

FOUR DISTINCTIONS OF BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHICAL SYSTEMS

ĀCHĀRYA SHERAB GYALTSEN

I have briefly talked about the differences between Buddhists and non-Buddhists, or “insiders” and “outsiders,” in regard to philosophical systems, but there are many ways to further explain these differences. Now I will speak in accordance with what is taught in the *Treasury of Knowledge* by the first Jamgön Kongtrul Rinpoche, named Jamgön Kongtrul Lodrö Thaye. He outlined the differences between Buddhist and non-Buddhist philosophical systems under four distinctions: the distinction regarding view, the distinction regarding meditation, the distinction regarding conduct, and the distinction regarding fruition.

Four Distinctions of a Buddhist Philosophical System

| Distinction of view | Distinction of meditation | Distinction of conduct: | Distinction of cessation: |
|--|--|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the four seals | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • meditation on the view of selflessness | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • abandonment of asceticism & hedonism | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the fourth noble truth of cessation |

DISTINCTION OF VIEW

The view of the Buddhist philosophical systems is subsumed under what is referred to as the four seals that identify a teaching of the Buddha. In regard to the view, the distinguishing factor is identified as whether or not the four seals are accepted. The word for “seal” in Tibetan is *chag-gya*,² and it refers to the things that have been sealed as truth by the teacher who is the Buddha. If someone has accepted the four seals of the Buddhist teaching, then he or she is a Buddhist, and if not, then he or she is a non-Buddhist.

An example can be drawn here of a king who seals his proclamations with his stamp. To be a subject of that royal sovereign, one must abide by that which is sealed by the royal sovereign. If one does not abide by the seal and goes beyond it, then one will become a non-subject of that particular sovereign. In this way, if one’s view does not go beyond the four seals, then one is a Buddhist. Where is this seal or stamp affixed? It is affixed within our minds. If in our minds we give rise to a certainty

² Tib. phyag rgya

that the four seals are true, that they are seals of reality, then we will be in line with the Buddhist view.

Four Seals

The four seals are as follows: all conditioned phenomena are impermanent, all contaminated phenomena are suffering, all phenomena are empty and without self-identity, and nirvāṇa is peace.

First Seal

The first seal says that all conditioned phenomena are impermanent. Here “conditioned phenomena” refers to that which is produced by the coming together of its own causes and conditions, and “impermanent” means that at the time a specific phenomenon is produced by its causes and conditions, it does not abide for a second moment. So the moment something comes into being and is not able to remain for a second moment is called impermanence.

Thus the nature of all conditioned phenomena is impermanence. We can discuss this further by using the example of this glass sitting before me on the table. In our usual conceptual way of thinking, we think that the glass came together through its own causes and conditions and that it has a continuum. We think that it continues until the moment it is destroyed, by a hammer or by some other kind of destroying factor. In our usual way of thinking, we think that the moment in which the glass abides is not impermanent. We think that impermanence only comes into play when the glass is destroyed. This, however, is incorrect. That is simply a coarse understanding of impermanence, or an understanding of coarse impermanence.

The correct way to view the glass is to see that it is impermanent from the very moment it arose as a glass. If it were the case that the glass was not impermanent when it arose, if it came together on the basis of the collection of its specific causes and conditions and at that point was a permanent phenomenon, it would be impossible for it to change at all. For the very reason it came into being through causes and conditions, it is impermanent. For the very reason it arose, it is impermanent. Therefore it is not the case that it is a permanent phenomenon after the coming together of its causes and conditions.

The glass, then, changes in every moment, from the moment it is produced until the next moment, the next moment after that, and so on. If it were the case that the glass did not change from the moment it



First Seal:

All conditioned phenomena are impermanent.

was produced until the second moment, it would follow that the prior moment was the same as the next moment, and there would be no allowance for any continuum of change between moments of time. It is not reasonable to say that the glass does not change after it is produced because then it would follow that the moments of time in which the glass abides are identical to each other. The glass that is in the first moment of its being is not the glass that is in the second moment of its being. The glass in the third moment of the glass is not the glass in the second moment of the glass. This applies to the fourth moment, the fifth moment, and so on. There is a continuum of moments and a subtle impermanence that is present throughout the entire continuum of the glass. If we examine it well, we can realize this subtle impermanence.

