

Lama Michel Rinpoche
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The Four Seals of Buddhist Philosophy teaching transcript

The Four Seals, the four basic principles shared by all Buddhists, determine whether a given concept is Buddhist or not. Understanding these principles allows us to apply them and actively follow Buddhist philosophy to positively transform our minds and our reality.

Lama Michel Rinpoche

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The Four Seals
of Buddhist Philosophy

teaching transcript

Uni Mail Université de Genève

11 May 2013

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*Teachings given at Uni Mail,
Université de Genève, Switzerland
thanks to the invitation and organization of Roger and Arlette Witschard,
whom we also thank for the printing of this text.*

*English transcription by Carla Anderegg
edited slightly for readability
1st edition June 2016*

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kunpen.ngalso.net

*Lama Gangchen Peace Publications
lgpp.org*



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Preliminary prayers

lo chok sangpoi pel gyur trashi pa
thub chen ten pe trinle yar ngo da
phel gye dro lor tsam pe dze pa chen
pal den lame shab la sol wa deb

Glorious auspiciousness of the supreme virtuous mind, divine action of the Buddha's teaching beneficial like a waxing moon, acting exactly in accordance with the mental capacity of living beings for their development and maturation, at the feet of this glorious guru, I request:

OM AH GURU VAJRADHARA SUMATI MUNI SHASANE KARMA
UHTA VARDANAYE SHRI BADHRA VAR SAMANIYA SARWA
SIDDHI HUNG HUNG

May You grant us the mundane and extraordinary siddhis of Lama Vajradhara, the noble mind of the Buddha's doctrine, which increases the activity of the noble glorious ones.

sang gye chö dang tsog kyi chog nam la
jang chub bar du dag ni kyab su chi
dag ghi jin sog gyi pai so nam kyi
dro la pen chir sang gye drub par shog

In the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha I take refuge until enlightenment. Through the practice of generosity and the other perfections, may I become a Buddha for the benefit of all sentient beings.

Buddha Shakyamuni's enlightenment and teachings

Around 2,500 years ago, there was a man named Siddharta Gautama that today we know as Buddha Shakyamuni. Some sources say he lived 2,500 years ago, while others say he lived 2,800 years ago. It doesn't make much difference. I'm not going to go through Buddha's whole life story now because that would take too long, but I will say that he had one very particular quality: he never accepted the fact that human beings needed to suffer. He deeply felt that there must be a way out, a way to go beyond suffering. He looked for a solution in many different ways. Having all imaginable material things a man could want: money, power, pleasure, etc., he saw that it was not enough.

So he left the palace and he went to meditate in the forest. He tried austerity practices for several years, challenging his own body in order to control his mind. He saw that it was possible to not feel the body while in very deep states of meditation, so he would access these deep, pleasant levels of consciousness where he would feel no suffering. But at a certain point, when he would come out of the meditation, he would get back in touch with his body again and he would feel the same suffering as before. Finally, he found that the solution was not about going against one's own body but about putting the body at the service of the mind. So he went to meditate in the forest under a bodhi tree where he stayed for six years and finally found all the answers inside of himself. One day, on a full moon during a solar eclipse in the month of Vesak, Buddha reached enlightenment. Today is the 11th of May and if I'm not wrong, May 25th will correspond to this full moon day.

When Buddha came out of his meditation after having reached enlightenment – at that moment – his first words were:

ଶବ୍ଦବୈଶ୍ଵରପଦାନ୍ତରାମପୁଣ୍ୟା
 ଏକାକ୍ଷରକ୍ଷଣବିଷାର୍ଥଶବ୍ଦବୈଶ୍ଵରାଙ୍ଗା
 ଶୁଦ୍ଧପଦାନ୍ତର୍ମହାର୍ଥପଦବୀକୁଶାଶ୍ଵରା
 ପୀପେକଶାଶ୍ଵରାଙ୍ଗପଦବୀପଦବୀ ।

zap zhi trö drel ö sel dü ma jé
 dü tsi ta bu chö zhik khowö nyé
 su la shé kyang gowar mi nü pé
 mi mé nak gi tsel du né par ja

“Profound and peaceful, free of elaborations, as clear light and non-composed, such a nectar I have found. To whomever I explain it, they will not be able to understand. So I will stay alone in the forest meditating.”

Buddha stayed in the forest for 49 days meditating. Brahma and Vishnu, two Indian gods, then came and requested Buddha to please teach what he had learned. They offered him a conch shell and a wheel, which became important symbols of Buddhism. Buddha accepted their request and he went to Varanasi, known today as Sarnath. In Sarnath, Buddha met his first five disciples and he taught the *Four Noble Truths*¹. From that time on, Buddha spent many years (almost 40 years, until he was 80 years old) teaching others and traveling a lot throughout India. He, however, never went to teach someone without being first asked. So if we look at the transcripts of Buddha's oral teachings, they always begin: “At that time, this person asked

¹ The Four Noble Truths (Skt. catvāryāryasatyā; Tib. ད୍ୱାୱାସାର୍ଥିଅନ୍ତର୍ଦ୍ଵାୱାସାର୍ଥି) were taught by Buddha Shakyamuni as the central theme of the so-called first turning of the wheel of the Dharma after his attainment of enlightenment. They are: the truth of suffering (Tib. ଶୂନ୍ଯାନଶୂନ୍ଯାନଶୂନ୍ଯା, Skt. duḥkha-satya) which is to be understood, the truth of the origin of suffering (Tib. ପୁରୁଷଶୂନ୍ଯାନଶୂନ୍ଯା, Skt. samudaya-satya), which is to be abandoned, the truth of cessation (Tib. ଅଶୂନ୍ଯାନଶୂନ୍ଯା, Skt. nirodha-satya), which is to be actualized, and the truth of the path (Tib. ଆଶ୍ରୟାନଶୂନ୍ଯା, Skt. mārga-satya), which is to be relied upon.

this question and Buddha gave that answer,” don’t they? We’ll never find: “Buddha said this just because he wanted to.”

When Buddha passed away, his disciples gathered together and they started to transcribe his teachings. Luckily they had very good memories, but there was still one problem: they remembered different teachings. Why? Because Buddha taught differently to different people, and sometimes even in seemingly contradictory ways. To one person he would say one thing and to another person he would say something else. Why? Because these people were different. So when we look at the different teachings, they may look contradictory but when we look at them more closely, we see that they all bring about the same result. So they are not contradictory because they lead each disciple to the same place. After Buddha passed away, four main schools of Buddhist philosophy were created. These four Indian philosophical schools are called the Vaibhashika, Sautrantika, Chittamatra and Madhyamika.

These four schools are said to be like steps of one staircase: first you climb one, then you climb another. They are complementary, not contradictory. So it’s like, for example, if we need to study physics, alright? We cannot jump right away to quantum physics. We need to first start with the basic laws of physics because if we don’t have the right foundation, we can get completely lost afterwards. OK? So in the same way, first we go to the first schools, then we go to the higher schools of Buddhist philosophy. But today we are not here to study the four schools, so we are not going to go into that. All of these these schools have something important in common and this is what we are going to see today, alright?

If someone is following Buddhist philosophy, there are four aspects that this person must follow. But before we see these four aspects, first we need to understand what following a philosophy means. In Tibetan we say:

ଶୁନିମସଦ୍ୟ ସନ୍ତୋଷପ୍ରଦାନମସଦ୍ୟ ଶୁନିମସଦ୍ୟ ଶୁନିମସଦ୍ୟ ||

drup ta rang go lo ngor té par drup pé na drup ta o

his is to say that following a philosophy means that we are sure about something. We are sure about a point of view, some ethical point, away in which we see the world. We are sure and we follow it. So having a philosophy is not only an intellectual experience, but the philosophy we follow is guiding us in our lives: the way we speak, the way we work, how we deal with situations, how we deal with ourselves, the way we exist. Alright? So the philosophy is guiding us. We all have a philosophy, even if we aren't aware of it. We all have our way of seeing things, which we learned from our culture, from religion, from society and our parents. But our philosophy is not always the best philosophy, is it? The best philosophy is the one that helps us eliminate our suffering and helps us help others. So, I think it's very important for us to be aware of the need to have a life philosophy. OK?

Generally speaking, when we study philosophy in the West, we are actually studying the history of philosophy. Instead here, we need to see how we can bring this philosophy into our daily lives. I need to have guidelines in my life, what we can call a life philosophy. In Buddhist philosophy, we have what are called the four main seals, like stamps, which are also like the four pillars holding the philosophy up. If the four seals are not there, it's not Buddhist philosophy. Within the different schools of Buddhist philosophy, there are also many other schools. The first school, Vaibhashika, for example, is divided in 18 schools because Buddha gave the same teachings differently in 18 different places with slightly different cultures.

The Four Seals

So, let's look at these four seals, alright? First of all, there are different ways of looking at, studying and learning these four seals. There is one way which is very academic and another way which is more practical. We are going to follow the more practical way today. The four seals in Tibetan are called:

তা'ক'ত'গ'য'ক' ত'ব'জ' ত'ন' ত'ব'জ' tawa ka tak gyi chak gya zhi.

Let's get started with what we are going to see today.

The first seal: All composed phenomena are impermanent.

দু'স' মু'স' সম'স' ত'দ' শ' হ'স' dū je tam ché mi tak pa

The second seal: All impure phenomena are of the nature of suffering.

হ'স' স'ক'স' স'ব'স' ত'দ' ফ'স' ম'স' স' হ'স' zak ché tap ché duk ngel wa

The third seal: All phenomena are empty and lack an inherently existing self.

