

*The Life of the
Buddha and the
Four Noble Truths*

By

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Notes

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We use the convention of B.C.E. (Before Common Era) for B.C. and C.E. (Common Era) for A. D.



The Buddha

When the Buddha was asked how he knew he was enlightened, he touched the earth in this position and said "as the earth is my witness."

*“Although I have shown the means of liberation,
you must know that it depends upon you along.”*

-- The Buddha

Chapter 1

The Life of the Buddha

The story of how Buddhism developed in India begins, of course, with the story of Buddha Shakyamuni who is the guide for all Buddhists. The Buddha born in India and we should not make the mistake of believing that since the Buddha was born in India, he was a typical Indian and taught in a typically Indian style. The Buddha was born for a very special purpose. He came to this world in order to help and teach the whole of mankind and also all other sentient beings the path that leads to happiness.

Examining the main religions of the world, one will find that all the great teachers whether Christian or Muslim or Buddhists were very special people. They all had an extremely pure motivation and the purest aspiration to help other beings. When they came to teach other beings, it wasn't in the way of a military conquest but rather in the form of a teaching that was intended to help beings find happiness. So most of these great teachers gave teachings that remain even today while military empires have come and gone by the hundreds. One may wonder why those teachings spread so widely and why they are still around today. The reason is that these teachers had a very pure motivation to help others from the very beginning. They were true, pure paths that could lead to happiness.

The Buddha Shakyamuni's teachings have been practiced for 2,500 years, and considering the history of people, who practiced Buddhism, we will find that the teachings generated little suffering and problems and difficulties. On the contrary, a great number of people were able to find true happiness through the practice of the Buddhist path and that a great number of people found peace and liberation through these teachings.

The Twelve Deeds of the Buddha

There are very many great deeds of the Buddha recorded but these can be summarized into the twelve most important, most famous deeds. The first of these twelve deeds was when the Buddha was teaching in the paradise of Tushita which is in the *god realm*.¹ While the Buddha was teaching there, the sound of his previous motivation reminded him that it was necessary to take birth in Jambuvipa and teach the Dharma. He then considered five things: the land where he ought to be born (Kapila), the caste he should be born into (royal), the family in which he should be born (the Shakyas), who his mother was to be (Mayadevi), and the time that was right for him to be born (when the five degenerations were on the increase). After having made these determinations, he decided to leave this Tushita paradise and take birth in our world. This particular deed of leaving Tushita to be born had a special significance. It was intended to teach us that somebody who has achieved enlightenment is not any more a slave of his own *karma* and has control over anything he or she does. So the Buddha chose to take birth in our world because the time was right and he wanted to show us that someone who is enlightened has control over anything he or she does.

The second of the twelve great deeds of the Buddha was his birth into the womb of his mother, Mayadevi. So first he entered the womb of his mother and was born in the normal way from his mother's womb. One may wonder why he took such a birth. If he had complete control over everything, then why wasn't he born miraculously from a lotus flower as was Padmasambhava or why didn't he simply descend from the sky. But he didn't do this because he had a special reason for being born in the normal way. If he had been born miraculously from a lotus, for example, it would have been very impressive and attracted many people. However, the Buddha was thinking in the long-term of his future disciples who would have felt that it was all right for someone like the Buddha to practice and to achieve enlightenment because he was a very special person from the beginning. Had he been born in a lotus they would have thought no ordinary human beings could reach enlightenment because they didn't have these same miraculous powers. So the Buddha took an

ordinary birth to show that even ordinary human beings can achieve the highest realization. He did this to instill conviction and confidence in his future disciples.

The third special deed of the Buddha was his birth in the garden in Lumbini (which is in present day Nepal). Although the Buddha took an ordinary human birth, there was still something very special in his birth. The Buddha came out of the body of his mother through her right side. Some people might start wondering how this was possible. They might think, “Well, what exactly happened? Did the rib cage crack? One doesn’t need to think in terms of anatomical problems because the Buddha was a miraculous being and he just took birth through his mother’s right side.

At the time of the Buddha’s birth, there were many very special things happening where he was born. All of a sudden, some crops started growing. Trees appeared all over the area of Lumbini and some very special flowers such as the Udumbara flower that had never grown in this area started blooming everywhere. From that moment onwards he was given his name of Siddhartha in Sanskrit, or *Tungye Drup* in Tibetan, which means, “The One That Makes Everything Possible.” As a result of interdependent origination, the presence of a high being, especially his or her birth, produces changes in the environment such as flowers blooming.