In this way, we can dismantle the clinging we have towards our ideas about the permanence of conditioned phenomena, such as the glass. We have the idea that this glass is as real as it appears to be and that it is a solid thing that exists in the same way in every moment. On the basis of that rough idea and rough clinging, we give rise to the idea of *my* glass. Attachment comes from that rough idea. Then when the glass breaks, we get angry because we have lost our glass, and we could perhaps go on to accumulate further misdeeds on the basis of our anger. By understanding and examining subtle impermanence, we will be able to dismantle this type of clinging to permanence, or to the idea that apprehends permanence.

When we examine conditioned phenomena, whether it be our skandhas, our bodies, our houses, or whatever, it is easy to realize that these things are conditioned phenomena. What is difficult to realize is that the nature of conditioned phenomena is impermanence. However, by analyzing in this way, over and over again, we will be able to realize this nature, and then we will be able to give rise to the certainty of impermanence in our mind-streams, the coarsest of the views presented by the Buddha. So the easiest thing for ordinary beings to realize is impermanence.

Student: I have a hard time understanding the view of impermanence. Why do we have to know whether the glass is permanent or impermanent when “glass” is just a label that we use to talk about it?

ASG: There are many different ways to present the teachings, from subtle points of view to coarse points of view. The subtle presentations refer to teachings that are very profound and get more and more profound, whereas the coarse teachings presented for beginners on the path and for people with a strong clinging to permanence are the teachings on impermanence.

The important thing to understand about clinging to permanence is that the clinging is from the perspective of the subject. It is not from the perspective of the object. If someone has a strong tendency to cling to permanence, one cannot immediately change this clinging from the side of the subject. One has to dismantle the object towards which one has the clinging. So we start with easy examples, such as a glass, and explain how it is composed of parts and how it has a continuum that has separate moments. In that way, we try to dismantle the clinging to permanence from the side of the subject. We are not saying that we are not allowed to call it a “glass” or to use the term “glass.” We are not saying that it is not okay for the glass to appear. What we are saying is that the clinging to the permanence of the glass, the clinging to the permanence of the way things appear, and the clinging to the true existence of things as the way they appear are what cause us to wander in saṃsāra. This basis prevents us from being happy.

Student: As the subject, we take apart the object?

ASG: Yes, if we explain it from the perspective of a coarse view, we can say that the clinging to permanence arises on the basis of the object. On the basis of seeing an object, a clinging to permanence from the side of the subject arises. That is why we first start with dismantling the object.

Second Seal

The second seal says that all contaminated phenomena are suffering. The word for “contaminated” in Tibetan is *zakche*.³ *Zak* means “contaminated” and *che* means “along with.” This contamination is equivalent with the kleshas, or mental afflictions.

The principle here is that whatever is associated with mental afflictions or contamination is suffering. When we say that contaminated phenomena are suffering what is chiefly meant by suffering here is fear. As sentient beings, we fear not getting what we desire, and we fear that what we do not desire will befall us. These are the two main types of fear or suffering we have as sentient beings. From the moment that contaminated phenomena take on the form of the appropriated skandhas, the skandhas are of the nature of suffering. In other words, the moment something becomes a sentient being, it is endowed with the contaminated skandhas.



Second Seal:

All contaminated phenomena are suffering.

³ Tib. zag bcas

I would like to further discuss what this fear means. It means not getting what we want and getting what we do not want. It means that we do not have the independence to change things to the way we want them to be. When it comes to the things that we do not want, we fall under the dependence of however they are. However undesirable a situation may be, we are under the power of its dependent nature. From the moment we take on these contaminated skandhas, we are under the power of not having this freedom.

