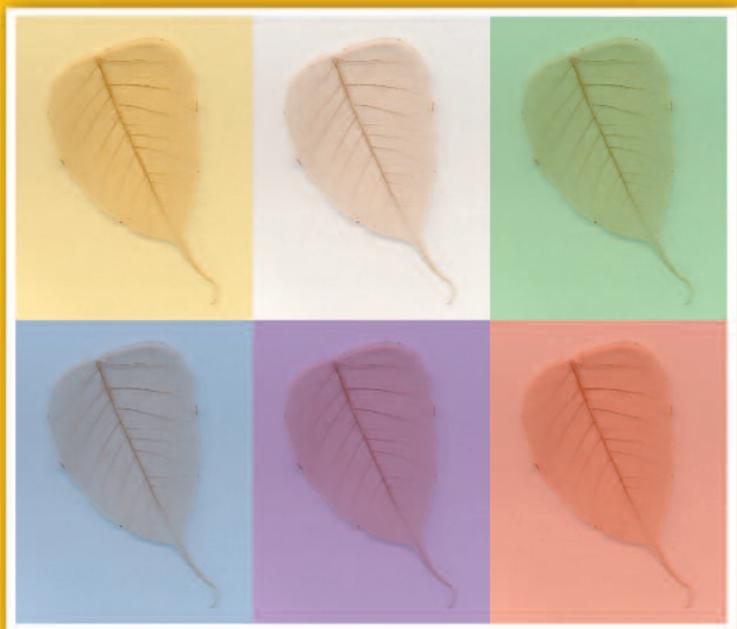


The Four Noble Truths



THE FOUNDATION of
BUDDHIST THOUGHT

VOLUME I

GESHE TASHI TSERING

FOREWORD BY LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

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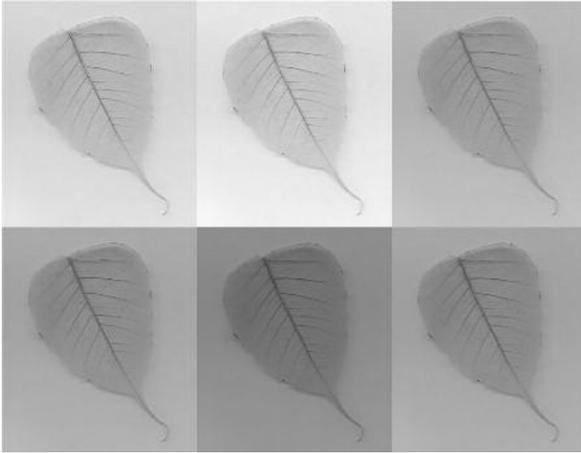
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FOREWORD BY LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

EDITED BY GORDON MCDUGALL



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FOREWORD

THE BUDDHA'S MESSAGE is a universal one. We all search for happiness but somehow fail to find it because we are looking for it in the wrong way. Only when we start cherishing others will true happiness grow within us. And so the Buddha's essential teaching is one of compassion and ethics, combined with the wisdom that understands the nature of reality. The teachings of the Buddha contain everything needed to eliminate suffering and make life truly meaningful, and as such the teachings are not only relevant to today's world, but vital.

This is the message my precious teacher, Lama Thubten Yeshe, gave to his Western students. His vision to present the Dharma in a way that is accessible and relevant to everyone continues and grows. His organization, the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT), now has centers all over the world, and Lama's work is carried on by many of his students.

The Foundation of Buddhist Thought, developed by Geshe Tashi Tsering, is one of the core courses of the FPMT's integrated education program. The essence of Tibetan Buddhism can be found within its six subjects. The Foundation of Buddhist Thought serves as a wonderful basis for further study in Buddhism, as well as a tool to transform our everyday lives.

Geshe Tashi has been the resident teacher at Jamyang Buddhist

Centre, London, since 1994. He has been very beneficial in guiding the students there and in many other centers where he teaches. Besides his profound knowledge—he is a Lharampa Geshe, the highest educational qualification within our tradition—his excellent English and his deep understanding of his Western students means that he can present the Dharma in a way that is both accessible and relevant. His wisdom, compassion, and humor are combined with a genuine gift as a teacher. You will see within the six books of the Foundation of Buddhist Thought series the same combination of profound understanding and heart advice that can guide beginner and experienced practitioners alike on the spiritual path.

Whether you read this book out of curiosity or as part of your spiritual journey, I sincerely hope that you find it beneficial and that it shows you a way to open your heart and develop your wisdom.

Lama Zopa Rinpoche

Spiritual Director

The Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition

PREFACE

THE TIBETAN BUDDHIST monastery I trained in, Sera, lies outside the city of Mysore in South India. It was built by refugees from the original Sera Monastery near the capital of Tibet who had escaped following the Chinese Communist occupation in 1959. The Sera I joined in 1970 as a thirteen-year-old monk is now unrecognizable—its small cluster of buildings has now expanded to become a sprawling campus. At that time, there was only one mail delivery a week—sometimes only one every two weeks. These days young monks have laptops to exchange emails whenever they want or else they can go to one of four or five crowded internet cafés.

It is not only the physical monastery that has changed. The worldview of the monks is different as well. When I was studying Buddhist philosophy, very few monks had any doubt about the accuracy of the cosmology in the traditional *Abhidharma* texts, which give precise dimensions for the universe; the vast majority believed that the structure and origin of the universe was exactly as the texts explained. Although a few elder monks still take the texts literally, nowadays most of the monks have either seen the outside world or have at least seen science documentaries. Whether their understanding of modern science is good or not, they no longer accept the *Abhidharma* explanation of the universe literally.

Such radical changes at one small Buddhist monastery in India in such a short span of time mirror changes in the rest of the world. Huge technological, economic, and scientific developments have transformed both humanity and the planet we live in. In many cases the changes have been positive, but certain changes have been negative and even extremely destructive.

