



The Four Noble Truths
by
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I was requested to teach on the Four Noble Truths, and also have a contemplation on them. Actually the Four Noble Truths is the first teaching that manifested from Lord Buddha. As you know, Prince Siddhartha reached enlightenment under the bodhi tree at Bodhgaya, and then for seven weeks he did not teach. After seven weeks then the Kings of the Gods, one known as Tsang-pa (Brahma), and another one called Gya-jin (Indra), offered a golden wheel of a universal monarch with a thousand spokes and a white conch shell that turns clockwise. This symbolism is upheld even today. In the monasteries every morning starts with the blowing of a conch shell—it is very difficult to get a clockwise one though, most of the monasteries have an anticlockwise one—and also the dharma wheel is on top of every monastery. Also at that time two deer came from the forest and sat next to the dharma wheel in such a way that it became a very auspicious symbol.

Then Buddha manifested his first teaching, he taught the Four Noble Truths to five human disciples—five who are known as *khor nga de zang-po* (Group of five excellent followers of Buddha Shakyamuni)—in the holy place of Varanasi. This teaching is the very basic first step teaching in dharma, but it is also a foundation, because without knowing the Four Noble Truths then knowing the dharma, even very advanced dharma, will be a little bit difficult. It is like building a very nice house with no foundation. It will not make much sense. So the Four Noble Truths are very basic, and also very simple because it's almost common sense.

As followers of Vajrayana Buddhism our understanding and perception of Buddha is limitless, so we will not say such things as 'Buddha taught the Four Noble Truth first because that was his understanding at that time, and that was what he thought he should teach to those people'. We do not think like that. If Buddha thought that way, then he is not Buddha, he is just a wise person, a wise man—someone who became wise, learned and intelligent person, that's all, not Buddha. For us, Buddha by definition is beyond all intelligence and beyond all limitation—Buddha has no limitation of any kind whatsoever. So the concept of 'I' and 'teaching' the Four Noble Truths to these five disciples doesn't work for our perception of Buddha. Buddha manifested the Four Noble Truths because that was the capacity of those five disciples, and that is what manifested as part of the limitless manifestation of the Buddha.

Now I am teaching the most basic Theravada teaching with a Vajrayana perception of the Buddha. That is the only way I can teach because I received all the teachings and practices and everything from A to Z in Vajrayana. I'm not saying that from A to Z is there, but everything that I have got from my A to my Z, not the entire dharma's A to Z. I don't even

have the complete A, just a little bit of A, a little bit of B, a little bit of C, a little bit of everything. So the transmissions I received are from Vajrayana, which I have to make very clear to you, because if you are hearing the Four Noble Truths from a purely Theravada practitioner, a Theravada master who has nothing to do with Vajrayana or Mahayana, then it might be slightly different. Therefore I don't want you to get confused, because I can't help but function as a Vajrayana teacher, that is what I am.

Now generally, the entire teachings of Buddha manifest, and it manifests to benefit to all sentient beings. It benefits all sentient beings by liberating them from suffering—because nobody wants suffering—and by helping them to be free and to have no limitation—limitation is suffering, so no limitation. That is the ultimate wish of everyone and for that Buddha manifests dharma. How Buddha manifests dharma is, before he became Buddha, for many, many eons he practiced as an ordinary sentient being and then as a bodhisattva. His basic motivation was to attain the ultimate realization and liberation to help all sentient beings, to free them and to help them to attain ultimate liberation. With that motivation, when he realized the ultimate liberation and limitless realization, then what his original motivation was, became manifest. So that is how the dharma manifests from the Buddha.

