



# The Buddha Project

IDMT Year 3 -Term 1

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Tonglen: Giving and Taking



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## Introduction

### Three forms of care

Compassion (or *care*) comes in three different levels, much to explore within each:

- The first level shows a realistic view on the challenges people face in life. Chandrakirti here speaks of *the compassion observing sentient beings*. I used a more narrow way, referring to an Martin Luther King Jr. saying: Spiritual traditions aiming at the ultimate well-being of humans, but fail to take care of their immediate needs, are bound to cease to exist. To only consider the need to attain nirvāṇa is not enough. To be able to practice, we also need food, safety, justice, friends, we need acknowledgement. It is essential to start here, not rushing into abstractions too quickly. Of course, karma and the suffering karma produces play an important role. But we are not able to immediately take someone's karma away. But we are able to alleviate some of the suffering they experience. His Holiness (as did Lama Zopa Rinpoche) practice this; they are magnificent teachers, and channel much of the donations to welfare projects, hospices, hospitals, homeless care, and similar forms of support, paying active attention to immediate human needs.
- The second level of care is called *the care observing impermanence*. Our incessant grasping, seeking satisfaction from things that change form moment by moment, is self-defeating; where this grasping rests on the sense of self: we believe to be unchanging. To *care for emptiness* gives insight to the underlying unsatisfiable desire, which creates many problems in the world.
- The third level is *the care observing emptiness*. The recognition of living beings are misguided by the way they believe both themselves and all other things exist. These wrong perceptions lead to unskillful actions and lay down karmic imprints uncontrollably propelling them from life to life and from moment to moment.

## About the meditation

### Feeling the levels of care

During meditation, as in my practice, I try to explore these three levels in an as felt way as possible. It is easy to conjure up abstract propositions, but people do not suffer from abstractions.

We will keep exploring this felt sense. How does it feel to grasp for inherent existence. We must learn to feel it. And of course the same is true for the other levels / forms of care.

### Keeping the reflections fresh

These three forms of care correspond to different levels of the problems beings face, yet they are also interrelated.



The *care observing emptiness* is the most fundamental level, but we cannot address it without working with the first two. During meditation it is helpful to keep finding new ways of approaching these reflections, in order for them to remain fresh.

### **Beginning with the particular**

As I often emphasized, an approach I rely on is to begin with a person in the present moment, someone I have read about, spoken to, or noticed.

I rather start with somebody specific, not somebody or something abstract, using my dilemmas to get a sense of what might be experienced by that person. From this person, I extend outward into a more global care.

We will return to this later and see a quote from Chandrakīrti directly related to this.

### **Another argument for emptiness**

During the meditation I introduced another argument for emptiness (something we will further explore next year) is we often experience certain characteristics belong to us inherently, as though they define us from our side.

Many of you have seen me in person, and you may have the impression that I am tall, as if this characteristic is something I can be known by. But if I were to walk into an American basketball court and that would be your only reference, you would not recognize me, as I would be one of the smallest guys on the team. Tall is a quality I *sometimes* have and this is true of all qualities (or characteristics) in many ways.

The deeper point is this sense of self depends upon labelling 'you' as 'other', and vice versa.

This sense of 'you' as being separated depends upon me labelling myself as 'self' and reinforces the sense of self. When I were the only being in the world (no others there), it would be impossible to know myself as *a self*. A strange but very important thought!

The Buddha does not deny the person: the person Gendun talks a lot. But the view of 'me' inherently existing makes no sense. This *sense of self* arises in dependence upon you.

Nāgārjuna will later unfold this in detail.

### **Seeing that qualities do not exist from their own side**

When we say '*Gendun is tall*', we hold a certain belief that Gendun has characteristics to be known in and of themselves, as if '*Gendun is tall*' were true without any context. We just argued this is not true. There is something mistaken in the way we understand it.

The same applies to many things we assume to existing from their own side. Imagine a valley, e.g. when you picture Switzerland. But a valley are not known independently: a valley exists relative to a mountain. In Holland there are no valleys as there are no mountains.

