

Causes and Conditions: How We Shape Our Experience

One of the central insights of Buddhism is that things do not arise by themselves. Our thoughts, emotions, perceptions, habits, and actions arise within a web of causes and conditions.

We can see this in ordinary life. We may wake up after a poor night's sleep and find ourselves unusually impatient. A conversation that would ordinarily barely bother us suddenly feels irritating. Or we take a walk, hear some music we enjoy, talk with a friend, or sit quietly for twenty minutes, and afterward the world seems slightly different. The world may not have changed very much. Some of the conditions shaping our experience have.

Instead of thinking, "I am angry," "I am anxious," or "I am unhappy," we can become interested in the conditions under which anger, anxiety, or unhappiness are arising. **What conditions are helping to shape this experience? Which of those conditions can I influence?**

We cannot control all the causes and conditions affecting us. Our biology, upbringing, other people, aging, illness, economic circumstances, weather, chance events, and countless other factors participate in shaping our lives. Many conditions arose long before the present moment, and many are outside our control. But we are not merely passive recipients of conditions either. What we do now becomes part of the conditions shaping what happens next. **We can influence the causes and conditions that help shape the next moment's experience.**

If we are agitated, we cannot simply command the mind to become peaceful. But we can put down the phone, stop rehearsing an argument, relax the body, go outside, listen to music, meditate, or bring attention to something pleasant that is already present. None of these guarantees peacefulness. They change some of the conditions. Buddhist practice is not a technique for controlling experience. Causes and conditions are far too complex for that. But changing conditions may change what becomes more or less likely to arise.

Conditionality as a Way of Seeing

Conditionality can become more than an idea we understand. It can become a way of seeing the world. Ordinarily, we tend to see things as if they exist independently. Someone is angry. I am impatient. This is a difficult day. We easily turn what is happening now into a fixed description of a person, ourselves, or a situation.

But we can look differently. Instead of simply seeing an angry person, we can recognize that the anger has arisen within conditions. Instead of thinking, "I am an impatient person," we can notice that impatience is arising under particular conditions. Instead of deciding that we are having a bad day, we can become curious about the many conditions shaping our experience of this particular day. What is happening now does not necessarily tell us what will happen next. Change the conditions and something different may become possible.

If all experience arises through causes and conditions, then experience is fundamentally a **process**. Nothing in experience simply stands alone, complete and independent. What is happening now has emerged from what came before, is being shaped by conditions in the present, and is already becoming something else.

One way of expressing this is that **what we ordinarily experience as nouns might be better understood as verbs**. A person, a thought, an emotion, a self, even what we call a “thing” is not simply sitting there unchanged. It is happening—arising, changing, responding to conditions, and passing away. The nouns are useful conveniences. The underlying reality is closer to process.

The mind, however, tends to make things cognitively solid. We turn changing processes into things: *my anger, my anxiety, my personality, that difficult person, this bad situation*. We give them names, draw boundaries around them, and experience them as though they are settled and complete. I call this cognitive closure. **But they remain open to what happens next.**

This may be one of the most liberating implications of conditionality. If something exists because of conditions, then when conditions change, what arises can change. The present moment matters, but it does not have the final word. Instead of asking only, “**What is this?**” we can ask, “**What is happening here? What is contributing to it? Where is it going? What might change its direction?**”

We still need concepts and categories to navigate life. The problem is not that the mind organizes experience. The problem comes when we mistake our cognitively closed descriptions for something fixed in reality. **Conditionality reminds us that experience is still moving.**

We can apply this understanding directly to ourselves. When an unpleasant state arises, we can become curious about it. **What conditions are supporting it? Am I tired? Am I repeatedly thinking about the same conversation? Is my body tense? Where is my attention? What am I expecting to happen?** Then we can ask whether any of those conditions can be changed.

The same approach applies to ease. What allows the body to soften? What allows the mind to stop reaching toward the next thing? What happens when we turn our attention to the music or the sky, feel the warmth of the sun, enjoy a conversation, or simply recognize that for this moment nothing needs to be different? Rather than forcing ease into existence, we can become more sensitive to the conditions that support it.

The Buddha on Conditions

Conditionality runs throughout Buddha’s teachings in the Pali Canon. In **SN 12.23, the Upanisa Sutta**, the Buddha describes a particularly interesting sequence because it does not stop with the causes of suffering. It also describes conditions that can lead toward greater ease and freedom.

