



The Four Seals of Dharma

H.H. the Sakya Trichen (the 41st Sakya Trizin)



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By the merit of this work, may His Holiness the Sakya Trichen enjoy perfect health and a very long life, and continue to turn the wheel of Dharma.

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The four hall marks of the Buddha's teachings, also known as the four seals, are:

‡ འདུ་བྱེད་ཐམས་ཅད་མི་རྟག་ཅིང་།
ཟག་བཙས་ཐམས་ཅད་སྐྱུག་བསྐྱེལ་བ།
ཚོས་རྣམས་སྟོང་ཞིང་བདག་མེད་པ།
སྐྱ་ངན་ལས་འདས་པ་ཞི་བའོ། །

All that is conditioned is impermanent.

All that is tainted is suffering.

All phenomena are empty and devoid of self.

Nirvāṇa is peace.

All that is conditioned is impermanent.

Everything is impermanent. There are two kinds of impermanence: gross, continuous impermanence, and subtle, momentary impermanence. Gross continuous impermanence refers to changes that continuously occur and are visible. An example of gross, continuous impermanence is with our own body: first one is a baby, then one becomes a child, a teenager, and an adult, and then grows old. At every stage, the body is changing—its color, shape, and size are all changing. Another example is when we look outwardly, we observe the four seasons with the colors of spring, summer, autumn, and winter are always changing. These changes do not occur suddenly—in actuality, the changes occur over an extended period. The changes are only visible when big changes occur over time and visible signs become apparent, such as black hair turns white and a youthful face becomes wrinkled, and so on.

When we observe the changes in physical appearance of a person as a youthful baby and seventy years later as an old adult with wrinkles and white hair, the changes are obvious and big. These visible changes did not occur overnight, but have occurred continuously throughout the last seventy years in subtle and momentary stages. Hair that was black yesterday does not suddenly turn white today. It is not like that; instead, the change

has been occurring, every minute and every moment—it is occurring even during the shortest durations. For the change to become visible, it must go through many moments of subtle changes that are occurring within the shortest possible time. When we observe from this perspective, this subtle momentary change is called the subtle, momentary impermanence.

Everything is changing, nothing is permanent, everything is impermanent. It is said that all compounded things have four endings. The four endings are:

The end of gathering is separation.

The end of accumulation is exhaustion.

The end of height is to fall down.

The end of birth is death.

The end of gathering is separation. Whenever we gather, we do not gather permanently. At the end of a gathering, we will all go our separate ways. Even the relationships that we think are more permanent, such as family members being together for a whole lifetime, are also not permanent. As everyone knows, as life goes on, one's parents leave, then one's children leave, and so on. Family members are eventually separated. Hence, the end of gathering is separation.

The end of accumulation is exhaustion. No matter how much we acquire and accumulate—wealth, possession, land, or power—whatever we accumulate will never remain with us forever; all will be stained or broken, will wear out, will change hands...all will eventually become exhausted.

The end of height is to fall down. History tells us that no matter how high one goes, in the end we will have to fall down. In ancient times, there were what we call universal emperors who conquered many continents. Even in modern history, there have been many great rulers who owned almost the entire world. However, they do not remain forever. They may reach the highest position and own the whole world, but their empire or kingdom eventually shrinks into a small country. Eventually they fall down.

The end of birth is death. Everyone who is born will die. There is no one who is born that will not die. Even the noble ones who are completely free from birth and death, yet in the eyes of ordinary beings, they demonstrate that they have to enter into mahaparinirvāṇa, too.

All these endings indicate that all compounded things are impermanent.

All that is tainted is suffering.

Second, all things that are tainted or contaminated cause suffering. This means that any deeds created through defilements cause suffering because they are generated by negative emotions such as ignorance, desire, anger, pride, jealousy, stinginess, and so on. All are negative.

Negative deeds create only suffering. For example, if the root of a tree is poisoned, then whatever grows on the tree—leaves, flowers, fruits—are all poisonous. Therefore, all contaminated things result in suffering.

All phenomena are empty and devoid of self.

Next, all phenomena are without a self, or selfless. There are two kinds of selflessness: selflessness of a person and selflessness of phenomena. Selflessness of a person means that although we all have an identity that we think of as “I,” when we try to discover where “I” resides, we cannot find it anywhere. If there is an “I” it must be either a name, a body, or a mind. The name is empty by itself; we can change our name anytime. Any name could be chosen. Therefore, a name is empty.

