



Beyond Happiness and Suffering: A Contemporary Introduction to the Non- differentiation of Saṃsāra and Nirvāṇa

His Holiness the 43rd Sakya Trizin, Gyana Vajra Rinpoche



"The Sakya Tradition" Publications

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.

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

Youtube: @TheSakyaTradition

Twitter: Sakya_Tradition

Strictly Not for Sale. Free Distribution Only

Beyond Happiness and Suffering: A Contemporary Introduction to the Non- differentiation of Saṃsāra and Nirvāṇa

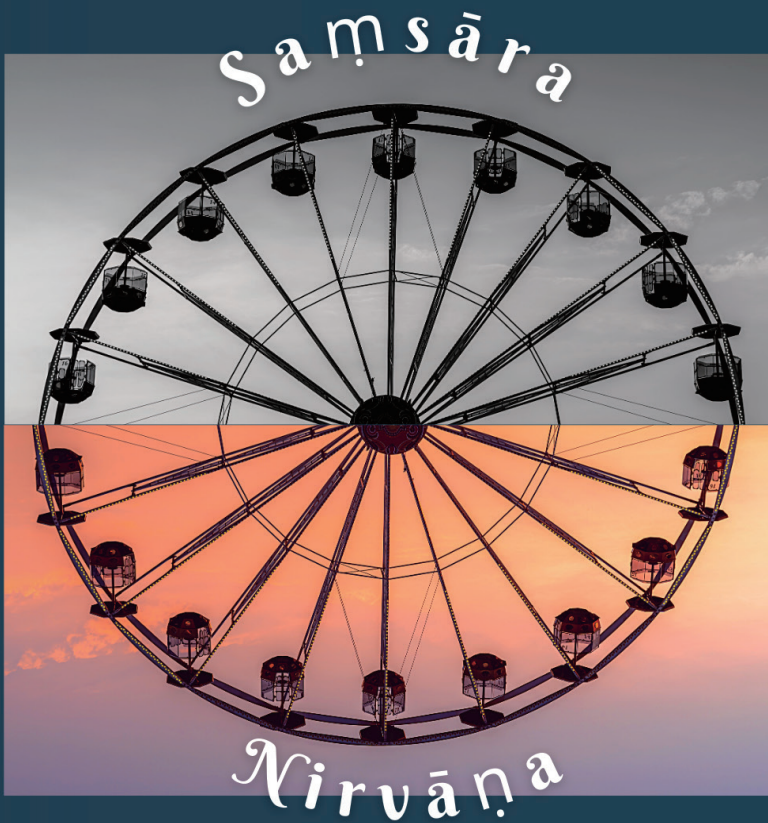
His Holiness the 43rd Sakya Trizin, Gyana Vajra Rinpoche

Acknowledgement

His Holiness the 43rd Sakya Trizin, Gyana Vajra Rinpoche bestowed this teaching at the request of Tsechen Kunchab Ling, U.S.A. on July 22, 2022. In 2023, this English transcript 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 text was translated into the Chinese language by The Sakya Tradition translation team.

This publication was made possible by the generous donations of Maria Julia Silva 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, the 42nd, and the 43rd Sakya Trizins enjoy perfect health and very long lives, and continue to turn the wheel of Dharma.



Saṃsāra and nirvāṇa are like bad and sweet dreams. Neither of these two extremes is ultimate happiness. According to Mahāyāna teachings, to achieve the ultimate state of happiness—to be awakened from the dream—is beyond saṃsāra and nirvāṇa. This state is known as perfect buddhahood. How can one achieve this?

Every aspect of life can be viewed as the practice path, and Dharma can be practiced anywhere, at any time, in our daily lives. In this teaching, His Holiness explains how it is possible to practice the non-differentiation of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa in modern-day living. By thoroughly studying and contemplating it, and putting it into practice, buddhahood can be accomplished soon.

CONTENT

An Important Part of the Teaching	1
The First Teaching	11
Looking for Happiness	16
Conclusion	20
Questions and Answers	23

An Important Part of the Teaching

I think that before we can understand what the Buddha taught, it is important to understand where the Buddha came from, how he lived, and how he started teaching. I'm not sure how many people know the Buddha's life story, but it is an important part of the teaching.

