



Module 6:  
How Things Exist  
Meditation workshop





# Module 6: How Things Exist

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## Meditation 1 - Dependent Origination

### *Introduction:*

This meditation uses the Buddhist logic of Dependent Origination to analyse how things exist. Any object can be described as a collection of different parts (nothing is unitary), each of which has its causes. Our minds isolate the different parts of a collection of parts (and their causes) and gives them a label, creating the appearance of solid, unchanging, independently existing objects.

According to the Buddhist view of reality, any phenomenon or object can be described according to three levels of analysis: its causes, its parts ("elements" of a larger whole), and the mind that sees the parts and causes as singular separate identity (mental labelling). In this meditation, we go from an intellectual to an experiential understanding of objects and phenomena. Ultimately, this practice helps us to change the way we think, connect, and react to material objects. As a focus for this meditation, we can choose any object in relation to which we experience a feeling of attachment: our phone, car, house, favourite meal, etc. Here, we use a mobile phone as an example.

## Meditation outline

### *Grounding*

- Sit in your favourite meditation posture, either cross-legged on the floor or sitting on a chair with a straight spine. You can keep your eyes half-open or closed, and your hands in your lap or on your knees.
- Focus on your breath for one minute to stabilise the mind, paying attention to your nostrils or abdomen.
- If your mind wanders throughout the meditative practice, bring your attention back to the breath.

### *Analysis of the parts*

- Bring to mind an object you have an emotional attachment for. For example, a phone, gadget, car, house, etc.
- Examine the parts of the object. Start with the bigger individual parts and try to find the essence of each individual part.
- Analyse the different components which make the individual parts of the object and try to find an essence on each component.
- Break your object down further to the atomic level and examine whether there is an essence in any of the particles and atoms which form the object.
- Try and see if the same emotional attachment to this pile of elements arises as you have for the object as a whole.
- Zoom back and see the object simultaneously as a whole and as the combination of particles and atoms.



## Meditation Outline (continued)

### *Analysis of the causes*

- Recall an object to which you feel attached.
- Reflect on the different people which made this object possible, who have designed, manufactured, delivered the object as it is.
- Think further back and acknowledge the evolution of science, technology, agriculture, commerce, and society itself which made the collection of raw materials possible.
- Contemplate the dawning of life on earth and further back the birth of our star and solar systems, the big bang and explosion of earlier starts which gave rise to elements of life on earth and all the particles and atoms.

### *Analysis of the mind*

- Now focus on the mind and all the labels the mind creates.
- Think about all the causes which brought together countless trillions of particles grouped into molecules, cells, and organs and contemplate how the mind imposes the continuity of particles and causes and label them as your object of attachment.
- Try and see this label in your mind applying the label as an equal participant in the existence of your object.
- Recall again how you ordinarily see the object as singular, independent, and unchanging.

### *Conclusion*

- Pull back and zoom back to your meditation posture and the breath.
- Make an aspiration to continue seeing things this way, as richly changing interdependent objects, especially when strong feelings of attachment or aversion to objects arise.



## Guided Meditation 1: Dependent Origination

### *Analysis of the parts*

Bring to mind an object you experience a strong emotional attachment for. First, acknowledge that this object has a beneficial factor: that it brings advantages to our life, and that we are grateful for that. To dive deeper and to understand reality better, we examine the parts of our object. We start with the bigger parts of our object, and we try to find an essence within this part.

Is the phone found in its screen, chip, battery, case, etc? Can you find your phone in any one of those parts or the collection of the parts? Reflect on the parts and investigate whether the object is identified with any of those parts for one minute.

To go more deeply, examine the human made materials of the glass, plastic, electronic components, capacitors, wires, and sensors. As we consider these parts of the object, are we coming closer to find the essence of the object that attracts us? Meditate silently for one minute and search to see if you can find the essence of the object in those individual parts.

Going deeper to the atomic level, we meditate on the elements that make the object. The phone contains almost every element on the periodic table. Indium, tin, and oxygen coat the touch screen display. The processor is made of silicone, phosphorous, antimony, arsenic, boron, indium, and gallium. The screen glass is made of silicon dioxide, aluminium, magnesium, sodium, and potassium. The electronic components of the phone are made of gold, silver and copper, tantalum, gadolinium, praseodymium, neodymium, terbium, dysprosium, europium, lithium, cobalt, and nickel. For a minute, try and conjure the same emotional attachment to this pile of elements as you have for the object.

