

Triratna Dharma Training Course for Mitras – Foundation Year

Part 4: Exploring Buddhist Practice – Wisdom

Week 3: The Wheel of Life

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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.

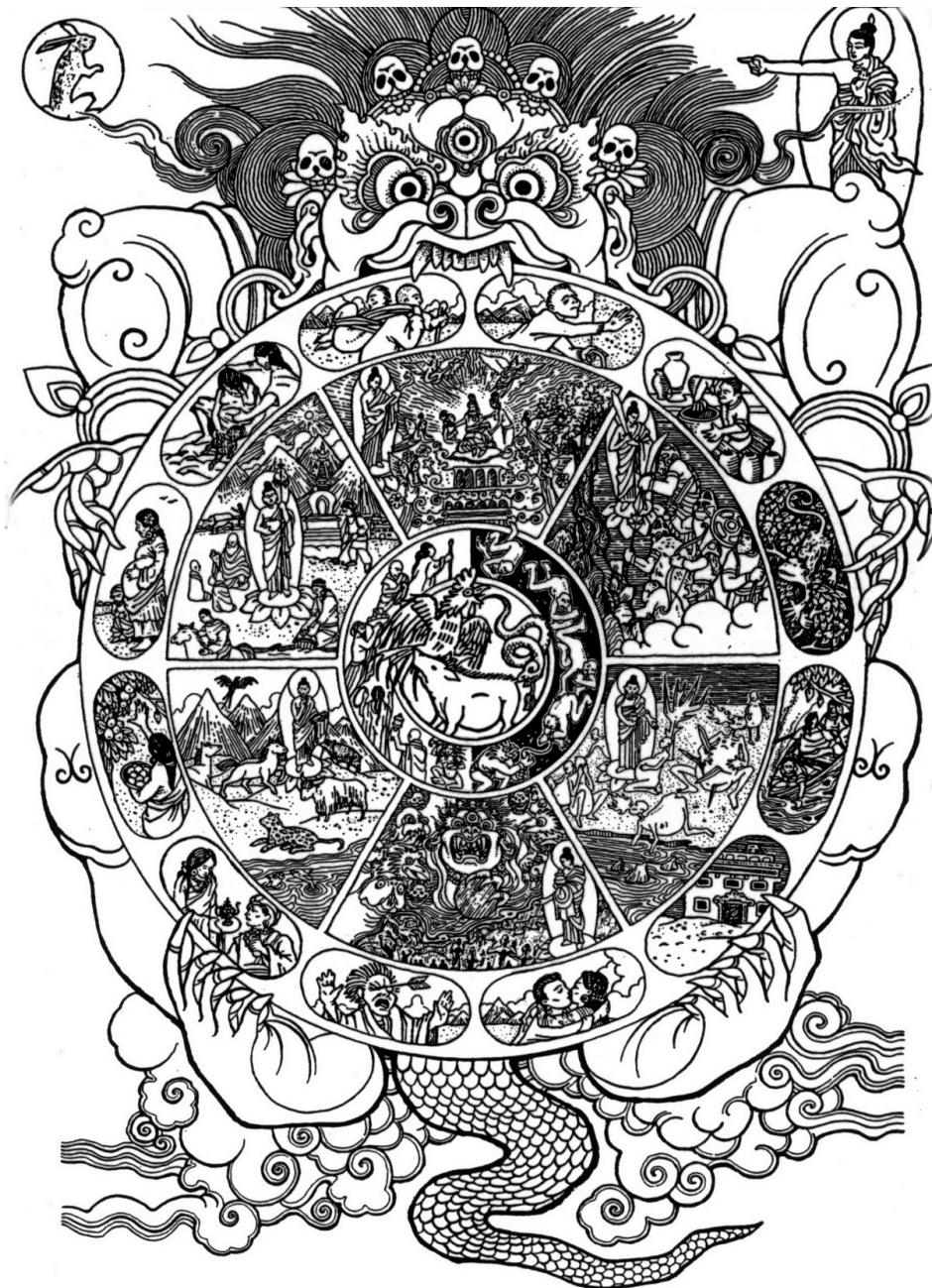
The creative mode

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 FWBO 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 users manual of saṃsāra. 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 give 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. Theirs is a place of big egos, competition, envy, and aggression. 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, to 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?