

The Four Seals of Dharma

Dharma roadside dialogue series

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Part one: Exposé

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The Four Seals of Dharma is an important teaching of the Buddha and the interest I have in particular for this teaching is that it points out four key points that will be a really important foundation as we practice. And I am always keen on trying to find the most essential aspects of the heart of the buddhist teachings so that we, in our very busy times, and are own limited capacities in terms of time and so on, we have something that we can practice, put into practice seriously, and have a result. What matters for me is that at the end of this session you have good tools that you can use throughout the rest of your life, and then before you die you reach enlightenment. Okay? And if not before you die, just right at the moment of death. And if not then next life. And if not next life. No, I'm kidding, but you have good tools so that you can really move forward on your discovery of the nature of mind. That's really my intention.

So these four points, and thanks for asking to talk about this, for requesting this theme, because for me they are very important because they are seals; and I understand it as a radical experience that changes your mind. In the sense of a seal, like when you apply a seal on a document then it becomes something that has an importance, the value is transformed.

So, these four seals are four directions for our exploration of reality. And they're called the Four Seals of Dharma, and Dharma of course can be understood as the teachings of the Buddha, this is one of the ways of understanding what the Dharma is, but also it could be understood as reality as it is. I like to approach the Four Seals of Dharma not as four teachings about the Dharma, but rather as four instructions for contemplation that will have a radical influence on your mind because they reflect reality. Through them you can come closer to reality and that means farther away from delusion and ignorance.

So, four seals. The first one, because I am going to list them out, the first one is: everything is impermanent. The second one, which is the one I will probably spend more time on, is: all contaminated contacts are a source of suffering. I will explain what that means. The third is: all phenomena are empty. And I will explain that. And finally, the fourth one is: nirvana is pacification and peace. That is the way leading to peace, pacification is the way leading to peace and peace is the result of the practice. So we have here a sort of blueprint of the way to enlightenment in the form of four considerations.

We will begin with the first one. The first one is quite obvious if we really want to look at it. Everything is impermanent. Everything is constantly changing. Nothing stays. It's always changing. And it's very important to understand and to bring this into our lives as a central piece of truth,

because we are constantly in denial about this reality and that brings a lot of suffering. We are actually convinced that we as an individual have a sort of existence that we are moving through time and fairly unchanged. And we try to calculate a sense of stability in our environment so that we are not confronted with transitions and the difficulties that come from transitions. What are the difficulties? The difficulties coming from transitions are basically adaptation. We don't like to adjust.

We want things to stay as they are, especially if they are good. You know. When we have good circumstances we don't want to see them go. And then when we have difficult circumstances, because of this idea of permanence of everything, we sort of panic, because we project this into the future. That's what I call copy and paste; we copy the present situation, and then control v and then we copy it for the next moment and the next moment and the next moment, and so we project the future of it's going to be the same shit again and again, and then we freak out, we don't like it. So whether it's good or whether it's not good doesn't really matter. It is a source of anxiety, this is called the suffering of change. Which is not really due to change, but due to our incapacity to dance with change. To adjust and adapt and transform as the conditions change, our position must change, our relation to the world must be adjusted, and we hate doing that. So the first consideration is really, whether you like it or not, everything is impermanent. Whether you like it or not will not make you happier. But what makes you comfortable with change is to embrace it and accept it and be with it. And be intelligent and kind enough to adjust to the new movement. The new distribution, the new shuffle. We're talking about like a hand in cards, a new set of decks that are given to you or that you receive.

So, we must really study this, that means understand. And then we need to contemplate it, and then we need to digest it, through a contemplative meditative practice of some sort. The difference between the three; study, reflection and meditation, I will explain like this: to study is to come to the understanding that everything is impermanent. Contemplating means that you agree with this and you are willing to do the transformation. From knowing to willing. That's what contemplation will make. And then meditating is actually doing the job. Actually doing the work of transition and transformation. So this is how we should always proceed. First the acquisition of the new idea, the new concept, then the validation through our own logical reasoning and study in a deeper way, and come to a certainty, a conclusion that, yes, this is what I have to do!