Do the parts themselves have the same allure as when they are all combined? Is our love for the object a love of all parts individually? If we cannot find the object in any of the individual parts, how is it possible it can be found in the sum of them? Meditate on this for one minute.

When we picture the different elements, they still have qualities: colours, textures, tastes, smells, and sounds. When we focus our mind to the atomic level, we arrive at the invisible level of the subatomic where there are no colours, textures, tastes, smells, and sounds. Atoms are almost entirely empty space with their subatomic particles in the form of electrons, protons, and neutrons zipping around at an incredible speed. Even at the subatomic level, particles do not exist as we think. They seem to be more like probabilities. They exist relationally and are only observed and measured by other things and minds. For a moment, try and picture your object as an incredible living cloud of energy and particles whatever those are and, ultimately, try to imagine the probabilistic coming in and out of existence of quanta energy, which is constantly changing and moving mostly in empty space. Focus on how your object exists at this level of quantum reality. Meditate on this for one minute.

Now pull back and zoom back to the conventional level, where the illusion of your object appears to the senses and see if you can observe the object simultaneously in both ways: firstly, the conventional way of appearance with form, colour, texture, taste, smell and sound. At the same time, see the object through its molecules and elements and, further, as subatomic particles of quantum probabilities. Does this view soften the edges of the strong feelings you have towards your object? Does it give you a deep sense of



## Guided Meditation 1 - Dependent Origination (continued)

awe and wonder of how things truly exist? For one minute, hold the two realities simultaneously: the reality of the senses and the subtlest underlying reality of the elements.

### *Analysis of the causes*

Now we think about the causes which bring these parts together. In the first instance and on the immediate causes, imagine the people who have designed, manufactured the different components, and transported them across the different countries to your house.

Think further back to deeper causes, to the evolution of science, technology, agriculture, commerce and society itself which made the collection of raw materials possible. Think back to the evolution of intelligent life on earth which led to human beings being able to work together. Now, back to the dawn of life on earth 4 billion years ago. Then, further back to the birth of our star, of our solar system. Back further to the explosion of earlier stars which led to the formation of the heavy elements, like carbon and oxygen, which form most of the elements of life on earth. Additionally, think back to the start of the universe when simpler elements like hydrogen and helium formed. See how the object you are thinking about is connected to the entire history of the universe, not only in the past but at this moment. See how each particle in your object feels the gravitational pull of every other particle in the universe and also interacts, at the quantum level, with other nearby particles.

### *Analysis of the mind*

Now we move from causes to the mind which labels these causal parts and we consider the role of the mind in reality. The collection of parts, of countless trillions of particles grouping into molecules, cells, and human made cells. Think about all the causes which brought them together. Then notice how your mind projects onto the continuity of particles and causes this strong label of phone. Try and see this label in your mind applying that label as equal participant in the existence of your object. When we do this, we can also see that other people might not see our object as we do. Other types of minds and beings might not even see it as a separate distinct object the way we do. Now you see the object in this much richer interdependent changing way, for a moment recall again how you ordinarily see it as singular, independent, and unchanging.

### *Conclusion*

Things do exist, but they exist in this interdependent and ever-changing way as entities composed of parts brought together by uncountable causes and labelled by the mind, for a time, as a certain object. It is possible that your strong feeling of attachment might be reduced through seeing reality in this way. The illusion of an independent object, which has the power on its own to bring us pleasure or pain, transmutes into a lighter more interdependent way of experiencing reality of the object.

As you come out of this meditation, you can make an aspiration to continue seeing things this way, as a rich and ever-changing collection of interdependent objects, especially when strong feelings of attachment or aversion arise which is only objectified through our mind temporarily by imposing a label on it.



## Guided Meditation 1 - Dependent Origination (continued)

As a final reminder, from a Buddhist perspective, this practice softens our mind, it awakens us to our interdependent role in the universe and gives a sense of responsibility to see how every action and thought has new effects on the world. Carefully attending to the web of cause and effect.



## Meditation 2: The Five Aggregates

### *Introduction:*

What is the nature of the “self”? Here, we use the logic of Dependent Origination to look at our body and mind and analyse the way perception of our “self” is construed. Using a traditional Buddhist outline, the body-mind complex is divided into five separate factors, or aggregates. The first is the body (or form), while the other four (feeling, discrimination, volition, and consciousness) refer to the different layers of the mind.

