



The Buddha Project

IDMT Year 3-Term 1

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Dependent origination



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Introduction

As a reminder, I collected extra information for you regarding *Dependent origination* and *The two truths* (page nine in Additional Materials on the website). You will find more on these topics. We will return to them in time, if you are interested you can read ahead. We will keep these topics at an introductory level to generate compassion.

We often misunderstand what it means to be a person; when we think about *self*, we think about something is in absolute control or should have absolute control. Where we came to understand this is not the case. To be a person is a more complicated, much deeper.

We will come to understand there are many reasons to generate compassion. The most straightforward reason is compassion is a power that can hold our intent. Both in daily lives, but also in meditation sessions. When you focus on developing something relatively simple as calm abiding, *powerful compassion* is a much better guide than *force* or *willing yourself into concentration*. There is much more to say about this, something that has to do with:

- We are living beings depending on causes and conditions, and most of these causes and conditions are other living beings.
- Our ignorance (we misunderstand, thinking we are permanent, unitary and independent) creates almost every problem we face in this world.

So compassion is a very important point to explore.

About the meditation

I mentioned a car as example in meditation. I chose to do so, as we are looking at the Seven Points of Mind Training.

(Reader, page 32) The Seven Points of Mind-training is one of the most important texts on the development of bodhicitta, the mind of awakening, the fulfilment of great compassion. We already had a look at the text in year 2.

2.3.1 The Preliminaries

First, train in the preliminaries.

The text starts with a general argument: *first train in the preliminaries.*

The preliminaries can be explained in a simple (*as we will do in IDMT*) and an elaborate way (*as ven. Gendun will do from September 2026 onwards, he will start an additional training one evening per week on the preliminary practices*).

These *preliminaries*, in a way, are an overall description of what the text is going to tell us. These preliminaries are usually described in this context in a numbering three.

The first of three is often called *renunciation* or *definite emergence*, but maybe better explained as *longing for freedom*. The mind often behaves in ways contradictory to our well-being.

We also looked at the circle of conceptuality. This circle generates experiences and these experiences create reactive emotions. Then the circle is round as these reactive emotions reinforce our concepts and our perceptions. This is how we go round in circles from moment to moment, from life to life.

When you are really interested the subject, look at the twelve links of dependent origination in the reader, a more comprehensive description. But for the moment this has to do.

The second of three is *generating the wish to obtain Buddhahood for the welfare of all living beings*, an extension of the development of bodhicitta, based on

- Realizing all beings have the same struggles
- We owe all living beings our gratitude – they were the causes and conditions for us to obtain this precious human rebirth.

We also looked at the Seven Cause and Effect meditation with its different stages:

- 1) *seeing all beings as your mother*
- 2) *remembering the kindness of the mother;*
- 3) *wishing to repay the kindness;*
- 4) *love;*
- 5) *compassion;*
- 6) *special intention*
- 7) *generating the mind of enlightenment.*

and where we explored the different ways in which living beings are our mothers. Based on this appreciation, this gratitude, we developed a sense of not only wanting to liberate all living beings, but realizing this is the only real purpose a human being could possibly have. This insight is the real definition of what it means to be a person.

The third of three is the *wisdom realizing emptiness*.

This is what we have been looking at over the past two years.

I received a question whether there is a shortcut to all this complicated stuff The answer is: *probably not*, for different reasons:

- Desire for easy solutions is what [Chögyam Trungpa](#) often called spiritual materialism. The wish for instant results are often a form of self-denial, we do not try to obtain something, we try to let go of something.
- We are complex beings.
To seek for a simple path is to deny your complexity, another unfortunate way to look at ourselves. This path is rich and varied; a description of what we are and what we will become. To only train in a narrow perspective means is to deny our complexity.
- The challenges of the mind, or the things the mind adds to the world, come in many different layers.