There is no other way, really. I can really reject change but I'm still subject to it, and so it will not help. So I have to embrace reality, I have to see it, I have to agree with it, and then I have to embrace it. That's study, reflection, and meditation. And then the transformation will take place, because we follow this three-fold process. Then once we are at this point, then we can move to the second. And the second point is: all contaminated contacts are suffering, and this is a very, very important point. Contaminated contacts is the translation of the Tibetan word tsakjay, tsakjay. Tsak means stained, polluted. Okay? And that refers to applying a dualistic perspective on any contact. To any contact. That's the pollution. Whenever there is a moment of conscious awareness through the six operative consciousnesses, visual, tactile, and so on, the five sense consciousnesses and then the

mental consciousness. I call this the six operative consciousnesses. This is always happening with the stain of dualistic perception. Even the words in Tibetan and Sanskrit sort of reflect this reality. The word in Sanskrit is vijñana, or consciousness. Vijnana is cognizance, awareness. Vi is a prefix that means divided. And the same in Tibetan. Nampar shepa. Shepa is jñana in Sanskrit, and that's consciousness, awareness, and nampar means in a divided way.

This means that there is always the knower, the known, and the knowing, or the knowing act. In every instance of the function of the six operative consciousnesses. And that's the stain. That's the flaw, you could say, in our cognizance. And why all these stained or polluted contacts are the source of suffering is due to the dualistic perspective. Where we conceive a subject and an object that are different, that are opposed, and exist as entities that have a sort of substantial reality and a permanence. And in between the two is opening a gap for all the apprehensions that will become the mental afflictions. If something is deemed pleasant by the subject, then it becomes an object of attachment. And then if it's deemed unpleasant it becomes an object of rejection. And if it's kind of vague, there is an indifference. But there's not really recognition of what this object truly is, so it's not really indifference, but also a sort of mental opacity. Not really seeing clearly through. And of course these three kleshas: indifference, stupidity, aggression and greed, will motivate actions and words. And these actions and words will have a kickback. You don't need somebody who will be the accountant of your misdeeds and will be in charge of punishing you. It's just that actions simply have consequences. And if they are made in the framework of duality, a subject towards an object, they will be felt in the same framework, from an object to a subject. It will sort of bounce back. So that's why the contaminated contacts are suffering. And to this effect Shamar Rinpoche once told me, "It's very important to be precise on this point, because we might understand that all contaminated objects are the source of suffering, that is, put the blame on the object. This is not correct. The contamination is not in the object. The contamination is in the lack of awareness of reality."

Mind doesn't know itself, and becomes the prey of its own ignorance and delusion. It's not. Don't blame the object. The blame should be like what we read in the mind-training literature, "Drive all blames into one." All the problems you see in the world come from this contaminated contact which is the ignorance of mind that creates dualistic perception. What I found is that this dualistic perception can bring us to a difficult point that in Western philosophy we call cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance. When you are caught between two opposite aspirations. In the Melanesian culture the man, the human-being gets caught between two aspirations. One is of the tree, and the other of the canoe. The canoe is traveling, and the tree is the root and the family. If you want the canoe you have to cut the tree. If you want the tree you have to cut the travel. And it's almost impossible to reconcile these two opposite aspirations, so you suffer from a mental dilemma, which is to be caught between these two aspirations.

If we don't pay attention to the manner we engage on the path, and that we're still very much ignorant of how powerful this dualistic perception is, we might project ourselves into the desire of

enlightenment. Like enlightenment becomes an object that needs to be obtained, and thereby samsara is another object which needs to be destroyed, rejected; it's dirty, the other one is clean. Pure, impure. And then when we are trying to gain the "object" enlightenment, we need to follow a procedure that eradicates, that suppresses, all the dark aspects of our personality that are actually very fertile ground to discover also a lot of qualities. We have to suppress this, but actually this is not possible. As a part of ourselves is coming to the surface, it sort of disrupts the beautiful clean party of me reaching enlightenment, so our practice of Dharma is contaminated...by this dualistic projection. And it's not able to do its job, which is to bring us beyond this opposition of pure and impure.

That leads us to the fourth point: Nirvana, enlightenment, is peace. And peace means the peace that is beyond the dichotomy, the opposition between peace and turbulence. Samsara and Nirvana. If we consider Nirvana as merely peace, we want just to pacify everything, so we have to cut anything that disturbs. We have to repress. And then the more you repress, the more it pops up, and the more you have to repress, and the more it pops up and so on and so forth. And that's where you've got cognitive dissonance in your practice of Dharma. Then you fall into an extreme of puritanism. You know, the one definition I like of puritanism is: the fear that somewhere someone is having a good time. This is unbearable, because I have to cut myself off from all forms of pleasure in order to achieve enlightenment. But if anybody else has a party, I hate it because it makes me doubt that my path is right.

