



# To Awaken from the Dream of This Illusory Vision: the Need for the Spiritual Path

His Holiness the Sakya Trichen



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# Acknowledgement

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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.



Why are we having so much worries and concerns despite living in an era with technology advancement? Where do the worries come from?

Being a busy bee, have we taken time to really ponder:  
What is the most important thing in our lives?

We only want happiness but no suffering—to accomplish this goal, who can we rely on and what we can do?

Let's search for the answer now!

In this teaching, His Holiness highlights the key for each stage of Dharma practice. This teaching, however, will inspire everyone, not just practitioners.

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# **To Awaken from the Dream of This Illusory Vision: the Need for the Spiritual Path**

**A**fter paying homage to the Mahāguru Padmasambhava and reciting his mantra, I would like to express my warmest greetings and best wishes to all those who have come tonight to hear this Dharma talk. It is always a great joy to share the teachings of the Buddha. They are the true medicine for curing every disease and for removing all our outer and inner sufferings.

Having been born as human beings possessing the right conditions for Dharma practice, and having had the opportunity to meet the precious teachings and a spiritual master, the most important thing for us to do is to practice the Dharma. The teachings tell us how important it is that we recognize this great opportunity and not waste it. We should utilize this opportunity without any delay. This is what the teachings tell us, although we can also learn it from our own experience.

There are many religions in the world with different masters

who have given diverse teachings. Each religion has its own way of helping. What I am saying tonight is according to the Lord Buddha who resolved to help every sentient being without any exception and not just one group of sentient beings. For the sake of all sentient beings, he generated the enlightenment thought and accumulated tremendous merit and wisdom over a period of three countless eons. As a result, he became completely awakened, free from all defilements and faults, both the obscurations of defilements and the obscurations of knowledge. In this way, he achieved unimaginable qualities: infinite wisdom, infinite compassion, and infinite power.

Possessing these infinite qualities, he bestowed an enormous number of teachings. Among them, the most important one says, “You are your own savior. Only through your own efforts can you be saved.” In order to be completely free from suffering and to achieve real happiness, we must make our own efforts. No one else can save us from suffering. No one else can establish us in real happiness. The main effort must come from our own side.

We can see that even though there are many different faiths, philosophies, social systems, and traditions, every one of them has a common goal: to free us from suffering and to help us attain happiness. Even people without any faith or philosophy



are seeking happiness. Even tiny insects seek it. We perform all our virtuous and non-virtuous deeds for the sake of having happiness. All the tremendous material progress that humans have made—with technology and medicines to cure diseases that could not be cured in the past—has been for the sake of attaining human happiness.

Yet, however much material progress has been made, real happiness will not be achieved without making inner progress, or spiritual progress. Material progress can be helpful, but relying only on outer progress ultimately contributes to suffering more than it relieves it. In order to reach real happiness, we need mental development achieved through spiritual practice. In our own experience, we can see that the mind is the most important thing for our happiness. The mind is like a master and the body is like a servant. Whatever the mind says, the body follows. It is the mind that experiences suffering; it is the mind that performs non-virtuous or virtuous deeds; it is the mind that will attain liberation. Everything is the mind.

According to the Buddha's teaching, the true nature of the mind of all sentient beings, right from the beginning, is never stained with defilements. This is why buddhahood is possible. If the nature of the mind were fundamentally impure, then we would never be able to purify it. For example, the nature of coal is to

be black, and no matter how much you wash coal, it will never become white. However, if the dirt is not inherent but only external, then it can be washed off. A fine object completely covered with dirt can be washed with water and soap, and then we can see the reality of it, the real thing that was previously obscured. Similarly, the nature of the mind is obscured by temporary defilements producing delusions.

As long as our minds are caught up in these defilements and these illusions, we are never free from saṃsāra. As long as we are not free from saṃsāra, we will experience suffering. Therefore, it is important that we develop our minds, which at the moment are completely covered with the defilements that produce our illusory vision like a dream. All our perception is like a long dream from which we can awaken one day through spiritual practice.