And although technological advances have solved many superficial difficulties that humanity once faced, the fundamental human problems remain as they always have. In both wealthy and developing countries, we find the same basic human difficulties, whether dissatisfaction or disharmony, poverty or prejudice, and see that, as always, they are mainly created by human beings themselves.

In this world so radically changed yet still grappling with the same fundamental concerns, I feel great benefit can be gained from re-examining the old wisdom. For this reason I chose to write this series of books.

The people now interested in studying and practicing Buddhism live in the twenty-first century, in the middle of all this modern technological and economic development. Their leisure, lifestyle, and commitments are totally different from the norm of even just fifty or sixty years ago. I feel, therefore, that Buddhist texts and study materials must take into account modern society's lifestyle.

Furthermore, due to the ease of travel, many Westerners have received teachings in Asia or have heard Asian teachers in the West. For many students of Buddhism, study has been in a piecemeal fashion, dependent upon whatever teachings were available. Many people have listened to various subjects but have never received a solid overview, one starting from a fundamental Buddhist teaching, such as the four noble truths, and progressing systematically up to the most profound teachings, such as those of highest yoga tantra. For that kind of person, I wanted to provide a structured program.

And I wanted to make it as accessible and relevant as possible. Today vastly more books on Buddhism are available than even ten or fifteen years ago, but many are either translations of great texts and therefore quite traditional in style, or else they are written by Western scholars and hence academic and dense. Both kinds of books can benefit people, but often they are not so accessible. For a long time I have felt that there is a need for Buddhist teachings explained in some detail but in very plain language, without Buddhist jargon. No question the Buddha's teachings are relevant, but the way they are presented makes a great difference as to whether people can actually assimilate them into their everyday lives. It is my hope that this series provides something easily readable, yet still with depth and structure, that allows people to read and study over a year or two and take these wonderful teachings into their lives in a way that is truly meaningful. That has been my goal for The Foundation of Buddhist Thought series.

I have chosen six subjects with the hope that they will lay out a comprehensive overview of Buddhist thought. The four noble truths, the first teaching the Buddha gave after he attained enlightenment, is the logical starting point. His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who has given teachings on the four noble truths on many occasions, says that they are the blueprint for all Buddhist teaching and practice. Within them lie the root of all Buddhist philosophy and the entire path to enlightenment. Whatever we study after the four noble truths will echo back to this most essential teaching, and conversely this teaching will be revealed in everything else we study.

If the four noble truths explain the human condition, the next two books, *Relative Truth*, *Ultimate Truth* and *Buddhist Psychology*, deal with the Buddhist theories of reality, external as well as internal. Then based on these, the remaining three volumes address what it means to be a practicing Mahayana Buddhist. Volume 4 looks at the

vast altruistic mind called the mind of enlightenment (*bodhichitta*), and volume 5 looks at the wisdom that understands that all things are interdependent and lack intrinsic nature. The final volume gives a glimpse into how the tantric practices are done.

These books evolved from the two-year courses I have been leading in Great Britain, France, and Spain since 1997, as well as from the correspondence course that grew out of the campus courses. If you find the books beneficial, you might consider enrolling in The Foundation of Buddhist Thought correspondence course, where you will explore the subjects in more depth under the guidance of qualified tutors.

If we examine our lives, it is not difficult to see how we are continuously searching for some form of happiness and trying to avoid the pitfalls and dissatisfaction that seem to plague our existence. This is as true for us living in this modern technological world as it was for the people of the Buddha's time. And now, just as then, we are continually getting it wrong. Everything the Buddha taught was to lead us out of the suffering we so unskillfully inflict on ourselves and to bring us to a profound and lasting happiness. The problem is not one of relevance but of accessibility. I hope that this series will allow you to enter into one of the world's great philosophical traditions.

Geshe Tashi Tsering

EDITOR'S PREFACE

The Four Noble Truths is the end product of a long and very dynamic process. It is a modified version of the course book written by Geshe Tashi Tsering for the first module of his study program, *The Foundation of Buddhist Thought*.

In 1994, when Geshe Tashi took up his role of resident teacher at Jamyang Buddhist Centre in London, he saw that the text-based, passive learning usually associated with Tibetan Buddhism in Western Dharma centers often failed to connect with the material in a meaningful way, and so, incorporating Western pedagogic methods, he devised a two-year, six-module course that he felt would give a solid overview of Buddhist thought.

The sources for this series from Wisdom Publications, of which this is the first volume, are the transcripts of Geshe Tashi's teachings from the first two London courses. Geshe Tashi reworked these texts into the materials you have in your hands. Most of Tibetan philosophical literature is derived from oral teachings, and this is true to some extent of each of the books in this series, but I also think that these texts surpass this level. Well-read in Western science and philosophy, and with a good command of English, Geshe Tashi is very much the author—in every sense of the word—of these books.

When I first met him in 1992, Geshe-la was staying at Nalanda

Monastery in southern France, studying both the English language and the Western mind. My respect for the diligence and enthusiasm with which he worked has only increased over the years. At the time, however, I had no idea of the depth of his knowledge.

Born in 1958, in Purang, Tibet, Geshe Tashi escaped to India with his parents a year later. He entered Sera Mey Monastic University at thirteen, and spent the next sixteen years working for his Geshe degree, graduating as a Lharampa Geshe, the highest possible level. He is a classmate of another notable Geshe who is also very important to Buddhism in the West, Geshe Thupten Jinpa, chief English language translator of His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

After a year at the Highest Tantric College (Gyuto), Geshe-la began his teaching career in Kopan Monastery in Kathmandu, the principal monastery of the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT). Geshe Tashi then moved to the Gandhi Foundation College in Nagpur, and it was at that time that the FPMT's Spiritual Director, Lama Thubten Zopa Rinpoche, asked him to teach in the West. After two years at Nalanda Monastery in France, in 1994 Geshe Tashi became the resident teacher at Jamyang Buddhist Centre in London.

His first years at Jamyang set the tone for his residency. When the center moved to a derelict courthouse in 1996, Geshe Tashi worked alongside the volunteers—scraping walls, clearing debris—I even saw him in overalls and wellington boots clearing out blocked drains. He has been very much part of the Jamyang community ever since.