A few years later when the Buddha had grown up a little, he trained in all possible arts and crafts and sciences and thus became very knowledgeable, very scholarly, and very skillful. This was his fourth deed and this may be a little surprising, because the Buddha was already enlightened or at least a great *bodhisattva* residing in the tenth bodhisattva level (Skt. *bhumi*).² It should not have been necessary for him to train in worldly skills because he should have known them naturally. However, there was again a specific reason for doing this. It was to counteract various misconceptions we might have had. One misunderstanding was to think that the Buddha was someone who was simply a meditator without any academic education. Another was the idea that he already possessed all this knowledge so he didn’t need to learn. This could give rise to doubts that if we humans tried to learn something it would lead to no results. Or again people might think that the Buddha did

not have any qualities he had ever had to train. So to overcome these misconceptions the Buddha worked at becoming the scholar and became very skilled in all different arts. It also shows that it is necessary to receive full education in the culture in which we are appearing. We must be fully at one with various positive aspects of our culture to be able to become a vehicle for transmitting the Dharma.

The fifth deed of the Buddha was to marry, have a child, and enjoy the company of his queen Yashodhara and consorts and all the pleasures of royalty. The Buddha did this so that his future disciples wouldn't think that the Buddha or an enlightened person was unable to enjoy any pleasures or feel the need for enjoyment. The other reason for the Buddha living such a sensuous life was to show that even though the Buddha had all the finest pleasures, he wasn't satisfied by these pleasures because he had understood that there was a higher form of happiness to be sought.

The sixth deed of the Buddha was his renunciation. The palace was enclosed with high walls and four gates facing each of the cardinal points. The Buddha went for a walk outside of the precincts of the palace, each time leaving through one of the different gates and each time he saw something different that gave him a different lesson on life. The first time he went out through the eastern gate of the palace and saw the suffering of an old man, discovering for the first time that all persons experience the degeneration of body. Another time he left the palace through the southern gate and saw a sick person and discovered the suffering that all persons at one time or another suffer. The next time he went out through the western gate and saw a dead person and discovered the pain of death which all persons must undergo. All of the sudden, this hit him really hard, because he realized that no matter how rich you are, no matter how powerful you are, no matter how much pleasure and enjoyment you have, there is nothing you can do to run away from the suffering of old age, sickness, and death. He realized that there was no way you could avoid these; even a king could not buy his way out of this suffering. No one can run away and hide from this suffering. No one can fight and defeat these three kinds of suffering.

But then the Buddha realized that maybe there is a way out which is the practice of a spiritual path. The Buddha understood this when he left the palace through the northern gate and saw a monk. And at this point he felt great weariness with the world and renounced the world at the age of 29.

Since the Buddha had these visions, he gave up the kingdom and left this life of a prince behind, which is his seventh deed. He led a life of austerities for six years by the banks of the Nilajana river in India. These austerities did not lead to his enlightenment. But these years spent doing ascetic practices were not wasted because they had a specific purpose of showing future disciples that the Buddha had put a very great amount of effort and perseverance and diligence to achieve the goal of enlightenment. This seventh deed was also to show that as long as someone is attached to money, food, clothes, and all the pleasures of life, one couldn't really dedicate him or herself to the spiritual practice. But if one gave up attachment, then it was possible to achieve Buddhahood without too much difficulty. So that is why the Buddha engaged in this deed of six years of austerities by a riverside.

The eighth deed of the Buddha was his giving up of the austerities, by accepting a bowl of yogurt and going to the bodhi tree and vowing to stay under this tree until reaching final awakening or enlightenment. In contrast to the austerities, the Buddha takes this nutritious food and gives his body a rest. He puts his clothes back on and then he goes to the bodhi tree. The Buddha gave up the austerities to show his future followers that the main object of Buddhist practice is working with one's mind. We have to eliminate the negativity in our mind and have to develop the positive qualities of knowledge and understanding. This is far more important than what goes on outside of us, so that austerities are not the point in them-selves.

What the Buddha wanted to show us is that the true practice should be in the middle of the two extremes of practicing too many austerities and being too indulgent. The first extreme is when you starve yourself or you don't allow yourself food and drink. These practices also involve placing yourself in extreme physical conditions such as being too hot or too cold. This is pointless because it has no true significance. The other extreme is where you just follow any of your desires. This is endless

because there is a constant escalation in your desires. If you have ten pleasures, you'll want a hundred. If you have a hundred, you'll want a thousand; so you will never find any satisfaction and you will also never be able to practice the Dharma either. So the Buddha wanted to show us that we have to avoid the extreme of too much austerity and too much indulgence and that practice lies somewhere in the middle.

The ninth deed of the Buddha is called "the subduing of the *mara* Papiyan" with Papiyan being the leader of the maras. This happened when the Buddha was sitting under the bodhi tree. Mara used forms related to the three *disturbing emotions* (Skt. *klesha*) of ignorance, desire, and aggression in order to lure the Buddha away from his pursuit of enlightenment.

The first deception representing ignorance was that the Buddha was asked to abandon his meditation and return immediately to the kingdom because his father, king Shuddhodana had died and the evil Devadatta had taken over the kingdom. This did not disturb the Buddha's meditation and then Mara tried to create an obstacle using desire by showing him his own beautiful daughters who tried to deceive and seduce him in all possible ways. When this did not disturb the Buddha's meditation Mara then used hatred by coming towards the Buddha surrounded by millions and millions of horribly frightening warriors who were throwing weapons at the Buddha's body. But the Buddha wasn't distracted or fooled by these three poisons. He remained immersed in *compassion* and *loving-kindness* and therefore triumphed over this display of the three poisons and was able to eventually achieve enlightenment.

