

Clarifying The Four Dharmas of Gampopa

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Introduction

The *Four Dharmas of Gampopa* is a text in which the full extent of the vast scope of the Buddha's teachings is fully contained. It spans the gradual path of Dharma practice for the individual, elucidating the way of practicing through all of the stages.

Excerpting passages from some of my previously written commentaries such as *Supplication to the Illustrious Tara*, and others I have extracted the substantive material that completely contains the meaning of the *Four Dharmas*, and have composed and printed this commentary with the intent to benefit those with a sincere desire to strive in the practice of the Dharma.

I would like to extend my heart-felt gratitude for all who contributed their time and efforts to help with this book project: to Vanessa Turner for the original translation, Dianna Mc Kinnon for additional translation, Bobby Blevins and Trey Utacht for proof reading.

Khenpo Konchok Samdup
February 1, 2015
Gar Drolma Buddhist Center in Ohio

Homage

To the one who has inseparably mingled his mind with that of the
supreme Milarepa's heart instructions, and who through his superior
knowledge clarifies the essence of the Victor's Teachings-

The exalted guide who leads all wayfarers on the supreme, authentic
path to the ultimate peace of Nirvana-

To the great compassionate Lord Gampopa, I prostrate!

The Main Text

Grant blessings for the mind to turn toward the Dharma.

Grant blessings for the Dharma to go along the right path.

Grant blessings to dispel confusion along the path.

Grant blessings for the confused perceptions to arise as wisdom.

The First Dharma

~Grant blessings for the mind to turn toward the Dharma~

The meaning of this line is that even though we may practice sublime Dharma, we have to make sure that the Dharma is taking root in our own mind stream, not just on an external level. It is for this reason that the holy beings of the past have all taught extensively on The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind as methods for turning the mind away from samsara.

Since we sentient beings, as taught in the Buddha Dharma, have been cycling since time immemorial within this samsara, the mind streams of sentient beings have amassed strong habits of self-grasping – the cause of samsara, and karmic imprints. Therefore, it is not easy to renounce. The reason for this is, first of all, the sheer length of time we have been gathering habitual imprints. During this time they have become quite strongly planted in us. The second reason is that in this modern century we have excessive availability of the sense pleasures, so even if we try to apply an antidote, the allure of the desirable sense pleasures is too strong, and this makes it very difficult for us to subdue much less let go of our desires. In one of his talks, His Holiness the Dalai Lama said:

In olden days many Dharma practitioners, even if they did not have a great deal of exposure to and knowledge of many teachings, since they did not meet with many conditions in their environment that would provoke them, there were many who accomplished their practice. Nowadays there are exceeding amounts of factors in our society that would influence us, so unless someone has sufficiently listened to and contemplated the Dharma, it is very easy for the

mind to change or be swayed in other directions. Therefore, everyone, please carefully listen to the Teachings and contemplate their meaning fully.

Through such words and others like them, we can understand this point. In short, if we are unable to awaken genuine renunciation within our own mind streams, we will not be able to find freedom from the suffering of samsara, and there would be no way to achieve the peace of nirvana, the states of shravaka or pratyekabuddha arhats, or the state of buddhahood. Therefore, if we repeatedly familiarize ourselves with the reality of how difficult it is to obtain the freedoms and endowments and with the impermanence of life, we will see the dissolution of our clinging to and fixation on this present life. If we repeatedly familiarize ourselves with and bring to mind the infallibility of karma – the law of cause and effect – and the suffering of samsara, we will see the dissolution of our clinging and attachment to future samsaric lives. We will not be chained to the hope of obtaining the pleasures and happiness in the higher realms. Without any longing or hunger for heights of samsaric enjoyment, an irreversible drive toward liberation should blossom in the mind stream. If this does not arise, it means that Dharma has not truly taken root in our heart-mind, and if it does, it means that Dharma has taken root. That is also the sign of mind successfully turning toward Dharma.

