



The Buddha Project

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Emptiness of mind



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Introduction

We start with what the Madhyamaka call 'the two truths'.

- *The conventional truth*

The world of appearances. There are tables, chairs and people. Coffee, pizza's, etc.

- *The ultimate truth*

This is the way 'things' (tables, chairs, etc.) exist.

It is important to remember these truths are two sides of the same coin, they are not separate.

The problem lies within the conventional truth; the way things appear and there are two interpretations of the conventional truth.

The first is referring to *conventions* (I will come back to this) and the second is called the *obscuring* truth.

The conventional truth is true in a specific way but there is a problem with the way objects appear: when I say *chair* and later speak of *the emptiness of the chair*, I am not arguing the chair doesn't exist, keep that in mind! In meditation, I did not say the mind does not exist; I invited you to look at how the mind *appears*, because the way the mind appears is *opposite to the way it exists*. This is the basis of all our problems; all the illnesses that hinder a wholesome functioning of the mind. all hold on to this wrong appearance. Anger, attachment, depression, all these states grasp at this mistaken appearance and hold on to it.

We aim to free the mind, not from the object itself, that is not possible. We set the mind free from the way the object appears.

I will often repeat this, following the great masters Tsongkhapa and Chandrakirti, as it is one of the important topics in Madhyamaka.

We end up with problems when we emphasize on either giving too much reality to things (than the mind ends up with anger, aversion, desire and attachment, depression, etc.) or we give too little reality to things (and we end up with nihilism).

Dependent arising

Tsongkhapa clearly states two things:

1. Objects exist dependently.

This denies any self-existence; there is no self.

2. Therefore they are empty.

The fact objects are empty affirms they exist because 'something is empty'.

This is a difficult and deep state statement, don't worry about it too much for now.

There is something false about the way things appear. Understanding any object has dependently arisen takes away this false aspect of how things appear. Objects (*incorrectly!*) seem to exist **not** dependently. This chair seems to be happy in and of

itself without depending on anything. The chair is empty of being independent; which does affirm something is empty: ergo, the chair exists.

We cannot deny the world; if we would, there would be no path to freedom, nothing to liberate, there would be no basis for ethics, etc..

Chandrakirti and Tsongkhapa argue things exist in beautiful ways and later we will explore how exactly.

Thought and meditation

Now we take one step back and talk for a moment about a technical question that arose among some students.

QUESTION

How does the use of thought relate to meditation?

ANSWER:

Many Westerners think *meditation* and *thought* are two different things.

This originates in a Western, narrow way of thinking about *thoughts*. In the Tibetan-Hindu exposition *thought* is composed of two aspects: words and concepts.

I have to talk to instruct you. When you use these techniques in meditation, you yourself do not use thought, you use concepts. It means that you learn to look actively at the object—that is why I teach. You could say when I teach and you think about it, you do contemplative meditation. You think for yourself: ‘what does that mean?’ You build concepts. Then you use these concepts to look deeply. This is very important to understand. Because without these concepts, we would never be able to go beyond the appearance. If you just stare at the appearance you would learn nothing from it. That is not helpful.

In the past we looked at all the characteristics which makes our lives precious. Two of them are very important:

1. We have a life that contains a language that allows us to question our own experience. We have a language that can question language.
2. We met the Buddha. We are still in an era where the Dharma exists. And so the Buddha provided us with very unique language, very unique thought.

It took fifteen hundred years for the West to catch up with Chandrakirti. Only in the second half of the twentieth century we were able to translate him; the Buddha's philosophy is so deep, it had no comparison to do this investigation until the second half of the twentieth century and due to people like [Ludwig Wittgenstein](#) and [Jacques Derrida](#).

Keep in mind how fortunate we encountered the teachings of the Buddha: it is uniquely, rare in world history of human thought and thinking.

We already argued Theravadas call all meditation up to, but not including the formless absorptions, *analytical meditation*: we use concepts in meditation.

The first Jhana, or first absorption, is qualified by the coming to perfection of two forms of thinking, investigation and analysis, both mental factors.

