



The Buddha Project

IDMT Year 3-Term 1

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Amanasikāra



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Introduction

Today, I will introduce the basic method that comes from the Cūḷasuññatasutta. We will use the next two weeks to refresh our understanding of the awakening factors and the stages of Asanga.

This way we have a month to calm the mind a bit, before heading into *bodhicitta*.

The meditation

As I said before: do not worry too much about your visualization. Earlier, I gave the example of learning to ride a bicycle. First you practice with your parents, and suddenly you know how to ride the bicycle without remembering how you managed. First there is a moment you cannot ride the bike, and then suddenly there is this moment you can. This shows there is a lot of stuff happening underneath our surface-awareness. It is the same with visualization. A clear visualization will come in time; it is a matter of doing it repeatedly. The image becomes clearer by itself, the mind will figure out how to do it.

A hint is visualization is much more *remembering* than *mental-painting* which is something most of us do. There are exceptions, and if you are the exception, that is ok. A minority of practitioners focus on the feeling-aspect, and that is fine as well. Most of us visualize: the moment I mention your bedroom or your kitchen or your favourite holiday spot, it will immediately come to mind, you are already looking at it. Visualizations are easy when you become familiar with the image. If you ask someone to bring you a specific item from your kitchen, you can describe in detail where it is, because you visualized your kitchen often, usually unknowingly. Repetition and familiarity make any visualization very clear. This is how visualization works.

For now, you can for example use the descriptions of the meditations, or the images in the IDMT reader as a starting point for visualizing the Buddha. Explore this practice and become familiar with how visualization works for you, how the Buddha appears to you, and what the Buddha means to you.

We will keep practicing visualizations this year and when it doesn't immediately work out or when it takes weeks or months to work for you: relax, keep trying. Practice without making it into a burden. Being at ease and relaxed allows the meditation to develop naturally.

Feel free to visualize the Buddha in a way that is meaningful to you, as our focus is in developing and *understanding the felt sense of the visualization*. In Tantra the exact image matters, but for now, we give ourselves space to move around and find our way around visualization.



For example, I often omit the lion throne in my visualizations as I am moved by how the sutras describe the Buddha sitting on kusha grass. Thich Nhat Hanh describes in one of his books ([Old Paths, white clouds](#)) how a young boy brings the Buddha-to-be fresh kusha grass to meditate on, and this story always moves me; it feels intimate, and evokes a feeling. What exactly moves each of us can vary, so play around and discover what moves you. What matters to me is that you experience a closeness to what you moves you.

Next year we will explore Tantra, where we visualize images very specifically. It will help you find your way in those visualizations when you already understand how the mind feels and what it needs in that context.

The felt sense

Another aspect is the felt sense, which is essential, and yet for Western meditators, it is one of the greatest obstacles. As we know from the first year of IDMT, feeling is one of the always present five mental factors.

Our experience is a felt experience. We feel the world before we interpretate what we se, and that is true for whether we are aware of it or not. In many ways, it's practical: it tells us to pull our hand away from something that is boiling hot before we intellectualize it is dangerous.

We believe we are responding to situations intuitively, when we are in fact reacting directly to how something feels to us. If the situation feels pleasant, we want to move towards it, and the mind develops strategies to get more of it, without needing to intellectualize it.

The reverse is true for a feeling that is unpleasant.

It is important to understand that how an experience feels to us determines our behaviour. Intellect is important, but its purpose in meditation is to understand and transform the felt sense. Meditating on emptiness feels like something; cessation feels like something. When they arise, a felt sense happens, and that felt sense is transformative.

Many of the cultures still affected by the Enlightenment-period continue to see feelings as unreliable and feminine. At that time, women were deemed unable to make their own choices. Today, we continue to live in societies built with an overemphasis on the rationalized, intellectual outlook on life, and a dismissal of the felt sense of it. We have grown up with very little language to express how things feel to us.

There are even children that grow up with this pathology. At the Maitreya Instituut in Holland there is a very good children's psychiatrist who once told me she treats young children who are unable to understand and express how they feel, because their parents also never learned a '*feeling-vocabulary*' for themselves. These children are

often angry, because to them, everything is either anger or the absence of anger. They can't distinguish between anger and irritation, or frustration, or other unpleasant feelings. To them, anything that is unpleasant is anger.