There are no *valleys* without *mountains*, no *mountains* without *valleys*. No *nearby* without *far away*, no *here* without *there*.

Just like there is no *self* without *other*, and no *other* without *self*.

### **Concepts as collections**

As Yogācāra argues: we are banks to each other's rivers. I can only make sense of myself in relation to you.

Last week we extended this argument by stating *all things are collections*. This is what *imputation* or *concept* means: a concept is always a collection of things parts.



What is Gendun apart from a collection of the five aggregates? Yet, none of the aggregates is Gendun. One could also say that Gendun is the continuity of moments of mind, but none of those individual moments is Gendun either.

Our wrong understanding of '*collections*' is these collections exist independently of their parts and independently of their environment. This wrong understanding creates mental problems and it makes freedom inaccessible, even makes a moment of mental calm unattainable.

The texts explains this is unacceptable. This obsessiveness with a disconnected sense of self is poison. Why hold onto something so unrealistic?

Once you understand it to be poison, you know this sense of self appears in a way it does not exist. I cherish a nice, authentic, always present, even when you are not there, self.

Yet in reality, that makes no sense. '*Self*' only makes sense in relation to you.

### **Extending the category of *self***

When the Buddha teaches other-cherishing, he is not telling us to harm ourselves. He explains our current strategy does not work. We misunderstand what it means to be a person. The answer to this misunderstanding is other-cherishing.

From this conclusion the Buddha argues: if '*self*' is only a name imputed onto a collection, I can probably define in what part of the collection this '*self*' is. If a / any part of '*self*' exists and I take this part away, '*I*' would cease to exist.

Last week we explored trees: trees without roots do not exist; roots without fungi and bacteria do not exist, or without soil trees die. Without other trees they die; without sun, wind and rain they die. What is true for trees is true for us.

The Buddha argues we can extend this insight, forget about this narrow *sense of self*, it was never accurate. Widen the category to include all that sustains me, together they become my body. This body then includes the totality of conditions that are part my existence.

When I look at all living beings, I can say: '*this is me.*' If they are happy, I am happy. They are like the cells of my body.

Sometimes cells misbehave and sometimes they function well. There is no fault, it is the nature of saṃsāra.

The same is true of living beings. Sometimes they act poorly and sometimes kindly. It is not '*their fault*', these are the conditions of saṃsāra.

### **The immediate effect on the mind**

Observe what happens when you direct your attention with kindness and care towards all you now call *self*. Immediately the sense of separation or loneliness falls away. During the COVID crisis at the Maitreya Institute, we played that out. Everyone felt alone, yet I reminded them that you are always free to think of someone else.

### **QUESTION**

Is there still an *other* when you think of all others as yourself?

### **ANSWER**

That is not the case. The point is not that I cease to exist and you cease to exist. The point is we shift the priority of what we observe. When I overfocus on my illusory sense of self, I create immeasurable harm. When I focus on you and identify correctly that you are a



condition necessary for me to exist, happiness naturally ensues.

It is delusory to call you: me. It is about changing priority of other-cherishing above self-cherishing and discover I then generate all the qualities I was always looking for.

When I see *others* as my priority, the *others* will like me, even if I neither want nor need it.

This is what Shantideva highlights: when *others* becomes my priority, I will have innumerable friends. They will all feel that I matter to them and for the first time in my life, I may actually become important.

Most of the beings moving about in this world will never be remembered. But I can guarantee you that in two hundred years everyone will still know who the Fourteenth Dalai Lama was. I have been with him, he only cares for you.

It is a matter of perspective and of how I choose to look at things, not a matter of holding a mistaken delusion.

### **Softening the boundary: self and other as flexible labels**

It is a matter of perspective, not delusion. I intentionally soften the boundary between us.

My sense of self depends upon your existence as *other*, and I can play with these terms. I can extend my sense of identification and include you in it. If you are happy, I am happy. If I care for you, I become a generous person. I cannot be a good person while excluding you.