The tenth deed of the Buddha is his enlightenment which he reached while meditating under the bodhi tree. Because the Buddha had developed all the qualities of meditation to the utmost, he was able to reach enlightenment. He did this again to show us how to understand that we also can reach enlightenment. As a matter of fact, one of the main points of the whole Buddhist philosophy is to show us that Buddhahood is not something to be found outside of us, but something we can achieve by looking inside ourselves. In the same way as the Buddha Shakyamuni reached enlightenment, we can also achieve enlightenment. And the qualities that we will attain with enlightenment will be no different from the one's the Buddha

attained. Also whatever negative emotions the Buddha managed to eliminate, we also can eliminate. The Buddha started as a bodhisattva and then became someone who achieved enlightenment to show us that we also can do the same.

The eleventh deed of the Buddha occurred when he turned the wheel of the Dharma three times, which means when he gave the three great cycles of teachings.³ When the Buddha lived in India, the population of India believed that if one made offerings and prayed to a god, then that god would be satisfied and happy and in turn that god would give you liberation and happiness. They also believed that if you didn't make offerings and pray to the god, he would be very angry at you and throw you down to the hells and inflict other states of suffering upon you. This idea of a god isn't really one of a special deity, it is only the embodiment of desire and aggression.

But in Buddhism, we do not expect our happiness or our suffering to come from the Buddha. It is not believed that if we please the Buddha, he will bring us happiness and if we displease the Buddha, he will throw us into *samsara* or some lower realm. The possibility of happiness or reaching liberation is entirely up to us. So if we practice the path that leads to liberation, we will attain Buddhahood. But if we do not practice it, then we can't expect to reach enlightenment. The choice is entirely ours. It's in our hands whether we want to find happiness or suffering. But still there is something that comes from the Buddha and this is the path to liberation. To provide us with that means for liberation, the Buddha turned the wheel of the Dharma.

The twelfth deed of the Buddha is his passing away which was in the town of Kushingara at the age of 83. He asked his students if they had any final questions and then lying in the "lion's posture" he passed away. His last words were, "Bhikshus, never forget: Decay is inherent in all composite things."

Chapter 2

The Four Noble Truths

One needs to understand that when the Buddha taught, he was not teaching as a great scholar who wanted to demonstrate a particular philosophical point of view or to teach for its own sake. His desire was to present the very essence of the deep and vast teachings of Buddhism, for that reason he gave teachings which suited the abilities of his disciples. All the teachings he gave, some long and some short, were a direct and appropriate response to the development of the disciples who came to listen to him. Of course, people have very different capacities and different levels of understanding. They also have very different wishes and desires to learn and understand the dharma. If the Buddha had taught only the very essence of his own understanding of those vast and far-reaching teachings, then apart from a small number of disciples who had great intelligence and diligence, few people would have ever understood the Buddhist teachings. The Buddha taught whatever would enable a person to develop so he or she could progress gradually towards the very deep and vast teachings. When we analyze all the Buddha's teachings, we see that they fall into three main approaches or vehicles.

The Buddha's teachings helped each student in a way appropriate for the level he or she was in. Because of that, one finds that on the *relative level* each student received some benefit from what the Buddha taught. On the *absolute level*, one finds all of the Buddha's teachings have the same goal. When one analyzes the Buddha's teachings on the relative level, one finds that there are three levels. But, when one examines them from the absolute level, one sees there is only one level, or yana, because all beings are directed towards the same goal.

The Hinayana

Of the three vehicles or *yanas* in Sanskrit, the first is the hinayana. Hinayana literally means "lesser vehicle," but this

The Four Noble Truths

term should in no way be a reproach or be construed to any way diminish the importance of the teachings. In fact, the teachings of the hinayana are very important because they suit the capacities and development of a great number of students. If it weren't for these teachings, which are particularly appropriate for those who have limited wisdom or diligence, many persons would never be able to travel the mahayana path. Without the hinayana teachings there would be no way for practitioners to progress in the dharma, because they would have never entered the path. The path is similar to a staircase: the lower step is the lower step. This doesn't mean it is not important or should be ignored, because without this lower step one can never reach the top of the stairs. One can never gain access to the upper stories of a building without that lower step. It is very necessary. It should be very clear that this term "lesser" vehicle is in no way a pejorative term. It just puts the path into a realistic context.

The fundamental teachings of the hinayana are the main subject matter of the first *dharmacakra*, or turning of the *wheel of dharma*. These teachings were given mainly in India in the town of Varanasi, which is now called Benares. The main subject matter of these teachings is the *four noble truths*.

