



Buddhism in a Nutshell: The Four Noble Truths

His Holiness the 42nd Sakya Trizin, Ratna Vajra Rinpoche



"The Sakya Tradition" Publications

Published by “The Sakya Tradition”

<https://sakyatradition.org>

Email : info@sakyatradition.org

Wechat ID : sakyatradition

Weibo : sakyatradition

IG: the_sakya_tradition

Facebook: TheSakya

Soundcloud: the-sakya-tradition

<https://www.youtube.com/c/萨迦传承> TheSakyaTradition

Twitter: Sakya_Tradition

Strictly Not for Sale, Free Distribution Only



2023© All Rights Reserved

This work is provided under the protection of a Creative Commons
CC—BYNC—ND (Attribution—Non—commercial—No—derivatives)

4.0 copyright. It may be copied or printed for fair
use, but only with full attributions, and not for commercial
advantage or personal compensation.

For full details, see the Creative Commons license.

Acknowledgement

His Holiness the 42nd Sakya Trizin, Ratna Vajra Rinpoche, bestowed this teaching by video on July 24, 2020, Dharmacakra day, on which we celebrate Buddha's first teaching in this world—the first Turning of the Wheel of Dharma, at the request of Sachen Foundation. In 2023, this English text of the teaching was prepared, edited, and published by The Sakya Tradition, Inc., a nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving and making widely available the precious Dharma teachings of the glorious Sakya lineage. The Sakya Tradition team also translated the text into the Chinese language.

This publication was made possible by the generous donations of Isabella Fehler and Cheah Poh Peng. We also want to thank all volunteers for their dedication and effort in putting this teaching together.

By the merit of this work, may Their Holiness the Sakya Trichen and Sakya Trizin enjoy perfect health and very long lives, and continue to turn the wheel of Dharma.



Over 2500 years ago, Prince Siddhārtha attained buddhahood under the bodhi tree. After that, he gave his first sermon to the fortunate disciples, revealing the four truths about life.

What are these four truths? How was the profound teaching explained? Why is it important for us to understand it? How should we receive it?

In this teaching, His Holiness gave an extensive explanation on the four noble truths, of which would help us understand suffering, determine its root cause, and share the most effective method to permanently and completely removing suffering.

Thus did I hear at one time. The Blessed One, the Buddha, was residing in the Deer Park at R̥ṣivadana by Vārāṇasī. At that time the Blessed One spoke to the group of five monks:

“Monks, regarding things that I had not previously heard, as I reflected thoroughly, the vision arose, and the insight, knowledge, understanding, and realization arose: ‘This is suffering, the truth of noble beings.’

“Monks, regarding things that I had not previously heard, as I reflected thoroughly, the vision arose, and the insight, knowledge, understanding, and realization arose: ‘This is the origin of suffering, this is the cessation of suffering, and this is the path leading to the cessation of suffering.’

Lord Buddha, *The Sūtra of the Wheel of Dharma*^[1]

Buddhism in a Nutshell: The Four Noble Truths

Lord Shakyamuni Buddha is the most excellent being, the most perfect being, free from all obscurations, faults, sufferings, and karmic propensities. He possesses all ultimate qualities, such as ultimate loving-kindness, ultimate compassion, ultimate wisdom, ultimate power, and every other ultimate quality. Lord Shakyamuni Buddha performed many great activities to lead sentient beings from suffering and dissatisfaction to happiness—both temporary and ultimate. Among all the Buddha’s noble activities, his greatest activity was giving teachings, which is called turning the wheel of Dharma.

When Shakyamuni first attained buddhahood in Bodhgaya, he thought, “I have found a true, nectar-like teaching, but no one will understand this profound and precious teaching. Therefore, I will not teach what I have realized.” Then, powerful worldly gods—Indra and Brahmā—came to him, and they offered him a white conch shell and a thousand-spoked wheel,

and they supplicated Buddha Shakyamuni to turn the wheel of Dharma. At that time, he also saw that there were some fortunate disciples who were devoted to seeking these teachings.

He acknowledged their supplications and agreed. The Lord Buddha went to Deer Park in Sārnāth, Vārāṇasi, and there he gave the first Dharma teaching to five fortunate disciples. What he taught that day was the four noble truths. They are:

1. *the truth of suffering,*
2. *the truth of origin,*
3. *the truth of cessation,*
4. *the truth of the path.*

The Buddha's purpose in giving this teaching was to lead sentient beings to the temporary result, liberation from the whole of saṃsāra, and to lead them to the ultimate result, the state of buddhahood. With this same purpose in mind, the Lord Shakyamuni Buddha later gave an enormous number of teachings to suit the many different mentalities of his followers.

We likewise need to have the right purpose when we receive Dharma teachings. We must not think of the Dharma as an ordinary topic of study, or as something that we can use for our

personal lives. The teaching is profound and precious because it transcends this life. It will help us gain happiness and good results in lifetime after lifetime. Eventually, it will help us gain the perfect and ultimate result of buddhahood. This is why we should be careful to bring the right intention and to maintain the right perceptions whenever we receive the teachings.