Around 2,500 years ago, the Buddha was born in a place called Kapilavastu, close to Lumbinī, in today's Nepal. Of course, 2,500 years ago there was no Nepal and no India, only many small kingdoms. It was ruled by a great king called Śuddhodana, a king of kings, who had two wives—they were sisters—named Mahāmāyā and Prajāpati. One night, Queen Mahāmāyā dreamed that a small white elephant with six tusks came down from the sky, circled her, and then dissolved into her belly. In the morning, she told her husband about the dream. The king grew curious, too, about its meaning, and he gathered an assembly of ministers, astrologers, and scholars to his court to ask them to interpret the dream. At that meeting, they all concluded that

it was an auspicious dream, and it meant that the king would be blessed with a child in the near future. Of course, the king was very happy to hear this. In those days, the tradition was that wives did not give birth in the houses of their husbands. They had to return to their family home to give birth. So before the Buddha was due to be born, Queen Mahāmāyā traveled to her home. People walked in those days to travel, and Queen Mahāmāyā went with her attendants who carried her.

Along the way, they stopped in Lumbinī. There was a beautiful garden filled with blossoming flowers, the birds were singing, and the trees were green. Everything was so nice that the queen felt that they should stop there for a rest, and she instructed her attendants accordingly. She walked into the garden, and as she walked, the Buddha was born from her armpit. At once, miraculously, the baby walked in all the cardinal directions and announced that he would be the teacher of the world. Of course this was a very auspicious sign. As soon as the king heard that the prince was born, he rushed to Lumbinī to meet them, and they all went back to the palace in Kapilavastu where there was a great celebration. For the celebration, he invited the astrologers and scholars again, and he asked them to tell him the prince's future. Many of them said that he would be a great king—the greatest of all kings. Then, a very famous and learned astrologer-priest arrived—someone so famous that people

were surprised to see him coming to the palace. He requested to see the baby, and the king brought the prince to him. When he saw the baby Siddhārtha—that was Buddha Śākyamuni’s name when he was a prince—the priest’s eyes filled with tears. This surprised the king, who asked him why he was teary-eyed, and the priest explained: One of two things was going to happen. Either the prince would be the greatest king in the world or he would become a great spiritual master and would teach the world. The priest said that he was crying because he was an old man, and by the time the prince started teaching, he himself would no longer be alive.

When the king heard that the prince might become the greatest king of all, he was extremely happy. However, he was worried about the second part of the prophecy, the second possibility. In order to prevent the prince from ever turning towards spiritual thoughts, the king hid from him all signs of human suffering—nothing of that sort could be seen in the palace. The king sent away all old people and all sick people, and the palace was so huge that even though the prince was not allowed to go outside, it never bothered him. Secluded in the compound of the palace, he remained this way for many years. As he grew up, he trained in martial arts, scripture, and philosophy. In all things he was thriving. The king provided music and dancing

and other entertainments to make the prince happy. However, Siddhārtha generally preferred to stay by himself, in the garden, in a meditative mode.

Queen Mahāmāyā had passed away not long after Siddhārtha's birth—a week or so. She asked her younger sister, Prajāpati, to raise Prince Siddhārtha as her own son, and she did. This happened when the prince was so young that of course he wasn't exposed to her sickness or death.

When he was in his twenties, the king thought that if the prince had a wife and his own family, then there would surely be no chance of him leaving his life as a prince and future king. The king sought out a suitable princess, and Siddhārtha was married to a girl named Yaśodharā. They had a son named Rāhula. When all this was accomplished, the father felt content that his son would never abandon his family or the throne, and he felt relief.

Renunciation

When Prince Siddhārtha was about to be enthroned, he said that in order to be a good king, he should see the kingdom and know it well. The father arranged a chariot for him. The chariot driver was Channa, who was Prince Siddhārtha's friend since they were both young. When the two of them left the palace that day, it was the first time Prince Siddhārtha had ever seen the real world.

Outside the gate, the very first thing he saw was an old person. He was startled and confused to see someone wrinkled, with grey hair, stooped over, and walking with a stick. In those days, there were no magazines, books with pictures, or computers. Prince Siddhārtha had truly never seen an old person. Channa explained to him what an old person was, and Prince Siddhārtha asked him if he were going to grow old, too. Channa told him, “Yes, everyone who is born will grow old. Even I will become old. So will my wife and my sons. If you live long enough, you will grow old, too.” This prompted Prince Siddhārtha to think. Prince Siddhārtha already had questions, and now he had more.

