



The Buddha Project

IDMT Year 3-Term 2

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Three Levels of Dependent Origination



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Content

Introduction	3
The paradox of <i>care</i>	3
The illusion of self-sufficiency.....	4
An intermezzo about selflessness.....	5
The lower schools on the existence of person.....	6
Dependent arising or dependent origination.....	7
1. Causal dependence.....	7
2. Mereological dependence	8
3. Conceptual dependence.....	9
Practice advice.....	12
Prayers.....	13
Closing words.....	13

Introduction

There are two things I like to mention before we get started.

Specific to the IDMT: not all students are on the same page yet, so to speak. Today we will discuss some topics to, as a group, get closer.

In a more general sense: the necessity of developing compassion in the world is, especially since the latest war. People don't understand harming others always results in harming ourselves. Bombs fall on Iran, and Iran starts bombing as well. The first victims this morning were, as far as I heard, Israeli children. This is what ignorance can do, polarization is never wholesome.

When we deduct what is underneath all this aggression we realize all grasping leads by necessity to zero-sum games, nobody will win in the end.

When we think we have a self-sufficient or inherently existent self, our well-being becomes a trade-off and it will lead to conflict: in competition, in violence, or anything in between.

When I use violence, I mean violence in the broadest possible sense. The abuse or use of others is also violence, a consequence of what we do.

Sometimes it seems far-fetched what we do as Buddhist in relation to the big problems of the world. The Buddha highlighted that without an antidote to ignorance, you will not be able to stop violence. Violence has been around since the beginning of time.

Today's victims will be tomorrow's perpetrators. We defeated Nazism 80 years ago and it is still here – as it will be in 50, 100 and a 1.000 years.

What we do as Buddhists is essential: developing the wisdom to lead people out. It is impossible to save everyone today, otherwise the Buddha would have accomplished this two and a half thousand years ago.

We should try to live in a way that, at the end of our life, we know we saved or touched someone sufficiently and saved that person, even if you do not know the person. We touched somebody in a way that alleviated that person's suffering. Then you can die with a grateful mind.

We need selflessness to accomplish this and see what we truly are.

The paradox of *care*

Care, a word I like better than compassion, is a complex and paradoxical concept. Compassion requires an empathy to feel the troubles of others, though that is not enough.

I prefer the word *care* as the word compassion does not fit what I'm trying to say. When we look at the troubles that living beings face, including ourselves, it is important to generate a deep sense of *care* to know how they and to know how you feel.

During emptiness-meditation, when this deep felt sense of *care* arises, it is uplifting and empowering.

When the four immeasurable thoughts and Bodhicitta are deeply understood a deep felt sense will arise as well and at the same time your being becomes self-refreshing and becomes inexhaustible. It is important to deeply experience these paradoxical concepts.

The generation of *care* deflates feelings of depression and the sense of powerlessness. In these moments of despair the mind misunderstands what is really there and it is important to investigate what that is.

The text of [Chekawa Yeshe Dorje](#) is quite elaborate in its psychological exploration of what Bodhicitta is and why it does not work in some instances. For example: today I feel deflated by the news of war, where the text helps me to investigate why I feel deflated. I want to feel empowered and to feel powerless is grasping at *self* characterized by being powerless.

Care must be nourishing. When it is not, this is not your fault! We aim to get at the point where emptiness and compassion are two sides of the same coin.

The illusion of self-sufficiency

Self-sufficiency is a delusion

A sense of being self-sufficient is a delusion, a finer form of ignorance than the permanent, unitarian, independent self (*PUI*).

A often used analogy is where the misinterpretation of this permanent, unitary, independence self feels like a king or a queen, having absolute power, where the appearance of a *self-sufficient self* feels more like a prime-minister. Prime ministers have a negotiated power: you need to deal with your cabinet, like dealing with the aggregates: you should be able to control your aggregates, within the limitations of the aggregates.

When you generate *care* that is tainted by a sense of self-sufficiency, you overestimate what you can do. You want to acquire something, without taking into account limitations within you and/or others. This might work shortly, but it will lead to a sense of pride rather than trust. And it is difficult to keep pride and trust separated! Pride feels empowering, but it is not. Eventually you run into reality, unable to bypass the aggregates. You cannot always order the aggregates what to do. When the mind is tired, no matter what you want, the mind needs to rest.

Self-sufficiency can run two ways

When pride and arrogance arise, you have an unrealistic, powerful *sense of self* that inevitably runs into reality which is its opposite. This will make you feel not good enough: you are a self-sufficient being, and now you fail? The conclusion is you are bad. Self-sufficiency is very damaging to our psychology.

