
The Buddhist Perspective on Cause and Condition

Dear Venerables and Dharma Friends,

Over 2,500 years ago, Sakyamuni Buddha was born into this world for the cause and condition of a major mission. This major mission, this cause and condition, is what we now commonly refer to as the “Buddha Dharma,” the Truth realized by the Buddha.

The Buddhist teachings differ from scholastic inquiry and knowledge. Usual scholastic inquiry focuses on explanation of appearances; it is an interpretation based on the name and form of phenomena. In contrast, Buddhism emphasizes the penetrative understanding of the nature of phenomena; it is ultimate and complete. For example, let us talk about my hand. Common knowledge holds that it is a hand.

Medical science looks at it as a structure of bones, muscles, nerves, and cells. Literature defines the hand in terms of style, gesture, and expression. The philosophical interpretation of the hand sees it as the embodiment of destiny and friendship. In physics, the extension and contraction of the hand is force and movement. In summation, the hand is regarded as real, as something that truly exists. In contrast, the Buddhist view of my hand is like a penetrating X-ray, which surmises that the hand is really only an illusive form, unstable in nature, and will eventually decay and vanish. It is a phenomenon that is ultimately empty in nature. Let's say I extend my hand and make a grasping motion. Common knowledge and intellect would say that I have grasped some air and dust particles. It is a movement and gesture. From the Buddhist point of view, the grasp is "like a dream, illusion, bubble, or shadow, like the dew or lightning." It is only a phenomenon that exists because of the combination of certain causes and conditions. Thus, we can see that human perspectives are narrow and confined; they often hinder us from looking at the world in the radiance of ultimate wisdom. Worldly happiness and suffering do not have an absolute existence

of their own. They arise only because of the differentiations we make in our perception and cognition. When we come to understand and accept the Buddhist teachings, we need to change our perspectives. We must go beyond superficial phenomena into the ultimate reality of “suchness,” illuminate our prajna-wisdom, and sow bodhi seeds. Only then, will the Dharma water of samadhi flow into the spiritual fields of our hearts.

The scripture tells the following story that will further develop my explanation. There was once an old lady who cried all the time. Her elder daughter was married to an umbrella merchant while the younger daughter was the wife of a noodle vendor. On sunny days, she worried, “Oh no! The weather is so nice and sunny. No one is going to buy any umbrellas. What will happen if the shop has to be closed?” These worries made her sad. She just could not help but cry. When it rained, she would cry for the younger daughter. She thought, “Oh no! My younger daughter is married to a noodle vendor. You cannot dry noodles without the sun. Now there will be no noodles to sell. What should we do?” As a result, the old lady lived in sorrow everyday. Whether sunny or

rainy, she grieved for one of her daughters. Her neighbors could not console her and jokingly called her “the crying lady.”

One day, she met a monk. He was very curious as to why she was always crying. She explained the problem to him. The monk smiled kindly and said, “Madam! You don’t have to worry. I will show you the way to happiness, and you will not need to grieve any more.”

The crying lady was very excited. She immediately asked the monk to show her what to do. The master replied, “It is very simple. You just need to change your perspective. On sunny days, do not think of your elder daughter not being able to sell umbrellas. Instead think of the younger daughter who will be able to dry her noodles. With such good strong sunlight, she will be able to make plenty of noodles and her business will be very good. When it rains, think about the elder daughter’s umbrella store. With the rain, everyone must buy umbrellas. She will sell a lot of umbrellas and her store will prosper.”

The old lady saw the light. She followed the monk’s instruction. After a while, she did not cry anymore; instead, she was smiling everyday. From

that day on she was known as “the smiling lady.”

When we have worries and problems, if we all emulate “the crying lady” and change our perspectives a little, we can transform negativity into happiness and fortune. This does not require magical power. If we can comprehend a minute amount of the wondrous Dharma of Buddhism and apply it effectively during pivotal junctures in our lives, we can have breakthroughs in our understandings. We will then turn foolishness into wisdom, and ignorance into enlightenment.

Anyone who has some knowledge regarding Buddhism knows that Sakyamuni Buddha achieved enlightenment while gazing at the evening stars under a bodhi tree on a “diamond” throne. When the bright shooting star streaked across the sky, what did the Buddha come to realize? He had seen the ultimate reality of the universe and life.

What then is the Truth realized by the Buddha? It is the law of cause and condition, the law of dependent origination.

If we can understand the law of cause and condition, the law of dependent origination, and if we can live by this truth, we will be just like the Buddha. We

can then abandon all the pains and anxieties that are associated with this imperfect worldly existence. The scripture states, “All phenomena arise out of causes and conditions; all phenomena cease due to causes and conditions.” What do we mean by causes and conditions? Causes and conditions are nothing other than human interactions and relationships. Relationships can be loving and respectful, antagonistic and competitive, or good and bad. If we can grasp the law of cause and condition, we can understand the rise and fall of sentient beings’ welfare, the origin and extinction of existence, and the reality of the universe and humanity.

