

A Brief Overview of the Three Turnings and the Mantra Pitaka of the Vidyadharas

by Khenpo Pema Vajra

Homage to the Buddha!

Our Teacher turned the wheel of Dharma in three stages: the first turning of the wheel of Dharma on the four noble truths, the second turning of the wheel of Dharma on the absence of characteristics, and the final turning of the wheel of Dharma on the perfect revelation.

The Four Truths

The four truths are taught for the sake of beginners who wish to leave samsara behind and attain liberation. They are taught in terms of (i) the characteristics of samsara and (ii) its causes, as well as (iii) the characteristics of liberation and (iv) the methods for attaining it. The Buddha said:

This is the truth of suffering.

The truth of suffering is to be understood.

This is the truth of origination.

The truth of origination is to be abandoned.

This is the truth of cessation.

The truth of cessation is to be attained.

This is the truth of the path.

The truth of the path is to be relied upon.

1. The Truth of Suffering

The truth of suffering refers to the environments and inhabitants of samsara, which can be divided further into the three realms and six

classes of beings, all of which can be included within the five aggregates.

How is this to be understood? There are four characteristics of suffering and samsara: (i) suffering, (ii) impermanence, (iii) emptiness and (iv) selflessness.

‘Suffering’ refers to the three types of suffering in samsara as a whole: blatant suffering, the suffering of change and the all-pervasive suffering of conditioning. ‘Impermanence’ includes the coarse impermanence of the birth and death of beings, the formation and destruction of the universe, the changes of the seasons and so on, as well as subtle impermanence, which is the fact that all conditioned things are constantly changing, moment by moment, and never remain static. ‘Emptiness’ indicates that wherever we search inside or outside the five aggregates, there is nothing that we might call ‘I’ or ‘self,’ just as a house is said to be ‘empty’ when there are no people inside. ‘Selflessness’ indicates that the five aggregates lack the characteristics of the self, i.e., permanence, singularity and independence. This is similar to saying that the house is not a person because it lacks all the characteristics of a human being.

It is necessary to understand the characteristics of the truth of suffering like this, so that we grow weary of samsara and develop the wish to find liberation from it, and so that we understand how deluded it is to cling to a self where there is none.

2. The Truth of Origination

Once we have understood the truth of suffering and no longer feel any desire for it, we need to understand its cause, the truth of origination, so that we can abandon it. For instance, when we know that physical pain is distressing and undesirable, we will see the need to abandon its causes, which are sickness and harmful influences.

The truth of origination consists of two aspects: karma and mental afflictions. ‘Karma’ here refers to the ten non-virtues, defiled virtuous acts not embraced by skilful means and mere shamatha which is not combined with vipashyana. Mental afflictions are the causes which motivate these types of action--the three main

poisons of the mind and all the primary and secondary afflictions they give rise to. The root or 'seed' of all mental afflictions is clinging to a self. This is what we call 'clinging to the self of the individual' or 'innate self-clinging' and is the ignorance that is the first of the twelve links of dependent origination. Therefore, this self-clinging and all the karmic actions and afflictions which it produces are what we call 'origination,' and we must understand how they are the causes for every kind of suffering.

Origination has four characteristics: (i) cause, (ii) origination, (iii) intense arising and (iv) condition.

Let us explain these in the proper sequence. Firstly, 'cause' means that just as a seed produces its fruit, for example, karma and the afflictions produce all the sufferings of samsara. Secondly, 'origination' means that just as crops grow from a field, all sufferings arise from karma and the afflictions. Thirdly, 'intense arising' means that just like touching a wound on the body, strong karma and afflictions immediately produce great suffering. Fourthly, 'condition' means that suffering is brought about through the conditions of karma and the afflictions, just as a crop requires for its production conditions such as water and fertilizer.

It is necessary to understand this, so that we develop the wish to avoid karma, the afflictions and self-clinging, in the same way that knowing how poison and infection are the causes of sickness means we strive to avoid them.

3. The Truth of Cessation

By abandoning origination, we can be free from the sufferings of samsara and realize the reality of cessation, which is nirvana. So we need to develop the wish to realize true cessation. True cessation is unconditioned absolute space, free from the five aggregates, in which the seed of origination has been abandoned. It has four characteristics: (i) peace, (ii) cessation, (iii) perfection and (iv) true deliverance.

'Peace' indicates that all the karma and mental afflictions, as well as suffering and the defiled conditioned phenomena that were present before have all been thoroughly pacified. 'Cessation' means that all the seeds which have been abandoned through applying the

antidotes will never return. 'Perfection' indicates that this state is faultless, excellent and endowed with qualities. 'True deliverance' indicates that when we have realized cessation once, it is impossible for us to return to samsara ever again. 'Cessation,' 'liberation,' 'total freedom' and 'nirvana' are all synonymous.

It is necessary for us to understand cessation because seeing the advantages and wonderful qualities we can gain will inspire us to pursue liberation.