The Four Noble Truths

If the Buddha had taught his disciples principally by demonstrating his miraculous abilities and various powers, it would not have been the best way to establish them on the path of liberation. The best way to bring them to that wisdom and liberation was to point out the very truth of things; to point out the way things really are. So this is what he did: he showed the truth through the four noble truths and the two truths (relative and absolute truth). By seeing the way things really are, the students learned how to eliminate their mistakes and their delusions. Eliminating one's mistakes and delusions automatically destroys the causes of one's suffering and hardships. This allows one to progressively reach the state of liberation and great wisdom. That is why the four noble truths and the two truths are the essence of the first teachings of the Buddha.

The First Noble Truth

The first noble truth is the full understanding of suffering. Of course, in an obvious way, people are aware of suffering, knowing when they have unpleasant sensations such as hunger, cold, or sickness, and recognize these as things that one doesn't like. But the first noble truth includes awareness of all the ramifications of suffering, because it encompasses the very nature and essence of suffering. This includes knowledge of the subtle and the obvious aspects of suffering. The obvious aspect of suffering is immediate pain or difficulty in the moment. Subtle suffering is more difficult to understand, because it begins with happiness. But by its very nature this happiness must change because it can't go on forever. Because it must change into suffering, subtle suffering is the impermanence of pleasure. For example, when Thrangu Rinpoche went to Bhutan with His Holiness Karmapa, he was invited to the palace of the king of Bhutan. When he arrived there, the palace was magnificent, the king's chambers were beautiful, there were many servants who showed complete respect and obedience. But he and Karmapa found that even though there was so much external beauty, the king himself was suffering a great deal mentally and had many difficulties. The king himself said that he was quite relieved that His Holiness had come and emphasized how much the visit meant to him because of the various difficulties with which he had been troubled. This is the subtle aspect of suffering. One thinks that a particular situation will give one the most happiness one can ever imagine, but actually, within the situation, there is a tremendous amount of anguish. If one thinks of those who are really fortunate—those gods or human beings with a very rich and healthy life—it seems as though they have nothing but happiness. It is hard to understand that the very root, the very fiber of what is taking place is suffering, because the situation is subject to change.

What is happiness? By its very nature it can often mean that there will be suffering later on. There is no worldly happiness that lasts for a very long time. Worldly happiness includes an element of change, of built-in suffering. For that reason, the first noble truth of the awareness of suffering refers not just to immediate suffering, but also to the subtle elements of suffering.

The Buddha taught the truth of suffering because everything that takes place on a worldly level is a form of suffering.

If one is suffering but is not aware of it, one will never have the motivation to eliminate this suffering and will continue to suffer. When one is aware of suffering, one is able to overcome it. With the more subtle forms of suffering, if one is happy and becomes aware that the happiness automatically includes the seed of suffering, then one will be much less inclined to become involved in an attachment to this happiness. One will then think, "Oh, this seems to be happiness, but it has built-in suffering." Then one will want to dissociate from it. The first truth is that one should be aware of suffering. Once one has a very clear picture of the nature of suffering, one can really begin to avoid such suffering. Of course, everyone wants to avoid suffering and to emerge from suffering, but to accomplish this one needs to be absolutely clear about its nature.

When one becomes aware that the nature of day-to-day existence is suffering, one doesn't have to be miserable with the thought that suffering will always be present. Suffering doesn't go on forever, because the Buddha entered the world, gave teachings, and demonstrated clearly what suffering is. He also taught the means by which suffering can be ended and described the state beyond suffering which is liberation. One does not have to endure suffering and can, in fact, be happy. Even though one can not immediately emerge from suffering by practicing the Buddha's teachings, one can gradually eliminate suffering in this way, and move towards eventual liberation. This fact in itself can make one happy, even before one has actually completely emerged from suffering. Applying the Buddha's teachings, one can both be happy in the relative phase of one's progress and then, at the end, one will gain wisdom and liberation and be happy in the ultimate sense, as well.

The first noble truth makes it clear that there is suffering. Once one knows what suffering is, one must eliminate that suffering. It is not a question of eliminating the suffering itself, but of eliminating the causes of suffering. Once one removes the causes of suffering, then automatically the effect, which is suffering, is no longer present. This is why, in order to eliminate this suffering, one becomes aware of the second noble truth, the truth of universal origination.

The Second Noble Truth

The truth of universal origination is an English translation of the name Buddha himself gave to this noble truth. It means “that which is the cause or origin of absolutely everything.” The truth of universal origination indicates that the root cause of suffering is *karma* and the *kleshas*. Karma is a Sanskrit word which means “activity” and klesha in Sanskrit means “mental defilement” or “mental poison.” If one does not understand the Buddha’s teachings, one would most likely attribute all happiness and suffering to some external cause. One might think that happiness and suffering come from the environment, or from the gods, and that everything that happens originates in some source outside of one’s control. If one believes this, then it is extremely hard, if not impossible, to eliminate suffering and its causes. On the other hand, when one realizes that the experience of suffering is a product of what one has done, that is, a result of one’s karma, eliminating suffering becomes possible. Once one is aware of how suffering takes place, then one can begin to remove the causes of suffering. First, one must realize that what one experiences is not dependent on external forces, but on what one has done previously. This is the understanding of karma. Karma produces suffering and is driven by the defilements. The term “defilement” refers mainly to one’s negative motivation and negative thoughts, which produce negative actions.

