



The Buddha Project

IDMT Year 3-Term 1

1 November 2025

Disadvantages of self-cherishing



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Introduction

Self and not self

Emptiness does not mean non-existence; *'emptiness is the absence of that which the mind adds to the world.'* This is important as we can not develop compassion for something non-existent.

I use the word *'person'* for what exists and the word *'self'* for what not-exists. The original text uses only one word meaning both and this can be confusing; we use two words. When I use *selflessness*, it does not mean we do not exist. This distinction *'person'* and *'self'* is not in the original text.

We do exist, we perform a function, but we and others appear to us in unfortunate unrealistic ways, which causes non beneficial behaviours, not leading to happiness.

Two years ago we looked at selflessness from an individual perspective. When we investigate during meditation all we see inside is not self, it do not possess something, there is a different relationship with what composes us.

We do not have an independently existing *atman* or a *soul*, everything depends on parts. Navigating from this perspective leads to problematic attitudes, like neuroses and also explains the experienced conflict between body and mind.

When we investigate, we come to understand the model we apply is poorly predictive (related to what we encounter), and we believe things to exist that do not exist: there is no independent self. From the perspective of an independent atman, we try to command body and mind to behave in certain ways. And it just does not work, body and mind cannot be commanded.

Body & mind

Parts create a car, the car does not exist apart from the parts. The care and the parts are interdependent. Cars do exist but not the way they appear to us. The parts of the car (wheels, windscreen, etc.) are not *car* either, they are parts. Parts can compose a car when stuck together in a certain way; cars exist.

What is true for a car is also true for *'person'* Based on body and mind, a person comes into existence. Body and mind are parts of a person, like wheels are part of a car. Body and mind function as body and mind while being part of a person. Like an engine functions as an engine while being part of a car. A person only exists interdependent on body and mind.

Next year we will look at Nagarjuna who argues there is an interdependent relationship with body and mind. In meditation, when we pretend there is an *ownership*-relation or *manipulative*-relation, the mind escapes in fantasies, distractions and dullness instead. This shows the mind is not *'ours'*. We do not own the mind

When we deeply understand this interdependent relationship with body and mind we develop a *care*-relationship and only then body and mind will respond in more wholesome ways.



But there is more to this. We do not only depend on parts, we also depend on causes and conditions. Just like we depend on imputation, labelling, language, conceptuality. We have an idea of a self, but when we look for a self, we cannot find 'me'. You come to understand you are imputed on what is not-self.

Exchanging self for others

I would like to highlight one thing,

Although Tsongkhapa and Shantideva forcefully argue the idea of exchanging self for others (prioritising others and forget about ourselves). However that is not yet the thing to do, for where we are on the path; it would not be healthy.

Exchanging self for others is a practice for healthy minds, not for infirm minds. It took us two years of IDMT to get where we are now, we need to take things step-by-step. So first we have to practice and establish a healthier mind before we can fully go into the advices of Tsongkhapa and Shantideva to exchange self for others.

We first need to investigate why exchanging self for others works and why does self-cherishing does not work?

Self-cherishing

(reader, page 36)

Habituation

Tsongkhapa argues (among many things) habituation plays an important role in the practice and definition of mindfulness. Mindfulness is being able to hold on to something we are habituated to, become familiar with. Mindfulness grows by way of familiarity, by habituation.

Unfortunately unwholesome emotions do the same.

The getting from self-cherishing to other-cherishing is a process of habituating oneself to a new view of how we truly exist. Tsongkhapa using the term habituation shows we should take time to develop and not to jump into it, but gradually understand the value.

Before we explore and investigate the disadvantages of self-cherishing, we have to explore what *self* is in this context. When we have a better understanding of *self* in this context we can explore the disadvantages of self-cherishing, and start to explore the advantages of cherishing others.

Conceptualising

Self-cherishing is the counterpart of self-grasping. Ignorance creates the wrong view on who we are and based on this wrong view the mind grasps for its own creation.