We are all endowed with skandhas, and the skandhas that we have are contaminated. Therefore the skandhas are of the nature of suffering. If we put this into the form of a formal reasoning, we can say, “Given these contaminated skandhas, they are of the nature of suffering because they are dependent upon karma and mental afflictions.”

We all have a strong notion of “I” and “me.” The basis for this label or name is the five skandhas. We call the collection of the five skandhas “I” and “me,” but the irony of the situation is that we do not have any freedom with which to look after this “I” or “me.” What we do is follow wherever we are led by the three afflictions of passion, aggression, and ignorance in our mind. If our mind tell us that something is good, we follow that direction. If it tells us that something is bad, then we follow that direction. Even if we want it to remain stable and say, “I’m not going to do such a thing,” if our mind, under the power of passion, aggression, or ignorance tell us to do something, we powerlessly go in that direction. It is for this reason that we say our skandhas are of the nature of suffering.

It is like a very strict feudal lord and his or her servants. Servants have no freedom whatsoever to do what they want or to accomplish their desires. Everything depends on their strict master, and they have to abide by whatever their master says. Whether the master punishes the servant or allows him or her to do something, it is all up to the master. The servant has no freedom whatsoever. We are the same. Our master is our mind, and we follow after whatever it does. There is no freedom. For the reason that there is no freedom, we say that contaminated phenomena are of the nature of suffering.



Third Seal:

All phenomena are empty are without self-identity.

Third Seal

The third seal says that all phenomena are empty and without self-identity. Here phenomena are “that which bears its own entity.” When we talk about that which bears its own entity, we are talking about such things as pillars, vases, tables, and so on. They bear their own entity

merely from the perspective of the way things appear. Simply said, all phenomena appear to bear a certain entity. However, if we examine whether a phenomenon exists in the way it appears or not, whether it is truly established as it appears, we come to find that it is not truly established as it appears. This is referred to as emptiness. It is like things are reflections or images in a mirror. We see the reflection of our face, and it is obvious that our face is not really on the other side of the reflection. It just appears there. It is not really there. It is same for all appearing phenomena.

Let us take the example of the glass again and see if it has any true existence. If we say that the glass is one thing, if we label the mere collection of the things that make up the glass as one thing, then removing one piece of the glass would make it not-a-glass, because it would take away the oneness. If we say that the glass is the lower part of the glass, then the upper part of the glass would not be the glass. If we say the glass is the upper part of the glass, then the lower part of the glass would not be the glass. In this way, we find that there is no substantial entity or make-up to this thing that we call “glass.” The glass is empty. If we examine all phenomena in this way, we will find that they merely appear. In terms of their entity, essence, or substantial make-up, they are not established. They do not exist. We call this “selflessness” or “the absence of self-identity” or “emptiness.”

Student: The statement “all phenomena are empty and without self-identity” seems to be typical of all Buddhist views.

ASG: There is one school of Buddhism that does accept a self. It possesses many totally different characteristics than what non-Buddhists accept as a self. So it is not the same. It is debated whether it is a Buddhist school or not. But in general, all Buddhist schools accept all four seals.

Student: I had understood that some schools asserted a form of eternalism in terms of partless particles.

ASG: The presentation of the Vaibhāṣikas and Sautrāntikas will be presented in more detail later. In brief, they do say that there are partless particles, but they do not assert that partless particles have a self-identity or are not empty. They assert that partless particles are not singular, not independent, and not permanent. Although they assert that partless particles are truly established, they are also selfless because they are empty of the qualities of singularity and independence ascribed to a self by other non-Buddhist philosophical systems. For this reason, they are said to be selfless.

**Fourth Seal:**

Nirvāṇa is peace

Fourth Seal

The fourth seal says that only nirvāṇa is peace. The Tibetan word for “nirvāṇa” is *nya-ngen le depa*.⁴ *Nya-ngen* means “suffering” and *depa* means “to go beyond” or “to transcend.” Through meditating on the path, we can come to a place of being free from suffering. We can transcend suffering. We call this “peace” or “nirvāṇa.”