According to the teachings, the first thing we must do in order to awaken from the illusory vision is to take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha. Refuge is common to all the traditions of Buddhism. The way to think about refuge is this: Think that anytime we want to learn something new, we need an experienced teacher. This is the Buddha. The Dharma is the teaching itself. Then, the members of the Saṅgha are our companions who help us on the path.

The next thing we should do is purify our minds, which at the moment are completely covered over with the temporary defilements. For this, we need to turn our minds away from attachment to this life. Even if you live the longest lifespan possible for a human—and there are only a few people who live to be one hundred years old—you will leave this world at the end of your life. No one can escape death, not the most powerful person in the world such as a universal emperor and not the poor, weak person on the street. Death will come the same to everyone who is born in this world. Each of us will have to leave behind all the things that we consider important and all the activities that we think about so much. We will go to some other place, to wherever our karma pushes us. Only the continuum of consciousness will survive. Therefore, it is not worth having attachment for the sake of this life. It is like having attachment to a magic show or to an illusory vision.

To abandon attachment to the things of this life, the teachings instruct us to contemplate the preciousness of this human rebirth possessing all eighteen prerequisites, so difficult to obtain.<sup>[1]</sup> This will help us realize how important it is to practice the holy Dharma while we can. The teachings show us how to examine the difficulty of obtaining a human rebirth from the points of view of cause, number, example, and nature. If we should lose this opportunity, there is no way of knowing when we might obtain it again.

We should also contemplate impermanence and the uncertainty of the time of our death. The precious human rebirth that we have obtained is not permanent because all things that arise through causes and conditions are impermanent. Any moment in one's life could be one's last. There is nothing worth having attachment to in this life because one day we will lose every material thing and every good of worldly life.

These two things—the difficulty of obtaining a precious human rebirth and impermanence—are very important. By meditating on the difficulty of obtaining a human rebirth, we create the need to practice the Dharma. By meditating on impermanence, we create the proper sense of urgency for practicing while there is time. If we meditate on these two topics, we will be able to abandon attachment to this life. Remember that only through spiritual practice can one really be free from suffering and have real happiness. Whether we are talking about societies or individuals, outer progress is not enough. Real happiness must come from mental development. Clearly, the most important thing we can do in this lifetime is to practice the spiritual path.

If any spiritual practice—such as keeping good moral conduct, study, contemplation, or meditation—is done with attachment to this life and for the sake of this life, then it is not a real Dharma practice but a worldly one, even if outwardly it

looks like religion. Every practice should at the very least be for the sake of the next rebirth and for the time when your consciousness departs all alone from this world. If we have turned our minds away from attachment for the sake of this life in our practice, we have reached what is called the path of the small person. This refers to a person who engages in spiritual practices not for the sake of this life but for the sake of future rebirths, to be reborn in one of the higher realms<sup>[2]</sup> such as the human realm where we will at least have further opportunities to practice the Dharma. The small person's path aims for something that is still within the wheel of existence rather than for complete liberation and enlightenment. But because it aims for rebirth in one of the higher realms, it is still considered an acceptable motivation, the minimum that you should have.

Nevertheless, we should really seek to abandon attachment not only to this life but to the whole wheel of existence, the wheel of saṃsāra which is full of suffering. Saṃsāra is called the wheel of existence because it has no beginning and no end, just like a circle. There is no point in time at which the mind can be said to have begun. Likewise, there can be no arising of any new mind. Mind only comes from mind. Material objects cannot become mind or produce mind, because material things can only produce material things. When we die, we leave the material body behind, but the mind continues, and any rebirth anywhere in saṃsāra, whether high or low, is subject to suffering.

The first teaching that the Buddha gave when he became enlightened is the teaching on the four noble truths:

- 1.The truth of suffering,
- 2.The truth of the cause,
- 3.The truth of cessation,
- 4.The truth of the path.