### Meditation outline

#### *Grounding*

- Sit in your favourite meditation posture, either cross-legged on the floor or sitting on a chair with a straight spine. You can keep your eyes half-open or closed, and your hands in your lap or on your knees.
- Focus on your breath for one minute to stabilise the mind, by paying attention to your nostrils or abdomen.
- If your mind wanders, bring your attention back to the breath.
- Recall a time where you experienced a strong afflictive emotion, for example a sense of injustice arising from being strongly or falsely criticised. Meditate for one minute on how you experienced yourself at that time.

#### *Body form*

- Bring that sense of the indignant, kind of self-righteous self into the corner of your mind and start to examine and search for that self among the different gross parts of your body, from the feet, legs, kidneys, and brain.
- Investigate for one minute quietly whether you are your brain or any other gross parts of your body.
- Go further, deeper to the cellular level and examine whether you can find a self in any of the cells of your brain and body.
- Further down to the atomic level, probe whether there is a self in each atomic particle which make up your body gross parts.
- Search for the self among your body parts and ask whether you are any one of them or the collection of all of them?

#### Mind

- Bring that sense of the indignant, kind of self-righteous self into the corner of your mind and start to search for a separate self in the mind.
- Probe the various parts of the mind which respond to the sensory and mental phenomena and whether there is a self in any of them. Meditate on this for one minute.





## Meditation outline (continued)

### *Feeling*

- Now start to search for a separate self in each of the feelings which arise.
- Further investigate the feelings and analyse whether the feeling arose in response to a sensory or mental event. Investigate whether you are each moment of a feeling or all of them combined.
- Watch the feeling grow, sustain and then, disappear. Dissect the sub moments infinitely into smaller moments of a feeling and probe for a self in each of them for one minute.

### *Perception*

- Now search for a separate self in the mental factor, perception.
- Investigate if there is a self among the labels the mind gives to reality for one minute.
- Probe all the sensory experiences associated with the label and see if you are your perception, the mind's ability to interpret a multitude of different sensory experiences as a single object.

### *Volition or mental formation*

- Then focus on other mental experiences, such as the mental formation of jealousy or pride or love or compassion or even democracy or justice.
- Give yourself a moment to probe any of your mental experiences and probe if the self can be found in any of them for a few moments.

### *Awareness*

- Finally, search for a separate self in the consciousness or mental experience which is separate from other mental factors.
- Allow your attention to move away from the contents of your mental experience to the container of your mental experience. Probe the qualities of your mind, of your consciousness: luminosity, darkness, clarity, and spaciousness, and pay attention to where thoughts and feelings emerge from and where they dissolve back to. Can you divide consciousness down to its fundamental constituents?
- Investigate whether you find a self within any of these moments of consciousness.

### *Causes*

- Probe all elements that made your body as well as the external elements in the form of intellectual influences from family, friends, and society, for instance.
- Trace your body back further and dissect it through the lenses of evolution, the origin of life on earth, and the big bang and investigate the role of the mind and labels in the construction of the self.
- Release all the complex analysis, concepts, and even all non-conceptual understanding of yourself which transcends the ego, labels any part of you or the collection of parts. Relax into the experience and the feeling of interdependence to know yourself as you truly are. Meditate on this for one minute.



## Meditation outline (continued)

### *Conclusion*

- Pull back and zoom back to your meditation posture and the breath.
- Make an aspiration to continue seeing yourself this way, as a much more alive, changing and interdependent being.

## Guided Meditation 2: The Five Aggregates

### *Grounding*

Sit in your favourite meditation posture, either cross-legged on the floor or sitting on a chair with a straight spine. You can keep your eyes half-open or closed, and your hands in your lap or on your knees. Focus on your breath for one minute to stabilise the mind, by paying attention to your nostrils or abdomen. If your mind wanders, bring your attention back to the breath. Recall a time where you experienced a strong afflictive emotion, for example a sense of injustice arising from being strongly or falsely criticised. Meditate for one minute on how you experienced yourself at that time.

### *Body form*

Bring to mind a time where you were strongly or falsely criticised and felt a sense of injustice. Meditate on this for one minute.