ক'স' স'ম'স' ত'দ' ফ'দ' ব'ি'দ' স'দ'স' প'ে'দ' স' হ'স' chö tam ché tong zhing dak mé pa

The fourth seal: Beyond suffering is peace, or nirvana is peace.

ন্য' দ'ব' এ'স' দ'ব'স' স' শ' ন' ন' ন' nya ngen lé dé pa zhiwa o

So, once again, I'll just repeat the four seals.

All composed phenomena are impermanent.

Everything that is impure is of the nature of suffering.

All phenomena are empty and lack an inherently existing self.

Beyond suffering is peace.

The first seal: All composed phenomena are impermanent

Permanent and impermanent phenomena

Then, we have what are called permanent phenomena. Permanent phenomena are phenomena that exist and they are not changing while they exist. They can cease to exist but while they exist, they are not changing. Let's try to find an example. There are many, many, many. There are actually more permanent phenomena than impermanent phenomena. Let's take the general concept of impermanence: the constant transformation of phenomena. What is impermanence today? The constant transformation of phenomena. What was impermanence yesterday? The constant transformation of phenomena. What will impermanence be tomorrow? The constant transformation of phenomena. So the general concept of impermanence is permanent. Is it clear? It's not changing, is it? So every general concept is permanent, and for every impermanent phenomenon

there is one general concept. OK? In Tibetan, it's called བྱତ୍ସୁ| dön chi, which means "general meaning."

Most of the things that we relate to in our lives are impermanent, aren't they? Everything that is produced, everything that depends on causes and conditions, is always changing. They are impermanent. There are two ways of looking at impermanence. We could recognize that things change, and so we should not suffer when they do. We need to understand that things change. Everything that starts, sooner or later will end; everything that is born will die; everything that comes together will separate. And everything that separates will come together again, somewhere, you know. Nothing in this sense is permanent. Even death is not permanent, is it? Everything that dies will be reborn, everything that is born will die. Everything transforms.

Mental images, change and suffering

Instead, why do we suffer when things change? Let's see. Do we accept change? No. Why not? Here comes what we call subtle impermanence. So let's try to understand how our mind works. This is what we call the subtle form of impermanence. I have this object here [*showing a bottle of water*] What is this? A bottle, right? OK. When I look at the bottle, what is appearing to my eyes? A bottle or a shape and colors? Shape and colors that I call "bottle," right? This first step is essential to understand.

I will give an example that will help you to understand a little bit better. [*Lama Michel tears a tissue into two pieces*]. OK, can you see this piece of paper? [*showing one of the two halves of tissue*] OK? Can you recall it? If we close our eyes, we can imagine the paper, can't we? OK, again, watch carefully... [*he passes the tissue behind his back and shows it again*] Here is the piece of paper. We can see the size, the shape, everything, right? So, is it the same piece of paper? Yes or no? Yes.

[He passes the paper behind his back again and shows it, this time slightly crinkled] And now? Yes. We can go on all day, can't we? [He passes the paper behind his back again and shows it, this time more crinkled] Same piece of paper? Yes or no? Yes. Alright, now is it the same paper? [tearing the tissue into small pieces] Is it the same paper? Yes? Are you sure? If you lend me your car and I give it back to you like this, would it be the same car? [laughter] Can it fulfill the same functions as it did before? Does the mental image that we had still fit here with the paper as it is now? Does it match here? So, is it the same paper as before? No, right?

Actually, every time I showed you the paper, it was not the same piece of paper: it had changed (sometimes just a little bit), but the change was so small that our mental image could still be sustained by that object. So what happens is that when we have an object, we have a mental image of that object. The object fulfills the functions and the characteristics of the mental image. When the object is no longer able to fulfill the functions and the characteristics of the mental image, we say that the object has changed. Are you following? So actually, each time I showed you the piece of paper, it was something different. It's like when we look at these beautiful flowers: are they the same flowers as the ones at the beginning of the talk today, or has there been some change? Some change, right? From when I started talking until now, has there been any change? We cannot perceive it, but actually yes. Do flowers wilt in one instant, or is it a slow, gradual process? It's a gradual process that we cannot always perceive.

Let's say that I see you today and will see you again tomorrow. Who do I expect to meet? The same person as the day before. Then if you are different, it must be your fault! When I see changes, I get sad. Why? Because I wasn't expecting change.

When I see that the flower has wilted, while I was expecting it to be fresh and beautiful, I am surprised because it's not what I was expecting. Why? Because we relate to everything through our mental images. We are not able to perceive any object independently of our mental images. OK?

For example, when you listen to me talking, what do you hear? What comes to your ears: sound or words? Sound, right? What do we do with this sound? We attribute a value to it. We have different mental images that we give to different sounds. OK? This is what language is all about. If we don't have the meaning in one language, it becomes difficult to translate it. That's the difficulty for example, in translating Tibetan and English because sometimes we don't have the meaning of the word in English and vice versa. So when we listen, what comes to us is simply sound. This is why verbal communication is faulty by its own nature: what I say is not what you hear. Because I have some ideas, I have some feelings, some emotions that I want to share with you, I want you to understand my ideas, I want you to understand my feelings, so I transform them into sound. You listen to it, and you give another value to it. The value that I give to the sound and the value that you give to the sound will never be the same. It's as if we have a kind of software that will encrypt a message, OK? So I have my message, which I will encrypt and send to you. Then when you receive the message, you need to decrypt the message but our softwares have different versions so we never get the same message, do we? Sometimes people say, "But no one understands me!" Yes, no one understands you and no one will ever understand you! [laughter] You will understand yourself, no one else. Why? Because no one will have the same mental image that you have of what you are saying. Is this clear? OK. That's why I don't like to communicate only with words; we need to be physically present.

On a side note, there was a study done some time ago, where scientists were studying our ability to judge faces. People were hooked up to machines to check their brain activity, and then other people would make different faces, friendly and unfriendly. The people monitored would then say if the face was friendly or hostile. And they saw that whenever they needed to judge the faces, there was one small part of the brain that was activated. Up to here, there's nothing special about this study, is there? But then they did something which made a big difference. They did the same study with blind people. So the person that is completely blind would have someone in front of him or her making faces and the participants had more or less the same amount of correct answers as the people that were able to see.

Two conclusions can be made: one is that the people that can see cannot tell the difference between friendly and unfriendly faces but I don't think so; or the point is that our judgment is not based on sight but on our perception of intention. We are not perceiving the face, we are perceiving the intention. OK? For example, sometimes when someone is talking to us we can feel that there is some incoherence between the words and the intention, can't we? So let's remember that communication is not only verbal. Our intention is very powerful.

Impermanent phenomena, permanent mental images

But now we are talking about impermanence, aren't we? So, I see something, I hear, I smell, I taste, and when I perceive it, I will attribute a mental image to it. Is this clear? Now, the object is impermanent; it's always changing, every millisecond. In Tibetan, it's said: ཆର୍ଦ୍ଦେଣ୍ଣ କେ ଚିଗ, which means one "instant." You take one second and you divide it into 67 parts. It's a very short amount of time. So things are changing every instant. The bottle has changed; everything

is changing. OK? But our mental image is permanent. It's not changing. When I showed you the paper before, every time you said, "Yes, it's the same," was the mental image the same or was it different? It was the same. But the object actually had changed, hadn't it? We were not able to perceive it, but it was changing. Alright?

So, the more detailed our mental image is, the more change we can perceive. The more gross our mental image is, the less we are able to perceive changes. Imagine a woman goes to the hairdresser and has her hair cut but her partner doesn't notice. I have seen this happen. Why doesn't he notice? Because he doesn't give much importance to that aspect in his own mental image and so he doesn't perceive that change.

The important point for us to understand is that objects are impermanent, always changing, but the mental image is permanent, unchanging. And we confuse the object with the mental image. We think the mental image *is* the object, don't we? So I see you today and then we will meet again in six months. Who do we think we are going to meet? The same person as today; the same one we met six months before. Then we see the person and we say, "Oh, how you have changed! How is it possible?" We are made of body and mind – what is more prone to change than that? [laughter] So we are always changing. The problem is that because we think that the mental image is the object, we do not accept change. We want the object to be the same as our mental image. We are attached to it. Because we don't want to change mental images, we have trouble accepting change. Is this clear? Our tendency is that when we look at things, we want them to be the way that we want them to be. The first time I learned this, it opened my mind.

There are some things that we can do here. The first thing is that we shouldn't say "*this is*." We should say "*this is what*

I perceive; it's what it looks like to me; it's how I see it. It may not be how it is." OK? The way we speak makes a big difference because our speech directs our mind. So, we shouldn't say, "this flower is," but rather, "this flower looks like or it appears to me..." In this way we can already start to see that things are only as we want them to be. Alright?

Another important consideration relates to attachment. If we look carefully, what do we have attachment towards? The object or the mental image that we have of the object? It's mixed but we are mostly attached to the mental image. If we were attached to the object, we would easily accept the changes because it's part of the nature of the object to change. Instead, when we are attached to the mental image and the object has changed but the mental image has not, it's as if the object were betraying us, going against us. We might despair, "How could this happen? It's not possible!" Why? Because we're attached to the mental image. Once we understand this mental game that we play, would it then be possible for us to perceive things without the mental image? No. Then what can we do? We need to update our mental images often. We need to remember that there is this mechanism, that there is an object and then there is an object perceiver (which is me). I perceive the object through the mental image. The mental image is permanent while the object is impermanent, so I need to update the mental image. It's true that we have more trouble seeing changes when we are with a person very often but let's say that we get separated from someone close for six months. When we meet again, we'll most probably say, "Oh, look how you have changed!" Why? Because we haven't given enough space for updating our mental image.