This underlines the importance of thought in meditative practice; without actively engaging the object of meditation, you cannot achieve higher concentrations. Just staring at the breath, gives too little detail and the breath is too slippery to hold on to. The mind, as you experienced, just keeps skipping off.

When the mind insists in this '*skipping off*', the mind sinks and becomes distracted and it sinks again. To learn to hold on to the breath, the mind needs to actively engage with the breath (or any other object of meditation). We practiced to hold on to emptiness, analysing emptiness by using concepts, not through language. We looked at the object in different ways, something that makes the object rich in detail so the meditator gets something to hold on to. Just like '*holding on to a bar of wet soap is very difficult*': without engagement there is no structure to hold on to. The object of meditation is like a flat surface and jumps away.

An object with a rough surface, is easier to hold on. Observing the breath, or emptiness, or compassion while having a rich idea of the structure of the object, it is easy to hold on to; then mindfulness settles in. And, in order to absorb the mind you also need wholesome joy (*piti*), coming from enthusiastically looking at what the object of investigation (*investigating the dhammas*).

It is like reading a book. It is difficult to stay concentrated when you don't like the book, then the mind keeps wandering off. When you really like the book, it fills you with inspiration or wonder and draws you into the book, you forget the world around you. You might even forget you are reading: the eyes and brain do the reading but you, you are lost in the story, absorbed in the story.

Both in shamata and in Vipassana, this is exactly the way the mind absorbs, becomes concentrated. The mind then is so enraptured, so attracted to the object, the mind forgets and stays with the object. This state of mind is called *absorption*.

And again, either through calm abiding or special insight.

Three aspects of mind

Primary there are 3 aspects of mind

1. Investigation.

Sayadaw U Pandita would say: '*the mind throws itself at the object*'. Venerable Gendun likes to call this curiosity. When you are curious, you keep looking at this object of investigation. For instance, sitting on a terrace while having coffee someone '*unusual*' passes by. You might rather not look (it can feel embarrassing), but the eyes keep going back to the weird person. That is investigation.

2. Wonder.

You are filled with wonder and think: 'what am I looking at?' This person is wearing



weird clothes, maybe that is what makes me curious, and so on and so forth. Wonder causes you to look deeper and deeper.

3. Wisdom.

Wisdom adds the important knowledge of being able to discern some things are wholesome to the mind. These wholesome things bring happiness, they bring well-being. Wisdom is also able to discern things being un-wholesome to the mind.

To summarize: the mind gets drawn towards concentration through curiosity and wonder. The mind becomes empowered and knows *this is good for me, this is healing* and wants to stay there. This state of mind is called concentration.

Just staring at something does not lead to concentration; we need activity of the mind. When the mind is able to hold on to an object, we talk of stability, but stability is not enough. We also need clarity; coming from curiosity, wonder and wisdom. Stability together with clarity lead to absorption and we will practice this again and again.

Of course I must talk during our joint meditations: I cannot show you my concepts, you have to create them yourself. First I explain my concepts (*in language*) and at one point they become yours. You deeply understand what I am talking about. Try this again and again, and you get a good sense of what this is about. Then you can use the concepts you created without having to talk out loud in meditation. You know how to apply what you learned; I hope this makes sense.

In the beginning it can be challenging to use thought (*to investigate*) but it will become very helpful.

To encourage you: remember the first jhana has analysis and investigation, curiosity and wonder as its defining characteristics. This first concentration is not without thought, it depends on *the culmination of thought*.

Emptiness of objects

Absences

There are many different meditation objects. We started with the breath, called a positive object. We also investigated the mind and noticed the mind can also think about negative objects, the *absence of objects*.

I can think about the chair in the room, it is a positive object, and I can also think about the absence of an elephant in the room, a negative object.

We surprisingly use this aspect quite often, for example when you park your car, you use this concept. You first notice the absence between two other cars, so you can park your car there; or when you walk through your house, you constantly realize the absences between furniture to navigate.



You cannot see empty space, you can only infer, and it something we do all the time. Empty space has no characteristics, so you can't directly see it.