There are usually four ways people look at the ever arising and ceasing of causes and conditions:

A. Without Cause, Without Condition

Commonly held beliefs about life include pre-determination, random chance, and divine design. These perspectives do not look at life from the standpoint of cause and condition. For example, rocks do not normally produce oil, but let us suppose that someone accidentally mines some fossil oil from rocks. Instead of analyzing the fossil oil and finding the cause of its formation, the person just assumes it

to be a random occurrence. When a child overeats and chokes to death, instead of thinking they should have prevented the child from overeating, the family members lament it as destiny. An unsuccessful robbery attempt turns into a murder; the family of the victim just blames it on predetermination. The most pitiful people are those who lay all responsibility at the doorsteps of the gods. They deny the value of choice, the meaning of effort, and the importance of self-determination. This total reliance on destiny negates the significance of self-help. It is an erroneous and one-sided view. It is not in accordance with the law of cause and condition.

B. Without Cause, but With Condition

Many people do not believe in past causes, conditions, and effects. They believe that life depends on present conditions and current opportunities. They look at mishaps as the lack of proper conditions, or as uncontrollable predicaments, such as, “Everything is in place except for the east wind.”¹ Some siblings in a family persevere and become successful. Others just

¹ This is a saying about how the famous wise minister and military strategist Zhuge Kongming was set to win a battle except for the last crucial condition, the east wind.

give up and fail. They blame it all on the lack of opportunities or ill fate and overlook their differences in education and character. Students in the same class finish with different grades. They attribute the differences only to the apparent condition of how much they apply themselves and overlook the underlying causes of the variations in aptitude and intellect. This is only a partial and biased understanding of cause and condition.

C. With Cause, but Without Condition

Many people look at cause and condition separately. They attribute their circumstances to causes but not to conditions. They overlook the wondrous and dynamic interplay of cause and condition. There are many examples of talented people who fail to live up to their potential, precisely due to the lack of proper conditions in which to exert themselves. When first entering the work force, they apply for jobs that call for experienced workers. Finally when they are mature, they only find openings for new graduates. Such situations happen all the time. Some people view cause and condition as separate and independent. Sometimes they believe in cause but not in condition. Other times, they only accept the existence of condi-

tion. These people fail to realize that cause and condition are not static, but are forever changing in the space-time continuum, never standing still to wait for anyone. There is an old saying which illustrates this point, “Good begets blessings; evil will be punished. It is not that there are no effects due to our acts; it is just a matter of time.”

The three views described above are biased and do not reflect the correct interpretation of the Buddhist view on cause and condition. In Buddhism, we believe that cause, condition, reward, and punishment are all intertwined, one giving rise to the other. All circumstances happen because of “the existence of causes and conditions.”

D. With Cause and With Condition

In Buddhism, the common thread for all Dharma is the law of cause and condition, regardless of whether it is the school of Mahayana or Theravada, whether it is viewed from the angle of principles or phenomena, or whether the perspective is worldly or transcendental. All phenomenal existences are products of the proper mix of causes and conditions. It is written in the *Surangama Sutra*, “All holy teachings, from elementary to profound, cannot depart from the

law of cause and condition.” It is like building a house. We need bricks, wood, cement, and other materials. The construction can only be completed when one has all the essential materials and all prerequisites are met. For example, if we want to throw a party, there are many conditions to consider. Do we know our guests well? Can they come? Can we find the appropriate accommodations? Only when all the proper causes and conditions are present can the party be a success. If not, the party will be a flop.

Once, a rich man threw a party. When half of the guests had already arrived, the chef asked if he could start to serve. The man told him to wait a little bit longer. After waiting a few hours, many important guests still had not arrived. Impatient and irritated, he complained carelessly, “Oh! It is not easy to throw a party. Those who should have come have not; those who should not have come are all here.”

His seated guests were shocked. They thought to themselves, “I guess I am not really invited. If I am not welcome, I may as well go home.” One by one, the guests quietly slipped away. Seeing the party was dying, the rich man made another careless remark, “Oh! It is not easy to throw a party. Those who should

leave have not. Those who should not have left are all gone.”

After hearing these thoughtless words, every guest was upset. They all stood up and left the party in a huff.

With the appropriate causes and conditions, all endeavors will become successful. If we destroy our own causes and conditions or if we cannot seize the moment available to us due to our own causes and conditions, success will be hard to come by. Allow me to build some good causes and conditions with you all today, and let me explain the Buddhist view on cause and condition in the following four points.

I. Cause and Condition and Human Relationships

Today, it is popular to talk about “interpersonal relationships.” With good interpersonal relationships, everything goes smoothly; otherwise, obstacles and problems abound. Events are the products of combinations of forces with “the major force called the cause; the lesser forces called conditions.” Interpersonal relationships are a form of cause and condition.

If we want to have a successful business, we must acquire sufficient capital, research the market, and then establish investments. If we do our homework, our businesses will thrive; otherwise, they will fail. Planning and setting up suitable business arrangements are the causes and conditions of business.

