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Emptiness in Buddhism: What Dependent Origination Means

World and Consciousness

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What this article is about

Imagine someone who says after a single failure, “Now I know what kind of person I am.” They describe an event, then quietly turn it into a verdict on their nature. In another conversation, someone declares the opposite: “Everything is an illusion, so nothing matters.” These extremes seem incompatible. Yet both close the inquiry too quickly: the first discovers an unchanging essence; the second dismisses everything that happens.

The Buddhist concept of emptiness offers a more demanding question: what exactly exists, in what way, and depending on what? It does not require us to regard pain as imaginary, people as ghosts, or responsibility as unnecessary. This article distinguishes early uses of the word “empty,” Madhyamaka philosophy, and our own contemporary examples. We will consider why the absence of an independent nature does not mean an absence of consequences, why dependence does not prove a mystical unity of everything, and how discussing emptiness can bring attention back to particular lives, provided we do not turn it into another final answer.

1. Empty of what?

The word “emptiness” readily misleads us because in ordinary language it usually means an absence of contents. An empty cup exists, but there is no tea in it. The Buddhist term also requires us to specify exactly what is absent. The answer changes with the text and philosophical context.

In the short discourse Suñña Sutta, SN 35.85, Ānanda asks in what respect the world is called empty. The answer concerns the absence of a self and what belongs to a self within the domain of the senses, their objects, and the experience associated with them. It does not concern the destruction of sight, sound, or experience. SN 35.85, translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

In Madhyamaka, the school of the “middle way,” the critique of svabhāva becomes central: intrinsic nature understood as an independent, self-sufficient ground of existence. Negation therefore needs precision. It is directed against a particular way of conceiving a thing's independence, rather than against every possibility of naming a thing or distinguishing its properties. The philosopher Jan Westerhoff examines this distinction in detail. Nāgārjuna, §2.

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To feel the difference, consider our hypothetical example. Someone regards themselves as a “bad manager.” Perhaps they really did fail to allocate tasks effectively. That gives them a reason to reconsider their actions, but does not yet prove that poor management constitutes their unchanging essence. The picture omits the composition of the team, the workload, experience, hiring conditions, particular mistakes, and the possibility of learning. Rejecting a permanent verdict does not mean denying the mistake itself.

This example is a contemporary reflection, rather than a translation of Buddhist instruction. Its usefulness lies in making us specify the negation. We are removing neither the person nor all responsibility, but the claim that one characteristic exhausts the person. What we preserve is the possibility of speaking more precisely about what they are responsible for.

Without that clarification, emptiness quickly becomes a destructive word. If a question about an experience receives the answer “it does not exist,” the person is left without language for their experience. If a question about intrinsic nature receives the answer “there is only an unchanging core,” conditions and change disappear. In both cases, a ready-made formula replaces inquiry.

2. Conditions matter more than the first label

Dependent origination means considering what happens through its conditions, rather than as something arising independently out of nothing. In the early text SN 12.15, this perspective is contrasted with sweeping extremes of existence and nonexistence. A sequence of conditions for the arising and cessation of suffering is then set out. This is a religious teaching within its own context, rather than a universal modern scheme of causes for every event. Kaccayanagotta Sutta, SN 12.15.

Our everyday example is much more modest. Imagine friends who have not met for months. One says, “Our friendship is over.” The other objects, “A real friendship is not affected by distance.” Both may overlook the conditions through which a relationship is actually sustained: time, attention, opportunities to talk, interest, and the possibility of saying no and returning. The word “friendship” cannot do that work on their behalf.

Explaining something through conditions must not turn into an endless list. We can name a hundred circumstances and still fail to understand what changed. It is more useful to compare two periods: when conversation was possible and when it ceased to be possible. Which difference matters? What do we know, what do we merely suppose, and what cannot be established without the other participant?

Dependence does not mean complete controllability. Learning about several conditions gives us no power over the whole event. Someone can suggest meeting, but cannot summon another person's desire on command. They can make time, but cannot restore trust with a

single message. Conversely, being unable to control the outcome does not eliminate the possibility of changing one's own participation.

