



THE FOUR
NOBLE
TRUTHS

.....
● A GUIDE TO ●
EVERYDAY LIFE
.....

Lama Zopa Rinpoche

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EDITOR'S PREFACE

SIMPLE WORDS to illuminate the Buddha's profound teachings are rare. Experiential teachings on the Buddhadharma are rarer still. Over a coffee table conversation at Malaysia's Kuala Lumpur airport, Kyabje Lama Zopa Rinpoche suggested I attempt a book on the four noble truths based on his teachings over the years. I hesitated. After all, Rinpoche not only teaches the Dharma but also *lives* it. Further, what has Rinpoche taught in the past forty-five years that was *not* the four noble truths? To fail in accurately compiling Rinpoche's teachings on the entire Dharma would be to belittle this precious lama's life and lifework. I believe Rinpoche saw through my hesitation. He whipped out his dice, did a quick divination, and offered encouragement. I am deeply grateful.

This book consists of Rinpoche's experiential teachings given over a span of forty-five years. Nothing about Rinpoche's actions is ordinary. Everything about his being is interwoven with Dharma.

At the end of each chapter are stories or anecdotes from the life of Kyabje Lama Zopa Rinpoche. Most are from the journals of Ven. Roger Kunsang, the devoted monk attendant and secretary to Rinpoche for almost thirty years. Some are from lamas and senior students who witnessed events firsthand. This generous sharing of factual accounts offers glimpses into Rinpoche's daily life and a taste of the lived experience of Dharma.

I offer special thanks to Geshe Tenzin Zopa, whose conversations with Rinpoche on the need for *yigchas* (study textbooks) of Rinpoche's teachings somehow led to the suggestion of this book. I am hugely grateful for the generous help of Dr. Nick Ribush of the Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive,

his team, and the many diligent transcribers who have produced thousands of pages of documented teachings by Rinpoche. I especially thank Steve Wilhelm and Mary Petruszewicz, who masterfully edited this manuscript, and David Kittelstrom, whose kindness made the editorial journey less stressful than touted to be. The book is now humbly offered to the reader. Any mistakes, especially omissions, are mine alone.

Rajiv Mehrotra of the Foundation for Universal Responsibility of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Ashok Chopra of Hay House Publishers India have kindly given permission to use the line drawing of the Wheel of Life from *The End of Suffering and the Discovery of Happiness: The Path of Tibetan Buddhism*, by His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

This endeavor is dedicated to the good health, long life, and fulfillment of all the wishes of my root guru Kyabje Lama Zopa Rinpoche; all my gurus; my center's resident teachers past and present, who have been my lamps on the path; and the family of Losang Dragpa Centre, Malaysia.

May all sentient beings be guided by perfectly qualified Mahayana masters and complete the path to enlightenment. May the Buddhadharma flourish. This dedication, prayer of dedication, and person are all empty and have no inherent existence.

Yeo Puay Huei
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION: WORKING WITH THE MIND

In essence the four noble truths say that we all naturally desire happiness and do not wish to suffer. . . . If we are to pursue our aspiration to gain freedom from suffering, we need to clearly understand the causes and conditions that give rise to suffering and strive to eliminate them. Additionally we must clearly understand the causes and conditions that give rise to happiness as well and actively practice them. Having established the framework of liberation in the four noble truths, the Buddha detailed the . . . steps along the path to enlightenment . . . how the principles of the four noble truths are to be applied in one's day-to-day spiritual life.

— HIS HOLINESS THE DALAI LAMA,
Essence of the Heart Sutra

HAPPINESS AND SUFFERING are part of our life experience, but they do not come from the external world. They come from within, from our own minds. Suffering springs from afflictions in our minds.

Until we understand the causes of suffering, no matter our intellect, education, or wealth, no matter the ordinary success we may have achieved, in the heart there is something missing, there is no real peace. The heart is hollow.

To transform our minds into one of happiness, we start by

pacifying the mind, separating the mind from the causes of suffering. When this happens — liberation! And if we are then able to cease even the very subtle mental imprints of negative action, speech, and thought — enlightenment!

The process of inner transformation begins with understanding the nature of mind.

THE VALUE OF AN OPEN MIND

How wonderful it is to open our minds! With an open mind we're open to exploration, which is the opposite of being limited by a closed and rigid mind as hard as iron, stuck to old concepts. An open mind enables us to look for fresh meaning and a better life. It allows us to investigate, check, and analyze.

We need to freely investigate whatever is being asserted. We need to apply analysis, logic, and reasoning to whatever is being taught before accepting it, whether the teaching is Eastern philosophy, Western philosophy, a teaching by Guru Shakyamuni Buddha, or a subject explained by scientists.

Guru Shakyamuni Buddha said, “Examine my teachings well, the way a goldsmith examines gold, by cutting it, rubbing it, and melting it to see whether it is false gold, mixed, or pure.”

In the same way, we should examine the Buddha's teachings or Dharma, using reasoning, analysis, and logic, but not blind faith. Only after we have done that should we consider accepting his teachings.

Therefore when we first read about the Dharma, we should not accept it without thinking about it. Questioning Dharma is what we are expected to do at this starting point. Emotionally clutching to words or the idea of Buddha in heaven brings little benefit. This is because when life gets tough and problems arise, we will have no inner understanding of the Dharma with which to support ourselves.

Thank you to everybody who is seeking happiness

differently from how you have sought it before. This time you are freeing yourselves to open the door to liberation, the door of the great release, through understanding the inner, spiritual method to gain happiness. This is a key point because happiness is not found outside but within. Happiness lies within the mind. Whether we are talking about temporal or ultimate happiness there is no other way to find it except through developing the mind.

Looking back at our own life experiences we should ask: How does happiness arise? How does unhappiness arise? Do happiness and unhappiness really come from external causes or do they come from our minds? It may seem as if the external world is the source of enjoyment and of troubles. However, look more closely. The key is our inner lives.

The real source of happiness and misery, the principal cause of these experiences, is mind and how it views everything it encounters. A person who realizes this makes fewer mistakes in life, experiences more happiness, feels greater peace. Sometimes we hear it said, “Oh, you were in such good spirits this morning, yet you seem so low right now.” This roller coaster of life happens because we have no control over our minds.

