

## The Meaning of *Dharma*

The word *dharma* in Sanskrit means 'that which holds'. All existents are *dharman*, phenomena, in the sense that they hold or bear their own entity or character. Also, a religion is a *dharma* in the sense that it holds persons back or protects them from disasters. Here the term *dharma* refers to the latter definition. In rough terms, any elevated action of body, speech or mind is regarded as a *dharma* because through doing such an action one is protected or held back from all sorts of disasters. Practice of such actions is practice of *dharma*. Since this is not the time to deal at length with the topic of *dharma*, only the Buddhist *dharma* will be explained briefly here in comprehensible terms.

## The Four Noble Truths

The Blessed One said, 'These are true sufferings, these are true sources, these are true cessations, these are true paths. Sufferings are to be known, their sources are to be abandoned, their cessations are to be actualised, the paths are to be cultivated. Sufferings are to be known; then, there will be no more suffering to be known. The sources of sufferings are to be abandoned; then, there will be no more sources to be abandoned. The cessations of suffering are to be actualised; then, there will be no more cessations to be actualised. The paths are to be cultivated; then, there will be no more paths to be cultivated.' These are the four noble truths in terms of their entities, requisite actions, and actions together with their effects. In explaining them, the interpretation of the Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamika system, the highest among all Buddhist schools, will mainly be followed.

True sufferings are phenomena that arise from contaminated actions and afflictions and that are included within the term 'cyclic existence'. True sources are the causes producing true sufferings. True cessations are the states of extinguishment and disappearance of true sufferings and true sources. True paths are special methods for attaining true cessations.

Because true sufferings arise from true sources, true sources actually precede true sufferings. Also, through cultivating true paths, true cessations are actualised; true paths therefore, actually precede true cessations. However, the Blessed One reversed this order when he taught the four noble truths, and this is extremely important. For, if initially one recognises the sufferings, then one investigates their causes; therefore, Buddha set forth the sources of suffering after identifying the sufferings themselves. When one generates confidence in the ability to eliminate these sources, then a wish to actualise their cessation arises. Then for the sake of doing this, a wish to cultivate the paths arises; therefore, Buddha set forth the true paths after identifying true cessations.

## Cyclic Existence and Sentient Beings

One might wonder, 'Since cyclic existence together with its miseries are true sufferings, what is cyclic existence?'

Cyclic existence is divided into three types by way of different types of abodes; these are a desire realm, a form realm and a formless realm. In the desire realm, beings partake of the pleasures of the 'five desirous attributes': forms, sounds, odours, tastes and tangible objects. The form realm has two parts: in the lower, beings are not attracted to external pleasures but partake of the pleasures of internal contemplation. In the

higher part, beings have turned away from pleasurable feelings altogether and partake of neutral feelings. In the formless realm all forms, sounds, odours, tastes and tangible objects and the five senses for enjoying them are absent; there is only mind, and beings abide only in neutral feeling, one-pointedly and without distraction.

There are six different types of sentient beings who migrate in cyclic existence: gods, demigods, humans, hungry ghosts, animals and denizens of hells. Gods include beings in the form and formless realms as well as the six types of gods in the desire realm. Demigods are similar to gods but are mischievous and rough. Humans are those of the four 'continents' and so forth. Hungry ghosts are many types of beings who are severely deprived of food and drink. Animals are those in the ocean and those scattered about the surface of the earth. Denizens of hells are persons born in various colours and shapes through the force of and in accordance with their own previous actions.

The essential meaning of 'cyclic existence' is a process outside of one's control, that proceeds in accordance with contaminated actions and afflictions. Its essential nature is misery; its function is to provide a basis for suffering and to induce suffering in the future. Technically, cyclic existence is the contaminated mental and physical aggregates appropriated through contaminated actions and afflictions. Because there is nothing in all three realms to which cyclic existence does not apply, the mental and physical aggregates of all these beings are cyclic existences.

## Causes of Cyclic Existence

What are the roots of cyclic existence? The sources of suffering are two: contaminated actions and afflictions.

Afflictions are classed as peripheral mental factors and are not themselves any of the six main minds [eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mental consciousnesses]. However, when any of the afflicting mental factors becomes manifest, a main mind [a mental consciousness] comes under its influence, goes wherever the affliction leads it, and 'accumulates' a bad action.

There are a great many different kinds of afflictions, but the chief of them are desire, hatred, pride, wrong view and so forth. Of these, desire and hatred are chief. Because of an initial attachment to oneself, hatred arises when something undesirable occurs. Further, through being attached to oneself the pride that holds one to be superior arises, and similarly when one has no knowledge of something, a wrong view that holds the object of this knowledge to be non-existent arises.