That is the explanation in Vajrayana about why there are the Four Noble Truths, why there is an Eightfold Noble Path, why there are Mahayana sutras such as emptiness and all of this, why there are tantric teachings such as Kriya, Upa, Yoga, and Anuttarayoga etc. All of this is because Buddha's original motivation fully matured, and according to his motivation, then the realization is to fulfill that original motivation, which is also why bodhichitta is important for every Buddhist practitioner. Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhist practitioners especially emphasize bodhichitta, the wish to attain Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings to attain Buddhahood. If that is your motivation, then that is what is going to happen—when you become Buddha you will manifest just like Shakyamuni, spontaneously and limitlessly, and limitless sentient beings will be liberated. Until the last sentient being attains Buddhahood Prince Siddhartha's manifestation will not cease to exist. Prince Siddhartha's physical body passed away 2500 years ago, but the manifestation of his dharmakaya, sambhogakaya, and nirmanakaya manifests at all times, through statues and through everything that motivates others to be free and to overcome their shortcomings—in limitless ways the Buddha manifests.

The common sense of the Four Noble Truths is, since you don't want to have suffering, then you have to do everything to overcome the causes and conditions of suffering. And if you want to be happy, that will never happen if you don't practice the causes and conditions of happiness. That is quite simple. For example, if I want a glass of water, just sitting here and wanting a glass of water will not make it happen. I have to ask somebody or go out and get a glass of water. Also, if it's too hot then I have to go and turn on the fan or turn on the air conditioner or go outside in the air or something. Just sitting here and thinking, "Oh I don't want this heat, this is terrible, it's so hot, it's so hot," won't help. You have to do what it takes to get what you want and you have to do what it takes to overcome what you don't want. So the common sense of the Four Noble Truths is that; very simple.

The first two noble truths, the truth of suffering and the truth of the cause of suffering, are the cause and result of samsara. Then the second two, the truth of the path and the truth of cessation, are the cause and result of nirvana. So the first two are the cause and result of samsara and the second two are cause and result of nirvana. That is an easy way to grasp what this is for. First is the truth of suffering, second is the truth of the cause of suffering, third is the truth of cessation (or you can also call it nirvana), and fourth is the truth of the path. But path to what? The path to nirvana.

There are many ways that the Four Noble Truths can be taught, but I thought this particular way will be the most suitable for us here because you also want to contemplate on them.

Now suffering is very easy to know, we all know suffering. The basic cause of suffering is 'I', the self. If there isn't this 'I' then who will suffer? As long as we perceive ourselves as 'I' it is guaranteed that there will be suffering. It is like an image and a shadow. As long as there is an image there will be a shadow. As long as there is 'I' there will be suffering. Also that 'I' will have all kinds of manifestations, for example, 'I' will manifest as a friend of somebody, 'I' will manifest as an enemy of somebody, 'I' will manifest as an owner of something, 'I' will manifest as an owner of something that is lost, 'I' will manifest as a friend of somebody who lost it, who lost a friend, and so on and so forth. Also, 'I' am somebody who has a friend but then my friend becomes much better than me so I am jealous. Everything comes from 'I'. I, self, ignorance, ego, all of these things are different terms for the same thing.

The Four Noble Truths are taught in sixteen parts—each one is divided into four, so it makes sixteen. These sixteen we can learn in an elaborate manner as Buddha taught, or in a little bit simpler way so that we can contemplate on them in our time here, which is just a few hours.

The Truth of Suffering

The first noble truth—the truth of suffering—is divided into four: impermanence, suffering, emptiness and selflessness (non-existence of the self). I will explain the definition of each one.

First, impermanence, which means, anything that has come into being, which happens to be because of everything else, is impermanent, that is guaranteed. Whatever is there, because of all the causes and conditions for it, whatever it is, a tree, a house, somebody, something, everything is impermanent. 'Any thing that is there' means because of everything else. 'I' is here, form is there, for example, this carpet, it is earth, water, fire, air, everything. A seed grew from the earth, then from that plant cotton was developed, then people collected that and put it together and made it into thread, then made the carpet and then you bought it, or somebody donated it to you, and it is here. So it is impermanent because it was put together, it came about, it happened to be, so it will fall apart. Also, somebody who is born will definitely die. That way everything is impermanent. There is nothing that is permanent—nothing which is or happens to be there can you ever find that is permanent, everything is impermanent.

Second is suffering, which by definition is: everything impermanent is suffering. For example, if you go to a village and somebody is crying. Why? Their father has died, or their son is dead, or a cow is dead, or their house caught fire, or a friend has abandoned them. Something was there, then something happened about it and now it is not the same. It was impermanent, therefore the person is crying.