The layer we encounter this year is quite simple and very deep at the same time. To prepare it in the steps as we do, allows us to work with small things. We benefit

from working with smaller forms of ignorance rather than immediately working with something that we might not be able to handle immediately. For example, when you want to drive a Formula One car, best start with a bicycle, then your driver's license, etc. Once you know how to ride the bicycle, maybe it is time to buy step up. Once you are a really good driver, then a Formula One car might be something to think about. Immediately stepping into a very fast and powerful car is a shortcut to death. Both in real world and in meditation, it is better to take things one step at the time, take it easy.

While taking things slow, gradually learning to let go, also creates the opportunity to develop other human qualities like patience, generosity, ethics, kindness, compassion; things that make human life so rich and rewarding.

- It also makes us humble considering that great masters like Atisha, Asanga, Vasubandhu and Nagarjuna were just like us at one point. They all spend decades of study and practice.

The same for great Thai Theravada masters like Ajahn Moon and Ajahn Chah. They all had live times of practice. This context might make us feel more relaxed.

It is good to have a sense of urgency from knowing the disadvantages of ignorance, but at the same time, not having to push ourselves beyond our limits. Practicing step by step creates a much more sustainable and long-term practice.

I am a bit on the slow side. I have been working on this for almost 40 years and every one of these years was delicious. From the first moment I heard the word of the Buddha until reading Garfield's book this morning. My morning practice, my tantric practice, I wouldn't have want to miss a single moment of these years.

The practice itself makes life easy: enjoy the practice. The practice in itself is a gift rather than an instrument for competitiveness, for short-term solutions. This approach is of great benefit.

Once you at the end of your life, it will be satisfactory. Gandhi beautifully says: *don't push the stream, it flows by itself.*

We need not push the stream, we need to guide the stream; you cannot make it go faster. There is no purpose in pushing.

Relax and enjoy the ride.

- We looked at aspects of the self, a phenomena central in our lived experience. We saw the self exists dependently. The self is impermanent and changes from moment to moment; the self is compounded (consisting of parts). The self is dependent on causes and conditions. The self only has agency relationally, it has no absolute control over anything.

This insight creates the opportunity to learn to meditate as a caretaker, rather than as a controller – both on the cushion and in daily life. Something much more beneficial than expecting we should have absolute control over things.

We come to understand that, as a person, we exist in dependence on body and mind. Neither one is self, but without them we would have no function. At the same time, body and mind exist in relationship to us, the relationship is mutual and allows us to look at what it means to be a person very differently; to learn to bring



wholesome conditions to body and mind in order to find their own way rather than controlling them.

That is the reason I hold motivation so important: a good motivation is a gift to the mind. The motivation points out what is beneficial: this meets your needs, empowered and rejoiced the mind will find its way.

This is the same for what we do in daily life; we will do what needs to be done without having unrealistic expectations of what we are supposed to do: we nourish ourselves in the best possible way.

When we run into limitations, we don't have to judge but we can question what condition was missing. E.g. yesterday I had a bad meeting: what was missing? What conditions were not available to body and mind for things not to work out? That's much more pleasant to do than feeling guilty, to worry or to feel not good enough. A better understanding of the self does not only help undermine desire and aversion, it also provides us with a good model to navigate through life.

We then looked at Yogacara. What stands out the most with Yogacara that will play an important role this year: they allow us to see that the world is a world we co-create. E.g. language is a social phenomenon, something we share. We used Wittgenstein's idea as a modern example of Vasubandhu: words have no inherent meaning in and of themselves. The way we use language between us gives meaning and allows us to see our perception is created by mind. It also allows us to see the perception and the world are co-created by us (*collective minds*).

However, we also saw there are limitations to the Yogacara schools. One limitation is Yogachara makes the world a little bit too unreal, which can leave us with a sense of being isolated, reifying the mind.

Madhyamaka

This year we will look at Madhyamaka and we will balance out the challenges and deepen our understanding.

Let's look at the next verse (*page 32 of the reader*).

2.3.2 The Main Practice

2.3.2.1 Training in ultimate awakening mind

Consider all things and events as dreamlike.

Examine the nature of unborn awareness.