And it is this sense of Western ease combined with his deep insight into Buddhist philosophy that has informed his teaching. Geshe Tashi not only understands us, but also in many ways is one of us and so can offer Eastern wisdom with a Western approach—one that we are comfortable with and one that is also utterly relevant to our lives. The Gelug school is thought to be the most scholastic of the four traditions

in Tibetan Buddhism, and if you engage Geshe-la in debate you will certainly feel the sharpness of his intellect. However, his emphasis is always on the experiential—according to Geshe Tashi, if it stays academic, it is worthless. Comfort might be found in dry scholasticism while the heart remains untouched, but this is a comfort he never allows us.

As with the other books in the series, many people have been involved with its development. I would particularly like to thank Bhikku Bodhi for allowing us to use his translation of the sutra, the core of this book.

I would also like to offer my warmest thanks to Lama Zopa Rinpoche, the head of the FPMT and the inspiration for the group of study programs to which The Foundation of Buddhist Thought belongs. Rinpoche is the font from which all else flows.

There are too many other people who have been involved with the course and the books to mention by name, but I would like to sincerely thank them all—those who helped to develop the course; the transcribers, readers, and designers of the books; and the tutors of the course among them. And of course, Geshe Tashi, an amazing inspiration.

It has been a real joy to edit Geshe Tashi's words. My very limited knowledge has undoubtedly meant that his ideas have been blurred and distorted in some instances, and for this I offer my deepest apologies. It is my sincere hope that the reader will gain the same inspiration and insight from this book that has been gained by the many hundreds of students who have already been fortunate enough to study The Foundation of Buddhist Thought.

Gordon McDougall

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THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS SUTRA

OVER 2,500 YEARS AGO the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, became enlightened. Having forsaken a life of luxury as the prince Siddhartha and endured six years as an ascetic, suffering deliberate deprivation in his search for the truth, he realized that in neither extreme was truth to be found. Only then, sitting under the Bodhi tree by the river Neranjara, did he overcome the last of his inner demons and break through to the truth of his existence, finally reaching the cessation of his human suffering. He became the Buddha, the Awakened One.

At first he remained silent, but then, after forty-nine days, he journeyed from Bodhgaya to Sarnath, a small town near the sacred city of Varanasi in central India. Here, he met his five former companions, the ascetics with whom he had shared his six years of hardship. At first they were suspicious, thinking he had renounced the search for truth, but upon seeing his radiance, they begged him for teachings. Thereupon the Buddha explained to them the four noble truths, and it is these four truths that comprise the sutra below and the core subject of this book.

Only after the Buddha's passing did his disciples, now vast in number, come together to try to preserve his precious teachings. The sutras we have now in the Buddhist canon come from actual discourses of the Buddha that were memorized by the Buddha's disciples and passed

down in an oral lineage. Only centuries later were they written down, retaining much of the convention of the oral tradition. The repetition of phrases and even paragraphs was designed for easy memorization, and the whole style was developed to facilitate ritual recitation. As such sutras can be difficult reading, but their content, the actual words of the Buddha, are an infallible map out of the suffering that currently traps us.

The following sutra—one of the most famous—records the Buddha’s very first teaching, *Setting the Wheel of Dharma in Motion*. It is also called the *First Turning of the Wheel of Dharma* or, more simply, the *Four Noble Truths Sutra*, because the four noble truths comprise its essence.



Thus have I heard.

On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling at Varanasi in the Deer Park at Isipatana. There the Blessed One addressed the bhikkhus of the group of five thus:

“Bhikkhus, these two extremes should not be followed by one who has gone forth into homelessness. What two? The pursuit of sensual happiness in sensual pleasures, which is low, vulgar, the way of worldlings, ignoble, unbeneficial; and the pursuit of self-mortification, which is painful, ignoble, unbeneficial. Without veering toward either of these extremes, the Tathagata has awakened to the middle way, which gives rise to vision, which gives rise to knowledge, which leads to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to nibbana. And what, bhikkhus, is that middle way awakened to by the Tathagata, which gives rise to vision...which leads to nibbana? It is this noble eightfold path; that is, right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. This, bhikkhus, is that middle way awakened to by the Tathagata, which gives rise to vision, which gives rise to knowledge, which leads to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to nibbana.

“Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of suffering: birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering; union with what is displeasing is suffering; separation from what is pleasing is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering; in brief, the five aggregates subject to clinging are suffering.

“Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the origin of suffering: it is this craving that leads to renewed existence, accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight here and there; that is, craving for sensual pleasures, craving for existence, craving for extermination.

“Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering: it is the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishing of it, freedom from it, non-reliance on it.

“Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering: it is this noble eightfold path; that is, right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.

“‘This is the noble truth of suffering’: thus, bhikkhus, in regard to things unheard before, there arose in me vision, knowledge, wisdom, true knowledge, and light.

“‘This noble truth of suffering is to be fully understood’: thus, bhikkhus, in regard to things unheard before, there arose in me vision, knowledge, wisdom, true knowledge, and light.

“‘This noble truth of suffering has been fully understood’: thus, bhikkhus, in regard to things unheard before, there arose in me vision, knowledge, wisdom, true knowledge, and light.

“‘This is the noble truth of the origin of suffering’: thus, bhikkhus, in regard to things unheard before, there arose in me vision, knowledge, wisdom, true knowledge, and light.

“‘This noble truth of the origin of suffering is to be abandoned’: thus, bhikkhus, in regard to things unheard before, there arose in me vision, knowledge, wisdom, true knowledge, and light.

“‘This noble truth of the origin of suffering has been abandoned’: thus, bhikkhus, in regard to things unheard before, there arose in me vision, knowledge, wisdom, true knowledge, and light.

“‘This is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering’: thus, bhikkhus, in regard to things unheard before, there arose in me vision, knowledge, wisdom, true knowledge, and light.

