



The Buddha Project

IDMT Year 3 -Term 1

18 October 2025

Emptiness of Self



*This is an AI generated transcript and contains inaccuracies.
© Ven. Losang Gendun and The Buddha Project.*



Content

Introduction and context.....	3
Core concepts and analogies.....	3
Analysing desire and dependent existence	4
Dependent existence as a path to wholeness	7
The role of labels and social concepts	10
Reflections.....	12
Prayers.....	13
Final remarks.....	13



Introduction and context

We take our progression one step at a time. We are still at the beginning of the Seven Points Mind Training by Atisha (*Reader, page 31*), slowly working our way towards the argument from Tsong-kha-pa and Shantideva on exchanging self and others. This is also the direction of the Seven Point Mind Training.

If you read ahead and looked at Tsong-kha-pa's arguments, you probably realized we need time to unpack the text.

There is debate within the tradition, whether Atisha's text begins with emptiness or with exchanging self and others. It is my '*firmly held opinion*' (😊) that the version in the reader is correct.

Understanding *emptiness* and *dependent origination* is crucial to make sense of *exchanging self and others*.

Core concepts and analogies

Without understanding *how* we exist, the practice of exchanging self and others is meaningless.

Last week I started with an example that is not *self*: cars. The mind strongly clings to this sense of self since beginningless time.

There is a good analogy for why we take things one step at the time: imagine an arch of stones held together by the keystone up in the middle: when you remove the keystone, the arch collapses. We remove our keystone gradually, maintaining psychological health as we proceed and the view of Tsong-kha-pa and his teacher [Candrakīrti](#) will present an alternative perspective on who we are.

Exploring existence through familiar objects

We began with the car because it is obvious a car exists. Yet through analysis, we came to understand the car exists however not in the way it appears. There is something misleading about the way the car appears to us. Using the car analogy allows us to freely explore the idea without psychological consequences.

At the same time, we can observe what happens in the mind when we see the car, even for a moment, as it really exists: empty of independent existence.

No matter what object you chose to practice with, a car – a mobile phone – or a pizza, when you first look at it as a strong object of desire or aversion, you notice it appears self-existent.

The paradox of appearance and emotional response

The shining red Ferrari seems to present itself independently. It appears as a car you desire or feel aversion toward. Yet when we looked for that car, we could not find it. That is the paradox: the car does exist and performs a function, but not in the way it appears.

According to Candrakīrti, [Nāgārjuna](#) and Tsong-kha-pa the car exists, but there is something wrong with the way it appears to exist. This mistaken appearance gives rise to unskillful emotions, as they respond to an illusion; like using a manual for the wrong object.



Hatred and desire arise in response to something we perceive as existing in and of itself. If inherent existence would be realistic desire and aversion would be the appropriate response; desire and aversion are not negative by nature. The problem does not lie in the mind being bad, our mind is *mistaken*.

When we turn to Tantra this argument plays a central role. Tantra argues aversion and desire are *wisdom minds*, but wisdom minds operating with wrong information, they analyse what they believe they see, rather than what truly is.

Knowing this mistake opens the door to the possibility of transforming these minds, while staying psychologically staying healthy. We can show the mind how things actually exist.

Starting with the familiar

First, we chose something not too personal and then used this insight to develop a better relationship with ourselves. There is no point condemning ourselves! We come to understand that when things sometimes go wrong it is not our fault. It is the *wisdom mind* trying to respond to something unreal. This process of taking things one step at the time is important to dive deeply into the work we started today.

During the week you looked at one of your favourite objects of desire and allowed desire to arise, and explored how (e.g.) the car appeared to you. It was very important to understand the appearance. We repeated this process today in relation to the self.

Tsong-kha-pa calls this the 'object of negation'.

The way both (e.g.) the *car* and the *self* appear causes the mind to behave in ways that do not serve our needs. The aspect that leads the mind to behave in unfortunate ways is precisely what we want to negate. The aim is to free the mind from the mirage.

The mirage of appearance

It is like walking through a desert when you are thirsty and seeing the air shimmer with the illusion of water. At some point, you stop running towards all those places where there appears to be water. You then understand it drains your energy and could even destroy you. You no longer want to be misled by the appearance.

We are not trying to overcome the fact that there is appearance!

There **is** a Ferrari, a pizza, or a self! We seek to overcome the way it (*the Ferrari*) appears.

Analysing desire and dependent existence

When we – during the week – analysed our favourite object of desire and allowed it to respond freely, it seemed this object had fantastic qualities that could make us happy. The analysis however showed there are no characteristics that could fulfil the promise of happiness. There is no car that brings happiness, drive itself, or make us appear more attractive: we did not find an independently existing car.

