

## THE FOUR SUMMARIES OF THE BUDDHA DHARMA

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**M**ore than 2500 years ago Lord Sakyamuni Buddha delivered 84000 sets of teachings out of great compassion for the sentient beings. These teachings were to be applied as a remedy for the various afflictions.

The Buddha's teachings are so vast and deep that in order to even begin to fathom them one must apply study, reflection and meditation. Therefore it is very important to listen. Without listening to the Dharma teachings, one cannot know the fundamental principles and tenets of the Buddha's doctrine. Still listening is not sufficient, one must reflect and scrutinize, thinking whether it is beneficial to oneself, for others and also for peace of mind.

The Dharma teachings should not be taken out of blind faith. Just as the goldsmith assays the purity of the gold by rubbing it into a blackstone, if when scrutinized the Dharma is found to be beneficial one should then practice it incessantly by meditating on the topic prescribed by one's spiritual master. This in short, is a method using study, reflection and meditation in application to Dharma practice.

The Buddha Dharma teachings are so vast and extensive that through study of all sutras and tantra is virtually impossible within this short span of human life. For the benefit of the listeners here I am giving you only the essence of all Buddha Dharma, known as the four Summaries of the Buddha Dharma.

Lord Buddha says:

All conditioned phenomena are impermanent

All afflictions are suffering,

All Dharmas [or phenomena] are devoid of self,

Nirvana is peace.

In expounding the first point:

"All conditioned phenomena are impermanent"

We can see our world as a vessel filled with sentient beings, rivers and so on. They are all impermanent. Impermanence is demonstrable and evident in our daily life and experiences. For example, during the change of seasons plants are beautiful in spring and are nourished by wind and rain in summer. However in autumn and winter they die. Impermanence pertains not only to the seasons, but can be easily observed at the moment of breathing, thinking and in the various states of consciousness. Nothing remains static, even for a moment. The joys and sorrows of sentient beings as do all phenomena, change continuously, like the flow of a river.

The span of human life is uncertain. We do not know when, how or where we will die. From the moment of birth we proceed towards death, just like the flight of an arrow. When we die our body disintegrates and we are either buried or cremated according to our usual customs and traditions. The mind never dies in like manner. As one famous Tibetan yogi Togme sangpo says:

"Our body is just like a guest house  
and the mind is like guest."

One stays in the guest house for a short period and has to leave it very soon to go elsewhere. The mind has to take innumerable bodies and has to suffer for countless aeons until it realizes egolessness.

While we busily accumulate wealth, mend family life, and make preparations for some future happiness, thus leaving little time for Dharma practice, our short life span runs out. Without thinking. We spend time pursuing happiness of this life, and if the death of our body was the end of mind stream also, this attitude could be befitting, but this is not the case.

If we investigate deeply on the nature of our present mind, the origin of this mind is found to be entirely based on the previous mind. So, the existence of previous and future births can be validly established through logic and reason. With this view in mind it is reasonable to think of future lives also, and for this, practice of the Dharma is essential and wise.

The second line of the verses says:  
"All afflictions are suffering"

The source of all afflictions is the wrong view of grasping at the ego as self existing. This ignorance along with attachment, hatred delusion, pride and jealousy emerge all sorts of troubles and problems. All conflicts between two friends, two neighbours, even two countries arise due to these five poisons combined with an attitude of self grasping and self cherishing.

There are three types of suffering:  
a) misery of misery [duhkha dukhata]  
b) misery of change [veparinama duhkha]  
c) misery of conditioned existence [samskara duhkata]

The beings in hell realms suffer from extreme hot and cold temperatures and bodily torture unknown to the human realm. The beings in the hungry ghost realm suffer from prolonged hunger and thirst which can never be satisfied and the animals suffer from ignorance, slavery, slaughtering and the killing of each other for food.

The beings of the god realm experience extended periods of great happiness and their suffering occurs when they perceive this starting to change. The beings in the demi-god realms suffer through constant warfare and jealousy.

Humans suffer from excesses. When cold they hope to get warm and if they cannot get warm the excess cold causes suffering. This is true of many extremes in the human condition. Compared

with this the suffering of the god realm is much more subtle.

Aryas who has perceived egolessness regard the five aggregates as suffering. To be born and assume name and form is great misery. Ordinary beings don't perceive this as suffering as it is very subtle. This is the suffering of Conditioned Existence [Samskara Duhkhata]. So we have the mind afflicted with five kinds of poisons. With this poisonous mind it is impossible to go beyond suffering. But, there are remedies to attain the state beyond suffering.

The third line of the verse states:  
"All Dharmas are devoid of self"

The wisdom of understanding that "all dharmas are devoid of self" is the key point for cutting through the root of Samsara. The doctrine of selflessness is the most important characteristic of Buddhism emphasize the selflessness of the person and phenomena [Pudhala Nairatmuya and Dharma Nairatmya]. All three vehicles [yana] of Buddhist emphasize the elimination of afflictions through realization of selflessness.

It is the general view that Shravakas try to eliminate attachment by practising contentment and mindfulness. Some take ordination vows of 227 precepts, nuns taking 364 precepts, and they practise shamatha and vipassana for the eradication of afflictions.

Bodhisattvayana followers emphasize the elimination of anger through the practice of Bodhicitta. They practice all the thirty seven factors of enlightenment, through the six perfection. They combine the unity of compassion and wisdom, leading to an understanding of voidness. Vajrayana followers eliminate ignorance by innumerable skillful means such as the contemplations in Developing and Completion Stage [Utpattikrama and sampanna krama].

The view that "all Dharmas [phenomena] are devoid of self existence is essence of the Buddha Dharma. The realization of egolessness leads us to the state of consciousness beyond suffering which is ultimate peace i.e. Nirvana.

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