

4

THE TRUTH OF CESSATION

Cessation, Liberation, and Enlightenment

THE THREE PHASES

“Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering: it is the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishing of it, freedom from it, nonreliance on it...

“‘This noble truth of the cessation of suffering is to be realized’: thus, bhikkhus, in regard to things unheard before, there arose in me vision, knowledge, wisdom, true knowledge, and light.

“‘This noble truth of the cessation of suffering has been realized’: thus, bhikkhus, in regard to things unheard before, there arose in me vision, knowledge, wisdom, true knowledge, and light.”

AS WITH THE FIRST TWO noble truths, the third noble truth has three phases. The first phase describes the nature of the truth of cessation, the second phase explains what should be done by the practitioner with regard to the truth of cessation, and the third phase explains the ultimate result or complete attainment when the practitioner has managed to realize that cessation.

In the first phase, when the Buddha explains the nature of the truth of the cessation of suffering, he says it is “the remainderless fading away and cessation of the same craving.” This cessation is the complete cessation, so that nothing remains, of the previous two noble truths—suffering and its origin. This is what is meant by the “same” craving—craving that is one of the main causes of suffering. This is not just any cessation; it is the cessation in our everyday lives, in our everyday minds, of all our fears, and all those deluded minds we have already discussed. When the presence of these mental states within our mindstreams is eradicated, that is the cessation of suffering and its origin.

In the second phase, the noble truth of the cessation of suffering is to be “realized,” which means actually achieving the utter end of suffering and its origin within the mindstream. Once the practitioner realizes the cessation of suffering and its origin, this cessation never deteriorates. Sufferings that were previously experienced will not be re-experienced. Realized once, this cessation is the final realization, attainment, and result. This is the third phase.

WHAT IS THE CESSATION OF SUFFERING?

While exploring the third noble truth, the truth of cessation, a lot of the ideas might seem very intellectual, so it is always good to remind ourselves that the purpose of study is only to enhance our understanding of how things actually function in our daily lives, and thereby develop ourselves so that we become more gentle, caring, and sincere. Intellectualizing alone is dry and worthless. Only by enhancing the positive qualities of the good heart and understanding the nature of reality can we reduce the emotions that bring problems and difficulties, and slowly subdue the mind.

Cessation, as the name implies, is related to stopping—it is the complete end of all our suffering through relinquishing it, as the sutra says, until it fades into nothing and no suffering remains. We will know freedom only after we abandon our reliance on this samsara that we see as happiness but which in fact is nothing but suffering.

The annihilation of the craving that keeps us clinging to cyclic existence is, at its very deepest level, the annihilation of our misconceptions about reality. This is only implicit within the sutra. We are bound to cyclic existence by the ignorance that actively fails to understand the nature of reality and that everything is interdependent and lacks any sense of intrinsic, independent reality.

In trying to understand such a subtle concept as well as to express it, different traditions have used different terms and approached it from different angles. Whereas Walpola Rahula uses terms such as absolute truth or ultimate reality, Mahayana scholars such as His Holiness the Dalai Lama quite often use emptiness or ultimate truth. Although referring to the same thing, each term gives a slightly different flavor, and so it is very useful to analyze them and see the subtle variations in the approach used by different scholars.

Rahula, approaching this from the perspective of Theravada, says that the cessation of suffering is the emancipation from suffering, from the continuity of dukkha, and is *nibbana* (Skt: *nirvana*).²⁰ This, he says, is the real nature of absolute truth or ultimate reality—it is not some physical state we enter when we are finally liberated from our delusions.

When His Holiness the Dalai Lama talks of cessation he is even more explicit:

As Nagarjuna says, a true understanding of liberation should be based on an understanding of emptiness, because liberation is nothing other than the total elimination, or total cessation, of delusion and suffering through insight into emptiness. The concept of liberation is therefore very closely related to that of emptiness, and just as emptiness can be inferred, so can moksha [liberation].²¹

Not only are emptiness and liberation almost identical, but according to His Holiness they can both be understood through reason, making our intellectual understanding an invaluable tool to gain access to the states of mind that will ultimately liberate us.