Let even the antidote be freed in its own place.

Place your mind on the basis-of-all, the actual path.

Between sessions, be a conjurer of illusions.

The word *dreamlike* is, especially used by Yogacara, is a 'dangerous' word. Yogacharas talk in terms of three different natures (*the imagined nature*,



the dependent nature and the perfected nature). For newcomers: forget about them for the moment.

Madhyamakas use a much more balanced notion of two natures. It is important to keep in mind these two natures belong to the same phenomenon. They are like two sides of one coin and are mutually supportive, they do not undermine each other!

1) The *conventional nature* comes with problems.

2) The *ultimate nature*, alleviates us from these problems.

The ultimate nature however also affirms the conventional nature to exist.

Two natures, ultimate- and conventional nature. We will dive deeply into this later. I take things one step at a time. When I spoke of a Ferrari during meditation, I did not deny the existence of the Ferrari, Ferraris do exist. However, Ferraris do not exist as they appear; we have a problem between the way they appear and the way they exist. That is the topic of this year.

We will look at appearances again and again. This is the meaning of the first sentence of the text: *Consider all things and events as dreamlike*.

There's something about a Ferrari or Netflix or the person you desire or your cell phone or whatever, there's something about the appearance that is dreamlike.

We will investigate what dreamlike means in this context. There is an aspect to these appearances that cannot be found in them, and still the appearances hold great power over our behaviour.

Your reactive emotions are so out of control, you get distracted in meditation because of the appearances. Something appears to you, and it governs a response based on the unreality of the appearance.

Very important to keep in mind, to contemplate on. We seek freedom for all living beings. However we are imprisoned by the appearance of objects, not by how they truly exist. Cars do exist, but a car appears in an unrealistic way. Netflix-series do exist, but appear in an unrealistic way, and so on, and so forth.

There's a lot to be explored here.

I highlighted the car seems to be able to perform its function: one of the functions might be is to attract us. It appears attractiveness is inherent to car; that is why people pay €300.000 for a Ferrari. But when you write me a check of €300.000 and I bring you plastic and metal parts, you will be very disappointed. And yet I would have given you all the parts of a Ferrari, so why are you unhappy; there is no satisfaction when you have all the individual parts.

We encounter this all the time. I was once leading a retreat in France where they had these magazines about the Second World War, where you buy a first edition of a magazine and you would get a part of a Second World War airplane, e.g. the wings. And with the second edition would arrive the wheels, then the engine, then the propellers – all to make you keep buying the magazines. This is completely different from when we speak about human beings: imagine instead of an encounter with e.g. Angelina Jolie, you receive a part of her every week. That would be pretty disgusting, all the pieces together would not be Angelina Jolie, We add something to all these pieces and thus



co-create Angelina Jolie. This is very different from the Angelina Jolie how she appears to us!

We add something unrealistic to the parts that elicits aversion, desire, or indifference. According to the Madhyamaka tradition things only seem to exist independently from their own side,. The Madhyamaka argue the opposite: things do not exist independently, things only exist in dependency. And we will come to understand things can impossibly exist in any other way.

Again, Madhyamaka does not deny the existence of things. When the text says *Consider all things and events as dreamlike* it refers to:

- 1) Things exist
- 2) An aspect of these things is dreamlike.

It is called dreamlike because these things seem to be real while they are not, just like in dreams. When we experience something scary in a dream or something very attractive, the mind believes it to be true and pursues it by either running away or running towards it.

At the moment we wake up, we realize it was a dream. We were unnecessary afraid of the nightmare, as in reality there was nothing to be afraid of.

I hope the analogy of a dreamworld makes sense. The metaphor highlights that in dreams things seem to be real in a way and this interpretation controls our behaviour: we run away or desire for more uncontrollably. And at the moment we wake up, we realize that all we dreamed about did not exist in the way we experienced: it was nothing but a dream.