We must learn to be humble and be appreciative of the relationships we have with others. Arrogance shuts off even the best of causes and conditions. One such example is the meeting between Bodhidharma and Emperor Wu of the Liang Dynasty.

Master Bodhidharma, the First Patriarch of Chan School, arrived from India to Guangzhou, China by sea at the time of the Datong era of Emperor Wu during the Liang Dynasty. The Emperor quickly sent envoys to accompany Bodhidharma to the capital. Emperor Wu, who wished to show off his past accomplishments, proudly asked Bodhidharma, “I have built numerous temples, published many scriptures, and supported the sangha. How much merit do you think I have accumulated?”

Dampening the Emperor’s enthusiasm, Bodhidharma replied coolly, “None at all.”

The Emperor was very upset. He asked further,

“What do you mean? I have done so many good and outstanding acts of benevolence.”

Bodhidharma replied, “Your Majesty! They are imperfect causes and will only bring you minor rewards in the human and celestial realms. They are as illusive as shadows. They are only empty phenomena.”

“Well! What then are real merits?”

“Do not become attached to the name and form of merits,” smiled Bodhidharma. “Sanctify your thoughts. Realize the ultimate nature of emptiness. Abstain from greed and do not pursue worldly rewards.”

The Emperor could not understand these profound words. To show off his wisdom as the emperor of his people, he asked in his usual arrogant tone, “Between heaven and earth, who is the holiest?”

Bodhidharma saw through the vanity of the Emperor. Not letting up, he replied, “Between heaven and earth, there are neither the holy nor the ordinary.”

Emperor Wu asked loudly, “Do you know who I am?”

Bodhidharma smiled lightly, shook his head and said, “I do not know.”

The Emperor always considered himself a great benefactor of Buddhism. He was conceited and not truly sincere about learning the Truth. How could he possibly take such slighting by Bodhidharma? He immediately flaunted his powers as the emperor and rudely sent Bodhidharma away. In so doing, he had lost the cause and condition to learn Chan from Bodhidharma; he had dismissed the excellent opportunity for the metamorphosis of Chinese Buddhism. Although he eventually regretted his behavior and tried to send for Bodhidharma again, it was already too late.

As the Emperor was egotistic and hungry for fame, he became caught up in the name of merits and swayed away from the Middle Path. He could not realize the ultimate truth that is “beyond true or false, beyond good or bad.” Since the cause was improper and conditions were poor, it was no wonder that the encounter went nowhere.

It is written in *the Avatamsaka Sutra*, “All the water in the oceans can be consumed, all momentary thoughts as innumerable as dust particles can be counted, all the space can be measured, and all the winds can be stopped; yet, the realm of the Buddha

can never be fully described.” So, for your elucidation, I will describe an episode involving the Sixth Patriarch, Huineng, that can further illustrate the law of cause and condition.

When Huineng was young, he traveled thirty days from Guangdong to Hube to learn the Dharma from the Fifth Patriarch. When they first met, the Fifth Patriarch immediately knew that Huineng had great potential and that the right causes and conditions were ripening. He asked, “Where are you from? And what are you seeking?”

“I have come from very far away, from Lingnan. My only goal is to be a patriarch and become a Buddha.”

Hearing such a reply, the Fifth Patriarch was impressed. He wanted to test if Huineng had cultivated the right conditions and asked him pointedly, “You are only a barbarian from the South. How dare you wish to become a Buddha?”

Huineng replied calmly and confidently, “People may be from the south or north, but the Buddha Nature is non-regional. When the right cause and condition exists, anyone can become a Buddha. Why not me?”

Huineng struck a chord with the Fifth Patriarch. He reflected and replied, “Okay! You are allowed to stay here and work. Report to the threshing mill.”

Everyday for the next eight months, Huineng used a huge axe to collect firewood. Everyday, he wore stone weights around his waist to act as ballasts in helping him thresh grains. Not once did the Fifth Patriarch visit him; not once did the Fifth Patriarch teach him one word. Huineng did not complain or get upset. It was late one night when the Fifth Patriarch finally handed Huineng his robe and bowl, making him the Sixth Patriarch. The Fifth Patriarch explained himself with this verse:

*Those with sentience come to sow
In fields of causation, fruits will grow.
Ultimately without sentience,
Having nothing to sow,
Without nature, there is nothing to grow.*

What the Fifth Patriarch was saying through this verse is this: When you first arrived from the distant land of Lingnan to learn the Truth from me, the cause was ripe and you were sincere. The environment and conditions, however, were inadequate. I first needed

you to polish and cultivate yourself for a period of time to the point “ultimately without sentience, having nothing to sow; without nature, there is nothing to grow.” Only when the right causes and conditions were met, would I then transmit the teachings.