Conceptuality generalises in unfortunate ways, it is useful when we know the mind generalises, but most of the time we do not realise. Conceptualising creates non-existing self.



The mind responds to thoughts as well as to things we directly see.

For example, when one thinks about looking over the edge of the Sears Tower in Chicago, the thought alone can lead to the same physical response as actually looking over the edge of the Sears Tower.

Conceptualising generalizes in time, for example you can think about yourself as a baby or as an old person. Conceptualizing squeezes all these different moments of time into one 'me', one person – but you are not. You are different as a baby, different when you are old.

Remembering tends to cluster repeating patterns about myself and turn them in characteristics. This makes you think that you are in a certain way, that you have certain characteristics, that you are a certain person. But this is not true. Patterns change over time. We have an illusion we stay the same 'me' over time, but in reality, nothing stayed the same compared to when you were a three-year old. We are causal phenomena, there are patterns changing over time. Recognizing a pattern or characteristics does not mean it one stays the same. It is a mere an illusion that we look at the same *thing (or person)*, you are not the same person now as you were back then, nor the same person you were last week.

The Scottish philosopher David Hume gives a good example when he speaks about a church somewhere in Scotland, founded in the early Middle Ages. The congregation wanted to give God a better chapel, therefor the wooden chapel was turned into a stone chapel. One day the church burned down, except the stone chapel and they rebuilt the church in stone. Later they added a chapel on the left and a chapel on the right. Though the church kept the same name over time, nothing of the original building is still here, not a single stone or wooden beam. This is the same for us. There is no essence in us as we constantly change from moment to moment.

I sometimes joke the Gendun you looked at last week is now in a vacuum cleaner, and it is true.

We have an illusion looking at the same person or thing, but it is just not true. The same is true for the mind, the mind is different in every single moment.

This conceptualising way to look at myself allows me to bring Gendun to the mind without context, without others, as an independent being, an illusion of self-existing. But this does not make sense: I am a Buddhist teacher at this moment in this context. There is a moment of *Gendun the Buddhist teacher* in the context of listeners. When I shave my head, I was not a teacher, I would be *Gendun the head-shaver*. Throughout the day we have many different functions.

The Buddha teaches we exist in a very different way from how we think we exist. When I speak of emptiness, I refer to what we add to the world. We, by mistake, seem to exist permanently, independent of what is part of us and independent of context. This misunderstanding of being independent of body and mind create unwholesome and harmful relations to both body and mind. Once we deeply understand we are interdependent, we can choose to fulfil a caretakers-role.



The body does many things on its own. For example walking; try to walk deliberately – it is impossible to ‘manage’ all muscles to act at the right moment in the right way. The same for digesting food, etc. We do not actively digest, the body does it ‘on its own’. For the mind the same: it makes sense of the world around and inside us, without having to intervene. While talking a foreign language I do not have to look up every word in the dictionary, the mind *translates on its own*. But it is a good to question the mind as it (very) often mistakes.

There is no *self*, independent of others; we are social constructs.

When the Buddha talks about self-cherishing, he specifically refers to the fact we cherish a *sense of self*, existing independently of others and of the concept of the language we share, a cultural embeddedness.

These two elements create a sense of separation; I on one side, the world and others on the other side. This makes us pursue happiness at the cost of others. We drink coffee and let forests disappear in order to be able to drink limitless amounts of coffee.

This sense of self creates all sorts of problems. We started with internal problems like disconnect-ness, depression, neuroses, etc. The burden of the *sense of self* is very heavy. It makes us feel not good enough, we go back and forth between pride and depressed, we have a persistent sense of fear.

When I started meditation I discovered how fearful I was, the most dominant emotion. The way we think the world exists, as created by the mind through conceptualising, leads to fear. The Buddha learns us how this wrong view on the world defeats us, makes us fearful.

We are fearful because our ‘model of the world’ is contradictory to the way the world truly exists. Our model does not work, and we are constantly defeated by the model. That is what the Buddha highlights: look at the way the model defeats you.