When you negate self-sufficiency, deeply knowing this self-sufficiency is impossible, gives rise to a sense of emptiness, a sense of absence. As long as you hold to this sense of emptiness, all unfortunate emotions will be blocked. This sense of emptiness cannot

yet destroy unfortunate emotions because there is something underneath. You are not self-sufficient, but dependent on the aggregates. We often spoke of a *caretaker relation* with your aggregates, rather than a *commanding-relation* with your aggregates.

You are not the prime-minister, but a primus interparish (first among equals) of the aggregates.

The Buddha was not the master of his community, he was the first amongst equals.

If you want the aggregates to work well, you have to negotiate. When you want to care for others today, you have to find out how the mind is doing and negotiate with the mind: *how shall we manage today?* It is extremely empowering and, in the beginning, also hard because we do not know who we are.

We have no idea what the mind is. Some think there is free will – as if we can do anything outside of causes and conditions. Ignorance makes The Lord of the Rings look realistic. There is a bigger chance you run into Gandalf or a Hobbit than that you run into a self-sufficient self.

When you practice *care* and run into deflationary mental states, this is the moment you realize the lack of self-sufficient self. When you deeply understand what this looks like, you can use it to suppress what is going wrong. It will take time, just like every level, as it is difficult to exactly define what that looks like

There are innate states of mind are difficult to recognise, they are undefined and very deep. But for example anger and depressive are states of mind that need to be recognized. What does depression and/or anger look like, what felt sense accompanies these states of mind; how do I experience myself when arrogance and superiority arise; what image does the mind create of me?

And again, this all does not mean there is no *person*. We need to figure out who we truly are and how things work.

An intermezzo about selflessness

Venerable Gendun shows a picture with six monks and nuns, and with [Ganden Trisur Rinpoche](#) who passed away a few months ago. He was a monk of the Sira Monastery. He was called Gendrutula, where Gen means teacher – it is the way monastics address each other – lá is added when there is special personal appreciation – drutula refers to him being the great yogi.

For most of us, there will always be a tension between developing scholastic power and developing meditative power. Somehow Gendrutula embodied, in my humble opinion and by my limited knowledge, an awesome understanding of the Dharma. The abbot of Nalanda Monastery estimated this man had memorized around 35,000 pages of text, that in itself is a feat, a library! Straight after my ordination, I travelled with the abbot, first to Spain, where he gave me an initiation, and then to London, where he gave the same tantric initiation.

In London, I noticed that, when Gendrutula was teaching, he would do a ritual of opening the book, turn the first page, and then start to teach, without turning any page. Tibetans always use these loose pages text, wrapped in cloth. We travelled around with all these books. He would be so enthusiastic about the Dharma that he would forget to turn the pages; he just taught from his exceptional memory.

He was always happy to talk to anyone, but when he was not engaged in conversation, he would recite texts. To memorize 35,000 pages, you need to keep them alive. He has a profound, internalized, balanced, stilled mind. On the one hand, an enormous power there, and on the other hand, in a good way, no one is home.

The abbot of Nalanda and I went to visit him. While having a conversation, the abbot did not agree with Rinpoche. Westerners, never dare say anything in disagreement to their teacher, however the abbot of Nalanda had no problem with that. The abbot started to debate in terms of 'what you say makes no sense'. Here you have the greatest scholar, apart from His Holiness, and one of his own students says something like that?! Their debate seemed harsh from the outside, almost aggressive, but that is just play. It shows a very healthy relation between student and teacher.

The Ganden Trisur was not insulted by his disciple, quite to the contrary. He had an immense sense of delight on his face: look at this student of mine, he tries to defeat me in debate. I think this is a beautiful example of what selflessness means.

Something to keep in mind when you meditate.

You become powerful when you realize selflessness.

The lower schools on the existence of *person*

The lower schools state a person lacks a self-sufficient self. However, when one says: a person lacks a self-sufficient self – you affirm there is a person as you just qualified the person.

Especially those on the Bodhisattva path, in fact this holds for all vehicles in the Buddhist tradition, it requires a very strong personality to pursue the path. When you deeply realize you are not self-sufficient, you will gain power because you will learn to navigate being a person. Buddhas bring this to perfection.

The mind provides us with wrong information, language and concepts are the problem. In the beginning, we need to approach this transformation by saying what person is not, and then figure out what is behind – as the Culasunnata Sutra tells us.