This is not about being delusory. It is about recognizing that *self* and *other* are relatively random terms; we can use them more skillful by re-identifying *self* and *others*.

### **QUESTION**

I cannot prioritize others because I am physically and mentally exhausted.

### **ANSWER**

This exhaustion is the product of self-cherishing. This is why the Dalai Lama and Lama Zopa Rinpoche can work twenty-four hours a day. They do not operate from self-cherishing.

We go around in circles with this

Feeling selfish does not help either because it is self-punishment, simply another form of self-cherishing.

Self-cherishing is often traumatic as pride and self-diminishing go hand in hand.

### **QUESTION**

How do we shift the sense of centre? How do we experience not being the centre of these particular aggregates, when the mind is so habituated to identifying this way? And is it advisable as a practice?

### **ANSWER**

Of course it is important to change the perspective, to understand self-cherishing is harmful. A common mistake however is when we speak of self-cherishing, the *self* that is criticised is not *you*, it is the delusion about *you*, the delusion harms you. It is a distinction we must learn to feel.

This deluded-self is an illusory- and disconnected sense of self you are obsessed about. This is why I gave you the argument in the meditation:

*What does this sense of self do?*

*It makes you restless; because this deluded-self always needs more, it cannot be satisfied because you cannot satisfy something that does not exist.*



Whatever trouble arises, self-cherishing makes things worse. Every conflict, every physical difficulty, every social circumstance becomes heavier. Self-cherishing turns everyone into objects to be used and makes everything into *mine, my friends, my enemies*, and those who do not matter to me. That is not a world to live in. No one responds well to that.

*Other-cherishing* means changing perspective. To exist, I depend on *you*. It is the sense of separation that makes me feel exhausted and frustrated.

Then notice what happens when through other-cherishing: the mind immediately responds. That alone is enough, it feels good to care. It is *not caring at your cost*. Nothing real is given up. The only thing that falls away is an illusion. The only thing we need to let go of, is this non-existing self. There is no point of obsessing over something that does not exist.

We do exist, of course, as persons.

We *inter-exist*. I arise in dependence on *you*. This means that caring for *you* matters to *me* in the same way that the trees care to soil and fungi matters to them. Trees support the soil, and fungi break down the soil so that the trees can be nourished.

## Transforming Adversity into the Path of Enlightenment

### **Meditating on illusion-like appearance**

(reader page 32)

#### *2.3.3 Transforming Adversity into the Path of Enlightenment*

*When all the world is filled with negativity,  
transform adversity into the path of enlightenment.*

*Drive all blames into one.*

*Meditate on the great kindness of all.*

*By meditating on illusions as the four buddha bodies,  
Emptiness is protection unsurpassed.*

*The fourfold practice is the best of methods.*

*Whatever you encounter, apply the practice.*

We start where we left of: *By meditating on illusions as the four buddha bodies.*

We could spend all day on this single line.

We need to approach this line with a sense of openness, because it will take a little more study of emptiness before this becomes completely clear. One step at a time

### **Concepts at the center of our problems**

On the one hand, Geshe Chekawa Yeshe Dorje makes an interesting move:

The center of our problem is conceptual thinking. We believe the objects of our concepts exist independently. But we came to deeply understand concepts depend upon imputation.

They are skillful in the way of categorizing the world, so that we can talk about the world.

Yet these concepts appear to be more than that, where they are not.

As an example, anger is a mental awareness. It holds a concept of a person as being bad in and of themselves. But such a person does not exist, just like a car does not exist: we

encircle a group of parts in a certain context and label this collection as *car*. But a car itself is empty. A car that is separate from parts, conditions and labelling cannot be found. This is what the text is pointing to.

### Seeing concepts as empty

When a negative concept arises, such as bad person, if I reflect, I can immediately understand that the concept *bad person* is empty.