Those who train their minds experience problems quite differently from most people. Whether conditions are good or bad, people who train their minds remain stable and happy. Nothing brings their spirits down. Such is the value of understanding the mind, its qualities and its potential.

In the mountains where I was born, in the Solukhumbu district near Mount Everest, villagers often dry animal skins in the sun. This causes the skins to contract, dry up, and become stiff. Villagers use these skins to make shoes, barley flour sacks, and containers for cheese by first softening the leather by applying butter to it, then pressing and squeezing the leather with their hands and feet. Kneading the dried skin makes it flexible, and the villagers then can cut it up and make shoes, sacks, and other things from it.

On the other hand, nomads in Tibet use dry animal skins to wrap big blocks of butter, and those skins stay stiff. The nomads keep the butter wrapped inside the dried skins for long periods but do nothing else to the skins. Therefore the skins remain stiff, even though they have been in contact with butter for many years.

The massaged Solukhumbu animal skin shows how a mind hardened by negative thoughts can be softened and changed for the better by listening to the Dharma. However, the mind untouched by the application of Dharma is unyielding and of limited use, like the hard skins used by Tibetan nomads for butter stocks. A thick, hard, closed mind is of limited benefit. Endless difficulties arise for such an inflexible mind.

THE NATURE OF MIND AND ITS POTENTIAL

What is mind? It is not the brain. It is a phenomenon that is formless, colorless, intangible, and whose nature is clear and capable of perceiving objects. Just as a mirror is able to reflect an image of an object, likewise the mind is able to perceive objects and reflect them.

There are two aspects to the nature of mind: There is the conventional aspect of mind that perceives and so on, and there is the ultimate aspect of mind that is called the clear-light nature of mind. We will discuss conventional and ultimate states later in this book, but for now it is useful to think of the ultimate aspect of mind as clear light in nature. Ultimate mind is pure in that it is not mixed with delusions or obscurations of any kind, and it is empty of inherent existence. This is the ultimate nature of mind or what is called the buddha nature, which lies within us all.

There is buddha nature in every sentient being's mind, no matter how many negative actions living beings have committed or how heavy their minds are with mistaken views.

This underlying buddha nature brings us hope because it means that if our clear-light mind meets favorable conditions, such as a teacher who reveals the path of virtue, we can take action to achieve the happiness of liberation and enlightenment. However, if our clear-light mind meets unfavorable conditions, such as nonvirtuous teachers or friends who divert us from spiritual cultivation, then mind degenerates. When this happens buddha nature is not lost, but the chance to experience happiness, realizations, and wisdom is severely delayed.

Think of a big gong. The potential for making sound is within the gong, but the gong needs to encounter the condition of somebody striking it for the sound to emerge. The sound does not come from outside or from somewhere else. The potential for sound is already within the gong. Sound emerges when the gong is struck by a gong stick.

Similarly, butter can be produced from milk. The potential for butter is there in the milk. Butter does not enter milk from somewhere else! It is already there. It is just a matter of meeting the conditions that can produce butter from milk. Therefore, as our minds have buddha nature, the potential for ultimate, lasting happiness is already within us. It is a matter of our creating the right conditions to accomplish that.

So you see there is always hope. Life is full of hope. No matter how many heavy negative actions we have committed, there is always the potential to be free from disturbing thoughts and obscurations, free from negativities, free from fears, and indeed free from all suffering. That potential is always within us. It is in our own hands. It depends on us.

Since life is full of hope, there is no need to be depressed. Even for those who have met the Dharma long ago but still endure so many obstacles in life and make so little progress in spiritual practice, the potential for total fulfillment remains possible. This is because of the clear-light nature of mind, the buddha nature within us. Problems and obstacles are temporary. The causes of problems can be removed.

THE BEGINNINGLESS MIND

Where does mind come from? Some people think that one's mind comes from one big, universal mind, which, like a planet, broke up into millions of pieces long ago, each of which found their way into our bodies. This concept in practice means that if all living beings' minds come from one big universal mind, it is then possible that when our postman's mind is broken up into pieces and somehow placed into our bodies, we all become our postman. It is very funny to consider.

There are others who believe that our minds come from our parents. Let us examine this view. Let us check this feeling of "I" and where it comes from. Why is it we have this sense of "I" without needing our parents or teachers to show it to us? This feeling of "I" has already been there from the beginning. What caused this? Did this feeling of "I" come from mother or father, or both?

If our sense of "I" comes from our parents, that sense should be like that of our mother or father or both, in which case all children would be just like their parents, except dwelling in different bodies! Parents would then be born from parents. We would be born from ourselves! Think about it. It would be interesting to investigate such a view.

We are born from parents, but our minds and our parents' minds are not in oneness. We have our own experiences and thus we have separate minds. This minute's mind came from last minute's mind. The continuation of today's mind came from yesterday's mind. This present year's mind continues from the previous year's, and that previous year's mind was the mental continuity of the previous year's, and so on. Each moment's mind is dependent on the one before. This is why it is said that mind is a mental continuum and beginningless.

Some people think we are born with a mind like a blank page, and that delusions in the mind come into existence later. It is not like this. From the very beginning of this life, our minds

have not been free from suffering and delusions, including ignorance, attachment, and anger.

Did the delusions come from our parents? No. Our delusions did not come from our parents. Why not? Because our minds are separate from our parents' minds. Our previous lives' minds had delusions, and as the delusions were clearly not removed, the continuum of mind carried those delusions forward from life to life.

We all have noticed how different children can be from their parents in personality, intelligence, interests, and so on. Even when two children are born from the same parents, those children are often different from each other and different from their parents. Even babies display different habits and traits without being taught by parents.

No matter how much parents may try to educate their children similarly, differences remain between them. Some children are aggressive or cruel from a very young age, whereas others are gentle and kind. The principal cause of these differences is the imprints of previous lives on the children's minds.

Let us look at a child born with defective organs or senses. Even if we try to explain this situation by showing that this gene and that gene were not functioning properly, that only shows *how* the defect came about. It does not explain *why* this specific child had to face this specific condition leading to this specific defect.

