

Handout for Class 2

The Life of the Buddha and the Four Noble Truths

Based on a seminar given by Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche on November 24 and 25, 1984, at Karma Thegsum Choling in New York City. Reprinted from Densal magazine.

In 1984, when Khenpo Rinpoche traveled to the KTC centers, he taught about the Four Noble Truths. Rinpoche began his teachings by saying that the aim in giving this teaching is so that everyone will be able to appreciate the profundity and richness of the Buddhist teachings. To develop devotion and heighten respect for the teacher and the Buddha, one must know the life story of the Buddha and how he taught. Knowing the Buddha's life story also helps those people who think that enlightened beings like the Buddha have been unchangeably enlightened since beginningless time. It further helps people who think that enlightenment happens quickly and is fragile. Rinpoche's story of the life of the Buddha was given to clarify those two mistaken ideas.

The Buddha of this age, Buddha Shakyamuni, was born Gautama Siddhartha approximately 2,500 years ago, to Suddhodana and Mahamaya, king and queen of the Sakya clan in Northern India near Nepal. When the queen was sixteen, she dreamed that a six-tusked elephant entered her womb; from that time on, she was changed, feeling great peace. She wanted to go on retreat, and the king allowed her to do so. She went to stay in a great forest, and after nine months and ten days she felt something unusual. Suddenly, she grasped the limb of a tree, and the Buddha emerged painlessly from her right side. Having emerged, the Buddha took seven steps in each of the four directions, and pointing at the sky, He said, "In this universe, I have come to purify the confused mind of all living beings."

These events prompted the king and queen to take their child to a great seer, who predicted that the child would become a universal king if He chose a mundane path, or a Buddha if He chose a spiritual one.

Determined to perpetuate the royal lineage, King Suddhodana did everything in his power to prepare the young Siddhartha for the life of a ruler. The child was schooled by carefully chosen tutors in all fields of learning and the arts, traditional to Indian royalty at the time, and He excelled to such a degree that He became a teacher to his own tutors.

At the customary age of sixteen, He married princess Yasodhara and began the life of a householder. The king, in an effort to protect his son from unhappiness, devised all sorts of entertainments and diversions, but Siddhartha was introspective by nature and often withdrew from the company of friends and family to sit quietly in the gardens surrounding the palace. Sensing his son's growing dissatisfaction with a life of luxury, and fearing that the prophecy of His Buddhahood might come to pass, and thus the termination of the royal lineage, the king forbade Siddhartha to leave the royal compound.

His father's efforts failed, however, and Siddhartha made four clandestine trips outside the palace grounds, where He encountered what are known in Buddhism as the four signs. On his first three

ventures, He saw an old man, a sick man, and then a corpse. Profoundly affected by such distressing sights, from which He had previously been sheltered, He began to question the nature and causes of suffering. On His fourth trip, He encountered a monk who was seeking liberation. Shortly after that, Siddhartha decided to forsake his royal life.

Accompanied by his attendant Chandaka, Siddhartha slipped out of the palace one night while everyone was asleep and rode away. After riding many hours, they stopped long enough for Siddhartha to exchange His princely clothes and jewels for Chandaka's simple garments. He asked Chandaka to return to his family with a message of comfort, explaining that there was no need to grieve for Him, since He was setting out to put an end to old age and death. He pointed out that the meeting of all living beings must inevitably end in parting and that it is best to let go of all attachment. Then, with unshakable resolve, Siddhartha said He would not return until He had attained complete enlightenment.

For the next six years, the prince led a spiritual life, diligently studying in the various yogic systems that prevailed in India at the time. In an effort to achieve a tranquil mind, He engaged in many ascetic practices, which culminated in a period of strict fasting that left Him extremely emaciated. Even though He was on the brink of death during his fast, His mind was brilliant and clear, and at a certain moment He discerned that this excessive deprivation was not the way to become enlightened: He concluded that if the body is worn out by the hunger and thirst, inward calm is not possible. He broke the fast by drinking some milk offered to him by the daughter of a local farmer. The other ascetics who had been His companions during the six years decided that He must have abandoned the holy life and expelled Him from their midst.