SYMBOLIC, RESIDUAL, AND NONRESIDUAL CESSATION

Liberation, cessation, and nirvana are synonyms, although there are many different types of cessation. Although some traditional texts cite twenty different types, the most important division is that division between the cessation of the obscurations to liberation and the cessation of the obscurations to enlightenment, which will be discussed later. These two categories of cessation both have different levels, usually divided into three:

- symbolic cessation
- residual cessation
- nonresidual cessation

Symbolic cessation

Symbolic cessation is sometimes called *temporary cessation* because its experience can be reversed. Symbolic cessation simply refers to the temporary stopping of a negative mind—such as when we actively work on our anger until we manage to overcome it. The anger has stopped, but if we then discontinue whatever technique we were using to deal with it, when the right circumstances arise, the anger will probably arise again. Thus, this state is a cessation in that something has ceased, but it is symbolic or temporary because the root cause has not been destroyed and the afflictive emotion can occur again. It is not a complete cessation of that deluded mind.

Traditionally it is said that through single-pointed meditation, we can temporarily experience complete calm, withdrawing all of our sense consciousnesses from sensory objects so that we experience no distraction from external phenomena. This is symbolic or temporary cessation. The mind has withdrawn from the external object but has not really dealt with the root of the problem. There is some kind of cessation, and as long as we are in that state we feel serene, but that state is not everlasting cessation. As soon as our minds begin

to relate with external objects again, we lose that serenity.

Certain practitioners can keep that state of mind right up until death, completely withdrawing their sense consciousnesses from external objects and experiencing total internal peace. However, when they begin a new life, all their new sensory consciousnesses will start seeking external objects. So again, this is a symbolic or temporary cessation because it is not permanent.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama says that we should not accept that liberation is possible simply because it is stated in the scriptures, and I think that this is where contemplating symbolic cessation can be very helpful. If we look at the ways we can reduce or even stop our anger, even for a short time, we will see that we can definitely experience some degree of cessation. On this basis, through reason, we can infer that complete cessation is also possible.

The texts state that there are four steps to achieving complete cessation: seeing that delusions and suffering are impermanent, seeing that there are methods to deal with them, seeing that these methods are available to us, and seeing that we ourselves can apply these methods.

Our goal, which is to eliminate all delusions and suffering from our mindstreams, would be impossible to achieve if these things were permanent and unchanging. Therefore the first step in freeing ourselves is to really understand that delusions and suffering are in fact impermanent, and hence changeable. Because this is so, it is possible to reduce them and eventually eliminate them completely.

If it is theoretically possible to deal with our afflictive emotions, the second step then is to investigate whether there are any actual methods, traditionally called *antidotes*, that could be used to accomplish this. Having established them, we should try to discover if these methods are available to us, and then move on to seeing that we ourselves can actually use them.

These four steps are very skillful, in that they lead us from an intellectual understanding of the possibility of liberation or enlightenment to a conviction that this is something we can actually pursue. This relentlessly rational step-by-step explanation of how to gain freedom sounds very intellectual, but it is in fact a great inspiration to see that we can actually do it.

In order to really appreciate that we are capable of complete cessation, we need to be aware that in general we as humans are much more capable than other beings, mentally and physically. Not only do we have incredible potential because of the physical and mental aggregates that we have gained in this human existence, but we also have the capacity to transcend our suffering. We can recognize that delusions such as craving and confusion are not in any way inseparable from our minds. Whether this is a realizable fact or merely religious dogma is something we really need to investigate, as it is crucial to understanding the route out of suffering.

We are dealing here with a process. Complete cessation is the end product of working through many temporary cessations, and while it is important to always have the end product in mind, it is equally important to be realistic in our expectations. In Mahayana Buddhism in particular we recite the phrase “all sentient beings” many times a day. Everything we do is for (or should be for) the benefit of all sentient beings. Because of who we are and the society we live in, we then feel guilty because we are not focused on all sentient beings and not doing enough for their complete enlightenment.

I find that frustration understandable but based on unrealistic expectations; it is too ambitious, and it may not even be what the Buddha meant by benefiting all sentient beings. If we manage to benefit even one sentient being with a pure heart, I think that is enough. Of course two or three is better, but we need to let go of the unrealistic expectation of being able to save every single being this instant. That is a wonderful aspiration, but as an immediate goal it is naively idealistic.