We can understand the four noble truths using the example of a medicine that cures disease. When someone is sick, the first thing to do is to recognize or diagnose the sickness. Without knowing the disease, one cannot apply the appropriate remedy. In the same way, it is necessary first to recognize and investigate the suffering of saṃsāra. From our own experience, we can see that saṃsāra is nothing but suffering. However, without the teachings and without concentration and meditation, we will not have a profound inner realization of this. The teachings put great emphasis on the suffering of saṃsāra because one needs to know the nature of the sickness that one is experiencing if one wants to treat it. This is why the teachings describe the nature, causes, and types of suffering from the highest places in saṃsāra to the lowest.

The second truth is the truth of the cause so that we can avoid

and abandon the causes of suffering, which are the defilements. In the medical example, once we know the nature of a sickness, the next step is to avoid the causes of the sickness. If we take the right medicine for a disease without avoiding the causes of the disease, then the sickness will return.

To be completely free from the causes of suffering, we need to eradicate the defilements completely. This is the third truth, the truth of cessation. After abandoning the causes of suffering, we will attain cessation, or *nirvāṇa*. This is the state in which all defilements have ceased. To reach the state free from a disease, we need to take the right medicine and follow the doctor's instructions. Similarly, to reach the state free from all suffering, we must practice the path that was taught by the Buddha. This is the truth of the path.

Lord Buddha gave the teaching on the four noble truths at the outset when he first started to teach. It is the foundation for all the other teachings. The four noble truths show clearly the importance of meditation on suffering, but this is not to make ourselves sad or miserable. The point is to help us abandon attachment to *saṃsāra* and to create the proper thought of renunciation.

The four noble truths also show us the importance of cause and effect, or the law of karma. According to the Buddha's teaching,

all our experience in this world, our existence in this place and in this form, our minds and bodies—all is the result of our own actions. No one else makes you suffer, and no one else can put you into a happy state, the state of liberation. Everything comes from our own actions.

We create karma, which means action, because of our defilements. The three defilements—anger, desire, and ignorance—produce our actions. Our actions create seeds that are planted on the continuum of the mind. These causal seeds will remain until they ripen in the result. This is how the law of karma works: by means of our virtuous and nonvirtuous deeds and their ripening.<sup>[3]</sup>

The basic or true nature of our minds is pure, but we do not realize this. Without any basis for it, we cling to the heap of the five aggregates as if it were a self, mistaking the aggregates for a self in the same way that someone might mistake a colorful rope in the dark for a snake. Clinging to that false perception, the person will experience fear and anxiety. Similarly, on the basis of the clear light and purity of the mind, we mistakenly think that there is a self. Naturally, whenever there is a self, there is an other, in the same way that right and left are bound together and depend on each other. The illusory dual vision arises on the basis of self and other. Dual here refers to subject consciousness and its object.



When there is self and other, there is attachment to what is self and hatred towards what is other. This is how the three defilements (ignorance, desire, and hatred) arise. Ignorance, the root of the other two, arises when we do not realize the purity, or the clarity, or the basic clear light of the true nature of the mind, and we mistake it for the existence of a self. With this fundamental ignorance, then desire and hatred arise. And with these defilements, we produce actions. As I said, our actions plant seeds on the continuum of the mind which are bound to ripen one day in the result.

Meditating on the suffering of saṃsāra and the law of karma will turn the mind away from attachment to the whole wheel of existence, or saṃsāra. This is how we can develop real renunciation in our minds, and abandon attachment to the whole of saṃsāra, realizing that it is nothing but suffering from the highest place to the lowest. This meditation place one on the middling person's path, the second level of the path. Here, one seeks not only higher rebirth but nirvāṇa, or liberation from the wheel of existence. Having abandoned all the causes of suffering, which are the defilements, one arrives at a permanent state of the cessation of suffering. This is like the extinction of a fire when there is no more fuel to feed it.

Although this is a very great state, it is still not the highest.