Then, learn to let it go.

Not because you should let go, but because you investigated and have seen for yourself the model does not work, cannot work.

Preoccupation with ourselves

Constant preoccupation with ourselves makes life hard on us, harder than life already is. We might not be able to overcome physical suffering. Toothache, leads to thoughts: ‘*Why me, I want to get rid of it?*’ There will be physical suffering and mental suffering will follow and might become worse than the physical suffering.

We will not be able to overcome all physical suffering in this life, but mental suffering is a choice. Mental suffering is far, far worse. than the physical suffering.

To us physical and mental suffering are mixed, but I hope one day you will have an experience when you can let go of the mental suffering.

There is a story in one of Ajahn Brahm’s books, where he tells about having a toothache meditating somewhere in the forest of northern Thailand and the dentist was like three or four days of travel away. So Ajahn Brahm realised there was nowhere to go. He describes 24 hours of pure agony, where he imagined how his infection was

going from his root canal. into his jaw and his jaw was rotting away and it would fall off etc. etc. Then, after 24 hours of mental suffering, the mind suddenly gave up. It stopped experiencing suffering and Ajahn Brahm states this was the most blissful experience he ever had.

One of the students asked me why I decided to meditate in huts in Burma, this is the answer: you learn to give up. Once you let go, when you unleash the mind of aversion, gives rise to a state of mind that is without comparison, something you never felt before. Nothing in the world can do that, happiness comes from release – important to understand. Let go.

We often seek happiness in conflict with others, and we fantasise that what is outside of us will make us happy. Life in samsara is not easy; when somebody speaks unwholesome to you is not nice, staying angry for weeks is much worse. Self-cherishing heaps enormous amounts on top of our suffering and leaves you no calm.

Neediness is contradictory to contentment. Desire and contentment exclude each other. This sense of self leads to endless talking in your head. The self-obsessiveness of the mind is therefore unwholesome on both sides.

- The sense of self is incorrect.
- The obsessive behaviour is terrible, a major form of dukkha.

It makes everything unsatisfactory.

Dukkha is often translated as *suffering* but it has a much wider connotation. It especially relates to the experience of mental suffering, this is the real suffering we talk about and produces dissatisfaction as well as a sense of being out of control from moment to moment, from life to life. That is the price to pay for self-cherishing.

It is worthwhile to contemplate and to investigate during daily life what self-cherishing does to you.

QUESTION

If I only cherish others, am I not allowed to take care of myself anymore?

ANSWER

This is the most asked question by students and the question itself originates in self-cherishing. Stating the question stems from a belief that *your* happiness and *my* happiness are separated, and that is verifiably not true.

We mistakenly believe this sense of self, we are mutually implicated – we *inter-exist*. When you investigate during meditation and/or contemplation, you find a body and a mind. But when you investigate a little deeper, you find that body and mind make no sense without others, are non-existing without others. In fact, you find all others.

When we look at trees we can ask ourselves where does a tree start? At its roots? Or by the moles living by the roots? Does a tree exist without soil, sunshine, rain? In philosophy this is called *a vague phenomenon*. Another example is a dune: when does sand become a dune? When there are 3 grains of sand? Or a 1.000? Or a 1.000.000?

So it is important therefore to look at the disadvantages of self-cherishing in your daily life? Where do 'I' begin and end? Who or what do 'I' need to be alive?

The challenges of letting go

There are two challenges:

- The sense of self
- The obsessiveness around us.

These are both to let go of and are mutually reinforcing.

We also look at larger phenomena.

When you analyse that we have existed since beginnings times, and we have been practicing this (wrong) view since beginningless times, well it should have worked by now. We tried self-cherishing for trillions of years, and we are still waiting for lunch then we should realise at one point that we have a problem. We have not been able to satisfaction.

The purpose of desire is the alleviation, the way we desire is unpleasant. And yet we always keep returning to the same unsatisfactory spot. Looking again and again for alleviation and after an infinite amount of time we still have not been able to alleviate our need. Contemplate on this, it is very important to realise.