The Third Noble Truth

The third noble truth is the cessation of suffering through which it is explained that the causes of karma and the defilements can be removed. We have control over suffering, because karma and the defilements take place within us—we create them, we experience them. For that reason we don’t need to depend on anyone else to remove the cause of suffering. The truth of universal origination means that if we do unvirtuous actions, we are creating suffering. It also means if we abandon unvirtuous actions, we remove the possibility of experiencing suffering in the future. What we experience is entirely in our hands. Therefore, the Buddha has said that we should give up the causes of karma and the defilements. Virtuous actions result in

the external state of happiness and unvirtuous actions result in suffering. This idea is not particularly easy to grasp, because one can't see the whole process take place from beginning to end.

There are three kinds of actions: mental, verbal, and physical. These are subdivided into virtuous and unvirtuous physical actions, virtuous and unvirtuous verbal actions, and virtuous and unvirtuous mental actions. If one abandons these three types of unvirtuous actions, then one's actions become automatically virtuous.

There are three unvirtuous physical actions: the harming of life, sexual misconduct, and stealing. The results of these three unvirtuous actions can be observed immediately. For example, when there is a virtuous relationship between a man and woman they care about each other, protect each other, and have a great deal of love and affection for each other, so they will be happy because they look after each other. Their wealth will usually increase, and if they have children, their love and care will bring mutual love in the family. In the ordinary sense, happiness develops out of this deep commitment and bond they have promised to keep. Whereas, when there is an absence of commitment, there is also little care or love, and sexual misconduct arises. This is not the ground out of which love arises, or upon which a nice home can be built in which children can develop happiness. One can readily see that from the lack of commitment to sexual fidelity, many kinds of difficulties will arise.

One can also see the immediate consequences of other unvirtuous physical actions. One can see that those who steal have difficulties and suffer; those who don't steal experience happiness and have a good state of mind. Likewise, those who kill create many problems and unhappiness for themselves, while those who support life are happy.

The same applies to one's speech although it is not so obvious. But on closer examination, one can also see how happiness develops out of virtuous speech and unhappiness from unvirtuous kinds of speech. At first lying may seem to be useful because one might think that one can deceive others through lies and gain some advantage. But Sakya Pandita said that this is not true. If one lies to one's enemies or persons one doesn't get along with very well, because they are one's enemies they are

not going to take notice of what one is saying anyway. It will be quite hard to deceive them. If they are one's friends, one might be able to deceive them at first by telling a lie. But after the first time, they won't trust you any more and may think that you have been a hypocrite. Lying doesn't really work. Then if one looks at the opposite, a person who takes pains to speak the truth will develop a reputation of being a truthful person who can be relied on. Out of this trust, many good things will emerge.

Once we have considered the consequences of lying, we can think of similar consequences relating to other kinds of damaging speech: slander, coarse, aggressive, and useless speech. Except for the immediate and the short-term consequences virtuous speech produces happiness and unvirtuous speech produces suffering.

When we say useless speech, we mean speech that is really useless, not just conversational. So, if we have a good mind and want someone to relax and be happy, even though the words may not be of great meaning, then it's useful speech based on the idea of benefit and goodness. When we say "useless speech," we mean chatter for no reason at all. Worse than that is "chatter rooted in the defilements" when one is saying bad things about other people because of dislike or jealousy of them or when one sets people against each other. When one just gossips about the character of people, that is really useless speech. Besides being useless, this very often causes trouble, because it sets people against each other and causes bad feelings.

The same applies to "harmful speech." If there is really a loving and beneficial reason for scolding, for example, a child when he is doing something dangerous or not studying in school, that is not harmful speech because it is devoid of the defilements. Rather it is a skillful way of helping someone. If there is a genuine, beneficial attitude and love behind what one says, it is not harmful speech. But if speech is related to the defilements such as aggression or jealousy, then it is harmful speech and is something to give up.

We can go on to examine the various states of mind and see that a virtuous mind produces happiness and unvirtuous states of mind create unhappiness. For instance, strong aggression will cause us to lose our friends. Because of our aggressiveness, our enemies will become even worse enemies and the situation will

become inflamed. If we are aggressive and hurt others and they have friends, then eventually those friends will also become our enemies. On the other hand, if we wish to benefit others, goodness will come out of it through the power of caring for our loved ones and then through wishing to help them develop goodness. Through this they will become close and helpful friends. Through the power of our love and care, our enemies and people we don't get along with will improve their behaviors and those enemies may eventually become friends. If we have companions and wish to benefit others, we can end up with very good friends and all the benefits which that brings. In this way, we can see how cause and effect operate, how a virtuous mind brings about happiness and how a non-virtuous mind brings about suffering and problems.

