

**The Sixteen Aspects of the Four Noble Truths  
- Coarse and Subtle**

Topic: The Sixteen Aspects of the Four Noble Truths  
Author: Gyalsab Rinpoche, Geshe Doga  
Translator: Fedor Stracke

The presentation of the coarse 16 aspects and their opposing wrong views were translated by semiconscious Fedor Stracke from Gyaltsab Je's commentary on the *Pramanavatika*, called *Clarification of the Path to Liberation*.

© Fedor Stracke 2009

The rest is a brief commentary given by the Ven Geshe Doga in 2002 in Tara Institute, Melbourne. It was also translated by the semiconscious Fedor Stracke.

© Tara Institute

Table of Contents

**The Sixteen Aspects of the Four Noble Truths .....1**

Reason for the Sequence of the Four Noble Truths ..... 1

Coarse and Subtle Aspects of the Four Noble Truths .....1

**Coarse Four Noble Truths .....1**

Truth of Suffering .....2

Truth of Origin .....2

Truth of Cessation.....3

Truth of the Path .....3

**Subtle Four Noble Truths .....4**

The Four Aspects of the Subtle Noble Truth of Suffering .....4

**Why Meditating on the Coarse Aspects Alone Does Not Lead to Liberation .....6**

## **The Sixteen Aspects of the Four Noble Truths**

### **Reason for the Sequence of the Four Noble Truths**

Maitreya in the *Uttaratantra*:

Sickness is to be known,  
The cause of sickness to be abandoned,  
Abiding in happiness is the aim  
And the medicine is to be relied upon.

Here Maitreya explained the reason for the sequence of the Four Noble Truths. First we have to know the sickness, because the main thing is to initially know the problem. That is why that which is to be understood, the truth of suffering, is taught first. After this one comes to understand the cause of the problem. Then, by understanding the cause of suffering, one understands that one can free oneself from this suffering, and arrives at the third noble truth, the cessation of suffering and its cause. Then comes the path leading to this cessation.

The reason why the Four Noble Truths are taught in this sequence is because of the way the meditator has to understand them. The order reflects the way an understanding of the Four Noble Truths is generated within the practitioner's mind. They are taught from the point of view of the way they are realized.

### **Coarse and Subtle Aspects of the Four Noble Truths**

It is important to mention the difference between the coarse Four Noble Truths, and the subtle Four Noble Truths. This refers to the difference between the Four Noble Truths from the point of view of grasping at the self as being a self-supporting substantially existent, and the Four Noble Truths that arise from the view of the transitory collection grasping at inherent existence.

#### **Coarse Four Noble Truths**

Here the root is the view of the transitory collection grasping the person to be a self-sufficient substantially existent. From that, craving is generated because of which one then accumulates throwing karma, and then from that karma the contaminated suffering aggregates are established. The contaminated suffering aggregates are the first noble truth of suffering and the view of the transitory collection grasping a self to be a self-sufficient substantially existent, the craving

arising from that and the accumulated karma are the second noble truth of origin.

The coarse truth of cessation is the adventitious abandonment of the manifest grasping at the person as being a self-sufficient substantially existent. This is just an adventitious abandonment that certain lower tenet practitioners sometimes attain. The coarse truth of cessation is arrived at by meditating on the coarse truth of the path which is the yogic direct perceiver realizing the person to be empty of being a self-sufficient substantially existent.

Apart from impermanence, which doesn't have the division into coarse and subtle, the other fifteen aspects of the coarse Four Noble Truth have to be related to the view of the transitory collection grasping at the person as a self-sufficient substantially existent.

#### Truth of Suffering

One is mistaken with regards to the truth of suffering by grasping at purity, happiness, permanence and self. Understanding the four aspects of the truth of suffering, which are impermanence, suffering, empty and selfless, counteracts this.

Take the subject suffering of suffering,

- it is impermanent - because it is generated adventitiously
- it is suffering - because it is powered by karma and afflictions
- it is empty - because there is no separate controlling self
- it is empty - because it is not established in the nature of an independent self.

#### Truth of Origin

One is mistaken with regards to the truth of origin by grasping at sufferings to be without cause or to have a discordant cause. Regarding the latter there is the grasping at suffering being produced by only one cause, being produced by a creator the intention of whom preceded the result and grasping at suffering to be changeable adventitiously but being essentially permanent.

Understanding the four aspects of the truth of origin, which are cause, origin, intense generation and condition, counteracts this.