The lower schools argue a person does not exist self-sufficiently; but there must be something on the side of the aggregates or I would not be able to call what I see a person. What I see must refer to something on the side of the object. If I look, in the end I must find something, something must remain.

There are different ideas and different schools. The most accepted ideas within the lower schools is the *continuum of mental consciousness*, or the *collection of the aggregates*.



They argue that, when you give something a name, you encircle it and so there needs to be something independent within that circle. They argue you can point at the mental consciousness within the aggregates, as it is the continuum that goes from life to life – it is the reason why you label it ‘*person*’. They say it is imputed on the *continuum of the mental mind*. They hold that the mental mind, the moments of consciousness, are self-existing, something to be found.

Later we will argue this theory does not work, but you need to have heard it.

Dependent arising or dependent origination

Venerable Gendun here shows page 9 of the document [Appendix](#)

We now move towards [Madhyamakas](#), the middle way school, and more specific, the [Prasangika Madhyamakas](#). The latter refers to what is called consequentialists, they argue by pointing out the consequences of ignorance. This Tibetan school especially follows in the line of [Je Tsongkhapa](#) the great founder of our tradition, where Tsongkhapa refers to [Chandrakirti](#), who wrote this famous commentary on Nagarjuna’s [Madhyamakāvatāra](#) (Entering the middle way) where Tsongkhapa wrote ‘*illuminating the intent*’.

We will talk about Madhyamakas even when we refer to Prasangika Madhyamakas as this name is a bit long.

We will ignore the other school for now.

Dependent origination

The Madhyamakas navigate between what the world understands by the terms *existence* and *non-existence*.

Related to the terms *existence* and *non-existence* the Buddha says: I do not accept either, because they will be misunderstood no matter the explanation, they are unable to understand without insight.

When somebody says the car exists, this person means the car self-exists and that makes no sense according to the Buddha, things have no *self* in that sense. The opposite person or philosophical school (even many Buddhist schools) would argue the car does not exist at all.

So the Buddha does not accept either: *things do not self-exist; things exist in dependence*. This is a simple idea, but the consequences are monumental.

1. Causal dependence

Things depend on causes and conditions.

This dependence means that something cannot depend on itself; something needs to depend on something which is not itself. A seedling depends on a seed, seedlings do not bring themselves into existence. Every moment of a seedling to become a plant or tree depends on water and so forth. Every moment of every phenomenon always

depends on sustenance by conditions. That is the reason everything is impermanent, nothing can sustain itself – not even for a moment. Everything needs something else. This '*something else*' has the same problem: they do not exist independent either. All things are like this; every phenomenon exists in an enormous network of always-changing things. No phenomenon can independently go to the next moment, it needs support to get there, it interdependent.

Every moment of Gendun needs oxygen to move through time. We do not realize this until oxygen disappears; then Gendun disappears. My visual consciousness depends on an object to see something. My mental consciousness depends on thought; etc. This is a very important concept to develop compassion.

Please look into the additional materials for more explanation.

The distinction between causes and conditions.

Causes produce results only when there are additional conditions. Seeds do not self-produce seedlings. Seeds only produce seedlings when there is e.g. moisture, dirt, and sunlight.

This is so very important to realize.

Another example is this teaching, they happen dependently. There are conditions to produce the teachings. The teachings happens as the right causes and conditions are here, and the teachings unfold themselves.

I do not want to think about this process while teaching, they can only unfold when there is no do-er, a paradox.

The moment I think about a do-er, the sense of self-sufficient self is introduced. At that very moment the process of *teachings happening* stops – this is a form of dependency.

We used this idea to reflect on all living beings as our mothers. We argued how all living beings have been the cause of one of our rebirths. All living beings, really all of them (!), are necessarily contributing conditions for the present moment.

When you make a drawing with lines representing dependencies, you will see how quickly you include every living being on the planet. You will see how short these relational lines are, how intimate our existence is.

It is said it takes max. six steps to know you are connected to every human being.

These relational lines are short and intimate. It is a beautiful and rewarding image of how to be in this world. To feel yourself held, to experience all these living beings as dear.

This way of experiencing your being does not deny you actually exist, the absence of self-sufficiency allows you to be grateful, gratitude is one of the most beautiful emotions.

2. Mereological dependence

This looks at: *phenomena depend on parts*.

In meditation I gave some examples: houses exist and depend on causes and conditions like brickmakers, architects and a house depends on parts like walls, roofs, foundations, windows, doors, rooms, and so on.

For anything to fill out space, things need to be directional. Everything that has directionality has parts.