Even if they are not crying, somebody tried to dress up really well, groomed themselves really well and tried to talk and behave very properly. Why? Because he or she thinks of themselves as somebody, and wants to hold onto that and doesn't want to lose people's respect and veneration; they don't want to have a bad reputation. All of these things. But it is very hard to keep those things, reputation, integrity etc. You are afraid of losing your face and you are afraid of losing your ear—I think in South-East Asia they say face but we say ear. I think Indians say nose. It is very interesting, face, nose, ear. When you have something you have to work so hard and really stress yourself out so hard to keep it. Then when you don't have it you have to work so hard to get it. This way everything is impermanent. Because of impermanence you are afraid to lose what you have, and when you lose what you have then you suffer. All of this is suffering. That is the definition of suffering. Impermanence is suffering.

The third is emptiness: anything that is suffering, actually its nature, the cause of that suffering, the suffering itself, the result of that suffering, everything is not there, it is emptiness. When you have nothing you want to get something and you suffer, and when you get something then you are afraid that somebody will take it, then you are suspicious of everybody. When somebody says nice things to you, the first thing that comes to your mind is, "I have to be careful, this guy is after what I have." Then you will have all kinds of things, bars and gatekeepers outside, inside secretaries, so many things that they have to go through before they get to you. So it is emptiness. All of the suffering itself does not really exist. If you really look into it, each one of those things are not there.

For example, money, it is very important, right? Without money we cannot have a house, without money we cannot have food, without money we cannot even go from one place to another. These days without money you can't even get water. It is unbelievable; we don't get free water which is drinkable unless we buy it. Some day I am quite sure if we are not careful we will also have to buy air. Right now we don't have to, but we have to buy earth and fire, we don't get free fire. Right now we don't have to buy space, but after some time I think we will have to.

That way everything depends on money. But what is money? If you really look at it, what is money? It is a piece of paper with a number and some zeros added to it. Then there is a bigger system which creates the importance of it, and human beings have been working for thousands of years to make it this way. It is made up by us. How long since the first money appeared? Twenty thousand years ago? Thirty thousand years ago? So it is the result of twenty or thirty thousand years of hard work, suffering and pain and all kinds of games that we created. Now we have a game and we are part of the game. We are in the football field kicking the money ball. We are all there and each one of us has a role. You are a keeper, a

quarter-back or a referee or somebody. This way it is emptiness, it is not there. Anything that is suffering, its natural characteristic is non-existence, it is emptiness.

Then selfless, the last one, void of self—anything that is emptiness, the nature of that is selfless. Who is suffering? I am suffering, 'I'. And that 'I', if you really look into it, it is not there. 'I' is just like sky, 'I' is just like space. It has no limitation. It is not tangible. You cannot lock 'I' into a box. You cannot burn 'I', you cannot drown 'I', you cannot bury 'I'. So the 'I' is emptiness and 'I' is non-existent, but not like money non-existence. 'I' is non-existent like space. It is limitless. It does not exist as a limited thing. Therefore, selflessness, non-existence of the self, is the fourth teaching.

The Cause of Suffering

Now it is the same thing with the cause of suffering, because suffering—which is taught in four parts—is the result of the cause of suffering. The four are: First is the cause *rgyu*. Second is *kun-jung*, which means like a source of becoming. *Kun* means all and *jung* means source—*jung-wa* means coming. So *kun-jung-wa*, because of this everything happens. So the cause and the *kun-jung* (the source of all). Third is *rab-kye*, which means gives birth to it, it makes it arise, it makes it materialize. The last one, the fourth, is *kyen*, the condition.