You can see chairs and cupboards, but you cannot see the spaces in between, you understand it. This way we focus on absences all day to navigate the world.

This is a straightforward proposition and the mind is unique in this aspect: the mind can hold on to what are called affirming objects. They say something positive about the object, the chair performs a function. A laptop affirms I can type emails on it.

I can also focus on absences, which do not perform functions; they are just absences, there is nothing there.

It is fascinating to see the mind is able to navigate the world in two very different ways.

Often when we think about emptiness, we make live way too complicated. Dwelling on emptiness-es is something we do all day, every day and makes live far more accessible. Meditating on emptiness is like thinking about the space between two cars: knowing there is something not there to find out (in this case) you can park your car (as there is nothing there).

This is a good way to think about emptiness of the mind. You practise this all day, it is a very natural aspect of the mind.

Duality

This year we noticed the mind strongly holds on to objects because of something the mind produces itself: Investigating the content of your awareness shows that everything in your awareness is biased.

You don't see things in an objective way, quite to the contrary. I am in a room in Silicon Valley I have never been before with many new things around me and I look around in a biased way.

In general, when we look around the room, I see a lamp I like, or something my mind makes appear unattractive, and something else appears neutral (*'has no purpose to me'*). We studied this aspect in 'The small sutra on emptiness'.

To say it in a different way: everything we see has a felt sense to it: things feel either pleasant, unpleasant or neutral.

As long as we believe this felt sense comes from the side of the object rather than from the side of the mind, this appearance holds enormous control over the behaviour of the mind. This misunderstanding causes the mind to subsequently act with aversion or with desire. And so on, and so forth.

We also noticed something else: the mind falsely translates this felt sense to be part of the appearance: things exist as being pleasant, exist as being as being unpleasant, or exist as being neutral. This second misunderstanding holds control over our behaviour, over our opinions, even over our sense of identity.

Then, during meditation, we practiced to deliberately let go of this aspect of the mind.

The very moment we deeply understand these aspects of appearance are not true, we can let go of them.



The lamp and the table and even the pizza is not attractive from its own side, the felt sense comes from the mind. We came to understand this felt sense is not in the object, object are empty of any felt sense. Understanding this emptiness of the object immediately liberates the mind.

Earlier, the mind was attracted to one thing and repelled by another, or not noticing a third object. The moment the mind deeply understands the felt sense is not in the object, the unwholesome behaviour of the mind starts to stop.

This is one way we approached *absences*. We came to understand pizza is empty of being pleasant. Once you understand this, there is freedom. The freedom from desire or (*for the rare person that does not like pizza*), freedom from aversion.

Past & Future

It is the same regarding past and future.

The mind does not realize both past and future are creations of the mind, they do not exist, cannot be found. The mind gets constantly lost in past and future because it believes they exist. The moment the mind understands their absence (you it point out during meditation) all this rumination, this obsessive thinking, ceases. There is no need to think about something that doesn't exist!

We have already found two illusory aspects of the mind:

1. The mind misunderstands things about the world.

The moment, through analysis, we know the world does not exist as it appears, the realization of this absence takes a burden from our shoulders. It brings relief and some freedom.

2. Objects of mind do exist.

When I argued a pizza is empty of pleasant feeling, I didn't argue the pizza does not exist. That is very important to keep in mind.

To my ignorant awareness, the pizza seems to exist. The pizza has the illusory aspect of being pleasant in and of itself.

Example given, when we are forced to eat three pizzas, we come to understand pizza cannot make me happy. Or two pizzas at 4 AM, they are not attractive at all. At that moment I realise it is an illusory aspect: the pizza is empty.

The appearance exists, but the illusory aspect is false. The mind is free of this illusory aspect by nature and being free of illusory aspects opens the door to a different relation with the pizza.

As long as the mind believes pleasantness or unpleasantness is within the pizza the mind's responds cause problems, they make me unhappy. The moment I believe there is pleasantness within the pizza, I lose contentment; rather than being content, desire arises and I lose control.