The Second Dharma

~Grant blessings for the Dharma to go along the right path ~

Even if one already has awakened a mind of renunciation, the Dharma might not go along the right path. This could happen because of following after words and labels in the teaching. For the Dharma to go along the right path, we should know that there are many instances in which words of Buddhist texts seem to be similar to non-Buddhist teachings, and many instances in which different philosophical traditions within Buddhism seem to be saying the same thing. However, in truth there are tremendous differences among them, as big as the difference between the sky and the earth. That is why Buddha taught the four superior ways of relying, and one of these ways is to “rely on the meaning, not on the words.” This is a case in which one needs to develop wisdom through listening to teachings. If you have the wisdom of listening, you will be able to awaken the precious bodhichitta.

A bodhisattva is one who, out of compassion, does not abide in the extreme of nirvana, and who, out of wisdom, also does not abide in the extreme of samsara. When one has wisdom, one looks at the sentient beings of conditioned existence, the beings who are lost in samsara, and sees that it is because they are ensnared in the web of self-grasping and the great abyss of ignorance that they are tormented by ceaseless suffering. It is from that recognition that great compassion is born, and it is from compassion that supreme bodhichitta can arise. If you have bodhichitta, it means your Dharma has gone along the right path.

Someone who gives rise to the supreme bodhichitta must apply him or herself to the path of the six perfections (Skt. paramitas). The first perfection is generosity. To practice this, we learn to give up the objects of our attachment and clinging, practicing generosity at the level we are able. We can make offerings to the Three Jewels of refuge by mentally offering all things that belong to us as well as all that do not belong to us. This serves as an antidote to possessiveness and self-clinging. The spirit of giving that is cultivated here constitutes generosity, by which we give to others without attachment.

The second perfection is moral ethics. Ethics is defined as the practice of abstaining from causing harm or suffering to others through one's three doors (body, speech, and mind), bringing forth virtuous qualities and dharmas where they have not arisen before, maintaining what virtuous qualities have already been cultivated without letting them deteriorate, and increasing these virtuous qualities as well. From that vantage point, one's mind is directed toward accomplishing the benefit of sentient beings as much as one is able.

The third perfection is patience. Patience is defined as forbearing antagonism from others and all discomfort or hardships that occur when one is practicing pure Dharma. Patience also refers to the mind that is able to handle the meaning of Dharmata – ultimate truth – without shirking away in fear.

The fourth perfection is diligence, or zeal. This refers to having enthusiasm and joyfully persevering in Dharma. Meditative stability is the fifth perfection. This refers to

single-pointedly directing the mind toward virtue. The sixth perfection is the perfection of wisdom, and this refers to recognition of the absolute nature of reality just as it is.

Thus, the bodhisattva practices these six perfections. Aspiring bodhichitta begins the moment we give rise to supreme bodhichitta. From that point onward, aspiring bodhichitta encompasses all the intentions we have for benefiting others through our body, speech, and mind, and all intentions we have for listening to Dharma, contemplating its meaning, meditating, doing retreat, and so forth. When we actually engage in these actions that we intend to do, everything we are doing then becomes the essence of engaging bodhichitta, otherwise known as bodhichitta in action.

The positive qualities that ensue from cultivating bodhichitta in this way are numerous. In the immediate future, one who cultivates bodhichitta brings happiness and well-being to beings in the world and purifies their mind stream of all obscurations. Ultimately, all the awakened qualities of buddhahood that blossom within one are due to bodhichitta. Buddhas, as we understand them, are none other than the manifestations, or embodiments, of bodhichitta. Without this, even if we tried to practice the development and completion stages of Unsurpassable Mantrayana, it would be impossible to ever awaken to buddhahood.

Therefore, after giving rise to relative bodhichitta, we must apply ourselves to the awakening of ultimate bodhichitta.

The Third Dharma

~Grant blessings to dispel confusion along the path~

Even though one may have awakened compassion and bodhichitta, one might not be able to dispel confusion about how to practice and meditate properly on the path.

People who strive for liberation and omniscient buddhahood must diligently apply themselves to the methods for internalizing the pure view of selflessness. Not satisfied merely with obtaining food and clothing for this life, one should really question, is there an afterlife or not? If there is a future life, are the resulting experiences of happiness and suffering, and the happiness and suffering we are experiencing in the present life, due to specific causes and conditions? If so, what are they? Not only should we have an understanding of these issues, we should also think about the ways in which we can dispel suffering and engender happiness.