We discovered the car only exists in dependence upon things that are not in and of themselves the car either. The car depends on **parts**, on **causes and conditions**, and on **labelling**. A car depends on an engine, wheels, a windshield, a hood; on factories, designers, metal, gasoline, roads, and garages. It also depends on a group of persons who understand that this collection of things can be used to travel from A to B. The car exists in dependence upon these relations.



When we begin to understand the car is empty of independent existence, desire, pride, anger, and aversion connected to an object naturally collapse. You cannot desire an empty car, not possible. You cannot be angry with an empty car as there is nothing to be angry with. Understanding this is very important.

Understanding the relation to objects in the world is for this moment is very helpful. The relation towards ourselves will be more challenging, that is why care and patience are so important.

The object of negation and its effects

In meditation, it is important to explore both the object and its effects

- The *object of negation* in relation to the self and
- What understanding the relation to the object of negation *does to us*.
The insight of what it does to us is essential for letting go of self-grasping and self-cherishing. Understanding what belief in a *self-existent-self* does to us explains why we need the relieve of this belief: releasing a burden we carried since beginningless times.

The Buddha does not instruct in a prescriptive or moralising way. He is not ordering us *'Thou shalt care for others.'* Instead, he shows *why we want* to care for others, an understanding that runs very deep.

Understanding self-grasping

It is important to develop a sense of what *grasping at an independent self* does to us; it also explains why moments of difficulty can be so helpful.

The mind easily deceives us during moments of pleasure, this makes it harder to see what really happens. Where on the other hand, moments of unjustly criticism can reveal how damaging this *sense of self* can be.

We know we are not vulnerable to things of which we have no inner doubt; we are vulnerable when we criticise ourselves. Without denying another's actions, it is important to recognise that the main pain we experience does not come from what was said but from what we believe about ourselves. In such a moment, we get stuck with the self-image and criticised ourselves.

To have a clear sense of what this means, notice what appears to you in such moments, and recognize what it feels like to experience a self seemingly existing independently; a self that appears *authentic, inherent, and truly existing*.

Gradually we will explore the consequences: how the sense of self makes us feel not good enough, or leads us to overestimate our qualities, regardless of circumstances. How the sense of self gives rise to fear, makes us afraid of death because we fear going from *self-existing to not existing*.

There is much to explore, and throughout the year we will continue to examine different aspects of what the appearance of a self-existing-self does to us.

Thus we understand from experience it is important to let go of sense of self.



The nature of suffering and the dependent self

The most important point related to this sense of self lies at the base of (the third form of) *dukkha*: the experience of being under the control of something other than our will. This is called [all-pervasive compounded suffering](#).

Difficulties in navigating the world arise from false beliefs about who we are. The mind endlessly telling story about '*I and me*' is a poor source of information.

Meditation on emptiness, on the other hand, opens the vision of a dependent self. On a self, existing in dependence upon the aggregates, upon others, and upon language. The latter understanding of *self* serves as an excellent manual for navigating life. It is challenging at first but ultimately liberating.

This *depending self* is a reliable predictive model. As we argued in year 1, the person depends upon the aggregates. The person cannot be found apart from the aggregates, nor entirely within them. The self does not have absolute control over the aggregates.

For example, when the body signals that it needs to go to the toilet, you may wish differently, but it needs to be done. Likewise, you cannot simply wish yourself out of depression: when the mind moves in that direction, wishing it to be otherwise will not change it.

The limits of control and the illusion of independence

We discovered through investigation the vision of an '*I*' as the owner of body and mind creates significant psychological difficulties.

Where recognising person, body and mind exist mutually dependent. It is not only a beautiful image but also a far better guide to navigate through life.

When we seek absolute power over ourselves, frustration inevitably follows. This is especially evident today. Consider LinkedIn, where everyone seems successful except you. We all see only successful people who appear happy, capable, and admired by clients and colleagues.

Everyone except you 😞.

This pervasive sense of powerlessness is deeply rooted in our culture. It contributes to what is often called impostor syndrome: the feeling of not being good enough, which can sometimes even lead to self-hatred.

Most of you know the story about His Holiness Dalai Lama. When he was first confronted with the impostor syndrome, he thought it was a mistranslation.

When you go on LinkedIn and see that everyone seems to be succeeding in life except you, it feels deeply uncomfortable. It appears you are the only person in the world failing, perhaps together with a few other lost souls. Then what is not to dislike, what is not to hate?

Everyone feels the same, because the story we see on LinkedIn is not true, but the illusion gives rise to many of the problems in our world.