There are two main aspects of karma: one related to experience and one related to conditioning. The experience of karma has already been discussed. Through unvirtuous physical actions, one will experience problems and unhappiness. Likewise, through unvirtuous speech such as lying, one experiences unhappiness and sorrow. Through unvirtuous states of mind, one also experiences unhappiness. This was demonstrated by the example of an aggressive attitude. All of this is related to the understanding that any unvirtuous activity produces unpleasantness or unhappiness.

The second aspect of karma relates to conditioning. By being unvirtuous with one's body, speech, or mind one habituates oneself to a certain style of behavior. Unvirtuous physical or verbal behaviors add to the habit of doing things. For example, each time we kill, we are conditioned to kill again. If we lie, that increases the habit of lying. An aggressive mind conditions our state of mind so we become more aggressive. In later lives, then, that conditioning will emerge so that we will be reborn with a great tendency to kill, to lie, to engage in sexual misconduct, and so on. These are two aspects to karma. One is the direct consequence of an act and the other is the conditioning that creates a tendency to engage in behavior of that kind. Through these two aspects, karma produces all happiness and suffering in life.

Even though we may recognize that unvirtuous karma gives rise to suffering and virtuous karma gives rise to happiness, it is

hard for us to give up unvirtuous actions and practice virtuous actions, because the defilements exercise a powerful influence on us. We realize that suffering is caused by unvirtuous karma, but we can't give up the karma itself. We need to give up the defilements, because they are the root of unvirtuous actions. To give up the defilements means to give up non-virtuous actions of body (such as killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct), the unvirtuous actions of speech (such as lying, slander and harmful and useless speech), and the unvirtuous aspects of mind (such as aggressive, covetous, or ignorant mind). Just wanting to give up the defilements does not remove them. However, the Buddha in his great kindness and wisdom has given us a very skillful way to eliminate the very root of all the defilements through the examination of the belief in the existence of ego or self.

We cannot easily understand this belief in a self because it is very deep-rooted. First of all, we have to search for this self that we believe in, and through this search we can discover that the self does not exist. Then we will be able gradually to eliminate the belief in a self. When this is done, the defilements are also eliminated because with an elimination of the belief in self, unvirtuous karma is also eliminated.

This belief in a self is a mistaken perception. It's an illusion. For example, if one had a flower and were to interrogate one hundred people about it, they would all come to the same conclusion that it is indeed a flower. So one could be pretty sure that it is a flower. But, if one asked a person "Is this me?," he would say, "No, it's you." A second person would say, "It's you." One would end up with one hundred persons who say this as "you" and only oneself would consider it as "me." So statistically one's self is on very wobbly ground.

We also tend to think of "me" as one thing, as a unity. When we examine what we think of as ourselves, we find it is made up of many different components: the various parts of the body, the different organs, and the different elements. There are so many of them, yet we have this feeling of a single thing, which is "me." When we examine any of those components and try to find something that is the essence of self, the self cannot be found in any of these bits and pieces. By contemplating this and working through it very thoroughly, we begin to see how this "I" is really an incorrect perception.

Once we have eliminated this wrong way of thinking, the idea of an “I” becomes easy to get rid of. So, all of the desire rooted in thinking, “I must be made happy,” can be eliminated as well as all the aversion rooted in the idea of “this difficulty must be eliminated.” Through the elimination of the idea of “I,” we can annihilate the defilements. Once the defilements are gone, then unvirtuous karma that is rooted in the defilements can go. Once the unvirtuous karma is gone, suffering will no longer take place. This is why Buddha says that the root of suffering needs to be abandoned.

To summarize, once one recognizes what suffering really is, then one begins by removing its causes. One stops doing unvirtuous actions that create suffering. To stop these unvirtuous activities, one digs out their root, which are the defilements and the various unhealthy attitudes. To eradicate the defilements one needs to remove their heart, which is the belief in a self. If one does that, then one will eventually come to realize the wisdom of non-self. Through understanding the absence of a self, one no longer creates the defilements and bad actions and brings an end to that whole process. This is highly possible to reach; therefore there is the third noble truth of cessation.

The very essence and nature of cessation is peace (Tib. *she wa*). Sometimes people think of Buddhahood in terms of brilliant insights or something very fantastic. In fact, the peace one obtains from the cessation of everything unhealthy is the deepest happiness, bliss, and well being. Its very nature is lasting, in contrast to worldly happiness, which is exciting for a time, but then changes. In contrast, the ultimate liberation and omniscience of cessation is the most deeply moving peace. Within that peace all the powers of liberation and wisdom are developed. It is a very definitive release from both suffering and its result, and is a definitive release from the defilements, which are the cause of suffering. There are four main qualities of this truth of cessation. First, it is the cessation of suffering. Second, it is peace. Third, it is the deepest liberation and wisdom. Fourth, it is a very definitive release. Cessation is a product of practicing the path shown to us by the Most Perfect One, the Buddha. The actual nature of that path is the topic of the fourth noble truth, which is called the truth of the path, because it describes the path that leads to liberation.

