

Venerable Geshe Sangey Thinley, Sunday Teachings 3 April 2016

“The Four Seals”

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As Buddha Shakyamuni said, the main (or most important) thing is our mind. If the mind is stable and happy; then we are happy and everything goes well for us. If the mind is disturbed, one cannot be happy. Therefore; the primary point of focus for us is always the mind.

We have two kinds of happiness – that of the body and that of the mind.

If one’s mind is disturbed and unhappy, then it naturally follows that even with bodily happiness or wellness one cannot be happy overall. The reverse is also true. If one’s mind is stable and happy, then even when one does encounter physical difficulties one can still remain happy. So of the two kinds of happiness that of the mind is the most important.

We also encounter two types of suffering – that of the body and that of the mind.

Of these two the suffering of the mind is more intense. It is the type that drives us and also the type that we have most control over. For example, if you have a physical injury or a sickness, you can take medicine to help it heal but the body always takes time to recover. The mind, however, is somewhat different. One can have intense difficulties in the mind- but one can turn this around in an instant. Thus the mind is also more pliable than the body.

A lot of the time we encounter mental agitation, doubt and confusion. This leads to us not being clear in our actions. A constant habit of doubt or lack of wisdom can create a lot of worry and disturbance in the mind, and really this is what needs to be addressed.

As we discussed we have the ability to work with the mind very rapidly, whereas the body takes time to recover or heal. The mind is much more flexible than the body, and change within the mind is possible to achieve very quickly. Doubt and confusion can be removed from the mind almost instantly.

So it is important that we make an effort to transform our mind. We must strive to understand its pliable nature and thus develop the confidence to really work with it to develop and transform ourselves.

It is possible for us to work with the mind and this really is the point of Buddhadharma. We work to transform states of doubt and confusion into wisdom and clarity. The true meaning of the word ‘dharma’ is to transform and change. This is not just any transformation but a transformation into something much more positive. This positive transformation is the point of dharma practice.

Of the actions of body speech or mind, those of the mind are those we are interested in trying to develop, as the mind is the king or most important factor. Actions of body and speech follow on from our mind and mental attitudes.

So here we are talking about far reaching types of transformation such as transforming a self-cherishing state of mind into a mind with more positive attitudes. We are not talking about mundane or worldly transformation; such as transforming a slow car engine into one with a higher rating.

When we talk about dharma; the Tibetan word is ‘choe’. This came from the Sanskrit word ‘dharma’ which means ‘to transform’. Is there an English equivalent to these two words? One doesn’t need to be a Sanskrit expert to answer this question, but one does need to have a good grasp of the ultimate meaning of this term in English.

Why is this such an important topic? It is important because we need to understand that if we do transform our minds it can be effective and will allow us to reach our ultimate goal. As an example of this effectiveness, we recall that all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas were once like us. They did not start off as realised beings, but through using these techniques they were able to transform their minds and transform their self-cherishing attitudes into the attitude that cherishes others. We need to understand that we have the potential to achieve these results ourselves if we follow the correct techniques.

We should note here that in this context 'dharma' is used in the sense of 'the practice of dharma' and means 'to transform.' There are other meanings for this word when used in other contexts, such as 'existent phenomena.'

In the context of spiritual practice, we need to clarify even more. All religious philosophies have their own 'dharma' because they are all interested in transforming the mind. In Tibetan we say 'inner dharma' and in English 'buddhadharma.' If one considers oneself to be Buddhist, one needs to understand the four causes or reasons that serve as a basis for this identification. These four are the key things that make us, in essence a Buddhist. They are often referred to as "The Four Seals of Buddhism." Do we know what these four things are?

The first of these four bases or understandings is that **"all compounded or produced phenomena are impermanent."** What do we mean by compounded phenomena? We mean anything that is produced based on causes and conditions. For example, a flower is produced through causes and conditions, e.g. a seed, rain, sunshine and so on. All other conditioned phenomena likewise are produced through causes, conditions and are impermanent in nature.

It is the same with us. We are produced phenomena born from a mother and because of being produced phenomena in this way, we are susceptible to change, decay and death. There is no way anything that is produced will fail to fade away in one way or another. We are no different in this. So what do we mean by this word 'impermanence?' Impermanence is a state of changing moment by moment.

The second of the four seals is that **"all contamination phenomena are the nature of suffering."** What is meant here by 'contamination?' Contamination is delusion. Anything that is contaminated by delusion is of necessity suffering. So it follows that until one abandons delusion, one will always be suffering.

We see that some people like to move around a lot. They are dissatisfied in one place, so they move to another only to find that in time they also become dissatisfied in the new place. Then they move somewhere else. Why is it that their dissatisfaction never ends? It is because they haven't abandoned the root cause of their suffering; which is delusion. Merely changing external circumstances is not dealing with the real or root cause of suffering.

