

Dharmette: Causes and Conditions

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsda1 on July 18, 2012

In the teachings of the Buddha, there are references to causes and conditions – the many causes and conditions that come into play to create anything, such as this group being here together today. Many causes and conditions have brought us together. Each of you has your own causes and conditions. Causes are more direct, and then there are also conditions for something to arise. All of you came here today, and maybe the cause of your coming was a desire to be here and you acted on that. But the conditions that allowed you to be here are many. One condition is that probably most of you have a means of transportation. My guess is that a lot of you wouldn't be here if you didn't have a way to get here – because it's too far to walk from wherever you live. And then the roads were usable, and there wasn't too much traffic. A lot of conditions allowed this group to come together today.

Sometimes in Buddhism we focus more on causes, and sometimes we focus more on conditions. In terms of developing a mindfulness practice or helping us find a greater sense of well-being, peace, or freedom – sometimes we focus on the causes and sometimes on the conditions.

I suspect that a lot of people naturally focus on the causes: "How am I going to become more peaceful and less stressed? How am I going to cause my suffering to go away?" Sometimes it takes the form that there must be a switch inside: "If I just turn that switch, everything afterwards will be good. Just push that button, and I'll find the key. There's something to understand, something I'm supposed to do, and then I can make everything go better." Certainly, a part of mindfulness and wisdom is to see clearly how we're operating – what we're doing and seeing, what we can let go of, and what we pick up. We can have particular causes that are beneficial for us and for the world around us.

But there are also conditions. I think that often we don't fully appreciate how important it is to have supportive conditions which allow us to grow, develop, do the practice, and let the practice unfold for us. Unlike direct causes, conditions are a wider field we can put into place to allow or support something to happen.

The analogy is like planting seeds in the soil. The cause of having the seed in the soil is that the farmer put the seed in the soil, but the farmer doesn't cause the seed to sprout. The farmer creates the right conditions for the seed to sprout. What are some of the conditions? The soil has to be fertile and the right kind. If the soil is parched and dry, the seed probably won't grow or even sprout. If you try to grow corn in a submerged rice field, it probably won't grow because corn can't grow in water the way rice does. If there are no nutrients in the soil whatsoever, you might water the soil and the seed might sprout, but the plant will wither pretty quickly, because it needs to take some nutrients from the soil. And you need to water just enough. There needs to be sunlight. The soil can be just perfect, just the right condition to grow the plant, but if your tomato or corn seed is planted in Alaska in December, the conditions are not appropriate for germinating a tomato seed or a corn seed. There have to be the right conditions for seeds to sprout.

This analogy applies to us. We have seeds inside. Buddhism uses the analogy of seeds to refer to our karmic actions. How we act with our intentions, what we aspire to, and what we act on plants seeds inside us. Those seeds will sprout when the causes and conditions are ripe. We all have capacities or many different potentials, and, depending on the conditions and causes, they may or may not sprout.

Some of our seeds don't represent the best part of us. You probably have seeds of anger and hate inside of you. You probably have seeds of greed and lust, or fear inside. If conditions come together in a certain way, those seeds can get watered and fed. But you also have seeds inside of yourself for compassion, peace, love, generosity, and wisdom – and those too can grow in the right conditions. Part of Buddhist practice focuses not only on causes – as if you can be responsible for a cause and make something happen. Instead it's about putting into place the proper conditions to allow the right seeds to germinate and grow for you.

What are some of these conditions that we put into place? One classic condition emphasized in Buddhism is the importance of living with integrity – being ethical. Without an ethical foundation, you're not going to have the right conditions. You're going to be agitated and afraid. You'll have all kinds of inner conditions that will then create

something. But being ethical creates very different conditions. You might not see it today, but in five years you will see the cumulative effect of living unethically. If you have robbed a bank, chances are you can't sit down to meditate and be calm – it's just not possible. If you lie to a friend, at the time it might feel like a good choice that got you out of trouble. But when you do meditation practice and get quieter and quieter, you become more sensitive to the depths of what you are carrying – the depths of what's operating inside of you. At some point in the stillness, the cost of that lie might germinate into remorse, regret, or something else. When we live ethically, we might not see obvious benefits today – but by living ethically, we create the conditions where it becomes easier for the mind to relax. When the mind gets still and quiet, we're not going to bump into remorse, regret, fear of being caught, or agitation. If you're interested in mindfulness and meditation practice, it's really essential to have the conditions in place that allow the mind and the heart to open up and settle fully. I wouldn't underestimate the tremendous importance of being ethical.

Another classic condition that allows the good seeds of practice to germinate is generosity. One reason generosity is considered a useful condition for the blossoming of the heart is that it creates a positive sense of self. You have a reference point inside that allows you to feel good about yourself: "I've done a good thing – a joyful thing; I've done a beneficial thing; I do things that are good." When you act generously, and you rejoice and are happy about your generosity, the conditions in place are very different from those you create when you are miserly, holding everything for yourself and afraid of giving anything up. That creates a field of conditionality – a particular kind of soil – where certain seeds will grow, and other seeds will wither away in that miserly soil. In the soil of generosity, certain kinds of seeds will grow and others will wither. In Buddhism we hope that one thing grows is a sense of joy and delight. Or to use a Western concept: a certain kind of self-esteem can grow because you feel good about yourself. You think about what you've done and you feel good: "Oh yes this is good. I'm blameless. I've entered into this situation, and I've tried to contribute to things becoming better; I can feel good about that." Then when you sit down to meditate, you can call up that sense of goodness – not in a selfish or self-indulgent fashion, but as a way of feeling some kind of open-heartedness, warmth, or delight. That then becomes a condition for further opening, and further deepening your practice.

Another very supportive condition the Buddha emphasized is having good spiritual friends – people you spend time with and whom you respect because of their wisdom, their ethical integrity, their practice. When you are with them, their viewpoint or their example inspires you, and is meaningful for you. They kind of pull out the best in you. If you spend all your time with people who complain and gripe, or rob banks, that creates certain conditions, and you'll have to be a very powerful personality to not somehow be influenced by that. The people you hang out with have an impact. The Buddha said – he didn't say it this way, but I'm saying – that on this path, one of the conditions for growth is to have a few good spiritual friends, good friends whom you respect. When you're with these people, you feel that you become a better person.

The last condition I will mention is kindness, or friendliness to yourself and to the world around you. To try to cultivate and act on your impulses and desires to be kind or friendly – not in a Pollyannaish way – but in simple ways. Call on that, because being kind sets in place very different conditions – it tills the soil very differently – than being mean, or being aloof to what's happening.

You might not be able to cause some of the seeds inside of yourself to grow. And you can't necessarily just will yourself to become a better person. But you might be able to put together a series of conditions that make it much easier for things to change. It's almost like a natural process, just as the germination of a seed is a natural process if the conditions are right.

You don't have to take too much responsibility for the germination of your own inner seeds, but you do need to take some responsibility for putting in place good conditions. You till the soil, prepare the soil just right, and then wait. And then you see the good and beautiful seeds inside of you develop in their own time and place. Everyone has great, beautiful seeds, which can grow and develop. And almost everyone has some rather unsavory seeds as well.

Which seeds do you want to germinate? What comes forth will have a lot to do with what conditions you put in place. Part of Buddhist spirituality is to begin taking some responsibility for the conditionality, the conditions – the soil you are tilling and creating. Make some sense?

Thank you.