The Fourth Noble Truth

The truth of the path is called “the truth of the path” because a path leads one to the ultimate goal. One does this step by step, stage by stage, progressively completing one’s journey. The main stages of Buddhism are called “the five paths” because by progressively traversing them, one eventually reaches one’s destination which is cessation. This path of the Buddha can be analyzed through its five main stages which are called the five paths. The names of the five paths are the stage of accumulation, the stage of junction, the stage of insight, the stage of cultivation, and the final stage of no more practice. Properly speaking, the first four of these are the path, with the fifth one being the effect.

The first path is called the “path of accumulation” because of gathering or accumulating a great wealth of many things. This is the stage in which one tries to gather all the positive factors one to progress. One tries to cultivate diligence, good qualities, and the wisdom, which penetrates more deeply into the meaning of things. One commits oneself to accumulate all the various positive aspects of practice. One gathers the positive elements into one’s being while at the same time working on many different ways to remove all the unwanted elements from one’s life. One also applies various techniques to eliminate the various blockages and obstacles that are holding one back. This is called the stage of accumulation, because one engages in this manifold activity and gathers all of these new things into one’s life.

In ordinary life we are caught up in the level of worldliness. Even though we don’t want to be, we are still operating on a level of conditioned existence (Skt. *samsara*) because we are still under the influence of the defilements. They have a very strong habitual grip on our existence. We need to get rid of these defilements in order to find our way out of *samsara*. Of course, we want to find this happiness and peace and we know it is possible. But even with the strongest will in the world, we cannot do it over-night. It is like trying to dye a large cloth, in that one needs to bring many different elements together to change the color.

So, first of all, in order to gain the good qualities, we need to work on creating all the different conditions which will make

those qualities emerge. To develop the various insights of meditation and real wisdom, we need to develop great faith and confidence in the validity and usefulness of that wisdom. Once we are convinced of its value, we need to change our habits so that we have the diligence to do all the things necessary to make insight and wisdom emerge. Therefore, there are many factors and conditions we must generate within our life that will bring about our happiness.

To remove all the unwholesome factors binding us in samsara, we must uproot belief in a self, eliminate the various defilements which are hindering us, and bring together the many different conditions that make this transformation and purification possible. We talk about accumulation because we are assembling all the different conditions for this transformation. We won't be able to progress in a significant manner until we have gathered all these causes and conditions in a proper and completely perfect way within ourselves. For that reason, the purpose of this stage of accumulation is to complete all the necessary conditions by gathering them into our existence.

Eventually, because of the complete gathering of favorable conditions, we will reach the third stage which is the "path of insight." This is the stage, during which insight into the way things actually are is developed, which is beyond the veil of delusion. Linking the path of accumulation and the stage of insight is the second path of junction. Here our inner realization, the very way we can perceive things, begins to link up with the truth of the actual nature of phenomena, because we are gathering all the favorable circumstances that will eventually lead us to the actual insight itself. When we attain insight into the way things really are and this insight develops beyond the level of delusion and mistaken views, we realize that there is no self. Once there is no longer a belief in self, there are no longer any root defilements of attachment, aggression, or mental darkness associated with the idea of self. Once there are no longer any defilements, one does nothing unvirtuous and has no more suffering.

Now, it is true that once we have that insight, all suffering is immediately removed, but in another way, that is not true. This is because the delusion of self is a habit which has been built up

for such a long time and is very, very hard to remove. For example, when we believe in the self and we hit our finger with a hammer, it hurts. Even when we have realized that an unchanging self is just a delusion fabricated by our minds, still when we hit our finger with a hammer it hurts. We still have the feeling, “I am suffering,” because there is an enduring built-up association of “I” with the flesh of our body. Removal of that long established conditioning of self is carried out through a long process of accustoming oneself to the truth of non-self. This is the fourth stage of the cultivation of insight.

The fourth stage is called the path of cultivation. The word *gom* is usually translated as “meditation” but actually means “to get used to something” or “to accustom oneself.”⁴ This is why it is translated here as “the path of cultivation,” while other texts translate it as “the path of meditation.” But this stage is the idea of getting used to the insight into the nature of things. Through becoming more and more familiar with the truth of things,⁵ we can remove the very fine traces of defilements and subconscious conditioning that still exist. Through gradual working on these, the goal of Buddhahood will be attained.

Through the cultivation of insight, we eventually reach the goal of the fifth path that is called “the path of no more study.” Through cultivation, we remove even the most subtle causes of suffering. Once this is completed we have reached the highest state and there are no more new paths to go along making this “the path of no more study” or “the path of no more practice.”

A Brief Biography of Thrangu Rinpoche

Thrangu Rinpoche was born in Kham in 1933. At the age of five he was formally recognized by the Sixteenth Karmapa and the previous Situ Rinpoche as the incarnation of the great Thrangu tulku. Entering Thrangu monastery, from the ages of seven to sixteen he studied reading, writing, grammar, poetry, and astrology, memorized ritual texts, and completed two preliminary retreats. At sixteen under the direction of Khenpo Lodro Rabsel he began the study of the three vehicles of Buddhism while staying in retreat.