From this story, we can see how cause and condition can greatly influence how people interact with one another. Without the appropriate cause and condition, human relationships will be imperfect and regretful. Events must await the maturity of cause and condition. It is like planting flowers. Some seeds planted in spring may blossom in the autumn. Others may take a year to bloom. Some varieties may take even a few years to flower and bear fruit. Han Yu, a famous Chinese scholar of the Tang Dynasty, was demoted and transferred to the remote area of Chaozhou. As this area was far removed and culturally backward, there were few learned scholars with whom he could converse. When he heard Chan Master Dadian was preaching in the area, he immediately went over for a visit. It just happened that the Chan master was meditating, so Han Yu decided to wait outside. After a long wait, as the master was still in meditation, Han Yu became restless so he stood up

and was about to leave. The master's attendant suddenly said, "First, influence through meditative concentration, then eradicate [arrogance] with wisdom." The words resonated like strong spring thunder and awakened Han Yu. Because his conditions of timing and opportunity were just right at that moment, Han Yu was able and ready to recognize the teaching and learn the way of emancipation from the attendant.

Several years ago, a female university graduate left Taiwan with high hopes and traveled halfway across the world to study for her doctorate degree in the United States. After a period of two years in the States, she felt that life was empty and aimless so she packed her bags and returned to Taiwan. From Taipei, she took a two-hour train ride to Hsinchu and became a Buddhist nun. This news story received a lot of attention when reported by the media. The famous Professor Liang Shiqiu sighed, "If what she had wanted originally was to renounce and become a nun, all she had to do was take a two-hour train ride from Taipei to Hsinchu. There was no need to fly to America. Why spend all that time struggling and then choose to renounce?"

The causes and conditions of human affairs are

rather similar to the unfolding circumstances relating to this woman's renunciation of home life to become a nun. Events may come and go, people may meet and separate; however random it may appear, there is meaning in all turns of events. The following Chinese saying captures this point well, "Without a bone-chilling freeze, how could plum blossoms have such great fragrance?" Everything must first have the right causes and proper conditions before results are produced and other favorable conditions are generated. There is the story of Chan Master Shitou Xiqian and his master, Qingyuan Xingsi. When they first met, Qingyuan asked Shitou if he was a student of the Sixth Patriarch, and if he still had any questions, "What did you take with you when you first went to Caoxi?"

"My nature was complete," Shitou smiled. "I was not missing anything prior to studying with the Sixth Patriarch in Caoxi."

"If everything was perfect, why then did you bother to go to study in Caoxi?"

Shitou Xiqian replied definitively, "If I had not gone, how would I have known that I was not lacking in anything? How could I have seen through my true

and free nature?”

All causes and conditions are within our true nature. We must realize the Truth in daily living. The continual flow of pure refreshing water is a form of cause and condition. The blossoming of beautiful flowers everywhere is another form of cause and condition. Parents who raise us are our causes and conditions in family relationships. Teachers who educate us are our causes and conditions in the pursuit of knowledge. Farmers, workers, and merchants who supply our daily needs are the causes and conditions of living in this society. Drivers who transport us here and there are the causes and conditions of traveling. Turning on the television and watching television programs are the causes and conditions of entertainment. It is with these wondrous combinations of causes and conditions that we can live happily and freely.

Regarding the causes and conditions of human relationships, I will cite a verse that can usually be found in temples next to statues of Maitreya Bodhisattva:

*Before our eyes are people
connected to us through conditions;*

*As we meet and befriend each other,
How can we not be filled with joy?
The world is full
of difficult and unbearable problems;
As we end up reaping what we sow,
Why not open our minds
and be magnanimous?*

II. How Do We Know Cause and Condition Exist?

How can we be certain that cause and condition really exist? How can it be discovered and harvested? For example, suppose a machine in a factory suddenly stops functioning. The technician opens up the machine and discovers a small screw is broken. This small screw is the cause. When cause and condition are not fully satisfied, the machine will not function. When we build a house, if a supporting beam is missing, the roof will collapse. When any ingredient of cause or condition is missing, it can have a great impact on the circumstances of our lives.

Buddhism teaches that our bodies are made up of the combination of the four great elements of earth, water, fire, and wind. These four great elements are

the causes. We fall ill when the four elements are not harmonized. Why does a flower fail to blossom? Why is a harvest not abundant? It could be a lack of proper conditions, such as inadequate irrigation or fertilizer. Even the space shuttle can be delayed by a simple computer problem. With the slightest offset in cause and condition, the resulting circumstance will be totally different.

No matter what problems or difficulties we face, we must first reflect. We should examine the situation closely for any missing causes and conditions. We should not simply blame the gods or other people, or else we are creating further troubles for ourselves. There are many situations in which a couple falls in love, only to find that the families oppose the marriage, criticizing the other party as unsuitable, poor, etc. When these conditions, or secondary causes, are absent, the marriage will not work. Other couples fall in love at first sight and get married with lightning speed. The rapid development of events is even beyond their comprehension. The man may reason that it is a case of "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." The woman may attribute it to the fact that "With the right conditions, people come to meet from thousands

of miles away.” This is what we call ripened conditions.

I will relate another story to illustrate the existence of cause and condition. Once, King Milinda asked Bhiksu Nagasena, “Are your eyes the real you?”