Now, bring that sense of the indignant, kind of self-righteous self into the corner of your mind and start to examine and search for that self among its parts. First, we search for the indignant self in our body and starting with the gross parts of your body you can ask yourself: can I find the self in my feet? Is that self which is being criticised found in my feet or my legs, torso, liver heart, or lungs? Can I find this inherent I in my kidneys, hands, arms, or neck? When we get to our head, we can ask if this inherent I can be found among the sense organs, which give rise to our many sensory perceptions? Am I in my eyes, ears, nose, tongue or skin? What about my blood that circulates through my body, do I find the self there or in any of the cells of my body? Can I find the self in the electrical and chemical signals passing through my neurons and limbic system? Or do I find the self in my DNA, my microbiome of billions of cooperating bacteria inside of me? Can I find the self in my brain? Is this where the self can be found? And if you find it in your brain, where exactly is that self? On the left side or right side? Is it possible to find a “self” neuron, some single neuron where the self resides? Do I find the self in the collection of all neurons in my brain? And if I am in all, why can I not be in one? Just ask yourself this question and probe for a minute quietly whether you are your brain or any other gross parts of your body?

Now go further below the cellular level to the individual molecules. Our bodies are mainly made of water. Are we the water? Or are we the electrolytes or the carbohydrates, lipids, proteins, and vitamins? Then descend to the atomic level: are we the oxygen, carbon, nitrogen, calcium and phosphorus which make up our body’s main elements? Now it can be useful to imagine once again some heaps composed by all those elements that make you who you are. Or are we the sub atomic particles, the electrons, protons and neutrons exchanging at enormous speed within our bodies’ matter? Or are we the empty space between the particles? Atoms are made almost entirely of empty space, so on a technical level most of our body is empty space too. We can go even further and ask if we are the finer particles we know as



## Guided Meditation 2: The Five Aggregates (continued)

gluons, muons, quarks and bosons? Are these the fundamental building blocks of the universe which can be broken down no further, is this where we find the self? Search for the self among your body's parts and ask: am I any one of them or the collection of them?

### *Mind*

Now we move on to search for the separate self in the mind. First, make sure that the slightly annoying indignant sense of self is still there in your mind so you can probe it. In case it is not, bring it back using the above mentioned technique of remembering a time where you were criticised. Now start by probing the various parts of the mind which respond to the sensory and mental phenomena.

### *Feeling*

The first aggregate after form is feeling. Feeling is the way we respond with pleasant feelings to an experience we like, unpleasant feelings to experiences we do not like and indifferent feelings to the rest.

Am I the pleasant feeling I experience when I hear kind words, see beautiful sights, and when I smell and taste foods that I love? Am I the good feelings that arrive through my skin and muscles to hugs and kisses from people close to me? Am I the good feeling from my body which arises when I take a walk or workout? Or, do I identify with unpleasant feelings like those I have when I am uncomfortable, when my body hurts, when I am criticised, attacked, blamed or ignored? Do I identify with the neutral feeling of indifference which I have when I pass a stranger or when I am served by a clerk at a store?

Try not to let your analysis stop at the feelings, making them solid, but see if you can further break down the feelings. If you look closely at your mind, can you see if there is a moment when a feeling arose in response to some sensory or mental event? You can watch the feeling grow, be sustained and then diminish and disappear. Are you any of these sub moments of a feeling? If you are not any single moment, are you all of them combined? Do these moments become indivisible at some point or can you divide them infinitely into smaller and smaller moments of a feeling?

### *Perception*

Next, we see if we can find ourselves in the third aggregate: the mental factor of perception. This is the part of the mind which takes a bundle of reality and labels it. For example: a collection of carbohydrates and proteins and lipids on a clay plate as our dinner; a collection of plant cells as a flower; or a collection of metal and glass and almost all elements on earth which come together as a phone. Are we this aspect of our mind which takes the continuity of invisible electromagnetic reality and, through the senses, labels it with colours, forms, tastes, smells, sounds and tactile sensations? Note these senses exist absolutely independently from the mind. Are you your perception, the ability of your mind to wrap bundles of sensory experiences with the label of home, phone, dinner or me?



## Guided Meditation 2: The Five Aggregates (continued)

### *Volition or mental formation*

Feeling and perception are two of the most powerful mental factors operating in our mind but there are dozens more categorized in the fourth aggregate: volition or mental formation. One way of thinking about this aggregate is our will, the thing which drives us to action. So, you can ask yourself if you are any of the mental experiences in your mind which differentiate between the intricacies of reality. Are you your mental experience of jealousy or pride or love or compassion or even democracy or justice?

If you do identify strongly with one of these mental phenomena, then what happens to the self when one mental experience dissolves into a new one? Give yourself a moment to probe any of your mental experiences to see if the self can be found in any of them for a few seconds.