At twenty-three he received full ordination from the Karmapa. When he was twenty-seven Rinpoche left Tibet for India at the time of the Chinese military takeover. He was called to Rumtek, Sikkim, where the Karmapa had his seat in exile. At thirty-five he took the geshe examination before 1500 monks at Buxador monastic refugee camp in Bengal, and was awarded the degree of Geshe Lharampa. On his return to Rumtek he was named Abbot of Rumtek monastery and the Nalanda Institute for Higher Buddhist studies at Rumtek. He has been the personal teacher of the four principal Karma Kagyu tulkus: Shamar Rinpoche, Situ Rinpoche, Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche and Gyaltsab Rinpoche.

Thrangu Rinpoche has traveled extensively throughout Europe, the Far East and the USA; he is the abbot of Gampo Abbey, Nova Scotia, Canada, of Thrangu House, Oxford, in the UK. In 1984 he spent several months in Tibet where he ordained over 100 monks and nuns and visited several monasteries. He has also founded the monastery, Thrangu Tashi Choling in Boudhnath, a retreat center and college at Namu Buddha, east of the Katmandu Valley, and has established a school in Boudhnath for the general education of lay children and young monks. He built Tara Abbey in Katmandu. In October of 1999 he consecrate the College at Sarnath which will accept students from the different sects of Buddhism and will be available to western students as well.

Thrangu Rinpoche has given teachings in over 25 countries and is especially known for taking complex teachings and making them accessible to Western students. Thrangu Rinpoche is a recognized master of Mahamudra meditation.

More recently, because of his vast knowledge of the Dharma, he was appointed by His Holiness the Dalai Lama to be the personal tutor for the recently escaped 17th Karmapa.

Notes

1. There are several realms which ordinary persons don't perceive. As Thrangu Rinpoche has said, "Because you can't see it, that doesn't mean it doesn't exist." One of these realms is the sambhogakaya which can be visited by only highly realized Bodhisattvas. In this realm the dharma is continually taught and one of these realms is Tushita which is presided over by the next Buddha, the Maitreya Buddha. The Buddha dwelled there before coming to earth to give dharma teachings.
2. The perfect mahayana practitioner is a bodhisattva who vows to not reach enlightenment until all other beings have also done so. There are ten stages which a bodhisattva goes through until reaching complete enlightenment.
3. The Buddha's teachings can be divided into three main streams. The first is called the hinayana which are the teachings of the Four Noble Truths and meditation and developing an understanding of the emptiness of self. The second is the mahayana teachings which involve the study of emptiness of phenomena and practicing the bodhisattva path. The third turning involves understanding that everything is not completely empty, but there is also Buddha-nature which pervades all sentient beings.
4. The word for meditation in Tibetan is *sgom* pronounced "gom" and the word for "getting used to" or "habituated" or "cultivating" is *goms* pronounced "khom." We can see the words are very similar.
5. Buddhists believe that the outside phenomena which appears solid and real to us is not actually real. A modern example is that if we look at a table it appears hard and made of brown wood. That is what it is on the relative level. A physicist would, however, tell us that the table is actually made up of 99.99% empty space and in this empty space are atoms which are moving around at thousands of miles an our and these atoms are flying off into space all the time. Furthermore, the "brown" is simply a wavelength of light which only human eyes see as "brown." This is more like what the table is on an ultimate or absolute level.

Books by Thrangu Rinpoche

The Three Vehicles of Buddhist Practice. This book gives an overview of the Hinayana, Mahayana, and Vajrayana as it was practiced in Tibet. Boulder: Namu Buddha Publications, 1998.

The Open Door to Emptiness. This book goes through in a easy-to-understand way the arguments made to establish that all phenomena are indeed empty. Vancouver: Karme Thekchen Choling, 1997.

The Practice of Tranquillity and Insight. This book is a practical guide to the two types of meditation that form the core of Buddhist spiritual practice. Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1993

Buddha Nature. This book is an overview of the whole concept of Buddha-nature as it is presented in Maitreya's *Uttara Tantra*. Katmandu: Rangjung Yeshe Publications, 1993.

The King of Samadhi. This book is a commentary on the only sutra of the Buddha which discusses mahamudra meditation. It is also the sutra which predicted the coming of Gampopa. Katmandu: Rangjung Yeshe Publications, 1994.

The Songs of Naropa. This book tells the story of the life of Naropa and analyzes in detail his famous Summary of Mahamudra which lays out the path of mahamudra meditation by the guru whose succession of students went on to found the Kagyu lineage. Katmandu: Rangjung Yeshe Publications, 1997.

¹ Explain Tushita heaven

² There are 10 bodhisattva levels etc.

³ The three wheels of dharma are: xxx

⁴ difference between gom and khom

⁵ Buddhist believe that the outside phenomena which appears solid and real to us is not actually real. Etc.