Suffering itself can become a condition for seeking another way of living. From there, confidence can support gladness; gladness can support joy or rapture; joy can support tranquility; tranquility can support pleasure; and pleasure can support concentration and a more settled mind. From a settled mind, further insight and freedom become possible.

This is important because pleasure and ease are not presented as obstacles to practice. They can be part of the path. **Tranquility conditions pleasure, and pleasure helps support a collected mind.** We do not necessarily produce a desired state directly. Telling ourselves to become tranquil or concentrated usually does not work. We can instead pay attention to the conditions that make those states more likely to arise.

In **MN 2, the Sabbāsava Sutta**, the Buddha approaches the same principle from another direction. He discusses how the way we use attention affects what develops in the mind. His examples of unwise attention are speculative questions about the self, such as whether I existed in the past or what I will be in the future, but the principle reaches further. Some ways of attending feed distress, confusion, and unhelpful patterns; other ways allow those patterns to weaken or prevent them from developing. **Attention, then, is itself a condition.** The sutta goes on to describe seven ways of dealing with the taints: by seeing, restraining, using, enduring, avoiding, removing, and developing. Several of these are not about attention at all. They concern the situations we put ourselves in, how we use what we need, what we tolerate, what we let go of, and what we cultivate. In other words, tending conditions.

In everyday terms, if we repeatedly return our attention to an argument from yesterday, we help maintain the conditions for irritation. If we continually anticipate what might go wrong tomorrow, we help create conditions for anxiety in the present. If we turn our attention toward the body relaxing, the music we are hearing, the sky, or an ordinary pleasant sensation, we have changed one of the conditions shaping our experience.

The practical message is that **what we cultivate matters.** What we repeatedly attend to, think about, and do becomes part of the conditions influencing what follows.

The Ye Dharmā Formula

The importance of conditionality is also reflected in some of the most widely attested material evidence of Buddhism. A short formula known as the **Ye Dharmā verse** became one of the most widely used expressions of the Buddha's teaching. It comes from the Vinaya (Mahāvagga I.23), where the monk Assaji gives it to Sāriputta as a summary of what his teacher teaches; on hearing it, Sāriputta has his first insight into the Dhamma. The verse itself speaks of things arising from causes and of their cessation. Extending that into the language we are using here:

Our experience arises through causes and conditions. When the relevant causes and conditions change or cease, what arises can change or cease as well.

Versions of the *Ye Dharmā* formula have been found on Buddhist inscriptions, seals, tablets, stupas, and other objects across large parts of Asia.

This points directly toward the possibility of transformation. If anger, anxiety, craving, habits, perceptions, and even our sense of who we are were fixed things, there would be little we could do about them. But if they are processes arising through causes and conditions, **they are not nailed down. Conditions can be tended.**

Cultivating Conditions for Greater Ease

We cannot simply decide to be at ease. But we can become more aware of conditions that tend to support ease and those that tend to disturb it. Some are very ordinary: adequate rest, movement, friendship, time outside, music, meditation, fewer unnecessary conflicts, or paying attention to an ordinary pleasant sensation instead of immediately reaching for something else.

Our perspective is also a condition. How we interpret an event, where we place our attention, what we expect, and the stories we repeatedly tell ourselves help shape our experience. Our behavior matters as well. Habits strengthen through repetition. Each time we pause rather than react automatically, redirect attention, or interrupt an old pattern, we alter some of the conditions that help shape future experience.

Suppose someone says something that irritates you. Ten minutes later, the conversation is over, but the irritation remains. You notice that you are replaying the conversation, your jaw is tight, and you are imagining what you should have said. Rather than trying to make the irritation disappear, you work with the conditions. You stop rehearsing the conversation, relax the body, take a short walk, and turn your attention to what is actually happening now. **The irritation may not disappear immediately, but you are no longer supplying it with the same conditions.**

Seen this way, much of Buddhist practice can be understood as **tending conditions**: noticing what we are reinforcing, what we are feeding, what we might stop feeding, and what conditions we can cultivate instead. We cannot control everything that shapes our experience. But where conditions can be influenced, there is the possibility of change.

We might therefore ask ourselves:

What conditions are shaping my experience right now?

Which of these conditions can I influence?

What conditions am I creating for what comes next?

We cannot determine the next moment. **But we can influence the causes and conditions that help shape it.**