They continued with their outing. Soon, he saw a sick person, someone screaming in pain, and he asked Channa why this person was behaving so strangely. Channa replied that that person was sick, suffering with physical pain. Prince Siddhārtha asked Channa if everyone would become sick, and Channa replied that everyone born is subject to becoming sick. This gave Prince Siddhārtha, who was already confused, even more questions.

They continued their journey and saw a funeral. The tradition in India, still seen today, is not to use a coffin. Instead, the body is wrapped in white cloth and carried from the house of the deceased to the cremation site by mourners and family who

carry the body on their shoulders while they walk. Prince Siddhārtha asked Channa what was happening, and Channa explained that the person they were carrying was dead. Again, Prince Siddhārtha asked if he, too were going to die—if his wife, son, father, and mother were all going to die. Like before, Channa said that, of course, everyone born in this world is going to die.

Thus, in a short period of time on his first trip outside the palace, Prince Siddhārtha became acquainted with old age, sickness, and death. Of course, the prince was sensitive and intelligent to ask the questions he did. As they continued, the prince saw an ascetic, someone who had given up all luxuries in life in order to seek the truth. There was no Buddhism yet, but there were people who were searching for the truth and doing all kinds of spiritual practices, including meditation. He asked Channa why the man was wandering and living so simply. Channa said that he was an ascetic attempting to get rid of suffering and attain the truth. Soon after, they returned to the palace.

For days and months after this, the prince pondered the things he saw. His wife, Yaśodharā saw that he was disturbed and tried her best to make him comfortable again, reminding him of the kingdom he was about to rule,

but it did not work. The thought had come into his mind that there must be a solution to suffering.

One night, he decided that he would slip away and search for the truth to end all suffering. Through a miracle, everybody in the palace that night—including the guards and the maids—was fast asleep, so that when he asked Channa to bring the chariot and they exited the palace gate, no one knew. He asked Channa to take him to a cemetery. There, Prince Siddhārtha removed his jewels and his luxurious garments of silk. He handed them to Channa and asked him to return to the palace without him. Siddhārtha found some cloth in the cemetery to cover his body, and so began his journey in search of the truth.

Some people have said that the prince was behaving selfishly by leaving his child and wife behind. But we must understand that he was seeking a solution to suffering not only for himself, and not only for his wife and son, but for everyone. Once he found the answer, he wanted to share it with everyone. This thought was in his mind.

At first, he went to a learned master. He was already very knowledgeable because he had been taught in the palace by scholars and renowned teachers. He said to this master,

“I do not need teachings like ordinary people do, but I have questions and I wonder if you can answer them.” He asked the master many things. The master tried his best to answer everything, but eventually he had to say, “I do not have any more answers. However, there is another master who might know the answers.”

The prince went to the second master who also did his best, but in the end, the prince did not find the answers he sought. Determined to find them, he began to meditate. During that period, there were many ascetics practicing meditation in India and Nepal in the jungles, in the mountains, and in other remote areas. In the place where Siddhārtha chose to meditate, there were five other ascetics practitioners, and he began to travel with them. Then, for six years, the prince meditated, surviving on nothing more than a grain and a drop of water each day. He grew extremely weak so that his body was like a skeleton. He was not even recognizable as a human being because he disappeared among the trees.

At the end of six years, the gods spoke to Siddhārtha, “You are seeking the solution to all our suffering—the suffering of all sentient beings—and so you must live.” The prince was near to death. His body could not take any

more asceticism. The prince came out of his meditative absorption and went to a tree, a bodhi tree.

There was at that time a very rich woman in the area named Sujātā who was seeking a rich and handsome husband. The elders of her village told her to propitiate the god of the trees, because if the god was happy with her, he might give her the husband she wanted. In that time and place, “rich” meant owning a lot of cows and other livestock, so Sujātā had many cows that produced good milk. She made offerings of this milk to the tree god, sometimes going alone, and sometimes sending her maid to make the offering for her. One day, the maid was making the offering to the tree when she saw Prince Siddhārtha. She was very happy and ran to Sujātā telling her, “The tree god is here today!” Sujātā went to see for herself and discovered a very weak Prince Siddhārtha sitting under the bodhi tree. She offered him a bowl of milk and yogurt, and this helped him regain his strength. Next, there was a boy working in the field, and Siddhārtha asked him to bring him some grass to sit on, and Siddhārtha placed the grass under the bodhi tree for his seat. Those of you who have received a two-day major empowerment will remember that at the end of the first day you received a stalk of kusha grass (Sanskrit: kuśa). This is the same grass that

Siddhārtha sat on under the bodhi tree. When you placed the kusha grass under your mattress, it symbolized that you would attain enlightenment. This is why initiates are given stalks of kusha grass.