Take the subject contaminated karma and craving,

- it follows it is the aspect of cause - because it is the root of it's resultant suffering
- it is origin - because it generates it's resultant suffering entirely again and again
- it is intense generation - because generates it strongly

- it is the aspect of condition - because it is the concurrently acting condition of it's resultant suffering.

#### Truth of Cessation

One is mistaken with regards to the truth of cessation by grasping at liberation to be non-existent, by grasping at certain contaminated dharmas to be liberation, by grasping at certain sufferings to be supreme liberation and by thinking that even though one can exhaust the sufferings one could reverse from that state.

Understanding the four aspects of the truth of cessation, which are cessation, peace, supremacy and definite emergence, counteracts those misconceptions.

Take the subject complete freedom from suffering achieved through the power of the antidote,

- it is the aspect of cessation - because it is the freedom having abandoned suffering
- it is peace - because it is the freedom having abandoned the afflictions
- it is supreme - because it is liberation with benefit and bliss
- it is the aspect of having definitely emerged - because it is irreversible liberation

#### Truth of the Path

One is mistaken with regards to the truth of the path by thinking that a path to liberation is non-existent, thinking that meditation on selflessness isn't suitable to be the path, holding certain meditative absorptions alone to be the path to liberation and holding a path reversing suffering to be non-existent.

Understanding the four aspects of the noble truth of the path, which are path, suitable, accomplishment and definitely liberating, counteracts those misconceptions.

Take the subject wisdom directly realising selflessness,

- it is the aspect of path - because it is a path progressing towards liberation
- it is the aspect of suitable - because it is the direct antidote against the afflictions
- it is the aspect of accomplishment - because it is a transcendental wisdom directly realising minds final nature
- it is the aspect of definitely liberating - because it is the antidote irreversibly eliminating the afflictions.

## Subtle Four Noble Truths

Here the root is the view of the transitory collection grasping the person to be inherently existing. From this craving arises, through which one accumulates throwing karma, which then in turn generates the suffering aggregates. The view of the transitory collection grasping the person to be inherently existing, the corresponding craving and the karma accumulated through them are the subtle noble truth of origin. The suffering aggregates generated by them are the subtle noble truth of suffering. The subtle truth of cessation is the abandonment of true grasping. This results from meditating on the subtle truth of the path, which is the wisdom realizing the lack of true existence.

Apart from impermanence which doesn't have the division into coarse and subtle, the other fifteen aspects of the subtle Four Noble Truth have to be related to the view of the transitory collection grasping at an inherently existing person.

So the four truths have a coarse level and a more subtle level. At the coarse level the truth of origin is the coarse view of the transitory collection grasping at the self as being a self-supporting substantially existent, and from that arises the coarse truth of suffering.

The subtle truth of origin is the view of the transitory collection grasping at the self as being an inherently existent, and also the craving arising from that, which establishes the subtle truth of suffering.

Because there are two different levels to the Four Noble Truths, it is said that by meditating on the coarse sixteen aspects of the Four Noble Truths one can temporarily abandon the manifest coarse delusions.

### The Four Aspects of the Subtle Noble Truth of Suffering

The four aspects of the first noble truth of suffering are impermanence, misery, selflessness and emptiness.

#### First Aspect: Impermanence

Take the subject contaminated aggregates - they are impermanent because they are produced.

#### Second Aspect: Misery

Take the contaminated aggregates, they are misery because they are under the control of karma and delusions.

#### Third Aspect: Empty

Take the subject contaminated aggregates - they are empty because there is no person that is self-empowered. This refers to the coarse selflessness of person, the lack of the person being empty of being self-sufficient and substantially existent.

Fourth Aspect: Lacking natural existence

The fourth aspect refers to the person lacking natural existence. This is according to the Prasangika point of view

There's a difference between the way the sixteen aspects are asserted according to the lower tenets and the Prasangika tenets. There is no difference in the level of subtlety in the aspect of impermanence, since impermanence refers to something that is momentary, and there's no coarse or subtle impermanence. The other three aspects have coarse and subtle. We explained how the interpretation of empty and selfless differs according to the coarse and subtle systems. This difference will appear very vividly to our mind if we reflect on them. It's necessary to think about the difference between those two sets of the Four Noble Truths, and then it will appear very clearly to our mind.

When we meditate on those four aspects of the first noble truth, there is a certain evolution of ideas as one leads onto the next. First we realize that the aggregates are impermanent, then that leads to the second understanding that they are misery. Why they are misery? Because they are under the control of karma and delusions. Then that realization acts as a building block for the third realization, that there's a lack of self-empowered person, which is the coarse selflessness of person. That leads to the fourth realization, which is the subtle selflessness of person - that a person lacks inherent or natural existence.