So, we are always changing. Our home and workplace are always changing. Our society is always changing. Everything around us is always changing. We are always changing.

Our body is changing. Our mind is changing. Our memories are changing. Our emotions are changing. So we need to update these mental images. OK? When we learn to update the mental image, we also become less attached to the mental image itself. Updating the mental image is something that truly helps a lot.

Attributing names and values

Let's dive in a little bit deeper still. Let's look at the object in front of me [*referring to the piece of paper*]. How many different types of mental images can I create? So many. Some may be wrong and some may be right. The wrong ones are mental images whose functions the object is unable to fulfill. For example, I can say that this is a tissue, can't I? I can use it to clean my face; I can say that it's a piece of paper and use it to take some notes; I can find many uses for it and so I can give it many names. But if I say that this is a sandwich, or if I say that this is Swiss chocolate, it won't work. Or if I call this a dog, it's not going to bark. So, even though we can create many different mental images for the same object, we cannot assign any mental image we want to just any object.

I remember a friend of mine who experienced something interesting related to a napkin. This friend was in Moscow in 1992, at the beginning of the transition away from communism. There were not many restaurants but there was McDonalds. So this friend went to McDonalds, she was eating a hamburger and she had a napkin. Then a man came up to her and he asked if he could take her napkin. She agreed so he took the napkin, he unfolded it, ripped it in half, gave her back one half and he took the other to use for himself. Did my friend and the man give different values to the napkin? Very different. For one person, it's just a napkin, you know. You can throw it away; it's nothing. You can use ten, twenty of them without thinking

about it because it's something with no value. For the other, it's something precious, something that we need to take care of and value. Even though you call it a napkin in the same way, you give it different values and therefore you have different mental images, right? So, we understand that we can give different values to the same things.

So, as I have said, everything that we see is impermanent, but the past is also impermanent. OK? Someone might ask how the past can be impermanent. What is gone is gone, what has happened has happened. Let me give an example: first of all, what exists now from the past? The memory of it, right? Let's say, I am walking down the road, someone comes and pushes me down to the ground. I break my arm and end up in the hospital in a lot of pain. The person who pushed me - is he an object of attraction, aversion or indifference? Aversion, right? What is my past? Someone harmed me, didn't they? Then while I am in the hospital, someone comes with a video of what happened, of the person pushing me. The video shows that there was a nearby robbery with shots fired in my direction. Witnessing this, the man pushed me down so I would not get killed. If he had not pushed me, I would have gotten shot. OK? Now, what happened to me? Did someone harm me or did someone save my life? Someone saved my life. Is my arm still in pain? Yes, the pain is there; the arm is broken, but I have gratitude, not anger. The past has changed because I changed the mental image. OK?

If we look at our own experiences, for example, as children, we had some experiences based on our mentality at the time. Many years later, we can see the same experience in a different way, we can also see reality differently and we can change our past. OK? We have one saying in Portuguese which is, "Se um não quer dois não briga," which means, "If one doesn't want to, two won't fight." OK? If one doesn't want to, two will not fight.

This means that to get into a fight, you need two people. Similarly, for reality, you need an object and you need perception, a so-called object perceiver; you need the mental image. OK? So nothing exists for us independently of the mental image we assign it. And by changing the mental image we change our reality, don't we? Do you see how our past is impermanent? We can change the way we see it. Is this clear? Now in the same way, things around us are impermanent but we do not perceive them as such because we are attached to the mental image. In fact, we work very hard at keeping the mental image when things change, but it's useless.

Our mental image of self

In the same way, our self is also impermanent. We are all impermanent but we relate to and see ourselves through a mental image. But this mental image of ourselves, is it permanent or impermanent? It's permanent. I'll give you an example, alright? For some reason, at some point in my life I told myself that I didn't like soup. Maybe because when I was living in the monastery in India, every day at six o'clock in the evening we used to have soup – very hot soup in hot weather, you know, Tibetan style. Tibetans are used to having soup, *tug pa*, at 4,000 meters in Tibet and they keep on doing so in the South of India. It's like the Italians who eat spaghetti anywhere and everywhere they go. [laughter] Anyhow, the point is that I don't like soup. So some years ago, I was in Holland for a conference. It was lunchtime and what do you have for lunch in Holland? Soup. [laughter] Now, it might be alright to have soup for dinner in the winter but soup at lunch? It just doesn't work. So there I was with nothing other than soup to eat. A friend who knows my likes and dislikes very well came by my table and saw me eating my soup. When he sarcastically asked how my lunch was going, I answered, "Oh, soup for lunch! How

good can it be? It's terrible!" But my actual experience was that the soup was really good: the taste was good, the temperature was right, the texture was good. It was a really good soup and I was enjoying it. When I finished the first cup of soup, I asked myself if I wanted more. The first mind said, "Yes!" But what did I do? I told myself, "No, I won't take any more because I don't like soup." Why? Because the mental image of what I like and I don't like is stronger than my direct experience. Is this clear?

So, throughout our lifetime we have strong experiences for which we generate mental images. The experience changes, finishes, ends, but we keep the mental image. For example, during our childhood or some time later we can feel abandoned. Maybe one day, our parents need to do something important and they cannot take us with them so they leave us with the neighbors for one day and we feel abandoned. We feel that we are not loved, we feel that we are not protected by those who should protect us, etc. Then 20 years go by or even 50 years later we feel: "Nobody loves me! I am abandoned and nobody takes care of me!" We are still attached to that experience; we're attached to the mental image we have created of ourselves. So if I feel that I am abandoned, if I have the mental image of not being loved, it will be a very difficult job for anyone to love me because it's never going to be enough. Why? Because I am not loved. The direct experience that I have doesn't matter because I am attached to the past experience. I am attached to the mental image of myself, I am attached to one form of identity that has nothing to do with the direct experience of the present.

Once I had a friend who came to me complaining, "Oh, at work my partner is never recognizing what I do. It doesn't matter what I do, it's never good enough!" Then I looked at her and knowing the situation quite well, I asked her if she had ever felt like this before, "Have you ever felt that you are not

recognized and that whatever you do is not enough? Have you ever felt like this before at other times in the past?" She told me, "Yes, since I was born, since I was young with my parents and then with my friends, I have always felt that whatever I do is never enough."

It reminds me of this really childish joke we had when I was a small kid in Brazil: "Wherever I touch my body, it's painful. I touch my head, it's painful; I touch my nose, it's painful; I touch my arm, it's painful; I touch my leg, it's painful; I touch any part of my body, I touch my mouth, it's painful. What's the name of the sickness? Finger pain!" [laughter] So, very often we have finger pain but we think the pain is in a different part of our body. We are attached to a mental image of ourselves and we project it on everything around us. It can't be that I am attached to the image that that soup is not good, it must be that Dutch people don't know how to eat! [laughter] Can you recognize yourself in this? It's important for us to see ourselves, not to keep these concepts abstract but to apply them to our lives. OK?

Change through interaction

We get attached to the image and we are not able to accept change, to use change. Why do things change? Because they interact; because there is interaction. Let's make an example. Let's say I wake up every day at the same time, I go to the same factory-like job, I come back home, I watch the same stupid TV program. Whenever there is some conflict, I try to run away from it by drinking or smoking or who knows what. I never look inside myself. I never look at things which are different from my own lifestyle. OK? And I spend ten years like this. Then, I take one year and travel around the world. I meet people from different cultures, I find myself in difficult situations where I need to find solutions, right? I really see things that I had

never seen before. Where would there be more change? In one year travelling or in ten years of doing the same things? In the one year travelling. Why? Because there was more interaction, alright? So interaction brings change and change means possibility. You know, we are somehow very fortunate that things are changing, that they are impermanent, because this means that there is the possibility for change. If things were not impermanent, then we would really have a big problem, wouldn't we?

So, phenomena are impermanent because they interact. What does this mean? Every word I say creates change. If I came to you now and I said, "Devadatta..." Devadatta was Buddha's cousin who was very envious of him, and let's say that because of this, all the texts use "Devadatta" when they need to say the name of someone. So, imagine I came and said, "Devadatta is a very bad person. Oh, he's so arrogant, full of attachment and so selfish," and I go on to tell you stories about Devadatta. Remember, you have never met Devadatta, but for thirty seconds I speak badly about him to you. After thirty years, you meet Devadatta. Those thirty seconds of negative talk about him will condition the way you see Devadatta. There is a preconceived idea, a prejudice, already there. Am I right or not? So when we listen to something, it influences our mind, it influences the way we see reality. OK? Because when I see Devadatta, the mental image will be influenced by what I had heard.

Every word we say is very powerful. Everything we hear is very powerful. Everything we see, everything we do, every place we go, every person we meet is essential in our life because change happens through interaction. So every thought, every experience is shaping the present and is also shaping the future, isn't it? So when we look at impermanence, we need to understand two things. Firstly, nothing is as permanent as it

seems. Secondly, we have the ability to change because every thought, every word, every action is a very important agent of change. OK? So we should not underestimate anything. But we also need to relax! Because a great deal, a great part of reality comes from the mental image that we give it. So, when we meet someone, when we go somewhere, when we hold any object, remember to update the mental image, which is a way of acting with humbleness in the face of reality. OK? Is this clear?

So this is the first seal, the first pillar. Everything that is composed, which means everything that depends on causes and conditions, is impermanent. So this is the first thing that we need to understand and follow according to Buddhist philosophy. We are impermanent. Life is impermanent. By understanding this, how much anger, how much attachment will we let go of? For example, why do we normally suffer when someone dies? Because we are worried about the person who has died? Or because we don't want to accept it? Because we are not able to accept it. We say, "But yesterday he was here. How is it possible?" or "We had lunch together just yesterday. How can he not be here anymore?" Because he died! OK? When we have difficulty accepting something, it's because we want things to be the way we want them to be. We want things to be like our mental image. Is this clear?