With a Ferrari or any other imagination, the same thing holds. The Ferrari exists, but there is an aspect to its appearance that does not exist at all. This causes the mind to either like appearance, dislike it, or be indifferent to it, but not wilfully: the mind comes up with an automated response.

We will also learn this automated response also deepens the illusion, we got stuck in a loop: on our side Samsara is circular, self-sustaining. Samsara is not the world, it is a psychological circle representing the way we are in the world.

Things exist in three ways

Madhyamaka argues things exist in dependence, in three different ways, regardless if you take a car, a cell phone, a TV or persons. Their argument holds for all phenomena in three categories:

- 1) *All functioning phenomena consist of parts.*

So we as persons consist of parts, Ferraris consist of parts, cell phones, a TV, a laptop, house, the tree that you like so much, the flower in a pot; they all depend on parts. In Chinese (or Zen-, or Chan-) Buddhism there is the famous [flower sermon](#) where the Buddha holds up a flower and [Mahakashyapa](#) immediately becomes enlightened: he realizes the flower is empty of self-existence. The flower exists, but only in dependence.

The same with the Ferrari: it exists, but not from its own side, not independently



and that is very different from the way it appears to us. There are no characteristics the Ferrari shows us. This is surprising as desire or dislike arise for that matter. The Ferrari consists of parts that are not Ferrari themselves. There is a car, but when you analyse you will not find *Ferrari-ness*. The dreamlike aspect of a Ferrari is Ferrari-ness, Ferrari-essence, Ferrari-substance. We cannot find an essence. We find parts, but none of these parts do what a Ferrari does. At the same time, without the parts the Ferrari would not be able to function. So the Ferrari exists, but dependent on these parts. None of the individual parts can do perform the function 'Ferrari'; there is no Ferrari there. But as a whole, in a certain way we can give it the name *car*. But when we look for the car, we will not find it.

I hope this starts to make some sense; some of you might be really familiar with Madhyamaka. *I am cooking for many mouths at the same time*, as they say in Dutch. But even when you already know more about Madhyamaka, to play with it is surprisingly effective.

Next time you encounter your favourite politician to be angry with, and you struggle with anger: thinking of this politician in terms of parts and anger dissolves instantaneously. Being angry with the microwave because it doesn't heat up a meal completely dissolves the moment you think of it in terms of parts, etc. etc..

Every time either desire or aversion arises, this analysis is very useful. When you are in a supermarket and desire for chocolate mousse arises, think of the mousse in terms of *fat*, *sugar*, and *cacao*, and desire will vanish. You would not want to eat either of the three, so why eat the combination?

This is an extremely powerful practice, repeat it over and over again to get a good sense of how all phenomena exist in dependence on parts. Anything we put a name on (car, mousse, people), we find no such thing.

A collection or the set of teacups is in itself not a teacup. The set of all teacups is not part of in and of itself.

It is very much worth your while to explore, it is fun to explore the tension between how functions of a phenomenon arise as a whole in relationship to its parts.

2) *All functioning phenomena depend on causes and conditions*

Parts are not enough. All phenomena also rely on causes and conditions.

The most famous example is the seed that gives rise to a seedling. But seeds (theoretically capable of producing seedlings) cannot produce seedlings on their own: seeds need sunshine, water, dirt, soil. The same is true for Ferrari, only to have parts will not work.

Here, causes and conditions can be designers, factories, etc. – and when you explore in detail you will find the entire universe. Stars need to explode to produce iron, etc. When we keep things closer to home, a car to function needs gasoline and electricity, roads, garages, and so on and so forth. For a car to be able to 'perform car', it depends on causes and conditions.

Every time you try to explore all causes and conditions of any phenomenon you will tell the story of the universe. We keep things simple for the now: when you look at a Ferrari, it is obvious it can drive. But when you take out electricity and gasoline, it



stops being a car as a car is something you can drive from A to B. Without electricity and gasoline what you called a car can no longer do that. It became a whole chunk of metal, grease, and rubber. A car is sort of halfway between its parts and a cloud of causes and conditions.

The car exists entirely relatedly.