The parents may have had several children, so why is it that this specific child had a gene complication? This has to be checked. Scientists may not have written books about past lives, but this does not mean there are no past lives. After all, we have no memory of being conceived in our mother's womb but that does not mean we were not born from a mother's womb!

Therefore merely not remembering past lives cannot be the sole reason for rejecting the idea of past lives. Our own experience is that mind is a continuum — from past to present,

from present to future. We need to think this through and reason it out.

Some people remember their previous lives clearly, with details being validated by persons who knew the predecessors. This supports the concept of mental continuity from before the present life. For instance, years ago the late senior tutor of His Holiness the Dalai Lama told me that when he would introduce a Dharma subject to His Holiness as a young boy, the Dalai Lama would display a profound understanding of the subject. This was the case even when the tutor had not previously taught or spoken to His Holiness about the subject, or even thought about it himself!

Many people can remember their past lives, the people they met and the incidents that happened, without ever being told about them. When the truth of those remembered incidents are checked, they turn out to be exactly as those people remembered.

MIND AND THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

In our daily lives whatever we do with our minds, our speech, and our actions leaves imprints on the mind. Every moment of thought, speech, and activity plants seeds within our mental continuum.

It is like shooting a video. When we make a movie, the image of the photographed object is captured by our device. When conditions come together, such as editing the video, connecting it to a projector, and switching on the projector, the image is projected. It appears and everyone can see it on the screen. In the same way, our actions create imprints on our mental continuum, which manifest when conditions ripen.

Our positive actions, also called good karma, leave positive imprints on the mind. When causes and conditions come together to bring a positive imprint into fruition, we might

suddenly see something of beauty like blossoming flowers, or get a chance to partake in something we enjoy. We may unexpectedly come across a very good restaurant that serves delicious food. These are the ripening of past positive imprints left on the mental continuum, from past lives even zillions of eons ago.

It is useful to observe daily life with this understanding of how our actions leave imprints, which later become projected results. This is the basic Buddhist philosophy that all our experiences come from mind, which motivated our actions or karma and later ripened into experienced results.

While we have all done some positive actions, we have also, over endless rebirths, been controlled by the delusions of ignorance, attachment, anger, and pride. Our minds have long been habituated to these delusions, which then influence our actions. Long has our mental continuum carried these imprints.

This habituation is why we are not able to apply the Buddha's teachings all the time, even though we may be familiar with them intellectually. We cannot effectively apply antidotes to the delusions just when they are most needed. We often forget the teachings just when delusions arise. And yet the teachings are medicine for the troubled mind.

When we are sick — whether from a headache, stomach pain, heart attack, wounds, infections, a toothache — taking one type of medicine may stop one of the ailments but not all of them. If we're suffering from several illnesses, we need to see a doctor to get the appropriate prescription for each of the illnesses, and then take those medicines to recover.

It is exactly the same with our minds. We have various diseases of the mind, such as the illness of ignorance, of attachment, of anger, of pride, of jealousy, and of the varying gross and subtle mental afflictions. These bring mental pain, and specific remedies are needed.

For instance, when the mental sickness of anger arises, how does it appear and feel? Are we at ease when we are angry? No,

there is no comfort, no joy. It feels like having a sharp blade lodged deep inside the heart. Our experience is similar with the mental affliction of pride, which feels as if a huge craggy mountain is stuck inside us, one so large it almost fractures our bodies from within. And when we are overcome with attachment we constantly feel anxious and uptight, as if something were pulling out our hearts!

Why are our minds so often disturbed and upset? This is because we have not realized that the principal cause of unhappiness lies within the mind. We have always assumed the principal cause of happiness is external, so we constantly try to manipulate our external environment to find happiness. When this fails we blame others and never think to look within, never try to develop our minds.

Even when we try to investigate our inner selves we do so with wrong understanding, which only brings more confusion. If we have never tried the Dharma path that brings ultimate happiness, we cannot actualize it. But we have the potential to do so by following the path that eliminates the root of all suffering, the afflictive emotions or delusions imprinted in our minds. When we succeed in uprooting these delusions, there will be no hindrance to lasting happiness.

Sadly we often sabotage our own pursuit of happiness. When someone suggests we read a Dharma book or listen to a Dharma teaching, pride or laziness overwhelms us. We think, “Oh, I already know that. I don’t need to hear it again.”

If we think this way we will feel lost when a crisis arises in our lives, even if we have read many Dharma books or received many teachings. We will feel defeated, as if we had never encountered the teachings at all. To make matters worse, we may blame or harm others, thinking that will get us what we want, while we fail at the real solution, checking and managing our own minds.

Physical sickness can be cured with the right medicine, but curing the inner disease of deluded thought is not so easy.

Disturbing thoughts can incapacitate us, so we take pills to numb the pain or we try to go to sleep, hoping unconsciousness can relieve the mental agony for a while.

But these inner diseases cannot be healed by external medicine. Therefore we need to study the Dharma and use it to eradicate the inner illnesses that bring suffering not only in this life but also from life to life.

Do we have any real chance at happiness? Of course we do! Even though the nature of mind is presently obscured by the delusions, mind is not the same as those delusions, any more than sky is the same as the clouds that float within it. Clouds form due to causes and conditions, but they clear away when those conditions change. When the sky clears it allows sunshine through, giving nourishment to the earth and bringing enjoyment to many living beings.

As cloudy weather is temporary, the self-centered mind with its delusions and mistakes is also temporary. Neither is eternal. Obscurations of mind, like clouds, appear through causes and conditions, so both can be cleared through different causes and conditions. This mind can become free of delusion and secure lasting happiness.

In Tibet villagers put milk into wooden churns, ensure that all the conditions are right, and then diligently churn the milk. From that milk is produced rich, golden butter.

Just as milk contains the potential for butter, mind contains the potential for happiness. We can fully develop our minds by studying and applying the Buddha's methods and be then able to understand sentient beings' minds, know the most suitable methods to help them, and lead them to peerless happiness. As we pursue lasting happiness we can secure not only our own happiness but also the happiness of all beings. This is the potential of our minds.