Dependent existence as a path to wholeness

Seeing ourselves bring dependent on body and mind, and recognising body and mind in turn depend upon the person, changes how we navigate life.

We move away from trying to be captains of body and mind and become surfers and caretakers. When you (*person*) create a wholesome environment for body and mind, they begin to function better and produce a more healthy, reliable sense of self.

This realisation reveals a beautiful circle: once you understand you exist in dependence upon body and mind, the relation becomes deeply intimate. Relating to body and mind in this way brings the success you seek. Gradually, with a sense of empowerment that gives rise to enthusiasm and joy.

In difficult moments, whether a challenging conversation, a social situation, or a conflict at work, it is helpful to stop expecting the impossible from yourself. Instead, ask what conditions your body and mind need to flourish. Accept solutions do not always work and adopt a relaxed and kind mindset.

If tomorrow seems difficult, consider what body and mind require. Maybe a good night's sleep, or a clear strategy. Such a strategy arises from understanding how you exist and, by extension, how the other person exists. If we want the other person to function better, it may help to create conditions that make their body and mind feel more comfortable as well. We have moved from recognising the disadvantages of believing in an independent existence of body and mind to appreciating the benefits of understanding our dependent existence.

Ignorance lies at the root of many psychological difficulties, giving rise to feelings of failure, fear, and doubt that are common to us all. Realising we exist dependent upon body, mind, and the conditions that support them opens the door to a wiser way of living. It allows us to move through life with greater ease and to become gentle and skilful caretakers of body and mind.

External dependence and conditional freedom

When we extend this understanding beyond ourselves, we begin to see we depend on body and mind AND on circumstances. Family relations provide a clear example. When you visit your parents or siblings, you may notice yourself behaving in family-ways, even when you do not wish to. It can be both fascinating and frustrating. Sometimes, despite your best efforts not to be treated like a child, you may find yourself acting like one. Rather than judging this, it is important to recognise the gap between what we believe about a situation and what is actually happening.

If we were truly independent of causes and conditions, we would be free to act what we deeply wish in any situation, but we are not. Holding on to the illusion of independence can be deeply harmful. It can lead to anger, harsh words, or even violence.

When we need to end a relationship that is no longer functional, and often begin by fighting the other person, because we see no other way to leave the situation. In the same way, we blame our boss instead of recognising that the workplace itself is simply not the right environment for us.



From control to caretaking

When you come to understand to be dependent on causes and conditions, you also understand the argument you find in Tsong-kha-pa's teaching on why cherishing others benefits you and others and why self-cherishing does not.

Self-cherishing makes you believe you can enter a family-situation and manage to take care of your own needs, yet you always end up walking away disappointed.

Cherishing *others* encourages you to investigate what these structures mean for others. It invites you to consider what is beneficial to both you and the other person.

This interdependence is a rich field for exploration, which we will continue together as we examine the practice of *exchanging self and others* over the next month or so.

It is fascinating to understand we exist only in dependence upon others.

Whether or not you hold the delusion of disliking your parents, especially your mother, for some reason, in our culture mothers are often seen as the source of all evil, particularly stepmothers or mothers-in-law. Yet without mothers we would not have life, we would not be here without them.

Interdependence and the illusion of ownership

We will explore this immense wealth of ongoing dependence.

By the way, this is one of reasons the Buddha made his bhikshus into beggars – monks are not allowed to support themselves, to have (e.g.) a house.

Here at the Vajrapani Institute, I look at this beautiful tree full of seemingly perfect apples, yet I cannot pick them. They are not mine, they belong to the tree, not to Gendun.

This mutual dependence reveals what is true for all of us: we have never been made independent; the Buddha removed the illusions of independence.

It once seemed as 'I' was making money, but making money without a company or clients makes no sense. The feeling of being *independent* and *self-sufficient* was an illusion.

To be a bhikshu is to recognise that, in every moment, everything around you exists in dependence.

The laptop I am using to connect with you, my iPad, pen, notebook, the food I have for lunch, even my under-robos all depend on the effort of others.

This constant awareness transforms one's lived experience. The sense of ownership and entitlement can dull the taste of life, making everything bland and colourless.



Gratitude and connection

I shared the story of the Benedictine brother [David Steindl-Rast](#):

He argues gratitude doesn't follow but precedes happiness. Over morning coffee, I often recall a special gift I received from someone in the past.



Sometimes because this person appeared in a dream, or the smell of sage, the sound of a bird, or a passage from a book reminds me of the person who gave a present. I ponder how the moment of giving changed me and the path of my life, like all meetings do.