In reality cessation is a slow process. We need to work on diminishing our delusions, working on the strongest first, and slowly moving toward temporarily

stopping them and then eliminating them completely. Whether anger, jealousy, attachment, or pride—whatever our strongest delusions are—we need to wholeheartedly put effort into eliminating them and then progress to the subtler delusions.

This is where real practice begins. Although we are talking about the complete cessation of all delusions, as I have mentioned, the starting point is to concentrate on our strongest delusion, such as anger, and apply the four steps. Through using the different methods and approaches, we will hopefully find that our anger has diminished, without in any way diminishing our minds. This is the sign that mind and anger can be separated, because if anger and mind were inseparable, when anger diminished and stopped, so, too, would mind.

We can experience a wonderful freeing and lightening of the mind by observing this process and actually realizing that it applies not just to one negative emotion in a partial, temporary way, but to all negative emotions in a total, permanent way. It is just a matter of time and practice. In this way I find the understanding of symbolic cessation to be crucial in understanding real cessation.

Residual cessation

Both the Theravada and Mahayana traditions agree that a human being with a physical body can achieve complete cessation. Through systematic reduction of our delusions we can finally completely eliminate them, but if we manage to do it in this lifetime we are still left with this physical body that has been produced by our previous lives' delusions and karma. The mind is cleansed of all delusions, but the body is still subject to the sufferings inherent in its nature.

This cessation is called *residual cessation*. It means that the cessation happens within the container of the body, which is still the result of delusions and karma, and that therefore, although mental cessation has been achieved, a residue of

karma will not disappear until the body ceases.

Nonresidual cessation

Once the person dies, however, and the body with its “residual” delusions and karma ceases, this cessation becomes pure cessation in that nothing of delusions or karma remains in any way in that person’s continuum. That is called *nonresidual cessation*.

While the person is alive in that particular body, the residue must remain, because the body was caused by delusions and karma and hence is bound to old age, sickness, and death. Even the Buddha was subject to those things. The demarcation is when that person dies and the body ceases—at that point the cessation becomes nonresidual.

The Theravada and Mahayana traditions actually have very different theories on this point. In the Theravada tradition, when a person achieves nonresidual cessation or liberation, everything ceases—not only their physical body and the other aggregates, but also the subtle mental continuation of the person. The Mahayana tradition sees this differently, asserting that once a person achieves individual liberation as an arhat, their mental continuum does not stop after death. According to them, it is the continuation of samsara and delusion that is stopped, not the individual. Wherever that being takes rebirth, he or she may remain for a very long duration, even eons, in a meditative state, rather than in an active role benefiting other sentient beings—but the mind nonetheless continues.

LIBERATION AND ENLIGHTENMENT

For the Theravada practitioner, the primary aspiration is to be free from this conditioned existence, to achieve liberation. Hence this path is called the *individual liberation vehicle*. For the Mahayana practitioner, the goal is to free all others, and in order to do this the practitioner must attain enlightenment for him or herself. Just as there are two different goals, there are two different initial aspirations and two different methods to achieve these goals. This is the core of the differences between the two traditions.

A thorough understanding of the way the twelve links bind us to this endless cycle of suffering could be quite depressing, but it provides an incentive to sincerely look for a way out. Hence, for the Theravada practitioner, the driving force behind such a practice is the sincere wish to be free. A practice becomes a Mahayana practice when that wish is taken a bit further. The Mahayana practitioner sees how the twelve links imprison him or her, and then sees further that this is true for all beings. Just as the thought of the practitioner's own endless suffering is unbearable, so too is the thought that all beings are enduring the same endless suffering. Therefore the aspiration is not to free oneself alone, but to work toward all beings becoming free. With that kind of aspiration the practitioner begins to practice.

Mahayana texts state that all beings will eventually go on to attain enlightenment, and therefore even practitioners of the individual liberation vehicle will sooner or later go beyond liberation to eliminate the obscurations to knowledge and become fully enlightened beings. This is, of course, strongly debated, and I cannot myself say whether this is true—but to me it makes sense.

