

## The Four Seals of Buddhism

THE FOUR SEALS, axioms that are common to all schools of Buddhism, have a profound significance for the practitioner. As explained earlier, the first seal states that all composite phenomena are impermanent. The nature of impermanence is explored to its fullest extent in the tenets of the Sautrantika school. According to this view, all composite phenomena are impermanent in that they are momentary: the very conditions that brought them into being also cause their disintegration. Anything or event that comes into being as a result of other factors does not require a secondary condition for its disintegration. The moment it comes into existence, the process of disintegration has already begun. In other words, the mechanism for cessation is built into the system itself. It is as if things and events carry the seed of their own eventual demise. The simple reason is that anything that is produced through causes is other-powered: its very existence comes about only in dependence upon other factors. This Buddhist view of phenomena as dynamic and of momentary nature—which emerges as a consequence of the principle of universal impermanence—is quite close to the view of a dynamic, ever-changing physical universe as presented by modern physics.

The second seal states that all contaminated phenomena are, by nature, unsatisfactory. In this context, *contaminated phenomena* refers to all things, events, experiences, and so forth, that are products of contaminated actions and the underlying delusions that give rise to them. As explained earlier, anything that is produced is other-powered, in the sense that it is under the control of factors other than itself—for example, its causes and conditions. Here, *causes* specifically refers to our own fundamental ignorance, afflictive emotions and cognitive events, and contaminated actions. Also, ignorance must not be perceived as a passive state of mere non-awareness; rather, it is a deluded state of mind, a fundamental misapprehension of the nature of reality. This is clearly stated by various Indian masters, such as Dharmakirti and Vasubandhu. Vasubandhu tells us in his *Abhidharmakosa* (*Treasury of Knowledge*) that ignorance is not simply the absence of knowledge but rather it is the antithesis of knowledge; it is misknowledge, a force actively opposing knowledge, as hostility opposes friendliness and falsehood opposes truth.

As long as beings are under the control of these forces of ignorance, suffering and unsatisfactoriness will always remain integral parts of their mode of being. And we should not think that suffering, or *duhkha*, refers only to manifest physical and mental suffering; it is extremely important that we remember that the underlying experiences of discomfort and dissatisfaction are also *duhkha*.

By contemplating these two marks of conditioned existence impermanence and *duhkha*—one can develop genuine renunciation, a deeply felt spontaneous wish to be free from the bondage of suffering. The question then arises, is it possible for an individual to attain such a state of freedom? This is where the significance of the third seal becomes evident. The third principle states that all phenomena are empty of self-existence. The path from impermanence and unsatisfactoriness to selflessness is quite clear. We learned from the principle of dependent origination that things and events do not come into being without causes. We also noted that suffering and unsatisfactory conditions are caused by our own delusions and the contaminated

actions induced by them. The underlying root of all delusions is the fundamental ignorance misapprehending the nature of reality. This ignorance is a state of misconception. Since it misapprehends the nature of reality, it has no valid grounding in our experience or in reality. In fact, it apprehends reality in a manner contradictory to the way things actually are. Hence, it is an erroneous and distorted state of mind. As this is so, it opens up for us the real possibility of eradicating it. We can accomplish this by generating the insight that can penetrate the illusion created by this misconception. True cessation is the state that is free from this distorted way of perceiving the world. It is an actuality that you can bring about within your own mental continuum. It is not a mere ideal. The nature of cessation is true peace. Hence, the fourth principle—nirvana is true peace—is also directly relevant to your practice.

The World of Tibetan Buddhism  
The Dalai Lama  
Translated and edited by Geshe Thupten Jinpa