As we said yesterday, it's not because we understand something that we realize it. So we need to repeat to ourselves many, many times: "Phenomena are impermanent but the mental image is permanent. I confuse the mental images and phenomena." We need to update the mental image and we need to accept changes. Remember that every thought, every word, every choice and every action is a big agent of change. We need to reflect on this because when we see impermanence, we are seeing the present because the present is the only thing

that actually exists in this whole process. When we accept the present, we are not fighting with the past or living with expectations about the future. All composed phenomena are impermanent. That's a very important part. Are there any specific doubts on what we have just said? Do you have any questions? No? Alright.

Past, present and future mental images

I'd like to add one last thing which is better to explain now because it's connected to what we have said. We have different types of mental images. OK? There is the mental image of the past (of what I have experienced), there is the mental image that I am experiencing in the present and there is the mental image of how I want the future to be. When the future becomes the present, often the mental image that we have in the present doesn't fit with the one we had in the past. Let me explain it in an easier way. Let's say I meet you and I say, "Oh, you are such a nice person!" So I mentally project: "Oh, we are always going to get along and be happy together. It's always going to be this good!" So I make a lot of plans for the future. OK? Two, three, four, five years, ten years pass. After ten years, did everything go as I had planned? No. It never does. But do I acknowledge that I had false expectations or do I say that things just fell apart? We blame things and others: "Oh, you didn't do the right thing. I thought you were a good person but you are not!" or "Oh people didn't do what they were supposed to do because things should have gone this or that way." So it's not only in the present that we are attached to the mental image, we are also attached to the mental image of what the object should be like in the future. OK? And all of this makes us suffer a lot. So we need to be a little bit more relaxed, practice less attachment to the mental image, have more respect for interdependence and for impermanence. There's no other choice.

It's similar to what we said yesterday² from Shantideva's *The Guide to a Bodhisattva's Way of Life*: "You have a problem and you have a solution, why get angry? You have a solution. Why suffer? You have a solution. You have a problem, and you don't have a solution, why suffer? You don't have a solution." If you don't like impermanence, why suffer? There is no solution. If things are not the way we expected, we need to accept it. And finally, has it ever happened in your life that you had a negative experience but after many years you see that it was positive or beneficial? Or vice versa? So accept that we are ignorant. We cannot give a label right now and say, "This is like this" and "That is like that." It's better to think, "This is how it looks to me now, but it can be different because it will depend on what I learn and how I deal with things." OK? So, don't be too attached to the mental image. Update it. Respect change. Alright? Let's take a break for lunch.

nyimo delek tsen delek
 nyime gung yang delek shin
 nyitsen taktu delek pe
 kon chok sum gyi jin gyi lob
 kon chok sum gyi ngoe drup tsol
 kon chok sum gyi tra shi shok

At dawn or at dust, at night or midday, may the Three Jewels grant us their blessings. May they help us to achieve all realizations and sprinkle the path of our lives with various signs of auspiciousness.

Tashi Delek. Merci et bon appétit.

² Teachings on Anger and Patience, Uni Mail Université de Genève, 10 May 2013

The second seal: Everything that is impure is of the nature of suffering

[short preliminary prayers]

OM VAJRASATTVA SAMAYA MANU PALAYA VAJRASATTVA
TENOPA TISHTA DRIDHO ME BAWA SUTO KAYO ME BAWA
SUPO KAYO ME BAWA ANURAKTO ME BAWA SARWA SIDDH
ME PRAYATSA SARVA KARMA SUTSA ME TSIT TAM SHRIYAM
KURUHUNG HA HA HA HA HO BHAGAVAN SARWA TATHAGATA
VAJRA MAME MUTSA VAJRA BAWA MAHA SAMAYA
SATTVA AH HUNG PHET

Good afternoon.

So this morning we saw the first of the four seals: All composed phenomena are impermanent. This first one will help us understand the more difficult ones so let's move on to the remaining three.



Pure and impure phenomena and material utopia

The second seal is: Everything that is impure is of the nature of suffering. To begin with, let's understand what is meant by pure and what is considered impure. Basically what makes something pure or makes something impure is how we relate to it. When we relate to something with anger, attachment, jealousy, envy, selfishness, etc., we are polluting the object and so making it impure. What makes something pure or impure is if it's related to with attachment, anger, selfishness and so on or not. It's impure if we relate to that object with anger, jealousy, pride, selfishness and so on. Everything that is impure is of the nature of suffering. It means there is no escape. Everywhere we go, we take ourselves along with us. We cannot go somewhere without ourselves. We cannot take a vacation from ourselves. We can break up with someone by saying, "Now, I am tired of

you; let's take some time off." That's possible, but we cannot do this with ourselves, can we?

We are constantly trying to create situations around us that make us happy. We try to create situations in order to avoid suffering. But it doesn't matter where we go, it doesn't matter what the situation that we create is, we will be there. As long we have selfishness, anger, attachment and so on, there will be suffering; it doesn't matter what job we do, it doesn't matter with whom we live, it doesn't matter how our health is, does it?

When I was around fifteen (some years ago already now), I understood something that changed my life. It's very simple but that moment was not an experience of intellectual understanding – it was a deeper understanding, you know. I don't know if you have a saying in French, but in Portuguese we say, "Quando cai a ficha," which means, "When the token falls³." How would say that? It comes from having to put a coin in the public telephone to get the dial tone. Often it wouldn't take the line right away so we would have to put the coin in again and again until we actually got a dial tone. And why it didn't work the first three times, we don't know. So sometimes we read the same things again and again but maybe after the tenth time, "Ah ha!" we understand! Maybe we are walking down the road having an ice cream and suddenly we understand, the lightbulb goes off. This is the moment we realize, when we understand deeply.

To go back to my story: that time I was walking, actually I was in the car – I remember the scene perfectly. And at that moment, I understood that problems exist and will always exist. Simple but powerful. If problems exist and will always exist, there is no point in dedicating my life to solving problems! Do problems need to be resolved? Yes. But there are other things

³ When the lightbulb goes off

that we need to do in life, because problems will be there and once we solve one, another one will come. Up until then, I had always thought, “Ah, when this is resolved, everything will be fine!” Right? Very often we think similar things: “Oh, if I get this job, then everything will be fine!” or “If I’m able to be with that person, everything will be fine!” or “If I get cured from my sickness, everything will be fine!” and like this we can go on and on and on with many examples. But when we get what we want, what happens? Another problem arises! [laughter] This is life, right? So, the point is that I cannot make solving problems the objective of my life or project my own happiness onto resolved problems. This means that there is no such thing as a perfect life even though very often we try to create one. Alright?

Out of this experience, I generated my personal objective in life: I want to be happy; I want to be in balance; I want to be in harmony with myself and others regardless of where I am, with whom I am or in what situation I find myself. I don’t want my life to be conditioned by external conditions because if I need to wait for the conditions to be perfect in order to be happy, it’s impossible – it will never happen, will it? There is no escape; there is no way I can make a perfect world.

 The only way out is by changing ourselves because the world around us is a reflection of ourselves. But we often live in what I call a material utopia, which means we believe it really is possible to be happy only or mainly through material gain. Can we recognize ourselves in this? We think, “If everyone is nice to me, if I have a beautiful house, if there is no noise, if everything is nice and my health is good, then I will be happy!” Don’t we?

There’s an idea that helps me a lot when I think about this. Imagine that you go home, you open a bottle and a genie comes out, like Aladdin. OK? But it’s a different kind of genie: he’s not giving you three wishes but a choice between two things.

You can chose scenario A or scenario B. Scenario A is anything you want materially speaking. Do you want to change your body? Do you feel that you are too tall or you are too short? Do you want to gain weight or do you want to be thinner? Do you want to change your nose or any other part of your body? Do you want to become a man or do you want to become a woman? [snaps his fingers] It's easy! Do you want to become younger or do you want to be older? Anything you want and your body will change.

What about the house where you live? How many houses do you want? How do you want the house? You can imagine anything you want and the genie will give it to you. Do you want cars, do you want helicopters, do you want planes, do you want boats? Anything you want you can have. Do you want a bank account so big that you are not even able to count the zeros? OK! Anything you want. And who do you want around you? "Anything you want, I'll give you," promises the genie. OK? In the snap of a finger [snapping his fingers]. But there is one condition: inside, you are what you are. "The second choice is keeping the body that you have; I cannot do anything about it. The house is the one you have. Your bank account? I cannot do anything about that either. If you have a job or if you don't have a job, it's beyond my ability to change. But I can change you inside. I can give you satisfaction. I can give you joy. I can give you generosity, love, compassion, stability and courage. I can take away your anger, jealousy, envy, fear, unlimited attachment, unlimited desire. I can take away your ignorance. I can open your mind to infinite space," promises the genie. Which one would you chose: A or B?

Some people ask me, "Can I get both?" [laughter] If you want both, that means you want the first one, that you are not 100% sure about the second choice. We still believe in the first. We are not sure that only inner change would be enough. But if

we really think carefully, we will see that there is no reason to choose the first and we will choose the second. Since we are probably never going to meet such a genie, let's ask ourselves a question: what direction does the energy in my life follow? A or B? This is a question we need to ask ourselves. The point is that the solution is not outside: it's in the way we relate to the world. So we cannot change the world, it's useless to change the world; we can instead change the way we relate to the world.