The third and greatest path is to abandon attachment even to one's own liberation. We reach this path by meditating on compassion and the enlightenment thought, or bodhicitta. One should think that just as I wish to be free from the suffering of the whole of saṃsāra, so also does every sentient being. As I said in the beginning, every sentient being has the same wish for happiness, whether they follow a religion or not. Therefore, it is not enough to think only about oneself. We should think about the happiness of all sentient beings. Furthermore, whenever there is one and many, the many are always more important. Thinking this way, we will develop the wish to attain ultimate enlightenment to save all sentient beings.

We produce the enlightenment thought—this wish to attain ultimate enlightenment to save all sentient beings—on the basis of loving-kindness and compassion for all sentient beings without any discrimination. If we develop loving-kindness and compassion, the enlightenment thought will arise naturally. These three things—loving-kindness, compassion, and the enlightenment thought—are the root teaching of the general Mahāyāna. They are the means by which we thoroughly abandon seeking liberation for one's own sake alone.

The person who has resolved to attain enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings must completely dig out the root of

saṃsāra, which is self-clinging. By themselves, loving-kindness, compassion, and enlightenment thought cannot do this. They can only remove the portion of the tree that is above the surface while leaving the root in place. The only way to completely remove the root of saṃsāra is through the realization of ultimate truth, which is called absolute enlightenment thought, or absolute bodhicitta.

To meditate upon absolute enlightenment thought, one must cultivate śamatha, or concentration. Our minds have many thoughts, and without śamatha or single-pointed concentration as a firm base, we cannot meditate upon insight wisdom and realize absolute enlightenment thought. We develop concentration through methods like learning to recognize the faults of concentration, learning how to avoid those faults through the application of antidotes, and through detailed instructions received from one's teacher.<sup>[4]</sup> With practice, the mind will become very steady. It is like rushing water that becomes completely clear when the water is undisturbed and the mud settles. Through concentration, ordinary thoughts will become completely pacified, and you will be able to rest single-pointedly in the clarity of the mind.

On the basis of this clarity of the mind, one should do the meditation on absolute truth, or insight. There are different

ways to do this according to different schools of Buddhism, but the highest is called Mādhyamaka, or the Middle Way, founded by the great master Nāgārjuna, who explained that Mādhyamaka is away from all extremes. Through concentration and meditation on insight wisdom, we can abandon attachment to this illusory dual vision. It will cease, and we will awaken from the dreams of this illusory vision and realize ultimate enlightenment.

The master Nāgārjuna taught that the base is the two truths: relative truth and absolute truth. The path is also two-fold: method and wisdom. Following the path, we will achieve the result, which is the two bodies of a buddha: the dharmakāya (truth body) and the rūpakāya (form body).

Relative truth means the world that we commonly see, or ordinary vision. It is the experience that we have not examined. It is existence before we have attained insight. The absolute truth comes when we investigate and discover the true nature of this illusory vision and acquire insight wisdom. If we do this investigation, we find that its nature does not reside anywhere. It is away from all extremes, whether existence or nonexistence, both, or neither. The absolute truth is completely beyond our present way of seeing or expressing things.

To summarize what I have said so far:

First, we abandon attachment for the sake of this life through meditation on the difficulty of obtaining a precious human rebirth and on impermanence.

Second, we abandon attachment to the entire wheel of existence, or saṃsāra, through meditation on the law of karma and the suffering of saṃsāra.

Third, we abandon attachment to seeking liberation for our own sake by cultivating loving-kindness, compassion, and the enlightenment thought.

Fourth, we abandon attachment to the dual vision through concentration and insight.

The first of these is the path of the small person, and the second is the path of the middling person. The last is the path of the great person, which is the path to ultimate enlightenment.

As I said, according to Nāgārjuna, the base is the two truths of relative truth and absolute truth, and the path is method and wisdom. Method refers to loving-kindness, compassion, and the relative enlightenment thought, while wisdom is the absolute enlightenment thought realized on the basis of concentration.

