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## **The Four Noble Truths**

**by His Holiness the Fourteenth**  
**Dalai Lama**

from the website [www.fpmt.org/Teaching/4nobletruths.html](http://www.fpmt.org/Teaching/4nobletruths.html)

When the great universal teacher Shakyamuni Buddha first spoke about the dharma in the noble land of India, he taught the four noble truths: the truths of suffering, the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering and the path to the cessation of suffering. Since many books contain discussions of the four noble truths in English, they (and the eightfold path as well) are very well known.(1) These four are all-encompassing, including many things within them.

Speaking of the four noble truths in general, and considering the fact that all of us want to have happiness and to eliminate suffering, we can speak of an effect and a cause on both the disturbing side and the liberating side. The true sufferings and true causes of suffering are the effect and cause on the side of things that we do not want; the true cessation and the true paths are the effect and cause on the side of things that we desire.

### **The truth of suffering**

We experience many different types of suffering. All are included in three categories: the suffering of suffering, the suffering of change and all-pervasive suffering.

**Suffering of suffering.** This refers to things such as headaches and so forth. Even animals can recognize this kind of suffering and, like us, want to be free from it. Because beings have fear of and experience discomfort from these kinds of suffering, they engage in various activities to eliminate them.

**Suffering of change.** This refers to situations where, for example, we are sitting very comfortably relaxed and at first everything is all right, but after a while we lose that feeling and get restless and uncomfortable.

In certain countries, like India, we see a great deal of poverty and disease: these are sufferings of the first category. Everybody realizes that these are suffering-conditions to be eliminated and improved upon. In many Western countries there may not be so much problem of poverty, but where material facilities have been highly developed there are different kinds of problems. At first we may be very happy, having overcome the problems that our forefathers faced, but as soon as we have solved certain problems, new ones arise. We have plenty of money, plenty of food and good shelter, but by over-estimating the value of these things we render them worthless. This sort of experience is the suffering of change.

A very poor, underprivileged person might think that it would be wonderful to have an automobile or a television set, and should he acquire them, at the beginning he would feel very happy and satisfied. Now, if such happiness were something permanent, since he had the car and the TV set his happiness should remain forever. But it does not; it goes. After a few months he wants another kind of car; if he has the money he will buy another kind of television set. The old ones, the same objects that before gave him so

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much satisfaction, now cause dissatisfaction. That is the nature of change; that is the problem of the suffering of change.

All-pervasive sufferings. Because it acts as the basis of the first two categories of suffering, the third is called, in Tibetan, *kyab.pa.du.ched.kyi.dug.ngel* (literally: the suffering of pervasive compounding). There may be those who, even in developed Western countries, want to be liberated from the second suffering, the suffering of change. Bored with the defiled feelings of happiness, some seek the feeling of equanimity: this may lead to rebirth in, of the three realms, the upper realm that has only the feeling of equanimity.

Now, desiring liberation from the first two categories of suffering is not the principal motivation for seeking liberation (from cyclic existence); the Bhagawan Buddha taught that the root of the three sufferings is the third: all-pervasive suffering. Some people commit suicide; they seem to think that there is suffering simply because there is the human life, and that by cutting off the life there will be nothing. This third, all-pervasive suffering is under the control of karma and the disturbing mind. We can see this without having to think very deeply that this is under the control of the karma and disturbing mind of previous lives: anger and attachment arise just because we have these present aggregates.<sup>(2)</sup> The aggregate of compounding phenomena is like a helper for us to generate karma and these disturbing minds; this is called *ne.ngen.len* (literally: taking a bad place). Because that which forms is related to taking the bad place of disturbing minds and is under their control, it supports our generating disturbing minds and keeps us from virtue. All our suffering can be traced back to these aggregates of attachment and clinging.

Perhaps, when you realize that your aggregates are the cause of all your sufferings you might think that suicide is the way out. Well, if there were no continuity of mind, no future life, all right--if you had the courage you could finish yourself off. But, according to the Buddhist viewpoint, that's not the case; your consciousness will continue. Even if you take your own life, this life, you will have to take another body that again will be the basis of suffering. If you really want to get rid of all your suffering, all the difficulties you experience in your life, you have to get rid of the fundamental cause that gives rise to the aggregates that are the basis of all suffering. Killing yourself isn't going to solve your problems.

Because this is the case, we must now investigate the cause of suffering: is there a cause or not? If there is, what kind of cause it is: a natural cause, which cannot be eliminated, or a cause that depends on its own cause and therefore can be. If it is a cause that can be overcome, is it possible for us to overcome it? Thus we come to the second noble truth: the truth of the cause of suffering.

## **The truth of the cause of suffering**

Strictly speaking, Buddhists maintain that there is no external creator. According to Buddhists, a buddha is the highest being, but even a buddha does not have the power to create new life. So now, what is the cause of suffering?