There was a disciple of Milarepa called Rechungpa. One day Rechungpa was doing a meditation practice when he got up and went to Milarepa to tell him that he wasn't really happy and that he felt the practice was not working. He told his teacher that he wanted to go somewhere else to try and improve in his practice. Milarepa told him this was not the way. The reason the disciple was not happy was not because he was in the wrong place, but that he hadn't abandoned his delusions. Milarepa urged his disciple to work harder to abandon his delusions as this would be the best way for him to gain the happiness he was looking for.

The third of the four seals is the most important. It states that **"all phenomena, permanent or impermanent, are selfless (or empty)."** This point is unique to Buddhism and it is very important that we

understand what is being said here. Other philosophies hold that there is some type of true existence to all phenomena, whereas Buddhism does not.

For Buddhism, all phenomena are merely imputations. There is no 'actual' existence to an object from its own side. Objects arise purely based on causes and conditions and have no existence independent of these causes and conditions. There is an absence of an independent self.

The 'self' can be regarded in two ways. The independent self-established from its own side, sometimes called an imputed or conventional self does exist – it would not make sense to say "I, myself, do not exist." But this self which we proclaim exists in a specific way. It is merely an imputation on a basis and has no independent existence. So the conventional self does exist; it is the type of self that is posited to be established beyond causes and conditions that we need to refute.

As Chandrakirti said, some yogis have ceased the self. He does not mean by this that they have ceased to exist. He means that they have cut or ceased the 'self' that is seemingly independently existing. The conventional self that we refer to when we say "I am eating" definitely exists on some level, conventionally. The important thing to understand is *how* it exists. This conventional self has dependent origination and is based on the five aggregates. There is no 'self' that exists beyond dependent arising.

The fourth seal is **"Nirvana is peace."** When you have cut through all your delusions and the seeds of those delusions, then you are free or liberated from samsara and all its sufferings.

If we have an understanding of these four points or seals, then whatever we do- be it mantra recitations, chanting or pujas- becomes dharma practice. Anything done without these understandings cannot really said to be dharma practice.

These four points might seem brief or simple, but they are the cornerstone of the dharma. If one has understanding of these four, then whatever activity one engages in becomes very meaningful and can be said to be pure dharma practice.

Most other philosophies hold to three of the four seals, but they do not hold to the point that 'all phenomena are selfless.' Only the Buddha taught on this point. To consider ourselves Buddhist, we need to really have trust in all of these four seals and believe they are the correct view. This is tantamount to having a visa to enter a country; if you don't have this faith and convictions in the four seals, you cannot enter the buddhadharma.

There are many different practices in buddhdharma; sutra, tantra, various techniques and so forth. But of all the dharma practices, faith and trust in correct view and the conviction not to harm are the two most fundamental things. Make an effort to establish these two and your dharma practice will be effective.

Correct view holds that things arise a collection of parts coming together. This is sometimes called dependent arising. It takes time to understand correct view or dependent arising, but this is fundamental to any Buddhist practice and important to grasp over time.

Let us ask at this point what is meant by 'dependent arising.' It is when things arise mutually. If one thinks of a mother and child, both arise in dependence of one another. Without the mother, the child could not come into existence and would not be born, and without the child you could not say the other person was a mother. The dependence is mutual, or acts both ways.

Dependent arising also means that things come about as a collection of parts. Take a car, for example. The car can only function if all the parts are present. If one of the key components is missing, then the car cannot function as a car.

Some will say that things come together as a collection of parts, and some say that things come together through causes and conditions. Both points are accurate and valid.

To return the attitude of compassion, we are looking at the wish not to cause harm. This is not a matter of just not harming others through convenience or circumstance. From a Buddhist point of view this is an active wish not to harm others.

To reiterate, correct view or understanding, and the compassionate wish not to harm others are the two key things in dharma practice. From a Mahayana point of view one should benefit others at any opportunity; however, at the very least we should commit ourselves to not causing any harm to others.

Today we've talked about the Four Seals of Buddhism, the right view and the wish not to harm. It is important that rather than just listening to these ideas we strive to bring them into practice.

Why is this so important to understand? Consider the example of a tree. If the roots are strong and healthy, the tree will be healthy. If the roots are poisoned, the tree will not grow. We too, need good roots or a good basis on which to build our dharma practice and allow it to flourish.

Lama Tsongkapa said that if one has the right motivation one has the Ground and the Path. If one doesn't have this positive motivation, one will have neither the Ground nor the Path. We have to take a genuine look at what are the causes for our happiness and suffering, and realise that the compassionate attitude is the source of all our happiness.

We also need to investigate what causes disturbance or suffering in our mind:

The Four Causes or factors are: too much hope, too much doubt, along with attachment and aversion.

It's important we understand these things as we are now part of the Buddha family and need to take this opportunity to improve our minds. The chapter on this in "Liberation in the palm of your hand" explains these points really well and it would be a good idea for you to read this after our talk today. Reading this text will really help to deepen your understanding. When the great meditators of old were reading this text they were so highly motivated they rushed out when they had to the toilet and rushed back to their study just as fast, as they were so keen to return to the text and read it with great enthusiasm.