



The Four Noble Truths

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



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By the merit of this work, may His Holiness the 41st Sakya Trizin enjoy perfect health and have extremely long life, and continue to turn the wheel of Dharma.

The Four Noble Truths

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

Second Edition

“The Sakya Tradition” Translation Team

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TRUE HAPPINESS COMES FROM SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

Until we have made spiritual progress, we cannot actually gain the happiness we are seeking, no matter how much external effort we put forth, or how much progress we make.

In this world, there are many different places, cultures, philosophies, religions, and traditions. But one thing common to all of them is that everybody wants to be free from suffering, and everybody wishes to have happiness. For the same reason, every individual is making efforts in their community and every country is making efforts towards this goal.

But it is very clear that until we have made spiritual progress, we cannot actually gain the happiness we are seeking, no matter how much external effort we put forth, or how much progress we make. Although the goal is to achieve happiness, every external goal, unless it is linked to inner mental development, will bring more misery and suffering instead of bringing more happiness. Therefore, everyone's goal of true happiness has to come through inner spiritual development. It is only through spiritual practices that we can achieve this.

THE BUDDHIST PATH

From the beginning, the Buddha's whole purpose was to help all sentient beings without any exception. Every activity that he performed was for the benefit of sentient beings.

There are many great masters who came into this world and gave many different types of teachings. Each has their own beauty, their own ways to solve problems, and their own paths to find inner peace and happiness. But what I will discuss is the path according to the Lord Buddha Shakyamuni.

For three countless⁽¹⁾ aeons, the Buddha worked to accumulate tremendous amounts of merit and wisdom for the benefit of sentient beings. Through that accumulation of merit and wisdom, he eventually overcame all obscurations and defilements. Everything that needed to be parted from, was parted from; and every possible good quality that needed to be gained, was gained.

The Buddha is fully awakened, fully enlightened, and has the power to help sentient beings free themselves from suffering. Even one ray of light from his body, or one line of teaching, can help countless sentient beings in a single moment.

Directly or indirectly, any contact with the Buddha will help to release one from suffering and gain happiness.

From the beginning, the Buddha's whole purpose was to help all sentient beings without any exception. Every activity that he performed was for the benefit of sentient beings. He performed many great physical activities, vocal activities, and mental activities. But among these, the most important was his vocal activities. The Buddha gave teachings in words about what he had realized, which is called "turning the wheel of Dharma".

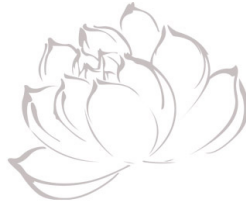
The Buddha helps sentient beings through his teachings. Those who are not ripe are ripened; those who are not on the path are placed on the path; those who are not making progress become able to make progress; and those who are already making progress are helped to gain higher realization.

Of the Buddha's great activities, the greatest was his vocal activity. Sentient beings have no limit; they are countless, just as space is limitless. These limitless sentient beings are all different—their mentalities, their defilements, their mental conditions, and their propensities. Therefore one type of teaching cannot help all sentient beings. Similarly, there are different types of medicines and treatments in order to cure different types of diseases. One type of teaching is not enough. The Buddha gave an enormous number of teachings in order to suit every type of sentient being. So the teachings of the Buddha have many different levels, according to the followers' mental states and conditions, situations, environments, and so forth. There are many ways to categorize them, but in brief they are defined by "the three turnings of the wheel of Dharma".

Notes:

(1) Countless (Sanskrit: asāṃkhyā) means immeasurable, is a number measurement in Buddhism. Aeon (Sanskrit: kalpa) means a relatively long period of time (by human calculation) in Buddhist cosmology. In general, there are three types of kalpas—great kalpa, medium kalpa, and small kalpa.

Three Countless Aeons (Sanskrit: Asaṃkhyeyakalpa) means the time needed for a Bodhisattva to become a Buddha. There are 50 Bodhisattva stages. The first forty Bodhisattva stages belong to the first countless kalpa. From the first Bhūmi to the seventh Bhūmi belongs to the second countless kalpa, whilst from the eighth to the tenth Bhūmi (Buddhahood) belongs to the third countless kalpa. Buddha Shakyamuni spent three countless aeons to transform the three poisons—attachment, aversion, and ignorance to the three liberations and attained full Buddhahood.



THE FIRST TURNING OF THE WHEEL OF DHARMA

The Four Noble Truths include both the cause and result of saṃsāra, and the cause and result of nirvāṇa.

The first turning of the wheel of Dharma occurred after the Buddha attained enlightenment at Sarnath (Deer Park). There he first turned the wheel of Dharma, and the title of that teaching is the Four Noble Truths. The Four Noble Truths include both the cause and result of saṃsāra, and the cause and result of nirvāṇa. There are four noble truths: 1) the truth of suffering, 2) the truth of the cause of suffering, 3) the truth of cessation, and 4) the truth of the path.