As Westerners, we have very few words for expressing feeling that it makes things difficult. In Dutch there is a very limited number of words for the felt sense of the world: either something is comfortable, or the food tastes good. Just crossing the border to Belgium changes this a lot. They have far more words for how things feel. In Holland, there is a Protestant culture that overemphasizes the pragmatic, logical side of the world that almost ignores everything else.

If you come from a culture alike, you need to learn. In the beginning, that may be frustrating, but the exploration of learning to listen to the mind is enriching.

Every moment of mind feels like something. When you don't know what a feeling is, sit with it.

There are good lists of felt senses, or emotions, available, at least in English ([such as the one from the Berkeley Well-Being Institute](#)). In certain situations, it can be helpful to take such a list, and see which word best fits the feeling in that moment. It's surprising how many words are in that list; there are more felt senses than just three! There's two hundred in the list, and it is very rewarding to work with the list. Keep doing that and you become a master of your felt sense of the world.

The mind uses the felt sense to communicate with us. The felt sense does not come from the side of the world; it comes from the mind. The mind tries to tell you something about that world, but you don't understand what it says since you don't speak its language.

To use Western terminology, the intellectual side doesn't really understand the emotional side of the mind. You must bring them together, learn to understand the felt sense.

This is very important as almost all circumstances are way too complicated to reason through intellectually.

I am sitting here in Brooklyn, New York State. There are ten people here, meaning this is too complex a social interaction for our minds to reason through. If I wanted to know exactly what the dynamic is in the present moment, I would have to take an hour and write about it. This means to navigate between the people sitting here in Brooklyn and the people online, I cannot rely on intellectual understanding. I can't reason through how a student sitting here is feeling, it doesn't work like that. We heavily rely on our felt senses.

When I look at someone, it feels to me in a certain way. That feeling is the mind telling something very intellectually intricate, very complex, where the feeling communicates in a very direct way. The felt sense tells me something about our relationship, the function that you perform for me, the function that I perform for you. And it is all translated into a felt sense.

The more we explore the felt sense, the more capable we become in navigating life.



We also learn to question our feelings, as the interpretation is not always true. At best, it is partially true. Some things in the present are okay, and some are not, but we are not able to distinguish between them.

The mind is talking to us, but we don't understand it.

During what we call *post meditation*, the period between meditation sessions, the most important thing for a yogi is to constantly observe the felt sense. In the 12 Links of Dependent Origination, that is where we start as meditators: feeling. Normally, we auto-respond to feeling and that should stop.

We want to be able choose: is this feeling reliable, or is not? To be able to separate between the feeling itself and the response to that specific feeling, we first must know these feelings.

Feeling has three basic shades: pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral, accompanied by a lot of nuances added by the mind, providing us with a very detailed interpretation of the world.

Freedom in the present

Those who are familiar with Shantideva; in the [Bodhicaryāvatāra](#) (*Engaging in the Deeds of a Bodhisattva*) he argues 'when a feeling is unreliable, then remain *like a piece of wood*', something he repeats like 10 times of so.

The first freedom and choice we have in the present is to refrain from acting out. The present experience is already happening, it cannot be undone. Your freedom is to either go with the feeling or to refrain from it.

The second freedom is to create a better future. We build the conditions in the present for the future.

Neurologically speaking, the frontal cortex performs a major function: it allows the mind to come up with all kinds of strategies and allows us the choose to ignore these strategies or go with them. Those with a damaged frontal cortex become uninhibited, they cannot refrain from whatever impulse comes up. For a meditator to have deep insight into how things feel, is important to able to ask ourselves: is this reliable – do I want to pursue this feeling? Or is it unreliable and I would like to remain like a piece of wood?

Both in meditation and life in general, intellectualized or reasoned choices (such as New Year's resolutions) don't support our motivation for very long. Telling ourselves we should stop *doing* something, or should *start* doing something else, usually quickly leads to failure. On the second of January we already find ourselves doing what we promised not to do anymore!