In the Mahayana tradition, the difference between liberation and enlightenment is very clear-cut, but the Theravada texts tend to disagree, positing either that a practitioner who has achieved liberation will not necessarily go on to achieve enlightenment, or that liberation and enlightenment are the same thing. According to Mahayana texts, even after liberation the

continuum of an individual liberation practitioner will continue. However, because that mind is in perfect peace, there are no senses or feelings to stimulate it, and in order to pursue enlightenment there must be compassion, which is a feeling. Therefore, this practitioner might remain in that state for eons before something happens to trigger the wish to move on. These arguments are very Mahayana-based, and I have heard them since I was eighteen, so they tend to be things I just accept, although I really don't know if this is actually the case.

Whether or not the end product is the same, at the initial stage of practice there is definitely a difference. This leads me to believe that because of having initially different motivations, which subsequently trigger different actions, the result must also be different in some way. Just looking at what we beginners do on a daily basis shows this clearly. If we are following a Mahayana practice, the emphasis is very much on doing things for all sentient beings. If we follow a Theravada tradition, there is no such emphasis. That is not to say that a Mahayana practitioner has compassion whereas a Theravada practitioner does not—it's just that one practitioner works toward enlightenment in order to free others whereas the other's emphasis is on individual liberation.

However, on both paths we need to interact with others. To progress toward liberation, we need to practice patience, which is impossible without others. We need to address our own anger, which arises only from working with others, and of course to develop love we must be in contact with beings in relation to whom we can express it. So the difference in the paths is not that one nurtures the welfare of others and the other neglects it, but that the emphasis of the motivation of each is different. It is definitely not the case that Theravada practitioners are selfish and Mahayana practitioners are selfless.

None of us has yet lost our sense of self, so in a way we are all selfish, but the selfish mind can be positive or negative. The negative selfish mind wants things purely for its own satisfaction and neglects others' rights and happiness, whereas the positive selfish mind uses that strong sense of self-concern to help others. Without self-worth, I do not think we can do anything for others, so it is not necessary to destroy ourselves to achieve liberation. However, the negative selfish mind *must* be destroyed.

Cessation and Enlightenment

CESSATION ACCORDING TO THERAVADA

Both the Theravada and Mahayana traditions completely accept that within this body, which is the result of delusions and karma, we can completely realize nirvana. In the Theravada tradition, however, ultimate reality or absolute truth seem to mean that the individual person is completely free from delusions and karma and, once the current rebirth ends, will never take another. This is ultimate reality in the sense that the person will never return to this circle of rebirth, aging, and death, and it is absolute truth because nirvana has been achieved. Nirvana is seen as an ultimate, an end, and as such is inexpressible. Walpola Rahula says:

People often ask: What is there after Nirvana? This question cannot arise because Nirvana is the Ultimate Truth. If it is Ultimate, there can be nothing after it. If there is anything after Nirvana then that will be the Ultimate Truth and not Nirvana. A monk named Radha put this question to Buddha in a different form: “For what purpose (or end) is Nirvana?” This question presupposes something after Nirvana when it postulates some purpose or end for it. So the Buddha answered: “O Radha, this question could not catch its limit” (i.e., it is beside the point). One lives the holy life with Nirvana as its final plunge (into the Absolute Truth), as its goal, as its ultimate end.²²

Rahula suggests that nirvana is no longer existence as we know it—it is not a realm that a buddha enters, and says that the phrase “entered into nirvana” does not exist in the sutras. The only closely related Pali phrase is *parinibutto* (Skt: *parinirvana*), which denotes that the buddha or arhat has no further existence after death. So in the Theravada tradition, the individual person who realizes nirvana or ultimate reality is free from delusions and karma and will not take further rebirths.

When Mahayana texts use terms such as *nirvana* or *cessation*, they are referring to emptiness (and here I am talking about the view of the highest philosophical school, the Prasangika Madhyamaka). For them, cessation is ultimate truth. They do not accept ultimate truth in the Theravada sense of freedom from rebirth, but rather as the direct realization of the absence of inherent existence of all phenomena.

