

Four Seals

The issue of distinguishing Buddhists from non-Buddhists existed in olden times as it does now. In ancient India, this was usually done on the basis of philosophical views regarding the nature of the self and phenomena. A convenient and concise way to delineate Buddhist views is according to the four seals as found in the *King of Concentration Sūtra* (*Samādhirāja Sūtra*). People accepting the four seals are considered Buddhists by view, and those accepting the Three Jewels as their ultimate source of refuge are considered Buddhists by conduct. The four seals are: (1) all conditioned phenomena are transient, (2) all polluted phenomena are *duḥkha* (unsatisfactory) in nature, (3) all phenomena are empty and selfless, and (4) *nirvāṇa* is true peace.

1. All conditioned phenomena are transient.

Conditioned phenomena are products of causes and conditions, and all of them undergo change, disintegrating from what they were and becoming something new. Change occurs in coarse and subtle ways. Coarse change occurs when the continuum of a thing ceases. Subtle change occurs moment by moment — it is a thing not remaining the same from one instant to the next.

We can observe coarse impermanence with our senses: we see that after coming into being, things later cease. A chair breaks, a person dies, and bottles are recycled. Understanding coarse transience is not difficult; we don't need logical arguments to accept this coarse level of change.

However, for something to arise and cease in this obvious way, there must be a subtler process of change occurring from moment to moment. Without a seed changing moment by moment, a sprout will not appear. Without the sprout growing at each moment, the plant won't come into being. Without the plant aging and disintegrating moment by moment, it won't die. Without subtle, momentary change, the coarse change could not occur. The fact that things end indicates they change subtly in each instant. They are transient or impermanent. In Buddhism, "impermanent" means changing moment by moment.

All the main Buddhist philosophical tenet schools (except for *Vaibhāṣika*, which has a slightly different understanding of the process of change and cessation) accept that the moment a thing comes into being, it contains the seed of its own cessation simply by the fact that it is produced by causes and conditions. It is not the case that one cause produces a particular thing, that thing remains unchanged for a period of time, and then another condition suddenly arises that causes its cessation. Rather, the very factor that causes something to arise also causes it to cease. From the very first moment of a thing's existence, it has the nature of coming to an end. The very nature of conditioned phenomena is that they do not last from one moment to the next.

Generally speaking, when we think of something coming into being, we look at it from a positive angle and think of it growing. When we think of something ending, we have the negative feeling that what existed before is ceasing. We see these two as incompatible and contradictory. However, if we reflect on the deeper meaning of impermanence, we see that its very definition — momentary change — applies to both the arising and ceasing of a thing.

Nothing, whether it is in the process of arising or the process of ending, lasts into the next moment.

The present is insubstantial. It is an unfindable border between the past — what has already happened — and the future — what is yet to come. While we spend a great deal of time thinking about the past and planning for the future, neither of them is occurring in the present. The only time we ever live is in the present, but it is elusive, changing in each nanosecond. We cannot stop the flow of time to examine the present moment.

Scientists, too, speak of momentary change: subatomic particles are in continuous motion, and cells in our body undergo constant, imperceptible alteration. When we understand impermanence to mean momentariness, we see that arising and ceasing are not contradictory but are two aspects of the same process. The very fact that something comes into being means it will cease. Change and disintegration occur moment by moment. When we understand impermanence in those terms, we'll recognize the significance of the first seal, that all conditioned phenomena are impermanent.

Understanding impermanence is a powerful antidote to harmful emotions that plague our lives. Emotions such as attachment or anger are based on grasping: we unconsciously hold the view that the people to whom we're attached will not cease and that the problem or mood we're experiencing at present will continue. Contemplating impermanence shows us the opposite: since everyone and everything changes, clinging to people, objects, or situations as being fixed doesn't make much sense. Since our problems and bad moods are transient by nature, we do not need to let them weigh us down. Rather than resist change, we can accept it.

While the direct and complete antidote to attachment is the realization of selflessness, an understanding of impermanence will prepare our mind to gain insight into the meaning of selflessness. But understanding impermanence will not harm beneficial qualities such as love, compassion, and altruism because those emotions are not based on unrealistically grasping impermanent things to be permanent. Contemplating impermanence gives us confidence that our disturbing emotional habits can change and that excellent qualities can grow in us.