It is amazing and unimaginably wonderful how we are able to benefit others with our minds! Our precious human body gives us the ideal opportunity to fulfill both our own aspirations

and those of numberless living beings.

MIND IS THE CREATOR

One of the fundamental points of Buddhism is that there is no creator other than our own minds. There is no creator who has a mind separate from ours. There is nobody outside who created the ups and downs of our lives except our own minds and our own actions, which have collectively produced the results we now face. Our entire life experience has been caused by the mental afflictions of ignorance, attachment, and anger, which then motivated our actions.

The whole world as we experience it comes from the mind and is caused by the imprints of positive and negative karma left on the mind. Our world, our perceptions, our experiences are manifestations of our karmic imprints that have ripened. We experience a human body, as well as happy feelings, suffering feelings, and neutral feelings, all because particular karmic imprints have ripened. In addition our aggregates — form, feeling, consciousness, discrimination, and compositional factors — that make up our sense of self all come from our minds and karmic imprints.

How things appear to us depend on these karmic imprints in our minds, which determine what the mind projects and how it labels things. Therefore we cannot trust outer appearances. It is the inner factor of the mind that is important.

The root delusion of ignorance refers to not knowing the ultimate reality of the “I” and the ultimate reality of the aggregates. The ignorant mind sees the aggregates performing functions and then imputes the label “I” on to the aggregates. It is a mere imputation, yet the mind believes there is a truly existent self or “I” right here.

Ignorance is the greatest of all superstitious thoughts, the king of all delusions, which blinds us from differentiating

between the true “I” and the false “I.” The seemingly true “I,” sometimes called the conventional “I,” is one that is merely imputed by mind to the base of aggregates but that is empty of existing from its own side. The false “I” is one that appears as inherently existent, as if existing on its own, as if not merely labeled “I” by mind.

If we put on unclean spectacles to look at the world, we will see the world as unclean. We may be able to see something of the world, but not accurately. Therefore while we see appearances all the time, those appearances are not true or correct.

After we wrongly conclude there is a truly existing I, the ego arises, the self-cherishing thought emerges, and from there emotional disturbances and mistaken actions flow.

The arising of anger is often based on believing someone else created problems for us. We think, “The problem I’m experiencing now came from that person.” Our angry thoughts about harming others are rooted in believing someone else is the source of our misery and that those problems had nothing to do with our own mistaken actions. This belief is totally unfounded and incorrect.

Such angry thoughts illustrate our belief in an external creator as the source of trouble. Instead of realizing that our own minds led us to do negative actions that resulted in negative consequences, we mistakenly believe there is an external creator or harm-giver who made problems for us. The minute we realize we are the creator, that all problems come from us acting on thoughts influenced by delusions, there will be nothing external to blame, no person to blame, and therefore no basis for anger to arise against anyone.

These days we often hear the term *instinct*. Whatever a child does that is not taught by parents or teachers is termed “instinct.”

In Buddhism we explain such actions as caused by imprints left by positive, negative, or neutral actions in the past. These actions left imprints on the mental continuum, which caused the

child to repeat similar actions in the present, and which will continue to manifest in the future unless the imprint is removed. In this way, the cycle of actions goes on, reinforcing imprints giving rise to the same results.

As per the video analogy, we imprint images of people and events like a video recorder does. Then with the proper device we can project and view these imprinted images. In exactly the same way, the imprints of what we consider true existence that was left on our mental continuums cause us to project true existence on to everything we perceive. When we first meet an object, person, or situation, these form the “screen” on which our past imprints will project an image.

If we meet a person who does not give us what we want, our negative imprints immediately project on to this person the label “bad person.” Right there arises the creation of a problem, an enemy.

Our positive imprints work in a similar way. Our virtuous actions leave positive imprints, so that when causes and conditions come together our minds project positive labels on to an encountered object, such as “good person,” “helpful tool,” or “fun.” In other words, mind imputes existence. Mind is the creator.

Once we label someone “friend,” we are kind to that person. If we label a person “enemy,” we may refuse to help that person. If we label someone a “stranger,” we become indifferent.

So you see that everything, including our perceptions and emotional states, is dependent on the mind’s projections. Because of delusions and imprints, our minds label objects, persons, or situations “truly existent,” and we then completely believe in our own labels.

From this we can see that the principal cause of happiness or unhappiness lies within our own minds. The mind discriminates between people and situations, labels them, and then believes in the labels as true existence. But these labels are not truly existent. They are merely labels. This is a very, very important

point to understand and remember.

It is therefore crucial to understand the nature of mind, its evolution, and how vast its potential is. Through this we open ourselves to correct understanding of all of the Buddha's teachings.

Understanding the mind and its potential enables us to fully understand the four noble truths' explanation of the nature of suffering, its causes, the possibility of the end of suffering, as well as the remedies that secure the end of all suffering.

1 : THE TRUTH OF SUFFERING

The noble truth of suffering (dukkha) is this: birth is suffering; aging is suffering; sickness is suffering; death is suffering; sorrow and lamentation, pain, grief, and despair are suffering; association with the unpleasant is suffering; disassociation from the pleasant is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering. In brief, the five aggregates of attachment are suffering.

— DHAMMACAKKAPPAVATTANA SUTTA

WHY THE BUDDHA TAUGHT SUFFERING FIRST

WHY DO WE travel to the east, to the west, or anywhere?

Why do we busy ourselves with activity? If we check our minds, we discover that behind all our actions is our quest for happiness. Deep inside we are bubbling with dissatisfaction. No matter what reasons we give for our busyness, such as wanting to learn and experience new things, the primary reason is that we yearn for happiness and wish to avoid suffering.

Because of this we might decide to change our lifestyle, thinking, “I will be happier doing that or living in a different place.” For instance, when we feel exhausted from life as an office worker, we might think, “Perhaps there is more pleasure living life in a circus.” Then we join a circus. However, we soon discover that circus life also is suffering.

I have heard that life can be rather difficult for television comedians if audiences do not laugh at their jokes. The fear of not being successful is a suffering that weighs heavily on many

people.