3) *Concepts precede recognized phenomena*

This explanation is not sufficient though! A car is only a car in relation to a social group that labels it as a car. There are still some tribes of Native Americans in the Amazon and if they would see the same phenomenon (*a car*), they would not see a car as they do not recognize it as a car. We cannot not know what they see but for sure, they do not see a car as cars don't exist to them. Driving makes no sense in the hidden forests of the Amazon.

We first need a concept to understand phenomena. This third point is the deepest and the most global one of the three.

This is why the word convention is important: phenomena exist conventionally.

When you drink a cup of tea, the cup exists conventionally. What does that mean?

- The cup consists of parts, e.g. an ear to hold on to, there is a round part, a bottom part.
- The cup depends on conditions, e.g. the factory where it is made, pottery, ovens, tea.
- A culture where cups are used to drink tea with. There are many cultures without cups – and do not know cups. We cannot know what it is to them as we are no part of their community

These are the three dependencies that are very important to us.

To come back to *Consider all things and events as dreamlike*, no matter a car, a cup or an enemy; they seem to exist from their own side. This is part of the appearance and the mind automatically responds to the appearance. That is why unskillful emotions are called re-active, they're not deliberate. The mind responds to an appearance, without understanding the three points mentioned above.

That is the reason I prefer to call them unskillful rather than non-virtuous or negative.

The outcome is not pleasant because we want to be free to choose. We do not want to suffer, or struggle with discontent, dissatisfaction. We do not want to be constantly overpowered by automated behaviour of body and mind in unfortunate situations. The appearance often has control over our minds, something we want to let go of, release. That is why I emphasized this letting go so much in meditations.

Now you know what we try to let go of, this is what *Consider all things and events as dreamlike* is about, to know this aspect is dreamlike. The moment you understand appearances to be dreamlike, the mind is released, it is free and the automated response is gone.

When you see a Ferrari and you recognize for a moment 'wow – *that would be nice . . .*', reflect on the fact there is no such thing as Ferrari-ness, realize you don't want any of these parts and the desire dissolves. When you are angry with your favourite politician



again, realize they exist and act only because of a cloud of causes and conditions, they are not free and anger dissolves. In both cases, what is left behind is useful – you might still want to buy a car but it will not be a Ferrari; you are no longer controlled by desire, nobody needs a Ferrari.

In Europe, there is almost no road where you can use that engine. Aside from the fact a Ferrari costs too much, I would not be able to get into a Ferrari, it is too small for me. While hitchhiking somebody with a very sporty and expensive BMW car took me on board and it was the most uncomfortable ride I ever had. My knees hurt, my feet hurt, and my head was in a strange angle against the ceiling for a few hours.

To be free of desire allows you to buy the car you need.

Of course I use an extreme example, but we all fall into this trap with phones and laptops as well. Laptops are often completely overpowered related to what we need. Most people send emails, watch YouTube and visit Instagram on their laptop, where our laptops can do high level mathematics; we hardly ever use the potential. We are made us desire them, but once you are free of desire, you obtain the freedom to buy the laptop you really need.

The same with regard to politics. Rather than losing our time being angry with individuals. It's much more empowering and interesting to explore what conditions brought about current circumstances. What are people controlled by? And can we change that? That is empowering, anger is not.

Earlier I argued '*A culture where cups are used to drink tea with*' and I like to relate this to jobs I had in refugee organizations. When I started these jobs, the people I worked with were asylum seekers. Holland has a Christian culture and the word *asylum* is used in the New Testament. Where Jesus said: '*When I was hungry and you fed me, when I was naked you clothed me, when I was in prison and you visited me*', that is the context we grew up in: people came seeking asylum, and we felt impelled to care for them. Once they were accepted, they became refugees – in the Buddhist context an beautiful word. These people seek safety, food, access to a life, and we welcomed them. At one point however the term *asylum seekers* changed in the newspapers and political discussions into *migrants*. But the word *migrants* means something else: migrants are people who want something we have, they want a slice of the pie. Giving this group of people a different 'title' also changed the way people looked at this group as perception is created by language. This is a very practical approach to understand the influence of social context.