Here an important distinction emerges between explanation and justification. If exhaustion and harsh words damaged a conversation, understanding the exhaustion does not make the words harmless. Conditions help us identify where a change might be possible; they do not erase consequences. We can acknowledge that circumstances were difficult and still apologise for a particular action.

Nor can we automatically call every sequence causal. A message was followed by silence: that alone does not prove that the message caused a rupture. Perhaps the person was busy or never received it. Attention to conditions requires patience with what remains unknown. It becomes more precise when it can retain several explanations, rather than simply replace one confident label with another.

3. Dependence has several meanings

In philosophical discussion, different relations of dependence must be kept apart. An object may depend on its parts, an event on conditions for its occurrence, and a distinction on concepts and ways of describing things. Westerhoff identifies these directions in his analysis of Madhyamaka; discovering causal dependence alone does not complete the entire philosophical argument for the absence of svabhāva. Nāgārjuna, the opening of §3 and §3.1.

Consider a library invented for this article. As a building, it depends on materials, maintenance, and physical space. As an institution, it depends on access rules, staff, funding, and readers. As “a place to go and learn,” it depends on the expectations someone associates with it. These descriptions concern the same library, but answer different questions.

Remove the books and the building remains. Close access and the collection remains, while the public library in its previous sense ceases to operate. If someone sees the premises for the first time and mistakes them for a warehouse, the institution does not physically disappear, although that person's participation will be different. This gives us no reason to declare bricks products of imagination. It gives us a reason to treat no single description as exhaustive.

This distinction protects us from the appealing but inaccurate phrase “everything depends on perception.” Some properties are indeed connected with how we classify things. Other circumstances do not change merely because we rename them. A locked door remains an obstacle even if we call it an opportunity. Another person's consent does not appear because we adopt a new attitude to their refusal.

The opposite danger is to assume that concepts are simply pasted onto a finished world and never change anything. Calling a relationship a “duty,” a “service,” or a “gift” establishes

different expectations. If people act in accordance with those expectations, the description becomes part of the subsequent conditions of interaction. This is our social example, rather than a proof of Buddhist ontology as a whole.

It is therefore useful to supplement “What does this depend on?” with “Which kind of dependence do I mean?” That prevents a leap from observation to a conclusion about the nature of reality. Neither an isolated psychological experience, the organisation of an institution, nor the fact of change proves the whole philosophy of Madhyamaka. Each can, however, reveal how readily we connect grounds that have not been connected by an argument.

We can examine another mistake: turning dependence into the same relationship between everything and everything else. In our example, the library's operation depends on access to its building, but one visitor's decision does not necessarily change the structure of the roof. Even if both belong to one institution, the relation between them must be established, rather than supplied by their shared name. Seeing several conditions does not prove a universal network in which every event affects every other event.

Dependence is not always symmetrical either. Today's meeting may depend on yesterday's agreement, yet yesterday's message does not disappear if the meeting falls through. The direction of time and the particular relation matter here. When we call everything interdependent, it is useful to ask what depends on what: the events themselves, their names, our explanations, or the available conditions for action? Otherwise, a beautiful word begins to conceal the work it was meant to support.

That clarification matters especially in disputes about another person's influence. One person really can alter another's circumstances, but it does not follow that they produced all the other person's experiences or bear responsibility for every subsequent choice. The reverse is also mistaken: having choices of one's own does not make outside influences irrelevant. Between complete independence and another person's total power lies a domain of particular relationships that must be investigated separately.

4. Why emptiness does not cancel causes and consequences

An objection to emptiness arises almost immediately: if things have no independent ground, how can they act? Would the distinctions between help and harm, understanding and error, action and inaction disappear along with it?

In Sonam Thakchoe's account of Madhyamaka, the absence of intrinsic nature is connected with dependent origination, rather than with the cancellation of causal efficacy. This is a particular philosophical school's response to the problem of grounding. It is not a claim that all

events are the same or that experience is unreliable in every respect. The Theory of Two Truths in India, §4.