“This noble truth of the cessation of suffering is to be realized’: thus, bhikkhus, in regard to things unheard before, there arose in me vision, knowledge, wisdom, true knowledge, and light.

“This noble truth of the cessation of suffering has been realized’: thus, bhikkhus, in regard to things unheard before, there arose in me vision, knowledge, wisdom, true knowledge, and light.

“This is the noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering’: thus, bhikkhus, in regard to things unheard before, there arose in me vision, knowledge, wisdom, true knowledge, and light.

“This noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering is to be developed’: thus, bhikkhus, in regard to things unheard before, there arose in me vision, knowledge, wisdom, true knowledge, and light.

“This noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering has been developed’: thus, bhikkhus, in regard to things unheard before, there arose in me vision, knowledge, wisdom, true knowledge, and light.

“So long, bhikkhus, as my knowledge and vision of these four noble truths as they really are in their three phases and twelve aspects was not thoroughly purified in this way, I did not claim to have awakened to the unsurpassed perfect enlightenment in this world with its devas, Mara, and Brahma, in this generation with its ascetics and brahmins, its devas and humans. But when my knowledge and vision of these four noble truths as they really are in their three phases and twelve aspects was thoroughly purified in this way, then I claimed to have awakened to the unsurpassed perfect enlightenment in this world with its devas, Mara, and Brahma, in this generation with its ascetics and brahmins, its devas and humans. The knowledge and vision arose in me: ‘Unshakable is the liberation of my mind. This is my last birth. Now there is no more renewed existence.’”

This is what the Blessed One said.¹

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I SETTING THE WHEEL OF DHARMA IN MOTION

The Four Truths

I HAVE BEEN A BUDDHIST all my life. My childhood, my monastic schooling, and now my work have all been steeped in the teachings of the Buddha. While I have questioned many philosophical points within my training—debate being a significant element of Tibetan Buddhist education—I have never questioned the essential message of the Buddha or wondered whether it was still relevant.

Since coming to the West and teaching students who demand logical explanations for the most basic Buddhist concepts, I have had to reassess my own core beliefs. But the more I see Western students integrating Buddhist principles and practices into their lives, the more I understand just how universal the Buddha's message is. Although you will doubtless come across many foreign terms and concepts in this book, everything the Buddha taught has the power to go straight to your heart. My job is to make sure what you read is meaningful and intelligible so you can fully appreciate its relevance.

The *Four Noble Truths Sutra* is the Buddha's first and most essential teaching. It contains the framework of all the many discourses he gave during his forty-year teaching career. If the language and style hinder the clear understanding of his meaning, then hopefully, by the time

you have finished this book, you will have a much better grasp of this all-important sutra.

In Tibetan monasteries, as in most traditions within Mahayana Buddhism, the *sutras* (the discourses of the Buddha) and the *shastras* (the canonical commentaries) that are studied originate from the Sanskrit-language canon. In this case, however, we are using the sutra translated from the Pali language. Although it differs slightly in style and structure from the Sanskrit, the differences are minor, and in the West this is the better-known version.

The four noble truths are:

1. The noble truth of suffering
2. The noble truth of the origin of suffering
3. The noble truth of the cessation of suffering and the origin of suffering
4. The noble truth of the path that leads to the cessation of suffering and the origin of suffering

The first two noble truths, the noble truths of suffering and of the origin of suffering, really reflect the nature of our present life—they function continually within each of us. The truth of cessation and the truth of the path that leads to cessation are the methods to eliminate suffering and its origin. We need to cultivate them within ourselves in order to overcome our difficulties. Thus, these four noble truths show us not only the nature of our present life in its entirety, but also the possibility of moving beyond this very limited existence into an existence that is free from suffering and its origin.

The first noble truth, the noble truth of suffering (*dukkha* in Pali), refers to the pain, distress, suffering, anxiety, and dissatisfaction that physically and particularly mentally exist within us. After teaching the first noble truth, the Buddha then explains that the cause of suffering—the second noble truth—is craving, desire, and attachment.

With the third noble truth the Buddha shows that there is a means by which suffering can be eradicated forever, and through the fourth noble truth he demonstrates the way to do this. The path that the Buddha lays out to enable us to achieve this eradication of suffering is called the *noble eightfold path*, which we discuss in chapter 5. Within the four truths we find two distinct sets of cause and result. Suffering is a result and the origin of suffering is its cause. Similarly, the truth of cessation, or peace, is a result, and the path that leads to cessation is its cause.

The four noble truths lay down the blueprint for the entire body of the Buddha's thought and practice and set up the basic framework of the individual's path to enlightenment. They encapsulate all of Buddhist philosophy. Therefore studying, meditating, and fully understanding this teaching is very important, because without an understanding of the four noble truths it is impossible to fully integrate the concepts and practices of Buddhism into our daily lives.

We all have an instinctive wish to have happiness and avoid suffering. This feeling does not arise as a result of training, education, or culture; it is innate. The teaching on the four noble truths presents an effective means to achieving this end. The suffering we want to overcome does not come from nowhere. It arises from its own particular causes and conditions. In this teaching the Buddha details the suffering that we experience in everyday life, from the very coarse forms of suffering to the very subtle forms of which we are not even consciously aware. He also explains the causes of that suffering with equal precision.

Similarly, the happiness that we all want does not come from nowhere but arises from its own causes and conditions. Happiness in this case has nothing to do with temporary sense pleasures but refers to the higher states of happiness—the happiness that remains unaffected despite changing external circumstances. Although the cessation of

suffering is not in itself a feeling, achieving that kind of cessation through the right path is the highest form of happiness. The path that will lead to the fulfillment of our most basic aspiration to overcome suffering and achieve happiness is explained in this teaching very clearly.