Generally, the ultimate cause is the mind; the mind that is influenced by bad thoughts such as anger, attachment, jealousy and so forth is the main cause of birth and all such other problems. However, there is no possibility to cut the mind, the stream of consciousness itself. Furthermore, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with the deepest level of mind; it is simply influenced by the bad thoughts. Thus the question is whether or not we can fight and control anger, attachment and the other disturbing negative minds. If we can eradicate these, we shall be left with a pure mind that is free from the causes of suffering.

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This brings us to the disturbing negative minds, the delusions, which are mental factors. There are many different ways of presenting the discussion of the mind, but, in general, the mind itself is something that is merely clarity and awareness. When we speak of disturbing attitudes such as anger and attachment we have to see how they are able to affect and pollute the mind; what, in fact, is their nature. This, then, is the discussion of the cause of suffering.

If we ask, "How do attachment and anger arise?"<sup>(3)</sup> the answer will be that they are undoubtedly assisted by our grasping at things to be true and inherently real. When, for instance, we are angry with something, we feel that the object is out there, solid, true and unimputed, and that we ourselves are likewise something solid and findable. Before we get angry, the object appears ordinary, but when our mind is influenced by anger, the object looks ugly, completely repulsive, nauseating; something we want to get rid of immediately--it appears really to exist in that way: solid, independent and very unattractive. This appearance of truly ugly fuels our anger. Yet when we see the same object the next day, when our anger has subsided, it seems more beautiful than it did the day before; it's the same object but it doesn't seem as bad. This shows how anger and attachment are influenced by our grasping at things as being true and unimputed.

Thus, the texts on the Middle Way (Madhyamaka) philosophy state that the root of all the disturbing negative minds is the grasping at true existence; that this assists them and brings them about; that the closed-minded ignorance that grasps at things as being inherently, truly real is the basic source of all our suffering. Based on this grasping at true existence we develop all kinds of disturbing negative minds and create a great deal of negative karma.

It explains in the Madhyamokavatara (Entering the Middle Way), by the great Indian pandit Chandrakirti,<sup>(4)</sup> that first there's attachment to the self, and then grasping at things and becoming attached to them as "mine." At first there is a very solid, independent I that is very big--bigger than anything else; this is the basis. From this gradually comes "this is mine, this is mine, this is mine." Then "we, we, we." Then, because of our taking this side, come "others, our enemies." Towards I or mine arises attachment; towards him, her and them we feel distant, and anger, jealousy and all those competitive feelings arise. Thus ultimately, the problem is this feeling of "I"--not the mere I, but the I with which we become obsessed. This gives rise to anger and irritation, along with harsh words and all the physical expressions of aversion and hatred. All these actions (of mind, speech and body) accumulate bad karma.<sup>(5)</sup> Killing, cheating and all similar negative actions also result from such bad motivation. So, you see: the first stage is solely mental, the disturbing negative minds; in the second stage these negative minds express themselves in actions, karma. Immediately, the atmosphere is disturbed. With anger, for example, the atmosphere becomes tense, people feel uneasy. If someone gets furious, gentle people try to avoid him. Thus he, too, gets disturbed. And later, the person who got angry himself feels embarrassed and ashamed for having said all sorts of absurd things, whatever came into his mouth. When you get angry there's no room for logic or reason; you become literally mad. So later, when your mind has become normal again, you feel ashamed. There are no good points about anger and attachment; nothing good results from them. They may be difficult to control, but everybody call realize that there is nothing good about them. This is the second noble truth. Now the question arises whether or not these kinds of negative mind can be eliminated.

## **The truth of the cessation of suffering**

The root of all disturbing negative minds is our grasping at things as truly existent. Thus we have to investigate whether this grasping mind is correct or whether it is distorted and seeing things incorrectly.

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We can do this by investigating how the things it perceives actually exist. However, since this mind itself is incapable of seeing whether or not it apprehends objects correctly, we have to rely on another kind of mind. If, upon investigation, we discover many other, valid ways of looking at things and that all these contradict, or negate, the way that the mind that grasps at true existence perceives its objects, we can say that this mind does not see reality.

Thus with the mind that can analyze the ultimate we must try to determine whether the mind that grasps at things as truly findable is correct or not. If it is correct, the analyzing mind should ultimately be able to find the grasped-at things. The great classics of the Chittamatra and, especially, the Madhyamika schools contain many lines of reasoning for carrying out such investigation.(6) Following these, when you investigate to see whether the mind that grasps at things as inherently findable is correct or not, you find that it is not correct, that it is distorted--you cannot actually find the objects at which it grasps. Since this mind is deceived by its object it has to be eliminated.