Let us test the intelligibility of this distinction through our example of an agreement. An obligation does not arise by itself: it needs participants, specified conditions, an understanding of what was promised, and an appropriate arrangement. Yet dependence does not make a promise meaningless. If one party fails to fulfil their part, the other may suffer real harm. Conditions explain how the obligation operates; they do not cancel it.

It would be a mistake to infer from this example that an agreement exists only in the mind or that philosophical reflection can remove its legal consequences. Its purpose is different: to show the logical possibility of combining dependent existence with significant consequences. An independent core is not necessarily required for a distinction to matter in life.

A similar difficulty appears in discussions of character. If someone changes, some conclude, “Then they cannot be relied on.” But reliability can be discussed in terms of repeated actions, remembering promises, and the capacity to correct mistakes. We do not first need to prove the existence of an absolutely unchanging essence. Indeed, remaining unchanging in harmful actions would scarcely be a virtue.

On the other hand, the possibility of change does not oblige anyone to wait for it forever. If harm repeats, one possible future does not outweigh all present evidence. The absence of an eternal verdict on a person is compatible with a definite limit to a relationship. We may not know who they will become in years to come and still decide that present conditions are unacceptable to us.

On this reading, emptiness does not make the world easy. It removes the convenience of certain final answers. We have to attend more closely to actions, circumstances, and consequences. Responsibility remains in a more particular form: for an action, for maintaining a condition, for a decision, rather than for a proven eternal nature of the person.

5. Two truths and the danger of two separate worlds

Madhyamaka distinguishes conventional truth from the truth of ultimate analysis. This distinction is discussed in chapter 24 of Nāgārjuna's Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way and in the subsequent tradition. Buddhist schools understand the relationship between them differently. The formula “Buddhism says” is therefore too broad here. Thakchoe, §4 and the subsections on different Madhyamaka approaches.

The most tempting mistake is to imagine reality as two floors. Ordinary people and their problems supposedly live downstairs; upstairs lies a special space in which nothing exists and one can stop taking the lower floor into account. In our contemporary reading, that picture

invites a simple question: who goes down the staircase, who uses it, and why should the consequences of moving between floors disappear?

Take a hypothetical incident involving lateness. Someone may investigate how our concept of time is formed, what makes a meeting a meeting, and whether an independent essence of “lateness” exists. Yet the participant who waited an hour in the rain still waited. A philosophical formulation of the question does not answer their request to be warned.

“Conventional” also does not mean “anything anyone invents.” In an everyday discussion, we can get a date wrong, mistake one person for another, or misdescribe an event. Correction has grounds: records, testimony, the order of actions. If every statement is equally acceptable, we have already lost the possibility of discussing what actually happened. Emptiness does not require us to take that step.

Distinguishing perspectives can instead make a conversation more careful. One description is needed to arrange a meeting. Another is needed to investigate the philosophical assumption of independent existence. We can notice their relationship without replacing one task with the other. A practical question cannot be cancelled by an answer belonging to a different level of analysis.

For the reader, this means the right to ask, “What does this formulation change right now?” If it helps clarify the grounds of a claim, it can be investigated. If it is used to evade a promise or devalue an experience, the conversation should return to particulars. The depth of a thought is also tested by its capacity to withstand that return.

Another useful test for our reading is whether a formulation allows correction. If someone has confused the day of a meeting, checking the calendar should change the answer. If what confronts them is a different philosophical account of time, the calendar does not refute the whole position, but it helps resolve the practical task. Being able to distinguish questions preserves both philosophical depth and ordinary accuracy. Sacrificing either for the other creates an unnecessary conflict.

6. Personhood without a final verdict

The doctrine of anātman, the absence of a permanent, independent self, should not be translated as “I do not exist” without further explanation. The philosopher Mark Siderits examines arguments about impermanence and control, as well as difficulties in explaining personal continuity and agency. These are disputed philosophical questions, rather than a ready-made result of laboratory research. Buddha, §3.