Such thoughts bring colour to the morning and life to the day. It's not the reflection that I deserve something that fills me with awe, or something I worked hard for, or should be proud of. It is the realization this moment is a gift that fills me with bright light and makes that particular day like no other. I wonder if I merited their gift, if they are happy and received a similar gift in return. That is the best gift one can give to oneself.

When I wake up and pick up the iPad I was given is happiness, opening the laptop I was given is happiness; seeing the effort the Vajrapani-team makes to make me feel comfortable, providing good coffee, brings a deep sense of appreciation.

Thinking independent existence is reality steals this joy. Skills, knowledge, goods, resources, they all lose their richness and become tasteless. To understand everything comes from someone else, and exists in relation to others, restores colour and connection to life.

When you understand this, you also realise you are never alone. Your existence implies the presence of thousands of others. We are filled with others, and that is a beautiful vision.

Expressing gratitude helps us navigate relationships, even when social patterns feel stuck. In many situations, gratitude is a far better way to disengage than blame.

Navigating difficult relationships

For example, when your mother still treats you like a child even in your fifties, blaming her will not help. Expressing gratitude for the adult life you have is a better place to start.

This illustrates the importance of understanding oneself.

It is essential to recognise the disadvantage of believing we exist independently, such a belief locks us into patterns taking away freedom of choice rather creating it. At the same time, it is both psychologically healthy and socially beneficial to understand ourselves as dependently existing, it makes life much more pleasant and provides insights into how to navigate the world we are in.

Human sociality and personhood

We are social creatures who cannot survive without each other. On our own, we are surprisingly weak.

The writer of the British version of *The Office* describes a conversation between an angel and God after creating humans. The angel observes the humans and concludes humans don't have claws, muscles, or sharp teeth, humans are neither strong nor fast.

Human strength lies in the capacity to cooperate, our social intelligence is unmatched (even by our closest relatives). Despite the challenges often mentioned about the United States,

cities such as New York and San Francisco demonstrate this extraordinary ability. The complexity of collaboration required for these cities to function, from universities and schools to cleaning and construction, is unparalleled in the animal kingdom.

Monastic life and dependence

To answer a question, if I lived in a monastery and need to go on alms round, I would gladly do so. Recently, while in New York, I arranged a conversation with Venerable Thubten Chodron, the abbess of [Sravasti Abbey](#) in Washington State.

I am deeply impressed, as Sravasti Abbey is perhaps the first Tibetan monastery entirely dependent upon offerings. They do not go on alms rounds, yet all their food is provided by their community. They introduced this model at the very opening of the monastery; the nuns initially survived on Mars bars and sweets until their supporters realised that monastics also need proper nourishment.

The role of labels and social concepts

The last and deepest topic of today is we are dependent on labelling ourselves.

We are persons – we exist – within a social environment that understands personhood. It will take time to grasp the full meaning of this.

As highlighted in meditation, consider what consciousness would look like without concepts. Without concepts, we would never know what we are conscious of, and even speaking of consciousness would seem impossible.

For Buddhas this operates quite differently, but for us it does not make sense.

The importance of relationships in self-knowledge

If left as a baby on an uninhabited island, we would simply die, not only because of physical needs but because we would never learn about ourselves. Babies come to navigate the world and themselves in relation to their mothers and fathers. It takes well into adolescence to learn to navigate relationships and to be a person in the world.

This shows that the concept of personhood is complex.

We often mistake we are independent individuals, yet without the surrounding culture and the relationships that shape us, we would have very little awareness of our own existence or consciousness.

The power of acknowledgment

There is a story worth retelling from a documentary ([‘Instructions to the Cook: A Zen Master's Recipe for Living Life’](#)) about American Zen master [Bernie Glassman](#), who organised *homelessness retreats* in New York (=pretending to be homeless as long as the retreat takes. All students relinquished their possessions except the clothes they wore. At the end, the journalist asked a participant what was most difficult: finding shelter, food, or money? He responded the hardest was no one acknowledging him as a person. After a week, the participant no longer felt a person, he lost his agency as a human being. We often wonder why beggars do not simply pick up their lives again, but living on the street for a long time without anyone acknowledging you are a person gradually erodes your capacity to be one. You become a non-person. You lose the memory of what it felt like



to be a person.

We sometimes do the same to ourselves, e.g. during depression – it is profoundly depersonalising. Depressed persons might, at one point, no longer remember what it feels like to be a person. They no longer see a capable human being in their mirror, they only see the burden of difficult circumstances and painful emotions.

This reveals something profound that we can offer others, is not plainly praise or polite acknowledgement (*'you are so nice' / 'you are so good.'*), the greatest gift is to recognise the other person as a person by telling them what they are to you, how your own being is shaped by their presence, and how you could not be who you are without them.