Siddhārtha sat on his seat that night, and the very next morning, at dawn, he became enlightened. He knew that he was enlightened, and he wanted to share what he knew with the two masters that he had met long before. However, they had both passed away since their meeting.

The First Teaching

The Buddha did not teach right away after gaining enlightenment. He did not teach for forty-nine days. When he did, he chose to teach the five ascetic practitioners who were meditating with him all those years ago, and he found them in Vārāṇasī. Important facts that we as Buddhists should remember: The Buddha was born in Lumbinī, gained enlightenment in Bodhgaya under the bodhi tree, and gave his first teaching in Vārāṇasī after forty-nine days.

The first teaching that the Buddha gave is called the four noble truths. He gave many teachings, but this one is considered among the most important. The four truths are:

The truth of the existence of suffering,

The truth of the origin of suffering,

The truth of the cessation of suffering, and,

The truth of the path to the cessation of suffering.

To explain this, the existence of suffering means that whoever is born into saṃsāra is born into suffering. The origin of suffering is our defilements: anger, desire, and ignorance. If we go deeper, we will find that these three come out of two factors: hope and doubt. To put it simply, these two factors cause all the suffering in our lives. Hoping that something will happen or that someone will do something for you, along with doubt about the same things, or concern and worry that someone will do something negative to you—these create all our suffering, whether we are worried about our marriage, children, work, or some other thing. Everywhere we go, we suffer because of doubt and hope. Typically, our thoughts are always about the future, the place of hope and doubt. Even right now, our minds are probably thinking ahead. Rarely are our minds situated in the present.

I believe strongly that we must look into ourselves and understand our own suffering in our own minds if we want to understand or help others. We think about ending the suffering of the world—always looking outside—when it is important first to understand ourselves. When you look into yourself, you can see that your suffering does not come from what is outside you but from your experience of it. When you understand that you are suffering and why, then you will understand everything

else. It would be impossible to understand each one of billions of people, all animals, and so forth, but because we are all the same, if you only look into yourself and understand your own suffering, then you will be able to understand everybody's suffering. This is a very important and effective method.

Typically, even when we think about the past, our minds are in the future. There is still future-oriented fear or hope in our minds. If you recall someone who died, there will be thoughts such as, "I may die, or someone close to me may get a Covid infection or get into an accident," etc. These fearful thoughts are present in our minds, and it is important to understand that this is why we cannot feel real peace or tranquility. The present is less fearful because we think we have some control, while the future which has not happened yet inspires fear and anxiety in our imaginations. I think that this is an important factor for every practitioner to understand about how our minds work. Once you understand this, it will help your practice because you will not be worried so much.

The third truth is the cessation of suffering. While the second truth established the cause of suffering, which are the defilements and hope and fear, the third says that a solution to suffering is possible.

The fourth noble truth is the path to the cessation of suffering. This means to practice Dharma. Just like diagnosing a disease is only one step and taking the medicine and doing whatever else is necessary to cure the disease is something else, so in our case, understanding the causes of suffering is one thing, but in order to eliminate the suffering, we need the fourth truth—the path. It is important that we do not neglect any of these things. We may feel sometimes that even though we are practicing, it has no benefit. I believe this is often because, neglecting what I just described about the four noble truths, our minds are still looking outward. We think about this person or that, or some situation, and we think that if only they were not obstacles, then everything would be okay and our mental suffering would cease, but it does not work that way. The suffering is coming from within, from our anxious imaginations, from hope and doubt, and then the cause is projected onto this or that external thing or person.

As your realization grows, you will experience less and less fear and anxiety. You will not become excited so easily. I like to give the example of watching a movie. When you see it for the first time, you laugh when there is something funny, and you are afraid when there is something scary. These emotions arise in you and go through you as you watch the movie. But if you

watch it a second, third, fourth, or fifth time, your emotional response will be increasingly stable. You already know the story. In the same way, if you understand how your mind works and where your suffering comes from, then you will not be so fearful or excited.