The root of our suffering is selfishness: *the I and the my*

The causes of suffering are ignorance, attachment, hatred, anger, aversion, etc. And then there are also many other mental defilements like envy, jealousy and fear. This point is another fundamental aspect of Buddhist teachings. We should not point our finger blaming people and situations for our suffering. Let's take this world, this planet, for example, alright? If we took away selfishness, if we took away anger (but selfishness would be enough), what would this world be like? Heaven! Is there enough food for everyone in this world? Can the Earth supply food for everyone? Yes. Is there medicine for everyone? Is there the possibility for everyone to have a good life? Yes. Is there any objective need for conflict? No. There was a study conducted by the United Nations where they analyzed all the wars of the past 150 years, I think, and they saw that there was not one war that had not been created for economic reasons, which means attachment and selfishness, doesn't it? So if we take selfishness away, we are in heaven! If we take attachment, if we take anger, if we take violence away, we are in a paradise!

So we don't need to go somewhere else. We just need to live the world we have differently. It's useless to try to create perfect conditions if inside we are not changing. So, the second pillar

tells us that the solution is inside, not outside. The causes of suffering are within, not outside. It's not easy to accept. In a general way we can say, "Yes, OK but...that person did this to me; I have this problem; I have that problem..." We are ready to point our finger, aren't we? But if we just let go of our selfishness - our selfishness is the obsession of self-gratification, which means doing everything for *the I and the my*. That's what we do, don't we? Have you ever gotten angry where the *I and the my* played no part? That would be very difficult because what I think is right and what I think is wrong, my point of view, is always very strong.

The root of our suffering, the root that is polluting everything with suffering, is our selfishness and the more selfish we are, the more we suffer, don't we? The more solid the concept of "my" is, the more things I have, the more I will suffer. Let me give you a simple example. Some time ago I was with Lama Gangchen, talking to him about this attachment to "my," since I had been giving similar teachings in Albagnano. He then gave a very simple example. There was a chair in front of where we were sitting and there were some friends present. And then he explained that if you come over to that chair and you put your bag on the chair, what does the chair become? *My chair*. If someone else then sits in that chair, what reaction will you have towards that person? Attraction, aversion or indifference? "How can you sit in *my chair*?" OK? If it's just the chair where I put a bag then there should be no need to feel aversion. When it becomes *my chair*, then you are doing something against me. Right?

Similarly, if we go somewhere by car and you see that your car has been scratched, does it harm you? Does it create suffering? Yes, I would say so. But what harm was actually done to you? None. The harm was done to the car but because the car is *my*

car, I feel hurt. It's not just a question of expenses: the problem is that someone damaged *my* car and so this person hurt me, didn't he? The more vast the concept of *my* is, the more I will suffer. The more things I have, the more places I project the *my* and the more I suffer. Is this clear? *My son, my daughter, my father, my mother, my family, my religion, my country, my house, my ideals, my everything*, you know. The more we have *my*, the more we suffer. OK? Instead, the house where *I* live; it's not *my* house, it's the house I use; it's not *my* chair, it's the chair on which I was sitting. OK? It's not *my* son, it's the child I gave birth to. OK? The stronger the concept of *my* is, the more we suffer because *my* is an extension of *I*.

So, in this way, we can see that whenever we actually relate to anyone, whenever we see any situation, we pollute the situation with our selfishness and we suffer. So the causes of suffering come from our own selfishness, our own ignorance and not from the objective external conditions. The solution is not to run away from situations or try to create perfect situations, it's to change our attitude. Is it clear? We know it, but is knowing enough? No. We need to repeat it, we need to analyze it, we need to observe it, we need to remember it again and again. That's why we need to meditate. Meditating means to familiarize ourselves; it means recalling, remembering.

The results of our actions

All polluted objects, everything that is polluted, everything that is impure is of the nature of suffering. We pollute things in two ways: with our mental defilements, which are the mental attitudes that generate suffering, like ignorance, attachment, anger, desire, miserliness and then we have the actions that we commit guided by these defilements. Our actions are our responsibility. We can do anything we want in life; we are free

to do anything. We can even break the law but we are not free from the consequences of our actions. We are not free from our actions in this sense, are we? When I do something, I am responsible for it. OK? I am free to do what I want, but I am not free from what I have done before. I am not free from my past. For example, I can buy anything I want if I have the money. Imagine you think that you are free to buy anything you want. You go to a car dealer and say, "I want this beautiful car. I don't have the 200,000 euros to pay for it but I am free to buy what I want!" [laughter] Yes, you are free, if you have the money. So in the same way, at every moment we are free to do anything we want, but we are not free from the actions we have committed; we are not free from our past. Anything we do, every word we say, every thought we have, every choice we make – we are responsible. And sooner or later, we pay for it. When we plant the seed, the fruit will come.

Sometimes we may find that we have already changed our behavior but we are still paying the price for what we did in the past. So in this way too, we encounter difficult situations, because in life things are not linear, they are cyclical. So I can experience the results now of something I did twenty years ago. If I do something today, I might see the result after ten years. This keeps us from seeing the relationship between cause and effect, but it's there. Like today, for example, can we see results in our life today from experiences we had twenty years ago? Yes. Of choices we made, of places we went, of people we met, of things we heard, of words we said, of thoughts we had? And we are conditioned by it all right now.

Purifying negative actions

Since we pollute things with our ignorance, with our mental defilements and with our actions, we need to be careful with

our actions, because once I do something, it's done. It's possible to get a sort of "amnesty" after, it's possible to, what we call "purify" the action. It's not obvious but it's possible. OK? To purify an action we first need to consider that an action, in order to be complete, needs to have four aspects: the motivation to do the action, actually doing the action, completing the action and rejoicing for having done the action. So we need these four things. Sometimes we can start an action without finishing it so the action is not complete. The result also becomes smaller, weaker, but I am still responsible. OK?

In order to purify an action, we need to also have four conditions:

The first condition is that we must generate an attitude which is directly opposite to the one we had when we committed the action. So, if I want to purify an action of anger, I need to develop love. OK? Simple.

Secondly, I need to openly admit my mistake. It's not about feeling guilty, but I need to say, "I made a mistake, it was wrong and I am sorry."

Thirdly, I need to make the commitment not to repeat it again. It's not useful to say, "Oh, I should not do things like this. What a bad person I am," and then I continue doing the same thing. Now, there are some things that we do that we know are not good, some things we do in life which we know are wrong, but acknowledging that it's wrong isn't a justification to keep on doing it. "I know I shouldn't do this, but..." There is always a "but." We are very good at making excuses to ourselves. So instead, we need to be very clear: "This is good, I'll do it; this is not good, I won't do it." So in order to purify, we generate a commitment not to repeat that action again.

The fourth aspect is actually doing something to purify the negative action. We can help other people, for example, do

one of the different types of meditation, even clean the house. If I clean the house imagining that the dust and dirt are the negative actions that I have done, promising not to do them again while generating love, I am purifying! OK? It's important to do this without a sense of guilt. We are ignorant, that's why we are here; that's why we suffer. It's alright; it's normal. But once we understand something, then we should make the commitment not to repeat it again.

Once we have the commitment, could it happen that we still repeat that action? Yes, we could repeat it! That's why we make the commitment again and again, so that each time we can go longer without committing the negative action, and the negative results become smaller and smaller. We are not able to make big changes in ourselves with the snap of a finger [*snaps fingers*]. OK? We are not able to make big changes in just one instant; we need time, we need constancy, then things happen. It may look as if it happened from one day to the next but it's the result of a long-term job.

Reflecting upon death

So the second pillar of Buddhist philosophy is that suffering comes from within. The solution is within and cannot be found by following the utopia of materialism. But we should ask ourselves and understand what we are indeed following. What am I doing in my life? Am I following the material utopia or not? Only you know the answer (and you don't need to tell anyone), but you need to check it out for yourself, and then eventually redirect it. OK? Also because as we said before, we are going to die. In the West we don't like talking about that, but in Buddhism we say that a Buddhist practitioner needs to think about death at least once a day. OK? I do it by asking myself these four questions:

The first question is: Will I die? The answer is: Yes, sure, no doubt. Really? [Audience: "Yes."] OK. Because we tend to believe in our immortality within our mortality. "Oh yes, death, one day...maybe." I remember more than once meeting people that I heard saying, "One day, if I die..." and I think, "What is the other possibility? Tell me." I have not seen any other possibility. Maybe they have one, but I don't think so. So it's important to ask this first question: "Will I die or not?" And we should ask the question two or three times, because the first time that we give the answer, it is not the real answer; it's just like, "OK, yes, I will die..." We need to see it as something real. Will I die? YES. I feel it. It's true.

The second question is: When? I don't' know! You know, death is not giving special allowances for young people, is not giving any special treatment for people that are healthy or for people that are very cautious. No, some people die young, other people die old, some people die even before they are born, some people die while they are very healthy, some people die very sick. There is no specific rule for when death can come. We see this every day. We try to hide it; we don't like talking about it. When someone dies, it looks as if something went wrong, but it's the most natural thing. Once we are born, the only certainty we have is that we are going to die, and there is nothing wrong with death. Imagine what the world would be if people didn't die. Terrible. OK? It would be a total mess, you know.

The point is that we are going to die, and we don't know when. Now I am, let's say, young, I am now almost 32 years. I am 31 and I am going to be 32 in 2 months. Is it too much to ask to live until, let's say, 50? No. I am healthy, I have everything I need, I don't have a dangerous lifestyle. But can anyone assure me that I am going to live until 50? No. How about 40? We hope, but we cannot be certain. How about 32? One month and 28 days

or so from now. Can anyone assure me of that? No. What about tomorrow? [pause] No. Then we need to ask ourselves, “Am I going to die tomorrow?” No, surely not! I have so many things to do tomorrow. Not next week either, nor next month. How about next year? You know, the probability may be low but something could happen. We do in fact believe in our immortality within our mortality. So the second question is, “When am I going to die?” I have no idea. Can it be today? Yes. Can it be tomorrow? Yes. Can it be in 20 years, in 50 years, in 60 years? Yes. But I don’t know. So I understand the certainty of the uncertainty of the moment of death.