### *Awareness*

The last element of this five-part analysis of the aggregates is the fifth aggregate: awareness itself. The space of consciousness or mental experience which is separate from the mental factors that go through it. Let your attention move away from the contents of your mental experience to the container of your mental experience. As you relax into the space of your mind, does it appear to have any qualities? Does your mind feel large and spacious or small and confined? Does it have qualities of luminosity or darkness? Does it have a clarity to it or is it fuzzy and obscure? Does the mind have a sense of knowing or reflection of what appears to it or is it indifferent to the mental factors that arise within its space?

Inevitable thoughts and feelings arise within the spaciousness of the mind but pay attention to where these thoughts and feelings emerge from and where they dissolve back to. What is the ground from which the other mental factors emerge within the mind? You may experience some intuitive sense of the space of your mind and relax into this experience for a moment. Is this the ultimate place where the inherent I can finally pin itself upon this pleasant space of the mind? If you decide this is who you ultimately are, this open space of the mind, inquire further. If we divide the space of our mind in half, am I to be found on one side or the other? What if we sub divide the space of the mind into little cubes of mental space, can you find the self in any of them? If this seems absurd and unfindable, can you definitely find the self in the collection of all these little cubes of mental space? The mind also has a temporal aspect, where individual moments of consciousness arise, grow, sustain, diminish and, finally disappear. Some of these have mental factors writing within them, others are free from thought and remain in the direct experience of an unobstructed mind itself. Whether combined or free from mental factors, do you find the self within any of these moments of consciousness? Maybe you find the self within the present moment of consciousness but what happens to the self when this moment of consciousness disappears? Does the self continue on with that moment of consciousness which has disappeared? If it does, where does it go or when does the self jump into the next moment of consciousness? Or is the self separate from any moment of consciousness? Am I in the prior or next part? Can you find a quantum of consciousness where you cannot divide anymore? Or can you divide forever and what does that mean? Is it almost like transcending time itself? Do we find the self in that realization, that experience?



## Guided Meditation 2: The Five Aggregates (continued)

### *Causes*

The physical and mental parts that make up our self all have causes. So, we move on to meditate on causes to see whether the self is as independent as it seems. Our body began with small bits of our mother and father and then incorporated food and nutrients and oxygen to grow itself, initially inside our mother and then outside of her. As we grew, this process continued turning non-me elements into me. With our mind we can notice all the words, concepts, skills, beliefs, and opinions we have learnt came from outside ourselves: from our teachers, parents, friends, and society. We can go back in time and trace our bodies and minds through generations of humans who created the languages, civilizations, technologies and religions which brought us to where we are today. Further back through evolution, millions of years evolving back through apes and mammals and fish to tiny sea creatures, and even further back to the origin of life on Earth, about 4 billion years ago. All the elements that make up life on earth came from earlier stellar explosions, which created the heavy elements of life, such as carbon and nitrogen. Ultimately, we can trace our physical body back to the big bang and the beginning of matter and energy and even time itself in our universe. Then, come back to the present and realise how, at the physical level, every atom in your body is moved by the gravitational attraction of every other particle in the universe. Gravity's reach has no limit. In this way, the galaxies we can see 1.4 billion light years away exert a tiny influence on every particle of our body. Even now we are interconnected with the entire visible universe.

Then, we look at the role of the mind in constructing the self. We are uncountable collections of parts brought together by innumerable causes, stemming back to the origin of the universe. The mind wraps these causes and parts with a label. It is a provisional label, but we become so attached to it that we often feel a surge of excitement or fear when someone says our name. However, we are not our name: this is just a label placed upon a collection of causes and parts. Try to see yourself in this way in your daily life, existing not independently but dependently and constantly changing, made of countless parts produced by an infinite stream of cause and effect. Your mind can be seen in the same way too: your opinions, beliefs, and thoughts are dependent on everything you have learnt, and on our whole civilization. If you always saw yourself this way, would it change how you responded to criticism, blame, craving or praise? Who is being criticised? Am I even the same person who is praised or blamed one second ago? So, try for a moment to abandon all the complex analysis and concepts, letting go of a non-conceptual understanding of yourself which transcends the ego, labels and any part of you or the collection of parts. Allow yourself to relax into the experience and feeling of interdependence, and to know yourself maybe for the first time as you truly are.

### *Conclusion*

Now return to conceptual thinking. See how you do indeed exist. You have not negated yourself in any way, only expanded the boundaries of how you understand your body and mind. Independent, unchanging parts as views of the self are so limiting, narrow and inaccurate. The separateness that arises from this incorrect view of the self is unnecessary when we become aware of our interdependent, changing self which is composed of countless physical parts and mental moments. We are much more alive and interdependent than our narrow ego imposes on us.