Looking for Happiness

We are all looking for happiness, whether in our society or in our lives. I think we need to ask whether the happiness we are seeking is true happiness. This is a question that not many people ask. Most people think that becoming wealthy, or having prestige, or acquiring power, is the way to be happy. But we need to learn that wealth and power do not bring true happiness. In fact, these things only increase our suffering.

Typically, we do not even know where our suffering and happiness come from or what they really are. When we are not happy, we might think that we are suffering, and when there is no overt suffering we might think we are happy. When I was student, it occurred to me that nobody was saying, "I'm happy right now, in this moment." They said, "I was happy at that party," or "I will be happy when..." I think this results from labeling our thoughts, assuming it to be a fact that a party brings happiness. You slap a label on it, and in the future you remember that as happiness.

Once we begin to understand how selfish our minds really are, only then will things become clearer and easier for us. Masters of the past and the present have taught many techniques for controlling our minds and so on, but basically I think that the main thing they are trying to teach us is how selfish we are in different ways.

Maybe your family or some other person you care about is going through a difficult time. Maybe they are in the hospital and experiencing pain. Maybe they are about to die. And what is going on in your mind? Is there the thought, "Why is this happening to me? Why is my husband, my wife, my child, my loved one dying? Why me?" We are liable to worry about what will happen to us when someone we love or care for is gone. The uncertainty disturbs us. But before we find ourselves in this situation, we can practice thoughts of loving-kindness and compassion so that we will be ready. It is best to do the practices when your mind is calm. It is too late to learn to swim when you find yourself drowning in deep waters. But if you practice swimming in shallow and calm waters, then you will be ready when you find yourself in deep water or about to drown. We can think about compassion and other positive thoughts in the same way.

Understanding and Believing

Maybe you already know what I just told you, that your suffering comes from the three defilements—anger, ignorance, and desire—and that the defilements arise from your hope and fear. If this is the case, if we know this, then why are we still suffering? Why are we still subject to experiencing difficulties? I think it is because although we might know the teachings, we do not have believing knowledge in them. I don't mean to say that we do not believe in the teachings in the ordinary sense, only that we are not yet one hundred percent behind them. Attaining buddhahood, which is the goal of all Buddhists, simply means gaining understanding. This is the sense of the English word *enlightenment*. It does not mean going to a different planet or anywhere beyond your life. It is as simple as turning on a light when you are in a dark room. Suddenly, you can see where to walk. Just like this, as soon as you are able to accept or believe the teachings one hundred percent, then you will have enlightenment. I believe that the Buddha's teachings can be explained in a sentence and understood in a second. On the other hand, if you want to study, if you need to study, you can spend a lifetime studying and still not be finished—if you want it to be complicated. Remember that the Buddha meditated for six years, day and night, until he nearly died, and yet this did not bring enlightenment. Later, in only a single night, he became enlightened.

Let me pass on something that I have learned from our teachings. Generally, we think that getting promoted or getting married is going to make us extremely happy: *the happiest day of your life*, and so on. For me, when I was young, I would save money to buy shoes, or cassette tapes, or a Walkman. Those of you who are old enough will know about that amazing device that allowed us to listen to our music. I experienced many times the anticipation of being happy and satisfied once I had bought some object, only to find that it did not bring satisfaction. This happened to me many times. I thought that once I had this or that, I would be complete, that my level of happiness would be tops. But it did not happen that way.

I think that the best way to learn something is from our own experience and our own emotions, similar to how learning a language is easier through real immersion than by book study alone. If you examine your own emotions and experience, only then you will understand the teachings. I'm not saying do not study, do not read books. Only that we need to gain experiential knowledge of the teachings. Year after year, our masters have been teaching the same things to us. Imagine a school. The teachers want to see their students graduate, not repeat the second grade over and over. We too have to graduate, and yet we are still trying to learn the basics. I think this is because we are not examining ourselves and our own experiences. We listen, but we do not put what we learn into practice.