At the same time, we have the description of the path of the Bodhisattva, we have the beautiful Jataka stories – which I like because they are so human. The Bodhisattva in these stories makes lots of silly mistakes. That is why I love reading them, they give me the freedom to make stupid mistakes as well.

The stories highlight the career of someone who gradually learns to cherish others, above cherishing this illusory *sense of self*, someone who more and more develops a *connected sense of self*.

To talk about *self* and *other* is a misunderstanding, they are interrelated things. My body is not mine. When I investigate, I find genes of my parents; I contributed nothing. I feed my body, but feeding a horse does not make that body to be your body either. It is only by habit I label this body '*to be me*'. Through investigation I know it is not me in the sense I thought it was. While investigating how the body exist, I find others. It takes a world community to feed this single body.

Me becoming you

Tsongkhapa argues this perspective gradually allows me to extend the sense of *my body* into *you*. Where I become aware of you as being part of my body. And that is where the word kāyah (Sanskrit for body) works quite well. The body is like us: a collection. In the end you get the feeling *I am the body of life*. I am imputed on the body of life, it is because the body of life that *I* exist.

That is what other-cherishing is, where identification transcends into others, and others are experienced as being part of what it means to be a person.

And you see the Bodhisattva practicing this in the Jatakas. The beauty of the Buddha's story is it makes clear how and in what way it made the Buddha who he became.



The Buddha is not a vague, transcendental idea. You can study what a Buddha is, you can study what letting go of self-cherishing means to you. Buddhahood is the ultimate release of self-grasping and self-cherishing.

And through letting go of self-grasping and self-cherishing, these boundaries are gone. The Buddha is a caretaker of the world in the same way as arahants are caretakers of their body and their minds.

The disadvantage of self-cherishing

Tsongkhapa gives a beautiful example of the disadvantages of self-cherishing and the advantages of other-cherishing.

Imagine you have a conflict with someone; the endless thinking about the conflict is burdensome. The mind keeps going back to this 'horrible person' and you might want to get rid of them. But the problem with good enemies is you cannot get rid of them. The moment you change perspective and turn this person into a friend, you immediately get what you wished for: the enemy disappears and the endless thinking stops.

This perspective might even lead to the opposite: the absence of the (*new*) friend is harmful. It is amazing to find out what a change of perspective can do. Once you say '*you are my friend*', you acknowledge you depend him. He contributes to me, and I cannot live without him. To think of someone in such a way is a great relief and an endless source of mental happiness.

To overcome loneliness is realizing we inter-exist. Loneliness exist only when you create a boundary between the person you are and others. This was a reason to organize meditation sessions during Covid, to remind us we are together.

Then Tsongkhapa argues, something important in Madhyamaka: it is important to investigate your relationship with others. One might ask '*why does your left hand carry care for your right hand?*', well it is because your left hand is not your right hand. The left hand cares for the right hand because you accept that the right hand and the left hand belong to the same collection. Why do you care for your pension? You care because the present moment of self and the later moment of self-belong to a collection of individual moments of mind.

One cannot exist without other

It is what we call *others belong to the body of being*, I cannot exist without other, just like my right leg does not perform a function without my left leg.

I can walk because I have two legs. If I lose one of my legs, the other one does not function as a leg anymore. It cannot walk.

Or, I would not perform a function as a teacher without you. Teacher is not within me or outside me, it is the result of how we interrelate; teacher-ness arises in relation between us; and I cannot tell a self-story without others, without my parents, without my teachers, without people in the supermarket, without bees pollinating flowers, etc. The distinction between '*self*' and '*others*' is illusory as we function interdependent.



Other examples are '*mountains depend on valleys, rivers depend on banks*', etc. Every other living being is our bank. Without them, we make no sense. So where does a river begin? Where does a river end? You cannot say.

