



Nature of Suffering: Discovering Bliss Beyond

His Holiness the Sakya Trichen



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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.

"The nature of saṃsāra is suffering" is a prominent theme in Buddhism, often discussed. However, many misinterpret Buddhism as pessimistic based on their own understanding. Contrarily, it advocates a positive outlook. Buddhism emphasizes understanding suffering and its causes as a means to overcome it and attain true happiness.

Consider, for instance, how young children, in their ignorance, consume sweets that eventually lead to tooth decay. Similarly, when eyelashes irritate the eyes, the person may not realize the cause. These examples illustrate how we often perceive certain things as "normal" or "pleasurable," when in truth, our lack of understanding of suffering's true nature causes us to unwittingly endure avoidable pain.

Seeking happiness is a universal pursuit, underscoring the importance of understanding its essence. This text serves as a beacon in the darkness, illuminating the path to genuine happiness.



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Saṃsāra Is Nothing but Suffering

As human beings, we require many things in our lives. There are things that we feel we must accomplish, and there are things that we wish for. But no matter how much we possess and no matter who we become, there is always a sense that it is never enough. There is always something more that we require, and we are never satisfied. It does not matter where we are, whether in a developed country or in a developing one, or what we do, or what we have. There is always dissatisfaction. Our own experience shows that “Saṃsāra is nothing but suffering,” as the Lord Buddha said. The nature of saṃsāra is suffering, like the nature of fire is to be hot.

Whether we are educated or uneducated, whether we believe in religion or not, regardless of our tradition, philosophy, or view, there is one thing that everyone has in common: everybody wants to be free from suffering. Everybody wishes

for happiness. Every individual is busy making efforts for the sake of their happiness, in both worldly ways and spiritual ones. Every country, too, is pursuing development in order to create more happiness and to lessen suffering. However, no matter what we do, there is no end to our suffering, and there is no final happiness. How then we can attain it?

Buddha Nature and the Importance of Spiritual Practice

According to the Lord Buddha's teachings, every sentient being possesses buddha nature. This means that the true nature of the mind is primordially pure and not stained with any obscurations. This is the primary reason why, if we make efforts, it is possible to attain enlightenment. However, at the moment, we do not recognize the buddha nature. It is completely covered with obscurations. The obscurations are not part of its nature, however. If they were, then they could never be eliminated. The nature of coal is to be black, and no matter how much you wash a piece of coal, it will never become white. But the defilements or obscurations are not like this. They exist only at the outer level, and with the right methods, they can be eliminated, like a white cloth that can be completely cleaned. If we make efforts and follow the Dharma path, we can become fully enlightened buddhas.

The most important thing in our lives is therefore our spiritual practice. Everything else—material things, power, and so on—can only benefit us in this lifetime. On the day we leave this world, we will have to leave everything behind: our wealth, our friends, and even these bodies that we care for so much, the bodies that we have had from the day we were conceived in our mothers' wombs. Only the consciousness will continue when we depart this world, and the only thing we can rely on at the time of death will be our spiritual practice.

Difficulties in This Life

Even in this lifetime, our spiritual practice can help us. When everything is going well, we may not notice this. But when major problems or tragedies arise, there is a vast difference between someone who can rely on spiritual assistance and someone who cannot. The person without spiritual assistance will be forced to rely in desperation on wrong or extreme measures when they face tragedy and suffering, but the person with spiritual assistance is prepared, and so their mental burden will be less. We are told all the time in the basic teachings of the Buddha that everything is impermanent—everything created through cause and conditions is impermanent—and every action tainted with the defilements is suffering. Therefore, when facing a tragedy or a

great difficulty, it will be obvious to the person with spiritual assistance that it is not an unexpected surprise or something to take personally, but simply the nature of saṃsāra. When facing the same tragedy, the person with such an understanding is more prepared to face the difficulty than someone without it because they will understand the true nature of the difficulty, and this lessens the mental burden.

The mind takes the lead while the physical body is like a servant. This is why outer suffering is reduced when the mental burden is lessened. If the mind is happy, then even someone living in the poorest country in the poorest conditions will be happy. But if the mind is unhappy, there will be misery even for the person with every facility in life. The mind is the most important factor, even when it comes to facing challenges and suffering in this life, and this is why the most important thing we can do is Dharma practice.

The Path of the Buddha

There are many religions in this world, and each one has its own beauty and its own way to help mankind eliminate suffering. In the beginning, the Lord Buddha created the enlightenment thought for the sake of all sentient beings without exception. Then, in the middle, he accumulated

tremendous merit and wisdom. Finally, he attained complete enlightenment which is apart from all forms of obscurations and endowed with every possible good quality. Because his very first motivation was to benefit sentient beings, all his activities—of body, voice, and wisdom—were for the benefit of sentient beings. The most important activity of the Buddha was the activity of his voice, turning the wheel of Dharma. The Buddha put into words the realization and perfect knowledge that he attained. He taught it to beings to show them how to eliminate suffering and enter the path of liberation and enlightenment.

