



## Dolpo Tulku Rinpoche Teachings

### **The Four Seals The Basic Buddhist View**

The main topic today is a summary of the Buddhist creed. As we only have limited time, I am not sure I can cover everything that I would like to cover, but I will do my best. Buddhism denotes the system which follows the Buddha's teachings, and I am sure everyone here is familiar with Buddha, so I don't have to explain anything in this regard. His teachings, also called Dharma, have the main aim to transform harmful states of mind into beneficial ones. In this regard, we can identify two points: the "*view*" and the "*conduct*".

The "*conduct*" of a person needs to be motivated through compassion, and, has at its core, the idea of non-violence based on this compassion.

Compassion here goes beyond not only human beings, but also includes all beings capable of experiencing suffering and happiness. We aim to benefit them all in whatever way possible, based on the understanding of our inter-connectedness. So the objects of our compassion are the innumerable beings that exist. We try to avoid harming them and instead try to help them, without any bias, and without claiming that some deserve our compassion but others are to be excluded. This is, ideally, how we should behave.

There are many reasons why we should have compassion for all beings. For people who live in the West, I think we can use pets as the best example. We can easily see how beneficial it is to have a pet, and how we enjoy its company and affection. This shows us how compassion is a positive factor in our life and we can easily see the benefits of extending this compassion to more and more beings.

Now, we come to the "*view*". The view must be based on certainty, and therefore, we must first of all examine it thoroughly using logic. Blind belief without reason cannot be called a valid view within the Buddhist system. Careful study is therefore emphasised.

Buddha said: *“Do not accept my view and conduct of non-violence because you believe in me, but because you have examined them yourself using logic and discernment.”* Naturally, it is safe to say that Buddhism is a coherent system of logic and analysis.

The *“view”* is based on different doctrines, like the *“Four Noble Truths”*<sup>1</sup>. Most of you here will be familiar with them. Another foundation of the view is the *“Two Truths”*<sup>2</sup>. Today, however, I will talk about the *“Four Primordial Seals”*.

The first Seal is: **‘All that is compounded is impermanent’**.  
The second is: **‘All that is contaminated is suffering’**.  
The third is: **‘All phenomena are empty and without self’**.  
The fourth Seal is: **‘Nirvana is peace’**.

To understand the philosophy of the views, like any one of the Four Seals is completely indispensable, if we want to be Buddhist.

We talk about *“Buddhists by view”* and *“Buddhists by conduct”*.

People who act with compassion and adhere to non-violence can be called Buddhists by conduct; however, they might not be Buddhists in their thinking. There are many people like that. So to find out if someone is a Buddhist by view, we have to see what his understanding of the Four Seals is. A Seal here means that the entire Buddhist view can be summarised within it.

I, for example, was ordained as a monk. It was only after my ordination that I started to study Buddhism, and learned about the Four Seals in one of the advanced classes. Until then, I was only a *“Buddhist by conduct”*, but not yet by *“view”* as I had no clear grasp of the philosophy.

### **Definition Of The Four Seals:**

#### **1) All that is compounded is impermanent**

This means that all that arises due to causes and conditions changes moment by moment. The room we are in for example, the building, the tables, the people - everything is changing all the time. The atoms of this table in front of you are constantly subject to change. This is something Buddha already taught long before modern science did, and apparently also before his time there were Hindu schools claiming that there is constant change of even the smallest particles.

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<sup>1</sup> The Four Noble Truths were the Buddha’s first sermon. They are: 1) the Truth of Suffering; 2) the Truth of the Origin of Suffering; 3) the Truth of Cessation; 4) the Truth of the Path (to Cessation)

<sup>2</sup> The Two Truth are the Relative Truth and the Absolute Truth

Generally though, we do perceive material things like this table to be permanent and unchangeable once built, and also up to the moment they break. This is erroneous thinking. We can also apply this to ourselves. We get stuck in our thinking that these are our qualities and these are our faults, without any chance of changing.