Bhiksu Nagasena replied, “No!”

King Milinda further inquired, “What about the ears?”

“No!”

“Does the nose represent you?”

“No!”

“Does the tongue represent you?”

“No!”

“Then, does it mean that your body is the real you?”

“No, the existence of the body is only an illusory combination.”

“The mind must be the real you then.”

“It is not either.”

King Milinda was annoyed and asked further “Well, if the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and thoughts are not you, then tell me, where is your true self?”

Bhiksu Nagasena grinned and replied with a question, “Does the window represent the house?”

The King was taken by surprise and struggled for an answer, “No!”

“How about the door?”

“No!”

“Does the bricks and tiles represent the house?”

“No!”

“Then, what about the furniture and pillars?”

“No, of course not.”

Bhiksu Nagasena smiled and asked, “If the window, door, bricks, tiles, furniture, and pillars do not represent the house, then where is the real house?”

King Milinda finally understood that causes, conditions, and effects cannot be separated nor understood through a biased and partial view. A house can only be built with the fulfillment of many conditions. Likewise, human existence also needs the satisfaction of many conditions. If we know the law of cause and condition, believe in its existence, plant good causes everywhere, and cultivate advantageous conditions all the time, our lives will be smooth paths, full of success. To conclude, I will give you this verse

to ponder:

If one understands

The law of cause and condition,

One can find spring

In the midst of autumn frost and winter snow.

III. The Different Levels of Cause and Condition

How many varieties of cause and condition are there? We can examine this from four different perspectives:

A. Having or Not Having

Cause and condition is not a matter of knowledge. It cannot be learned by research or via debate. It must be experienced through the heart and mind amidst daily living. If we come to understand cause and condition from real practice and experience, then this is “having” the true understanding of cause and condition. Under the law of cause and condition, our natures are all equal. The universe is us and we are the universe. If we comprehend the law of cause and condition superficially through intellectual speculation or as mere word expressions, then this is “not having” the true understanding of cause and condi-

tion. The result will be as futile as looking for fish on trees.

B. Wholesome or Unwholesome

Causes and conditions can be good or evil. Wholesome causes and conditions are good. Unwholesome causes and conditions are evil. Let us suppose a person lives to be a hundred years old. If he/she does not understand the cause of arising and ceasing—the ultimate reason for existence—and only comprehends cause and condition superficially, he/she will be easily enslaved by changing environments and be trapped in dark and evil causes and conditions without the chance for liberation. On the other hand, if a person has a firm belief and correct understanding, then all resulting causes and conditions will be bright and virtuous.

C. Internal or External

Causes and conditions can be internal or external. External causes and conditions are the commonly noticed environmental factors. Internal causes and conditions are more related to intrinsic value. It is like farming a field. The external factors may be the same, but the harvest from different seeds is not. Seeds, in this instance, have different causes and conditions of

value. For example, the siblings of the same parents have different temperaments. The students of the same teacher have varying abilities. External causes and conditions such as parents and teachers may be the same, but the internal causes and conditions of value such as talent and aptitude are very much dissimilar. Therefore, we say that cause and condition may be external and internal. Although external conditions may be complete, if internal causes are inadequate, the resulting effects will leave much to be desired.

D. Correct or Erroneous

Causes and conditions can be correct or erroneous. Some people, when they become ill, know that illness is caused by disorders in the body or mind. They are willing to undergo treatment so they can be cured. This is the “correct cause and condition.” In contrast, there are some people who, when sick, are confused about the true reason for their malady. They are suspicious and attribute their sickness to divine punishment. They go about looking for magical charms, special spells, or they ingest incense ashes; their illness will only worsen. This is “erroneous cause and condition.” Life may be smooth or bumpy,

and obstacles may be many or few. Many of life's difficulties are rooted in misconceptions about the law of cause and condition. We must know how to apply the correct understanding and shun the erroneous views.

Furthermore, as far as the understanding of cause and condition is concerned, there are four levels. They are right understanding, cause and condition, sunyata, and prajna.

A. Right Understanding

As ordinary people, we can understand the law of cause and condition at the level of right understanding. Most of us have the experience and intellect to enable us to affirm cause and condition in the world. When confronted with sickness, distress, and misfortune, we are able to find the cause and can therefore liberate ourselves from suffering. This is the understanding of cause and condition from a worldly angle.

B. Cause and Condition

Those who have reached the level of arhat have realized the transcendental truth. Since they know that the five skandhas (form, feeling, perception, mental formation, and consciousness) are empty and

can abandon the hindrances of knowledge, they elevate themselves to a higher spiritual level. They understand that there is no absolute and that all existences are interdependent. They have realized the true nature of cause and condition.

C. Sunyata

Sunyata, emptiness, is the realm of bodhisattvas. They have realized both the worldly and transcendental truths and can function in this world in a transcendental way. They realize that, “Forms and smells are all Dharma. Words or quietude are ultimately Chan.” When one can view the law of cause and condition from the point of view of sunyata, then life is full of possibilities and nothing is unreachable.