In fact, in most meditation sessions, the *reasoned motivation* is lost almost instantaneously. The intellectual motivation only works when you keep repeating it. You can't do breathing meditation telling yourself all session long that you should



follow the breath. That's very distracting: "*Follow the breath, I should follow my breath, I should follow my breath because the hindrances are bad...*" Something else is needed to support you during the session, something else must perform that function.

It's a bit more complicated, but the central role here is fulfilled by a felt sense, once again. That is why we make so much effort in generating a motivation. One of the great motivations of our tradition is renunciation or definite emergence, the wish to be free, to have a very strong felt response to what the hindrances lead to.

We deeply explore what the hindrances lead to and we repugnance arises, as the Buddha calls it. *I could be free, and there is something in the mind stealing my freedom – I find this totally unacceptable – I cannot live like that.* When you feel that way, when you have trained to recognize this feeling, then the felt sense inhibits distracting thoughts in your session; you gain control.

These thoughts then appear to you as unpleasant.

A thought comes up, because there's a karmic imprint, and the mind reacts with disgust, but you are already free as the thought just passes by. The thought can no longer grab you because your emotional response protects you.

This is important to understand because most of us try to control the meditation. That is not the right approach, we don't have that much power.

Trying to control your meditation is very frustrating, and leads to feelings of failure, just like the New Year's resolutions I mentioned. It is helpful to generate a profound, transformative motivation that *is felt*. Such a motivation becomes part of who you are, comes to your rescue when something unskilful appears in the mind, the motivation protects you.

True refuge is not having to fight all the time. True refuge is when the mind protects you without any interference.

That is why the felt sense is so important to cultivate, this is also true for bodhicitta.

Devotion

There's one more motivation that plays a central role in all Buddhist traditions, especially in the Tibetan tradition: *devotion*, a Western handicap as many Westerners deeply like their concept of devotion. Maybe we should find another word for devotion.

We are relational beings, we depend on our parts: a good relationship with your parts is helpful. But above all, we depend on causes and conditions – an abstract concept mostly referring to other living beings, or other people. The concept of your parents as *causes and conditions* might not entirely feel okay, best just call them parents! 😊

We live in a very entitled world, with *rights*, about having *authentic characteristics*, as though we fell out of our mothers with skills. And according to my mother, I absolutely



came into this world without any inherent skills apart from screaming; everything else came afterwards.

And this is true for all of us: we came into this world completely useless. We are the most expensive babies amongst all species; no other animal takes so much time to get to adulthood as human beings, and every parent knows that. This is one of the reasons I did not want to become a parent, thinking to myself, *I can use those 20 years for something else.*

That is why rejoicing is so important. We have all these wonderful skills, and often we don't realize we have them – we take them for granted. I can read and write, and I did not invent those skills myself.

There is nothing I like more than reading, and without the people who taught me to read, I would never have access to this joy. We take reading for granted and forget it takes thousands of hours for a child to learn to read. Teachers and parents sat with us for many hours, teaching the alphabet, reading through our first stories (*'the gnome went to his mushroom house...'* 😊)

It is surprising how much effort it takes to read and it is the kindness we received from others.

This is true for almost everything we are able to do and all our possibilities, such as recognizing things, being able to feel, having the capacity for social engagement, and so on. Our identities, our hopes, our dreams – it is worthwhile to cultivate a sense of gratitude. Cultivating gratitude emphasizes on the importance of these things, because when we forget how wonderful having them is, we can't enjoy them.

We often take for granted that we can read a book, and it is much nicer to think about the ability to read as a gift: 'how fantastic, I can read!' To hold the book and the fact we can read as a true gift by others. This appreciation and gratitude makes the moment precious and special. The book you hold was written by someone! I am reading a book now that took the author six years to write. Unless I'm careful, I might just page through the book without paying attention.

I remember my mother always complained it took her hours to cook something for us, and it all got eaten within ten minutes. On top of that, we put ketchup on the food.

It is so much more joyful to be in the world with gratitude, or gratefulness, as the famous German Benedictine monk David Steindl-Rast says. To be able to open a book and think *wow, it's magic that I can read it.* Someone spent six years researching the topic, putting in all this work, all this thought, writing all this down, and endlessly editing it. That's fantastic!

This attitude of gratefulness makes life magical and it is no rocket science; gratitude or gratefulness make life so much more pleasurable. We need that.