The two main Buddhist traditions, Theravada and Mahayana, have different sets of scriptures. The Theravada is an earlier tradition whose teachings are recorded in the Pali texts, while the Mahayana is based on Sanskrit texts that were written down later. The countries that follow the Theravada tradition strongly emphasize reading, reciting, and learning the actual discourses of the Buddha. In the Tibetan monasteries, which follow the Mahayana tradition, we study the four noble truths on many occasions over the course of our education, but we do not typically study the sutra itself. Usually we study this topic in conjunction with the teachings that emphasize the bodhisattva aspiration for enlightenment for the sake of all other beings. For example, one of the main texts that we study in the monastery is Maitreya's *Ornament of Clear Realization (Abhisamayalamkara)*, and the main topic of that text is the way bodhisattvas train their minds on the path. The four noble truths is a key subject in illustrating this training. Similarly, in the Mahayana, the noble eightfold path is taught only implicitly within the teachings on the bodhisattva conduct rather than laid out explicitly.

In Tibetan monasteries, study of the four noble truths is combined with the examination of what we call the sixteen characteristics of the four noble truths. Each noble truth is explained, studied, and meditated on by focusing on four defining characteristics. For instance, the first noble truth, the noble truth of suffering, is studied by analyzing its four characteristics of impermanence, suffering, selflessness, and emptiness.

Although the sutra is the main source of all of this, in the Tibetan system the main focus of our study on the four noble truths is the

commentaries, which include extensive and elaborate explanations about each of the truths.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE SUTRA

As you can see from the *Four Noble Truths Sutra*, the Buddha describes each noble truth in a slightly different way. He says that the first noble truth should be understood, the second noble truth should be abandoned, the third noble truth should be realized, and the last noble truth should be developed. This indicates that although the four noble truths are one subject, the way we study and meditate on each truth differs slightly.

The Buddha says that we must *understand* the truth of suffering. We will overcome suffering eventually as we practice the other noble truths, but first we must understand what suffering is. This is logical. Before taking medicine, we must understand our illness; before abandoning suffering, we need to really understand it. Therefore, at this stage, understanding the truth of suffering is the most important thing we can do, and this requires a clear recognition of its importance and a systematic study of the steps we must take to complete our task.

The Buddha says that the second noble truth, the truth of origin, should be *abandoned*. So here we have to diligently search for the best method to totally abandon the origin of suffering. This requires a different way of studying and meditating. The truth of cessation, on the other hand, should be realized or attained. Therefore, to begin, we must definitely come to understand that this can be achieved and that we ourselves are capable of achieving it. And naturally we now come to the fourth noble truth, the truth of the path, which we need to develop in order to overcome suffering.

In the first section of the sutra the Buddha very clearly presents the task ahead of us. In the next section he repeats each noble truth

three times, each time with a slightly different emphasis and a slightly different flavor. This repetition represents the three phases of understanding that the Buddha himself acquired in his ever-deepening realization of these four truths. The three phases are as follows: knowing the nature of the truth, knowing what needs to be done in connection with that truth, and finally accomplishing what needs to be done.

In regard to the noble truth of suffering, in the first phase the Buddha explains what suffering is, and in the second phase he explains that this suffering should be understood. Then, in the final phase of realizing this noble truth, he explains complete attainment—the fact that when someone has understood suffering fully and completely, this is all that needs to be accomplished.

It is the same with the other noble truths. In relation to the origin of suffering, the Buddha explains what it is, that it needs to be abandoned, and that once abandoned, there is a state of complete attainment and suffering can never return. For the cessation of suffering, the Buddha again explains what it is, that it needs to be realized, and that once it is realized, that is the final point, which can never reverse into noncessation. In fact, this point is liberation or enlightenment. Finally, the Buddha presents the truth of the path in the context of the noble eightfold path, explaining that it must be developed, and that once it is developed, there is nothing that remains to be done.

At the end of the sutra, after explaining the three phases of each noble truth, making twelve aspects in all, the Buddha says, “So long, bhikkhus, as my knowledge and vision of these four noble truths as they really are in their three phases and twelve aspects was not thoroughly purified in this way, I did not claim to have awakened to the unsurpassed perfect enlightenment....” Only after each noble truth has been realized in its own unique way is complete attainment possible.

THE ORDER OF THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

The Buddha taught the four noble truths in a very specific order, and this has nothing to do with the order in which things arise in reality. In reality, the cause must naturally come first and be followed by the result; it cannot be the other way around. There is a cause that produces suffering, and there is a path that leads us to the end of suffering. However, in both sets of cause and effect that comprise the four noble truths, the order is reversed—the result of suffering is presented first followed by the cause of the origin of suffering. The second set presents the result of cessation and then the cause of the path.

In his *Great Stages of the Path (Lamrim Chenmo)* the Tibetan master Lama Tsongkhapa explains that despite not following the natural sequence, this is the particular order that the student should be taught because it represents the way each truth is psychologically established within us. For example, when we start to work with the first two noble truths, it is natural that we first realize that there is suffering. That realization will then lead us to search for the causes of that suffering. It is the same with the second set. When we see that there is suffering and that it has an origin, the next step is to ask if there is any way that suffering can cease. In so doing, we establish that cessation is possible, and then we look for methods that can lead to it.

Say, for example, the sink in my apartment is full of cups and pots, but when I turn on the hot water tap to wash them, nothing happens; there is no hot water. Seeing the flashing red light on the boiler, I phone someone to come and fix it. That is the natural process. When we discover a problem, we go back and try to find its origin. When we see the result, naturally we look for the cause, so the result of identifying a problem is a motivation that starts us off toward the solution. Our minds naturally operate in that way, which is why the Buddha taught the four noble truths in this unique sequence. Therefore, for the

Buddhist practitioner who wants to pursue the spiritual path, the realization of this particular sequence is psychologically very natural and helpful. Maitreya's *Sublime Continuum (Uttaratantra)* compares these four stages to overcoming an illness.

Just as disease needs to be diagnosed, its cause eliminated, a healthy state achieved and the remedy implemented, so also should suffering, its causes, its cessation and path be known, removed, attained and undertaken.²

It is not until we notice we are sick that we begin to look for the source of our sickness, and seeing that there is a cure, try to obtain it. This is suffering, origin, cessation, and path.