It can also relate to time: e.g. our mental-consciousness has parts in time. Each individual moment of mind does not do much. But to express a single sentence requires a lot of individual concepts and ideas, etc.

An individual moment of mind depends on the moment before it, and it hands off something to the moment afterwards. Only together can they perform cognitions, speech, or recognition, or anything.

What is true for the person is also true for the mind. And the mind, like matter, is all compounded in the sense that you have six types of mind. These minds are accompanied by mental factors. There is no consciousness without mental factors, especially the five omnipresent mental factors.

All matter has necessarily directional parts and temporal parts; the same is true for the mind and the person.

The first two, *causal dependence* and *mereological dependence*, are true for what is called *functioning* or *impermanent phenomena*. Something can only perform a function when it can change. Again as an example: a laptop that is unable to change is incapable of doing something – my laptop performs a function because it changes.

3. Conceptual dependence

A category of phenomena that are called *non-functioning* or *uncompounded phenomena*. These are absences, buildings and the planet and laptops, people are possible because they are pervaded by uncompounded space. Uncompounded space is simply the absence of obstruction.

This strongly relates to the third noble truth: cessation, this is where our problems end, then there is an absence of a problem.

An example is the emptiness of a self-sufficient *self*. Emptiness is an absence, a non-affirming negation: something is not here. There is a whole category of phenomena that are absences. Absences are not dependent on these causal and mereological dependence, but everything else is.

Important

A unique aspect of Buddhist meditation is meditation on absences without affirming something. The lower schools in Buddhism, Vaibhashikas and Sautantrikas do affirm something in their meditations.

Our school does not; we argue something is absent and affirm nothing.

All Buddhist schools accept *causal dependence* and *mereological dependence*.

Vaibhashikas and Sautantrikas, Yogacharas, they all accept the three layers of dependence, all schools are on the same page. But when it comes to *conceptual dependence*, there are differing opinions.



All Buddhist schools accept it to some extent, but not all the way down.

Turtle metaphor

A classical Indian cosmology argues earth is hanging on the back of a turtle. But what is the turtle then standing on? And the answer is it is turtles all the way down. 😊
It is a childlike expression on what is called foundationalism. Everything must always rest on something.

And will see it is something all Buddhist schools accept. The turtle on which everything rests is particles and moments of mind, findable things – and based on that, we impute a person. The Madhyamakas argue that in the end, there is no turtle, mind is the ultimate nature.

Difference between schools

Causal dependence and *mereological dependence* are true for functional phenomena (synonyms for functional phenomena are impermanent - , compounded - , and conditioned phenomena). These schools are based on foundationalism: when I look for something, in the end I will find particles. For example: the question *why do I call this a laptop* will (through reasoning) be answered, questioning will end somewhere, will be answered.

Yogacharas argue we will always find mind. Remember, they argue the apprehended object and the apprehender (the mind) are not different substances, they are non-dual but there is still something to be found.

Conceptual dependency is true for all phenomena, this is where the Madhyamakas differ from all schools, where *non-functioning phenomena* and *non-compounded phenomena* are also synonyms., a more idealistic approach.

The Madhyamakas argue that what Yogacharas argue (*there is still something to be found*) is not realistic. Following the arguments of Yogacharas, you would be able to find for example aversion, desire, and every other problem – and this is according to the Madhyamakas unrealistic.

Mutual dependence

The reader (Appendix) states on page 9

Mutual dependence involves phenomena being posited and attaining their conventional identity in relation to other factors, as the examples of seed and sprout and mother and child demonstrate. Mutual dependence also pertains to, for example, long and short; young and old; self and other; and friend, enemy, and stranger.

For example, the relationship between cause and effect: a cause is not a cause in and of itself, it is only a cause in relation to an effect. Where a cause is the effect in relation to what came before.

Related to what we look at (person) ven. Gendun explains: *I could argue 'I am tall', being tall seems a natural aspect of me. But when an American basketball team walks in, all of a sudden I seem short.* Being tall is not an aspect of ven. Gendun.



The Madhyamakas argue *one is only tall in relation to short people and vice versa*. Personal qualities are relational. Being tall, intelligent, thin, fat, all these qualities are relational.

Another example is the exams of the FPMT-training exam. When somebody passes the exam and I congratulate them on their performance, they would shine – but often for the wrong reason. When I would congratulate them and say some other students did better, they would shine less.

Pride leads to downfall, emotions like pride and intelligent set you up for failure when someone does better, you then feel deflated.

When you understand it relationally, things get very different.