4. The Truth of the Path

The true path is that which is practised by an individual who knows the faults of samsara's true suffering and the advantages of liberation's true cessation, and who wants to leave samsara behind and to reach nirvana. The true path consists of the wisdom of not conceiving of the self of the individual, accompanied by faith, diligence, mindfulness, concentration, intelligence and so on. It has four characteristics. It is: (i) a path, (ii) appropriate, (iii) effective and (iv) truly delivering.

It is a 'path' since it takes us from the state of an ordinary being to awakening and liberation. It is 'appropriate' in the sense that it is appropriate and suitable as an antidote to origination, karma and the afflictions. It is 'effective' because it infallibly brings our minds to accomplishment on the genuine approach. The path is 'truly delivering' because if we practise it, there is no doubt that we will be led out of, or 'emerge definitively' from, the quagmire of samsara.

How do we put this into practice? Knowing that the whole of samsara is by nature suffering, we should feel strong renunciation and the wish to escape it, and seek a spiritual teacher who can show us the path correctly. Receiving his instructions, and guarding our pure moral discipline as carefully as our own eyes, we need to accomplish a stable calmness and one-pointed concentration by practising referential and non-referential shamatha in an isolated place. Then, we must train our minds in the points of selflessness and emptiness having discovered vipashyana based on our teacher's instructions. Out of the unity of shamatha and vipashyana, we can definitively ascertain the nature of mind itself, and arouse non-conceptual wisdom in our minds. Then, in a state of meditative

equipoise that is unstained by attachment to experience or intellectual speculation, self-clinging will be cut at its root, fixation upon the view or meditation will fade, subtle and grosser thought states will be purified, and we will arrive at the clear and pristine natural state of consciousness that is self-knowing and devoid of any object. Until we reach this, we need to apply ourselves to the practice with great diligence. Once we do reach this level, quite naturally and effortlessly, we will be able to sustain its continuity through an innate mindfulness free from any distraction, and, through developing the strength of our practice, the natural radiance of unborn awareness and emptiness will become the display of uninterrupted samadhi. All types of enlightened activity for our own and others' welfare—such as love and compassion, faith and pure perception, generation phase (kyerim) and perfection phase (dzogrim) practice, mantra recitation, accumulation of merit and wisdom, purification of obscurations, the six perfections and four means of attraction, dedication of merit and aspiration—will be accomplished effortlessly. Then, just as a magician conjures up magical creations or displays illusions of the four elements in the sky, all this variety will arise unceasingly as the radiance of the unborn nature, and be liberated without any clinging to its display. This is how we can practise enlightened action in which the two truths are inseparably united, and without any clinging or attachment, “Act, like a lotus in water, unsullied, and like the sun and moon in the sky, unhindered.”[1] --in other words, act without attachment or hindrance.

Let us relate this to the instructions on the preliminary practices:

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The teachings on death and impermanence and the sufferings of samsara are instructions for understanding the truth of suffering.

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The teaching on the cause and effect of actions is the instruction on abandoning true origination.

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The teaching on the benefits of liberation is the instruction on attaining true cessation.

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The teachings on contemplating the physical support with its freedoms and advantages and how to rely upon a spiritual teacher are instructions creating the right conditions for embarking on the true path. Then, the stages of the teachings from taking refuge up to guru yoga, which guide us through the three outer, inner and secret vehicles, are the instructions for following the true path.

Therefore, since these four truths reveal the way we should practise adopting and abandoning based on an understanding of the nature of samsara and nirvana, they provide a general structure for all paths and a common ground for all vehicles, and form the great pathway that is followed by all noble beings. This means that whatever we are practising, whether it is the sutras, tantras or pith instructions, it is crucially important that we understand them.

The Second Turning of the Wheel of Dharma

Then, in the intermediate set of teachings, all phenomena are explained in terms of the three gateways to liberation: emptiness, absence of characteristics and wishlessness. The wheel of Dharma on the absence of characteristics was turned for the benefit of disciples who have the potential to follow the mahayana. Self-clinging or the view of self, which is mentioned in the context of the truth of origination as the root of samsaric existence, is here separated into two, i.e., clinging to the self of the individual and clinging to a 'self' or identity in phenomena. It is the clinging to a 'self' in phenomena which is taught to be the root of samsaric existence. In order to teach its antidote, the selflessness of phenomena, in a complete way, in the context of the true path, the profound theme of emptiness is set out in extremely elaborate detail. By taking this to heart through practice, all our cognitive obscurations are abandoned, so that we realize omniscient wisdom and work for the benefit of beings for as long as space exists. Since we need to train in the boundless activity of the bodhisattvas once we have meditated on emptiness endowed with the supreme of all aspects, all the aspects of the practice of skilful means, such as arousing the supreme mind of bodhichitta, accomplishing infinite gateways to samadhi meditation, the six perfections, four immeasurables, four means of attraction and so on, are also taught in vast detail. In this way, we are taught to practise without dissociating skilful means from wisdom.