Sentient beings are as limitless as space, and these limitless sentient beings are all different. All of us here are human beings, yet each one of us has a different mind. We have different tastes, different defilements, and so on. In order to suit every kind of mental disposition, the Buddha bestowed an enormous variety of teachings. Just as we need many different medicines to cure different diseases, the Buddha gave many teachings to help limitless sentient beings. These limitless teachings can be categorized according to their subject, their chronology, and in other ways. But, generally speaking, the relevant categorization for us is from the point of view of followers. There are two types of followers: those who wish to

follow the smaller path and seek the smaller goal, and those who wish to follow the greater path and seek the greater goal. This is the division between the two yānas, the Śrāvakayāna and the Mahāyāna.

Two Yānas

Although there are many teachings in the Śrāvakayāna path, what is most important in essence is not to harm any sentient being, whether physically, mentally, or verbally. In the Mahāyāna path, in addition to not harming sentient beings, you should benefit them as much as possible. This is because each and every sentient being is just like us. From our personal experience, we know how much we wish to be free from suffering and how much we wish to have happiness. Every sentient being has the same wish, from the tiniest insect up to the most intelligent human being, and up to the devas. Because this is so, it is not right to think only of oneself. I am only one person, while other sentient beings are countless. Between one and many, it is clear that the many are more important.

Besides, good things and qualities never arise from selfish thoughts; only suffering arises from selfish thoughts. The great Indian pandit Śāntideva said, “All the suffering in this universe comes from caring for oneself.” When we think of ourselves, we

will experience jealousy, competition, pride, stinginess, desire, hatred, and so forth. All the impure thoughts arise, and any action created from impure thought results in suffering. If the root of a tree is poisonous, any branch that grows from the tree will also be poisonous. In the same way, actions that arise from the defilements are only suffering.

Śāntideva also said, “All the happiness in this universe comes from wanting other people to be happy.” If you wish other people to be happy, then all the good things and qualities will arise, just like the root of a medicinal tree produces medicine. Any action created on the basis of loving-kindness, compassion, and wanting to help other sentient beings will produce happiness. This is why the root of the Mahāyāna Dharma is loving-kindness and compassion, the source of all happiness and all benefit.

We must try to cultivate loving-kindness and compassion in every way, but merely wanting to benefit beings is not enough. We must act to rescue them from saṃsāra. We must put them onto the path to happiness. However, at the moment, we are not free to do this. We do not have full knowledge or full power. We are completely bound by our karma and defilements. The only way to help sentient beings effectively and fully

is to attain perfect enlightenment. Once we have attained perfect enlightenment, we will be able to rescue countless sentient beings in a single moment. We must attain perfect enlightenment not just for our own sake, but for the sake of all sentient beings. Having this thought even for a single moment has immeasurable merit. We must try in every way to produce a real, sincere wish to attain perfect enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings.

Method and Wisdom

Perfect enlightenment does not arise without causes and conditions. The causes and conditions proper to the arising of perfect enlightenment are found on the Mahāyāna path. Of course, this path is vast and contains many things, but the first essential thing is motivation, why one follows the path. This should be the sincere wish to attain perfect enlightenment. This is the basis upon which we practice the Dharma. Among the many Dharma practices, there are primarily only two: *method* to realize wisdom and *wisdom* itself. Just like a bird needs two wings to fly in the sky, we need these two in order to attain enlightenment. To walk, we need feet to move and eyes to see the way. Without eyes, we cannot see where to walk, and without feet, we cannot move even if we can see the way.

Method means to accumulate merit through practices like generosity, moral conduct, patience, endeavor, and concentration. However, all of these, including loving-kindness and compassion, will only suppress our faults—including the main or root fault, which is self-clinging. All the other faults arise from this. The practices of method suppress self-clinging, but to dig it out from the root requires wisdom. Wisdom is able to completely eradicate self-clinging. To cultivate such wisdom, we must practice concentration meditation, or *śamatha*. With concentration as a base, we can build up wisdom that is able to see the ultimate truth of all phenomena, both of self and of outer phenomena.

In this way, uniting wisdom and method, perfect enlightenment can be attained.

Busy Lives

Many people say that it is difficult for them to practice the Dharma, particularly people living in big cities. They say that there are many distractions, too much noise, or that their lives are very busy, and so forth. However, Lord Buddha gave us many teachings. The purpose of all of them is to tame such wild minds. It is because of our wild minds that we are involved with defilements and caught in this realm of *samsāra* experiencing

suffering from beginningless time. We have suffered greatly in the past, and we still suffer. If we do not make efforts now to change our minds, we will continue to suffer.

There are many different forms of Dharma practice, including recitations, offerings, prostrations, concentration, circumambulation, study, contemplation, meditation, and so forth, and all of them are to tame our minds. The word *dharma* itself has different meanings in different contexts, but it generally means the teachings for changing the impure mind, or for turning the wild mind involved with defilements to the right path.

