

The Buddha Project

In-Depth Meditation Training

Teachings on developing Mahayana insight meditation
with guided meditations and
long term support for meditative development



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Table of Contents

- Introduction*..... 2
- The In-Depth Meditation Training (IDMT)* 3
 - COURSE DESCRIPTION 3
 - Prerequisites and planning 3
 - CONTENT..... 3
 - The insight aspect 3
 - The motivational aspect 4
 - Contemporary Western scientific theories for support 4
 - Practical focus..... 4
 - Engaged practice..... 5
 - Tantra as culmination 5
- Practicalities*..... 5
 - Website 5
 - Recruitment and funding..... 5
- IDMT Course Overview*..... 6
 - Year 1 - Foundational insight meditation 6
 - Year 2 - Yogacara practice and the Jataka tales..... 6
 - Year 3 - Madhyamaka and Tathagatagarbha..... 7
 - Year 4 - Mahamudra and Kriya Tantra..... 7



“Without realizations of the path, Buddhism will disappear in the West”
–Lama Zopa Rinpoche

Introduction

Around 2008 I attended teachings by Lama Zopa Rinpoche at Nalanda Monastery. During these teachings Rinpoche emphatically stressed that without realizations of the path, the Dharma would disappear from the West, apart from as mere academic interest.

The *In-Depth Insight Training* was conceived as a response to Rinpoche's exhortation, and initially developed and implemented in Maitreya Instituut Amsterdam, as a sequel to the FPMT's Discovering Buddhism and Basic Program.

In time a new element, the *Yogi Bootcamp*, was added for students that wanted more intensive training, and to provide the center with experienced meditators who can guide meditations.

Finally, in collaboration with two researchers and a board member of Mind & Life Europe, the *Buddha Research Project* was conceived, aimed at investigating perceptual and social transformation in long-term meditators.

Together these three elements now form *The Buddha Project*:

1. In-Depth Meditation Training (IDMT)

A four-year online course that provides students with long term support in their meditative development. The course will offer:

- authentic traditional instructions, in contemporary language, aimed at providing a comprehensive set of meditative tools for students to transform their knowledge of the Dharma into personal experience.
- traditional and modern theories on supplementary topics such as models of healthy psychological and spiritual development, ritual, narrative, ethics and social engagement.
- an online and live community of FPMT meditators
- four annual retreats on vipassana, bodhicitta and mahamudra, that students can participate in, both live at the respective center and on Zoom.

2. Yogi Bootcamp

The Yogi Bootcamp is an optional, intensive, and accompanied one-year meditation training. It consists of bi-weekly written instruction and weekly personal interviews. It is available to eight students annually and requires a minimum of two hours of daily meditation.

3. Buddha Research Project

The Buddha Research Project is a collaboration with researchers from the universities of Nîmes and Lausanne, and the Mind & Life organization, aimed at investigating transformative processes in long-term meditators, regarding such topics as mental-health, perception, and self-transcendence. As such it is a collaborative partnership of scientists and contemplatives. During the 2022 Mind & Life European Summer Research Institute¹ a presentation and workshop of the Buddha Research Project were given.

¹ <https://www.mindandlife-europe.org/our-work/european-summer-research-institute/>

The In-Depth Meditation Training (IDMT)

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Prerequisites and planning

This course is designed to run over the course of four years. It comprises weekly online sessions of an hour of guided meditation and an hour-and-a-half of teachings, in which the psychology of meditation and the application of traditional instructions are explored. Although the first year introduces many of the foundational topics, a basic understanding of Mahayana Buddhism is a prerequisite. Students should therefore have preferably completed either a Discovering Buddhism course or the FPMT Basic Program.

A study manual is being produced, consisting of classical expositions from sutra and shastra, practical instructions, and essays on a range of topics such as the arhat and bodhisattva ideals, the role of ritual, identity formation, metaphor in Yogacara, Buddhist epistemology, theory of narrative and so on, geared towards the needs of Western meditators.

An international pilot of the course will start in September 2023, to be offered online, in English with French translation, in collaboration with various FPMT centers. All materials and recordings will be available to all participating centers.

Several annual retreats will be offered for intensive communal practice on the subjects covered. These will take place in/be facilitated by the participating centers. Additionally, as stated above, there is the opportunity of a year of intensive accompanied training, the *Yogi Bootcamp*.