Conclusion

The best way to practice is to understand your own mind and your own thoughts. Once you start understanding your own mind, you will understand everything else. Examine your thoughts and your mind, understand how the defilements work in your mind and how selfish the mind is. Then, it will be much easier to go deeper—your level of understanding will be much greater. I would like you to understand that we run after happiness when this “happiness” is only a label that we have given. We brand this or that as “happiness” or as “suffering,” but if we can go beyond this labeling through our practice, then we will discover that there is no suffering, no happiness: only calmness and simplicity. As I said, when you know the story of the movie from top to bottom, there can be no surprises. And when you understand yourself, your family, and your world, then your emotions will be controlled. Otherwise, we have no control whatsoever, despite what we think. As soon as somebody

smiles at us, we become happy. As soon as somebody gives us a bad look, negative thoughts go through our minds. Wherever the winds of the defilements blow, our minds go that way. We are driven by the defilements, the negative emotions. Once we understand this, then each time we feel happiness or sadness we can ask, “Is this really happiness or suffering, or is it the defilements going through my mind?”

Sometimes people say that the Buddha lived 2,500 years ago, how can his teachings be relevant today? This is the most common question I get, and I believe most masters get it, too. It is very simple to answer. When the Buddha lived, people had headaches, backaches, stomachaches, sickness, old age, and death. If the suffering is the same and the causes of suffering are the same, then the solution is the same. We may have changed external things like our clothing and hairstyles and technologies, but anger, desire, ignorance, hope, and fear are still the same. Inwardly, we have not changed anything at all.

In our practices, we always begin by saying *for the sake of all sentient beings*, and then, when we dedicate merit, we dedicate it to all sentient beings. If you dedicate the merit to your family or to a small group, it will decrease. Merit is something that becomes bigger the wider the group you dedicate it to. This is why I said that the wider your view—essentially, understanding

that we are all the same—then the easier your practice will be.

With this, I would like to conclude my talk. I will answer a few questions now.

Questions and Answers

Q: Is nirvāṇa a place? Is Sukhāvātī a place?

HH: There are stories about masters who have been to nirvāṇa or Sukhāvātī and returned. I do not think that these are physical places that we can visit. For example, we have wrathful deities and peaceful deities because they are reflecting the terms of this life. Nirvāṇa is a mental attainment, a mental place. The places, people, and things that appear in our dreams do not exist in any conventional way. Similarly, these terms do not describe physical things but states of your mind. Remember that every time we visualize the deities, we do not visualize them in flesh and blood that we can touch. We visualize them as like rainbows or light.

Q: Can you say something about emptiness?

HH: Many people think that *emptiness* means non-existence, that something does not exist, that Buddhist emptiness is as

simple as the emptiness of an empty house or an empty garage, or an empty stomach. But in the Buddha's teachings, the term *emptiness* refers to the understanding of ultimate reality as beyond the extremes of existence and non-existence. If you dissect anything into its component parts, you will not find the essence of that thing. If you take apart a box, for example, piece by piece, you can find nothing that can be called the box. Even scientists have reached the same conclusion.

Q: How can we think about the shootings in the elementary school in Uvalde, Texas?

HH: In the teachings, it says that everything exists in our own minds. When we are distressed, thinking, "Oh, so many children died..." then we are thinking in terms of the external. But if you look inside, towards yourself, I believe that the Buddha's teachings on emptiness can help us. Emptiness is the greatest antidote to selfish thoughts. When you dissect everything outside and realize that everything external is empty of inherent existence, then there will be nothing to cling to. Your selfish thoughts need the external objects of attachment. That is the air they survive on, like the gasoline or battery for your selfish thoughts. Once there is nothing to which you can be attached, then your self-clinging also dissolves. I think this is

how we explain it. If the outside world is empty of inherent existence, then you must ask whether the self exists in the same way. Remember, if *right* does not exist, does *left* exist?

Thank you very much. I hope that this has benefitted you. My final request to each one of you is to try to understand the teachings in your own way and according to your own experience and the techniques and methods that suit you. If you approach the teachings this way, I think it will be more beneficial and you will get results more quickly. Thank you.



■ His Holiness the 43rd Sakya Trizin, Gyana Vajra Rinpoche, is the second son of His Holiness the Sakya Trichen (the 41st Sakya Trizin). He belongs to the noble Khön family, whose successive generations have provided an unbroken lineage of outstanding Buddhist masters.

At an early age, Rinpoche undertook his training in the principal rituals and prayers of the Sakya lineage. Rinpoche has received from His Holiness the Sakya Trichen most of the major initiations, empowerments, oral transmissions, blessings, and pith instructions that are inherent to the Sakya lineage. Furthermore, Rinpoche has received numerous common and uncommon teachings from some of the pre-eminent teachers of Tibetan Buddhism of our age.



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

<https://sakyatradition.org>

2023©All Rights Reserved