Through method and wisdom, we will be able to overcome all forms of suffering. Simply by meditating on loving-kindness and compassion and thinking about others, especially by practicing equality and exchange of self and other, we automatically are thinking less about our own suffering. Meditation on loving-kindness and compassion also helps to uncover the root of saṃsāra, which is self-clinging. Then, thinking that all forms are illusion and that ultimate reality is away from all extremes is a great help in overcoming the problems of mental suffering.

It is said in the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*: “Form is void, void is form; form is not other than void, void is not other than form.”<sup>[5]</sup> This means that the relative truth is not separate from the absolute truth of śūnyatā, or the void (emptiness).<sup>[6]</sup> Everything that we see and experience, the illusory vision that we are seeing today, in ultimate reality transcends ordinary experience. This is the absolute truth, beyond the dual illusory vision.

Through method and wisdom, we will reach the result. This is the two bodies, or kāyas, of a buddha. For one’s own sake, one attains the dharmakāya, or the truth body. This means to be completely free from suffering and to see the basic clear light or the clarity of the mind which is its true nature. It means that the obscurations to knowledge and the illusory vision are purified,

as well as the obscurations that are defilements. Then, for the sake of others, one attains the rūpakāya, or the form body. This is to help sentient beings advance through the tremendous practice of method and the accumulation of merit. The form body has two aspects, the saṃbhogakāya and the nirmāṇakāya. Possessing these kāyas, one will be able to perform all the activities of a buddha on behalf of sentient beings.

With this brief outline of the Buddha's teachings, I will conclude my talk tonight. If you have any questions, I will be happy to answer them.

## Questions and Answers

[*Student 1*] – I'm new to Buddhism, and I'm very attracted to the idea of nonattachment. At the same time, I feel troubled by the whole state of the planet, and I think that it's important to be committed. I find it difficult to abandon this.

[*His Holiness*] – You find that it is difficult to abandon attachment?

[*Student 1*] – Well there is a conflict for me. I feel I need to be committed.

[*His Holiness*] – To really eliminate suffering, both for oneself and for others, one needs to produce the renunciation thought. In order to produce the proper renunciation thought, one must abandon attachment for saṃsāra. For one thing, there is no point in having attachment because you will have to leave this life one day. We all have to die. We cannot remain forever in this world. Also, from the relative point of view, it is clear that saṃsāra is nothing but suffering. From the absolute point of



view, we see that it is not even real. Everything is an illusion. From both the method and the wisdom points of view, we can see that it is not worth having attachment.

[*Student 1*] – Still a conflict.

[*His Holiness*] – You have to overcome this through study and contemplation. You can be committed to benefitting beings by having the enlightenment thought. But it is necessary to have renunciation.

[*Student 1*] – His Holiness the Dalai Lama seems to be committed to dealing with problems in the world, ongoing problems. There isn't only my personal experience of suffering in the world, there are things that will be problems for people in 100 years. I mean, what should I do about those things? If you understand what I mean.

[*His Holiness*] – Our minds are very accustomed to attachment to saṃsāra, and it is difficult to abandon that. But these teachings tell us that saṃsāra is only suffering, and saṃsāra is an illusion. Thinking this way lessens our attachment. This will make clinging to the world seem less important. From my own experience, I can tell you that it is very helpful. After only a short period, it will not make attachment to saṃsāra go away, but attachment will diminish over time.

[*Student 1*] – Thank you.

[*Student 2*] – If I can just say something to help clarify the problem that I think she is trying to express: On the relative side, there is not only oneself in the world but other sentient beings who are suffering. Surely one has to do something to help other sentient beings in this world, in this existence, whenever one can. If some people are trying to destroy the world, for example, if they are taking many human lives and the lives of other sentient beings, then surely one must take whatever action one can to help beings in the world.