Reflections on self-cherishing

Tsongkhapa gives different arguments to reflect on self-cherishing:

1. The sense of self is unrealistic.

We appear to ourselves in all our unwholesome emotions as independently self-existing. This is because of conceptuality, all unwholesome minds are conceptual minds. Anger, jealousy, depression are all based on thought and proliferation.

This does not mean all mental thinking is unwholesome, but it does mean that all unwholesome minds are conceptual minds.

This is where things go wrong. We misunderstand the generalisations of the world to be the world itself, and thereby come to unrealistic conclusions.

2. Based on this sense of self we self-cherish

Since this sense of self is present, we cherish it. It is wise to reflect on what self-cherishing does to our well-being. Even in the best of times, self-cherishing steals away contentment. And the very moment we face challenges, self-cherishing heaps on immeasurable suffering.

3. Self-cherishing manipulates our perception.

We create illusory distinctions between 'self' and 'others' which creates a full circle of suffering.

Therefore, think of the advantages of other-cherishing.

Letting go

When we practice shamatha, and you deeply investigated happiness, you come to understand you cannot pursue happiness in and of itself. Mental happiness (piti, meditative happiness) is actually a byproduct and arises when the mind indicates its internal state during shamata-practice.

Normally we are very object-obsessed, a big challenge. During shamata-practice you might encounter something else, where temporary happiness comes from sensory relief.

When we practice calm abiding we find temporally relief of desire, distraction, dullness, spiritual doubt. This relief (contrary to temporary sensory relief) can be held over a longer time span and can be extended; it can grow.

The mind responds to its freedom. This is important to seek at the beginning of every meditation when you practice equanimity; when you let go, there is a strong sense of



relief, it is quite nice. When we let go in meditation, we relieve the mind, and the mind responds in a very pleasant way.

The longer you sit, the better it gets and you can do it as long as you want. I was tired the other day and practiced letting go for two hours. To *just to sit equanimously* is happiness.

The ability to relieve the mind will grow through practice; it is not something you can pursue to find, like all things on the path.

When we outside of meditation engage in kindness, compassion and generosity, the mind will respond like it does when you let go during meditation: you will feel immense happiness. However, there is a paradox: when you engage in kindness, compassion and generosity in pursue of happiness, it will not work.

The same during meditation: when you pursue happiness by letting go it will not work either.

The only way to get the result you aspire (here: *happiness*) is to forget you want that result. Tsongkhapa invites us to only think about other-needs and forget about the 'self'.

Forget your desire for happiness and focus on the need of happiness in other-persons. Slowly habituate yourself, start with little things. For example when you are in a hurry and see someone in need of help. Realize whatever you are hurrying towards can maybe wait for five minutes.

Other-needs slowly become more important than self-needs. Then you pay attention to the experience of (e.g.) generosity. It has arisen from within, not because you seek generosity; a beautiful feeling that shows you something the person you are: you become a generous person, the other-person enables you to develop generosity. Place the needs of the other before you. The other needs help, and you generously help, not for the sake of pursuing happiness by acting generous.

This week I interviewed Jay Garfield and we also spoke about ethical philosophy, where prof. Garfield gave the example of visiting a friend in hospital. When you visit the friend to *maximize his happiness*, or because you think '*visiting is inherently ethical*'. This is (as Garfield says) '*one thought too many*.' Too often we act out of self-cherishing and self-grasping: '*one thought too many*.'

This is paradox, the mind tries to improve in- and by itself.

One step at the time

We should learn to forget self-cherishing, one step at a time. When you meet someone and generosity arises, you feel the need of the other. There is simply giving, without any reason. Then you come to understand the giver, the giving, and the receiver arise together, the three melt into one at that moment.

When you feel and deeply understand this, you forget about *self* and *self-cherishing*. And once you are really good at this, you are a Buddha. Buddhas only cherish others, they are free and perfect.



Buddhas include all life. The Buddha's function is between the Buddha and all living beings, not solemnly within the Buddha.