Precious human rebirth and gratitude

We have something extraordinary: we have a precious human rebirth. Since beginningless time, we have been out of control. And here we are, with a chance to stop this. All around us we see people being hurt, people being dissatisfied, people try to navigate this world just following their impulses, lost in make-believe, which is completely represented by Facebook.

And here we are, we have choice, something amazing. We found the tools to question the present. With questions like: *Is what I'm seeing true? Is what I'm seeing reliable? Is there a different way to look at the present? Could I consider the present in different ways? What does it mean to be happy? Is happiness dependent on something outside of me or not? Do my actions have consequences?*

It is easy to forget how rare this opportunity is.

There are many conditions that make a precious human rebirth special, and we could list them, but please look them up in Je Tsongkhapa's Lamrim (instructions for the graduated path to enlightenment): eight freedoms, ten endowments.

I only want to talk about one of them. Two and a half thousand years ago, a person became a Buddha after having worked for it for three countless eons. He loved us so much, he gave up all his time to take care of us. Amongst all teachers, amongst all ideals, this is incomparable!

The Buddha does not care for some, such as one nation over another nation, he cares for all. He does not care sometimes, but always. We are not only loved when we believe him, he also loves us when we go to hell.

When I reflect on the Buddha becoming awakened, I can only think that the first emotion, the first felt sense he encountered must have been gratitude. At the moment of enlightenment, suddenly, the world is transparent to you: you are free. You look inside and go wow! Need to think about that. And he did – he thought about what being free truly means for seven weeks.

The past becoming transparent to you and *knowing* countless living beings contributed to your enlightenment. It was not the fruit of a single moment, but the fruit of endless encounters with others, their limitless generosity.

The Buddha obtained enlightenment in relation to an infinity of beings. Without a free mind, his sense of gratitude would have been overwhelming. The Buddha was so skilled he could explain others how to achieve enlightenment – and these others did. For two and a half thousand years, many men and women have given their lives to achieve the same. You now know this is not easy, they gave up every comfort, all they had, just to pass on that gift. We have still access to that lineage.

This is what visualization is about: to remember this moment is extraordinary, to feel gratitude: wow. The reality is we have this moment once, and we will never have it



again. The choice in this moment, the freedom in this moment, was given by the Buddha. This is a gift that is given again and again.

You can sit here, feel the Buddha's presence, and have the same sense of gratitude: wow, thank you; thank you for what you've done!

To see the Buddha is not separated from you, he also is your mirror: he is you. The Buddha shows us ourselves, makes us look at him and understand that once all the adventitious stuff is taken away, we are the same.

When we can feel this way, this felt sense can hold calm abiding together. This is the reason we visualize the Buddha above us. Conforming we want to keep the devotion with us, or gratitude, or love, or whatever you want to call it. This way, the felt sense indicates how extraordinary the opportunity of the present is. You might become enlightened right now.

But again, do not force anything, grow in the process. It is ok to have difficulty feeling, that is the reason we practice together. We are products of our environment. Try to avoid frustrations and recognize this moment is an occasion to delve into the felt sense. Explore it, the felt sense is already there, you just need to recognize it.

Amanasikāra

Amanasikāra will be with most of you for a long time.

By the way, the 'a' at the beginning of the word is a negation, so the term indicates the not-doing of something.

Manasikāra is the Sanskrit word for the mental factor of attention.

Every moment of mind attends to an object. Our intention moves in a certain direction, tending to a certain object. In our field of vision, we pay attention to a specific thing.

When I look at everyone sitting here in this room, there's also a camera and other objects. I attend to something specific within that field and in a specific way. The basic idea is we can learn to control the mental factor *amanasikāra*. We can learn to have choice over whether we pay attention to something or not.

Amanasikāra is an immensely deep topic and it will take us more than a year to explore it. *Amanasikāra* turns up often in Mahamudra meditation.

We will gain a more profound toolkit to practice to let go. But it will take us some time to know how easy it is to let go. We need to help the mind to see why to let go, and how to let go. In a year from now this will be much easier for you.

Even if you don't practice Buddhism, and you don't want to become enlightened, to be able to let go will improve your lived experience 100%.