This is what is meant by the first of the Buddha bodies. The Buddha sees the conventions living beings create and at the same time sees how they truly exist: empty of inherent existence.

These creations function, they are not illusions, but they are *illusion-like as they appear as something they are not*.

When I think me, it is a useful way of talking. But at the same time it creates the illusion I can be known without parts, conditions and labelling. And that is not true: I exist, but I am empty of self-existence.

Remember that.

This is a practice we can continually apply. We can still use the concept, yet the unwholesome emotion bound to the appearance disappears immediately. When an angry concept arises (*he is a bad person*) and we know it to be empty, merely labelled by us, the anger is gone. We punctured the illusion-like appearance.

Just like the mirage above asphalt in summer: the appearance remains, but once you know it is not water, your thirst no longer reaches for it.

### Using appearance for awakening

That is what he means here.

Buddhas still see concepts as we do, but they know how they exist. They have no inherent existence, what we see exists relationally. This means we can use whatever appears to the mind, especially when concepts arise, illuminate or awaken ourselves through the simple reflection: *how do concepts exist?*

This is why we have spent so much time exploring how concepts arise.

### Seeing things as activities bringing awakening

Your practice for now is the reflection 'how do concepts exist?' and to look at all things as activities of a Buddha guiding us toward awakening.

When negative emotions arise, be aware they arise because of self-cherishing and the very experience becomes an activity of the Three Jewels. It is an activity of your guru, helping you to let go of what causes the sense of harm. Buddhas do not literally create harm, they are not even able to. When negative emotions arise is nothing but an opportunity to transform these experiences into wholesome emotions.

### Two ways of working with appearances

When we understand things are empty, we have a perspective that is close to the awakened mind. We see things as they truly exist, bringing an immediate sense of freedom.



At the same time, when difficult things happen, we can look at them as if they are activities of the Three Jewels guiding us towards Buddhahood.

When circumstances are difficult, time becomes an opportunity to practise patience. When a beggar comes our way, it becomes a chance to practise generosity. And we continue along this path. It is a slightly complex argument, we will keep exploring.

### **Emptiness as protection**

Line six of this verse says

*Emptiness is protection unsurpassed.*

This means continually reflecting on how things truly exist.

Remember the Buddha does not deny the existence of things. Emptiness here refers to the emptiness of inherent existence (also called *self-existence*, or *essential-existence*), meaning existence without reliance on anything else. All this is absent. Things inter-exist, as Thich Nhat Hanh beautifully argues: *All things exist dependently.*

To know a car, you need to rely on things that are not car. That is the only way to know a car. A car exists dependently, yet the illusion created by concepts is that the car self-exists. When I imagine *me* as something I can bring to mind without relying on anything else, I am generating the illusion of self-existence. But that is only a mirage of conceptuality, we are free to let go of this mirage.

When we let go, afflictive emotions can no longer arise.

We are immediately free.

### **The space-like nature of mind**

There is a beautiful sentence in the commentary. We used it often while meditating on the nature of the mind: *the mind is space-like*, it has no manifest characteristics. Though this is a limited perspective of the mind. When we go deeper, we come to understand the mind has no inherent existence.

We experience as if things have fixed boundaries, existing in and of themselves. We experience the world estranged and alienated. *Me* here, *you* there, a computer *there*, and so on. And we need to learn to feel what that way of experiencing does to us.

That is a conventional way of perceiving the world and I again emphasize the conventional world exists. My computer performs the function of computer, and I perform the function of me. But the boundaries we imagine between all things are illusory.

### **Appearance and emptiness together**

When we observe conventional phenomena, we can notice two aspects at the same time: their appearance and their emptiness. They are all space-like.

When you look for the essential nature of the car, you find space – there is nothing to be found. It is open. At times I prefer the word *openness* to emptiness, because it conveys the felt sense more clearly.

When I think *Gendun*, the mind immediately creates boundaries: *me here* and *you there*.