First is *rGyu*, the cause, which is 'I' and all that develops from it, which is described as defilement. Because of 'I', then 'I like', that is attachment, and 'I don't like', that is hatred, and 'Why not me?', that is jealousy. Then when something good happens to you, if you say "Of course it has to be me," that is ego, and when something bad happens to you, you say "Why me, why not somebody else?" That is jealousy. The source of all of this is ignorance, the 'I'. That is called *nyön mong pa*,¹ defilement. Then whatever kind of action that *nyön mong pa* takes—if we just sit there having all this defilement then not so much action happens, but we take action, we follow our attachment and we try to indulge in things that we have desire for—then the appetite grows bigger and bigger and bigger, normally. Then anger; because of anger we act and cause injury to others. So anger, jealousy and the ego, all of these defilements, when they are in action, then it becomes karma. So, the defilement and its karma (that it accumulates), is the cause for planting the seeds which will ripen in the future. That is the cause.

Second is *kun-jung*. The kind of karma which is conducted and accumulated by the defilements, according to that, there are all kinds of conditions that will arise, which are part of the karma. For example, we as human beings, we have nice beautiful land or we have terrible land, we have a good environment or we have a bad environment. Even in a city like Delhi we have very nice houses, we have terrible slums, we have very nice swimming pools and we have terrible ponds of sewage, all kinds of things, and these are all a result of our common karma.

I cannot separate myself from my hair or from my finger, right? In the same way, we all cannot separate ourselves from our environment. So all human beings see and experience the

same environment which all human beings see and experience. So what makes the sun, what makes the moon, what makes the Earth, what makes the rotation of the Earth around the sun? What makes all of these things, and what makes us look a certain way, physically look like this, and live a certain amount of years, a maximum of a hundred and a minimum of a moment (we can even die inside our mother's womb before we are born). All of these conditions are called *kun-jung*,ⁱⁱ and are the result of karma.

I will give you a very stupid example. Some of the bugs that are born and thrive in dirty, unthinkable, untouchable, terrible ponds, they are very happy in there. If you take them out of that and put them in a very fresh clean pond, they will die. It is poison for them. What is good for them and what is bad for them is part of their karma. Our environment is part of our karma. It is all the same thing. It is all part of us, everything is part of everybody. *Kun-jung* is what makes that happen.

Third is *rab-kye*. Even though the general conditions are a result of our karma, each individual is born in such a way so that maybe you don't have to even go near those dirty places. They are there, but you don't have to go there. You are born in a place, in a family, in such a way that you don't even have to go there. Then others, who are born in those very terrible places, they have to live there and they have to grow up there. So within the *kun-jung*, then the *rab-kye*—even though you have the commonness you have your own thing. We all have everything in common, but each one of us is different—you have your problem and your advantage and I have my problem and my advantage. Everybody has their own problems and their own advantage or happiness. You have your own happiness and you have your own suffering, everyone is different. Even in one family each family member is different. That is called *rab-kye*.

The last one, the fourth, is *kyen* (condition). *Kyen* means: this time I am born as a human being of planet Earth, but after I die I might be born as a human being of another planet which is ten galaxies away. Or I might be born as a monkey in the African jungle. Actually that would be fun if the jungle was protected, then I would just have to watch out for tigers, but they don't climb up, so I would become wise. Even my feet and tail could hold on to trees so I could make fun of the tigers. Anyway, *kyen* means whatever condition that makes us obtain a new environment, manifest in a new environment, which is not the same environment in which we were born before. So that is *kyen*; altogether: *gyu dang kun-jung rab-kye kyen* (1. rGyu 2. Kun jung 3. Rab kye 4. Kyen), the truth of the cause of suffering.

All of these places, all have suffering, that is for sure. From the highest of the gods to the lowest of the hells, all sentient beings have suffering, and they all fight. If you have superior power like gods, then your fighting will be quite superior fighting—you will throw suns at each other. Inferior fights will be amongst amoebas that grow in the most unbecoming conditions; they will try to eat each other. Some amoebas win and eat the other amoebas that lose. When we have diseases in our body, some of the germs, parasites, eat the other ones. Normally we have lots of those in us and they eat all the sickness, but then sometimes they become passive or something and they don't manage to eat the other ones, the other ones eat them. Then we

get sick and we go to the doctor and they try to fix it. But if our 'soldiers' inside don't want to fight on our behalf then we will be eaten by the enemies and we will be dead.

So like that. That is the cause and conditions of suffering. Everything is suffering. As long as there is 'I' there is suffering.