Our physical body is actually formed by many entities, such as flesh, bones, blood, inner organs, skin, and so on. If we investigate from head to toe, we cannot find anywhere that is called “I” in each part of the body. This indicates that our body is

formed by many different entities working together. Therefore, we cannot refer to all these entities that form our body as “I.” If these are each called “I” there will be many “I” s. We cannot find a single entity anywhere that we can refer to as “I.”

The mind is also changing all the time. Yesterday’s mind and today’s mind are different. When one was a child, one’s mind was very different from how it is now, as an adult. Adults think differently from children. Their minds are not the same. This shows that one’s mind has been changing from birth until now. Mind is changing all the time, constantly; every moment that one exists. Something that is changing constantly cannot be “I.” If it is, then the “I” from yesterday and the “I” from today are very different. Therefore, the mind is not “I.” When we try to investigate where this “I” resides, we cannot find it.

We all have a very strong habitual tendency to build an identity as “I.” Therefore, one naturally thinks of one’s self as “I,” although it is not “I.” One tries to investigate where this “I” resides, but it is never found. It is thus called “selflessness of a person.” A “personal self” is a wrong notion. Selflessness of a person is the right view. Even in our everyday language when we refer to “my house,” “my car,” or “my land,” there is no “mine.” A house may belong to me but this house itself is not “mine.” Likewise, when we say “my body,” this body belongs to me, yet it is not “mine.”

The same goes for the mind: when you say “my mind,” it indicates that the mind belongs to you, but this mind itself is in fact not you. So where can one find the owner of one’s body, mind, and everything, who owns everything? If you try to think and search, you are not able to find this “owner” anywhere. Hence, this is known as “selflessness of a person.”

Selflessness of phenomena refers to outer entities, such as a table. We think of a table as one entity, but in actuality many woods are assembled into a particular shape that we cling to as a “table.” If the table is disassembled, different layers and pieces of wood will be removed. When these wood pieces are crushed, we will find they are made of atoms. If the smallest atom that is indivisible is extracted and placed in the center—though we may not be able to physically cut it because it is so microscopically tiny—this atom in reality is not “one.” Because it has directions—it has eastern, southern, western, and northern sides, thus we cannot find any entity that is truly “one.” If there is no “one,” how can we have “many”? Therefore, all entities are of no inherent existence. And this is selflessness of phenomena. According to Buddhist teachings, everything is of no inherent existence. Just by saying that, it is difficult to comprehend because if everything is emptiness or śūnyatā in Sanskrit, then why do we suffer? Why do we have feelings? Why do we have to go through these different experiences? However, if we think and analyze in this

way philosophically, then we cannot find anything; therefore, this is known as the selflessness of phenomena.

Taken all together, all these dharmas are “selflessness.” *Dharma* is a Sanskrit word and has many different meanings. In fact, depending on the context it has ten different meanings. Here, when we say “all dharmas are selflessness,” this refers to all phenomena, not the holy Dharma that we practice. Everything that we see and hear is also referred to as *dharma*. So, all phenomena are selflessness.

Nirvāṇa is peace.

Nirvāṇa is peace. As long as we are in saṃsāra, there is nothing, but suffering. As we all know, saṃsāra has higher realms and lower realms. There is tremendous unimaginable suffering in the lower realms. We think that there is a mixture of happiness and suffering in the higher realms. For instance, in our human lives, sometimes we have happiness, sometimes we have pleasure, sometimes we have suffering, sometimes we enjoy life, and sometimes we suffer. But if we think carefully, only when we compare the enjoyments of the higher realms with the great sufferings in the lower realms does it appear that higher realms have pleasure. However, in reality, it is not real pleasure; instead, it is another kind of suffering. Because the so-called pleasures in the higher

realms are not permanent, even enjoyable times that we spend are not permanent—they are going to end. Then when the temporary joy or happiness ends, it becomes another kind of suffering. When we compare the pain and anxiety that we are going through, the enjoyable times we get to experience appear like happiness. So, in a relative way, suffering appears like pleasure. When pleasure ends, so long that we are still in *saṃsāra*, or the circle of existence, there is suffering.

The only way to overcome suffering is to be free from defilements. And to be free from defilements, we must know how defilements arise, which is the source of all suffering, and the fault lies in clinging to the “self” without any logical reasons. Although we cannot find anywhere that is called “self” or “I,” yet without investigation, analysis, and logical reasons, we cling to our identity as a self. This notion is just like we have mistaken a colorful rope as a snake. In the dark one thinks that the colorful rope one sees is a snake. Until one realizes that the rope is indeed not a snake, one must go through fear and anxiety. Likewise, until we realize that there is no selflessness, we cling to a self. When we cling to a “self,” then automatically “others” appear, because self and others are depending on each other, just like right and left. If there is a right side, there is a left side. We cannot have the right side alone. When we have self, then based on that,

there are others. And when we have self and others, then there appears attachment and desire for oneself and anger toward the others.