The third question is: If I die today, what will I take with me? OK? Can I take my body with me? But I like it! It’s nice and I take such good care of it. But when I die: goodbye! How about my things? You know, I accumulate so many things, and I put them in the bank, and I keep them at home. Can I take anything with me? No. So many of us have so many friends. Can I take my friends with me? No. I have so much knowledge; I’ve studied so much. Can I take this knowledge with me? No. Otherwise, a baby would be born already reading and talking and doing so much, wouldn’t he? If we could take our knowledge with us, then the baby would be born and know how to do everything already. So what can we take with us? We can take our love, compassion, stability, patience, generosity and faith. We can take the actions we have done in this life, and we can also take the other deeper aspects of our mind. We can also take anger, jealousy, envy, fear, ignorance and so on... OK?

So if I die today, who am I? What will I take with me? And what am I leaving for others? What example am I giving to other people? Materially, what I am leaving for others? It’s a question that we need to ask ourselves. For example, if after my death, someone benefits from reading a book that I wrote, it doesn’t

matter where I will be, I too will receive some benefit. So what am I leaving for other people that can bring them benefit? It's the third question: what do I take with me and what do I leave for others?

The fourth question is: What am I doing today to cultivate what I need to take with me? And what do I need to do? It's not that we need to be afraid of death, but by asking these four questions every day, we will give more value to life, and more value to what continues from one life until the next life. OK?

Methods for overcoming negative defilements

As we can see, the second seal, the second pillar, is a priority: it's our inner development, not external development. So then here there are many different methods. How do I deal with anger? How do I deal with attachment? And so on... There are basically three ways. The first way is to remove myself from the object of anger or from the object of attachment. Let's say that I like water so much! [*holding the glass of water to his heart*] I know that when I see water, I feel so much attachment, and I know that my attachment is not good because the stronger my attachment is, the more I will suffer when I have to inevitably be separated from my object of attachment. The stronger my attachment is, the more aversion there will be when something threatens to take my object of attachment away. So seeing that attachment is not good for me, what do I do? I move away from the object of attachment so that I don't see it. I cover it up, I don't look at it, so the feeling of attachment doesn't overwhelm me. It works. But there is the danger that if and when I do see the object, I could lose control and jump on it! OK? But in this first system of dealing with negative emotions, I create distance. I create distance from the object of attachment, and I create distance from the object of anger.

In some Buddhist traditions, monks cannot touch women, and sometime people ask why, wondering what the problem with women is. “Do they think women are impure?” they may ask. No. It’s because of needing to create distance from the object of attachment. It’s because of not being able to deal with attachment, not because there is something wrong with women. So this is related to the first system. I have attachment, so I move away from the object of attachment. OK?

The second system says: I understand attachment is not good. I reflect upon it again and again, so I am able to be face to face with my object of attachment and not follow the mind of attachment. It’s more difficult, but it works better.

The third system, which is more difficult but even more effective, says: I have attachment. Good! The more attachment the better. But I need to redirect this attachment. Why do I have attachment to water? Because I want to be happy, and I believe water makes me happy. And when I look at the water, I feel pleasure, but then Buddha comes and says, “Ah, but the pleasure you get from water is nothing. The pleasure of liberation, the pleasure of enlightenment is much better!” So I take the energy of attachment and I direct it towards enlightenment. I transform it. That’s the most powerful method. It’s like what the Sixth Dalai Lama said. The Sixth Dalai Lama didn’t follow a monastic life: he had many girlfriends everywhere and he wrote many love poems. And in one poem, he wrote: “If I desired enlightenment as much as I desire women, I would have already reached enlightenment.” [laughter] Which is true! When we want something very much, we do everything to get it.

So it depends on where we direct our mind. If we take all the energy of desire, of attachment, and we direct it towards our spiritual path, or if we take all the energy of anger and we direct it towards destroying ignorance, it works; we transform.

OK? And it's much faster. It's more difficult, but it's faster. So you can see there are many ways to overcome our negative defilements. We need to see which one is the most suitable for us at this time in our life. OK? So to conclude the second seal, the solution is inside of us. Suffering comes from within, so that's where we need to work.

So now I think we can take a short break, and then we'll come back to see the last two points.

The third seal: All phenomena are empty and lack a self

We now come to the third pillar, which is the most simple and most difficult one. And because it is so simple, very often it is made complicated, because our mind is complicated and so we need complicated ways to understand simple things. If we just went directly to the simple point, we wouldn't get it. So we need to go around, we need to analyze, we need to see many aspects and then, when we get to the final conclusion, we get to the simple point. It takes about four years of study in the monastery to study the third pillar. This means six days a week, twelve hours a day, eleven months a year for four years. And after all of this study, when you get to the end of all of this, you understand that it's so simple! So when we say simple things in a simple way, often we don't understand. But still, I am going to try to explain in a simple way, the simplest way I can. OK? So the third pillar is: All phenomena are empty and lack a self.

Actually, if we literally translate, it says: "All phenomena are empty and they don't have a self, don't have an identity." Many of you have already heard about *shunyata*, emptiness. Many of you have heard about emptiness. Everything is empty. Right? And maybe we understand that if everything is empty, nothing exists! No! If everything is empty, it means, first of all, it all needs to exist to be empty. If something doesn't exist, it

cannot be empty. So, is the glass empty? Yes or no? It depends. Empty of what? Is it empty of milk? Yes. Is it empty of water? No. So whenever we say “empty,” it means something is empty of something else. OK? So whenever we talk about emptiness, we need three aspects: what is empty, the fact that it’s empty, and what it is empty of. OK?

The object of negation

If we say, “All phenomena are empty,” the first question we need to ask is, “Empty of what?” If we don’t get that question right, we won’t understand anything. And very often, when we talk about emptiness, people want to focus very much on the emptiness and forget about what it is empty of. Shantideva said⁴:

प्रत्यक्षसंदर्भसाधारणस्तु द्विदर्भस्मेद्यद्वयिका।

tak pé ngö la ma rek par / dé yi ngö mé dzin ma yin

“Without entering in contact with the designated object, it’s impossible to perceive its non-existence.”

Is there an elephant in here? No. are you sure that there isn’t? How can we be sure that there’s no elephant in here? Can we imagine an elephant coming in here? Do we need to open one or two doors? A small elephant might be able to get in. So, can we imagine the elephant coming in? Can we imagine the smell of the elephant? I don’t know – I lived in India so I saw elephants many times, but we can imagine an elephant, right? That’s why we can say there is no elephant. If you cannot imagine an elephant in here, you cannot know if an elephant is here or not, can you? What if I asked, “Is there a *shiluma* here?” Yes or no? You don’t know! So if you don’t know, how can you answer yes or no? *Shiluma* means “cockroach” in Tibetan. It’s a nice word, isn’t it? It sounds beautiful, but it means cockroach. Now if I

⁴ *The Guide to the Bodhisattva’s Way of Life* (Skt. *Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra*), chapter 9, v.139abcd.

asked if there was a *shiluma* in here, we would know how to answer. I don't see any, so I can say no, but I can imagine one in here, right?

So, without entering in contact with the designated object, we cannot understand its non-existence. Alright? If I don't know what an elephant is, I cannot see the non-existence of an elephant. A negation is a form of affirmation. All phenomena are empty. Empty of what? First I need to be able to understand what it is empty of, so I can understand emptiness. First I have to understand the object of negation, so I can understand emptiness. If I come and I say, "Is missing, is missing!" what's your question? "What is missing?" "Who is missing?" "Oh, is missing, is missing!" You wouldn't understand anything, and maybe you would just start shouting about, "Is missing, is missing!" but you wouldn't know what was missing. So first we need to understand what is missing, why it is missing? Then we can understand "missing." So whenever we talk about emptiness, the fact that all phenomena are empty, we need first to understand the object of negation. OK? *What is missing?*

How phenomena exist: three levels of interdependence

I will deviate a little to explain the object of negation because I think it will be easier. Sometimes we prefer to go around a topic than straight to the point. And we don't like negations; we don't like the word "no." We prefer "yes." So I will first explain how phenomena exist, before telling you what is missing. Alright?

1. All composed phenomena depend on causes and conditions

Everything is interdependent, on at least one of three levels. The first level is the interdependence of cause and effect. I do an action, there is a result. I experience a result, it came from

causes. OK? The first level of interdependence is also what we can call the law of karma, isn't it? Karma means action. OK, we are not going to go into detail about karma now, but focus on how everything is interdependent. So for example, these flowers I have here in front of me. How many people needed to be involved for these flowers to be here? How many liters of gasoline were used to transport these flowers here? How many kilometers have these flowers travelled to get here? How many people worked for it to happen? So many. So everything is connected. I do an action here, it will bring results elsewhere. Every experience I have in the present is the result of many actions. And we are connected to everything, we are responsible, aren't we? So if we want to have a pure environment, then we need to take care of the environment because every action is important; we need to remember cause and effect. There is no action that brings no result, there is no result that exists without actions, without causes. OK? With this here we explain the first level of interdependence: all impermanent phenomena depend on causes and conditions.