THE ETYMOLOGY OF THE TERM *FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS*

It may be useful to clarify what a *noble truth* actually is, because *truth* has different meanings in different contexts. In Buddhism there are many truths—the two truths, the four noble truths, and so on—and we need to be very careful and not assume that *truth* always means the same thing.

The modifier *noble* means truth as perceived by *arya* beings, those beings who have had a direct realization of emptiness or selflessness. *Noble* means something seen by *arya* beings as it really is, and in this case it is four recognitions—suffering, origin, cessation, and path. *Arya* beings see all types of suffering—physical and mental, gross and subtle—exactly as they are, as suffering. For people like us, who do not have the direct realization of emptiness, although we may understand certain levels of physical and mental experiences as suffering, it is impossible for us to see all the levels of suffering for what they are. Instead we may see some things as desirable when in truth they

are suffering. This may sound counterintuitive, but if you examine society it is fairly easy to see what I mean. What most of us chase after thinking it is happiness actually has the potential to bring just the opposite.

It is the same with the other three subjects, all of which are seen by the arya beings as they are, on all levels of subtlety. We ordinary beings cannot see them in the same way because we lack the direct realization of the nature of reality.

The Benefits of Studying the Four Noble Truths

What prompts us to embark upon a spiritual journey? As we first become interested in Buddhism, I think this is a question we need to ask ourselves. His Holiness the Dalai Lama says that our interest in the spiritual life is “something very instinctive and there is no need to prove it is there. Happiness is something that we all aspire to achieve and of course we naturally have a right to fulfill this aspiration.”³

We should try to understand our deepest motivation clearly from the very beginning and not just accept intellectually that we all want to be happy or because somebody like His Holiness says it, but only as a result of our own thorough investigation. We need to see whether the wish to be happy is instinctive, as His Holiness has said, and if so whether it is always present, fueling our actions. We also need to be aware of how skillfully or unskillfully we are actually fulfilling that need. This examination is our starting point.

The minimum advantage we will gain by studying the four noble truths is that we will develop some confidence that the problems and difficulties in our life can be stopped. At present our life is completely conditioned by factors outside of our control, but by clearly seeing the things that actually cause our problems and that they can

be eliminated, we can determine that there is a remedy for this “conditioned” life. If we can develop confidence in the possibility of cessation—through reading books, contemplating, and meditating—then I think we will definitely have good results.

Furthermore, if we see that by following the teachings of the Buddha we can slowly learn to subdue our minds and finally completely cease our conditioned existence, we will be, in effect, taking refuge in the Dharma—the Buddha's teachings and the second of the three refuges. This will naturally lead to a respect for the Buddha himself and then for the Sangha, those realized beings who follow his path, and so we establish our refuge in the Buddha and the Sangha, the other two objects of refuge. This will all arise from a thorough grounding in the four noble truths.

The best way to take refuge in the Dharma is to put the path into practice, and so we go from taking refuge in the Sangha to *becoming* the Sangha—not necessarily as an ordained monk or nun, but through the direct realization of emptiness. This is the intermediate benefit of studying the four noble truths.

Finally, we will come to understand the real nature of our own suffering and see how all beings are exactly the same in this experience, and so our practice will naturally turn from being primarily concerned with our own welfare to focusing on the welfare of others. As we progress, our prejudices and self-interest will fall away, and our activities will become more altruistic. Of course, this can really be achieved only through understanding and practicing the four noble truths at a very profound level. The highest benefit of studying the four noble truths is attaining the mind of enlightenment, or *bodhichitta*, at which point we are completely motivated by the wish to free all beings from suffering and hence work toward our own enlightenment to be able to do that.

The cessation of suffering is not a gift that someone can give us,

but rather it must emerge through our practice of the true path. As we progress, the gap between the uncontrolled, conditioned life we now lead and the core that is pure and perfect peace will narrow. By developing an understanding and then actually practicing the teachings of the four noble truths in our daily lives, we will become greatly beneficial for all other sentient beings, not only helping them bring an end to their suffering but incidentally eliminating our own as well.

The Two Sets of Cause and Effect

One of the key beliefs in Buddhism is that nothing comes into being without a cause, and this law of cause and effect is a fundamental point for understanding the four noble truths. The following table shows two sets of cause and effect: suffering as the result of the origin of suffering and cessation as the result of the path.

	Result	Cause
Problem	1. Suffering	2. Origin
Solution	3. Cessation	4. Path

Although these two sets of cause and effect are very specific, they follow the rule of all causes and effects, and in particular the type of cause and effect called *karma* in Buddhism. *Karma* is an often misunderstood concept. To clarify, natural changes such as planetary rotation or plant growth are not the results of karma. Karma always relates solely to the workings of the mind. Only when there has been some sort of mental action, some sort of intention or volition, does the specific chain reaction of cause and result occur, and thus it is always associated with our mindstate, our feelings or emotions. However, while it is quite easy to

see how suffering and its cause are linked with feelings, it may be more difficult to understand this in the context of the second set, cessation and path, as these are more subtle. Nonetheless, cessation and path are also inextricably intertwined.

From a Buddhist perspective, the countless things and events that make up the entire external world, whether associated with our feelings or not, are called *other-powered* because they arise due to other conditions. Nothing comes into being without a cause. In the *Rice Seedling Sutra* the Buddha gives three statements:

Due to the existence of this, that arises.

Due to the production of this, that is produced.

It is thus: due to ignorance there is volition.

The first statement—“due to the existence of this, that arises”—can be applied to all phenomena, permanent and impermanent, and describes interdependent origination. These things exist, then that happens. In Buddhist philosophical terms, for the purpose of meditation, all phenomena are divided into classifications, *permanent* and *impermanent* being a very common division. To briefly describe the difference, *permanent phenomena* are phenomena that do not depend on causes and conditions for their existence. During their existence, there is no moment-to-moment change. In other words, they are static. *Impermanent phenomena* refers to the opposite—things and events that depend on causes and conditions to come into being and that are subject to constant change. Thus *impermanent* in this context means changing moment by moment.

