

Dharma Drum Mountain Toronto: Selected Readings from the Saṃyukta Āgama

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Learning the Emptiness View of the Four Noble Truths and the Three Dharma Seals

I. Introduction

Label-based identity and FoMO anxiety: Starting from the modern reliance on social media (e.g. Instagram likes, academic degrees, job titles), this section examines how building self-worth on unstable external conditions leads to a sense of insecurity and discontent.

- Interactive reflection: Do you feel that many labels in your life (Instagram likes, academic background, appearances) define who you are? How do you react when these labels change or disappear?

II. The Preciousness of Hearing the Dharma

- Buddhists profess faith in the Three Jewels: the Buddha, the Sangha (or spiritual community), and the Dharma. So, what is Dharma?
- Dharma refers to the nature of ultimate reality, and our understanding of it. When Buddhists refer to “practicing” the Dharma, they are referring to devotional acts that unfold in four stages:
 1. Hearing (聞).
 2. Reflection (思).
 3. Cultivation (修).
 4. Realization (證).
- The focus of this practice is to identify psychological interruption points within the chain of “Dependent Origination,” which describes the arising and passing of all phenomena. Four of these twelve links are of particular importance here:
 1. Contact (觸).
 2. Feeling (受).
 3. Craving (愛).
 4. Clinging (取).
- A contemporary example of these links in action is scrolling on your phone to see other people’s posts. One’s mind might run from the initial act itself (contact) → a sense of inferiority (feeling) → a desire for what they have (craving) → attachment to labels (clinging).
- A method of “reverse contemplation” is proposed as a way to cut off the chain of afflictions.

III. Buddhist Terminology of the Four Noble Truths

(1) Definition and Analogy.

- “Noble” (聖) means righteous, referring to the four true principles attained by the sages.

- “Truth” (諦) means real and undeniable truth. The Four Noble Truths are the four real principles that transform an ordinary being into a saint.
- In "The First Turning of the Dharma Wheel," from *the Samyukta Agama Sutra (379)*, the Buddha taught the “Three Turnings and Twelve Practices” to five monks in Deer Park of Benares. The three turnings are:
 1. Indicative Turning (this is Suffering, this is Origin...),
 2. Exhortation Turning (Suffering should be known, Origin should be eliminated...).
 3. Realization Turning (Suffering is known, Origin is eliminated...)
- In the same sutra, the Buddha uses the metaphor of a great physician to characterize this process. Here the physician employs the Four Noble Truths (the existence of suffering, its origin, its cessation, and the path to follow) as a scientific system of diagnosis. Using this system, one can identify the cause, recovery, and prescription as they relate to suffering. This example illustrates how Buddhism is a combination of "conceptual understanding" and "methodology".
- So, we have a process that looks like this:
Suffering (Diagnosing symptoms) → Origin (Identifying cause) → Cessation (Foreseeing recovery) → Path (Prescribing medication).
- Note that this is a practical teaching sequence, not a series of metaphysical claims.

(2) The Truth of Suffering and its Origin.

2.1. *The Truth of Suffering (Dukkha)* arises from observing life as it really is. In other words, Buddhism is neither pessimistic nor optimistic: it is based on seeing things as they actually are. Suffering, undeniably, exists. Moreover, phenomena are clearly impermanent and in a constant state of flux. Observing impermanence means that "the entire universe and Dharma realm are arising and ceasing in every instant; this fact is what we call the 'view of impermanence.'"

* *Life Examples:* A teacher's changed state of mind after getting married, or the aversion one feels when pests eat one's vegetables.

2.1.a. The Three Levels of Suffering (from coarse to subtle):

- Painful Suffering (Dukkha-dukkha):* this pertains to the “coarse,” or broader level of body and mind in general. Examples include sickness, injury, and hunger. This form of suffering is generally felt by beings in the “desire realm”.
- The Suffering of Change (Viparinama-dukkha):* the suffering of change is felt when pleasant conditions deteriorate, such as when one's wealth is exhausted, an important relationship is broken, or one's company goes bankrupt. These pertain to the “form realm”.
- The Suffering of Formations (Sankhara-dukkha):* this is the deepest and subtlest form of suffering. It arises from the endless pursuit of stable contentment, typically through worldly circumstances, while one is adrift within a stream of causes and conditions that arise and cease in every instant.
"Even though you have great blessings, you still have to work every day... you are always

pursuing... your life is forever in pursuit" – This is the "Suffering" that Buddhists must truly see through.