You know all these forced conversions we have seen in religion throughout the ages are not meant to enlighten other people, they're just meant for you to make sure that you're right. The more people adhere to your view, the more you're justified to think that you're right. So you don't preach to educate, you preach to gain members so that if your party or club is big, you must be right. The famous words, "too big to fail" applies to this. So, it's very important to understand that if you don't have a firm understanding through study of how dualistic perception is the source of all our trouble, we will keep desiring an object enlightenment and we have to repress what does not conform to this mental representation of enlightenment that we need to hold; we have objectified enlightenment.

This is what Trungpa Rinpoche spiritual materialism. Spiritual Materialism. And so for me the second point is a warning. There is no problem in the world for a mind that is enlightened. Everything is an option, everything is an opportunity to work, this is all very good material for recycling, it's a great opportunity to cultivate more discernment and more compassion. But as long as I maintain this dualistic perspective, as there will be pleasant things and unpleasant things, I'm in trouble. Because remember the first point, everything is impermanent, right? So there are the things that are pleasant. You have them, great. You lose them, because everything is impermanent, so it doesn't work well. Or there's the things you like, and they're illusory, you can't get them, you get frustrated, maybe you're jealous and angry because somebody made it like that? And then there are the things you don't like. You try to avoid them. They're coming, you keep trying to avoid them, but they're coming. You're good at dodging, but they keep coming. And then there is the fourth point,

which is: you're weak, you're down and out, there's no way you can avoid it any more, and then you suffer, full load.

So whether it's pleasant or unpleasant, in the end there is really not much difference between the two. The result is suffering. Unease. Dukkha. And then, of course, you're bitter, frustrated, jealous, you're angry, disappointed. And then you have to find a scapegoat. You know. And then you spend a lot of time trying to find somebody so you can pass on the hot potato that you can't hold anymore, or someone to punish. The idea of the scapegoat; in the Judaic tradition there was a goat that was charged with all the misdeeds of the people, basically this animal was pushed away, sent out of the city, to be the scapegoat so that all the problems of the people would be solved. That's my memory of the story anyway. But the idea is basically that somebody else will clean up my mess. And take the responsibility. But this doesn't work. This doesn't work.

So in mind training, when we practice sending and taking, tonglen, the first thing we do is to own our problem. "I'm angry!" I'm not trying to say, "Yes, but..." No! I am angry! Period. This anger is mine. We own it. And because we own it we can look at it. And then because we look at it and we open our eyes and look around and see that there are so many brothers and sisters who are in the same predicament. Then we have a sense of compassion, and our anger becomes compassion. And then we think, "What can I do? Oh, by owning my suffering I can alleviate theirs." How is it possible? It's possible because there is only one suffering. Whether you call it my suffering or your suffering, this is just a way of dividing things artificially. Suffering is one. If you treat one suffering, you treat all suffering. If you take one suffering and then you recognize it and you recycle it with the process of tonglen, then you find a freedom and a wisdom that you can offer, and that will be the giving part of sending and taking. It will be the part of giving. You can give the result of your transmutation of suffering into compassion. So you're not stalking misery as you deplete yourself from your goody, you recycle. You never give anything else other than what you have taken and recycled. It's just a flow. And this is possible when you understand that the dualistic framework of action is the source of suffering.

A question I was asked in the previous discussion was about this sort of cognitive dissonance in Buddhist practitioners; there is one part of us that is actually very appreciative of the world, we have a sense of the beauty of the world, nature with its sunsets and mountains, rivers, flowers, it all smells so good, and the food is fantastic, and the cheese is so good and the bread is so wonderful and life is so good when it's good, really good! And then there is the little part of the puritan in your mind that is saying, "You're not supposed to have an orgasm. You're not supposed to have enjoyment, because then you go astray from the path of purity which is without any feelings and sensations. Oh, yeah, I want to be enlightened so I have to cut all of this out." So we are caught between these two opposing experiences. On the one side the mind does as it quite naturally and openly marvels, and then on the other side this tedious, constrained mind of purity/holiness that we try to maintain.

How can we go beyond this? Because this is really the heart of the problem when we practice. You sit, and then you say, "That's not enough." Or you like to see your friends and have a coffee or a beer, but then you think, "Oh, but that's wasting time." When you study you want to meditate, when you meditate you want to study. When you meditate you think about work, when you work you hope you can be in retreat, when you are in retreat you're so bored, you have to go back and check your emails and social media, and so on, so we are constantly pushed too and fro between these two things. And in the meantime your life is going and the clock is ticking and soon you'll be dead. Let's be serious. In the best case the lifespan is 30,000 days. How many days are left?