Basically, the source of all defilements is ignorance. Due to our ignorance or lack of wisdom, we do not recognize the reality, we cling to a self. And then from this arises all the other defilements. Hence, the root of the saṃsāra is clinging to a self. When we cling to a self, we then have all the other defilements. And when we have all the defilements, then we commit negative deeds, and when we commit negative deeds, we then create karma. When we create karma, it is just like planting a seed in fertile ground that in due course will produce crops. Likewise, negative karma will produce negative results. So, to overcome that, we need to cut the root of self. In order to cut the clinging to self, we need to develop the wisdom of selflessness, because this is the antidote for the clinging to a self. When we do this, then nirvāṇa is peace, for example, if fuel is exhausted fire naturally extinguishes. Similarly, the root of saṃsāra is clinging to a self, and if self-clinging is cut by creating the wisdom of selflessness, then naturally all suffering will cease. Hence, nirvāṇa is peace.

Peace, or nirvāṇa, means no suffering. There are three types of nirvāṇa: small nirvāṇa, medium nirvāṇa, and high nirvāṇa, or the great nirvāṇa.



Small and medium nirvāṇas. Small and medium nirvāṇas are referred to as the śrāvaka and pratyekabuddha nirvāṇas. If one attains one of these two types of nirvāṇa, one will be totally free from suffering, yet one has not fully developed one's qualities. One will still have subtle obscuration that prevent one from developing one's qualities fully. Due to this, one is unable to benefit others. This becomes the greatest obstacle for one to become fully enlightened.

Great nirvāṇa. The great nirvāṇa is also known as the nonresiding nirvāṇa. We have two extremes. On one side we have saṃsāra, the cycle of existence, which is full of suffering and fault; thus, there is not a single place that is worthy of attachment. Through wisdom, we totally abandon all attachments and renounce the entire saṃsāra. On the other side, we have nirvāṇa, which is complete peace and without any suffering. Out of great compassion, we abandon these types of small nirvāṇas and do not reside in them; we also do not remain on the other extreme of nirvāṇa. Nonresiding nirvāṇa means that through great wisdom and great compassion, we do not remain in the two extremes of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa. Rather we go beyond both saṃsāra and nirvāṇa, and this is called the great nirvāṇa or nonresiding nirvāṇa, which is perfect buddhahood or complete enlightenment.

As a Mahāyāna follower our actual goal is not to be in nirvāṇa, but to be in the great nirvāṇa, or the nonresiding nirvāṇa. Out of great wisdom, we do not remain in the extremity of saṃsāra, and out of great compassion we also do not remain in the extremity of nirvāṇa. We do not become inactive, yet we are totally free from all forms of obscurations. In this way, we are beyond saṃsāra and nirvāṇa; we are free from all forms of obscurations and have developed full qualities and great activities that never cease to benefit sentient beings. Only the great nirvāṇa can benefit all sentient beings, because the small and medium nirvāṇas do not benefit others. Although for one's own sake there is no suffering, there is still subtle obscuration. But when we attain great nirvāṇa, then we are totally free from all forms of obscurations, and at the same time, out of great compassion, we never cease our activities to benefit sentient beings. So, if one believes in these four great seals and practices for the sake of attaining the great liberation, then one is a Buddhist. One must practice the path to eventually attain perfect buddhahood.



■ His Holiness the Sakya Trichen is revered as the forty-first throne holder of the Sakya lineage of Tibetan Buddhism. Born in Tibet in 1945, His Holiness is from the noble Khön family, whose predecessors date to the early days of Tibetan history and established the Sakya order in the eleventh century. In his youth, His Holiness received intensive training in Buddhist philosophy, meditation, and ritual from eminent masters and scholars.

Widely regarded as an emanation of Mañjuśrī, His Holiness is the spiritual guide to many in the next generation of Buddhist teachers and practitioners, and has bestowed Sakya's core teaching cycle known as the Lamdre (the Path with the Result) in both eastern and western countries. His Holiness manifests profound wisdom and compassion, tirelessly working to establish monasteries, nunneries, and educational institutions and to impart the Buddha's teachings to countless students around the world.



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