2. Everything depends on its parts to exist

The second level of interdependence shows that nothing is indivisible: everything depends on its parts to exist. OK? This means that everything is a part of a whole and everything is made up of parts. OK, what are the parts that compose me, that allow me to exist? What do I have, what are my parts? Mind and body, right? Then the body is itself a unity. What are the parts of the body? Hands, head, liver, kidneys, etc., etc. Right? Then if I take the heart, what are the parts of the heart? There are the different arteries, valves and so on and so on. What if I take one drop of blood? What are the parts of a drop of blood? Can I divide it? Yes. And I divide and divide and divide and

divide until I get to the atom. Can I divide an atom? Yes. Then I divide and divide and I get a nucleus, and I go and I go and I go, where do I get? Finally, what do I find? Nothing. So some people say that everything is made out of nothing, because when you divide, divide, divide, divide, you get nothing. I have a different idea: nothing is made out of something. Nothing is made of something, which means that there is nothing that exists that is indivisible. There is no substance that is the core essence of everything, that is the basis of all. What do we mean by this?

Everything is made out of parts and everything is a part of something. OK? So what are the parts of a car? You have the engine, the wheels, the seats, there is the body of the car, and we can go on. So does a car exist independently of its parts? No. Does anything exist independently of its parts? No. For example, let's take a these prayer beads, a *mala*. What are the parts of the *mala*? The beads, the string. OK? Can the *mala* exist independently of the beads? No. How can I change the *mala*? By changing its parts. Can I change the *mala* independently of its parts? No. So remember this: if I change a small part, do I change the *mala*? Yes. Is there any other way of changing the *mala*? Can I change the *mala* independently of changing its parts? No. So If I take a pen and I make a small dot on the *mala*, am I changing the *mala*? Yes. From this we can see that when you have a big problem that you don't know how to deal with, you can break it up into many small parts; divide it until you have a size that you can deal with. If I want to change my anger, and I'm able to change some aspect of anger I have towards one person, did I change my anger? Yes.

So the only way to change the whole is by changing the parts. There is no other way. But are we aware of this when we see things, when we relate to situations? Not really. We like to see the whole, forgetting its parts. But we depend on the

parts. This refers to everything, ourselves included. What am I? I am a person, I have a body and I have a mind, right? Right or wrong? Wrong. Why? "I have a body and I have a mind." Who has the body and who has the mind? Who? No one. Because what happens is that in a relationship of ownership, the one that owns exists independently of what is being owned. I own a glass, so I can exist independently of the glass. If I own the body and if I own the mind, I can exist independently of body and mind. Do I exist independently of body and mind? No. So I don't have a body and I don't have a mind. I am made of body and mind; I am composed of body and mind. OK? Can you see the difference? Let me repeat. When I say, I have a body and I have a mind, it implies that there is one self that exists independently of its parts, meaning body and mind. Instead, when I say I am made of body and mind, there is no self independent of body and mind. OK? So this is a subject we can go on about for hours and hours, but if we simplify, we can say that everything is made out of parts, and every part is a unity, is a whole. So if you want to change anything you must change the parts. Alright?

3. Everything depends on the imputation of the name

Now, what puts things together, what makes parts become a whole, an object? I'll give an example. [drawing a line on the blackboard] What is this? Just a line. Then this? Another line. Then? What is this? ཨ: It's the syllable AH in Tibetan. It represents emptiness. Then [drawing again on the blackboard] And what is this? ། OM: pure body, speech and mind. It has a lot of meanings. But what is 1 line, 2 lines, 3 lines, 4 lines, 5 lines, 6 lines. These are many parts put together. But how did they come together? What made these parts become one unity? The name. The mental image. OK? Did this object exist as an "OM" independently of the name? No. Have you ever gone to

a place like a modern art museum? You see something and you cannot understand what it is. Then someone comes and says, “Oh, can you see this here, that there? The head is here, the hands are there.” And then you can see and make sense of it. When I give something a name, I attribute a value to it; I attribute a mental image.

So what puts the parts together and makes a unity is the name, the mental image. OK? Can we look at what I just wrote? Can we see what this is, what is there? It's just chalk on a blackboard, lines; it's an OM. It's the unity of three sounds: AH, O and MA. It symbolizes body, speech and mind. It symbolizes the pure state of body and mind, and the emptiness of body and mind. There are many meanings. It symbolizes purifying the body, it symbolizes eliminating ignorance and like this we can go on and on. But it's just some lines. The third level of interdependence shows what makes these lines become “OM”: the name. Nothing exists independently of the name.

The external world *does* exist, but it *does not* exist independently of the internal world. OK? This is the third level of interdependence. Nothing exists independently of our mental image, independently of the imputation of the name. Is this clear for us? If I take this object, what is this? [*showing his iPhone*] A telephone? My father would say, “No, this is a computer that you use as a telephone.” [*laughter*] Imagine that I take this to a place where people have never seen a telephone like this since they still use rotary dial telephones, but a place where people use a lot of beverage coasters. I give them this object and then what happens? I give them this object, and they say, “That's a strange coaster!” And they use it as a coaster under their drinks to protect their tables. Are they right or wrong? They are right. For me it's a phone. Am I right or wrong? I'm right. I am wrong if I say it's a phone and nothing else – if I say it's a phone, and

it's not a coaster. It depends on the value that I attribute to it.

Can I say, "It's a piece of chocolate"? I can believe it's chocolate but is it chocolate? I'll give you a better example. We go out in the evening; it's dark. We see a snake, and we get scared. But when we go back the next day in the daylight, we see that the snake was just a coiled up rope that was lying there. So was it a snake? Did we believe it was a snake? Yes. In reality, was it a snake? No. Why? Because it could not bite us. Even if I believe it's a snake, I get afraid and start running and shouting, it's not a snake because it cannot fulfill the functions of a snake. Alright? In the same way, this object can be a telephone, can be a coaster, can be something to level the table when it's unbalanced, it can be used to throw at the head of someone; we can do many things with this object, but it's not a sandwich and it's not a piece of chocolate. OK? So everything exists as *this* or *that* according to our own relative reality. This means that nothing exists objectively: everything depends on causes and conditions, depends on its own parts and on the imputation of the name. Is this clear?

Empty of inherent existence

What would happen if something didn't depend on causes and conditions? It would be permanent; it would not change. What would happen if something existed without depending on its own parts? It wouldn't be divisible. What would happen if something existed independently of the name, independently of the mental image? It would be the same for everyone. If this object existed as a telephone independently of the name, it would be a telephone for everyone. Is this clear? Can we find anything that is like this? Yes or no? I at least have never found anything like this. OK? This thing that we cannot find, which is an existence independent from causes and conditions,

independent from its own parts and independent of the imputation of the name, is what we call inherent existence. Alright? It's what we call objective existence; it's what we call existing from its own self.

So, does anything like this exist? No. That's why it's empty. Empty of what? Empty of inherent existence. Why? Because it's interdependent, because it depends on causes and conditions, it depends on its parts and it depends on the imputed name. Do we get it? Yeah? Yes, no, more or less? OK, once more. So, external reality does exist. I can touch this water, I can throw water on you – you too can feel the water, you know. So external reality does exist, but it does not exist independently of one's internal reality. So, everything is interdependent: everything depends on causes and conditions, depends on its own parts and depends on the name. This is clear, isn't it?

When we get angry, does our object of anger (imagine being really angry with someone or something) at the moment of anger, depend on causes and conditions and on the imputation of the name, or is it an object of anger from its own self, own side? How do I experience it? Existing from its own self, right? We might think, "I don't like having an object of anger, so why would I create one? It must exist as an object of anger because of the object itself; I have nothing to do with it." That's how we experience it. When we see something we like, an object of desire, do we want it because we have given it a name as an object of desire or because it is inherently good and desirable? Because it's good! No matter what I say, it's good! That's how we experience things. But nothing exists from its own characteristics; everything depends on the observer. OK? Everything depends on the imputation of the name, but we are totally unaware of this when we are angry, when we are jealous, when we are envious.

For example, what is the only difference between an object of anger and an object of compassion? The only difference. It's the same person, the same words, acting in the same way, with one difference? What makes it an object of anger or an object of compassion? What makes this person or that situation an object of anger instead of an object of compassion? The imputation of the name. OK? The mental image we attribute to it. What do we prefer: an object of anger or an object of compassion? Compassion. You know I can think, "Oh, you bastard, how dare you do something like this?" and I get angry. Or I can think, "I'm so sorry for your ignorance. I really wish you could change your attitude. How can I help you do that?" These are two very different attitudes deriving from the same situation, aren't they? So nothing exists independently of the imputation of the name. Everything is empty of inherent existence.

Based on this, we can say that reality is "subjective." This is not very precise philosophically speaking but it helps us to understand. We live in a subjective world, but we think our subjective world is objective, and that's where we trip up. That's why all phenomena are empty of an objective truth. Is it more clear? All phenomena are empty and lack inherent existence. This is the third pillar. We could go on and on for hours about it. It is the key to eliminating all our suffering because there is a big difference between seeing an object of anger as an object of compassion, which is already one good possibility, or seeing it simply as an object of compassion. If I see the object of anger as an object of compassion, I force myself to act differently, but deep inside, it's still an object of anger. I push the anger down and I tell myself to act with compassion – which is good – but the moment that I am not able to keep the anger at bay, it comes out. The second way of relating is that it's not an object of anger that I see as an object of compassion: it is an object

of compassion! Can you see the difference? So in order to make this change, we need to understand that nothing exists independently of the name. There is no such thing as object of anger or object of compassion independently of the name we give it, independently of the mental image that we attribute, independently of our subjective truth. So this is the third pillar.