CONTENT

The insight aspect

While involving all three stages of hearing, contemplating, and meditating, the course will emphasize direct, personal experience through meditation.

The course will roughly follow the Gelug presentation of the schools of tenets as a pedagogical basis for deepening insight into the nature of reality, with every layer of practice informing the next, culminating in the practices of Mahamudra and Kriya Tantra.

Students will train in both shamatha and vipassana, gradually investigating the nature of self and phenomena as being impermanent, selfless, empty of imaginary nature, empty of inherent existence, buddha nature, and the union of bliss and emptiness. They will explore how layers of ignorance are projected onto our perception - the side-effect of the unenlightened mind's conceptual interaction with sensory perception - and how to challenge these superimpositions through reasoning and direct insight.

Special attention will be given to the psychology of meditation, especially in terms of working with the wholesome and unwholesome mental factors, in combination with insights gained from

modern psychology, arguably the language of Western spirituality according to HH the Dalai Lama.

The purpose of the insight meditation aspect of the IDMT is to provide students with a genuine opportunity to have personal experience with selflessness and emptiness in its various gradations, taking in account the psychological needs of Western meditators.

The meditative skills presented in this course are based on decades of training in both the Burmese Forest Tradition (Burmese U Pandita and Pa Auk traditions), Vietnamese Chan, the Tibetan lamrim, tantric and mahamudra practices, and more than 4 years of retreat.

The motivational aspect

The motivational side of the IDMT helps students apply their experiences from insight-meditation to lamrim reflections, building a wholesome relationship with both themselves and others through the generation of definite emergence, the brahmavihara's¹ and bodhicitta. The course aims to make apparent that when one's awareness is sufficiently permeated by these values, our intentionality becomes increasingly stable, wholesome, and less distracted.

Contemporary Western scientific theories for support

To support students from a Western, secularized environment in religious literacy, the course will explore traditional and contemporary theories on topics such as:

- ritual: why is it important, how does it work, how does it influence the individual and her social context?
- language: how are concepts formed and how do they influence our perceptions?
- metaphor: what is meaning, how is it generated, what role does it play in our daily activities?
- identity: what is it, how do we get it, which functions does it have? How does an ethical identity contrast with an ego-identity, and how is this expressed in Buddhism through the arhat and bodhisattva ideal?
- narrative: in what ways do stories play a role in our lives, how do they influence us, out of what elements are they constructed?
- spiritual bypassing: how do we listen to our emotions instead of avoiding them when they don't fit our self-image? How do we hear what these emotions have to say, so that we can transform them from enemies into allies?

Practical focus

This course is above all a practical one. It aims at helping students navigate their meditative lives successfully, both on and off the cushion. Ideas will therefore be explored to the extent that they are necessary for the level of practice of the students and illustrated through guided meditations.

¹ Equanimity, empathetic joy, loving kindness and compassion

Engaged practice

Meditation will be approached not only as an activity on the cushion, but as an all-encompassing process of familiarization with a new and wholesome outlook on ourselves, our environment, and on our relation to it. For that purpose, students will be encouraged to extend their reflections into the day, act upon their insights, and use their daily experiences to deepen their sitting session. As the course focusses equally strong on the ethical side of insight meditation, discussions on current events are used to explore how Buddhist practice can inform an active engagement with the world to alleviate its suffering.

Tantra as culmination

Kriya tantra, as the practice that unites method (compassion) and wisdom, is the final subject. Tantra is presented as the culmination of the various practices explored earlier in the course. Subjects are carefully selected to lead to this point, e.g. a discussion on narrative structure of identity in order to understand how visualization of oneself as a deity is transformative, or the discussion on metaphor in Yogacara explaining the dynamic of replacing ordinary view with pure view.

Practicalities

Website

A website will be created with the following aims:

- To facilitate discussion and mutual support for students through chat and forums
- To connect students and teacher
- Connect researchers and meditators
- To make the materials available
- To host the online teachings and retreats
- To publicize and promote the activities of participating centers and provide links to their websites

The Buddha Project and its website will be presented as an FPMT initiative, in which participating FPMT centers (and possibly Mind & Life) collaborate.

Recruitment and funding

The Buddha Project will engage in publicity but will not recruit participants for the IDMT. Potential students will be directed to the participating centers. Centers are invited to establish the fee level between them and donations to the Buddha Project are requested as a contribution to the livelihood of its teacher and the maintenance of the Project and its website. The Buddha Project will also explore financial support from other funds and foundations, to develop its website, instruments for the interaction between students and researchers, and so forth.