Siddhartha took a ritual bath in a nearby river, and thus renewed, He went on to Bodhgaya. There, at sunset, he sat down in lotus posture on a cushion of kusha grass under a great spreading tree and vowed that He would meditate until enlightenment, even if His flesh and bones should rot away. During the night, many distractions arose. In the course of His meditative concentration, He was beset by visions of countless armies attacking Him with fearful weapons, but because His indestructible meditation could convert negativity into harmony and purity, the weapons all turned into flowers. When other visions and distractions arose, through the stability of His meditation, He remained unmoved. Sitting in a state of total absorption, He passed the four watches of the night, attaining all the degrees of realization up to and including full omniscience. The earth shook and rain fell from a cloudless sky in response to His supreme achievement. With the dawn, he arose as Buddha.

For the first forty-nine days of His enlightenment, the Buddha remained silent, refraining from speaking because others would not be able to understand the nature of His experience. Eventually, certain beings of the god realms requested the Buddha to teach all who were capable of comprehending. In response to their request, He went to Benares, where his former companions were staying in the Deer Park. When they saw Him coming they from a distance, they joked among themselves, determined to mock Him; but as He approached and they saw His radiant form, they naturally and spontaneously treated Him with great respect. When they asked for teachings, He began, at the age of thirty-five, to expound the Dharma.

When the Buddha first turned the wheel of Dharma at Sarnath, he taught what are known as the four noble truths, presenting them in three stages. First, he simply named them: the truth of suffering, the truth of the origin (of suffering), the truth of cessation (of suffering); and the truth of the path (to the cessation of suffering). Second, He taught what kind of action is appropriate of each of the truths: suffering is to be known, and its origin is to be removed; in order to do that it is necessary to practice a method, or path, and then cessation can be experienced. Third, He taught that if one knows suffering, there is nothing else that one needs to know; if one removes its origin, there is nothing else that one needs to remove; if one applies the practice, nothing else need be applied; and if one experiences cessation, there is nothing else to experience. Upon hearing His teaching, the Buddha's listeners attained the realization of arhats and bodhisattvas, but we, who are not so fortunate as to hear the Buddha speak, require more detailed explanation.

Whoever has a body and feelings of pleasure and pain experiences suffering. Beings may enjoy varying degrees of happiness, but no happiness is everlasting, and the loss of happiness is itself suffering. The reason it is called the truth of suffering is that it is inescapable.

Those who suffer are the beings of the six realms, which are the six possible ways of experiencing samsara (the cycle of rebirth, existence unliberated from suffering). Beings experiencing the hell realms suffer from intense and unremitting heat and cold, and beings experiencing the hungry ghost realm are constantly deprived of food and drink; these beings of the most unfortunate realms must endure their extreme torment for unimaginable lengths of time without actually dying, until the negative karma that brought about such experiences is exhausted. In the animal realm, beings suffer particularly from ignorance or stupidity and are unable to relate their suffering to others. Beings existing in the human realm experience a mixture of happiness and sorrow as a result of having accumulated both positive and negative karma. The sufferings of the human realm include: birth, sickness, old age, and death; the suffering of being separated, from that which one loves, and that of not being separated from that which one hates, and the suffering of not getting what one wants, and of getting what one does not want. Beings of the demigod realm are more fortunate, but they suffer because of quarreling, fighting, and warfare. The most pleasant existence is that of the gods, who do not experience suffering until the last seven days of their lives. Then they see signs that the end of their life of ease is approaching; they are abandoned by their attendants, their magnificent bodies deteriorate and their beautiful complexions fade, and they foresee the pain of their next rebirths in the lower realms, which they are bound to experience because their positive karma has been used up. Thus, there is no existence in samsara that is free from suffering.

There are different realms because there are six poisons, or defilements of the mind (Skt. *klesha*; Tib. *rayon-mongs*) that are the seeds or causes of the experience of the various realms. There are no more than six realms because there are no more than six poisons to act as seeds. The six poisons are: (1) hatred, or anger, which creates the experience of the hell realm; (2) greed, or miserliness, which creates the hungry ghost realm; (3) ignorance of how to act virtuously, is the cause of rebirth in the animal realm; (4) attachment (virtuous action performed with attachment to the meritorious results) is the cause of

human rebirth; (5) jealousy (virtuous action sullied by jealousy) causes rebirth in the demigod realm; and (6) pride, or egotism (virtuous action performed with pride) causes a godly rebirth.