D. Prajna

Prajna, the ultimate wisdom, is in the realm of the Buddhas. It is the wisdom, when one has achieved enlightenment, of one’s original nature. It is the realm of one who has realized that true nature and phenomenon are one. In this realm, there is no differentiation between the worldly truth and the transcendental truth. There is no distinction between self and others. Cause and condition arise and cease of their own accord, just like drifting clouds in the sky. Eve-

rything is naturally integrated and fulfilled.

We can explain these four levels of understanding from another angle. In order to play a musical instrument, such as a flute, violin, or piano, beginners must first study scales and notes. They must first learn to read the musical score and familiarize themselves with their respective instruments. To generate each sound, they must look at each note on the score, become knowledgeable in the use of the instrument, and practice. They continue this process of practicing until they are thoroughly familiar with the music. This is the first level of performance. These performers can only play with a musical score. Similarly, when we still need to look at the phenomena of the external world for understanding, we are at the level of right understanding.

When the performers have perfected their practice, the musical score now has been etched into their hearts and minds. They can close their eyes, and the notes will naturally appear in the mind. Although they appear to perform without the physical music sheet, their minds are still bound by the existence of the score. They perform by following the notes and cannot freely express themselves musically. This is

the second level of performance. When the internal understanding is in agreement with the external world, this corresponds to the second level of understanding, that of cause and condition.

As the performers continue to practice, they soon enter the realm where the boundary between the external and internal vanishes. They do not need to look at the music sheet, nor do they feel the existence of the score in their minds. When they perform, they become one with the music, forgoing their sense of separate identity. The resulting music flows seamlessly, smoothly, and wonderfully. Although the performers no longer hold on to the musical score physically or in their minds, they are still playing something that they previously learned rather than something they spontaneously composed. This level of performance corresponds to the third level of understanding, that of sunyata.

Finally, when the performers truly know and integrate musical harmony and concepts of composition, they are musicians in tune with nature. They are one with the music, and they create beautiful compositions with every turn of the mind. Everything is music. Likewise, when one reaches the level in which

each thought is prajna, the ultimate wisdom, and each hand gesture is a wondrous discourse, one then is in the realm where there are no distinctions between inside and outside, without remembering or not remembering. This is the highest level of prajna realization in the law of cause and condition.

People nowadays tend not to have even the right understanding. We often look at the world in a topsy-turvy way. We regard fame and fortune, the cause of many afflictions, as pleasure. Out of our equal, undivided, unbound original nature, we insist on making distinctions and divisions of superiority. When the cause and condition call for our peaceful mutual caring, cooperation, and coexistence, we instead become distrustful and hostile to each other, thereby generating conflict and disputes among ourselves. What is the point of all these troubles? The only way to free ourselves is to understand the law of cause and condition correctly. When we can realize prajna, concentration, and wisdom, when we are not bound by phenomenal existence, and when we let go of the fixation of us versus them, then we will be able to be in complete accord with the Buddhas, venture into the realms of the Dharma, and be won-

derfully free.

IV. How to Multiply and Improve Wholesome Conditions

Some people say, “The greatest invention of the twentieth century is human communication.” It is also written in the scripture, “Before achieving the Buddha Way, we must first cultivate favorable conditions with others.” To cultivate favorable conditions is to build harmonious relationships and to establish good communication with other people.

One of the greatest treasures of life is the “cultivating of favorable conditions.” Building plenty of good conditions is essential for one’s happiness in particular and the welfare of the public in general. How, then, can we establish a multitude of good conditions with others?

To cultivate favorable conditions with others, people in the past put up lanterns by the side of the road. They built rest stops and provided free tea. They built bridges to establish good conditions with people of the other shore. They dug wells to develop good conditions with everyone. Others may give you a watch or a clock to foster good conditions with you.

All of these are examples of building precious good conditions with others. If you have a heart of gold, good conditions will open up everywhere. I can provide you some suggestions on a few methods to form favorable conditions with others.

1. Provide Monetary Assistance—We can donate money as a way to build good conditions with others. Not only does it make others feel our concern for them, it may even save a life. For example, if there is a car accident on the road, someone may need a coin to call for emergency assistance. If you offer a coin, the person can make the call. Paramedics and physicians will then arrive and provide assistance to the needy victims. Your coin will have built a multitude of good conditions with others.
2. Give Kind Encouragement—When others are frustrated, a word of encouragement can bring them immense hope. When others are disappointed, a word of praise can give them a positive outlook on life. There is a saying that, “A kind word is more valuable than the gift of royal attire; a harsh word is more se-

vere than the fall of the axe.” There are times that a few kind words can bring great joy and peace to everyone.