You might have noticed you are not at all free to choose what you attend to. E.g.: when someone said something that you think is unjustified, when you feel you should not



have been treated that way, it becomes almost impossible to not-think about what was said. I don't have to delve into that; we are all experts in that type of thinking. Luckily, we can learn to not-think about what has been said.

Most often, especially when it really matters to us, we are completely unfree. In those moments where choice would be the best option, we can't. Instead, we are driven by a complex internal process that we will deeply investigate.

Cūlasuññatasutta

We also need time to deeply understand the Cūlasuññatasutta.

It would take me a month or so to explain this very complex sutra. At the end of this year, we will come back to the sutra.

For now, I want to emphasize on the first half of the sutra: the Buddha uses a lot of tools he doesn't explain. The Buddha explains a way of developing calm abiding: infinite space, infinite consciousness, infinite nothingness, and neither perception nor non-perception are higher concentrations. The basic descriptions underlying all the stages of calm abiding are there.

In the sutra the Buddha talks to a monk that he is sitting with in the forest. The Buddha realizes the monk keeps all kinds of things (*objects of the mind*) to mind by thinking about them, when in reality these things (*objects of the mind*) are not there at all. They live in the jungle, far away from the marketplace, far away from their families, they left social complexity behind. And yet we drag this complexity along with us.

I might have a challenging social moment with you [students], and if I don't take care, this moment might be very much present in the mind for days. And, this thinking has the tendency to get worse and we will think more about it.

This what the Buddha speaks of in the beginning of the sutra, where he points out to the monk brought along things (*objects of the mind*) that are not here. The monk is thinking about something that doesn't exist in the present, is made up.

The mind has great difficulty separating between what is imagined and what is real and responds to imagination as though it was real and then the mind becomes disturbed.

This is reason that, in times of conflict, you should stay close to the person: the further away you go, the worse anger becomes.

The point here is to realize that we bring to the present a lot that is not present in the present.

Keep your practice simple. Begin with simply noticing the mind is often occupied with things that are not present. The mind behaves as if it is walking around with a photo of an enemy and screaming at the photo: very silly. And yet, we all do that a lot. Seeing the silliness of that (*your*) behaviour is a good starting point. I always emphasize humour, it is to avoid becoming normative about things. Having a good laugh breaks



the spell and helps us to relax, and to see how ridiculous the mind sometimes is. Learn to keep observing the mind as it brings things to the present which are not here. Then understand deliberating on those things (*objects of the mind*) doesn't serve the situation: they are not here, let go.

In the beginning, you will find it takes a lot of repetition to be able to let go as the mind is very strongly habituated; it takes time to transform those habits. Therefore, we begin the practice by becoming mindful of the fact the mind is bringing up a lot of things that are not present. Then to let go – there is no need to pay attention to all these things (*thoughts, objects*). We will keep practicing as thoughts will keep coming back. We don't need to pay attention, let them go. The second half of the practice is to notice the feeling of relief when you let go. Anger is always a good example. Deliberating on someone I dislike makes me feel unpleasant; it is poisonous to both the body and the mind. Anger is a burden and depends on visualizing the person or object of anger. At the moment I let go of the image, anger cannot arise anymore as anger is an interpretation of the visualized object of anger. The moment I let it go, anger is gone; it is surprisingly simple, almost embarrassingly simple. We just have strong habits. It matters to practice this as that sense of relief is happiness and we often overlook the feeling of happiness. Once you convince the mind to let go, it is important to deeply recognize the benefit of letting go as it will empower you: *wow, I just gave up on anger and it feels nice!*

Those of you who have watched the movie will know this example from The Lord of the Rings: at one point Gollum's imagined counterpart is gone, and he looks around confused, looking for him. That's exactly the feeling when you let go. You struggle with anger for many different reasons, and finally you let it go. And you will wonder: *The anger is gone, where did it go!?*

Anger went nowhere, enjoy that moment of relief. In the beginning, this moment is short-lived, but keep doing it and that feeling will keep coming back. Let go, see how it feels: wow!