For our illustration from everyday life, return to the manager. They can recall many different states: enthusiasm, exhaustion, confusion, attentiveness. No individual state exhausts their

biography. Yet simply listing states does not answer the philosophical question about personhood. Here we use it only to encourage greater care with the labels we attach to ourselves.

That care works in both directions. Someone may say, “I am different now, so my earlier promises no longer apply to me.” But the other person is entitled to ask who benefited from the earlier agreement and which actions have actually changed. A change in self-understanding does not automatically cancel the continuity of relationships and their consequences. These questions remain open to discussion; the name of a doctrine cannot resolve them.

It is particularly important not to turn philosophy into an instrument of pressure. The phrase “You have no real self, so your opinion does not matter” does not logically follow from the teaching under discussion. It simply deprives another person of the right to take part in a conversation. Likewise, the absence of an independent essence gives no one access to another person's boundaries without consent.

Our editorial proposal is more modest: a particular characteristic can be distinguished from the whole person. Instead of “I am unreliable,” ask which promise remained unfulfilled; instead of “They are always like that,” ask which events support the expectation and where there were exceptions. This language does not guarantee reconciliation. It makes it possible to decide more precisely whether a conversation, a change of conditions, or distance is needed.

Sometimes a more precise formulation brings uncomfortable clarity. The problem turns out to be a persistent sequence rather than a single episode. Attention to conditions then supports a serious decision rather than softening it. Declining to pass an eternal verdict does not require anyone to remain where harm repeats.

7. Why emptiness does not mean one soul shared by everyone

The denial of an independent self is sometimes turned into a positive claim about a single consciousness supposedly living in all beings. That transition needs a separate argument. The absence of one kind of ground does not establish another merely because the alternative sounds inspiring.

In Siderits's study already mentioned, Buddhist arguments are considered alongside objections from proponents of an independent self. The very existence of this dispute shows that we are not dealing with an obvious shared formula that all Indian traditions merely name differently. Buddha, §§3–4.

Let us test the transition through our own thought experiment. If no single employee in an organisation produces its overall result alone, that does not mean the organisation is a single person. Its work may arise from the participation of many people, rules, and resources. The

absence of a single controlling centre does not prove the existence of a new subject beyond individual persons.

Nor should a physical concept replace the Buddhist one. If a scientific description of matter differs from the familiar image of solid objects, that does not confirm Madhyamaka. Questions about intrinsic nature, the conditions of knowledge, and liberation differ from the particular tasks of physical measurement. A connection would require specified claims and appropriate grounds.

Comparing traditions is possible and interesting when differences remain visible. We can ask what pictures of human dependence they offer, what they regard as the ultimate good, and which actions they connect with understanding. We cannot first choose the unity we want and then compel the texts to confirm it.

For UW, this is an important discipline of reading. Another tradition deserves attention even where it does not confirm our favourite thought. Sometimes difference itself creates a useful question. If one position seeks a stable ground while another investigates the very demand for such a ground, their conversation is more substantial than an attempt to declare both variants of the same belief.

Encountering a different position also leaves us the right to object. We can acknowledge that the demand for an independent essence creates difficulties and still ask whether the proposed explanation is sufficient for memory, action, and responsibility. That question need not signal unwillingness to understand. It helps distinguish a persuasive argument, an interesting hypothesis, and an accepted belief. Comparison becomes more honest when readers may retain that distinction, instead of treating every doubt as a spiritual deficiency.

8. Emptiness without indifference

What remains valuable if value does not reside in a thing as an independent, eternal core? In our contemporary reflection, an answer can be sought through relationships and consequences. Water matters to someone who is thirsty. Attention matters to someone trying to be heard. Support exists in a particular action and can be timely or inappropriate.

These examples do not derive morality as a whole from the philosophy of emptiness. They show something else: value can matter without being independent of all conditions. Indeed, conditions make certain distinctions clearer. Help without consent sometimes deprives someone of the opportunity to act for themselves. Refusing help sometimes leaves them without an available resource. A single name does not decide what is happening.