If we compare, for example, the knowledge we had when we entered university and then see how it has grown over four, five years of study, then we can observe a real difference. We move from someone who knows very little about a certain subject to someone learned in it.

So what this sentence '*All that is compounded is impermanent*' shows us, is that not only matter is subject to constant change, but also our mind. This implies that there is a real chance for us for us to improve.

This Seal also denotes a significant difference from Buddhism to other religions. If everything comes together and changes through causes and conditions, it means that no outer force is bringing anything into being. The statement negates an independent creator and Buddhism therefore does not accept the notion of an independent creative force of any kind.

The most important figure in Buddhism, is the one who shows us the path to achieve happiness and avoid suffering: our guide, namely the Buddha. But all he can do is point to this path. We are the ones who have to follow it. He is not able to change us.

For example, as this table does not have the right causes and conditions to grow apples on it, then even Buddha is not able to make them grow! But if the causes and conditions for something to arise are assembled, then also there is no-one who can stop the process. So this is the argument, which refutes the existence of a creator within the Buddhist philosophical system.

## **2) All that is contaminated is suffering**

All beings, including humans, do not wish to suffer. It is very important, therefore, to find out what methods help to end suffering. What do we have to know to overcome suffering? These are significant questions.

The statement uses the word '*contaminated*' and here Buddha refers to the contamination of our mind through negative mental states. This means that suffering is not an outer object but a mental state.

For example, the premises of this university are very beautiful, but if we had a bad day because we didn't pass an exam, or, something upset us, we will not be able to enjoy it. On the other hand, when we are happy and we encounter difficulties we don't get immediately swayed by them. This shows us that happiness or suffering is not mainly produced by something external, but depends on our thinking. Happiness and suffering

are products of the mind. There are objects that trigger harmful states of mind, and then the harmful state of mind in itself causes us to suffer.

All phenomena arise due to causes and conditions. For example love, compassion and wisdom are generated through causes and conditions and they are also impermanent. But they do not give rise to negative states of mind and therefore do not result in suffering. So we can distinguish between states of mind, which bring suffering, and, states of mind that don't. As we said before, it is possible to change from suffering into happiness through the notion of impermanence.

Sometimes, everything goes well, and for example, we are in a nice temple. There, it is easy to feel relaxed and happy. In these situations the Dharma (Buddhist teachings) do not need to be implemented. But when we face difficulties in our job, in our family and so on, we have to use the Dharma to change harmful thoughts into beneficial ones. This is the most important point to understand here.

Many people make a big distinction between their everyday life and their spiritual practice. If we have a good look at Buddhist teachings though, then they are all aimed to help us in our everyday life without splitting off a separate spiritual life. For example, if we go to the office and get angry or jealous at our colleagues, then we need the Dharma to give us guidance on how to deal with our mind. When we happily sip our coffee and sit in the sunshine, we can just remain as we are.

If we have any doubts about the best time and the best environment to live the Buddhist teachings, then the best time is when we encounter difficulties and the best environment is the one we are actually presently in. We don't need any special time for meditation or prayer, and no special environment like a temple.

If we consider prayer and meditation are the most important practices in Buddhism which act as antidotes to our harmful states of mind, then we have a wrong understanding. These are branch-practices. The most important practice is how we deal with other people in everyday life. At work, for example, all sorts of emotions arise. At that particular time, we cannot always take a break to pray or meditate. What we need to do is to reflect on what is going on in our mind, relax, and find the most appropriate way to deal with the situation. That is essential.

So, when we talk here about '*All that is contaminated is suffering*', then by "*contaminated*" we mean our negative states of mind, and the objects we perceive in relation to them. The Dharma is then used to carefully investigate what these negative states are; how they arise; what objects trigger them; whether these objects are actually present; or are they memories and so on in order to turn them into a positive direction.

### 3) All phenomena are empty and without self

Normally, we assume an inherent essence in the phenomena that we perceive. This concept is called the *self of phenomena*. When we talk about the *self of person*, then we mean the person that we impute on our five aggregates (footnote). This imputation we understand as an 'I' which is a singular person.