I make sure to get the pizza as I am attached to it. Then I take a bite and a moment of pleasantness arises, and immediately starts to decline: I am left dissatisfied. The wrong appearance creates problems: it makes me discontent and dissatisfied.



When you know the pizza is empty of pleasant feeling, you also know the pleasant feeling is relational. Understanding the mind responds to a temporary relationship with *pizza*, very different emotions can arise. A moment of realizing my body needs food and I have the opportunity to buy pizza. I'm a human being and I like pizza; this way I have a positive, appreciative relation with the pizza.

I can satisfy my hunger and the pizza does what it is supposed to do: I was hungry and now I am satisfied and I am grateful for the pizza, for the pizza baker, the person who offered me the pizza, the manufacturer of the oven, etc. Now I feel happy; not discontent, not dissatisfied.

Very important to keep in mind.

I'm not trying to steal something away from you. There is nothing negative about the world, to the contrary. The belief pizzas are inherently pleasant causes them to be dissatisfactory. Knowing pizzas are not inherently pleasant can lead to satisfaction, then I know what pizzas cannot do, what they can do and when they can do so.

We develop a realistic view on objects of the mind, that is the whole point of where we are trying to go.

This is what freedom looks like as the Dalai Lama says: we have the freedom to be happy. What more freedom could we hope for?

Westerners define freedom in terms of being able to do whatever we want; real freedom is to be able to be content, to be happy. That was always enough.

The conventional- and the ultimate truth

We analysed the mind and objects of the mind and came to understand there are different aspect to these objects of the mind:

- Objects exists dependently.
We used the example of a car, seemingly self-existing. Through analysis we now understand the car does not self-exist. The car exists, but not self-exist; the car is empty. Empty means, *empty of self*.
The car exists, but it exists empty of self, the car does not self-exist.
- Objects depend on parts.
The car is not a whole, it exists of numerous parts
- Objects depend on causes and conditions
The car needs gasoline, roads, a human to drive it, etc.
- Objects depend on labelling, naming.
A car is only a car to human beings who can drive cars.

That is what we explored the last two weeks. It is the way the car exists.

Tsongkhapa argues: 'Realizing the car exists dependently takes away the illusion it self-exists'.

This illusion is the cause of all our problems.

To deeply understand the car is empty of self, affirms the existence of the car: the car has emptiness as its nature. The car does exist by being empty of self-existence. We have the conventional (relative or concealer) truth or and ultimate truth.

- The conventional truth
Convention refers to what human beings agree upon. To us it is a car, it exists, you can drive it from A to B. The car performs a function.
- The ultimate truth
The nature of the car is empty, the ultimate truth is emptiness.

These two truths are aspects of one and the same thing. The car exists conventionally and at the same time it is empty of self-existence; this is what we explore this year. You notice even a beginning explanation is already challenging.

In order to deeply understand these two truths we need to empower our ability to analyse and to investigate. This can only be done by deepening our concepts and deepening our understanding.

We will gradually see things only function because they are dependently existing. Things that exist independently don't do anything, they have no function. A car functions because it depends on gasoline, on a driver, etc. That is why a car functions. We will take things one step at a time.

We will continue to meditate on the notion of dependent arising and emptiness from different points of view. It is fascinating as there is so much to explore; an entirely new and rich universe.

Hopefully, by the end of this year, we will have a deep insight of what emptiness means. Next year we will use the deep understanding of emptiness in order to explore Mahamudra.

Mahamudra makes things simpler but only when we have deep understanding of concepts, a deep understanding what emptiness means.

In a broader sense, desire arises because the mind believes (e.g.) the pizza has independent characteristics and the mind grasps at these (*non-existing, independent*) characteristics, the pizza has no independent characteristic! The concept of pleasantness of the pizza depends on its parts (the ingredients) where none of the individual ingredients of the pizza are attractive: pleasantness will not arise when you put dough in your mouth or tomato puree or salt or grease. In combination however The pleasantness of pizza depends on its parts, on pizza-ovens, on bakers, on grain, on Italian culture and so on and so forth. Pizza depends on causes and conditions. And pizza depends on human beings labelling pizza as food because it can perform that function to us. Pizza is food to us, for a fly however it is not. Nor is pizza food for horses (horses can die of eating pizza).