Some of us have changed our lifestyles many times in the hope of attaining happiness. However, if we take an honest look back at those lifestyles, we see how the nature of each of them was suffering. Before we engaged in those lifestyles they looked very attractive. But after we immersed ourselves in them, anticipated delight soon gave way to discontent.

Whenever we first meet someone — either a high-status person like a king or an ordinary person — we will exchange pleasantries and all may appear well. However, as the conversation progresses the new person gradually begins to talk about his or her difficulties. If the conversation continues for an hour, much more suffering is revealed. Discontent keeps surfacing. This is the nature of life as we presently know it.

Repeatedly experiencing dissatisfaction by circling in suffering is called cyclic existence, or *samsara*. Many people have the idea that *samsara* is a place, so they are in *samsara* when in a crowded city or a noisy market, but not in *samsara* if they are in the mountains or at a monastery. This is a big mistake.

Wherever you are, including on your death bed, you are still in *samsara*. Even when the mind is no longer in your body but is in the intermediate stage after death, the mind is still in *samsara*. There is no break time from *samsara*! Over beginningless lives there has not been one moment of release from *samsara*. Until we totally uproot ignorance we are stuck in *samsara*.

Your hair is also in *samsara*. Some people think it is easy, that they can shave off *samsara*! You cannot shave off *samsara* with a machine. *Samsara* is the continuity of the aggregates, which are caused by the delusions of ignorance, attachment, and aversion. To escape from *samsara* you have to stop continuously grasping the aggregates, which are caused by delusion and karma.

This is why the Buddha taught suffering first, followed by the cause of suffering. Without understanding suffering and the

nature of samsara in all its forms, there would be no reason to be rid of it, let alone find the causes for it and pursue the method to eliminate those causes. There would then be no wish to follow the method to happiness — to realize great peace, the cessation of suffering — and consequently no liberation.

When a person feeling unwell visits a doctor and the doctor explains what sickness the patient has, the patient identifies the sickness as the cause of his suffering and develops an aversion to it. The patient learns about the cause of that sickness, follows the treatment that removes the cause of the sickness, and is healed.

In the same way, Guru Shakyamuni Buddha revealed the truth of suffering before explaining the cause of suffering. He did this because unless we recognize how suffering affects everyone we will have no incentive to investigate the cause of suffering, the second noble truth, and no possibility of ending suffering, the third noble truth. If we don't envision the cessation of suffering, also known as nirvana, we will remain chained to suffering in samsara.

On the other hand, if we understand that suffering is not eternal and that freedom and everlasting happiness is attainable once the cause of suffering is halted, we will aspire to achieve freedom. That aspiration inspires us to seek the method to achieve it. This method is the fourth noble truth of the path.

The four noble truths are Guru Shakyamuni Buddha's psychological method for us to break free from suffering and to attain everlasting happiness.

THE SIX GENERAL SUFFERINGS

The six general sufferings refer to the hardships faced by all living beings in samsara.

Nothing is definite

Until we are liberated from samsara we have to continuously experience the six types of suffering. I once met the mother of a rich Indian family who said to me, “Please pray for my daughter to get married.” The mother was anxious for the marriage to happen and couldn’t wait. I advised her that it was better to wait and be careful, but the mother continued to worry about her daughter’s single status. People never think there might be problems. They only think about short-term results, in this case marriage.

There are two occasions in Nepal when one hears loud music playing: during weddings when musicians blow horns and play drums while transporting the bride and groom, and after people die when funeral processions transport bodies to cemeteries, again accompanied by the sounds of horns and drums.

Nothing in samsara gives satisfaction

The Rolling Stones described this perfectly when they sang “(I Can’t Get No) Satisfaction.” Alcoholics are plagued by dissatisfaction, so they drink in search of relief, yearning to derive some level of satiation, but are instead overwhelmed by discontent. It destroys them, their work, and their families.

A common experience is that we are never satisfied no matter how much we have. If we make \$100 in profit, we try to make \$1,000. When we’re able to get \$1,000, we’re not content until we make \$10,000. If we are able to make \$10,000, we feel driven to make \$100,000. It goes on and on like that.

There was a wealthy person in London who was in the car business. He bought a mansion with many rooms and he would sleep in a different room each night. I heard he ate poorly but drank something like sixty bottles of liquor in a short time. He was rich but found little satisfaction, so he became unhappy, depressed, and drank excessively.

The man thought the root of his suffering was his car business. So he asked his bodyguard to buy lots of toy cars, place all those toy cars in the fountain in his garden, pour kerosene on them, and burn them. He thought that symbolic act would remove his unhappiness. Never once did he think that his mind and its delusions caused his misery. His problem was attachment, not practicing contentment, always wanting more and more.

A completely opposite response came from Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche, the great Tibetan master from whom I received many teachings and initiations, when his doctor diagnosed him with cancer. When the doctor asked Rinpoche what he thought, Rinpoche answered, “I am very happy to have cancer because this gives me the opportunity to practice *bodhicitta*, taking on all sentient beings’ suffering and its causes.” This response demonstrates complete renunciation of clinging to life for one’s own benefit.

We have to leave this body again and again

Until we attain liberation from samsara, we are forced to be reborn again and again in samsara. We have taken the body of a butterfly countless times. We have taken a cat’s body numberless times. We have been born as dogs from Tibet or dogs from England — dogs with flat noses, long noses, short tails, long tails — numberless times in beginningless rebirths. There would be no empty space left if all our bodies were collected. This is the same with all the human bodies we have taken.

There is not one type of samsaric body we haven’t taken or experienced. Whatever animal we’ve been attracted to, such as horses, birds, spiders, or rats, we have taken such bodies numberless times. Those insects we are so scared of, which we think are so menacing and horrible, we have been born as those insects numberless times. We have taken birth as tigers and

By forgetting to apply this understanding of impermanence to our daily lives, we tend to think that our possessions will always be useful and that the people we know will always be the same. There appears to be something concrete and permanent about these appearances. But in reality they are all changing, degenerating, getting old, day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute, second by second. What exists during the first minute no longer exists in the same manner in the next minute. It is gone. This is the nature of suffering.

One time, I think at the Milan, Italy, airport shop, I noticed a figure standing there and thought it was a mannequin, but it turned out to be an actual person! That shop had many well-dressed mannequins, so I thought this person was also a mannequin.