Language is such a powerful instrument in politics. Modern politics speaks very accusatory, blaming the other, and so on and so forth. We learn this is not helpful, it is even counterproductive in general. True power is realizing other people are not free, they are – just like us – trapped by perception and we cannot talk unless we share a language. You cannot talk with a Native American about cars as the word car has no meaning to them.

In the same way, there is no conversation possible when one person talks of refugees and the other of migrants. It is very important to find words you share, only then a conversation is possible, then we share some of each other's world.



We can start by asking what the other person sees and respond to, inviting them to ask us the same question.

This way we can develop an understanding that some of the things we see are very illusory and disempowering. When we want to bring about change, we must be able to point out people are locked in their perceptions and to explain what is illusory about the perception; not as an accusation, but to empower them to do better. In the end, we all seek the same: enough food, protection, freedom to express our lives according to our beliefs.

As Buddhist practitioners we are invited to see the illusory dreamlike aspect of 'reality': things seem to self-exist (from phenomena to persons, but also beliefs and fantasies). This dreamlike aspect holds sway, holds control over our behaviour. By learning to have an active approach, seeing phenomena as they are, frees us from automated behaviour and provides the freedom to choose. That is where we like to go.

That is why I like the sentence *Between sessions, be a conjurer of illusions* so much. It explains we cultivate on the cushion and it becomes gradually more apparent between sessions. When we really understand we live in a language concept-generated world, we can become conjurers of better illusions.

We can play with what people see, not to manipulate but to illuminate. We use language to make things visible to others that are useful to them to be aware of. I hope that makes a bit of sense.

Summing up

It took a session to explain two sentences, something promising for the year to come. Next week we will take this verse to understand something about our mind.

To understand what it means to be a person or what a mind is, is arguing exactly the same thing. Minds are also dependent on parts. We saw so in year one: mind and mental factors. Individually, the mental factors would not do anything, they would not exist, but together they make up our perception.

In Yogacara we saw the mind depends on causes and conditions: e.g. knowing only makes sense in relation to something known; knowing only makes sense in the context of language. And we, as persons, as knowers, we depend on labelling. We obtain personhood in relation to a common social understanding.

The greatest gift to others is to give them personhood.

There are many people in the world that don't feel persons because we deny them personhood. For example, beggars in the street. We often believe they have choice, but when no one ever acknowledges you, you lose personhood, you lose choice. Very important to think about.

Next week we will look deeper into what is most intimate to us: what is true for cars and cell phones, is also true for the mind: we only exist in a cloud of causes and conditions, we only exist in the cloud of language. Once we deeply understand, this



insight allow us to reach out to others and see how our needs and the needs of all life are intertwined. To seek happiness is to seek the freedom of all living beings.

I hope this was a useful introduction to this topic and we are all a bit on the same page. We will leave Madhyamaka at this level for a month or so.

We will investigate and play with causes and conditions and language. To argue how self-cherishing is a paradoxical phenomenon: the self that self-cherishing holds is not realistic, is dreamlike, does not exist and leads to our misery. Cherishing others is a true understanding of who we are and the only way to benefit ourselves. That is where we are going.

The text gives us a lot of practical instructions how to achieve that, how to pursue the welfare of all living beings in a way that works out very well for us as well. To show being compassionate, being caring, being loving, is being happy and why that is.

I hope that makes sense.

Prayers.

By the way, at the moment I am staying at Land of Medicine Buddha in California, and wow, what an amazing forest. To walk out in the morning into the red woods, makes me feel at home.

Closure

So thank you for sharing time with me.

Please keep reading the Seven Points of mind training to become familiar with it.

Next week we will head into the emptiness of the mind itself. In two weeks we will explore what this means in terms of compassionate activity for all living beings.

Have a most wonderful and blessed day.

Sadhu, Sadhu, Sadhu.