2.1.b. The Eight Sufferings (Traditional List):

- (1 – 7) The first seven of the eight sufferings are: birth, aging, sickness, death, separation from loved ones, meeting with what one dislikes, and not getting what one seeks.
- (8) The eighth form of suffering pertains to the intensity of the five aggregates. It arises when one clings to forms, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness itself.

2.2. *The Truth of the Origin of Suffering (Samudaya): Where does suffering come from?*

- Here, the term "origin" refers to the gathering of the causes and conditions of suffering.
- "Karma" is the overall, structural, cause in the origin of suffering, whereas "Defilements" are specific, auxiliary conditions.
- Karma is generated by the mental act of forming an intention. Intentional thoughts lead to specific verbal and physical behaviours.
- Fundamental Defilements can be classed into two types:
 - i) Afflictions, or "Defilements of Cultivation": greed, hatred, ignorance, arrogance, and doubt.
 - ii) Defilements of View, or "Intellectual Defilements": the view of one's 'self,' extreme views, wrong views, attachment to views, and the attachment to rites and rituals.
- Ignorance and craving lie at the core of suffering. Because of ignorance, we cannot see the reality of impermanence: the momentary arising and ceasing of phenomenon. Because of craving, we cling to views that reflect what one likes and dislikes. To defend such a view, or stance, we objectify and cling to it regardless of change and impermanence. As such, we stand in opposition to the true nature of phenomena. This leaves us ill at ease and in a state of suffering. Ignorance + Craving → Stance → Conflict → Suffering.
- Review points:
 - The 12 Links of Dependent Origination form the "Gate of Observing the Flow of Existence in Sequence," or "The Cycle of Transmigration."
 - The 12 links are, in full:
Ignorance → Formations → Consciousness → Name and Form → Six Sense Bases → Contact → Feeling → Craving → Clinging → Becoming → Birth → Aging/Death.
 - From the *Agama Sutra*: "When this exists, that exists; a great mass of suffering arises."
 - For example, viewing of a moment in slow motion:
Eye sees waves → Contact → Feeling (Joy/Disgust) → Craving → Clinging → Attachment → Becoming (Action) → Emotion arises → Aging/Death (Emotions rise and cease).

2.3. *The corresponding relationship: How the Noble Truths of Suffering and the Origin of Suffering encompass the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination.*

- The Truth of Suffering consists of 7 links: Consciousness, Name and Form, Six Sense Bases, Contact, Feeling, Birth, Aging/Death (Fact of suffering and consequence).

- The Truth of the Origin of Suffering consists of 5 links: Ignorance, Formations, Craving, Clinging, Becoming (Root cause of suffering: delusion and karma).
- Observing the entire 12 Links of Dependent Origination in sequence reveals the unfolding of worldly causality and conditioning. From this perspective, one is observing the "Gate of Flow."
- The Truth of Cessation corresponds to the "Gate of Reversal" rather than the "Gate of Flow." This can be likened to observing the 12 links that lead to suffering in reverse.
- The Truth of the Path is the method of practice that leads to the cessation of suffering.
- Overall, this constitutes a shift in thinking from the "worldly defiled (mundane) causality" to "supramundane (undefiled) causality".

(3) The Truth of Cessation (Nirodha): The True Meaning of Nirvana.

