

# Dharma Drum Mountain Toronto: Selected Readings from the *Samyukta Āgama*

Lecture 1 | March 7, 2026

Lecturer: Venerable Chang Yuan

## I. Course Theme and Significance

This course takes the *Samyukta Āgama* (Saṃyutta Nikāya) as the primary text for guided study. The *Samyukta Āgama* is one of the most important early Buddhist scriptures. It consists of a collection of short suttas. Although it is varied in form, it constitutes the very foundation of Buddhist practice.

Course Theme:

Departure: A Compassionate and Mindful Journey to Freedom

“Departure” implies an active, forward-moving force—like an airplane that, once airborne, can only move ahead and cannot stop or retreat. Learning the Dharma should similarly be a power that propels our lives continually forward, not merely an accumulation of knowledge.

The journey is driven by two central forces:

1. Compassion—starting from a heart of loving-kindness, caring for oneself and others.
2. Mindfulness and non-negligence—remaining awake and attentive in both life and practice, cultivating a freer and more peaceful existence.

## II. Why Study the *Samyukta Āgama*

The *Samyukta Āgama* is the very root of Buddhist cultivation, like the deep, unseen roots of a great tree that nourish all its branches and leaves—serving as the source of nutrients for all Mahayana scriptures. Even practitioners who have studied a wide range of teachings often return to this original and fundamental collection.

Three main reasons for choosing this text:

1. Authenticity: It is one of the closest records to the Buddha’s own words, compiled by five hundred great arahants after his parinirvāṇa.
2. Doctrinal Core: It embodies the essential Dharma seals—**The Three Dharma Seals (Three Marks of Existence)**:  
All phenomena are impermanent  
No phenomenon has a self  
Nirvana is Quiescence / Nirvana is Peace
3. Foundational Teachings: It covers core frameworks such as the Five Aggregates, Dependent Origination, the Four Noble Truths, and the Thirty-seven Factors of Enlightenment.

The course emphasizes “Integration of Understanding and Practice”—knowledge and cultivation must progress together.

### **III. The Buddha’s Story and His Inner World**

#### **(1) Historical Context**

Prince Siddhartha was born about 2,500 years ago in ancient India. His father, King Śuddhodana, ruled Kapilavastu, a small kingdom living cautiously among powerful neighbors. At that time, the Aryan peoples had migrated into India and established various states. The society was pervaded by the caste hierarchy and a harsh law of the strong dominating the weak.

#### **(2) Childhood and Growth**

Siddhartha’s mother, Queen Māyā, passed away shortly after his birth, and he was raised by her sister, Mahāprajāpatī. A Brahmin sage named Asita predicted that the child would become either a Universal Monarch or a Buddha. The old seer wept—knowing he would not live long enough to hear the Buddha’s teaching.

Gifted from a young age, Siddhartha mastered arts and letters by the age of seven, and martial training by the time he was twelve. Yet his achievements failed to satisfy him. Deep inside, he sensed an unfulfilled yearning to uncover the truth of life.

#### **(3) The Four Sights and the Birth of Renunciation**

On several outings, Siddhartha encountered the realities of old age, sickness, and death. He also developed the serene demeanor of a wandering ascetic. He saw insects devoured in the fields and farmers labouring endlessly recognizing the suffering and injustice of the world. Compassion arose within him, along with the resolve to find a way to free all beings from suffering.

King Śuddhodana, fearing the prince might renounce the world, surrounded him with pleasures—music, dancers, jewels, and wealth—and even sealed the city gates. Yet none of these could sway Siddhartha’s determination.

#### **(4) The Great Renunciation**

One day, hearing an ascetic explain the reason for renunciation, he was deeply moved. The ascetic said, “Precisely because family ties, emotions, and social obligations bind us, true cultivation is impossible; thus, I choose to leave them.”

“Renunciation,” Siddhartha realized, “is not an escape—it is liberation from the inner fetters that obscure the truth of life.”

That night, he awakened his attendant, Channa, and departed the city at midnight. It is said that celestial beings lifted his horse over the city walls in protection. Once outside, he shaved his head, sent Channa home with his horse and hair, and began the life of a mendicant.