The Truth of Cessation

The truth of cessation is *gogpai denpa*.ⁱⁱⁱ *Gogpa* means cessation, you can call it nirvana, but the true direct translation of *gogpa* means cessation. *Gogpa* is again taught in four: *gogpa*, *shiwa*, *gya-nompa*, *ngepar jungwa*.^{iv} *Gogpa* is when you manage to overcome the causes and conditions of suffering, then those causes and conditions cease to exist. So anger ceases to exist, jealousy ceases to exist, the ego ceases to exist, greed, hatred, all of these things cease to exist when we are able to overcome the 'I', the self. That is *gogpa*, the cessation.

Then second is *shiwa*, which means peace, because you overcame the cause, all the defilements. What makes you not at peace, all of the sufferings of trying to get something, trying to get rid of something, afraid of losing something, and mourning for losing something, all of these things will not be there, therefore there is peace. What causes all of the suffering is the defilements, which cease to exist through practice. That is *shiwa*, peace.

Third is *gya nompa*,^v the real meaning of which is 'very precious', it is precious, which is quite unique Tibetan terminology—valuable or precious. This means when you are free of all defilements, then it is very clean, you are clean. When you are free from all the suffering then that is joy—free from all suffering is joy; that is peace. That is *gya nompa*; this is very precious and very valuable.

The last one is *ngepar jungwa*,^{vi} which means truly becoming. *Ngepar* means truly and *jungwa* means happening or becoming, so truly becoming. In the truth of the cause of suffering we also have *kun jung*.^{vii} Now this is becoming the other way, which is: once you are able to achieve the cessation, which in this case, in the first teaching of Buddha, it means arhathood, the realization of arhat. Once you reach that level you will never fall back, it is truly becoming. You truly become an arhat and you will not lose your arhat realization and fall back into samsara. You will proceed from there and become a bodhisattva and become Buddha. Therefore, *ngepar jungwa*^{viii} here means sort of like permanent, it is something that will never go wrong, it is done. You truly became an arhat. That is the truth of *gogpa*, the cessation or nirvana.

The Truth of the Path

The fourth noble truth is the truth of the path. When teaching, first is the truth of suffering, then the truth of the cause of suffering, then the truth of cessation, then the truth of the path. But in practice, the truth of the path comes before cessation, because you have to practice the path in order to reach the truth of cessation. So in practice it is different, but in teaching it is

this way. I guess why Buddha manifested it this way is that the five disciples had heard the final result, so after hearing the result then they heard the way for that result. Otherwise the truth of the path should be before the result—because of it you will get the result.

Anyway, this also has four parts: first is the path, second is *rigpa* (the opposite of ignorance, like seeing, knowing, intelligence, awareness), third is *drubpa*,^{ix} which means practicing, and fourth is *ngepar jinpa*,^x which means truly providing. The first one is 'truly becoming' and this is 'what makes it truly become'. *Ngepar jungwa*^{xi} means 'truly becoming', and *ngepar jinpa* means 'what makes it truly become'.

First is the path. The path by definition is: you are travelling to get somewhere, and that somewhere is *chönyi de ko nai* (nature of dharma/suchness). *Chö-nyi* means the ultimate unobscured true nature of everything. *Chö* means all the dharma, *chönyi* is true nature—true, unmistakable, not obscured by ignorance, not obscured by anything, the true thing, as it is. Not how it appears but what it really is. That is what we wish to reach. What leads towards that is the 'path'. That is the definition of the path, and searching for it, little by little trying to understand it, and so on and so forth.

Second is *rigpa—marigpa* is ignorance, which is none other than self—the awareness, the intelligence, the knowing, the *rigpa*, that makes you able to overcome *marigpa*, ignorance, able to overcome the self. For example, in the path it is quite natural that the practitioner—more in the Theravada practice here—they actually practice Shamatha and Vipassana and they observe the Vinaya vows, the precepts. That way you slowly, gradually overcome ignorance, because you renounce the conditions that will feed the ignorance. Because of that the ignorance itself becomes weakened, then as the ignorance weakens, then the wisdom, the awareness, the *rigpa* manifests and becomes stronger. So that is *rigpa*.