The practices should be done properly in order to be truly effective, although even simply mimicking the practices or going through the motions can have some benefit. The way to know if a Dharma practice is effective or not is to observe whether the practice is changing your mind. Everything depends on how we implement the practice. If you do it in the right way, you can be a very good Dharma practitioner even if you are the busiest person living in the busiest city. This is because everything that we encounter, everything that we do, and everyone we associate with are opportunities to practice the Dharma. In a big city, you can see that everything in flux,

and this should remind you that everything is impermanent. In a big city, you can also see much suffering, and this, too, can be an experience of the Dharma. The Buddha has told us that everything is suffering, and we can actually see it with our own naked eyes, not just learn about it from the teachings. Every time you associate with someone, you have the opportunity to help them, to practice loving-kindness or compassion. And when people upset you, when they are angry with you or disturb your mind, you have the opportunity to practice patience. In everyday life, especially in cities, there are great opportunities to practice the Dharma, whether you are going somewhere, busy at work, or staying at home. The experience of life in the city can help you understand the Dharma, and the need for Dharma, more deeply.

Experiential Knowledge

Higher meditation practices like concentration and insight wisdom are important, but to reach that level, we must first establish a foundation. The four common foundation practices are meditation upon the difficulty of obtaining a precious human birth, impermanence, the law karma, and the suffering of saṃsāra. You can learn about these things from teachers or read about them in books, but acquiring knowledge is

not enough. We may have heard a hundred times about the difficulty of obtaining a precious human birth, but if we still have anger, then it has not made any change in us, and we are still at the same level with the same defilements.

This happens when we know the teachings but have not experienced them through contemplation. These are two different things. Someone might know many texts and teachings, but it is not right if they do not practice what they know, if they do not utilize what they know in daily life. If you make delicious food but you do not eat it, there is no point in having made it. Similarly, studying the Dharma is for using it in our daily lives. To do this, we can rely on many methods, including the opportunities presented by our daily experiences. If we approach it right, everything that we see or encounter can be a Dharma teaching.

If you have this basic foundation—not only in your understanding, but an inner feeling—then you will not waste any time in your practice. You will make every effort to attain liberation and enlightenment. A person in prison has only one thought, to get out of prison. Similarly, when you have a genuine understanding of the suffering of *saṃsāra*, of impermanence and death, and so forth, then you will have a real inner urge to practice Dharma to get out of *saṃsāra*. If you

have this sincere inner wish or urge to practice Dharma, then higher meditation—concentration and insight wisdom—will also arise.

Having such a strong foundation, meaning an inner feeling or urge and not only knowledge, depends on our merit. In our past lives, we accumulated merit by doing virtuous deeds and making special prayers, and because of this, we have been born as human beings in this life. Not only that, we have also had the good fortune to hear the Dharma, to practice the Dharma, and so forth. We must accumulate merit through prayers and through devotion to the guru, Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha as we are also practicing loving-kindness and compassion to all sentient beings. When our merit increases, our wisdom will increase, too. These two go together. With both, we will be able to succeed on the path.

With this I conclude my talk. I wish all of you long life, good health, and complete success in your spiritual path. May the blessings of the Triple Gem be with you now and always. Thank you.

Questions and Answers

Q: You said earlier that when people encounter problems, someone with no spiritual practice or background will have trouble facing their problems compared to someone with a spiritual practice. I consider myself to have some spiritual background and still I find these problems to be very great. Does this mean I am doing something wrong?

A: When a spiritual practitioner faces suffering, it is not easy. Of course, generally speaking, the problems we face are the same for everyone. But when we compare, the person who does not have any spiritual background will experience more suffering when confronting their difficulties than someone without a spiritual background. If a person's spiritual level is low, or their level of understanding of the Dharma, then of course their problems will seem very big.

Q: You said that there are limitless sentient beings. How is this possible? How can we generate compassion for them?

A: The modern world also thinks the same. In science, there are many worlds with many planets, and so forth. Also, time is

beginningless. We have always been in this realm of saṃsāra without beginning, and it is not possible to say that a person's mind started from this or that date. Our minds have existed from beginningless time. This is why, through endless rebirths, everyone is associated, whether as mother, father, friend, and so forth.

We practice loving-kindness and compassion on the basis of the thought that all sentient beings have been our mothers. It is easy, for most people, to generate feelings of loving-kindness and compassion for their mothers. Every child, when they face problems, will call for their mothers. We have very close feelings towards our mothers. So, the method of practice is first to develop genuine loving-kindness and compassion for your own mother, then for your relatives, then for indifferent persons, and then for difficult people and enemies. Thinking of these people as your mother makes this easier.

Q: Can you say more about self-clinging?

A: As I said, sentient beings have many different mentalities. But from the spiritual point of view, we all have this caring for oneself. It is natural, generally speaking. At the moment, we experience a vast difference between self and other, and

although we might have some feelings of care for others, these feelings are not as strong as our feelings for ourselves. For example, if you are sick, you will do everything to cure your sickness. But if you see somebody else who is sick, although you might help them, curing their sickness will not be as important to you as curing your own sickness.

Wanting to help another sentient being has great benefit. It is a positive thought. In the Mahāyāna, we extend this wish to all sentient beings. We generate bodhicitta, or enlightenment mind, which is the wish to help limitless sentient beings reach liberation from suffering. The goal is not to solve one kind of problem or to help only one kind of being, but to solve all problems and all sufferings. Having this thought for even a single moment has great merit.



■ 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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