We should think that Lord Buddha is like a skillful doctor, the teaching is like a medicine, and we are like patients. Our negative thoughts are our disease: ignorance, attachment, hatred, pride, stinginess, jealousy, and the rest. Receiving and following the teaching is like receiving the doctor's good advice and following it. This is the perception that we should have when we hear and follow the Buddha's teaching.

We should also generate the right intention. The Buddha's purpose in giving the teaching is to lead sentient beings to liberation and the enlightenment state. Similarly, when we receive the teaching, we should have the intention of gaining liberation and eventually attaining buddhahood.

Why are the four noble truths called noble? *Noble* (Skt. *ārya*, Tib. *phags pa*) means an extraordinary being. In Buddhism, it is an epithet for a person who has realized the true nature of all phenomena directly, a person who has gained liberation from

the whole of saṃsāra by entirely abandoning the causes of saṃsāra, which are the afflictive emotions and negative karma, or actions. A noble being is a being who has gained liberation.

There are four types of noble beings. Buddhas are noble beings, but so are śrāvakas, pratyekabuddhas, and the noble bodhisattvas, beings who all reside on the first bhūmi up to the tenth. All these beings have realized the four noble truths. Having realized them, they cannot be persuaded otherwise by any opponent. They possess certainty. There is no misunderstanding for them, and this will never change because the truth will never change. Once these beings have realized this truth, no one can argue the point, and no one can change their view, because no one can change reality. When we say that this truth will remain as it is forever, *remain* does not imply permanence. What I mean is something different. The truth will remain, as it is, and as it is realized by the four types of noble beings.

This noble truth is four-fold. There are not three noble truths, not five, because exactly four are right. We do not need more or less than these four. Of the four, the first two describe the cause and effect of saṃsāra. The next two describe the cause and effect of liberation, or nirvāṇa. All of the Buddha's teachings are based on the law of karma, or cause and effect. The law of karma and the four noble truths are closely linked.

We can view the four noble truths in terms of *what is to be adopted* and *what is to be abandoned*. Saṃsāra, which is to be abandoned, is full of suffering. This states the truth of suffering, while the truth of origin addresses the cause. Together, they describe the cause and effect of saṃsāra.

That which we need to adopt is liberation. Liberation also has cause and effect. Its cause is the method that leads to liberation. Its result, or effect, is the truth of cessation, which is freedom from the suffering of saṃsāra. In this way, the whole law of cause and effect is understood: The teaching of the four noble truths shows the cause and effect of saṃsāra and the cause and effect of nirvana.

What about the order of the four noble truths? The great Maitreya, the future buddha, said in the text called the *Uttaratantraśāstra* that when we are not well and we visit a doctor, the doctor must first diagnose the problem. Without knowing the sickness, the doctor cannot cure it or know the appropriate treatment. Once the diagnosis is clear and the doctor has investigated both the symptoms and their causes, he can determine the right way to eliminate the sickness. Diagnosis and understanding the cause correspond to the truth of suffering and the truth of origin, and this is why they are first.

In the example, the happiness of being free from sickness corresponds to the truth of cessation. We need to have the wish to attain freedom from sickness and an idea of the healthy state, and we need to apply the right methods to attain it. We must follow the advice of the doctor, do the right treatments, and take the appropriate medicine. Having the idea or wish to attain liberation from sickness and taking the appropriate medicine correspond to the truth of cessation and the truth of the path.

Through really knowing the truth of suffering—knowing suffering as it is—we will be able to generate a genuine wish to abandon it and its causes. When we really understand suffering and the causes of suffering, it will be easy to see that there is no use in having great attachment to worldly objects. This will help us generate the thought of renunciation. Also, knowing suffering as it is will help us avoid the causes of suffering, which are karma, or our actions, and the afflictive emotions, and it will help us perform positive actions and obtain the antidotes to suffering.

We must really understand the true causes of our suffering. Otherwise, we will never eliminate it. Take the example of a poisonous tree in your yard. If you want to get rid of it, you will need to eradicate the root of the tree. If you only cut off the

branches, the tree can grow back. But if you remove the root of the tree, then you are removing the tree completely. Similarly, in order to remove suffering completely, you need to remove the root of suffering: this is the truth of origin.

Further, if you have a wish to remove the root of suffering, this implies that you also have a wish to gain a state free from that suffering. The truth of cessation is placed third because without some idea of the goal of liberation it will be impossible to obtain such a result. Finally, the Buddha explained the truth of the path. Without the path, we cannot gain cessation, just as without medicine we cannot effect a cure.

From another way: we are made up of our aggregates (Skt. *skandhas*, Tib. *phung po*). On the basis of our aggregates, we experience suffering. However, not all of the aggregates that appear are caused by negative actions and emotions. The Buddha's physical form, for example, is free from karma and afflictive emotions. However, our ordinary aggregates, caused by our karma and afflictive emotions, are the basis upon which we experience the sufferings of birth, old age, sickness, and death. We experience other suffering besides these, too: the suffering of not fulfilling our wishes, the suffering of meeting unfavorable conditions, etc. All of these are called "the suffering of suffering," and this is the first truth.