Dependence on names

The reader (page 9) says:

Names are imputed or designated in dependence on something that is able to fulfil a unique or specific function that corresponds with the meaning of the name. Something exists as that object only when we give it a name. Before the name has been given, we can't say that particular object exists (e.g. being a president)

Conceptual dependence (the third form of dependence, see page 9 of this document) relates to names and concepts.

An example of dependence on names is are machines. A coffee machine only is a coffee machine (aside of being dependent on parts and causes and conditions), but above all on our understanding of it to be a coffee machine. Nothing comes from the side of the coffee machine. We belong to a community agreeing this is a coffee machine. And we cannot step out of our community. That is not possible.

Dependence on concepts

The reader says:

Since all phenomena (including emptiness itself) are merely imputed by conception, everything that exists arises from the conceptual mind that imputes it. While that does not mean that a conceptual mind causes or produces it, it is true that all phenomena depend on, rely on, and arise from the conceptual mind that imputes them.

Every concept is a conventionality, an agreement, a social structure; e.g. when I argue from now on a notebook is a laptop, this is not going to happen. This only works as an agreement within a community.

Wittgenstein argues *there is only the language game*.

There is nothing beyond names and concepts: we and everything around is are put in concepts. But, we need a basis for the concept to function, things depend on conceptuality but conceptuality does not create them.

The three levels – different levels of difficulty

These three dependences (mutual, names, concepts) are listed in order of depth.

- Mutual dependence
To understand causes and conditions seems pretty straight forward and you can stay with an illusion for a while.
Rationally you understand: when you leave seeds on the table they will not turn into plants.
- Dependence on names
To deeply understand things depend on parts for their existence, feels against our intuition because things appear as a whole.
An example is the cell phone: why do we pay so much money for an Apple than another brand? There seems to something inherently in the iPhone that is not. There seems to be something in the iPhone, independently existing outside the parts.
- Dependence on concepts
The deepest and most difficult to understand is things depend on concepts.
For example: the coffee machine does not make coffee on its own. Just leave it in your kitchen and see what happens: nothing. It requires you accept it as a coffee machine, and that is true for all phenomena. That is the deepest way, the foundational truth of the way things truly exist.

Emptiness shows us nothing exists apart from being imputed, designated, or conceptualized by mind. Mind is the maker of the world, including ourselves. If you understand that, you understand Bodhichitta: individual enlightenment is not a path.

Practice advice

Practice the meditation

The object of negation is one of the most difficult things to develop: What am I looking at when I am angry? What am I looking at when I am not feeling good enough?

That is very challenging, allow yourself time to practice, it is worth your while.

Do not fall into the trap of not feeling good enough with this theory. If today was quite novel, do not worry.

When you look at the world in terms of absences, of negation, problems are no longer there. Madhyamaka is not difficult to understand, ignorance is hard to overcome.

Once you have more insight on how things truly exist, you have found refuge. You know where to go when you are in trouble: you will not turn to movies, alcohol, or other distractions – all you need to go to is the understanding you do not exist self-sufficiently and to allow yourself to rest and to heal there.

Refuge is always inside of you only need to see it and once you do: you are free. Our medicine is always within.

How we truly exist is magnificent. But through these sessions I first steal the delusion

you exist permanently, unitarily, and independently, I steal the idea you are self-sufficient. But I strongly emphasize on what letting go liberates.

We treat body and mind unwholesome and they feel hurt because they obey a fictitious dictator *'living somewhere in the head'*.

On the one hand, when someone supports you, has trust in you, facilitates you, sees what you do not see yet, and creates wholesome conditions and this person knows how you can get the right conditions, you will flourish. That feels good, because you feel acknowledged.

On the other hand, believing there is a self-sufficient self is depressing, hard, fearful, and above all, not true.

You need to become a caretaker to appreciate the extraordinary mind. And our body, well, imagine four trillion bits and pieces working in unison – it is unimaginable. That is what you get to see when you give up the non-existent fictitious dictator.

Once you come to understand you are not self-sufficient: others create me, and I create others. We are inter-relational and need to learn to see how body and mind flourish. It is beautiful, and you will find body and mind respond to it well.

Study the Additional material (Appendix)

Do so to become familiar with today's subjects.

Prayers

I now that you understand how powerful what we are doing is. It seems nothing to do with meditating on a cushion, to reflect on philosophy.

But without it, no problem can be solved.

Closing words

Thank you for your presence, both online and live.

Thank you for your efforts to pursue your freedom, the welfare of all living beings. until we meet again.