What distinguishes the human race from less evolved life forms in the animal kingdom is that human beings have intelligence and the capacity for critical thinking. Not simply content with the fleeting attainment of food and clothing, we are looking for something deeper. We are thinking about how to attain everlasting happiness. We should rely on the wisdom that realizes the absolute nature in order to realize the view of selflessness, beyond all extremes. Without the wisdom that realizes the absolute nature we will not be able to completely uproot the three types of suffering.

We must study the meaning of interdependent origination to understand the meaning of selflessness. In order to understand selflessness, we need certain clarity regarding its subtle and grosser levels as presented according to the different philosophical systems. I will briefly explain the different assertions here. There are two kinds of philosophy: one brings an outlook on life that a person has naturally without relying on religious studies or philosophical exposure. In other words, this refers to a view a person has when he or she does not study any particular philosophy. The other kind is one that changes the mind, a philosophy that one arrives at after studying and pondering.

An example of the first kind, an outlook of an unchanged mind, is the case of someone who has never listened to or studied nor pondered the teachings at all and who does not question or examine anything more deeply. This person's basic outlook, or "philosophy", is simply the drive to accomplish pleasure and happiness in the present life. The second category refers to someone whose mind is committed to a belief system based on studying relevant scriptures or applying mental analysis.

The second category can be further divided into the classes of non-Buddhist schools and Buddhist schools. There are many non-Buddhist schools, but to name a few here, they are the traditions of Vaishna, Shaivite, Jain, Kapilavasta, and Charvaka. The first four mentioned follow the extreme view of eternalism. The last one follows the extreme view of nihilism. Traditions of eternalistic views generally teach the importance of engaging in moral conduct and abstaining from non-virtue, and they have many

positive features, including encouraging the cultivation of altruism and compassion. However, they believe in an intrinsic and eternal self and in a creator, or lord, of the world.

The second class I will discuss here is the Buddhist tradition. To belong to the Buddhist tradition one goes for refuge from one's heart in the Three Jewels. The purveyor of Buddhism, Lord Buddha, taught us to abstain from causing harm to others and refuted the existence of a permanent, singular, free will possessing self. There are four major levels within Buddhism. Lord Buddha first gave rise to bodhichitta and then proceeded to gather the two accumulations in the middle and finally manifested the attainment of perfect buddhahood. Before the gathering of the first five human disciples, he turned the wheel of the Dharma of Four Noble Truths in Varanasi. Those who follow after the meaning of the first turning of the wheel of Dharma and who take those teachings as the ultimate sermon of Buddha are said to belong to the foundational *yana(vehicle)* of Buddhism and are known as shravakas. They belong to the two sub-schools of Vaibhaishika and Sautantrika.

Then, in Rajghir on Vulture Peak, during the middle turning of the Wheel of Dharma, Buddha taught the Dharma Beyond Characteristics to the disciples of sharp faculties. Those who took the meaning of that as the ultimate sermon and followed that are known as Madhyamikas. They belong to the two sub-schools of Rangtong, "Self-Empty Middle Way" school and Shentong, or "Other-Empty Middle Way" school. In Vaishali and other indefinite places, during the final

turning of the wheel of Dharma, Buddha taught the Dharma distinguishing provisional and definitive teaching to disciples of diverse faculties. Those who took from that sermon that the ultimate teaching is the line “phenomena are only mind” belong to the Chitamatin, or Mind-Only, school. Those who took from that sermon that the ultimate is the line “mind, whose essence is empty and whose nature is luminosity, pervades all sentient beings” belong to the Shentong school of Madhyamika. The latter is Jigten Sumgön’s position and belongs to the definitive teaching of the third turning of the wheel. I give a clear explanation of this in my commentary *Gongchig Gongdon* (Clarifying the Central Thoughts of the Single Intention).

In summary, all four schools of Buddhism are one insofar as they all teach that phenomena by nature are devoid of inherent self-existence. However, the dependent origination of the absolute nature spoken of here is suchness itself. It is the subtle level of interdependence of the aggregates that serves as the basis of imputation. In other words, by establishing this as the basis of reasoning, we see that there is an ultimate nature to be actualized, and this is the ultimate, subtlest level of interdependence. To understand this, first we need to understand the interdependence of dependent causation. To understand dependent causation, we need to understand the interdependence of cause and effect. Simply put, to understand the subtle, we first start by understanding it on a crude or gross level. In modern terminology, we need to understand it on the material or physical science level, the psychological level, the level of chemistry, and so forth.

