This presentation is not meant to be an exhaustive presentation on emptiness and no-self. It is only an attempt to introduce some conceptual frameworks and perhaps ultimately reduce suffering.

Dependent Origination and the Five Skandhas: Will not be used in typical order or appearance as these categorizations make it difficult to fit in modern scientific frame works.

\*Ontology is the study of *what exists*.

\*Epistemology is the study of *how we know* what exists.

**Dependent origination/arising** (pratityasamutpada):

*Wikipedia; dependent origination, or dependent arising, is a key doctrine of Buddhist philosophy, which states that all dharmas ("phenomena") arise in dependence upon other dharmas: "if this exists, that exists; if this ceases to exist, that also ceases to exist".*

The Buddha emphasized dependent arising not so much as a scientific endeavor to know *what* exists (ontology) in this universe as much as to understand the causation and cessation of human suffering. Many Buddhist text elaborate the chains of dependent arising as it relates to human (bodies) interaction with our world *including our minds conscious feelings and thoughts* (epistemology). And further how these interactions can be “deluded” which then creates a sense of self that results in needless suffering. The study and realization of dependent arising allows us to shift our awareness to focus on “*How* things exists” and less particularly with “*What* Exists”. And most importantly how a sense of self comes to exist and why this causes suffering.

**Dependent arising of a self**:

Nervous Systems evolved to allow an organism to*sense*, through physical interaction (contact/sense doors)and subsequently have *knowledge* (name and form)of these interactions through*representation* (mental formations)***.*** Physical interaction of the world and sentient creatures results in the action of e*motions*.

Emotions (according to Neuroscientist Dr. Antonio Damasio’s schema) are physical changes in the organism signaled by nerve firing or chemical releases to the blood stream. *Feelings* in this same schema are the mind created representations of these physical emotional body states. Emotions and feelings give *Salience* (biologically related judgements) to these interactions of organism and world. Salience here stands in for the Buddhist concept of “feeling tone”.

**Emptiness (Sunyata):**

Emptiness is NOT the assertion that all is void-ness and that the universe does not exist. The emptiness of Buddhism is not solipsism (nothing exists but a dream of existence). Emptiness in Buddhism typically refers to “emptiness of” some mentally assigned characteristic of phenomena. Explicitly, empty of intrinsic independent existence and permanence. The Buddha asserted that “emptiness of intrinsic existence” is true of all phenomena including individual bodies and most importantly a “sense of a self”. The Buddha asserted that all phenomena *appear* to have an independent individual existence for some semi-permanent (objects/bodies) or permanent (self) due to a *misapprehension of reality*. This misapprehension is derived by perceiving phenomena through an individual *biologically biased* point of view.

*Dr. Carlo Rovelli, Theoretical Physicist: “…we must not confuse what we know about a system with the absolute state of that same system. What we know is something concerning the relation between the system and ourselves. Knowledge is intrinsically relational. We slice up reality surrounding us into objects. But reality is not made up of discrete objects.*

*Dr. David Albert, Physics/Philosophy of physics: “Quantum Mechanics ended forever the idea that we can observe a system without interacting with it..”*

*Anais Nin: “We do not see things as they are, we see them as we are”.*

All ontological assertions (like a self in a world) are created by epistemologies. In other words *what* we believe we know is created by *how* we know it. Particular epistemologies are created by interactions between a privileged observer (an individual human body/mind), that actually *exists within* a system, and this same system is the whole of the universe. All information is created through inter-action. No interaction, no information. No information, no self!

**Dependent Arising and No-Self (Anatta):**

How can there be no self? There is clearly a body. This body has thoughts based on interactions (body/contact/senses/mentality). These thoughts are privileged to my body only! But where do these thoughts actually come from? Your body and mind only?

*Comedian Emo Phillips: “I used to think the human brain was the most fascinating part of the body. Then I realized, well look what’s telling me that!”*

Where does mind come from? Physics, biology, evolutionary forces, genes, epigenetics, history of location and environment… In the Buddha’s words, it arises dependently on myriad “causes and conditions”. The mind is influenced by all these things yet it only “*knows”,* or is aware, of this “*narrative self”* as experienced inside this (privileged) mind. This narrative representational “Self” is a delusion. Although, once known for what it is through Buddhist practice, it *can* be a useful representation rather than a delusion that generates suffering.