The explanations given by the Buddhist texts refuting this notion of "a Self" are very similar to the scientific explanations of the nature of matter in physics. Therefore there are many scientists who are interested in this point: 'All phenomena are empty and without self'. As a result, a number of them are currently visiting monasteries to learn more about Buddhist logic.

What is important to understand here, is that when we say 'phenomena do not have a self' it does not mean that there are no phenomena at all.

If we do not examine phenomena minutely, then all phenomena are there.

We are wearing clothes, there is an 'I' and a 'you' and so on. But if we have a close look to see in what manner phenomena exist, we find out that they do not have an inherent essence that we can prove, or that abides anywhere.

Our concept of how they exist as independent entities is destroyed through this examination. Within the nature of reality, no independent, singular phenomena can be found. We can claim though, that phenomena have something at their core, like the essence of fire is heat or the essence of water is wetness, but this is not an autonomous self.

Generally on a relative level there is an 'I'.

But, when we have a look at what in our body is the 'I', or, where the 'I' is located (as we associate the notion of 'I' with the body), we cannot find it.

This is what we call the *selflessness of the person*. We simply impute the 'I' on the body, which is a collection of many parts.

If 'I' were my hands, for example, then as I have two hands, there should be two 'I's. Normally we don't think in this way. Therefore the way we perceive the 'I' and the way our body is structured is different.

The *selflessness of phenomena* is explained very well in physics. For example, if we think there is a table, then we should look exactly at where this thing called 'table' is located.

Is it in the table top? Or in the legs? In which part is the 'table'? If we dissect what we call 'table' further and further, we end up with atoms, which have the nature of waves and matter. We cannot find an object that is 'table' by itself. All phenomena are the same. For example, what we call 'car' is an assembly of four wheels, seats, doors, a steering wheel and so on. But the wheels by themselves are not the 'car', the seats are not the 'car' and so on. There is nothing that we identify as being 'car'.

If I were to ask where from which direction the sun shines through the windows, then you would all think "from the left", because this is the thought that immediately comes to your mind. But my thought, based on where I am sitting, would be that it shines from the right side. Where the sun shines from is dependent on our position in the room, so the direction is actually relative to us and has nothing to do with the sun itself. Therefore we say that a *right* or *left* window is empty of an independent existence. We still believe these things to be true without questioning them. That is called '*grasping at the self of phenomena*'. But notions like '*left*' and '*right*', '*behind*' and '*in front*' only come into existence depending on our perception and have nothing to do with the objects as such.

The main point that this philosophical view teaches us is how we can counteract harmful states of mind.

We all have strong concepts about what is good and bad. Around that we establish all sorts of restrictions, rules etc. that we then apply to what we perceive.

My thoughts about what is right and wrong were really shaken up when I first went to visit foreign countries. I am sure when you travel, the same happens to you. A lot of what we believe in is based on our culture. This is in fact, not by itself right or wrong, good or bad. By understanding this point, we can overcome our judgements and the harmful states of mind like anger or desire that is associated with them.

#### **4) Nirvana is peace**

Nirvana means to have pacified harmful states of mind from their root, and, that love, compassion and wisdom have been completely developed. For example, Buddha lived in India from the time of his enlightenment up until the time he passed away. So his nirvana was in India. Therefore, nirvana is not some kind of heavenly place to which we have to go. It is a state of mind.

These Four Seals were expounded by Buddha himself in his teachings, called sutras, and they are the basis for all the different streams of Buddhism practised all over the world as for example in Thailand, India, Sri Lanka, Korea and Tibet.

There are some differences between Buddhist streams, for example, due to the weather. Monks and nuns in different countries will wear different kinds of clothes according to the weather in their countries. Also, the ancient culture and traditions of their countries influence how Buddhism is practiced in each place. In any case, the basic philosophical view as I have just explained to you now, remains the same in each stream or country.

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