THE TWO OBSCURATIONS

| | <i>individual liberation vehicle</i> | <i>universal liberation vehicle</i> |
|----------------|--------------------------------------|---|
| to be overcome | obscurations of defilements | obscurations of defilements and obscurations of knowledge |
| goal | liberation | enlightenment |

Through spiritual development, suffering slowly diminishes and the various cessations begin to emerge. There are two main types of cessation, which have either liberation or enlightenment as their ultimate goal. To achieve them we need to overcome two types of obscurations:

- obscurations of defilements
- obscurations of knowledge

To achieve liberation, practitioners need to overcome all the obstacles that block them from realizing selflessness and from eliminating all negative states of mind. These obstacles are called the *obscurations of defilements*. Once liberation is achieved, subtle stains remain on the consciousness—a residue of wrong views. To continue on the path and achieve enlightenment, the *obscurations to knowledge* must also be overcome. In this way, liberation and enlightenment are different—in terms of the methods that are used to achieve them and in terms of the specific obscurations that block the goal. Enlightenment requires that extra step.

Although these seem to be two different obstructions to two different goals, this does not mean that a person on the path to enlightenment has only to contend with the second set of obscurations. Practitioners on this path must eliminate both. The obscurations of defilements are related to our emotional tendencies, and so when we work on lessening our anger, attachment, jealousy, and so forth, we are working with our obscurations of defilements. The obscurations of knowledge are the very subtle obscurations, such as the

propensities for misconceptions of reality. To a certain degree these still remain in the minds of those who have achieved liberation through following the first path.

If that is so, then what is liberation? In this sense liberation means liberation from samsara, from taking rebirth due to delusions and karma. Having achieved that state, although a person might then be free from the obscurations of defilements and therefore no longer a samsaric being, according to Mahayana that person is not a buddha. Nor is he or she a god or a being of the formless realm, because those realms are still in samsara. One who has attained freedom from the obscurations of defilements is called an *arhat*. To be a buddha, the individual must be completely free from the obscurations of knowledge.

Again, each of these two obscurations has two levels—those acquired through learning and innate obscurations. The Mahayana literature in particular presents many methods for dealing with these two levels of obscurations.

THE TWO CESSATIONS

Of the Indian philosophical schools considered important by Tibetan Buddhism—Vaibhashika, Sautrantika, Chittamatra, and Madhyamaka—all four accept two different types of cessation that arise when the two types of obscurations are ceased: liberation from samsara and full enlightenment.

It may seem quite academic, but understanding the differences among the schools can actually be quite illuminating. The first two schools, on the one hand, believe that certain beings will never progress past the first cessation, and hence will never achieve enlightenment. The two higher schools, on the other hand, also accept two cessations, but assert that all living beings will eventually attain the second cessation, full enlightenment.

It is possible for the first cessation, liberation from samsara, to be obtained while the practitioner still possesses the contaminated body aggregate. This is called *nirvana with remainder*, a synonym for residual cessation, which we discussed above. According to the lower schools, while the practitioner is in such a state, he or she makes a decision to either continue on the path or to remain in that place, accepting it as the final goal. If a practitioner makes the latter decision, upon passing away, his or her continuum ceases to exist, completely and forever.

In the sutras, an arhat, after death, is often compared to the image of a fire gone out after the supply of wood has been used up, or the flame of the lamp that is extinguished when the wick and oil run out. This kind of analogy indicates that everything is gone, that nothing exists after that state. Quoting such passages, the two lower schools maintain that certain beings by their own choice will not attain full enlightenment. For these schools, when parinirvana is achieved, not only does the form aggregate cease, but the mental aggregates do as well. Therefore, for these schools everything ceases, and there is no discussion of the continuation of consciousness. To me this seems to indicate that the delusions are completely integrated with the mind. As long as mind is

there, delusions are there, and conversely when delusions cease the mind also ceases. Mahayana Buddhists believe that obscurations are not one with the mind, they are not completely integrated with the mind. They are temporary, or, to be more precise, adventitious. The basic nature of the mind is pure.

When the two higher schools talk about true cessation, therefore, they are not referring to the end of the practitioner's continuum but to the end of his or her karma and delusions. What continue are the truth body (Skt: *dharmakaya*), which is the enlightened aspect of the mental aggregates, and the form body (Skt: *rupakaya*), which is the enlightened aspect of the form aggregate.

A BUDDHA'S TWO BODIES

According to the Mahayana tradition, after achieving complete cessation, a practitioner not only realizes nirvana, but after death his or her now-purified form becomes the form body and his or her now-purified mental aggregates become the truth body.