3. Perform Meritorious Deeds—A small kind gesture or even a simple kind thought can have tremendous impact. Once upon a time in Holland, there was a child who walked home one evening and saw a small hole in the dike. When he saw that the sea water was slowly seeping in, he thought to himself, “Oh no! How disastrous! If the hole is not patched up immediately, the dam is going to break before dawn and the town will be flooded.” As he could not find anything to patch the hole, he stuck his finger into the hole to stop the leak. He stood like this by the dike throughout the windy rainy night. The whole night passed and not even one person walked by. In the morning, he was found frozen by the dike with his finger still tightly stuck in the hole. The entire town was very grateful to learn that his finger had saved the lives and property of the entire town. Therefore, “Do not commit an act of atrocity just because it is

minor. Do not pass up the opportunity to perform a virtuous deed just because it is small.” A simple kind thought can save countless lives and build boundless virtue.

4. Educate Others—We can use knowledge and know-how to cultivate favorable conditions with others. Each day, there are over 180,000 teachers in Taiwan patiently teaching and passing on their knowledge to the younger generations. They are instrumental in promoting the national intellect and catalyzing growth. You show someone a minor skill; it can be his/her means for future survival. You teach others a word of wisdom; it can influence his/her entire life and serve as the guiding principle of how he/she deals with others.
5. Lend a Helping Hand—We can gain much respect if we accommodate others. The traffic officer helping an elderly person to cross the street becomes a model civil servant. The sales representative who kindly helps shoppers find what they need can make the customers’ shopping experience a real pleasure.

The young person who politely forfeits his seat to an elderly person gives us confidence in our country's future. By looking at the way we assist others in daily life, we can gauge if we live in a truly progressive and developed society.

6. Make Warm Gestures—Sometimes a smile, a nod, or a simple handshake can build unimaginable good conditions. Once in Taiwan, an unemployed young man was wandering the streets near the Taipei train station, wanting to commit suicide by running in front of the car of a wealthy person. In this way, his impoverished mother would be able to collect some monetary compensation to live on. When he was about to make his move, a beautiful gracious lady walked by and smiled at him. He was so excited that he dismissed the idea of committing suicide. The next day, he found a job to support his family. Of course, he no longer wanted to die anymore. Therefore, the smile managed to build great causes and conditions for the young man.

Learning Buddhism and building merits are more than retreating to a mountain or donating money. A kind word, a good deed, a smile, or a bit of know-how can help us build plenty of good conditions and accrue tremendous merits. In China, there are four famous mountains. Each mountain is a sacred site for one bodhisattva to preach his Dharma. These four bodhisattvas, to whom we commonly pay respect, are Avalokitesvara, Ksitigarbha, Manjusri, and Samantabhadra. As discussed in the following paragraphs, each of these four Bodhisattvas provides us with a special cause and condition.

Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva provides a special condition through the Bodhisattva's kindness and compassion. The Bodhisattva brings universal liberation to all. Through the Bodhisattva's kind heart and compassionate vows, all sentient beings may benefit from the nurture of the Dharma and actualize the mind of compassion.

Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva provides us with a special condition through his great vow. The Bodhisattva vows to liberate all sentient beings as noted in the verse, "Only when all beings are emancipated, shall I then attain enlightenment. As long as hell is not

emptied, I vow not to reach Buddhahood.” For thousands of years, Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva’s limitless vow, as reflected in this verse, has served as the pointer for countless beings to the path of Buddhahood. It has also lit an eternal light for the Buddhist teachings.

Manjusri Bodhisattva provides a special condition through his wisdom. The Bodhisattva uses his extraordinary eloquence to expound the ultimate teachings. He brings light to the blind and the Dharma sound to the ignorant. With great wisdom the Bodhisattva has propelled Buddhism into the profound and wondrous realm of great prajna. Buddhism in China has greatly benefited.

Samantabhadra Bodhisattva provides us conditions through his actual practice. The Bodhisattva shows us the Way with every movement of the hands and feet. With the raise of his eyebrows or the twinkle of his eyes, the Bodhisattva expresses the wonderful teachings. In Chinese Buddhism, Samantabhadra Bodhisattva is an exemplary model and has established virtuous ways for cultivating simplicity and striving for thoroughness.

In addition to these four great Bodhisattvas, there

are countless patriarchs, masters, and Buddhist practitioners who cultivate favorable conditions with others in their unique ways.

Through his calligraphy and by upholding the precepts, Venerable Master Hongyi cultivated favorable conditions with others. For those sincerely interested in Buddhism, he often used calligraphy to present the words of Dharma wisdom as the means for cultivating good conditions with them. Personally he was diligent in his cultivation, and he strictly upheld the precepts. He never uttered a word to slight the Dharma nor committed an act in violation of the precepts. Like “the luxuriant flowering branches in spring and the perfect full moon in the sky,” he set a highly regarded example in Buddhism.

With his meditative concentration, Venerable Master Xuyun fostered wholesome conditions with others. He was immovable, in accordance with the ultimate reality of “suchness.” His mind was focused and imperturbable. He propagated the Dharma without speaking about the teachings. He interacted with different types of people, yet remained true to himself.