The appearance of a pizza by the mind makes us believe the pizza self-exist, but it doesn't. Once we know the pizza does not self-exist desire can be substituted for appreciation.

Shantideva on the two truths

Shantideva uses anger as example.

Anger observes a person to be angry in and of himself: this person is bad! But this is wrong view, this person does not exist this way, no person is bad in and of themselves. This supposed badness is a relational function; it can arise in dependence of the person having internal problems, or maybe pain, a mental illness. It is also depends on context; the person might feel vulnerable; might depend on the relation between us. Actions might be experienced as bad by me, and might at the same time be experienced as pleasant by someone else. Interpretations are always relational. Believing a person is bad, will lead to unfortunate behaviour on my side. Maybe I want to get rid of this person. If *badness* would be a self-existing characteristic of the person, the only way to solve the problem is to get rid of the person – and this is what anger tries to do. The deeply understanding the person is empty of being bad creates the possibility for wiser emotions to arise. *Badness* cannot be found when you look for it, *badness* depends on parts, on causes and conditions and on labelling. Imagine I know the bad behaviour is dependent on the person's illness, I might want to help that person find healing. Or when I know the person behaves this way because of her circumstances, I might work with these circumstances to help.

That is why realizing emptiness is so important. Unfortunate states of mind hold on to self-existence. As is depression, depression is a self-aversion: 'I am bad; I am hopeless.' The mind observes something that does not exist in that way. Once we realize the *emptiness of ourselves* we implicitly also understand we exist dependently and we can work with dependent relationships to improve the situation. I am not in one way or another, I depend and I can navigate these dependencies. Maybe I don't function well because of circumstances and this opens the door for finding new circumstances. All things appear self-existing to us, things seem to be self-contained phenomena. And when we try to find this self-existing aspect: it is simply not there. The Mahayana tradition explains:

When we look for something in the basis of what we call it, we don't find it.

Wholes and parts

The Buddha uses the word heap.

When you see a hill and you look for the *hill-ness*, you will find grains of sand: a hill is a name for lots of grains of sand. *Hill* is not to be found in its basis; we call *hill* the whole, but there is no *hill-ness*, no *hill-essence*. The hill depends on grains of sand and wind and so on. The hill depends on the valley next to it.

We will gradually explore where this problem comes from; sadly we are stuck with it for a while.

However, we can remain being aware of this, as long as we have an active and engaging mind. Then the unskilful emotional states will diminish. In reality we are not

always mindful and the appearance is very strong. This is the reason your practice will fluctuate for quite some time; it is just the way it is.

Our analysis is not very strong yet but it will improve. When analysis becomes very powerful, the mind will let go and will be free. Finally the mind will be permanently free of aversion, desire, attachment, depression, jealousy, and all these unwholesome states of mind. When you deeply investigate the mind, you find it always sought freedom.

I often give the example of cigarettes. We experience cigarettes to be pleasant because the desire of a cigarette is very oppressive. The nicotine produces a nervous seeking for more nicotine. When we can stop this oppressive feeling we (*only for a short period of time*) experience it as happiness. To be temporarily free from this oppressive feeling, is pleasant. The mind seeks freedom and always did.

Realizing emptiness can satisfy the need for cigarettes permanently and all oppressiveness in the mind is gone. Thus emptiness is able to bring limitless happiness.

Recap

The mind obviously exists.

Many suffer from overactivity of the mind, so you know. The mind performs way too much function. It would be nice if the mind would perform less function from time to time.

We have the sense the mind exists in and of itself: first there is mind – then then the mind observes something. The mind appears to be independently.

This is what we distinguish first: the way the mind appears to us is. Tsongkhapa says: the object of negation.

This is very important, I used depression as an example: a depression is the belief the mind is bad (a consequence of believing the mind self-exists). It is an enormous relief to realize the mind does not self-exist. When you look for the self-existing characteristic of mind, you can't find it. And once you deeply understand the mind is not self-existing you also come to understand depression is not true. The mind grasps at an impossible appearance and this is where the process of healing begins.