One must know the truth of suffering, abstain from the cause of suffering, realize the truth of cessation, and practice the truth of the path.

THE TRUTH OF SUFFERING

Beings in the form and formless realms go to the highest worldly stage and then fall back into the lower realms.

First, one should know the truth of suffering. For example, if we are sick with a specific disease, the first thing we must do is to learn the exact nature of the sickness. Without knowing the exact nature of the sickness, we cannot determine any treatments.

Similarly, to have an effective treatment for suffering, one must know the exact nature of suffering. In order to give rise to genuine renunciation thought, which is the sincere wish to practice and enter the path in order to gain liberation, we must know the truth of suffering, what suffering is, and the exact nature of suffering.

Generally speaking, there are three different types of suffering: 1) the suffering of suffering, 2) the suffering of change, and 3) the suffering of the conditional nature of all things.

The suffering of suffering is visible suffering, the suffering we consider to be suffering, such as physical pain, mental anxiety, and so on. This suffering exists mainly in the lower realms.

The whole universe is divided into three realms: 1) the desire realm, 2) the form realm, and 3) the formless realm. The desire realm has six other realms within it. Three are lower realms: the hell realm, the hungry ghost realm, and the animal realm. Three are higher realms: the human realm, the demigod realm, and the god realm.

The hell realm has so much suffering. There are hot hells, cold hells, neighboring hells, and so on. The greatest suffering experienced by human beings cannot represent even the slightest part of hell realm suffering. Beings are born in hell due to their karma, particularly the karma related to anger and hatred.

The second lower realm is that of hungry ghosts. This realm exists mainly due to desire and attachment, resulting in stinginess. Thus, beings who fall into the hungry ghost realm experience extreme hunger and thirst. There are three types of hungry ghost realms: those where beings have outer obscurations, inner obscurations, and obscuration of obscurations, which means that for ages those hungry ghosts cannot find even a single drop of water.



In the animal realm, we can actually see how much beings suffer. No human being could bear even the slightest part of the sufferings that animals go through. Animals in the jungle, animals in the ocean, animals belonging to humans, animals not belonging to humans, are either tortured or killed. Animals have to remain in constant fear.

The main cause of rebirth in the three lower realms is ignorance. The suffering of suffering that we normally consider to be suffering, is mainly seen in the lower realms.

Then there are three higher realms: 1) the human realm, 2) the demigod realm, and 3) the god realm.

First of all, no one in the human realm is free from the four sufferings—the sufferings of birth, old age, sickness, and death. And there are also many other types of suffering in the human realm—the suffering of meeting enemies, the suffering of losing friends, the suffering of not fulfilling one’s wishes, and the suffering of undesirable things happening. Those who are poor suffer from being unable to find food, clothing, shelter, medicine, and so on. On the other hand, those who are rich have many mental burdens and sufferings of their own.

No matter what one does, there is no satisfaction. Whatever we do, in spite of all the efforts we make to eliminate suffering and to gain happiness, we cannot find our actual goal of happiness.

In the human realm, beings experience some suffering of suffering, but their primary suffering is the suffering of change. Everything is changing: large families lose members, gradually dwindle down to one single member, and then disappear; the rich become poor and the poor become rich; people with power become weak, and so on. Everything is changing.

The demigod realm is higher than the human realm but lower than the god realm; therefore, its inhabitants are called “demigods”. The demigods are naturally envious because they are constantly engaged in wars with the gods and other demigods. Since their power is not equivalent to the gods’, they are constantly defeated. Due to this, they have much physical and mental suffering.

In the deva or god realm, the gods have a very luxurious life, everything prospers; there they have all the worldly good qualities such as long life, good health, and an abundance of food. But because of this, their whole lives are spent in leisure and enjoyment. They do not realize how quickly their lives are passing, and only when the signs of death appear do they start to think of how they have spent their whole lives in wasteful luxury and now have to fall into the lower realms. Therefore they have tremendous mental suffering at the time of death. This type of suffering is even greater than the lower realms' physical suffering.

Then there are the highest deva realms, which are known as the rūpadhātu, the form realm and the arūpadhātu, or formless realm. There, beings do not have physical suffering as we have here. They possess very high meditational states, but these are worldly meditational states which have not yet cut the root of suffering, which is self-clinging; they do not have the wisdom to dig out the root of samsaric suffering. Therefore, after remaining for a long time in a meditative state, they again fall down into the lower realms, like birds. No matter how high they fly in the sky, eventually they have to land on the ground. Likewise, beings in the form and formless realms go to the highest worldly stage and then fall back into the lower realms.