3.1 *Meaning:*

- When Buddhists refer to "cessation" they are not talking about a nihilistic abyss of dead silence. Cessation is, in fact, tranquil, secure, and ultimate.
- Nirvana is "neither arising nor ceasing, tranquil or secure, free at ease, and absolute existence." It transcends the dualistic concepts of "mind/matter," "existence/non-existence," and "arising/ceasing."
- The Wave Metaphor:
When the surface of a body of water is calm, we sense tranquility. When a tsunami comes, we feel turmoil. Yet, to the water itself, movement and stillness are just phenomena manifested by conditions external to it.
- All things in the Dharma realm are originally tranquil. Suffering arises only because we take a stance, differentiate, and cling. If you abandon that stance, the wave itself is tranquil.
- Realizing Emptiness:
"Phenomena change, causes and conditions arise and cease, the intrinsic nature is empty." When we fully realize this, the distinction between subject and object breaks down. As a result, both vanish. That is Nirvana.
- The highest realization: Arhatship—"My birth (life) has been exhausted, the holy practice is established, what has to be done is done, there is no further existence."

3.2 *The "Gate of Reversal" and the observations that lead to Cessation":*

- Ignorance ceases → Formations cease → Consciousness ceases → Six Sense Bases → Contact ceases → Feeling ceases → Craving ceases → Clinging ceases → Becoming ceases → Birth ceases → Aging/Death ceases.
- From the *Agama Sutra*: "When this ceases, that also ceases; the great mass of suffering ceases."

3.3 *The first practice of the Noble Eightfold Path is that of "Right View."* By holding and maintaining Right View, the light of wisdom breaks the darkness of ignorance. When ignorance is extinguished, everything up to aging and death is eliminated.

IV. Classic Reading: Proof and Dialectics of Non-Self (approx. 30 minutes)

- *Sutra 110*: The debate on "Sovereignty" (Can one control the body?).
Through the dialogue between the Buddha and an arrogant dialectician, we explore whether the "Five Aggregates" constitute the self. If form (the body) is the self, one should be able to "freely dominate" it like a king, causing it to never get sick or old. If one cannot dominate it, then "non-self" is proven.
- *Sutra 335*: The "First Truth of Emptiness" and the Three Dharma Seals.
We explain the basis of the view of emptiness through the argument that "when the eye arises, it has no origin; when it ceases, it has no destination." That is to say, "All formations are impermanent; all phenomena are non-self, Nirvana is peace." This sutra emphasizes that there is only "karmic retribution" and continuity, but no substantial "doer." It also explains "nominal existence" (the law of dependent origination, borrowing a name for explanation) and what a "moment of time" is. Finally, it proves that our life is only karmic fruit, and that no "self" exists.
- *Sutra 262*: Channa's terror and the Middle Way of Right View.
This describes the "terror, hesitation, and confusion" felt by practitioners afraid of losing the "self," leading to the "Middle Way" taught by Venerable Ananda. It departs from the two extremes of existence and non-existence, seeing only the arising and ceasing of the true Dharma.

V. Master Sheng Yen's View of Emptiness: The Dissolution of Self in Time and Space (approx. 25 minutes)

- **The Spatial View of Dependent Origination:**
 - A. Deconstruction of the 18 Elements and 5 Aggregates:
Master Sheng Yen points out that the "self" is a false construct composed of the six roots, six dusts, and six consciousnesses. He emphasizes that physiological (subjective matter), physical (objective environment), and social phenomena constitute self-centeredness. If the subjective "self" (five aggregates) leaves the objective environment (18 elements), it cannot exist independently.
 - B. The Temporal View of Dependent Origination, The Flow of Life, and the Value of Change:
The Master uses the example of a child growing up, noting how its values shift from chanting mantras to wanting independence. This proves that the psychological self (feeling, perception, formations) is "temporarily false" and constantly changing with education, environment, and information, not real and unchanging.
 - C. Critical Integration of Materialism and Idealism:
Master Sheng Yen clarifies that Buddhism is neither "annihilationism" (materialism) nor pure "idealism." Life is the continuous sequence and change of karmic force (consciousness). Only when one realizes that every aggregate is changing and lacks substance can one achieve the practice goal of "dissolving the self."
 - D. Conclusion:
Impermanence entails non-self, and non-self is emptiness. All interpersonal conflicts stem from clinging to "self-rationality." It is only through perceiving the falseness and emptiness of the self can one move from "asserting the self" to true freedom.

VI. Q&A and Dialogue on Life Practice (20 minutes)