Exploring the disadvantages of self-cherishing give us a deep understanding about the way we exist. Then you slowly move towards equanimity, joy, appreciation, love, compassion, and finally the wish to become a Buddha for the welfare of all living beings.

Tonglen

Within the Mahayana tradition Tonglen is the most exquisite, and most difficult practice.

Tonglen means giving and taking, you visualize you take all the troubles in the world upon you and because you are a bodhisattva; you are able to handle it. When you take all these troubles upon yourself, it transforms into the nectar of a medicine as it relieves you from self-cherishing, a release producing immense happiness. The only way to experience this happiness is by giving it away: that is why Tonglen means 'giving and taking.'

Tonglen is extremely healing to both body and mind. Next time you have a toothache, you will not wallow in your own suffering and heap up on the misery by producing unwholesome thoughts. You realize you are a bodhisattva: 'may all the toothaches of all the world ripen upon me', and us be free from self-cherishing.

There is paradox: the more you take suffering you upon yourself, the more relief you will experience. Some great masters try really hard to be reborn in the hell realms because there is much work to be done there. The paradox is the harder you wish it, the more impossible it becomes. It is next to impossible for a bodhisattva to be reborn in a hell realm.

Self-cherishing is the great detriment of ourselves and the planet

Tsongkhapa quotes from a beautiful text by the Nagarjuna (page 42 of the reader):

*If you attain unexcelled Buddhahood,
In dependence on living beings.
Why be at all amazed in these three realms
The resources of deities and humans
Relied upon by Brahma, Indra, Rudra,
And the worldly protectors,
Are also brought about by
Just helping living beings?*

This shows that even in a samsaric context, all the higher rebirths from human to the gods arise based on caring for others and based on ethics. Then Tsongkhapa contrasts:

*All of the many sufferings
Living beings experience
As animals, hungry ghosts, and hell beings
Come from harming living beings.*

Self-cherishing is not only to the great detriment of ourselves, it is also to the great detriment of others. That is the world that we live in, when we keep consuming like this, we will end up with an empty planet.

During a Sommet among different Buddhist centres about climate change and I was asked to say something about it and I quoted from the Theravada Vinaya (monastic vows), that says *'the Dharma will stay in the world as long as there are arahants meditating in forest.'* And maybe no one thought this might be about forests rather than Arhats. People always believed that 'somewhere in the future' there will no longer be Arahants, but maybe enlightenment becomes increasingly difficult when there are no places to meditate in silence and solitude anymore.

We are emptying the planet in an endless search of satisfaction at the cost of someone else's benefit.

The Buddha explained this is a misunderstanding: satisfaction comes from releasing, setting the mind free of the constant pursuit; happiness only comes from within. We are actively limiting our well-being by ignorance.

Self-cherishing is the ultimate letting go, letting go of the self, letting go of self-obsession. To learn to only think of others and to know by own experience that we are satisfied by doing so, but one step at a time.

Prayers

Concluding

We are lucky. We still live in a time where not only the intellectual side of the Dharma is still present, but the lived experience is present. We can still connect with people that do only cherish others and see for ourselves by way of their experience, what practicing the Dharma does to a human being.

And in that sense, we have no greater example than Lama Zopa Rinpoche. He managed to stop sleeping for 23 years when he came to the conclusion that with so much suffering around, sleeping is a waste of time.

We find them in every moment to be happy. They are satisfied and yet they do nothing for themselves.

Buddhas do not need to be praised. We need that praise as we need to believe it is possible.

If you want to keep Rinpoche in this world, you should become like him. Life can be hard on us, where Buddhas are wonderfully boring and they are all the same.



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Maybe we too should become exquisitely boring and serve all living beings and thereby keep our gurus in the world because that is their purpose, nothing more and nothing less.

So maybe spend an evening on exploring the disadvantages of self-cherishing and the advantages of other cherishing. the negativity of the self-image, contemplating how we do exist.

Then the meditation apart, putting it back together, taking it apart, putting it back together until it becomes. Act intuitively.