IDMT Course Overview

Year 1 - Foundational insight meditation

- Shamatha as a path to overcoming the five hindrances
- Insight meditation as the application of the seven enlightenment factors to the four close placements of mindfulness,
- Application of Buddhist psychology (mind and mental factors) to meditation and daily life
- Training in both bare awareness and mindfulness with analysis and investigation
- Meditation on the twelve links of dependent origination
- Introduction to the seven stages of purification in Theravada
- Exploring the relation between our conditioned nature and potential to become enlightened
- Mindfulness of the qualities of the Buddha as a perspective on ourselves and our relation with the Buddha
- Setting up a motivation; harnessing the power of our intentionality; exploring the relation between right view, wholesome emotions, and our sense of agency
- Meditation on the four brahmavihara's and the relations between them
- Generating the mind of definite emergence as a balanced awareness of our precious human life being in the nature of samsara
- The supportive role of the arhat ideal in meditation, as a precursor to the bodhisattva ideal

Texts:

Sutras from the Pali canon; parts of Buddhaghosa's Visuddhimagga and Vasubandhu's Abhidharmakosha; instructions from modern and ancient meditators; various essays on topics such as the arhat ideal.

Year 2 - Yogacara practice and the Jataka tales

- Shamatha according to Asanga, emphasizing the role of trust/faith as an antidotal worldview to that of the hindrances
- The difference between Theravada and Mahayana four close placements of mindfulness, as a basis for generating of bodhicitta rather than definite emergence
- The thirty-seven aids to enlightenment as a developmental process in sutra and Abhisamayalankara
- Application of the Yogacara three-nature and eight consciousness theory to insight meditation
- How to establish phenomena's lack of external establishment, arising from the seeds in the storehouse consciousness, and maintaining that perception in between sessions
- Reality as being a social karmic construction and our interdependence with other minds
- Seven-cause-and-effect method for generating bodhicitta
- The pratyekabuddha ideal and its historical influence on meditators
- Application of Yogacara theory of metaphor and the narrative structure of perception
- The bodhisattva narrative in the Jataka's as a trope to restructure the sense of self

Texts:

Relevant passages from Mahayana sutras, Vasubandhu's Trisvabhavanirdeśa, Asanga's Mahayanasamgraha, Mahayanasutralankara, Abhisamayalankara and Aryashura's Jatakamala, interwoven with instructions and essays.

Year 3 - Madhyamaka and Tathagatagarbha

- Application of Madhyamaka reasoning in meditation and the use meaning generalities in investigating experience
- Clarifying the object of negation of inherent existence, its formation, and characteristics
- Cultivating calm abiding on a non-affirming negative
- Maintaining right view in daily life
- The function of ritual in general and puja in particular
- Identity, its formation, and radical application in the practice of exchanging self with others to generate bodhicitta
- Meditation on buddha nature, and exploring the relation between de naturally abiding and developmental lineage
- Application of insight into emptiness to lojong practices

Texts:

Kamalaśīla's *Bhāvanākrama*, Nagarjuna's *Mulamadhyamakakarika*, Maitreya's *Uttaratantra Shastra*, supplemented with essays and instructions.

Year 4 - Mahamudra and Kriya Tantra

- The cultivation of guru devotion and recognizing pitfalls
- The preliminary practices and their psychology
- Shamatha and vipassana practices in mahamudra context
- Gelug Mahamudra
- Recognizing the nature and downsides of ordinary view and its production by conceptuality
- Practicing pure view
- Training in visualization
- Cultivating the practice of the six deities
- Transforming afflictive emotions, understanding their pure nature and innate wisdom
- Exploring the ethical ideal of the state of Vajradhara, and how to cultivate it

Texts:

Asanga's *Mahayanottaratantra Shastra*, Atisha's *Pointing-Out Instructions in Sets of Five*, and Panchen Lama Lobsang Chökyi Gyaltsen, *A Root Text for the Precious Gelug/Kagyü Tradition of Mahamudra: the Main Road of the Triumphant Ones*. *Ganden Lha Gyäma*, HH the Dalai Lama's *Source of All Attainments: Yoga of the Inseparability of the Guru and Avalokiteshvara* and the *Sadhana of Buddha Maitreya*.