Imagine an older person whose relatives want to organise everything. Their intention may be kind. But understanding the situation also requires hearing from the person themselves: which

actions are difficult, which remain possible, where they want support, and where they want independence. Dependence is real here, but it does not entitle others to speak on their behalf about everything.

Our everyday illustration also has limits. Not every problem can be resolved by an attentive conversation. A lack of money, safe housing, or an accessible environment does not disappear with a new worldview. Discussing dependence requires taking external conditions as seriously as ways of describing them. Otherwise, a concept meant to broaden inquiry reduces it to inner work.

In this editorial application, compassion means a willingness not to stop at a convenient explanation of another person's difficulty. Yet a willingness to inquire does not equal a duty to endure indefinitely. We can respect someone's complexity and limit contact. We can understand the circumstances of an action and demand that it stop. These decisions need context, rather than a universal slogan.

Perhaps the hardest turn is that understanding dependence brings us back to action. If circumstances matter, our participation may become one of them. That promises no control over the outcome. It offers the possibility of choosing which part of what happens we are prepared to continue supporting.

9. What this means in practice

You can read about emptiness without trying immediately to experience a special state. As a first step, choose an everyday judgement that seems final: “I am no good at anything,” “Our conversation is pointless,” or “This job will always be like this.” You do not need to choose the hardest episode of your life or a dispute in which participation is currently unsafe.

It helps to begin by recording the event itself. What happened, who was there, which words were spoken, and which outcome is known? Then distinguish the description from the generalisation. In what particular way does the event support the conclusion? Which part of that conclusion arose from fear, habit, or previous experience? Those suppositions need not be declared false in advance: their status needs to become visible.

The next question concerns conditions. For example, “I cannot explain the task” may mean a lack of preparation, an unfamiliar audience, too little time, or a gap in one's own understanding. Different possibilities call for different decisions. Acknowledging what remains unknown is sometimes more useful than immediately choosing the most reassuring explanation.

You can then ask about one condition that might be changed. Would it help to clarify expectations, choose another time, prepare an example, or ask for missing information? An

available action must be kept apart from a guaranteed result. Even a prepared conversation may not happen. Another person retains the right to disagree.

Consequences that have already arisen deserve separate attention. If a promise has been broken, a new understanding of oneself does not replace an explanation or a possible repair. If conditions are genuinely dangerous, inquiry does not require remaining within them. If a task concerns medical treatment or a legal decision, a philosophical article does not supply the necessary professional grounds.

This sequence is our limited editorial application, rather than an abbreviated Buddhist path to liberation. It neither proves emptiness nor measures spiritual development. Its assessable result is more particular: were we able to distinguish the event, the inference, the condition, and the available choice? Even “There is not enough information yet” can make a subsequent action more honest.

At the beginning of the article, a person saw a ready-made essence after a failure. By the end of the inquiry, they may face a more complex picture: an actual action, actual consequences, several conditions, what remains unknown, and the possibility of another decision. Emptiness need not fill that picture with reassurance. It helps us avoid closing it prematurely.

Sources and passages used

1. SN 35.85, Suñña Sutta. Translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 1997; Ānanda's question and the response about the absence of a self in the domain of sensory experience. A brief account, rather than a verbatim translation.

2. SN 12.15, Kaccayanagotta Sutta. Translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 1997; the extreme positions and the account of dependence in the arising and cessation of suffering.

3. Jan Westerhoff, Nāgārjuna. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy; §2, the opening of §3, and selected passages from §3.1. Different meanings of svabhāva and forms of dependence.

4. Sonam Thakchoe, The Theory of Two Truths in India. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy; §4 and the introductions to subsections on Madhyamaka. The two truths, dependent origination, and differences within the school.

5. Mark Siderits, Buddha. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy; §3 and the opening of §4. Philosophical arguments concerning the absence of a permanent independent self, and questions of continuity and agency.

Tags

Buddhism, emptiness, śūnyatā, dependent origination, Madhyamaka, Nāgārjuna, svabhāva, anātman, two truths, conditionality, personhood, causality, responsibility, philosophy, intercultural reading.