The defilements lead to unskillful actions, which generate karma, the infallible operation of cause and effect in the mental continuum of each individual. The negative karma caused by the defilements is the origin of the sufferings of the six realms. The only way to eliminate suffering is to practice the path, method, or remedy that will remove the defilements and the negative karma they produce.

By developing loving-kindness and compassion it is possible to diminish the defilements, but in order to uproot them completely, it is necessary to develop the discriminating awareness (Skt. *prajna*; Tib. *sit-rab*) that arises from the wisdom of emptiness. The development of loving-kindness together with wisdom is the result of following the path of Dharma, otherwise known as the five paths: path of accumulation, path of unification, path of seeing, path of meditation, and path of no learning.

The first, the stage of accumulation, has three subdivisions. The first stage consists in taking the first step in the right direction, that is, taking refuge and practicing tranquility meditation (Skt. *shamatha*; Tib. *zhi-m*). The aspect of wisdom that is involved is that of listening to teachings (called the wisdom of hearing), and of reflecting on them with the analytical mind (called the wisdom of contemplation). The contemplation appropriate to this stage is known as the four applications of mindfulness, which is an examination of the true nature of (1) the body, (2) the feelings, (3) the mind, and (4) all phenomena. By logical analysis it is possible to come to the intellectual understanding that all of these are merely names for interdependent occurrences that lack any real self existence; this prepares the way for an acceptance of the idea of emptiness (Skt. *sunyata*; Tib. *tong pa-rryr*).

The second stage of the path of accumulation involves the abandonment of negative actions and the cultivation of virtuous actions, by which merit is accumulated. The third stage consists of the development of four qualities, without which further development on the path will not be possible: (1) aspiration (strong determination to practice dharma), (2) diligence (enthusiastic effort), (3) recollection (not forgetting the practice), and (4) meditative concentration (one-pointedness of mind without distractions).

What was developed in the first path becomes stronger on the second, the path of unification, which is a linking of the ordinary level to the exalted. On this path the practitioner experiences greater tranquility, more joy in virtuous action, and fewer negative thoughts; confidence, energy, reflection, concentration, and wisdom increase, and tolerance of obstacles is developed. Finally the highest possible mundane realization is reached, a momentary experience that occurs during meditation, in which the nature of emptiness is perceived directly. After having this perception, the practitioner is called a noble or exalted one (Skt. *uvya*; Tib. *pagpa*), one who has immediate insight into the four noble truths. This experience is like that of a blind person whose blindness is cured and who sees colors for the first time; therefore, it is called the path of seeing.

On this, the third path, subtle obscurations remain; the practitioner directly perceives emptiness when in a state of meditative concentration, but when not meditating continues to perceive as before, only with the awareness that the perception is illusory, like a person watching a magic show and seeing through the magician's tricks. This is the level of the first stage (Skt. *bhumi*; Tib. *sa*) of the bodhisattva path, and from this stage there is no possibility of falling back.

The fourth path, the path of meditation, is a process of familiarization with the experiences of the path of seeing, which stabilizes the realization. It includes the second through tenth bodhisattva bhumis. By the seventh bhumi, all defilements have been removed, and by the tenth bhumi, even their subtle traces, which are like lingering scents, have disappeared. For the benefit of beings, bodhisattvas manifest eight qualities known as the eightfold path: right view, conception, speech, action, livelihood, exertion, reflection, and meditative absorption.

At the highest level of the tenth bhumi begins the path of no learning; it is so called because there is nothing more to develop. Actually it is not a path but a fruition, a result, complete enlightenment, buddhahood. At this level, as a result of the accumulation of wisdom, the mind is omniscient, meaning that everything is known simultaneously as it really is (ultimate truth) and as it manifests (relative truth); there is never any separation of the two truths. This mind of a Buddha is called the truth body (Skt. *dharmakaya*; Tib. *cho-ku*), the ultimate reality. The body of a Buddha, resulting from the accumulation of merit, can manifest in two forms, the emanation body is called the truth body (Skt. *nirmanakaya*; Tib. *thrul-ku*), like that of Buddha Shakyamuni, or the pure enjoyment body (Skt. *sambhogakaya*; Tib. *long-ku*), with the ability to teach higher realized beings or beings in the pure realms, or Buddha fields.

However remote this may seem from our samsaric experience, we are basically no different from such enlightened beings. Our enlightened nature is covered by obscurations that can gradually be removed; that is the essence of the teaching of the four noble truths.