

Four Dharmas of Gampopa Khenpo Tsultrim Tenzin

Many great Tibetan masters based teachings on this arrangement of the Dharma. For example, Lord Gampopa taught the *Four Dharmas of Gampopa*, the great Sakya master Sachen Kunga Nyingpo taught *Parting from the Four Attachments*, and Je Tsong Khapa taught the *Three Principal Aspects of the Path*. We will look briefly at the first of these, the *Four Dharmas of Gampopa*.

1. May my mind follow the Dharma.

In this first statement, Gampopa stresses the importance of fully turning the mind toward Dharma practice. When we are practicing Dharma, the mind should be focused on the Buddhadharma. Lord Jigten Sumgön gave a slightly more nuanced explanation of this line by restating it as “May my dharma follow the Dharma.” When we are practicing the Dharma, we need to be sure that our practice is actually in accord with what the Buddha taught. If our practice is motivated by wanting to make this life more pleasant or by a desire for wealth, fame, or power, then our practice has become samsaric. It is possible to begin with the right motivation but inadvertently stray from this motivation. So even though we may have fooled ourselves with the appearance of Dharma practice, in reality it is something else. Our practice should be for a purpose greater than gaining material benefits for this life, or even for the next one. Our Dharma practice must be aimed at the attainment of enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. Only then is *our* dharma following *the* Dharma. As long as you remain attached to the pleasures of samsara, you are following the path of samsara.

We can also understand this first statement as a teaching about impermanence. All compounded phenomena, all things, are by nature in constant flux. This is reality; this is the Dharma. Thus, we should train our minds so that they tend toward this reality.

2. May the Dharma turn into the path.

Of course, it is not enough to just turn toward the Dharma. We need to put our understanding of the Dharma into action by progressing on the path. Gampopa said that the reason he explained his Four Dharmas in such great detail is that he was trying to help his followers become genuine practitioners. As explained earlier, our practice cannot be aimed at merely achieving the goals of this lifetime. We should turn our attention beyond petty goals toward the path to complete enlightenment.

The great Sachen said that if you are attached to samsara, or worldly pleasure, you lack true renunciation and are not a Dharma practitioner. Je Tsong Khapa, also emphasized renunciation, calling it the first of the *Three Principal Aspects of the Path*. What Gampopa, Sachen, and the other great lamas are trying to tell us is that without proper realization of renunciation, without a true mind of renunciation toward samsaric, mundane pleasures, we cannot count ourselves as genuine Dharma practitioners. The following story illustrates this point:

Buddha Shakyamuni’s half-brother, Nanda, was very much attached to his wife.

He had no intentions whatsoever to leave the home life and practice renunciation.

However, he later discovered that if he became ordained, he could be reborn in a god realm. With that motivation, Nanda started practicing the vinaya. Wishing to point him onto the right path, the Buddha called the other disciples together and told them, "Nanda is not like you. He has become a monk in order to gain higher rebirth, not to become enlightened. You should not associate with him in any way." Eventually, due to being shunned by the other monks, Nanda began to recognize his mistake and eventually corrected his motivation.

Renunciation is so very important because the root cause of our endless cycling in samsara is our tendency to react with attachment or aversion. All Buddhist traditions agree on this point, as this story shows:

One time, a Chinese monk arrived at the Tibetan king's palace. The king was puzzled by the fact that the philosophical view presented by the Chinese monk was different from the one understood in Tibet. He reasoned, "If there is just one Buddha, it is impossible for more than one tradition to be true." He invited Kamalashila to come from India to debate with the Chinese monk. As it turns out, this had all been prophesied by Kamalashila's teacher, the abbot Shantarakshita, some time earlier. Before they met, Kamalashila wanted to test the Chinese monk's understanding, to see whether his view was based in wisdom or ignorance. If the Chinese view was based in ignorance, then there was no hope for him. From across the river, Kamalashila swung his cane in a circle over his head three times, which represented the question, "What is the cause of the three realms?" In response, the Chinese monk shook his robes two times. Kamalashila understood him to mean that the root cause of samsara is twofold, attachment and aversion, and went on to meet him.