Even in these fields of science, the doctrine of interdependent origination is incorporated. All phenomena are completely subsumed within interdependent origination. It is for this reason that Maitreyanatha said in the *Abhisamaya-Alamkara*:

“Without studying the five subjects of learning until becoming adept, even the Supreme Illustrious One could not have become omniscient.”

Out of the five subjects of learning, if we expand just the field of mechanics or mechanical engineering¹, all the crucial points of today’s times can be subsumed within this field. Because of this, we can see that in order to know Dharma exactly and perfectly, we need to use critical thinking and to analyze with the wisdom of discernment to understand all the many different systems of Buddhist and non-Buddhist schools of thought. With this basis of understanding, gradually we can ascend to more advanced doctrines. Each time we move to a more evolved philosophy the view becomes increasingly profound.

¹ The Tibetan word *bzo rig* is defined as one of the 5 major fields of knowledge. This field, quite vast-in scope, encompasses a broad number of the sciences, technology, all areas of manufacturing, fabrication and arts just to name a few.

Therefore, in order to avoid pitfalls in our view, and to gain certain understanding of the range of subtle and gross meanings of selflessness, it is very helpful if we not only know our own Buddhist philosophy, but all the philosophical tenets and viewpoints of non-Buddhist schools as well, both ancient and modern. Thus, for the sentient beings who are misled and who are ignorant of the differences and salient characteristics of the philosophical systems, this (understanding) dispels confusion.

The Fourth Dharma

*~Grant blessings for the confused
perceptions to arise as wisdom~*

As expressed in this line above, the primordial nature of mind is empty, essence of clear light. Mind's innate nature itself is Dharmakaya. The meaning of Dharmakaya is that primordial knowing, the union of luminosity and emptiness, is none other than this momentary thought. There is no such primordial knowing, no luminosity-emptiness, to be found anywhere outside of or other than this momentary thought itself. Wisdom, or rather Dharmakaya, is not apart from this.

*This itself – the clear awareness of the present moment
Is the true face of relative truth phenomena.
Without altering this, if you know its nature,
This itself is ultimate truth.*

Just as expressed in the above verse from the *Māhayānasūtrālaṃkāra* (Ornament of the Mahayana), when a positive or negative thought or emotion arises, if we do not look deeper into it and instead simply get caught up in its display, this accrues karma, becoming causes of samsara. However, when we examine the thought or emotion, look into the essence of the thought, it naturally ceases in its own nature and never truly existed. Recognizing this is the cause of Nirvana, that is, awakening to primordial knowing Dharmakaya.

The nature of one's own mind is extremely difficult to realize and is beyond the framework of an ordinary person's conceptual mind. In the *Uttaratantra* it is stated:

*Since it is so subtle, it cannot be an object heard and so forth.
Since it is ultimate truth, it cannot be thought about.
Since the Dharmata is profound, an ordinary worldly level
Meditation and so forth cannot objectify it.*

Since it is so incredibly subtle, you cannot hear about it as the topic of an ordinary worldly discourse. Since it is ultimate truth, it is beyond being the subject of ordinary worldly contemplation. Since Dharmata is extremely profound, it cannot be the object of meditation of an ordinary worldly meditation. On this topic, Mahasiddha Tilopa said:

*I, Tilopa, have nothing to show.
If you just see yourself, you will be free.*

Saying this, Tilopa simply whacked Naropa on the head with his shoe. It is not that the ultimate truth is something there that he was unable to show, but rather that the very nature of it is something that cannot be shown, because it is beyond language, beyond word, and beyond metaphor or symbol. In the praise to the Mother of the Buddhas, the *Prajnaparamita*, when we say, “Ma-Sam-Jömed,” or “beyond articulation, beyond thought, beyond expression,” we are not saying there is something there that can be articulated, thought of, or expressed and that we simply lack the ability to do so, but rather that this nature is itself beyond word, thought, and expression. Although such a nature is beyond the conceptual mind of ordinary worldly people like us, during the path of accumulation we can focus on listening to the teachings and contemplating this absolute nature. Then, during the path of approach we envision this nature in our meditation

on the essence of Dharmadhatu. Once we achieve some degree of meditative stability, after that comes the path of seeing.