Lama Zopa Rinpoche advised always to have some coins, money with you and to always give while sincerely thanking the recipient. The recipient is so generous to grant us a moment to be *giver*. Then we offer a real gift expressing 'You are a person, you made my day.'

The other person can then get up on his feet on his own, and find their way in life again. They need the concept of themselves as an individual.

Stories in the Dharma

This also highlights the importance of stories in the Dharma. I often complain we focus too much on philosophy, which is indeed important, but in Tibet, Thailand, or Vietnam, you do not find philosophy in daily life. It is a Western neurosis making us uncomfortable with religious stories.

In temples in Thailand or Burma, you will always find the rebirth-stories of the Buddha, the Jatakas, such as the Monkey King, the Great Golden Goose, and many others. These stories are essential as they speak of real personhood. These stories better explain what it means to be *'me'* and *'you.'*

Modern world stories are often unfortunate and disempowering; they do not guide us well. The Jatakas are stories of collaboration, caretaking, and connection; of working with and for others, and show how caring for others ultimately benefits oneself.

These stories offer inspiring role models, helping us to tell ourselves stories about useful and life-affirming, that make us feel safe in this world, and that provide wise guidance for navigating the complexities of existence. For this reason, I strongly recommend finding good translations of the Jatakas.

I particularly recommend *The Enlightened Vagabond* by [Mathieu Ricard](#), please read it. It is the beautiful story about a nineteenth-century master, [Patrul Rinpoche](#). The story is told through the eyes of those who met him, showing how sainthood and personhood are wonderfully unified in Patrul Rinpoche. He was both an enlightened master and a deeply recognisable human being. Spending time with him through this story, travelling across ancient Tibet, is a good way to rediscover yourself and your place in the world. It is a story that can inspire anyone, whether a professor, caretaker, company director, or otherwise. Rinpoche's serves as a role model for both great yogis and bodhisattvas in daily life.



Reflections

The object of negation revisited

We come full circle: we began with the object of negation. The mind adds 'things' to our awareness, especially '*I and me-making*', exist independently. There is not just Gendun, there is *Gendun-ness*, characteristics of Gendun by which you recognise Gendun.

The object of negation is not Gendun himself, we discovered through analysis. Gendun has performed his function (*teaching*) but Gendun-ness is the object of negation.

Meditation and kindness to body and mind

during the week, please explore how this belief in independent existence harms you, not in a normative sense but by directly observing the mechanics. This insight helps you develop kindness toward your body and mind. When either behaves unskillfully, it is not a fault; the information on which the react is misinterpreted. The same applies to other persons: there are no bad people, only people who are badly informed.

Use the examples we used to understand independent existence is impossible. Consider dependence on parts, on causes and conditions, and on imputation by concepts. The order of difficulty may vary.

- The easiest to understand is dependence on causes and conditions: without parents there is no life, without farmers there is no food.
- More complex is dependence on parts: there is not a single atom in us existing independently of the aggregates, and the aggregates themselves are not self.
- The deepest and most subtle is dependence on labelling for our existence.

Use these examples and your insights to recognise you do exist; through causes and conditions, through parts, and through language. Explore how this understanding improves your life and guides your way of navigating existence.

Based on these new insights, reflect on what you might want to change to improve live. This evening offered many rich ideas and we have plenty of time to continue this work.

The power of stories

I also used the Jatakas to illustrate their importance, not as the absolute historical truth but as skillful means for teaching.

Reflect on how to use stories from our tradition with understanding why they are important. They are not to be taken as absolute historical truth. Their importance lies in helping us tell better stories about who we are, because all stories are social stories. Some social stories are bad, while others are beneficial.

Explore these wholesome stories, through them we begin to understand why *self-grasping* (holding on to an essential self) and *self-cherishing* (trying to take care of this self), can never succeed.

The understanding of existing dependently helps us seeing why cherishing others is the path to happiness, to personhood, and to the capacity to fully function in the world: the golden road to happiness: to love all beings unconditionally.



I suggest we conclude with prayers and remember prayers are stories, very important stories.

We dedicate them to the Buddha and our teachers, in whose eyes we see ourselves. We dedicate them to our body and our mind, that they may flourish and become the Dharma and [Rupakaya](#). We dedicate our prayers to all living beings, on whom we depend for every aspect of our being, especially our mothers.

Prayers

Final remarks

As always, it was a joy to arise in dependence on you for two and a half hours and hope you benefited as well, for I truly appreciated the connection that arose in relation with you.

I wish you a great day, wherever you are.

Go forth, multiply your virtues, care for others, freely give people personhood and unconditionally.

We will meet again next week.

Thank you for being here.