News of the prince's departure shook the entire kingdom. The king was heartbroken and sent ministers to bring him back. They appealed to filial piety and parental love, but Siddhartha replied:

"I understand my father's grief, but the suffering of birth, old age, sickness, and death is far more dreadful. To resolve this great affliction, I must leave the comfort of home."

He compared his decision to food that, once vomited, cannot be swallowed again. Having seen his unshakable resolve, Siddhartha's ministers were moved. They gave up all attempts to change his mind. Five attendants, even followed him into ascetic practice. Later they became the Five *Bhikkhus*, who all attained arhatship?

### **(5) Six Years of Asceticism and the Middle Way**

After renunciation, Siddhartha practiced two major disciplines popular at the time: austerities and meditative absorptions.

The austerities included breath-holding, extreme fasting (one grain of barley a day), and physical torment to reduce attachment to desire. Yet he realized such severity only clouded the mind. It did not lead to wisdom.

He then studied under renowned meditation masters, and swiftly attained the highest levels of *jhāna* and *formless attainments*. Each of his teachers professed that he was their equal.

Soon he discerned that meditative bliss alone could not bring true liberation. Subtle selfhood remained, and the cycle of rebirth continued. He thus abandoned both extremes and chose the Middle Way—neither self-indulgence nor self-torture—cultivating wisdom and insight. Beneath the Bodhi tree, he finally awakened and attained liberation.

## **IV. The Five Aggregates and the Nature of "Self"**

To end suffering, one must first understand who suffers. That is, one must understand the nature of self.

Buddhism analyzes the "self" in terms of the "Five Aggregates", or five *skandhas*. These are form (*rūpa*), sensation (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), volition (*saṅkhāra*), and consciousness (*viññāṇa*).

Form: The physical body, composed of the four elements: earth, water, fire, and air. The body's cells renew completely in about seven years. The "you" of before no longer exists now.

- Sensation: Sensations arising from contact—pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—arise and cease moment by moment.
- Perception: Recognition and conceptualization. Like new versions of technology, our knowledge constantly updates. Old perceptions are replaced by new ones.
- Volition: Mental activities and intentions are constantly shifting. A single compassionate vow may falter once a person's circumstances change.
- Consciousness: Awareness and discernment constitute a continuous stream of change.

All five aggregates are impermanent, unstable, and uncontrollable. If a permanent “self” truly existed, we would be able to forbid our bodies from aging or falling ill. But clearly, we cannot. Thus, the “self” is merely a temporary convergence of conditions. It is like a tree that exists only because of a seed, water, sunlight, and soil.

### **Definition of “Living Beings” (*Samyukta Āgama* 122)**

The Buddha explained to the monk Rādhā that a “living being” is one who clings and attaches to the five aggregates. A child may build a sandcastle, and cry when it washes away. Likewise, our suffering arises from our attachment to what is transient. We are trapped not by the world, but by our clinging to it.

When we release this clinging, we move toward liberation.

## **V. The Definition of Suffering**

The root of *dukkha* (suffering) lies in two aspects:

1. Imperfection: We seek lasting satisfaction, yet nothing conditioned is eternal: all is limited and flawed.
2. Oppression: We labour to preserve what we want to keep from changing. But when they inevitably alter, we feel crushed.

In essence, we suffer because we grasp at things that can never be permanently ours.

“All feelings are suffering.” (*Samyukta Āgama Sutta*, 473)

This *dukkha* does not refer merely to emotional pain but to the inherent instability of all experience. All feelings are impermanent and unreliable in nature.

The Buddha compared the body to foam, and feelings to bubbles in water: they are momentary and vanishing. Where, then, is a lasting “self”?

## **VI. Summary of This Lecture**

This first lecture explored the course theme of the *Samyukta Āgama* as one of the most important early Buddhist scriptures. It addresses the choice of scripture, the Buddha’s renunciation story, the analysis of the Five Aggregates, and the definition of suffering.

The core insights are:

1. The Dharma is not an accumulation of knowledge but a living power of practice that propels life forward.
2. The root of cultivation is to establish Right View and embody it in daily life.
3. The “self” is a temporary aggregate of conditions. Attachment to it is the cause of suffering.
4. To let go of attachment is to embark upon the path to freedom.

In the next class, we will discuss the three forms of suffering: the suffering of suffering, the suffering of change, and the suffering inherent in formation. We will also learn how to observe the changing nature of the Five Aggregates in daily life.