Thus, through investigation we find no valid support for the grasping mind but the support of logical reasoning for the mind that realizes that the grasping mind is invalid. In battle, the mind supported by logic will always be victorious over the mind that is not. The understanding that there is no such thing as truly findable existence constitutes the deep clear nature of mind; the mind that grasps at things as truly findable is superficial and fleeting.

When we eliminate the disturbing negative minds, the cause of all suffering, we eliminate the sufferings as well. This is liberation, or the cessation of suffering: the third noble truth. Since it is possible to achieve this we must now look at the method. This brings us to the fourth noble truth.

## **The truth of the path to the cessation of suffering**

When we speak of the paths common to the three vehicles of Buddhism--Shravakayana, Pratyekabuddhayana and Mahayana--we are referring to the thirty-seven factors that bring enlightenment. When we speak specifically of the paths of the bodhisattvas' vehicle (Mahayana) we are referring to the ten levels and the six transcendent perfections.(7)

We find the practice of the Hinayana path most commonly in Thailand, Burma, Sri Lanka and so forth. Here the practitioners are motivated by the desire to achieve liberation from their own suffering. Concerned for themselves alone, they practise the thirty-seven factors of enlightenment, which are related to the five paths: the four close placements of mindfulness, the four miraculous powers and the four pure abandonments (which are related to the path of accumulation); the five powers and the five forces (the path of application); the seven factors of enlightenment (the path of seeing); and the eightfold path (the path of meditation). They are able to manifest thereby a cessation of the disturbing negative minds alone, attaining nirvana, individual liberation. This is the path and the result of the Hinayana.

The primary concern of followers of the Mahayana path is not merely their own liberation but the enlightenment of all sentient beings. With this motivation of bodhicitta--their hearts set on attaining enlightenment as the best means of helping others--these practitioners practise the six transcendent perfections and gradually progress through the ten bodhisattva levels until they have completely overcome both types of obscurations and attained the supreme enlightenment of buddhahood. This is the path and the result of the Mahayana.(8)

The essence of the practice of the six transcendent perfections is the unification of method and wisdom

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so that the two enlightened bodies--rupakaya and dharmakaya-- can be attained. Since they can be attained only simultaneously, their causes must be cultivated simultaneously. Thus together we must build up a store of merit, as the cause of the rupakaya, the body of form, and a store of deep awareness, or insight, as the cause of the dharmakaya, the body of wisdom. In the Paramitayana, we practise method grasped by wisdom and wisdom grasped by method, but in the Vajrayana we practise method and wisdom as one in nature.(9)

This teaching is continued with *The Eight Verses of Thought Transformation*  
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## **The Organization**

### **The FPMT: a vision of totality**

Standing on the steps of the Kopan Gumpa in November, 1975, Lama Yeshe gazed into the distance, as if surveying with his mind's eye his already wide-ranging dharma works, and said, 'We need an organization to keep this together.'

Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche had just returned from an eight-and-a-half month round-the-world tour of nine countries, the most extensive they were ever to make, and one that had resulted in the creation of four new centers. What Lama was wanting to 'keep together,' then, was a mushrooming collection of twelve centers and departments, the evolving external manifestation of his total dedication to spreading the Buddha's teachings for the benefit of all beings.

Thus Lama Yeshe summoned together nine of his senior students present at the time, to discuss the coordination of this rapidly growing dharma network. He called this group the Council for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (CPMT)-- a mouthful that Lama always insisted was necessary to spell out exactly what his (and our) purpose was. Later this name was extended to denote the body that comprised the directors of the centers and other divisions of Lama's worldwide organization, which itself became known as the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT). (Wisdom, May 1983, contains details of the historical development of the FPMT.)

Lama Yeshe was always less than complimentary about those dharma students who eschewed organization and management. 'Some hippies reject organizing themselves; they reject. They are stupid. They don't understand. They are not organized themselves in their own lives, besides so many people benefit.... We have not landed on the moon; we are living on Earth in the twentieth century. Everybody lives in a certain environment with a certain structure. We should too, otherwise we'll get confused. Therefore I have put forward guidelines to show how our centers should be. In a place where hundreds of people are involved, we are responsible for using their lives in a worthwhile way instead of wasting their time. So we have to organize.'

Over the years, Lama Yeshe gave many pep talks to his directors, each containing a wealth of good advice and fresh perspectives on the purpose of the FPMT. Last year Lama suggested that this issue of WISDOM contain information that shows the FPMT's reality 'in a clean clear, dynamic way.' We feel that the best way to do this is to publish what he himself has said on the FPMT's objectives, structure and function, so we reproduce here the talk Lama Yeshe gave to the CPMT meeting at Istituto Lama Tzong Khapa, Italy, in January, 1983. Edited by Nicholas Ribush.

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So what we are trying to do is to help people discover their own totality and thus perfect satisfaction.