Cause & Effect Relationship of the Four Seals

The four seals can be classified in the manner of cause and result. The first three of the four seals are the causes, and the fourth seal is the result. You can progress through the four seals in a sequential manner. First you realize that all conditioned phenomena are impermanent and then perceive realize that all contaminated phenomena are of the nature of suffering. Then through that realization, you understand that suffering is not something that exists. It is empty and without self-nature. You can progress to understanding the absence of self-identity. If you realize the absence of self-identity and emptiness, then the root of saṃsāra will be cut, and you will obtain the peace called nirvāṇa.

Four Seals

| Causes: | | | Result: |
|---|---|---|---|
| First seal • All conditioned phenomena are impermanent. | Second seal • All contaminated phenomena are suffering. | Third seal • All phenomena are empty and without self-identity. | Fourth seal • Nirvāṇa is peace. |

DISTINCTION OF MEDITATION

The next major category of differences between Buddhist and non-Buddhists is meditation. Meditation is not something that is only practiced in Buddhism. Of course, many different methods of meditation are practiced in non-Buddhist traditions. The basic difference between the two is that Buddhist philosophical systems meditate on the basis of the view of selflessness. Other philosophical systems do not do the same. It is said that through Buddhist meditation one can free oneself from cyclic existence completely. In non-Buddhist systems, however, one can only come to the peak of existence, the highest point of existence. There are skillful meditations in non-Buddhist systems that will enable one to reach the summit of the happinesses of existence in a single instant, but since they are not connected to the view of selflessness, one will not be

4 Tib. nya ngan le depa

able to cross over the peak of existence. However, in Buddhist meditation systems, it is accomplishable. One can cross over the peak of existence and obtain liberation from cyclic existence completely.

DISTINCTION OF CONDUCT

The next main category is conduct. The main difference between the conduct of Buddhists and non-Buddhists is whether or not they abandon the extremes of asceticism and hedonism. Therefore the distinction of conduct between Buddhists and non-Buddhists is whether or not there is the abandonment of the two extremes of hedonism and asceticism.

Abandoning the extreme of asceticism is to abandon intentionally causing suffering to one's body or harming oneself through the power of not understanding the correct discipline or the correct view. Here one purposely causes suffering to one's body as a method to obtain liberation—as a wrong method to attain liberation. There are certain religious traditions, such as the Jains, who do things like wrap towels around their bodies and light them on fire, which then lights their bodies on fire. To abandon the nonvirtuous act of lying, they cut off their tongues and so on. These forms of intentionally causing suffering to oneself fall into the extreme of asceticism.

The extreme of hedonism is falling into the extreme of not having any contentment with one's material possessions, food, and so on and being attached to respect and service. One is not content with a few or a little or with bad quality, or even with mediocre quality, but one constantly strives only after more and the best. Being attached in this way with no sense of contentment with one's lot is the extreme of hedonism that Buddhists must abandon.

The Chārvāka tradition of India did not accept past or future lives. They said that one should constantly strive to accumulate as much material enjoyment and wealth as one possibly could. The Chārvāka tradition is an example of a religious tradition that falls into the extreme of hedonism that the Buddhists try to abandon.

In short, if it is a conduct that abandons the extreme of asceticism and the extreme of nihilism, then it is a correct Buddhist conduct.

DISTINCTION OF CESSATION

The final difference between Buddhists and non-Buddhists is the result, and the result is what Buddhists call “cessation.”

Cessation follows the sequence of the four noble truths. The first noble truth is that we have suffering, and the second noble truth is that suffering is caused by karma and afflictions. Third, through relying on the truth of the path, one brings an end to karma and the afflictions and that causes the cessation of suffering, the final truth of the four noble truths. A person who asserts liberation as this type of cessation is a Buddhist, and a person who does not assert this type of cessation as liberation is a non-Buddhist.

However, just on the basis of accepting the view of a philosophical system, it does not necessarily follow that we have realized that view of a certain philosophical system. As soon as we enter the paths of accumulation and juncture, we may understand the view of the Buddhist philosophical systems, but it does not necessarily follow that we have manifested this view as realization. ♣



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