I will link this point to the fourth one. I will link this point of how can we go beyond the dichotomy of marvel and hardline pure practitioners that reject samsara and feelings? Link this with the fourth point, the fourth Dharma Seal which is pacification and the path leading to peace. With the practice, particularly the practice of mahamudra, that begins with shamatha, calm-abiding, because calm-abiding is very very important because it creates the foundation where your mind can just rest and look at itself. Free from all the agitation and turbulence related to the management, control, or promotion of the object that mind perceived. So we pacify this. As we pacify this the mind becomes more stable and calm, there's a sense of well-being and ease, sukha, there's a sense of spaciousness and also a very important quality of reflexive consciousness, a capacity to look at things and analyze. Because we can see. We are not lost in the thoughts, or the struggle with thoughts. Once we have this, then we can begin to look at the mind. And then when we look at the mind, that is insight, vipassana, lhaktong in Tibetan, we're going to really question this object that we perceive, that was, so far, the source of all love and hate and all sorts of problems. It seems. What is it really? And then as we look at it we see that this is like a ghost, this is like a rumor. It makes a lot of noise, but actually it doesn't have any defining characteristics, it doesn't have any location, it doesn't have any form of shape, or color, or smell; it doesn't!

At the same time it's very clear. It is really vivid. But it lacks substantiality. So we begin to understand what will be the third point: all phenomena are devoid of substantial reality with regard to the object. Then when this becomes clear about the object, then we look at the subject. The subject is that which knows. The cognisance of mind. The cognisance of mind that we have disguised, or we have crowned with a crown of a self. We've turned the quality, cognisance, into an entity, me. We look at this, "What is me?" Yes there is cognisance, we cannot deny this. But when we look at "me" where is it? Is it in the physicality somewhere? Is it in the feelings or emotions I have? Again, we can't find it! It's like a rumor, it's like an optical illusion. It appears very real but can't be found. And as we look more and more we see that yes, there is cognisance, but there is no identity, or there is no entity that we could correlate to cognisance.

Then we are going to observe the action. What is moving back and forth between the subject and the object? Same. It is very clear, sharp, but we can't find it. It is very elusive. So as we practice vipassana in this way, the dualistic pattern is exposed as a fraud. Or a mental construction, a habit. And we begin to understand how the pseudo-subject gets pseudo-excitement regarding the pseudo-

object. And that is all very clear but it's all a mental construction based on old habits and ignorance. It doesn't reflect reality. And then when you keep looking at it reality becomes more obvious and as clear as what obstructed it; habits are peeled off by this laser-like mind observing itself. So that's the moment where we begin to realize that actually yes, all misery comes from dualistic perspective and the entanglement in this process of relation between subject and object. Yes. And at the same time it is devoid of any substantial reality. And even more deeply we realize that the so called subject is just the cognisance of mind, mind's own cognisance, that the object is mind's own creativity, and that the movement between the two is just the natural display of mind.

So we begin to see that these are more like the three waves of the same ocean. They have different functions, but this doesn't entail that they are three different entities, because they partake of the same essential reality, which is the emptiness of mind. Also known as the ocean. So when we begin to see that we can either see the ocean, or we can see the waves. Or when we see the ocean, we don't miss the waves. When we see the waves, we don't miss the ocean. Therefore the conceptual duality we've been operating upon since beginningless time, doesn't apply anymore. It is non-applicable in this experience of vipassana. And as we abide in this we realize that this is the natural state of our mind. All phenomena are in essence empty. But they are also clear and manifest because the nature of mind is luminosity. Mind has the capacity to conjure, create, manifest through the power of interdependent origination all sorts of phenomena.

As the third Karmapa said in the *Profound Inner Principles*, "This mind is empty, in essence, yet due to its nature of luminosity, it may manifest itself in any form." And that is turbulence, also known as samsara, or peace, also known as pacification or nirvana. Both of them come from the same mind. They are not opposed entities; one has to be obtained, samsara has to be rejected or abandoned, no!

And so that's where for me is the marvel. Of course I like sunsets and flowers and so on, yeah, that's beautiful. I like Cezanne and the painting of the forest behind me. Okay. It's all wonderful, right? But it's all an illusion. But what is really marvelous? It's that the mind can produce all of this!! The mind can know itself and ignore itself. At the same time. You ignore the something that is, it is, and you ignore it, so the ignorance and the presence of the wisdom of mind is simultaneous, or coincident, co-emergent, that's wonderful! The mind can create hell, the mind can create heaven. It's all an illusion, but it's also real when you go through it. This is wonderful! And that's where my sense of beauty is applied, in how wonderful this mind is.