On the path of seeing (the first *bhumi* of the bodhisattva), the glimpse into the absolute truth nature of Dharmata is compared in the *Uttaratantra* to a newborn baby seeing the sun for the first time. The baby at that point can only see light and cannot recognize that he or she is seeing the sun. In the same way, illustrious beings in the beginning see a glimpse of the absolute nature, but at that point it is still unclear. If they become conversant with this nature they have glimpsed, they can dispel obscurations and bring about all the awakened qualities without exception. Therefore, give rise to diligence when meditating.

Even though the absolute nature is beyond signification and beyond words, it can be realized, for it is the nature of reality. This nature that cannot be described is always with you, connected to your own mind stream. In fact, it has always been the nature of your own mind. This indescribable nature is not worsened or degraded when you are under the control of the negative emotions. This indescribable nature is not improved or enhanced when the innate awakened qualities in your mind stream are unfurling and your realization is growing. Regarding this indescribable nature and meditation, as Saraha says, there is not anything you are meditating “on,” but at the same time there is not the slightest wavering or deviation, because there is nowhere else for mind to wander. Without anything to meditate on, and without the slightest wandering, letting mind rest in its natural state without modification – this nature of mind is what we call

“Mahamudra.” In this “meditation” with mind being aware and not wandering, if we remain under the watchful eye of awareness without contrivance, this is how we will awaken the wisdom of meditation.

As explained above, all of us sentient beings, even though the Dharmakaya has always been innately present as our own minds, do not recognize this. We are under the power of the negative emotions, as expressed in a *sutra*:

*All sentient beings are actually buddhas,
But they are temporarily obscured by adventitious defilements.*

The adventitious obscurations described here are divided into two categories, as explained in the treatise *Madhyāntavibhāga* (Distinguishing the Middle from the Extremes):

*These are shown to be the obscurations of the negative emotions
And the subtle obscurations to omniscience.*

Why, you may ask, are the obscurations classed into two definitive categories? The highest goal to be attained by a person, or individual, is twofold, namely, the attainment of supreme liberation from samsara and the attainment of omniscient buddhahood. Out of these two attainments, what is it that obstructs our attainment of liberation from samsara? It is the negative emotions, born from grasping at “I” and “mine” that obstruct liberation. In addition, what is it that obstructs the second attainment, the attainment of omniscience? It is the ignorance of not actualizing the nature of phenomena. These two obscurations lead to the grasping at a self-nature

of the person and grasping at an inherent nature of external phenomena. Until this grasping at the realness of self and the realness of phenomena is released, the two obscurations are there. In the *Madyamika Ratna-Avali* (*Middle Way Treatise Mala of Jewels*) it is explained:

*As long as there is clinging to a body,
There is self-clinging.
If there is self-clinging, then there is karma,
And from karma comes rebirth.*

It thus has been taught that as long as we have grasping at a self, we will not be liberated from samsara. If you want to know whether the self-grasping can be released or not, you can find the answer through many scriptural verifications and through reasoning, as expressed in the texts of *Madhyamika* and *Pramana*. The teachings reveal the antidotes to help us actualize this by showing how to meditate and cultivate loving kindness and so forth, as well as the antidote to completely uproot self-grasping through the wisdom that realizes selflessness. According to the Buddhist scriptures, the differences between the three vehicles, or *yanas*, relates to the differing approaches to purifying these two obscurations.

The *shravakas* and *pratyekabuddhas* [of the individual liberation path] meditate solely on the selflessness of the individual person as an antidote to the obscuration of negative emotions, through which all their negative emotions are exhausted, and it becomes impossible for them ever to fall back into samsara. However, since they have not perfected the meditation on the selflessness of phenomena, they do not become free of the subtle

obscurations to omniscience. The Illustrious Ones of the Mahayana path, beginning from the path of seeing (the first bodhisattva *bhumi*, or stage), gradually purify both of the two obscurations, and these are purified simultaneously. Then, when they reach the eighth *bhumi*, in the manner of effortlessly entering the Dharmata, even the subtle subliminal sense of self-grasping and all negative emotions are completely exhausted. From that point onward, through the next three *bhumis*, known as the pure stages, the subtle habitual imprints of dualistic perception, or rather the subtle obscuration to omniscience, is purified alone.