The second statement—“due to the production of this, that is produced”—can be applied only to impermanent phenomena. In order to produce something, the producer must be impermanent, for only impermanent phenomena can produce something that does not

already exist. Permanent phenomena cannot. *Permanent* means fixed and unchanging, so how could it go from one state to another, like a seed becoming a flower? Only if something is impermanent, and hence has the potential to change when circumstances and conditions come together, will results and other phenomena arise.

The third statement—“due to ignorance there is volition”—is narrower in scope. Impermanent things do not have the ability to produce any random thing. In order to produce something, the cause must be similar to the result. Ignorance does not produce love—it produces attachment and aversion, and from these the deluded mind creates the wish to act, which is volition.

HOW THE TWO SETS WORK

The second noble truth is the origin of our suffering. We are ignorant of the fundamental nature of the way things exist, and we feel anxiety because of this. We see things as existing permanently and cling to anything that reinforces our concept of permanence, pushing away anything that threatens it. Attachment and aversion are the roots of all other problems, and they themselves are caused by ignorance. Thus ignorance, attachment, and aversion—what Buddhism calls the *three poisons*—are the origin (the second noble truth) of suffering (the first noble truth).

The relationship in the first set of cause and effect—suffering and its origin—is easy to understand because both truths are impermanent. On one level, the relationship in the the second set—path and cessation—is equally understandable. The path is the practice we do to eliminate our delusions and to increase our positive qualities. This path becomes the final cause of the complete cessation of all our suffering.

But cessation itself is *not* the result of a chain of cause and effect because cessation is permanent, and in order to be either a cause or a

result, something must be impermanent. This is a very important point. If something is a result, it means it has come into existence in dependence upon other factors, and so it must, by definition, be impermanent. Permanent phenomena do *not* come into existence due to causes and conditions. They may, however, come into being through other circumstances, such as a state that occurs when various conditions are removed.

This is a little abstract. As I have pointed out, from a Buddhist point of view, a permanent phenomenon means something that never changes and that is never produced by something else. Usually *permanent* describes some sort of state, rather than a physical or mental object with definite causes. Cessation itself is one of the prime examples of a permanent phenomenon, so it may seem strange that we find it here in the second set of cause and result, when in fact it cannot strictly be called a result.

We can use a teacup to illustrate this point. When I pour the tea out, the cup becomes empty. The action of pouring brings a particular result, an empty cup, and by *empty* here I simply mean empty of tea. That lack of tea, however, cannot truly be called a product, because it is an absence, and something cannot produce an absence. Yet there is, nonetheless, a dependent relationship between my pouring action and the cup's empty state.

In the same way, through practicing the path, our suffering gradually decreases, and we finally attain a state that is free from all suffering, ignorance, and the defilements that are the seeds of that suffering. This mere absence of suffering is called *true cessation* and that cessation is a state, not a product. It is not produced by the path; it is not a result *per se*. As tipping the cup over rids it of tea, following the path rids us of our negativities, and we are left with the state of being free of suffering, which is nirvana.

Nirvana is simply the cessation of suffering, not the annihilation of

the person. People often misunderstand this point, thinking that nirvana is the complete cessation of not only suffering but also of the person trying to gain that state. That is not what Buddhist practice is for.

According to Mahayana Buddhism, when suffering and its causes have finally been eliminated, at the time of death the mental and physical aggregates cease, and what is called *cessation without remainder* is achieved. Previously we had achieved nirvana but we had *not* ceased to exist, because throughout our entire practice we had done nothing to stop the continuation of the person. Just as our suffering does not come from external sources but is caused by our own delusions and karma, so the complete end of that suffering arises from the gradual elimination of our delusions. In that way, peace arises from chaos, cessation of suffering arises from suffering, and nirvana arises from samsara.

Nirvana is not out there somewhere in space; it does not drop down from the sky. Cessation will emerge only from our development of wisdom. Buddhahood is an internal state, but because our normal life is focused on the external, there is a very strong tendency to see things such as nirvana or buddhahood as somehow “out there,” as physical entities in physical places. That view is mistaken.

Nirvana might seem like a conceptual abstraction, but cessation and the path have very a lot to do with our everyday lives. Although we all want happiness and spend most of the hours of our day trying to get it, most of us are searching in the wrong place entirely. Following the path laid down by the Buddha, as exemplified in the fourth noble truth, we will slowly lessen our suffering, ceasing the delusions as well as their causes, which keep us trapped in conditioned existence.

This is what Buddhism says, but do you agree? You have to investigate for yourself. When the Buddha describes cessation, he is talking about the potential we all have to completely fulfill our fundamental,

instinctive wish to be happy. The first set—the truth of suffering and the truth of origin—is easy enough to understand if we really contemplate it, but can the path that the Buddha describes really lead to the complete cessation of suffering? Is this possible, or is this merely Buddhist dogma, something we are being asked to accept unquestioningly simply because the Buddha said it?

Even if the first set feels true to us, will the path really lead to cessation? And if so, what is that cessation—complete extinction or existence on a different level? These are the questions we need to seriously consider.

Being Our Own Refuge

It is you who must make the effort. The Great of the past only show the way. Those who think and follow the path become free from the bondage of Mara.⁴

If we all have an instinctive wish for happiness, these words taken from the *Dhammapada* tell us where to begin the search to fulfill it. We are our own refuge. The key to fulfilling our need for happiness lies within, not outside, us. This means that we have all we need right here, inside, without looking to external things. And more good news—it's cheap! We don't have to pay for our happiness!

I cannot emphasize enough how powerful and accurate this verse is. Everybody, all the time, is trying to fulfill the instinctive wish to attain happiness and avoid unhappiness, and yet no one seems able to do so. Here, however, is the simple truth: the source of our own happiness is within ourselves.