Third is *drubpa*, which actually means implementation or practicing. But practicing what? We are all practitioners, everybody in samsara is a practitioner—everybody in samsara practices samsara. We practice attachment, we practice jealousy, we practice greed, we practice fear, we practice hatred; we practice them and we are following them. We are very strong followers, almost slave-like followers of our greed, our hatred, our jealousy, our self, the ignorance. It is practice, practicing. But here the definition of practice is not practicing that but practicing to overcome that, so practicing in another way. Instead of becoming the slave of my jealousy I practice to free myself from my jealousy. Instead of being the slave of my greed I practice to free myself from greed. This is the definition of practice.

I have come across many people who have a misunderstanding of renunciation. Renunciation is misunderstood as being anti-social, abandonment, irresponsible and escapism, and so on and so forth. But it is not. Renunciation means that instead of remaining as a slave of our anger, jealousy and greed etc, we try to free ourselves from our anger, jealousy and greed etc. And for that, whatever makes us a slave of our defilements, we have to renounce that. That is renunciation.

In Mahayana we are renouncing for the sake of all sentient beings. We are renouncing our attachment for the sake of the freedom and happiness and liberation of all sentient beings. So

it is totally the opposite of abandonment, it is adopting; adopting all sentient beings as our sons and daughters. That is the definition of renunciation in Mahayana.

But here renunciation means the causes and conditions of suffering, we are renouncing them so that we will reach the cessation of the defilements, which is arhathood. That is the practice.

Fourth is *ngepar jinpa*. What makes us truly become is totally the opposite to the definition of impermanence. Everything is impermanent because it is a result of the composition of many things—it became, it happened to be, therefore it is impermanent.

When you overcome all of the ignorance and defilements then you are free of all of the karma. When you reach that state then that is not the result of all the other things, it is the essence of everything, therefore it makes you truly become an arhat. It is not *dūjay* (collected phenomena), it is not created, it is not made, it is undone; it is not done. So all the karmas and defilements of countless lifetimes are undone—the ego, the self, the ignorance, which is the source of all suffering, is undone. It is undone by recognizing the baselessness and emptiness and nonexistence of this ego, this self. That way it is forever and it is not impermanent, therefore you are an arhat. But of course an arhat will become a bodhisattva, and a bodhisattva will become a Buddha. So until you become Buddha you have not totally reached the ultimate realization, ultimate liberation. But once you become an arhat it is not something that will become impermanent and then one day you are not an arhat. But of course, as a Mahayana practitioner, then you can look at an arhat and when an arhat becomes a bodhisattva, then the arhat becomes more than an arhat. And when a bodhisattva becomes a Buddha, they are more than a bodhisattva, and totally limitless. Arhats still have limitation, but do not have the limitation of impermanence, of falling back. That is the definition of *ngepar jinpa*.

So those are the sixteen aspects of the Four Noble Truths, very roughly. I hope it is now clear enough for you to make sense of.

For further teachings by Chamgon Kenting Tai Situpa, see
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ⁱ A secondary mental factor—a state of no peace and happiness by the force of unwholesome deeds. *Klesha* in Sanskrit

ⁱⁱ According to the karma of all sentient beings everything will happen and be experienced as individual and common for the six types of beings.

ⁱⁱⁱ Truth of cessation is completely disconnected from samsara.

^{iv} Four features of Gogpai denpa 1. Gogpa/ cessation 2. Shiwa/peace 3. Gya nompa/excellence 4. Nge par jungwa/renunciation.

^v Very precious/excellence because this is pure and peace which is free from defilement and suffering.

^{vi} Out from samsara and achieved the state of arhat.

^{vii} In the first truth there is *kun jung*, but that *jung* and the *jung* here have two different meanings. So as Rinpoche says, "now this is becoming the other way."

^{viii} Renunciation from samsara and willing to achieve nirvana/arhathood.

^{ix} Practicing: giving up negative mind and applying mind towards the positive.

^x Truly providing the arhat state when you practice this path.

^{xi} Renunciation from samsara and willing to achieve nirvana/arhat.