Aside from a buddha, it is impossible for anyone who is still on the path to be unhindered by even subtle obscurations. Here, when we speak of the selflessness of phenomena, there are two contexts. One is the selflessness of phenomena that is common to all the vehicles of Buddhism. The other is the selflessness of phenomena specific to the Mahayana. There is what is known as the grasping at the self-nature of phenomena that takes a focal object and the grasping at the self-nature of phenomena that ensues from dualistic perception. Out of these three categories, the first one is purified on the first bodhisattva *bhumi*. The second one, grasping at the self-nature of phenomena with a focal object, is purified on the eighth *bhumi*. In the *Lalitavistara Sutra* (The Play in Full), it reads:

*When you are able to have the forbearance
to handle the knowledge
That there is neither birth nor death,
At that time, I, Dipamkara, will prophesy your enlightenment.*

Here, the word “forbearance” refers to the ability to forbear, or handle, the truth that phenomena are unborn. This occurs on the eighth bodhisattva bhumi. The third stage of realization, the realization of selflessness of phenomena that is free from dualistic perception, is only realized when one becomes a buddha.

Because we have accrued all kinds of erroneous and perverted habitual imprints in our minds, conditioned existence arises unceasingly in all sorts of dreamlike appearances. All this is made only of the stuff of mind, and nothing other. Therefore, as long as mind is under the power of attachment and other negative emotions, we will automatically enter and get caught up in the play of samsara – the three realms – and even the hand of the Tathagata (Buddha) cannot make it stop. Only when we become free of obscurations and gain control over our own mind will we finally gain control over all phenomena. It is not like we are fleeing a bad place and running off somewhere else to a better place. Without having to rely on anything outside of mind, if we simply recognize this nature of mind, the Mahamudra, this is how we become free of obscurations and attain liberation and the omniscient state of buddhahood.

Not recognizing the true nature of mind and falling under the power of attachment and the other negative emotions is how we become confused and wander in samsara. Whether we become confused or liberated is rooted in whether or not we realize the true nature of our own mind.

To cite a *doha* by Saraha:
Emanating samsara and nirvana,
Bestowing the fruit of our desires,
To this wish-fulfilling jewel-like mind, I prostrate!

A negative thought does not need to be rejected or rid from your mind. You need not try to find some wisdom to counteract the negative thought. Whatever is holding you down, if you realize this extraordinary path, in which simply recognizing whatever arises enables it to naturally release on its own, then you will become a buddha in one lifetime. If strong desire emotion arises, do not follow after it or get lost in it. Instead, look directly into the essence of that desire and rest your mind there without wavering. When desire arises it is rootless and groundless. This is known as not rejecting desire, but rather as desire purified into its own nature, desire liberated in its own ground. That itself is discriminating wisdom. That itself is Buddha Amitabha. In the same way, at the arising of the five emotional poisons, do not follow after or indulge in them, but look into their essence and rest there. By doing so, the emotions and thoughts are pure in their own ground, are naturally free in their own nature. They arise, but they are rootless. These are the five wisdoms. These are the five buddhas. Whatever thoughts or emotions arise, look directly into their essence and rest there. When you do this, the thoughts or emotions naturally self-release for they have no intrinsic realness. This practice is from the oral instructions for taking the five poisons onto the path. This practice should be understood and sustained.

Spanning the entire course of practice, these *Four Dharmas*, which have been briefly expounded upon here, lend themselves as a guide to the way of practicing through the gradual stages of the path.

The Dedication

By the cause of whatever little virtue I have previously accumulated, and by the empowering condition of the humble merit arisen from these efforts, I pray that this commentary on *The Four Dharmas* of Gampopa, who is the crown ornament of the Kagyu Practice Lineage, becomes the unceasing cause for limitless wayfarers to enter into the sphere of complete enlightenment.

Excerpting passages from within some of my previously written commentaries such as *Supplication to the Illustrious Tara*, and others, I have extracted out the substantive material that completely contains the meaning of the *Four Dharmas*, and have composed and printed this commentary with the intent to benefit those with a sincere desire to strive in the practice of the Dharma.

This was written in Gar Drolma Buddhist Center in Ohio, United States, by Khenpo Konchog Samdup, on January 15, 2015.