We are still not really aware of the inner refuge that the Buddha says we should understand, because we have not reached the level where

we can tap it. Until we do, we will continue looking for happiness outside, and there will be no way to satisfy that instinct. Bringing that internal refuge to life is what Dharma practice is all about.

It is really up to us. The Buddha says in the *Dhammapada* that we should work for our own liberation because the buddhas can only show us the way. They can give us the tools, but we must use them ourselves.

One very important point that the Buddha mentions in his first teaching is to avoid the two extremes, which are as follows:

[t]he pursuit of sensual happiness in sensual pleasures, which is low, vulgar, the way of worldlings, ignoble, unbeneficial; and the pursuit of self-mortification, which is painful, ignoble, unbeneficial.

Because these two—excessive self-indulgence and excessive self-denial—are easy traps to fall into, it is very important to be clear about them. The Buddha's words in this case were directed at the five monks who were his first audience, but I think that these words are very valuable even outside the monastic context. They are relevant to our own daily lives. If we fall into one extreme, indulging ourselves in sense pleasures by merely living for sensory gratification, we devote our entire lives to something useless, robbing ourselves of any energy for what is worthwhile.

Self-mortification, the other extreme, seems an archaic concept in this material world, something more suited to the Indian forests of two thousand years ago. On the surface it seems that nobody we know punishes his or her body by not eating or drinking in order to find spiritual salvation. There are people, however, who push themselves too hard in their search for something spiritual, ending up sick and unhappy. And it is quite common to find people who mortify their bodies for worldly reasons, too. In both cases, self-denial is ego-driven.

Seeking sense pleasure is definitely the bigger danger for most of us. Our society and the media—especially advertising—promote the compulsion to indulge our sense pleasures. Advertisements are always saying, “You need this, you need that,” whereas upon investigation it has nothing to do with need and everything to do with sensory gratification. There is a big difference, however, between devotion to sensory gratification and satisfying our daily needs. The Buddha says:

He who fills his lamp with water will not dispel the darkness, and he who tries to light a fire with rotten wood will fail. And how can anyone be free from self by leading a wretched life, if he does not succeed in quenching the fires of lust, if he still hankers after either worldly or heavenly pleasures. But he in whom self has become extinct is free from lust; he will desire neither worldly nor heavenly pleasures, and the satisfaction of his natural wants will not defile him. However let him be moderate, let him eat and drink according to the needs of the body.... To keep the body in good health is a duty, for otherwise we shall not be able to trim the lamp of wisdom and keep our mind strong and clear. Water surrounds the lotus flower but does not wet its petals.⁵

Growing out of mud and water, the petals of the lotus are still clean and dry. We live in the desire realm surrounded by the objects of our senses—our sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch—but the sense objects do not have to drown us. At present they overwhelm us and rob us of time to practice Dharma. Also, they never really satisfy us—like drinking salt water, the more we drink, the more thirsty we become.

The Buddha’s life is an example of the journey beyond both extremes. After his early palace life of utter sensory gratification, like many spiritual practitioners of the time, the Buddha deliberately

deprived his body of what it needed in the belief that this could bring salvation. After six years the Buddha realized that this was not the way to fulfill his instinctive wish for happiness and freedom from suffering. He found that the only path was through what he called the *middle way*, which he summarized in his first teaching in the form of the noble eightfold path.

We need to be really clear on this ourselves before we even begin our journey. Is following the middle way, avoiding both extremes, the only way to fulfill our instinctive need for true happiness? And if that is so, what does following the middle way entail? If we are clear that it really leads to happiness, we will develop great motivation to sincerely follow this path. There is no doubt in my mind that this is so, and if Buddhadharma has even the potential to reduce the problems and difficulties we face these days, then it is our responsibility to do our utmost to practice it.

If that is true, it is also our duty to stay healthy. Without the body in good health we will not be able to “trim the lamp of wisdom” and keep our minds strong and clear, which is the first step in our exploration of our inner selves to find that well of happiness. This process depends on keeping the balance between the two extremes.

RESPONSIBILITY TO OURSELVES AND OTHERS

When we observe how animals react if they are harmed even a little, we can see that they naturally try to protect themselves. Scientists say that this instinct to survive and avoid harm is a biological function. But our existence is more than that; it is a combination of our biology, emotions, sensations, and other mental components. It is very beneficial to observe what actions we perform in our daily lives. Ideally, we should be continually mindful, examining everything that we do and the intention we have while doing it.

Sometimes we may feel that we do things without any kind of conscious intention. But if we are truly mindful, we can notice ourselves as we act; and if we trace the motivation back, we will definitely see that we have an instinctive wish to enhance our happiness or reduce our difficulties in some way. Through mindfulness we can glimpse this instinctive wish while it is arising.

We can even go further, recognizing that regardless of superficial differences, deep down all beings possess this same instinctive feeling: At this deepest of levels is complete equality among all sentient beings. Understanding this is fundamental if we want to truly help others.

In fact, if we naturally saw our motivation at such a deep level, we would not need to try to generate a good motivation; it would come effortlessly. We would simply know that all beings have as much right to happiness as we have, and we would naturally want to help them. This is the basis of ethics. His Holiness the Dalai Lama says:

My own view, which does not rely solely on religious faith, nor even on an original idea, but rather on ordinary common sense, is that establishing binding ethical principles is possible when we take as our starting point the observation that we all desire happiness and wish to avoid suffering. We have no means of discriminating between right and wrong if we do not take into account others' feelings, others' suffering...[E]thical conduct is not something we engage in because it is somehow right in itself but because, like ourselves, all others desire happiness and to avoid suffering.⁶

I find his words very powerful. There can be no ethics—no sense of right or wrong—without taking others' feelings into account. Right from the beginning we should try to see that the feelings and rights of

others are important and work toward serving not only our own welfare but also the welfare of all others.

Without any religious dogma whatsoever, by using simple common sense, it is important to judge what is right and what is wrong, what is happiness and what is unhappiness. We can only really do this if we can understand that the feelings, rights, and needs of others are every bit as important as our own.