This is saṃsāra, the realm of existence. It is suffering from the highest deva stage to the lowest hell realm. It is completely permeated by the three types of sufferings.

Everything is changing; anything that is gained through causes and conditions is impermanent. If it is impermanent,

it is suffering because it does not remain. For example, today we do not have so much physical suffering. We are healthy and able-bodied, but anything can happen at any moment. So therefore we experience the suffering of change, including the change from feeling happy to feeling unhappy.

And then there is the suffering of the conditional nature of all things: no matter how much we work, how many actions we perform, or how much effort we make, there is no end. From birth until now, we have engaged in many different actions and types of work, but we have never finished them and never feel satisfied. For anything we start, there is no satisfactory end. Like the food we eat, the more we eat, the more we desire; this is suffering.

No matter where one is, from the lowest realm to the highest realm, saṃsāra is completely full of suffering; like the nature of fire is hot, whether it is a small fire or big; the nature of saṃsāra is suffering, whether in the lower realms or the higher realms.

We must first know this in order to overcome these limitations. To know the nature of suffering is very important. It is important not only to try to understand suffering intellectually, but actually to feel it until you are deeply moved to be permanently free from the realms of existence.



THE TRUTH OF THE CAUSE OF SUFFERING

What is the cause of suffering? The cause of suffering is actually actions and defilements. Where do defilements come from? They come from ignorance, from self-clinging.

In the first truth, Buddha taught that one must know the truth of suffering. Then the second truth is the cause of suffering. For example, when we are sick, we must first know the exact nature of the disease, and then we can avoid the cause of the disease. Otherwise, if you take the treatment, but continue to expose yourself to the cause of the disease, you will not be able to cure it. Therefore, the second stage is to abstain from the cause of suffering.

What is the cause of suffering? The cause of suffering is actually actions and defilements. Where do defilements come from? They come from ignorance, from self-clinging. Our true nature of mind is pure but we do not recognize this; instead we cling to a “self” without authentic reasons and logic. We cling to our overall existence; we mistakenly believe that our being exists as a “self”.

When you have a “self”, then automatically you have an “other”. “Self” and “other” depend on each other. When you

have “self” and “other”, then there is attachment to one’s own friends and relatives and so forth. When you have one’s own side, then there is also the other side—the people you do not like, beings that you do not appreciate, beings that you do not agree with and *et cetera*, and so anger arises. From ignorance comes hatred and desire. In this way, the defilements are formed, which are known as the three main poisons: ignorance, desire, and hatred. These three give rise to the other defilements. For instance, when you have attachment to your wealth and possessions, then you generate stinginess and pride. And when other people have wealth and prosperity, you then have jealousy and competitiveness and so forth. All of these impure mental states arise.

Based on these impure mental states, you then take actions—physical actions, mental actions, and verbal actions. These actions are like planting a seed of suffering. Actions that arise from the defilements are all forms of suffering. If the root of a tree is poisonous, then anything that grows on the tree, such as fruits, flowers, and leaves are all poisonous. Similarly, the actions arising from defilements—ignorance, hatred and desire—are all non-virtuous deeds and are the cause of suffering.



Performing an action is like planting a seed. When you plant a seed, its fruit depends on causes and conditions. When the right causes and conditions are brought together, then you are bound to produce a result. Through our own actions, we have created all of our own situations. Through all of our own actions, we have created our own suffering. It is through all our own actions that we have created all of our happiness. Everything comes from our own actions.

Therefore, the Buddha said that the second truth is to abstain from the cause of suffering, which is the defilements. When you wish to be free from suffering, then you must abstain from its cause. But if you continuously create the cause, then the result of suffering is bound to follow.

These first two truths form the cause and result of saṃsāra. They show that everything in saṃsāra arises out of our own actions, from our own defilements, and through our own self-clinging. As a result, we are born in saṃsāra, which is full of suffering. So the first truth is the result and the second truth is the cause.



THE TRUTH OF CESSATION

The Buddha said, “You yourself are your own savior.”

The third and fourth truths are the cause and result of nirvāṇa.

The third truth is the truth of cessation. For example, when you are sick, you seek to recover from the disease and become healthy. Similarly, what we are seeking is to be free from suffering. But nobody else can remove your suffering. Each person has to work their own way out of suffering. The Buddha said, “You yourself are your own savior.”⁽²⁾ Nobody else can save you; only you can save yourself.

For example, when you are sick, although it is very important to have a good doctor, good medicine, and good helpers, the main factor is that the patient has to take the medicine and abstain from the cause of the disease. The patient has to take treatments to eliminate the disease and to gain health and strength. Otherwise, if the patient does not take the doctor’s advice, no matter how good the doctor

or how good the medicine, the patient will never get well. Similarly, the Buddha is like a doctor and the Dharma is like medicine—together, they help us to be free from suffering.