The realization of those four aspects acts as an opponent to the four misconceptions regarding the first noble truth.

- The realization of impermanence counteracts the grasping at permanence.
- The realization of suffering counteracts the grasping at purity
- The realization of empty counteracts the grasping at the self-empowered person
- The realization of selflessness counteracts the grasping at an inherently inherent person.

## Why Meditating on the Coarse Aspects Alone Does Not Lead to Liberation

There are many quotations in *Illumination*, which all try to establish the point that, according to the lower tenets the root of cyclic existence is the grasping at the person as being a self-sufficient substantially existent. Through this grasping one creates karma and from this the contaminated suffering aggregates are established. Since the root is grasping at the person as a self-sufficient substantially existent, by investigating this ignorance the meditator realizes the lack, or the emptiness of the person as a self-sufficient substantially existent. They then meditate on this selflessness, which is coarse selflessness. By meditating on and realizing the person's emptiness of being a self-sufficient substantially existent, the meditator can temporarily pacify or subdue manifest grasping at the person as being a self-sufficient substantially existent. There are certain Hinayana practitioners who then believe that, because they have temporarily subdued the manifest coarse self-grasping, they have actually attained liberation.

The significance of saying 'temporarily' is that they haven't even abandoned the manifest coarse afflictions, not to mention that they haven't abandoned the seeds of the coarse afflictions, because by meditating on the coarse sixteen aspects one can't even attain the abandonment of the manifest coarse afflictions. If that did happen, no coarse affliction would arise in post-meditational period. All one can attain by meditating on the coarse sixteen aspects is a temporary abandonment of the coarse afflictions during the meditation session.

That is the whole point of this debate. What it is trying to establish is that in order to actually abandon even the grasping at a person as being a self-sufficient substantially existent, one needs to abandon the seed of that grasping. The seed of this coarse self-grasping can only be abandoned by realizing the person's emptiness of inherent existence, by realizing that the view of the transitory collection viewing the person as being inherently existent is a mistaken consciousness.

The lower tenets assert that the grasping at the person as being a self-sufficient substantially existent is the root of the cyclic existence. Therefore, according to them, by realizing the person's lack of being a self-sufficient substantially existent, one can cut through the root of cyclic existence and attain liberation. According to the Prasangika system this is not possible. Understanding the lack of the person being a self-sufficient substantially existent doesn't harm the

actual root of cyclic existence, because the actual root of cyclic existence is the view of the transitory collection that grasps at the self as being inherently existent. Realizing a person's lack of being a self-sufficient substantially existent doesn't harm the ignorance grasping at the person as being inherently existent. Therefore not only do meditators who meditate only on the person's lack of being a self-sufficient substantially existent not abandon the afflictions together with the seed, but of course they also don't abandon the manifest afflictions.

The explanation of the coarse truth of cessation refers to the momentary or adventitious abandonment of the coarse afflictions. Here this doesn't say that it abandons the adventitious obscuration of the afflictions, as one cannot even say that they abandon the manifest afflictions. If they did so, then the manifest afflictions also wouldn't arise again.

Here one talks about the momentary or adventitious abandonment of the afflictions at the time of meditation. While in meditation the afflictions don't arise for the time being, but then when they arise from meditation those afflictions again become manifest. So therefore one can't say that they have abandoned even the manifest afflictions. They have only achieved a temporarily abandonment of the manifest coarse afflictions while in meditative equipoise.

In order to abandon the afflictions from the root one needs to acquaint one's mind with the person's lack of inherent existence. By familiarizing the mind with the person's lack of inherent existence then one can harm the root of cyclic existence, which is the view of the transitory collection grasping at the inherently existent 'I'.

Even though practitioners of the lower tenets have this shortcoming from the side of view, from method side of the path there's no lack. They can generate bodhicitta, they can practice the various perfections, generate love, compassion, bodhicitta, and so on. They can enter the path of accumulation but they won't be able to proceed from the path of accumulation to the path of preparation. In order to induce the path of preparation one needs the realization of emptiness. So you can see that why the realization of emptiness is called the door or gateway to liberation. It is because it is essential to understand emptiness if one is to attain liberation. Even though we might not realize emptiness in this life, at least by reflecting on and contemplating emptiness we will place very good karmic imprints on our mind, so that we will be able to realize emptiness in a future life.

May all be auspicious.