2. All polluted phenomena are *duḥkha* — unsatisfactory by nature.

Polluted phenomena are those produced under the control of ignorance and its latencies. Because all things in cyclic existence — including our body and mind — are polluted in this way, they are said to be *duḥkha*, unsatisfactory by nature. They are not capable of providing the enduring happiness and security that we seek.

How are the unsatisfactory circumstances in our lives related to our minds? In the *Sūtra on the Ten Grounds*, the Buddha said, “The three realms are only mind.” The Cittamātra (Mind Only) school says this means the external physical world that we perceive is nothing but a projection of our mind. The Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka school understands this statement differently, saying that it indicates there is no absolute, independent creator and that the source of our experiences lies in our minds — our virtuous, nonvirtuous, and neutral minds — and the actions, or karma, that these mental states motivate.

From the Buddhist viewpoint, many universes exist simultaneously at different stages of development — some are beginning while others are devolving. Before a particular universe

begins, the potential for material substances exists in the form of space particles. Changing moment by moment, these space particles are not absolute or independent entities.

How is the physical evolution of a universe related to sentient beings — their mental states and their experiences of pain and pleasure, happiness and unhappiness? This is where karma comes in. Karma is intentional actions done by sentient beings. As the potencies remaining from these actions ripen, they shape the evolution of the external world and condition our experiences in it.

Sentient beings create karma physically, verbally, and mentally. Our motivation is principal, for it fuels our physical and verbal actions. Destructive actions are motivated by afflictions such as attachment, anger, and confusion, which in turn are polluted by and rooted in ignorance, an erroneous belief in inherent existence. Even when sentient beings act with kindness, the karma they create is still polluted by the ignorance grasping inherent existence. So whether the actions are constructive or destructive, they produce rebirth in cyclic existence. Because unawakened cyclic existence is a product of the undisciplined mind, it is said to be *duḥkha*, unsatisfactory by nature. Secure peace and happiness cannot come from ignorance. For this reason, the second seal of Buddhism is that all polluted phenomena are in the nature of *duḥkha*.

The first truth, the truth of *duḥkha*, consists of two factors: those in the external environment, such as our environment, tables, and oceans, and those internal to sentient beings — our bodies and minds. Within the latter, the feeling aggregate, the primary consciousnesses and mental factors that accompany them, and the cognitive faculties that cause these consciousnesses are all unsatisfactory by nature. Both the external and internal objects are true *duḥkha* because they come into being due to the polluted karma and the afflictions of ordinary sentient beings.

Once someone has eliminated afflictions and karma, she becomes an arhat, someone liberated from cyclic existence. Even so, she may continue to live in the external world, which is true *duḥkha*. In other words, the criterion for being in cyclic existence is not the environment in which a person lives but her state of mind.

The first two seals are related. We can use the transient nature of functioning things as a reason to show that all polluted phenomena are unsatisfactory in nature. Functioning things are products of causes and conditions, thus they are under the control of other factors. Polluted things, such as our ordinary bodies and unenlightened minds, are under the power of polluted causes — the undisciplined mind, at the root of which lies ignorance. As long as our minds remain under the control of ignorance, we live in an unsatisfactory state where the cause of suffering is always present.

3. All phenomena are empty and selfless.

4. Nirvāṇa is true peace.

The third and fourth seals are closely related. The explanation of the third seal accepted by almost all Buddhist tenet schools glosses the term “empty” as the absence of a permanent, unitary, independent self or soul and “selfless” as the absence of a self-sufficient, substantially existent person. According to the Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka school, which is considered the most accurate view, “empty” and “selfless” both refer to the absence of

inherent, true, or independent existence. Unless otherwise noted in this book, explanations will be according to this school.

The root of our cyclic existence is the ignorance that grasps phenomena as possessing some sort of independent existence, selfhood, or self-existence. The word *ignorance* conjures up the image of something inauspicious or undesirable, and it is indeed so. Just as whatever grows from a poisonous seed will be poisonous, everything that arises from ignorance will be undesirable. If we remain under the control of ignorance and erroneous views, there is no possibility of lasting joy.