One thinks something is one thing, but it turns out not to be so. Large concrete buildings seem permanent, making us think they will always be there. But suddenly an earthquake happens and the building totally changes into a collapsed heap. Or the building could be hit by a bomb or a tornado, and what seems to be permanent can get completely destroyed. Suddenly it is gone.

Even this planet will one day be gone and nothing will remain, only space. Such is the nature of impermanence. Causative phenomena, the things that come about due to causes and conditions, are like dew. They can drop or evaporate at any time, cease at any time. Our own life can end at any time.

During a lightning strike at night we briefly see varied phenomena like trees and houses. There is a vivid appearance of things during that moment, but in a flash it is gone. It happened, then it is gone. In the same way, this life, family, friends, enemies, strangers, possessions, reputation, and sense objects all appear but will end. Gone. It is no different when you die. Life happened and it is gone. Understanding impermanence and recollecting it frequently helps us gain the right view.

Remembering impermanence helps us cut off clinging to this life and turns us toward renouncing samsara. This renunciation

is a cause of happiness now and in future lives, and a cause of liberation. Recollecting impermanence helps us see the futility of the self-cherishing thought. It persuades us to practice great compassion toward all.

The advantage of reflecting on impermanence is that we become a guide to ourselves. It steers us away from wasting our lives through blindly following delusions and having to face their troublesome results. Merely thinking about how death can come at any time is extremely powerful in weakening delusions like attachment, anger, and pride. We become less petty and able to appreciate what we have.

If you want to destroy pride right away, use the impermanence of status and possessions as the most potent tool to destroy it. If you want to be relaxed and contented, simply remember impermanence.

When meditating on how death is inevitable, fear may arise. We can intelligently use this fear as an antidote to the toxic thought of worldly concerns. More than that, this meditation is like an atomic bomb that can break the chains of cyclic existence. In a single moment it quickly and utterly destroys the empire of delusions and unhappiness. Such is the efficacy of meditating on impermanence and death.

Once we have a strong experience of impermanence through deep reflection on the shortness of life and certainty of death, we will naturally become less attached to the shallow happinesses of this life. Instead we become more focused on making this life meaningful, on doing the virtue that easily brings joy. Our minds will gravitate toward a better path, especially at the time of death.

Think for a moment: If a man is moving the next day from his hometown to New York, his mind will be thinking only of packing up his things. He will no longer be concerned about his present accommodations, how to fix his oven, or how to make the place he is leaving more comfortable. His mind will be busy packing up the old things, preparing for life in a new place, and

planning his new life. His mind will be occupied with preparations for the impending move.

In the same way, a person who realizes impermanence and the inevitability of death will no longer be fixated on this life and will instead put effort into preparing for the future and future lives.

DEATH

Intuitively most people view death as a great suffering. Many people are afraid of death and do not want to hear the word, even though death is around us all the time and will definitely happen to us.

Although death is part of natural evolution, many people reject knowing more about it. Even where there is Buddhadharma in a country and people have access to it to practice and to solve their life problems, they do not want to discuss death. They shy away from all reflections on death, and if someone talks to them about death, they shun the subject and may even get angry.

Yet when a sudden and terrible sickness strikes or they simply get older, they are filled with anxiety. As they approach the moment of death they feel desperate and fearful.

On the other hand, some seek to understand death just as they seek to understand life. They study and analyze samsara and meditate on its nature. Such people find the energy to practice Dharma, create merit, undertake purification, and realize the ultimate nature of reality. Through these pursuits they develop the mind that renounces samsara, generates compassion, and cultivates bodhicitta and wisdom.

People like this, when faced with the critical moment of death, experience very little stress in their minds. Instead of feeling afraid their minds are relaxed, peaceful, and confident. When highly realized lamas pass away, death for them is like a

stroll in a beautiful park or like going for a picnic. Their death is pure ease and happiness. They experience death with their mind in a blissful state.

Even an ordinary person without high realizations can be comfortable, peaceful, and free from fear at the time of death. But to achieve this, such a person must have prepared himself by meditating on subjects that include impermanence, death, and samsaric sufferings, while living life ethically, engaging in virtue, and purifying negativities.

The cause of all anxiety at the time of death is the negative mind, which comes from living life with a self-grasping attitude of self-cherishing, heavily afflicted by ignorance, attachment, anger, and other delusions. In contrast, a person who lives life cultivating good-heartedness, generosity, and compassion will end life calmly and happily. At the time of death that person's body will end but the mind will be peaceful and joyful.

If death strikes us right now due to sudden illness or extreme conditions, do we have a method to cope with that? Do we know what happens after death?

Visualize yourself at the moment of death right now. Your dead body is lying still and cold on your bed. People are preparing to take your body out. Family and relatives are upset about how your dead body looks. Your body is then brought to the funeral home. You are alone. Visualize all these events as clearly as you can. Immerse yourself fully in this situation. This is what will definitely happen in the future.

If you are scared to visualize this right now, how will you handle your mind at your moment of death? Avoiding thinking about death will not help. Dharma understanding and meditation is intended to fortify you in death as well as in life, to stop the dangers of the negative mind from arising. Otherwise what would be the purpose of meditating on death? What purpose would any religion or spiritual system serve, if it does not help us know what to do at the time of death? If religion fails us at the time of death, then better to have no religion.

We can prepare to face death without fear by meditating on these three points in relation to death: death is definite, the time of death is indefinite, and only Dharma helps at the time of death.

Death is definite

Every human being experiences death. Death is certain, and for most of us it will happen while we're controlled by delusions and karma. Death will occur without us choosing it or wanting it.

If we throw a stone into the air, it will fall back without stopping in midair for even a second before it hits the ground. Just like this our lives rush along without stopping for even one moment. Just like this our lives finish.

Every second sees our life diminishing, bringing us closer to death. This is not being macabre. It is a fact. Ever since we were conceived in our mother's womb, we have been moving closer and closer to death. If we are young adults, we may think we have another fifty years to live. We see fifty years as a kind of concrete certainty. Yet in fact with each split second — the snap of a finger — our lives get that much shorter. Fifty years stretches shorter and shorter and then finishes, just like that.