We will gradually explore why the mind goes back to these distractions, but for now, keep using your capacity to let go. And reflect: the distraction is no longer here. Question the mind, show the the enemy is not here. Experience how this absence feels. It feels cool because the anger is not here. Bit by bit the mind learns all this thinking is an enormous burden. It comes with all kinds of felt senses that are not pleasant at all. When you let go, they disappear instantaneously. They leave a little bit of unpleasantness behind, but the source is gone. Just wait, and all of it dissipates. This is where to start, letting go. A very important capacity to learn.

Next time I will give you some details on why the mind keeps going back to the distractions, but for now try to let go. Keep practicing, and whenever the mind gets lost in all this thinking, let it go.



You don't have to pay attention, and try to notice that the moment you let go of what the mind clings to, the emotions related to it go as well. That sense of relief is very pleasant.

All happiness is, by definition, relief. Happiness does not come from the desired object, happiness comes from the absence of desire. There are exceptions where you appreciate a pizza for example, that might lead to wholesome emotions like appreciation. Most fundamentally, true well-being is relinquishment, letting go. This also means the source of happiness was always within. You liberate happiness by letting go of anything that is not in concordance with it.

When the mind is obsessed with an object of anger that you not attend to it, you have something that is almost like a cessation. By applying some wisdom, you know the person is not present: *I'm talking to an image and that is silly, I let it go.* And then you have the bliss of release. This release can be very fragile in the beginning, but you can make it grow.

In the next step, we dive deeper into calm abiding. The Buddha then argues that when you let go of what is not here, you're still left with something that is here. In the sutra he talks about the community, for two reasons:

- 1) The sutra refers to a wholesomeness community of accomplished practitioners. It consists of people who pursue ethics, who pursue taking care of each other. In this community one is safe. In the sutra the Buddha talks about singleness. Instead of thinking about every individual, you think about how it feels to be in a wholesome community, this is a single felt sense. *The people around me in this community protect me, care for me, they seek my well-being, they are not competitive, I can be at ease.* Enjoy that companionship.
- 2) Apprehending the community is however mental work. The mind tends to mental constructions. As we are not enlightened yet, even a wholesome community comes with all kinds of feelings (distractions). The Buddha argues it is important to firstly stay with these feelings and then try to let it go. It is true this community is here, but you don't have to attend to it.

We practice like this all the time. I am in this room, and there are all kinds of things here. Some are important for me to see so I attend to them, while other things are not important to me, so I don't attend to them. I'm already making that choice. The day before yesterday I discovered that there are all kinds of brown blocks here [*in the gompas at the Shantideva Center NYC*] and I have no idea why they are here. I'd never seen them before and I don't attend to them. But I'm very much aware of where the plugs for electricity are, because I need to charge my laptop.

The mind constantly chooses what to pay attention to, and what not to pay attention to. Since we aim to calm the mind, we want the meditative object to be peaceful. We want to take complexity away, an important aspect of calm abiding. We want to calm



the mind, so anything that produces even a little disturbance, we would like to let go of. This is what the Buddha says: you can attend to the community, but you don't have to.

At first, it's good to attend to the community to generate a sense of safety, then let it go. Once you have let go and no longer paying attention to the community, there is an absence of the community and it is this absence is what the Buddha calls emptiness. When you learn to distinguish the felt sense of this absence, you will find the mind becomes deeply calm.

This method is like a refrigerator: you cool the mind in stages. The method transfers the mind from calm topics to even calmer ones. Once you let go of the fact that there is a community, the absence of this thought cools the mind, and provides release.

In the sutra the Buddha then proceeds and takes us to ever subtler topics: from the community to the forest to the earth element. As we let go of the earth element and its coarseness we are left with a sense of infinite space. And finally, letting go of infinite spaciousness leaves just you being aware of you being aware

A clear knowing without boundaries, an in-between state where we need to go first. We will keep doing this practice and explore it from a perspective of moving towards calmer and calmer states.

First, we let go of the things that are relatively coarse to the mind. Once we know what it feels like to let go, we enjoy it and massage that feeling into the mind.

Next, we notice that there's still something left to let go of, and to achieve even more peacefulness.

We let go in stages, allowing ourselves to slowly develop calm abiding, we take our time.

Emptiness

The most important topic this year is emptiness.

there is a unique element to Buddhism, where other philosophical or religious traditions in the world cultivate *something*: God or money or whatever you have. There is always something you focus on, something that you deliberate.