The Third Turning of the Wheel of Dharma

In the final series of teachings, all phenomena are perfectly divided into three categories: imputed, dependent and truly established. The truly established, which is the absolute truth, is taught by proving definitively that the unconditioned absolute space of all phenomena, our own naturally arising wisdom free from all conceptual elaboration, is the nature of the great Middle Way. Concepts of real things as really existent and unreal things as empty, and even extremely subtle mental extremes are shown to be mere conceptual ideas and subtle thought. Then, we are taught how to enter into the sphere of the enlightened mind, the inconceivable wisdom in which all the bases for such views have been abandoned. Therefore, this too is a teaching on the ultimately profound truth of the path as a means to abandon the subtle negative tendencies related to origination.

Therefore, the teachings of all three turnings do not go beyond the approach of the four truths, but are merely divisions within it.

The Secret Mantrayana

Even in the tradition of unsurpassed secret mantra vajrayana, we realize omniscience by turning away from the causes and effects of samsara and engaging in the causes and effects of nirvana. Generally, therefore, this does fit within the scheme of the four truths, but there is a difference in how this is put into practice.

The environments and inhabitants of samsara, which make up the truth of suffering, are spoken of in terms of how they actually are and how they appear.

Let us firstly consider them from the point of view of how they really are. Underlying all these various appearances is naturally arising wisdom beyond all conceptual elaboration, the great dharmakaya in which the realities of appearance and emptiness are inseparable. Therefore, we speak of 'buddhahood of the spontaneously perfect ground.' Like the example of a jewel caked in mud, our own nature is utterly pure. The nature of the reality of suffering is true cessation, and so we speak of the indivisibility of samsara and nirvana. This is the continuum of the ground, or the

basis for purification. In order to realize this we have the view or philosophy known as 'the indivisibility of samsara and nirvana.'

Now let us consider how things appear. Outer and inner phenomena, which appear to be independent in the common perception of ordinary beings, are called 'deluded appearances based on a lack of realization.' This is what we must purify. It is the truth of suffering.

With regard to the karma and mental afflictions of the truth of origination, there are two alternatives: one is to bring them onto the path through recognizing their nature and the other is to let them run their course and originate suffering. The way to bring them onto the path is as follows: Whatever afflictive emotions arise, if we allow ourselves to settle gently into the affliction itself, without trying particularly to block it or cultivate it, its energy will be released upon the fundamental ground of mind, like a block of ice melting into water, or a wave dissolving back into the ocean. The essence of the afflictive emotion itself, which is fundamental wisdom beyond concepts, will arise nakedly and distinctly. As this happens, there is no need to apply some other antidote; the mental affliction itself dawns as wisdom, so that origination becomes the truth of the path. Therefore this is known as 'taking afflictions as the path.'

By themselves, the actions (karma) of our body and speech are neutral; it is the mind that makes them virtuous or non-virtuous. If we do not allow our minds to reify subject and object, but instead allow whatever arises in the mind to be freed within the open reality of its own intrinsic nature, that is wisdom. To generate bodhichitta at the outset, practise the main part of bringing to mind deity, mantra and samadhi so that our ordinary perception dawns as pure perception, and finally dedicate this to the swift completion of the two accumulations is skilful means. When they are accompanied by this special wisdom and skilful means, our actions too become the true path.

As for how they become origination, if we do not have this special wisdom and skilful means, we will slip into ordinary patterns in both our intentions and our actions, and, by doing so, accumulate karma and be compelled to wander endlessly in samsara. This is how they become the true origination of suffering.

Therefore, if we understand the key points of vajrayana like this, and we have the confidence of realization and experience, we can recognize the nature of the reality of suffering to be cessation, and take origination as the true path, so that the causes and effects of samsara become the causes and effects of nirvana. What is to be abandoned becomes the remedy and we gain the realization of the indivisibility of samsara and nirvana.

If we understand this, we can see that there is only a slight difference between the pratimoksha, bodhisattva and mantrayana vows in terms of the truth of the path, and whether one practises avoidance, transformation or 'taking as the path.' In fact, these approaches are all identical in terms of abandoning actual karma and mental afflictions, purifying our habitual perception of samsara, which is the truth of suffering, and realizing the ultimate reality of cessation.

It is because the approach of secret mantra also falls within the approach of the four truths that the "essence of dependent origination" dharani,[2] which sets out the meaning of the four truths, is universally praised as supreme and is found throughout all the sutras, tantras and pith instructions.

These four truths, the direct teaching of the first turning,

Whose meaning is captured in a single verse in The Essence of Interdependence,

Are here set out in an original and fine explanation,

Showing how to proceed in stages along the path of all the sutras, tantras and instructions.

This was drawn out of the great ocean of Manjushri's wisdom,

By the playful intervention of the goddess Sarasvati,

To bring delight to the minds of the fortunate,

Just as it was related to me by the sound of her vina.

Over the peaks of the eastern mountains of the intellect,

May this youthful sun of instruction shine out its countless rays of light,

And cause the thousand petalled lotuses of faith and wisdom to blossom,

Sending out the sweet scent of experience and realization in all directions!

This was written by Pema Vajra. May it be virtuous!

Translated by Adam

[1] This is a quotation from the famous aspiration prayer called Samantabhadra's Aspiration to Good Actions (bzang spyod smon lam).

[2] om ye dharma hetu prabhava hetum tesham tathagato hy avadat tesham cha yo nirodha evam vadi mahashramanah svaha.