *saṃskṛta*, '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'. Duh- 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 *lakṣaṇa* 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 lakṣaṇa, 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 Candrakīrti'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?