Representations in the mind of the shifting states of both the internal and external environment in a complex nervous system like a brain allows the organism a more complex ability called a *conscious* *narrative space* (In Buddhism, Formations) in the mind. This dynamic *transitory* (impermanent) space allows organisms to take lessons learned from past interactions and use them to plan future actions within this narrative space. This narrative space shows up as a *story* of *us* (selves) in the world within our mind’s conscious eye. Remember, this *story* is not just about a world, it is about a specific creatures world and it’s related interactions within it.

However, this narrative self-viewpoint while useful is not always accurate and extremely narrow compared to a wider more comprehensive view of phenomenon in totality. Though most often we view the world from this narrative sense of self it is possible to re-orient our view of both our narrative selves and the world. When the narrative self is seen as just another functioning within the universe our ***perspective*** shifts from *being* the content of the narrative self to that which realizes or *perceives* this narrative self-process. This *wider, open* and *contentless* awareness is better able to perceive the interconnected and impermanent nature of all phenomenon. This type is awareness is able to perceive beyond biologically judged and filtered specific contents to see ***how*** things exist beyond merely ***what*** exists. Namely, impermanent, contingent and not self.

**Conclusion**:

This presentation is merely a brief conceptual introduction into what must ultimately become a new way of *perceiving and interacting with both the world and your own narrative “self-construct” in the mind*. Through Buddhist practices or spontaneous realizations (typically both) it is possible to change your orientation to both the narrative self that occurs in your mind as well as your phenomenal world. An awareness not reactive to the empty self-construct is possible…and wonderful! For further explanation of the realization of emptiness can result in less suffering and an equanimous state download the presentation on “Equanimity and Ethics posted on our web site.

**Self and Suffering:**

Being that this representative self is literally created in the present moment as part of a narrative story means that it is akin to an ***illusion***. *It does not actually* ***exist*** in the classical (Newtonian Physics) sense of the word. It occurs to be sure! Just as consciousness itself also occurs. But as of this time in history NO ONE knows what the heck the ***experience*** of consciousness (qualia or “the hard problem”) is physically made of, or if it physical at all! Or exactly how the mind takes sensory input from the body and external world and weaves into a single narrative space (“the binding problem”). Worse yet, consciousness is the primary tool we have for knowing anything at all about ourselves or the world!

To be sure, “reality” is out there and our bodies are physically here. Also, our conscious minds representations are *somewhat* constrained by the actual world (reality testing) so they are *like* illusions but not exactly illusions. Unlike dreaming or psychoses in which the representations are completely unconstrained and maladaptive to homeostatic imperatives.

***Misapprehension & Suffering – (Dukkha)***

Remembered homeostatic actions of the past show up in the narrative story as **Judgements** about the self’s past interactions with the world. Positive judgments show up as **transient** pleasant **feeling states**, negative judgements show up as transient unpleasant feeling states. Negative judgements show up as feelings such as embarrassment, shame, guilt or depression and anxiety about the future and low energy states. Positive feeling states about the past show up as pride, self-esteem and higher energy states. All these particular feeling states have the ***integrity of the self-image as their primary concern (Ego)***! Primary because it is the only *measure* of how the organism was doing in the past and how the organism will probably do in the future.

The **motivational pressure** behind **future** oriented action is also feeling! Not thought! Thought (the ***story***) is a secondary tool used to do the bidding of feelings. This motivational pressure for a positive future state shows up in the narrative space as feelings of **desire** for the **self** to achieve a goal. Desire’s positive valence shows up when the emotional pressure (suffering) is relieved upon acquisition of the imagined desirable outcome. This release of pressure can also be combined with the **inflated sense of pride and illusions of the self’s control** in given situations. If the goaI is not achieved, then the feeling valence is negative, frustration and/or guilt.

***Misapprehension & Impermanence – (anicca)***

As stated through out the presentation thus far we have hinted that ALL of these feelings and secondary narrative states are **transitory** or **impermanent.** The posited self within the story ***constantly******desires new*** homeostatic successes. Homeostatic drive never allows any positive state to be permanent so that the organism will constantly seek to exploit it’s environmental resources (*bad news for the actual environment*). When that success has been thwarted in the past **suffering is experienced in the present**. When a desired future is not yet in hand the pressure toward acquiring that future shows up as **suffering in the present**. Over time we learn that *indeed the feelings all successes are temporary* even though the self would like them to be a permanent feature of itself. This realization and the memory of past difficulties can last beyond their occurrence in order to be stored in memory for self-learning. The self can never resolve the past entirely and permanently. **For the egoic self** the present is filled with past, and future, thoughts and feelings that *all* involve a “***wish for reality to be other than it actually was, or is yet to be***”.