The dangers of attachment and aversion are shown by this story that I have heard, but not read in any text:

One time, a fire broke out at Drigung Thil monastery. Many practitioner monks were living on the mountain close to the monastery. Because of the fire, all those monks flew in the air to safety on the other side of the mountain. In the middle of his flight, one monk remembered that he had left his fire-flint behind. Because of his attachment, he lost his concentration, fell to the earth, and died.

To emphasize the pernicious nature of attachment and aversion, Jigten Sumgön said that attachment and aversion can cause even tenth-level bodhisattvas to fall into the hell realms if they fall prey to them. In order to overcome suffering, we must understand the truth of emptiness. This understanding is called wisdom. Without this wisdom that realizes emptiness, we will not achieve the ultimate goal of buddhahood despite studying the sutras and engaging in the deity yoga of secret mantra. There is even the possibility that someone who studies sutra and practices secret mantra, but has no understanding of emptiness, will be reborn as a powerful negative spirit. Thus, the understanding of emptiness is crucial to one's spiritual development.

The teachings on meditation are often focused on "single-pointed" concentration. But more important than technical skill is the understanding that without proper awareness and properly

focused mental resources, we cannot be considered genuine Dharma practitioners. This is because the mind will wander from here to there no matter what kind of practices we are engaged in. When the Buddha taught the principles of concentration, on one level he was indeed talking about samadhi. But at the same time, he was reminding us to remain aware and alert regardless of whether the mind is in single-pointed meditation or in a post-meditation state.

After teaching about concentration, the Buddha elucidated the principles of wisdom, the wisdom that realizes emptiness—the ultimate nature of all phenomena. It is crucial to achieve the mind that understands and realizes emptiness. Even a merely intellectual understanding of this can motivate us to eradicate defilements and lead ourselves out of samsara toward total liberation. Without this wisdom that realizes emptiness, we cannot attain nirvana or liberation no matter how great our accumulation of merit is. So this, too, is something that defines us as genuine practitioners.

3. May the path be free from confusion.

According to Gampopa, lower level practitioners—those who are practicing in the *sravaka* or *pratyekabuddha* vehicles—remain confused about the ultimate nature of reality. Therefore, in order to remove that confusion, one must climb up the ladder, so to speak, to the Mahayana practices. We must focus on generating the mind of bodhicitta. This is the second crucial principle of the path. Many great masters, Je Tsong Khapa in particular, emphasized this. The great scholar Sachen also said that if you are still attached to yourself and your own well-being while practicing the Dharma, you are not a bodhisattva. If the object of your practice is to help other beings, however, you are a bodhisattva.

4. May all confusion dawn as wisdom.

If an individual continues to grasp objects as real, continues to react with attachment and aversion, he lacks a true realization of the correct view of reality. This “view” can be taught in so many different ways. Here, when we talk about view, we are talking about the ultimate nature of reality, the ultimate realization of the emptiness of all phenomena. Je Tsong Khapa stated that the third and final principal aspect of the path is this correct view of emptiness.

You may have already heard this teaching, but it is important to return to these foundational principles again and again. Nowadays, so many people are tempted to enter into the highest practices, such as deity yoga, dream yoga, the highest of the tantric practices. People act as if they believe the past masters laid down these foundational teachings because they were bored and had nothing better to do. This is not the case. These teachings and practices are the true foundation of the higher ones. Without them, a practitioner cannot expect to successfully jump to the higher teachings and practices. If they were to do so without a solid foundation, their practice would be meaningless. This is why I am emphasizing these fundamental teachings.

The Buddha was not trying to waste people's time. He could have taught more directly about the higher teachings. But, as the past masters have explained, a practitioner who has no understanding of death and impermanence will not be able to achieve anything while practicing *mahamudra*. As mentioned earlier, the Buddha's 84,000 teachings are direct antidotes to the 84,000 coarse delusions of our mental continuum. If you lack one of these antidotes, you are like

a sculptor who lacks one kind of chisel. Your work will not be finished or perfect because your tool set is incomplete. In fact, before giving a secret mantra empowerment or teaching, His Holiness the Dalai Lama always reminds the students that without at least an elementary understanding of emptiness, there is no way one can practice secret mantra properly or receive the empowerment in the fullest way. Therefore, all the teachings of the Buddha are necessary for the complete purification of all delusions.

Knowing and practicing are very different things. Merely knowing the fundamentals is not enough. We must also put them into practice in order to benefit from them.