When I think *openness*, there are no boundaries, openness cannot be separated, *me* being *emptiness* knows no bounds. When I think of *me* in terms of emptiness, all of a sudden we are sky in sky, space in space, inseparable in emptiness. This is a profoundly calming perspective, something we will practice a lot as in Mahāmudrā emptiness is essential.



This is something you must explore; when you see and think of a car, you can stay with its limited appearance, but when you ask how the car exists, you find openness (or emptiness). Once you are able to focus on this openness the mind produces a sense of release; the mind opens and relaxes.

This is something you must learn to feel. It might seem overwhelming, but do not worry. We have time to explore opening and letting go.

## Putting the teachings into practice

We go back to the text, line 3 of this verse saying:

*The fourfold practice is the best of methods.*

### Fourfold practice

The *fourfold practice* is not explained in the reader, but I like to elaborate on it a bit – as it is an interesting way to conclude today.

There are four contemplations.

#### 1. When harm comes, practise gratitude

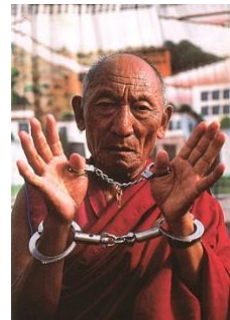
When harm comes my way, especially when it comes from other beings, I should reflect with kindness and gratitude. The person who tries to harm me gives me awakening.

We spoke about [Palden Gyatso](#), the Tibetan monk who spent thirty-three years in a Chinese prison and used those conditions to cultivate the awakened mind.

We need such examples to make this plausible.

When someone says something unkind and unpleasantness arises, we can analyze the emotion, coming to the conclusion it is self-cherishing. The other person has just helped me to discover it. So I say ‘thank you’ and observe what happens.

This is not as difficult as we often imagine.



#### 2. When unkindness appears, reflect on karma

This moment of unpleasantness is the result of negative actions in the past. Former actions created the conditions that came together to produce this unpleasantness. But when we reflect correctly, it becomes a moment of freedom.

When I recognize the moment for what it is and generate kindness toward the other person, thanking them for helping me see this, and I recall karma ripens only once, I am freed from the unpleasantness. What happens is a complete shift: I am free now, while the person who harmed me has created the causes of their future imprisonment. I become the victor and the other person is the victim. This contemplation naturally gives rise to compassion.

#### 3. Recognising the harm of self-cherishing

Based on reflecting on karma, we recognize how self-cherishing gives rise to afflictions.

We allow these patterns of self-cherishing to recede into the past and we apply the antidotes.

We contemplate: *'this is the last time this happens, or at least I will try'*.

We seek an *other-cherishing mind*, which (unlike the *self-cherishing mind*) does not create circumstances in which I experience harm while others are pushed into lower states.

#### **4. Seeing difficulties as activities of the Buddha**

When I recognize how this process works, I can see these experiences as activities of the Buddhas, as activities of my guru.

I use these reflections knowing that harm has arisen since beginningless time, from the endless grasping at *'me and I'*. I turn my gaze away and choose other-cherishing, knowing the benefits of other-cherishing.

This brings us back to what was asked earlier about exhaustion:

If I choose other-cherishing, the mind relaxes. When the mind is filled with only kindness and compassion, it is no longer disturbed, because in a compassionate and kind mind disturbances cannot arise.

A calm mind arises and I allow myself to enjoy it.

Learn to sit with a calm mind, both on your cushion and in daily life, because it is the mind that disturbs itself. Understanding this brings great freedom and we can stop it.

One of the interesting aspects of Buddhist psychology is we cannot look at the same thing in opposing ways. We cannot hate and love something simultaneously, no matter what people say, it is not possible.

When we live the world with infinite kindness, the mind becomes calm. We can finally relax, be at ease, and nourish ourselves. And from that place, we can go into the world with joy to care for others and grow in that care.

#### **Caring for the body and the mind**

Of course we need care.

Shantideva expresses it magnificently: Now that I know self-cherishing is my problem, I give my body and my mind to the Buddha, because Buddhas only care for others. My mind and my body are safe with the Buddha.