**These are the root of suffering!** Our *experience* of life ***as a self*** is suffering by homeostatic design. But wait, that is only the first noble truth!

**The Birth of Equanimity**

Once the *self-construct* is seen through ***experientially,*** once you have **woken up** from the dream, there establishes a **spacious** *peaceful* **awareness**. Within this space all sadness and joys *are allowed to manifest* **as they are**, when they are *and when they are not*. When there are no phenomenon in this space, a peaceful open awareness remains. A peace not dependent on causes and conditions that arise within this space. This is true equanimity. Equanimity and joy of simply “*Being*” in itself.

**Equanimity, how to get there!**

Simply being *told* this information does not cause us to “**wake up**” from this narrative dream of a self in a mind created representational world. You must first learn of, then practice **seeing** the three characteristics of Impermanence, Suffering and Not Self in our everyday waking experience of mind, *constantly*! This is insight meditation (vipassana).

We must also practice concentration meditation (samatha) to enable the mind to stay centered in awareness in the present moment and not be pulled into the stories (formations) of the mind which are always out of sync with present time and experience.

Even the first (or the thousandth) time we sit in samatha and are unsuccessful at stopping formations the **self** declares “I (self) suck at this!” “I cannot keep my mind from wandering getting lost in formations”. But do not listen to *that* **self**-complaint. Instead notice that there was a ***presence*** **in the moment of intention** (directed awareness) by some part of the mind to not be swept away, and yet another part of the mind created attractive formations to spring forth and grab away this awareness. Which activity of mind are “you” really? Awareness or content?

Notice that the story is always seen by an **awareness** that is not itself ***seen***! Awareness is a spacious energy that is ***contentless (empty),*** so is not visible like contents of a story. **Awareness is a felt dynamic energy which seems larger than the story itself.** **Awareness has a spacious quality that seems to be unperturbed by phenomenon occurring or the stories about them,** *whereas the self in the story is always experiencing some* ***positive or negative*** *valence* ***towards******feeling states*** *themselves,* ***Awareness simply acknowledges feelings as they are****.*

Self is always a judging self. **Self always** ***contracts*** **the breadth of experience** into like or dislike, advantageous to the estimation self or not. Self always accepts pleasant feelings and tries to make that which is inherently not permanent, permanent. Or rejects what is clearly occurring thereby creating more dukkha **beyond the negative feeling state in itself** (the second arrow).

Awareness does not have this preferential filtering and ***doomed wish for control*** and as such no pressure for phenomenon (experiences of the world and related feeling there-of) to be other than what they actually are.

***Equanimity is a side effect*** of **not** seeing phenomenon through the filter of a desiring self that wishes phenomenon to be other than what it is***. Equanimity is the felt character of that spacious aware state allowing things to be what they are.***

**Equanimity is** **NOT** an ***unfeeling state***, it is a state of accepting that some external and or internal state has arisen, **as it is**. The fact that external or internal events happen to arise are accepted, as they are, **in a “self*less”* space**.

When not seen from a position of Self the energy of denying or controlling experience (Dukkha) is absent. **This does NOT mean that that what has arisen is not dealt with according to its homeostatic derived emotional valance**. Without a self-construct the issue is seen and experienced in a more complete and realistic way, with no denials and no secondary self-construct to protect and fain competence and control.

*When phenomenon are seen just as they are the information about them is clearer. The experience of them is more vivid and visceral. The lessons learned from them are more valid and effectual*. Awareness is not cluttered and constrained with additional unskillful formations of the self’s desires.

When phenomenon are seen without a self there is **no egoic mandate that action taken will result in the desired outcome** as there is no self to maintain the illusion of control, approval or disapproval.

If some situation does not work out **sadness *is* felt *at that time***. This sadness may be further motivation to take more action if possible or be **an opportunity to become *wise* about the world as it is**, **as your heart is, and as *all* hearts are**.

This ***wisdom*** is the birth of real ***compassion***. You will find that when sadness arises, as it well should in some circumstances, and is allowed to express its energy on its own terms that, just as it arose it will subside on its own. While it is there, accept it, learn from its lessons ***experientially,*** emotionally and not simply intellectually. Sit with this sadness with no expectation of when it will go. Sit and listen only.

Over time you will learn confidence in your ability to accept and manage *whatever* arises, whenever it arises, with all possible wisdom, compassion and skillfulness, with no expectation of outcome. Then ***all experience is always welcome***.

“*Let come what comes, let go what goes. See what remains*”. Ramana Maharshi.

This is a life ***actually lived***. A full life, a richly textured life. And when it is time to let go of even that, peace.