Buddhists don't cultivate a *something*; we cultivate an *absence*. We cultivate the fact something is not there, even after believing it has been there since beginningless time. Since beginningless time we believed there was a ghost under our bed, and now we meditate this ghost never, ever existed. This is a unique aspect to Buddhism.

There is no way around this conclusion for Buddhists. Something simply is not there, period. We must learn to meditate on something that is not there and this sutra is a good introduction to meditating on emptiness.

In daily life we cultivate an absence every time we park a car. You cannot see empty space, there is nothing there, so it cannot show you it exists.



You can only infer the existence of empty space: there is a car to the left; there is a car to the right and based on logic you understand there is an absence in between. You understand the absence but cannot see it with your eyes. That is something to think about, because what is not there cannot show itself to you.

In Buddhism, empty space is defined as *an absence of obstruction*. Next time you park your car, or your bicycle, or you find an empty seat, notice that above all, you feel that empty space. When you were navigating your car, you could feel the absence was there. Once you notice it, you can almost park your car without having to look. In your house, to be able to move in the dark, you need to know where the absences are. You move your body from one emptiness to the next. We use absences in daily life a lot.

Emptiness, when you look deeply, has a distinct felt sense to it. When I move towards a wall, there is a felt sense that I should not move further. And when I then turn to the left and there's space again, it feels like there's breathing space. I can move. In our lives, we use absence meditation (or emptiness meditation) all the time.

We will continue this course in the same vein. At end of this year, we will see we always believed there was something obstructing us, something that was in our way. We are going to look at what the Buddha calls *inherent existence* – a complex term for obstructions and see these obstructions were never there. They never obstructed you, because they never existed, it is make-believe. It is like talking to your enemy when he is not there. Inherent existence is the enemy that was never there.

We will use the Cūlasuññatasutta as a tool, the sutra offers a straightforward absence. We are here in this room, and our jobs are not here. For those who have children, the complexity of your social life is not here. The market, the busy street are not here. Notice the mind fantasizes all kinds of things into this space, things that are not there.

We struggle with illusions all the time. Practice to realize when you have an illusion and let it go.

Then feel the absence of the illusion: a liberating feeling and focus on it. Take your time, breathe. Notice how the arising of an unwholesome emotion brings a physiological sensation, for example a sense of pressure in the solar plexus. When you are angry, or desirous, it is almost difficult to breathe. Notice that by letting go of the thought the physical sensation goes as well.

The description is phenomenological, when the mind is obsessed about your enemy, simply notice the enemy is not there. In the absence, the physical pressure is gone as well. Learn to explore that felt sense. Learn that in the present you can attend to some things, or not to attend to them.



When we look at compassion, we will see there is one more step to be made. We spoke of *manasikāra* and *amanasikāra*, but there are different kinds of *manasikāra*. For example, I can pay attention to someone as my enemy or as my mother sentient being, as we will do later as well. I can choose how I pay attention.

Conclusion and instructions for practice

Keep your practice next week simple.

- Cultivate visualization; listen to this teaching again, take the time to explore for yourself what your relationship is to the Buddha, practice the Seven Limb Prayer (in both *Prayer Book* and in *Additional Materials*).
- When thinking about the community, think about it as singleness, or oneness. You can think of the community as a single thing, rather than a collection of many things. Just like you can either think of a football team as a team, or as 11 individual players.
- Visualize the Buddha the you want. Work with the stages of the *Cūlasuññatasutta* until the stage of the infinity of mind. When we later meditate on emptiness of the mind; it is very important to be familiar with the mind.

The next topic that we will do is *bodhicitta*, a specific mind. Based on having a good idea of what the mind is, and having cultivated calm abiding, we can start to play with giving the mind different colours. Once we know what mind is, we can explore what this specific mind of *bodhicitta* is. Of all the possible motivations, *bodhicitta* is the best way to hold the mind together when developing calm abiding.

Relax, enjoy your practice.

Next week we will elaborate on emptiness using the awakening factors or the eight antidotes of Asanga.

Please read through the *Cūlasuññatasutta* a few more times, as well as the chapter on calm abiding or *shamatha* in the *Additional Materials* reader.

Prayers

Closure





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