One could say: I have two possessions of the Buddha in my house: this mind and this body. I shall care for them as I would care for any possession of the Buddha. So I nourish the body, and I nourish the mind as they are precious possessions of the Buddha through which the welfare of living beings is enacted.

That is truly relaxing.

That is the marvel of it.

And yes, you can still have a pizza. You can buy the best pizza you can find for this Buddha body, and you offer it to that which you have given to the Buddha. And in the process, you make merit.



**QUESTION**

Can you provide an example of an empty mathematical concept?

**ANSWER**

I am not entirely sure what is exactly meant, but the basic idea is we know things by way of concepts. Concepts are mental constructions we use to assemble our experience. They are categories based on parts, arising in the context of causes and conditions, and viewed from the perspective of a particular observer, much like the example of a car.

A car exists because you can drive from A to B with it. But when you look for the car as something self-existing, you cannot find it. When you look for the car, you find only things that are not car at all. Cars exist, but they have no 'essence', no 'soul', no 'self'.

This is the way all things exist. Things function, but when you look for them as self-existing entities, there is nothing to be found: they are empty.

**QUESTION**

There is a difficult person at work. At first we were fine, but over time some miscommunication happened, and I began to distrust her. This distrust, arising from felt experience, is hard to let go of.

**ANSWER**

Yes, exactly. That is already a good answer to your own question. If that person were difficult from her own side, you would have known it from the beginning. But that was not the case.

We all have experiences of someone being a friend at first, then becoming an enemy, and, if we manage well, becoming a friend again. Rivers and banks, mountains and valleys, selves and others, friends and enemies all arise dependently.

**How we see others determines who we become**

Here is a final reminder.

Who I am depends on the other. When I think of you as *my enemy* and I turn my gaze around, *I see your enemy*. By defining you as my enemy, I implicitly define myself as your enemy.

But when I think of you as an object of care, and I turn my gaze around, I see a care-taker. And personally, I prefer seeing a care-takers over enemies.

Tonight, both here and online, in twenty minutes I will see none of you. But I will still be with myself.

This, when I define you as *enemy*, I have a massive problem, because I took the real enemy home. When I think of you with love, then in twenty minutes I will have a good evening on the couch, formatting these recordings. Then I sit on the couch as a lover of others. I prefer taking the lover rather than the enemy home.

This is the truth of all things.

**Practicing small steps**

Remember, one step at a time.

Once you see how this works, it is not so difficult. It is like swimming: once you know how, swimming is easy. You do not jump into a river assuming you know how to swim.



That is why we use these examples, to gradually practice and slowly things start to make sense. You need experience with how it works.

Next time you hear someone says something and unpleasantness arises. Try to work with it: you heard something unpleasant and observe how you feel when you respond with anger, how you appear to yourself.

Then apply what we practiced during meditation and observe how the mind response on unpleasantness: a heap of misery.

Then contemplate on what you heard and think 'why do you hurt me, what happened to you?' Then look again and notice you are relieved. Nourish that experience. Once you have seen this for yourself, you can take something slightly bigger. Again and again and again, until it becomes natural.

Thank you for practicing this evening, both live and online. It is always such a blessing.

## Prayers

## Closing remarks

### **Two freedoms to remember**

We have two freedoms, and these are important to remember.

1) We are free in how we look at things.

Seek freedom in how you look, it is the heart of this text: explore different ways of looking at the world and notice what they do to you.

2) You have the freedom to be happy.

It is your freedom to be happy.

To be a Buddha is to see all beings as your children, as your mothers, as beings to care for. To be in saṃsāra is to see others as your competitors.

These are two very different ways of understanding what it means to be a person. One comes from a disconnected sense of self. The other comes from seeing that when you look for 'you', you find others. The latter of course is the way you exist.

So go forth and be happy.

Thank you to everyone present.

Make it the last time we need go through saṃsāra. Because we can.

See you soon.