As it is for an animal tied to a rope and led from the family farm to the butcher, death comes closer with each step. The animal, which also seeks happiness, has no idea it is being taken to be slaughtered. The animal's life is shortening, yet the animal remains unaware. In exactly the same way we are approaching death. Fifty years or a hundred years is nothing. Each is made up of a definite number of seconds and each second is passing.

Perhaps we think, "I will have a long life. I will live another eighty years because a palm reader told me so." This we cannot trust. No one can be sure. There are no guarantees. And what will happen after death? Presently our minds are completely dark on this question because we do not understand what will

itself, the greatest hindrance is attachment. If the dying person's last thought is one of attachment, whether to family or to possessions, that person is less likely to experience a peaceful death and could be reborn in the suffering lower realms.

An analogy will help to explain this: To make bread dough we mix flour, water, and yeast. The yeast is activated by moisture when mixed with water and flour. The moisture, in contact with yeast, causes the dough to rise.

In the same way, when attachment is activated unease grows and a kind of tightness in the mind arises. This tightness is a great hindrance that arises painfully in one's mind. If this happens at the time of a person's death, even if that person had been creating some good karma in his or her life, this negative mind of attachment will activate whatever negative karmic imprints the person had accumulated and propel that consciousness into the suffering realms. Thus the nature of rebirth is closely linked to the final thought at the moment of death. The final thought acts like a catalyst that triggers the corresponding accumulated karmic imprints and steers the consciousness into its next realm of rebirth, be that higher or lower.

To prevent rebirth in the suffering lower realms we need to have lived virtuously, to have purified our negative deeds, and to have made our last thought a virtuous one. We might think, "Oh, I can do that. I know how to think of virtue at the moment of death."

But actually it is very difficult to do this. When an earthquake strikes or when a crisis unexpectedly happens, we are often unable to handle our minds. We cannot think virtuous thoughts at such times because our minds are completely seized by distress and fear. Therefore there is almost no chance of making our minds virtuous during the even-more challenging time of death unless we have been accustomed to living a virtuous life. Can we say we have lived our entire lives virtuously?

So you see, when death occurs it will be very, very difficult to say, “Oh, I can think virtuously.” To make the mind capable of virtuous thought at death requires prior mind training. Mind training includes living daily life ethically, generating merit, and purifying negativities. In particular, it is helpful to meditate on the shortcomings of samsara, on impermanence and death, and on delusions and their antidotes, all of which help eliminate attachments. These are the most powerful daily meditations we can do to train our minds, to control our minds. At the time of death, at least remember Guru Shakyamuni Buddha, an object of virtue.

Which is longer, our present lives or all our future lives? The suffering we experience in this life is nothing compared to the suffering we will experience in our future lives. Therefore it is more important to take steps to stop future suffering rather than trying to alleviate only present suffering or suffering over the next five or ten years.

It makes little sense to focus on preventing a short period of present suffering rather than stopping all future suffering. Even if we wish to stop our present suffering, the most efficient way is through engaging in Dharma. It is highly worthwhile to focus first on future happiness because the end of this life and the start of the next are uncertain, while it is certain the future will be long. Death can happen at any time — maybe this year, this month, this week, tonight, after this hour is over, we don’t know. For this reason, it would be sensible not to delay preparing for the ultimate happiness of future lives.

What happens after death?

What happens when we die? Does the mind get extinguished like a candle? It is not like this. Mind or consciousness, imprinted by delusions and karma, continues on. The mental continuum does not cease. Where the mind will be reborn is according to our karmic imprints. Gaining a happy rebirth

depends on having created good karma in our preceding life, practicing Dharma, and having virtuous thought at the time of death.

However, if we have created negative karma and die with a negative mind of attachment or anger, we are headed for rebirth in the suffering lower realms. Forcing the mind to think virtuously at the moment of death is not possible. We need the training of a life habituated in virtue.

THE THREE CATEGORIES OF THE SUFFERING OF SAMBARA

If happiness is what we seek, we have to eliminate suffering. In teaching the first noble truth of suffering, the Buddha was instructing us to examine our experiences closely to understand the nature of our present existence. The nature of the suffering of samsara can be understood under three broad categories: the suffering of suffering, the suffering of change, and pervasive compounding suffering, which is the fundamental suffering of samsara.

The suffering of suffering

The suffering of suffering is easy to recognize, as it arises from life's hardships. The problems of everyday life include pain, extreme heat and cold, unhappy feelings, sickness, worries, and meeting with undesirable objects, difficult circumstances, enemies, and harmful things. We are disturbed when we encounter even the smallest bug, fearing it will deny us a comfortable night's sleep. We worry about not having wealth, favorable surroundings, friends, status, and other objects of desire.

After we have acquired these things, after working incredibly hard for them, we soon worry and fret about holding

on to them. We may feel mounting dissatisfaction with the objects we have acquired. We feel anxiety about acquiring more things and better ones, and about not losing the ones we have. This is the suffering of suffering.

The suffering of change

The category of “suffering of change” often takes the form of sense pleasures, which is why it’s so hard to recognize them as a form of suffering. The nature of the suffering of change arises from the temporariness of sense pleasures, the inevitable change from pleasure to dissatisfaction. All forms of samsaric worldly enjoyments fall into this category, for instance the pleasure of eating delicious food and enjoying the sun at the beach. How is this so?

When we like a certain type of food we tend to eat more of it, seeking more pleasure. But soon enough we get tired of that food or even develop an aversion to it. Likewise when we feel cold and go out to sit in the sun for warmth, it feels good at first. But when the heat begins to burn we feel discomfort and need to move away from the sun. What was an enjoyment has become a source of discomfort.

If enjoyments were a true source of happiness, the more and longer we engaged in them the happier we would be. If delicious food were the cause of true happiness, then continuous eating from morning to midnight would bring unbelievable bliss and comfort. If we continued such continuous eating without break for a further month or one year, amazing, inconceivable pleasure would arise. We know this is not so. Since pleasure does not arise from continuous eating, it proves something is wrong in our belief that food is the source of true happiness. This test can be applied to any worldly enjoyment. If the nature of these enjoyments were not ultimately suffering, the pleasure derived from them would increase with repetition. But in fact the pleasure from repetition decreases, which requires us to

reevaluate them as the true causes of happiness.

