
The Four Dharma Seals

Teaching of Claude É Mon Cannizzo - July 2020

The first aspect of the Eightfold Path is the Right understanding, which could also be called the Right view. Seeing and understanding correctly is really a necessity. And to achieve this, we must see things more deeply than through the “ordinary” vision. As if we were dissecting what we look at, not only seeing what is visible, but seeing all aspects of the existence of something.

- **All compounded phenomena are impermanent.**
- **All compounded phenomena are suffering.**
- **All phenomena are empty and devoid of self.**
- **Nirvana is Peace.**

To begin with, we must already understand what a “compounded phenomenon” is.

Everything that appears is compounded. As it appears, it is named. What is named is limited to what it is meant to be. Let's take a chair: it is made of several pieces of wood. If the chair is cut in half, it loses its usefulness and is no longer a chair. In any case, it can no longer be called “a chair”.

Closer to us, a human being is also a living compounded phenomenon. If it is cut in half, it can no longer live, because it is only as a whole that it can live.

Closer still, but this time invisible, our mind is also a compounded phenomenon, since it is composed of moments of consciousness that we experience moment by moment, but none of these moments alone is our mind in itself.

In short, a compounded phenomenon is a phenomenon that loses its identity when it is shared and decomposed.

On the other hand, an uncompounded phenomenon cannot be broken down. For example, space: no matter how hard you try to cut it in half, it will always be “the space”. It does not lose its identity, because it cannot be broken down. More concretely, water, cannot be cut in half, because it will not remain divided

To broach more the Four Seals subject, Nirvana is also an uncompounded phenomenon, since it cannot be limited in space or in time.

In short, an uncompounded phenomenon does not lose its identity...

1) All compounded phenomena are impermanent

Everything that is born is doomed to disappear. All phenomena are compounded and therefore impermanent. Nothing is eternal, neither our body in its process of ageing and degradation, or our mind with its succession of thoughts that keep popping up and disappearing at each moment. Even the world will one day disappear, and giving time, everything will eventually disappear.

There are two aspects of impermanence:

- The **visible impermanence**, which corresponds to the fact that things and beings disappear, more or less quickly, or slowly through process of degradation (like old age and sickness for human beings). This is a kind of impermanence that we can perceive as a transformation in daily life.
- The **invisible impermanence**: Imperceptible to our senses, it transforms everything in a very slow process. When we see certain things, we think they will last without changing, without apparently transforming themselves (like a mountain or a continent), but despite the imperceptibility of it, they transform themselves.

Some aspects of impermanence we can accept, such as the change of weather, as we go from rain to sunshine... On the other hand, there are things that we find more difficult to accept: for example, old age for human beings. It is a perceptible impermanence, a process of transformation due to the passage of time. And it shows that our life will sooner or later come to an end.

On this subject Buddha says:

*"Most people forget
That they will die one day.
For those who think about it,
The struggle is appeased".*

When we say "compounded", it just implies a dimension of time and space. Time is compounded like phenomena and therefore is ephemeral. The present does not exist without the past and the future. If the present moments were permanent, there would be no future.

Living in the present - as we are invited to do during zazen - does not exclude the past and the future, but they only exist in relation to the present which is itself impermanent.

2) All compounded phenomena are suffering (*dukkha*).

The teachings of Zen Buddhism can be often disturbing, and especially *dukkha*, or suffering. Thus, we need to understand what is meant by "all compounded phenomena are suffering". In fact, in all our life experiences, there is suffering. The forms of suffering as well as its degrees are very variable.

Understanding the first of the "Four Noble Truths".

Everybody can see **the reality of suffering**, as long we open our eyes. The Buddha gives examples that are as ordinary as they are real, such as illness, old age and death. The translation of the Sanskrit word "*dukkha*" by "suffering" is limited and incomplete. Because *dukkha* also includes sensations, emotions, and frustrations which are also part of suffering. For example, being in close relation with things and beings that we do not like, or being separated from things and beings that we like, or not getting what we want, or having to do what we don't want to do, etc.

Suffering can vary in intensity and nature, from a mosquito bite to a dog bite. Or emotions, such as jealousy or anger, which are also experienced as painful. But what about pleasant emotions such as love? We don't experience love as painful. But it can be painful ... Why?

Buddha says that no moment of existence is completely free from pain and suffering.

There are several types of suffering

The suffering of suffering: It is physical suffering as we know it: breaking a leg or cutting off a finger ... Or suffering from mental origin: fear, depression, feelings of loss or abandonment ... These sufferings are inevitable sooner or later, whether through illness, old age, etc.

The suffering of changes: The Buddha does not say that happiness does not exist, but he says that even in a state of happiness, there is a hidden suffering which is the suffering of impermanence. If someone we love were to die, or if life were to separate us from our loved ones, it would be a great suffering. We have probably all experienced this feeling. We know it deep down, even if we refuse to admit this possibility. This is suffering in connection with impermanence.

Suffering related to the Three Poisons of the mind: desire and jealousy, hatred and anger, and ignorance. They generate suffering for ourselves and for others. Most of the time, we don't see them as suffering. A regular practice of zazen is necessary to realize this and to follow the Eightfold Path can remedy these sufferings.

3) All compounded phenomena are empty

No phenomenon has its own existence. It does not exist independently of other beings or of things in the universe. All phenomena are interdependent with all other phenomena. Multiple elements enter into the existence of everything, and everything happens in interaction with the rest of the world.

If we look at a plant, we only see the plant. But for the plant to live, we must also see the earth, the rain water, further up the clouds, and the ocean from which the water has evaporated, the wind that pushed the clouds, and we can't forget the sun that gave its energy... This image shows us that nothing exists independently! Even Buddha, between the state of awakening and the Way...

"Emptiness" is the link between phenomena, a "zero space" between phenomena, which gives an impression of concrete existence, but masks the space which composes their interdependence. When an "ignorant" sees something, he considers it really exists, but the awakened one is not mistaken.

Nagarjuna in its "Fundamental Treatise of the Middle Way" tells us:

*"We call emptiness
What appears to be dependent.
This is a dependent designation.
It is the Middle Way.*

*Since there is no phenomenon
That is not of dependent production,
There is no phenomenon
That is not empty".*

4) Only nirvana is beyond the extremes.

"Everything is impermanent, everything is doomed to disappear, we are condemned to suffer and our existence is a mirage." This Fourth Seal is not there to lead us to depression. It reminds us as well that there is something "positive" in all this Buddhist "negativity". Nirvana is beyond time. So, instead of placing our hopes and dreams in things that belong to the deceptive and illusory world we cling to, perhaps would it be wiser to practice the Way and the Dharma, in order to realize this "haven of peace" that is Nirvana.

N.B. Nirvana is not a place but a state!

In many philosophies and religions, the ultimate goal is something one can hold on to. Nirvana has not been invented, (apart from the word) to give us something we could cling to. It is - in a way - the "zero space", the "middle point" between phenomena. Nirvana is the moment when all mental constructions are dispelled. The only ideal of Buddhism is to try to make us see the truth.

Life may seem long, but – in time - it just lasts as long as a blink of an eye. All the chimeras about a lasting (but illusory) happiness divert us from the practice of Nirvana. The quest is long, it will take us a lifetime and maybe more. So, let us not waste our time and let us engage ourselves in Dharma and the practice of the Way!