Why have we established the FPMT? Why are we establishing these facilities all over the world? I think we are clean clear as to our aim -- we want to lead sentient beings to higher education. We are an organization that gives people the chance to receive higher education. We offer people what we have the combined knowledge of Buddha's teachings and the modern way of life. Our purpose is to share our experiences of this.

We know that people are dissatisfied with worldly life, with the education system and everything else; it is in the nature of our dualistic minds to be dissatisfied. So what we are trying to do is to help people discover their own totality and thus perfect satisfaction.

Now, the way we have evolved is not through you or me having said we want to do these things but through a natural process of development. Our organization has grown naturally, organically. It is not 'Lama Yeshe wanted to do it'; I've never said that I want centers all over the world. Rather, I came into contact with students, who then wanted to do something -. expressed the wish to share their experience with others -- and put together groups in various countries to share and grow with others.

Personally I think that's fine. We should work for that. We are human beings; Buddhism helps us grow; therefore it is logical that we should work together to facilitate this kind of education. And it is not only us lamas who are working for this. The centers' resident geshe and the students are working too. Actually, it is you students who are instrumental in creating the facilities for dharma to exist in the Western world. True. Of course, teachers help, but the most important thing is for the students to be well educated. That is why we exist.

The foundation for a center's existence is the five precepts -- no killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, telling lies or intoxicants. When we started establishing centers there was no overall plan -- they just popped up randomly all over the world like mushrooms, because of the evolutionary process I've just mentioned and the cooperative conditions. Now that all these centers do exist, we have to facilitate their development in a constructive, clean clear way, otherwise everything will just get confused. We have to develop properly both internally and in accordance with our twentieth century environment. That's why I've already put forward guidelines for how our centers should be -- residential country communities, city centers, monasteries and so forth.

The foundation for a center's existence is the five precepts -- no killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, telling lies or intoxicants. We base our other activities on those: education, administration, accounts, kitchen, housekeeping, grounds and so on. All this unified energy also depends on the kindness of our benefactors, the devoted people who give us donations. Thus we are responsible to utilize their donations in the wisest possible way, the way that brings maximum benefit to others. For this reason, in a place where hundreds of people are involved, we have to organize -- to ensure that we use their energy in the most worthwhile way and not waste their time. Therefore, each of our centers and activities needs a general director -- to direct and manage all the human and material resources at our disposal.

What does it mean to be a director? Take, for example, the job of the director of one of our country centers. He or she is responsible for everything that happens in the center: education, legal matters, finance, business, community, kitchen et cetera. Computer-like, the directors have to watch everything to make sure that it's all going in the right direction. And if they see something wrong, it is their responsibility to correct it.

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Of course, one person, the director, cannot do everything himself, but under his umbrella all center activities function. To control all these we need a management committee and a good place for the committee to meet and discuss things. The director should not decide how things will be done alone. In committee meetings we decide upon the projects for the forthcoming year and give various responsibilities to different people. It is then the director's job to make sure that these people follow the committee's instructions exactly. If they don't, the director has the power and authority to correct them. He can even ask people who are disrupting the center's harmony and proper functioning to leave.

Thus a center director takes incredible responsibility -- for the center's educational success, for its financial success. He has to think like a computer. The director is one of the most important aspects of the center. This doesn't mean that other people don't have responsibility; that's not true. They are responsible for the areas they have been given; they have their individual responsibilities. And it is not only the people who have been given jobs who have responsibility. Even students who come to, say, a ten-day course have a certain degree of responsibility. They are working; they are expending energy for dharma; they are giving -- to some extent they do have responsibility. As their hearts are touched they take more and more; slowly, slowly. We can see how we too have evolved in the same way.

What you should do is take the practical points of dharma and shape them according to your own culture. Now, the way to bring dharma to the Western world is to bring the nuclear, essential aspect of dharma. Of course, you can't separate the essence from the Eastern cultural trappings immediately: "This is culture; this isn't." However, what you should do is take the practical points of dharma and shape them according to your own culture. In my opinion you should be making a new kind of dharma dependent upon each different place and its social customs. Since we are Mahayanists we have a broad view and don't mind if dharma takes different shapes. To bring dharma to the West we should have a broad view.

Because we have so many centers I can no longer direct them. Of course, at the beginning I had to direct the centers because the students were always asking, 'Lama, what to do?' and we were small enough for me always to be in direct communication with them. But eventually we reached the point where I had to ask myself the question, 'Am I a businessman, a dharma teacher or what?' Hundreds of letters were coming in from all over the world; I had to say, 'What is this? Should I spend my life answering letters and running centers?' I thought it was wrong for me to spend my life in business because this was not the best way to serve my students. I thought that the most realistic thing to do to benefit them and make my life worthwhile was to go the middle way instead.