According to Prāsaṅgikas, ignorance is not simply a state of unknowing. It actively grasps or conceives things to exist in a way that they do not. Superimposing inherent existence on persons and phenomena, it apprehends what is contrary to reality. Whereas persons and phenomena do not exist inherently, under their own power, ignorance grasps them as existing in that way.

As we investigate how phenomena exist, our conviction that ignorance is erroneous increases. By seeing and familiarizing ourselves with the wisdom of knowing reality, we gradually erode the force of ignorance and the undisciplined mind. When the cause, ignorance, is completely uprooted by its counterforce, wisdom, its resultant *duḥkha* is likewise extinguished. This state of freedom is *nirvāṇa*, lasting peace and true freedom. Therefore, the fourth seal of Buddhism is that *nirvāṇa* is true peace.

Knowing the evolution of afflictions such as attachment and anger helps us understand the necessity of employing analysis to gain the wisdom of realizing the selflessness of persons and phenomena that eradicates ignorance. If we examine emotions such as attachment and anger, we see that they are rooted in grasping at inherent existence. The stronger our grasping at an independent I, the stronger our attachment to the concerns of that self. We cling to whatever is seen as important to the self and are hostile toward whatever impedes fulfilling its interests.

For example, we may see a beautiful item that we are very attracted to in a store, and we crave to possess it. After we buy it, we call it mine and become even more attached to it. Behind the label, mine is the belief in a self whose happiness is extremely important. If someone else then takes or breaks the article, we become angry because the happiness of this I have been adversely affected. Here we see the relationship between our grasping at an inherently existent I and our attachment to the article and anger at whatever interferes with our enjoying it. Refuting the inherent existence of this I eliminates the basis of our attachment and anger, which subsequently diminish and eventually are totally eradicated.

The distinguishing mark of being in cyclic existence is the mere I being under the control of ignorance and karma; that is when the aggregates that are the basis of the designation of the I are produced by these polluted causes, the person designated in dependence on them is bound in cyclic existence. As soon as that person eliminates ignorance, she no longer creates polluted actions that propel cyclic existence. Her cyclic existence ceases, and that person — that mere I — attains liberation. Gradually, she can also remove the cognitive obscurations that prevent omniscience, and when this is done, that mere I attains Buddhahood, the state of full awakening or non-abiding *nirvāṇa*, in which the person abides neither in cyclic existence nor in the personal peace of an arhat's *nirvāṇa*.

The four seals follow each other in a natural sequence. The existence of our body, mind, and self, as well as the people and environment around us, is governed by causes and conditions. Thus, their very nature is transient and momentary. The very causes and conditions that brought them into existence are the causes of their disintegration. In short, all conditioned phenomena are impermanent, the first of the four seals.

The external environment as well as factors internal to sentient beings — our bodies and minds — came about under the influence of our afflictions and polluted karma. Thus, they are unsatisfactory by nature. As the second seal states, all polluted phenomena are *duḥkha*.

The story does not stop here, because there exists a powerful antidote — the wisdom realizing the emptiness of inherent existence — that is capable of totally eradicating ignorance, afflictions, and karma. All phenomena are empty and selfless, the third seal. When emptiness is realized directly and nonconceptually, and the mind becomes habituated with it through consistent meditation, all afflictions and karma causing rebirth are eradicated. In this way, cyclic existence is ceased and the fourth seal — *nirvāṇa* is peace — comes about.

The four seals are related to the four truths. The first two seals — all conditioned phenomena are transient and all polluted phenomena are unsatisfactory — describe the first two noble truths: the truths of *duḥkha* and its origins. But knowing this alone doesn't overcome our suffering. The last two seals — emptiness and selflessness, and *nirvāṇa* — speak of the third truth, true cessations, and imply the fourth truth, true paths, as the path that realizes them. By realizing the true path — the wisdom realizing emptiness — that knows all phenomena are empty and selfless, we uproot the ignorance that is the root cause of cyclic existence. Its cessation is the fourth seal, *nirvāṇa* is true peace.

H.H. the Dalai Lama, and Thubten Chodron. *The Foundation of Buddhist Practice*.
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