Even though we receive help in the form of the Buddha's blessing, compassion, and grace, due to our own faults and defilements, we have not yet been able to relieve ourselves from the suffering of saṃsāra.

Among the sentient beings of the six realms, we human beings are endowed with superior knowledge and intelligence so we can work effectively to free ourselves from suffering. Even animals can do this to a degree. But we are different from animals; we have intelligence, we have a mind to think, and we have the capability to overcome all of our problems. Therefore, we must not lose precious time.

What we are seeking is the state beyond suffering. Therefore, the Buddha spoke of “the truth of cessation which one must obtain.” That is the goal we are seeking: the state that is permanently free, the state where we have permanently parted from all types of suffering and there can be no more relapse. In such a state, we are not only free from suffering, but suffering never reoccurs.

Notes:

(2) “You yourself are your own savior” was taken from “Monks, be islands unto yourselves, be your own refuge, having no other; let the Dhamma be an island and a refuge to you, having no other.” *Digha Nikāya* (Collection of Long Discourses): DN16, 165, *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*: Page 100.

THE TRUTH OF THE PATH

Our mind is constantly engaged in many different thoughts, so we cannot meditate on insight wisdom straight away.

How do we get to the state of complete cessation of suffering? The truth of the path is the cause of attaining the state permanently free of suffering. Therefore, it is said that the fourth noble truth is the truth of the path which we must practice.

Again, if one is sick, in order to be cured and completely recover from sickness, we must receive treatment. Similarly, the truth of the path is what we must practice. As I said before, one must accomplish this oneself, so you must turn to yourself for help. The Buddha said, “I have shown the path of liberation, and whether you attain enlightenment or not depends on yourself.” Thus we have to practice.

How then should we practice? We must eliminate our defilements such as anger, hatred, desire, pride, and stinginess through different methods and practices such as meditations and contemplations on loving-kindness and compassion, breathing practices, concentration practices, interdependent

origination practices, and so on. There are so many different types of meditations and methods. Through these meditations, we reduce or suppress the impure mental states which are causing non-virtuous actions, and we develop the positive qualities of our minds that eliminate these impure mental states. Yet this method alone yields only temporary results.

The main thing that we must do is to attain wisdom, the wisdom of cutting the root of saṃsāra.

The root of saṃsāra is the ignorance that does not realize selflessness. The root of all suffering is self-clinging. From this self-clinging arises all impurities in the mind and due to it, all non-virtuous actions are undertaken. Then we suffer. Therefore, the root of suffering is self-clinging.



To overcome this self-clinging, we must develop the wisdom of selflessness. It is the complete opposite of self-clinging. If we search for this self to which we mistakenly cling, we cannot find it. There are many reasons that this is true.

Our mind is constantly engaged in many different thoughts, so we cannot meditate on insight wisdom straight away.

In order to be able to meditate, the first thing we have to do is to improve our concentration. Concentrate on a specific object with your mind and then focus on the breath. The eyes focus on the meditative object and remain there, instead of thinking about its color and shape and so on. Remain in this state as it is. There are many other methods, such as remembering the types of concentrations, applying the antidotes, practicing various methods of concentration *et cetera* that try to bring the mind to concentrate on the object.

In the beginning, when doing this, more thoughts seem to come. This is not only our normal stream of thoughts, but it feels like even more than usual. This is because normally we do not discipline our mind and pay attention to our thoughts. When you try to meditate, then you start to notice your thoughts. This is the first sign of improvement. Then the number and duration of your thoughts will slowly be reduced, and then eventually your mind will become able to remain completely single-pointed, free of thoughts, like an ocean without waves.

The base of this ability is clarity of mind. This is attained through proper concentration. Only after we attained clarity of mind can we meditate on insight wisdom. Through very sharp reasoning,

we logically analyze teachings that explain how everything is devoid of self, and we see that the truth is away from all extremes. The perfection of wisdom is to thus awaken from all forms of extremes and elaborations.

The last two truths—the truth of cessation and the truth of the path—are the cause and result of nirvāṇa.

The Buddha taught these four noble truths at the very beginning; they were his first teaching. This teaching is shared by all the Buddhist traditions, including the Mahāyāna and Hinayāna schools. Through them, we turn away from non-virtuous actions and establish ourselves on the right path. After putting ourselves on the right path, we pursue the path further to gain liberation.

-The End-



- His Holiness the Sakya Trichen is the 41st Sakya Patriarch of Sakya Order throne holder of the Khön Lineage. His Holiness is widely recognized as the emanation of Mañjuśrī, is a very well respected and accomplished great master. His Holiness is the teacher of many eminent and accomplished Buddhist masters, and is acknowledged as the “King of Vajrayana Masters”. His Holiness manifests profound wisdom and compassion, and his teachings benefit countless students all around the world.



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