

Four Dharmas of Gampopa

It is the nature of sentient beings to want happiness and freedom from suffering, but these objectives cannot be obtained merely by wishing or striving. One must also employ effective methods. Everything arises in dependence upon causes and conditions, and nothing occurs without a cause or through an incomplete or unrelated cause. Buddhist philosophy clearly explains the workings of cause and effect this way: non-virtuous thoughts and actions give rise to suffering, while virtuous thoughts and actions bring about happiness. Karmic causation is inexorable.

Samsaric peace and happiness are transient and ephemeral. This is the suffering of change. Even though we might attain the happiness of the higher realms, there is no reason to become attached since it will not last. We must make an effort to achieve total freedom from samsara. Perfect happiness can only be attained through liberation from conditioned existence.

Whether one wishes to achieve complete enlightenment, personal liberation from samsara, or simply temporal happiness, the fundamental practice is to perform the ten virtuous actions and to abandon the ten non-virtuous actions. Practicing the ten virtuous actions without renunciation of samsara will serve as a cause to be reborn in the higher realms of humans and gods, but one will still not be free from the cycle of suffering. If one practices these same actions based on renunciation of personal suffering, then one will achieve individual liberation. And if one practices them on the basis of bodhicitta, then one can achieve buddhahood.

The *Four Dharmas of Gampopa* explain the way to meaningfully implement our desire for happiness in a very succinct way. The four are:

- * turning the mind to the Dharma;
- * the Dharma becoming the path to enlightenment;
- * dispelling error from the path; and
- * the dawning of confusion as wisdom.

These four are simply stated, and yet they encompass the entire teachings of the Sutrayana and Vajrayana.

Turning the mind to Dharma means, first of all, appreciating one's precious human rebirth and its eighteen qualities of leisure and endowment. At this moment, we have the opportunity to become completely free from samsara and to achieve complete enlightenment. All phenomena, including sentient beings, are impermanent and momentary. Humans must experience birth, aging, sickness, and death. No matter how much energy we may expend in improving the conditions of this life, it will all just pass like a dream. To achieve even a small amount of pleasure, one must undergo hardships and make sacrifices. Then at the time of death, the only thing that will be of any benefit is the realization that one has gained through Dharma practice. Even our body that we have cherished and protected will be of no help and, in fact, it will only be a source of misery. All compounded phenomena are subject to change. No matter how much one may strive for it, there is no absolute happiness in samsara.

The suffering of conditioned existence involves both physical and mental pain. The contaminated skandhas, or aggregates, are caught up in the suffering of misery, the suffering of change, and pervasive suffering. Sentient beings suffer from not attaining what they strive for, from being separated from what they are attached to, from coming into contact with enemies, from losing friends and loved ones, and from being dissatisfied even when they get what they want. No matter how much pleasure we experience, there is never any satisfaction. We always seek further happiness. This is the reality of samsara. When this is recognized clearly, one naturally seeks a way to be free of these things. Then, when one understands how the Dharma can purify defilements and lead one to enlightenment, one's mind turns to that direction.

Contemplation of the four thoughts (the precious human rebirth, impermanence, suffering and karma) is thus the means for turning the mind toward Dharma.

Dharma becoming the path means using the Dharma to achieve buddhahood. On the foundation of the four thoughts, one has to genuinely develop immeasurable loving-kindness, compassion, and bodhicitta. This is a special method for developing one's mind to create happiness for oneself and others. All the buddhas and bodhisattvas of the past achieved their realizations by developing bodhicitta, and all the buddhas and bodhisattvas of the future will do likewise. There are none who have achieved realization without it.

Dispelling error from the path means dispelling the three poisons of ignorance, desire, and aversion. Whether we practice the Sutrayana or Vajrayana form of the teachings, our main focus should be on eliminating these poisons. If, in the name of Dharma, we develop desire and other afflictions, then rather than practicing Dharma we are just becoming more deeply enmeshed in samsara. When we study or practice Dharma, we must watch our own minds. If our minds become more clear, open, calm, patient, aware, and understanding, then this is a sign that error is being dispelled from the path. If, on the other hand, we practice advanced Dharma teachings such as the vajrayana, and yet only become more arrogant, undisciplined, confused, proud, and only see negative qualities in others, then error is not being dispelled from the path. So in order to practice successfully, one must always recall the four thoughts, loving-kindness, compassion, bodhicitta, and interdependence, and maintain the awareness that all phenomena are illusory like a dream. Lord Jigten Sumgön said that these preliminary points are much more profound and important than the advanced practices. Without a firm foundation in these preliminaries, advanced practices such as tantra and mahamudra will not be effective.

The fourth dharma of Gampopa is **the dawning of confusion as wisdom**. Since buddha-nature completely pervades all sentient beings, there is nothing to attain that we do not already have. Rather, our study and practice of Dharma are for the purpose of recognizing the reality of the primordial state, the ultimate mode of abiding that has not been previously recognized. So if we develop more ignorance, desire, and aversion, there will be no way for confusion to dawn as wisdom. We cannot achieve buddhahood by developing more afflicting emotions but only by purifying defilements. This was emphasized by all the great masters of the past. I am merely repeating it here.

For those of you who are interested in following the path of Dharma, it is necessary to practice sincerely and with mindfulness. Understanding Dharma is not so difficult. What is difficult is practicing it. Without a proper method of practice there will be little sign of progress. Laziness is deeply ingrained and it always causes us to postpone practice. The current of negative propensities is very strong, and it sweeps us along without choice. Letting ourselves become slaves to our merciless negative thoughts, we suffer unnecessarily. The Dharma is the only means by which we can free ourselves, but it must be practiced with mindfulness and sincerity. If we do not abandon the Dharma, the Dharma will never abandon us. Dharma is the real refuge that can lead us to buddhahood.

*A talk given by Khenchen Konchog Gyaltsen Rinpoche
at the Tibetan Meditation Center on Christmas Day, December, 1991.
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