[*His Holiness*] – Yes, yes. This is one more reason why we should work hard on the path to enlightenment. As our ordinary selves, with so many defilements and our karma, we cannot do much. I mean, of course, whatever little thing we can do, we must do it. And it is said in the teachings that we need to practice the six perfections: giving, moral conduct, patience, etc. So just doing your practice, and also teaching the Dharma to others, will be a great help. But as ordinary people who are not free from the defilements, we cannot really help other sentient beings. We can only truly help them by attaining ultimate enlightenment. This is why we must work hard on the path to enlightenment.

[*Student 3*] – If everything is empty anyway, what is the difference between doing good things and bad things?

[*His Holiness*] – It is not that everything is empty anyway and so therefore nothing matters—a kind of nihilism. Emptiness means that, in absolute truth, everything is away from the extremes of existence, nonexistence, both, and neither. This absolute truth is beyond our ordinary conceptions, beyond our ordinary ways of seeing and expressing. We hear teachings on emptiness, or that all is an illusion, but until one has realized these things, one remains caught in the dual vision, in this realm of saṃsāra where we still feel hungry, we still feel cold. As long as we are caught in the dual vision, we are creating karma. If you do good things, then you will have a good result, and if you do bad things, then you will have suffering. Unless and until you realize the ultimate truth, avoiding non-virtuous deeds and practicing virtuous deeds is very important. In our ordinary experience, there is a big difference between the happiness of good things and the suffering of bad ones. Of course, when we realize ultimate truth, then we will be beyond all karma and actions, there will be no such thing as one and many, or bad and good.

[*Student 4*] – Could you repeat the theory of reincarnation, please?

[*His Holiness*] – There is mind and there are the objects of the mind. The object can never become mind, and the mind never

becomes object. The object continues in the mode of an object, or matter, and the mind continues in the mode of mind. Mind cannot arise from matter but can only come from mind. There is no such a thing as the birth of a new mind, because the mind exists as a continuum from beginningless time. When we die, we will leave the body, but the mind continues. Although the mind changes moment by moment, its continuity goes on, from the past life to the present life to the future one.

Notes:

[1] The eighteen prerequisites are the eight freedoms and the ten obtainments. The eight freedoms are freedoms from eight restless states of existence where there is no opportunity to practice Dharma. The first four are freedoms from nonhuman states of birth, whether (1) hell being, (2) hungry ghost, (3) animal, or (4) long-lived god. The second four pertain to the human realm. They are freedom from being born (5) among barbarians, (6) as someone with wrong views, (7) at a time when no buddha has appeared in the world, and (8) as a fool who cannot comprehend or practice the Dharma because of incomplete sense faculties or a foolish mind.

[2] The three higher realms are the realms of gods, demigods, and humans.

[3] Awakened beings who are free from all defilements do not generate any karma or karmic seeds. They are beyond the law of karma. An enlightened being's actions for the sake of sentient beings, manifested through a form body or rūpakāya, come from primordial wisdom rather than ordinary mind.

[4] There are traditionally five faults and eight antidotes. A very practical aid for śamatha meditation, they are widely taught. His Holiness explains them in *The Nature of Mind*, published by The Sakya Tradition, Inc. (2022). <https://sakyatradition.org/archived-teaching/the-nature-of-mind/>

[5] From the “Heart Sutra,” the brief name for “The Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom, the Blessed Mother.” *84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha*, <https://read.84000.co/translation/toh21.html>.

[6] *Emptiness* is the most common translation of Sanskrit *śūnyatā*, but sometimes *the void* or *voidness* appear as well. As His Holiness explains in an answer to a question at the end of this teaching, the sūtra statement that “form is void, void is form” does not mean that nothing exists and therefore ultimately nothing matters. Emptiness means that, in absolute truth, everything is away from the extremes of existence, nonexistence, both, and neither. Absolute truth is beyond our ordinary conceptions, beyond our ordinary ways of seeing and expressing. It is reality as it is perceived by enlightened beings. As His Holiness puts it here: “Everything that we see and experience, the illusory vision that we are seeing today, in ultimate reality transcends ordinary experience.” In the Sakya Lamdré tradition, this is called the view of the non-differentiation of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa.





■ 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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