Through preaching the Dharma, Venerable Mas-

ter Taixu was able to cultivate favorable conditions with people. He used words to expound the great wisdom of prajna. He preached the sutras to awaken the confused. He traveled to all corners of China and helped to revive the declining Chinese Buddhism with a dose of effective medicine.

Master Shandao cultivated favorable conditions with others through illuminating radiance. For the physically blind, he ensured that they were not blinded in their minds. For those blinded mentally, he brought the light of wisdom back into their minds. He brightened the dark and defiled human existence with his illuminating light.

Venerable Master Yinguang cultivated favorable connections with others through chanting. With each thought, he was continuously mindful and contemplative of the Amitabha Buddha, and he chanted the Amitabha Buddha's name incessantly everyday. In this way, he guided the faithful to maintain a strong belief in the Western Pure Land and to form wondrous causes and conditions with the Amitabha Buddha.

Other examples include Elder Sudatta in India who gave alms to cultivate favorable conditions with

others. He was well respected for building the Jetavana Monastery, which became the focal point of the Buddha's missionary work in Northern India. Chan Master Yongming Yanshou cultivated favorable conditions by setting captured animals free. He saved countless animals and water creatures from the pain of the slaughterhouse and the torture of the fiery stove in the kitchen. Master Longku used tea service to cultivate favorable conditions with others. He helped to quench the thirst of exhausted travelers and gave them renewed energy to continue on their long journeys.

Society needs the unity of group effort to thrive, just as the happiness of individual existence relies on the integration of the six senses. Our daily subsistence depends on the close cooperation of all professions working together to facilitate the workings of supply and demand. In this way, we can live in abundance. We should be thankful for the workings of causes and conditions and for the help of all in society. If we want to be successful and happy, we must cultivate favorable causes and conditions with all beings. We must do it for the present as well as for the future. We should also cultivate favorable

Dharma conditions with the Buddhas and bodhisattvas. We must treasure, build, and live within our causes and conditions. “[Resources] coming from the ten directions, going to the ten directions, to accomplish endeavors of the ten directions. Ten thousand people contributing, ten thousand people giving, to cultivate ten thousand favorable conditions.” If we can do this, we will be able to attain Buddhahood and the wisdom of enlightenment.

In closing, I offer all of you my best wishes. May each of you become a well-respected and loved person. May each of you have plenty of good causes and great conditions. May each of you be successful.

About the Author

Venerable Master Hsing Yun

Venerable Master Hsing Yun was born in Jiangdu, Jiangsu Province, China, in 1927. Tonsured under Venerable Master Zhikai at age twelve, he became a novice monk at Qixia Vinaya School and Jiaoshan Buddhist College. He was fully ordained in 1941, and is the 48th Patriarch of the Linji (Rinzai) Chan School.

He went to Taiwan in 1949 where he undertook the revitalization of Chinese Mahayana Buddhism on the island with a range of activities novel for its time. In 1967, he founded the Fo Guang Shan (Buddha's Light Mountain) Buddhist Order, and has since established more than a hundred temples in Taiwan and on every continent worldwide. Hsi Lai Temple, the United States Headquarters of Fo Guang Shan, was built outside Los Angeles in 1988.

At present, there are nearly two thousand monks and nuns in the Fo Guang Shan Buddhist Order. The organization also oversees sixteen Buddhist colleges;

five publishing houses, including Buddha's Light Publishing and Hsi Lai University Press; four universities, one of which is Hsi Lai University in Los Angeles; two nursing homes for the elderly; a secondary school; a satellite television station; and an orphanage.

A prolific writer and an inspiring speaker, Master Hsing Yun has written many books on Buddhist sutras and a wide spectrum of topics over the past five decades. Most of his speeches and lectures have been compiled into essays defining Humanistic Buddhism and outlining its practice. Some of his writings and lectures have been translated into various languages, such as English, Spanish, German, Russian, Japanese, Korean, etc.

The Venerable Master is also the founder of the Buddha's Light International Association, a worldwide organization of lay Buddhists dedicated to the propagation of Buddhism, with over 130 chapters and a membership of more than a million.

About Publisher

Buddha's Light Publishing F.G.S. Int'l Translation Center

As long as Venerable Master Hsing Yun has been a Buddhist monk, he has had a strong belief that books and other documentation of the Buddha's teachings unite us emotionally, help us practice Buddhism at a higher altitude, and continuously challenge our views on how we define and live our lives.

In 1996, the Fo Guang Shan International Translation Center was established with this goal in mind. This marked the beginning of a string of publications translated into various languages from the Master's original writings in Chinese. Presently, several translation centers have been set up worldwide. Centers that coordinate translation or publication projects are located in Los Angeles and San Diego, USA; Sydney, Australia; Berlin, Germany; Argentina; South Africa; and Japan.

In 2001, Buddha's Light Publishing was estab-

lished to publish Buddhist books translated by Fo Guang Shan International Translation Center as well as other valuable Buddhist works. Buddha's Light Publishing is committed to building bridges between East and West, Buddhist communities, and cultures. All proceeds from our book sales support Buddhist propagation efforts.

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