The truth of origin is that the causes of suffering are our karma (karma means *actions*) and our afflictive emotions. Karma is of two kinds: positive and negative. The afflictive emotions are ignorance, desire, anger, and so on. Sometimes they are called the defilements in English. There are many translations, but the Tibetan word is *nyon mongs pa* or *nyon mongs*. We are caught up in *samsāra*, and we experience many kinds of sufferings, not only in this life but from beginningless time until now, because of our karma and afflictive emotions. If we do not remove them, then we will experience more suffering in our future lives. In short, the truth of origin means the causes of suffering, which are none other than karma and afflictive emotions.

The third is the truth of cessation. Cessation refers to the cessation of suffering and the causes of suffering, and the attainment of the state of happiness free from them. For example, a doctor, recognizing the cause of a sickness, removes the cause and this produces a state free from the sickness. Similarly, cessation is the state free from the causes of suffering and the suffering itself.

The truth of the path: If we know that cessation of karma and afflictive emotions is possible, but we do not know the method or the remedy or the antidote, then we will not be able to achieve the result. We need the method to gain the truth

of cessation. Having the wish to gain the truth of cessation, knowing the truth of suffering and the truth of origin, we must apply the right remedies to overcome suffering and its causes.

The Buddha examined reality carefully for himself. If we do the same, we will also find the right remedy, which is the wisdom that realizes selflessness. This is the only true remedy, because all suffering and all negative actions are caused by our negative thoughts, and the root of our negative thoughts is our self-clinging or self-cherishing mind. Unless we are able to remove this, we will not be able to remove our suffering, and we will not be able to attain liberation from saṃsāra. In order to remove selfish thought or self-clinging thought, we need to produce the opposite of it, which is the wisdom that realizes selflessness.

At the moment, as ordinary human beings, we can study selflessness and understand something of the meaning. This is called the wisdom that is gained through listening or study. But merely gaining the wisdom of study and listening will not remove the causes of our suffering and bring us the truth of cessation. It is only a basis upon which we can obtain wisdom through contemplation. Then, after study and much contemplation, we need to obtain wisdom through meditation.

It is only through the wisdom of meditation that we will eventually have the wisdom that realizes selflessness directly. At that moment, we will have reached what is called the path of seeing and we will have realized the truth of cessation. This is the moment when one reaches the first bhūmi and become a noble being and gains liberation from the whole of saṃsāra. The truth of cessation, as you can see, does not necessarily mean the same thing as attaining the ultimate result of buddhahood.^[2] All four of the noble kinds of beings that were already mentioned have realized the four noble truths and have gained liberation from the whole of saṃsāra.

With this, I conclude my short talk on the four noble truths. I would only like to add that we have to be careful to avoid negative actions as much as we can, and we have to perform good deeds, or positive actions, as much as we can. Today is Dharmacakra day, the day on which we celebrate the Buddha's first teaching in the world, the first turning of the wheel of Dharma, which was the teaching on the four noble truths. On such special days as this, whatever merit we gain through our virtuous actions can be multiplied by thousands and thousands. On such special days, we should be diligent and careful to perform virtuous deeds and Dharma practices and to avoid negative actions. Likewise, if our deeds are negative, they will also be multiplied on these days, so we should be extra careful.

With that, I will conclude my short talk. I sincerely wish that the blessings of our guru, the Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha will be with you now and always.

Notes:

[1] *“The Sūtra of the Wheel of Dharma | 84000 Reading Room.” 84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha*, <https://read.84000.co/translation/toh337.html>. Accessed 30 July 2022.

[2] According to the Sūtrayāna system, complete and ultimate buddhahood is attained on the tenth and final bhūmi.



■ His Holiness the 42nd Sakya Trizin, Ratna Vajra Rinpoche, is the eldest son of His Holiness the Sakya Trichen (the 41st Sakya Trizin). Renowned for his erudition and the clarity of his teachings, His Holiness the 42nd Sakya Trizin is regarded as one of the most highly qualified lineage holders in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. He belongs to the noble Khön family, whose successive generations have provided an unbroken lineage of outstanding Buddhist masters.

Since his youth, His Holiness the 42nd Sakya Trizin has received an ocean of sutra and tantra teachings, empowerments, transmissions, and pith instructions from His Holiness the Sakya Trichen, as well as many other learned and accomplished masters. After years of rigorous philosophy studies at Sakya College in India, he was awarded the kachupa degree. And starting from the age of twelve, he has completed numerous meditation retreats, including the Hevajra retreat. With utmost humility, he travels extensively to bestow teachings and empowerments at the request of students across the globe.



**"The Sakya Tradition"—Delivering the
Precious Sakya Teachings Accurately
and Entirely in Your Native Languages**

<https://sakyatradition.org>

2023©All Rights Reserved