In reality what is happening is that a sensation we have mentally labeled as “pleasure” lasts only until the feeling of discomfort becomes noticeable. Only then do we label it “discomfort” or “suffering.” So our labeling an experience “pleasure” or “suffering” does not depend on the object or circumstance; it depends on our minds and how the mind interprets things and sensations. When an experience like basking in the sun at the beach becomes uncomfortable at a gross and noticeable level, we label it “suffering”; when the discomfort is not yet at a gross level, we call it pleasure.

Apply this to the earlier example of continuous eating. When we began to eat it brought relief from the suffering of hunger and we labeled it “pleasure,” but as the discomfort of continuous eating became gross and observable, we changed the label and called it “suffering.” What was pleasurable had become plain suffering. This is the suffering of change. All that happened was that when one suffering stopped, another suffering began. This is the nature of samsara.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama once said, “Nowadays many people first aim to buy a TV and later a car and then an apartment. After some time those become insufficient. They get tired of these possessions, start to find fault with them, and begin to search for more and better things.” You can see how the first possession one acquired with the expectation of contentment actually brought about the result of more dissatisfaction. It has no end.

Because death comes without choice, there is an end to this life, but the grasping at more and better things has no end. The dissatisfied mind knows no end. The initial pleasure of getting the desired object turns to boredom; the pleasure changes into dissatisfaction and unhappiness. This is how the suffering of change works. These samsaric, temporal pleasures not only fail to last but they also change into suffering. One suffering stops and without our noticing it a new suffering starts.

surrendering our minds to the delusions?

The mindstream, the stream of consciousness, cannot be stopped or eliminated. Due to the fact that the delusions and their seeds are embedded in our consciousness, when we meet with an object that our minds label as “beautiful,” attachment quickly arises. When we meet with an object we regard as disturbing, anger immediately arises. When we meet a neutral object that neither triggers attachment nor anger, indifference arises. Therefore when our senses contact an object, depending on how the mind behaves under the influence of delusions, the mind labels the object as “truly existent” and resultant emotions arise.

While we may seem peaceful right now, if the person sitting next to us suddenly disturbs us while we are having a good meditation or an enjoyable time, anger will instantly arise just as if a burning match had been thrown into a barrel of kerosene. So it is with all the other delusions.

Ignorance and action or karma planted the seeds of delusion into our consciousness. If in a past life or this life we have created negative karma by criticizing others with anger, or by blindly saying harsh words with ill will, this karma will create the potential for us to repeat these actions as well as result in our receiving similar harm, such as being verbally abused and physically ill. These negative actions plant seeds of delusion in our consciousness, giving rise to mental suffering compounded by the physical suffering of sickness.

From this we can now understand that without this fundamental pervasive compounding suffering — the aggregates — we would not experience the suffering of suffering and the suffering of change. Even if we don’t think about the past, we can easily see how our present aggregates are controlled by the unsubdued mind and karma.

A common experience is when we try to use the aggregates to practice Dharma, like meditating on the Buddha or on the teachings, and find that we often can’t concentrate. Thoughts of

boyfriend, girlfriend, enemy, or cheesecake arise, instead of the virtuous object of concentration. We might be surprised at ourselves and wonder, “How did this happen? Where did these distracting thoughts come from?” These thoughts come from our minds that are habituated with delusions and overwhelmed by them. Pervasive compounding suffering is the main suffering from which we need to be liberated.

When we say we need to renounce samsara, what do we mean? We mean that we need to end suffering. While this goal may seem too obvious to mention, it’s also quite obvious we have not yet achieved it. To cease true suffering we must cease the cause, the delusions.

How quickly we can free ourselves from samsara depends on how we live our lives each day, on our spiritual practice. Our hardships will have no end so long as we offer victory to the delusions, in particular the ignorance that holds things to be truly existent, the attachment that fans our grasping minds, and the anger that inflames us to harm others.

How are we to eliminate these delusions? All these delusions originate from the root delusion of ignorance grasping at the “I” as independently and truly existent. So much negativity has been committed due to this mistaken belief in the “truly existent I.” When this is completely eliminated all the other delusions will fall.

THE THREE REALMS OF SAMBARA

There are three realms in samsara: the desire realm, the form realm, and the formless realm.

Desire-realm beings seek pleasure from their bodies’ contact with external sense objects through sound, smell, taste, or touch. They indulge in those pleasures and always yearn for more. Due to this, they generate negative karma, creating suffering in their own life and in future lives. The desire realm includes humans as

well as five other beings: animals, demigods, gods, hell-realm beings, and hungry ghosts.

Form-realm beings, having seen the shortcomings of the desire realm, understand the nature of suffering and that sense pleasures are gross. Due to this understanding they generate detachment from worldly pleasures and seek peace through meditation, developing concentration that brings physical and mental bliss. However, danger remains for them if they become attached to the pleasant sensations of meditative concentration, because they will then be reborn into the formless realm, which is still bound to samsara.

Formless-realm beings have no physical form and are made only of consciousness. They see the suffering nature of the desire realm and understand the mistaken pleasure derived from meditation in the form realm. To avoid those traps they continue striving in meditation, approaching the higher levels of concentration of limitless space. At this point they see the shortcomings of limitless space and move further toward the stage of infinite consciousness. This progress continues as they realize the flaws of infinite consciousness, move on from there to the next stage of nothingness, and then finally reach the stage called the peak of samsara.

At this time there is no visible delusion operating within these beings' consciousness, no discernible anger or attachment. Because of this the consciousness mistakenly believes it has achieved liberation, nirvana. However, the apparent absence of delusion lasts only briefly because the imprints of delusion have not been eradicated, the renunciation of samsara has not been completed. When the karma to remain in this formless state finishes, the consciousness sees that it has to reincarnate again to the lower realms.

At this stage anger and doubt arise in the mind with the thought, "Alas, it is untrue that there is liberation. Liberation cannot be achieved." With that heavy thought, rebirth in the lower realm occurs.

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