The Fourth Seal: Beyond suffering there is peace

Our pure nature

The fourth pillar is extremely important but simple to understand: Beyond suffering there is peace. It means that we can eliminate suffering. We have all the conditions to go beyond suffering; we have a pure nature. We are like a crystal in the middle of filth. OK? If you take a crystal and you put it in the middle of shit, does it stink? Yes. You can keep the crystal for a thousand years inside shit, when you take it out, it's full of shit. Then you start cleaning it. It takes time and the smell is not good. But when you are able to clean it completely, there is a crystal. The crystal has not changed its nature; it's still a crystal. When you clean the dirt off, the crystal is still a crystal. Our own ignorance, our attachment, our anger, our selfishness are like the shit. Our mind is like a crystal. It's possible to clean it. This filth is not part of our nature. So we can get out of suffering, because it is not part of our nature. Because we can eliminate the causes of suffering, we can become pure. OK? So it's very important to have faith in ourselves: "I can do it. I have the ability to do it. I have the potential." So in Buddhism, we wouldn't say, "Oh Buddha, please help me. I give myself over to you. Do what you like with me!" No, in Buddhism we say, "Oh Buddha, please help me by telling me what I need to do and I will do it. I will walk with my own legs; I have no other way."

And I can walk, I have strong legs. I can learn. Alright? So it's possible to go beyond suffering.

In Buddhism there is no high state of being that is unreachable. Everyone can reach the highest state of buddhahood. Everyone can become a buddha. Everyone can eliminate suffering, everyone can develop compassion and wisdom. All we need to do is familiarize our mind with these states of mind. OK? Beyond suffering, there is peace. And this peace is not connected to somewhere, to some place, but to ourselves. Alright? In the same way that in the second pillar we said that everything that is impure is of the nature of suffering, in the fourth pillar, when you become pure, there is no more suffering, and we *can* become pure. Maybe it takes more than one lifetime; it's a gradual path, but it's by walking the path that we get there.

Conclusion

I'd like to conclude with one short story of Milarepa⁵. Milarepa was a great meditator. So Milarepa was already a Buddha; he had reached enlightenment after very hard work and many years of meditation. Towards the end of his life, he had one disciple named Rechungpa. He had many, many disciples but this was one of his main disciples. Rechungpa was leaving for a trip, and they were saying goodbye. At that time in Tibet, going on a trip meant travelling for months to reach one's destination and so they knew that they would not meet again. Milarepa was already very old and Rechungpa was very sad to leave. Milarepa told him, "Don't worry, you have everything you need for your journey," but he didn't mean the physical journey at hand, he didn't mean his trip, he meant his spiritual journey. Then Rechungpa left, but after a few steps, Milarepa called him back, "Oh, I forgot to give

⁵ Milarepa (c. 1052 – c. 1135 CE) is generally considered one of Tibet's most famous yogis and poets. He was a student of Marpa Lotsawa, and a major figure also in the history of the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism.

you the most important teaching of all.” Of course Rechungpa was surprised and wondered what it could be. So Rechungpa came back quickly. Milarepa turned his back to him, he raised his skirt and showed him his behind. It’s said to have been ugly, rough, like the behind of a monkey because of the many years sitting on a cold stone to meditate. So he turned around facing him once again and he told Rechungpa, “Remember, without effort, there is no result.” If we put in energy, we will get results! This doesn’t mean that life needs to be difficult and full of suffering. The spiritual path is a path of joy, but it’s not because of this that it’s always easy. OK? So remember, if we make effort every day, we will get results, gradually, slowly, slowly.

There are many levels on which we can practice, but we need to start with our own. Recall impermanence, remember that suffering comes from within, that everything is interdependent, and that we can go beyond suffering. These are the four bases of Buddhism, the four seals, which we need to bring into our daily lives. This means being a Buddhist, following Buddhist philosophy. If we learn all about Buddhist philosophy, but then we are attached to things as if they were permanent, or we blame everyone around us for our suffering, we are not following Buddhist philosophy, are we? So we become a Buddhist follower, we follow Buddhist philosophy by putting it into practice. Try. If it works, continue, alright? I guarantee, from my personal experience, it works. You just need to follow it; it’s not that difficult, we just need to do it. I think this is all.

Request and dedication prayers

I would like to explain the prayer that we recited at the beginning of teachings. This is the lineage prayer request: the prayer request of the blessings of my guru, the guru of my guru,

the guru of the guru of my guru, all the way back to Buddha Shakyamuni. If I have anything to share with you, it's thanks to those who taught me. So I always start by requesting the blessings of the lineage and generating the correct motivation. Now that we have finished, we shall recite a dedication so that every word said can be of benefit so that they don't remain merely words, but that they can transform into actions.

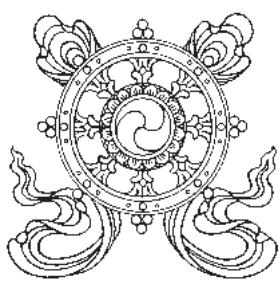
Dedication prayers

jetson lame ku tse rabten chin
namkar trinle chog chur kye pa dan
lobsang tenpe dro me sa sum gyi
dro we mun sel tac tu ne gyur chik

May the holy teacher have a long life. May the enlightened activities be fully displayed in the ten directions and may the brightness of the teachings of Lama Tsong Khapa continuously dissipate the veil of darkness covering the beings of the three realms.

nyimo delek tsen delek
nyime gung yang delek shin
nyitsen taktu delek pe
kon chok sum gyi jin gyi lob
kon chok sum gyi ngoe drup tsol
kon chok sum gyi tra shi shok

At dawn or dusk, at night or midday, may the Three Jewels grant us their blessings, may they help us to achieve all realizations and sprinkle the path of our lives with various signs of auspiciousness.



About Lama Michel Rinpoche

Lama Michel Rinpoche is a Buddhist master following the NgalSo Ganden Nyengyu tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, under the spiritual guidance of Lama Gangchen Tulku Rinpoche.

Born in São Paulo, Brazil in 1981, Lama Michel was recognized as a Tulku (the reincarnation of a Buddhist master) at the age of 8 and ordained as a monk at 12. He received a formal education of Buddhist practice and philosophy for 12 years at the Monastic University of Sera Me in the south of India. He continues his studies with annual visits to the Monastery of Tashi Lhumpo in Shigatse, Tibet-China.

Since 2004 he has been residing in Italy, dedicating his life to serving his Guru, Lama Gangchen Rinpoche, and generously sharing his experience and wisdom in many formal and informal situations, such as conferences, teachings, retreats and school visits.

Under the guidance of Lama Gangchen Rinpoche, he oversees several Buddhist centers such as the Kunpen Lama Gangchen in Milan, Italy, Albagnano Healing Meditation Centre in Albagnano on Lake Maggiore, Italy and the Centro de Dharma da Paz in São Paulo, Brazil.

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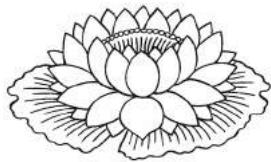
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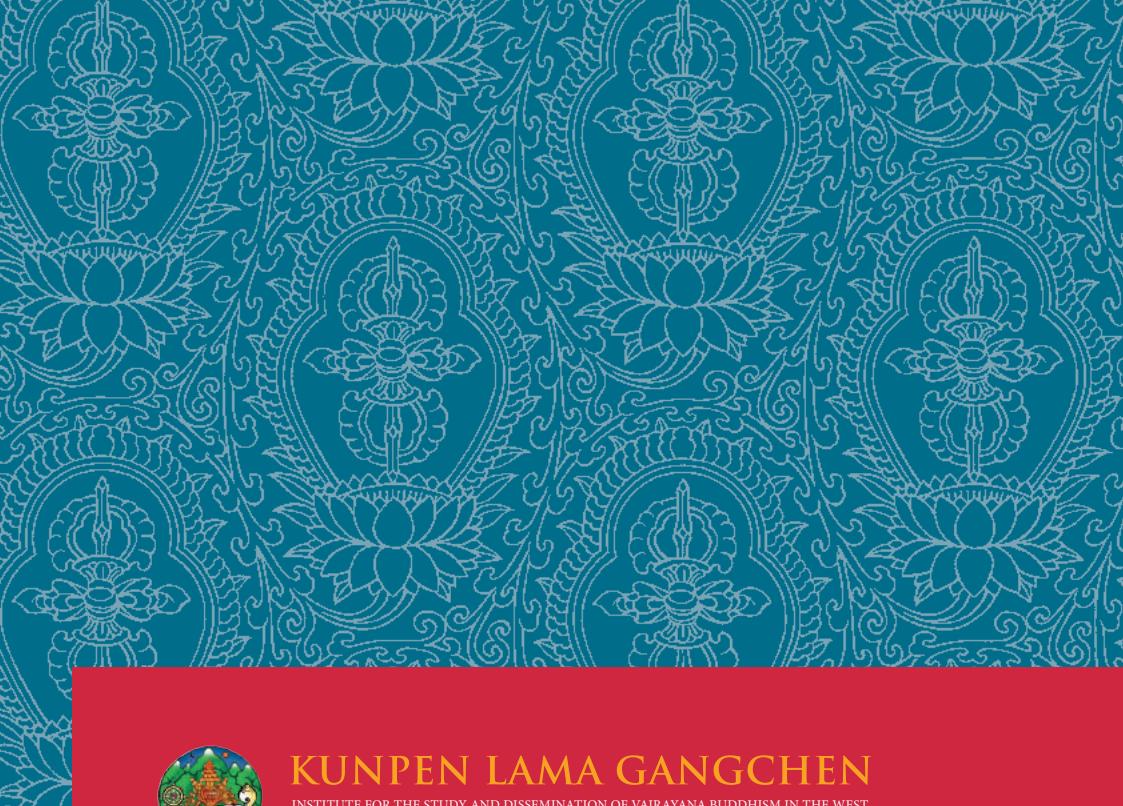
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