We explored the mind in three ways and I invite you to explore them coming week. This list comes from a commentary on the seven verse mind training, they are:

1. The mind has no manifest characteristics.
No colour, no form, no taste, no smell, nothing. Your senses can't see the mind.
2. Knowing is not a inherent characteristic of the mind.
There is only *knowing in relation* to something *known*. You only indirectly know. To know the knowing of the mind, you need something known. There is no other way.



3. You are an idiot

It is important in the context of Buddhism, to know that in the sutras the Buddha only calls someone stupid on two occasions.

- The first is where someone mistakes intellectual understanding for insight, a very important misunderstanding! *Knowing something doesn't mean you understand it.*

Even the great Indian myth states: we all know we will die and yet we behave as though this happens to everyone, but not us. We go to bed believing we will definitely wake up again until we don't.

- The second time the Buddha calls someone stupid, is when a monk says: *'It is the mind that is reborn from life to life'*.

The Buddha replies: *'You idiot, I did not say that'*. When you look for mind you will not find it. Whatever you look for belongs either to the past or to the future. Mind happens in the sliver, in the touching point between past and future. If you look for mind, there's nothing to find. In that sense, we are reborn. That is why Buddhists don't use the word reincarnation: there is a distinction between reincarnation and rebirth. The mind is reborn in every instant, it is never the same. Mind is like a river, you will never ever find the same water in a river. You can't hold on to a river, nor can you stick a river in a pot.

Explore the mind.

The mind exists. Then look at the way it appears, it is the appearance we try to negate. There is something wrong with the appearance – as Tsongkhapa says: 'the mind is the object of negation'.

Take a moment and think: mind. What appears when you think mind? Take some minutes and keep looking at mind, what do I see, then investigate.

Does what appears to mind exist the way it appears? Investigate as if you could really see the mind in and of itself. Can you put it in a box and take it with you from life to life. And analyse: Does the mind have smell, does it have form or colour? Can I touch it? Where can I find the mind? That is what it means for the mind to be clear.

Explore knowing.

Maybe you can find *knowing*. Is there knowing in and of itself? You will find a strange paradox as you will not be able to find it. You can find something *that is known*, very weird. Take your time, don't get frustrated, this is difficult. Let your analysis ripen. We have time and it is important not to over-intellectualize. Stay with the weirdness.

Then you explore time.

Again you can't find it.

Then remain with the not-finding, this is called emptiness.

You cannot find self-existence, everything is empty of self.



Explore the positive side of emptiness

In between meditations you can explore the positive side of emptiness.

Because the mind has no explicit characteristics it can show you colour and form and feeling and all these other aspects. If the mind was red, you would only ever see red and not the whole rainbow.

Knowing is always a meeting with the known. We exist only in meeting. And that is very important. We exist as a flow of endless meetings.

Finally, knowing only makes sense when we have the tools to know something. We need concepts to know. Neurologists argue: we don't see the world, we recognize the world. Young children have to be learned to see the world. They don't see anything at all. They learn from us to see. To see is to share a world. I see a human world because I'm part of the collection of humans. My world is the world I share with you, share with our parents. It's our world, not mine.

This is the way to go back and forth. I hope that makes some sense.

Study advice

We will do this next week again. Then I will start to argue why this matters for compassion.

Please look at the text by Tsongkhapa about exchanging self and others, it is important as one of the ways we exist is relationally with others.

I will argue that this is why exchanging self with others works.

Remember you have a document called Additional Materials. There you can find some standard arguments with regard to emptiness if you want to look deeper into this topic. In the back of the readers you also find a bibliography, a list of books.

Prayers

Closure

There is some homework to explore, may it fill your mind with wonder. Emptiness leaves a marvellous world in its wake, the world of Buddhas. May you see it with your own eyes.

Thank you for being here.

Have a great morning, afternoon, or evening, wherever you are.

My gratefulness for you being here and I hope to see you next week alive and entirely new.

May we come together again.