How do self-attachment and so forth arise in such great force? Because of beginningless conditioning, the mind tightly holds to 'I, I' even in dreams, and through the power of this conception, self-attachment and so forth occur. This false conception of 'I' arises because of one's lack of knowledge concerning the mode of existence of things. The fact that all objects are empty of inherent existence is obscured and one conceives things to exist inherently; the strong conception of 'I' derives from this. Therefore, the conception that phenomena inherently exist is the afflicting ignorance that is the ultimate root of all afflictions.

## Actions

From the point of view of their nature, actions are of two types: intentional and operational. An intentional action occurs prior to physical or verbal deeds and is a mental factor that provides the impulse to act. An operational action is a physical or verbal action that occurs at the time of engaging in activity.

From the point of view of the effects they impel, actions are of three types: meritorious, non-meritorious and invariable. Meritorious actions impel one to happy migrations, which are the lives of humans, demigods and gods. Non-meritorious actions impel one to bad migrations, which are the lives of animals, hungry ghosts and denizens of hells. Invariable actions impel one to the upper realms, which are those of form and the formless.

All of these can be divided into physical, verbal and mental actions. Also, from the point of view of how the effects are experienced, actions can be divided into three types: the effects of an action 'accumulated' in this life may be experienced in this very life, in the next life, or in any life beyond the next.

## Liberation

Cyclic existence means bondage, and liberation means freedom from this bondage. As was explained above, the causes of cyclic existence are contaminated actions and afflictions. If the roots of the afflictions are eliminated and if new actions are not 'accumulated', since there are no afflictions to activate the predispositions of contaminated actions persisting from the past, the causes of cyclic existence have been eliminated. Then there is freedom from bondage. Some say that as long as one still has mental and physical aggregates wrought by former contaminated actions and afflictions one has a *nirvāṇa* with remainder. When these no longer remain, there is a *nirvāṇa* without remainder. 'Without remainder' means that there is no remainder of mental and physical aggregates wrought by contaminated actions and afflictions, but the continuum of consciousness and the continuum of uncontaminated mental and physical aggregates still exist.

Through removing the cause, the contaminated aggregates

cease, and through becoming free from them all, the suffering that depends on them is extinguished. Such is liberation, of which there are two types: a liberation that is a mere extinguishing of sufferings and their sources and the great, unsurpassed liberation, the rank of Buddhahood. The former is an extinguishment of all the afflicting obstructions [which prevent liberation from cyclic existence] but not of the obstructions to direct cognition of all objects of knowledge. The latter liberation is the ultimate rank, an utter extinguishing of both the afflictions and the obstructions to omniscience.

## Hīnayāna

In order to attain either of these liberations, one must rely on a path. There are paths of ordinary beings and paths of Superiors. The latter are true paths. There are two types of Hīnayānists: Hearers (Śrāvaka) and Solitary Realisers (Pratyekabuddha). Each of them has five paths, and thus there are ten Hīnayāna paths.

Although Hearers are lower and Solitary Realisers are higher, their basis is the same. They both practise the Hīnayāna doctrine of a path that serves as a method for achieving a mere liberation from cyclic existence for their own sakes. In brief, they take as their basis a set of ethics in conjunction with a thought definitely to get out of cyclic existence. On the basis of this, they cultivate a union of calm abiding (śamatha) and special insight (vipaśyanā), which is directed toward emptiness, and thereby extricate the afflictions together with their seeds so that it is impossible for them ever to grow again. Doing this, they attain liberation.

Both Hearers and Solitary Realisers have a series of five paths: the paths of accumulation, preparation, seeing, meditation and no more learning. One who trains in such paths is called a Hīnayānist.

## Mahāyāna

Mahāyānists primarily seek the rank of Buddhahood, the non-abiding nirvāṇa, the supreme liberation, for the sake of others. In conjunction with this aspiration to highest enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings, they practise the paths that were explained above for the Hīnayāna. However, these paths are higher and more powerful because of the difference in motivation. The paths are also augmented with special methods, the main of which are the six perfections and the four means of gathering students. Based on these, Mahāyānists overcome totally and forever not only the afflicting obstructions but also the obstructions to omniscience. When the two obstructions are overcome, they attain the rank of Buddhahood.

In the Mahāyāna there are also five paths: the Mahāyāna paths of accumulation, preparation, seeing, meditation and no more learning. Though these are similar in name to the Hīnayāna paths, they in fact have a great difference. In brief, the difference between the two vehicles of Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna lies in their initial motivation, and because of this the general body of their paths, and especially their methods or deeds, come to be different. Through this, in turn, their effects also have a great difference of inferiority and superiority.

Once Hīnayānists have attained their fruit, do they remain there? Or do they enter the Mahāyāna?

They definitely do finally enter the Mahāyāna. Because their type of liberation is not the ultimate attainment, they are not satisfied with it, but gradually seek the ultimate attainment, train in its paths and become Buddhas.

## Tantrayāna

The Mantra Vehicle has four sets of tantras: Action (Kriyā),