You know the term in Tibetan, Ema. Ema is wonderful, and Ho is joy. It's just like "amazing!" So when I correlate this mind with the Buddha, which is another way of naming it, my devotion and aspiration for the Buddha the enlightened state just blossoms. And I'm in awe, and I'm amazed by the capacity of this mind to create so many details, and so much perversion in the suffering at the same time. Maybe it sounds kind of crazy, but you can appreciate the transcendent beauty of the ugliness and torture. And there is one text by one of the Dodrupchen Rinpoche's that is the one flavor of bliss and suffering where he explains this. If you go on the website Lotsawa.org there is a

whole test there, it's a whole mind training teaching. But really from the ultimate bodhicitta perspective. So there is a sense of marvel. You can have the marvel, and at the same time understand that suffering is despicable because people are trapped into their own confusion. And because you know that there is nothing to add or subtract to this beautiful mind, in terms of its essence and its nature, you can relax your crusade for enlightenment. Just abide in the natural state. Follow the procedure of cultivating shamatha, cultivate the proximity, the close investigation of the nature of your mind through vipassana. Become inspired by the view of mahamudra, and if you don't know how to do that, read *Boundless Wisdom* by Shamar Rinpoche, it's very well explained. And if you want to know more about it, join us on Tuesdays, we study it.

And then you can really abide in the natural state. Emaho! It produces pure and impure, it produces hell and heaven, and this is really amazing. So through this practice you free yourself from dualistic minding. You free yourself from a path of self-inflicted torture of puritanism in order to reach your pure nirvana. And you don't despise the samsara as inherently bad. As Salingpa said, "Just like the lotus doesn't grow from a well leveled ground with drainable water, the flower of bodhicitta will not grow in the mind of disciples who have desiccated desire." It's very important to understand this. This is how you can really go beyond the fact that all contaminated contacts are possibly the source of suffering. But you can also possibly flip back, and through the contaminated contact come to realize non-duality, the wisdom of non-duality. And that will be your workshop, so don't throw it away.

And so we have seen the third point, all phenomena are devoid of substantial reality. We could talk for hours and hours more on this, but I want to talk a bit more about the fourth one, nirvana is pacification and peace. So, pacification in which sense? The path of mahamudra. Shamatha and vipassana leading to the realization of the true nature of mind, beyond pure and impure. Beyond embellishment and discredit, if we take the formulation of madhyamika. When we follow this path of mahamudra, when we come to realize Emaho, how wonderful and beautiful is this natural state, that is peace. But not a peace that is in opposition to turbulence, because the peace in opposition to turbulence is just pacification in the sense of shamatha pacification, we're just calming it down. We don't liberate, shamatha is not liberating. It's just creating peace so that you can begin to look at mind through vipassana and then through this, find liberation. So this peace is just pacification. It's sort of like the shadow and light of turbulence and peace. Nirvana, the peace of nirvana, is beyond this. Beyond turbulence and peace. Because you realize that both are just the play of the same mind. And because you see the nature of mind, there's luminosity and it's essence is emptiness. This wisdom liberates everything. All delusions will be totally liberated. All the rust will be totally removed. Or dissipated, it's not even removed. Like the sun dissipates the morning mist just by the warmth. The warmth of wisdom dissipates the mist of ignorance. And so that is truly peace.

And there is no coming back. There's no falling back, there's no relapse. Because in the process of pacification everything has been investigated, everything has been seen. All the mistakes are being corrected, and we've totally transformed our behavior but it is now totally inspired by wisdom and

benevolence. And so there is no more the seed for suffering, there is not the soil for it to appear, so for that reason it is a state of the wisdom of no return, there is no falling out of this enlightenment.

And then of course there will be a sequel, like all the good movies, they have a sequel. The question would be like, so what, you reached enlightenment, but what for everybody else? So what comes after is this wisdom, which is the union of luminosity and emptiness, keeps radiating what we call enlightened activity, which is described as for the benefit of all beings without preconception. And this just flows; it's just a flow of benevolence and wisdom, which is the natural state. And as you progress on the path of pacification, the path of the bodhisattva, you make powerful wishes, like the bodhisattva who was going to become the Buddha Amitabha made 48 vows where he ear-marked his enlightenment with the realization of his wishes. If such and such cannot happen, I don't want to be enlightened. The power of his enlightenment is irrepressible, and couldn't be stopped if the wishes were followed. That's the warmth of the Buddha. Amitabha, like he's the sun. That's enlightened activity for the benefit of everyone. As Shantideva said, "As long as space endures, and as long as there are beings in need, until then may I too abide to dispel the misery in the world." That's the enlightened activity.