The delusions cease but the mental continuum carries on, now completely purified and one with the compassion and wisdom that the practitioner has been developing since the start of the spiritual path. The mind that realizes emptiness directly and is full of compassion—in other words the mind of bodhichitta—is the base that becomes the truth body of a buddha.

The truth body has two different aspects: the mind realizing emptiness and the actual emptiness of that mind, so you often see literature that classifies the *dharmakaya* into two types: the wisdom truth body (Skt: *jnanakaya*), which is the mind of a buddha, and the natural truth body (Skt: *svabhavakaya*), which is the emptiness of the mind of a buddha.

In the same way, the form aggregate becomes the form body of a buddha. The gross physical body does not transmute into a buddha's gross physical body, as in some strange alchemical process. Rather the practitioner's gross physical aggregates dissolve, and the very subtle physical body becomes the base for the form body of the buddha he or she will become.

The form body is rarely talked about in Theravada. I see the concept of the form body as one of the big differences between the two traditions. *Rupakaya* does not necessarily mean material form. It really refers to how a buddha's omniscient mind of wisdom and compassion manifests in different forms. Since the only reason a buddha manifests is to aid other beings, and since there are different levels of beings with different levels of understanding, so there are different levels of that manifestation. These are commonly classified into two

kinds: the enjoyment body (Skt: *sambhogakaya*) and the emanation body (Skt: *nirmanakaya*).

Some beings can see higher forms of a buddha's body, such as the complete enjoyment body. They can communicate with and receive teachings from the buddha in that form. Those who are realized enough to receive such teachings are arya beings and are already on the path of seeing. We will examine the five paths later. You often see Tibetan *tangka* paintings of buddhas in the *sambhogakaya* aspect, with beautiful robes and fine jewelry, as opposed to Shakyamuni Buddha's normal representation as a monk in simple monk's robes, which is his *nirmanakaya* aspect. From a Mahayana point of view, the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, was a supreme emanation or *nirmanakaya*, because ordinary sentient beings were able to see him and receive teachings from him.

Buddhas can continuously and simultaneously emanate in many different forms and in many different places. When they began the path to enlightenment, their main aim was to benefit others, so of course when they achieve the result they must do that, otherwise they would be cheating! Therefore, the Mahayana tradition posits that when an individual achieves enlightenment, the two bodies—the truth and form bodies—manifest simultaneously. The truth body is the state of being free from obscurations; the form body is the form in which that being is perceived by others.

This is precisely why the Mahayana tradition emphasizes practicing both method and wisdom together—the method side produces the form body and the wisdom side produces the truth body. Bodhichitta, generosity, morality, and patience are all part of the method aspect of the path, which leads to the development of the form body of a buddha. Trying to achieve the wisdom that realizes emptiness and impermanence is the wisdom aspect, which leads to the development of the truth body.

If the form body of a buddha is a being, it is therefore impermanent, and so it might be argued that it is by nature suffering. Here again is a difference between the Theravada and Mahayana, this time in the interpretations of the four seals, Buddhism's fundamental tenets. The four seals are:

1. All compositional phenomena are impermanent.
2. All contaminated phenomena are, by nature, suffering.
3. All phenomena are empty of self-existence.
4. Nirvana is true peace.

Theravada scholars suggest that if something is impermanent it is contaminated, and therefore it is suffering. But Mahayana scholars, quoting the four seals, posit that while contaminated things are suffering, not all impermanent things are contaminated. They make a distinction. Things and events produced by afflictive emotions and karma are suffering because they are contaminated, but other impermanent things, such as a buddha's form body, are not necessarily suffering.

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN LIBERATION AND EMPTINESS

A famous quotation of Chandrakirti says:

Whether the Buddha comes into this world or not, emptinesses already exist.

It makes no difference whether a buddha comes into this world and teaches us about emptiness; all things and events, including our own existence, are still empty of inherent existence. However, it does take someone like Shakyamuni Buddha to have the wisdom to understand it and explain it to people like us in such a way that we can learn from it and actually come to realize it ourselves.

There is no difference between the fundamental nature of a table and the fundamental nature of my mind. Both are empty of inherent or intrinsic existence. Both require exactly the same process to realize, because both emptinesses are essentially identical. However, although objectively there is absolutely no difference between them, subjectively there is a big difference. My mind has all the adventitious delusions, such as anger, jealousy, fear—all the things caused by selfcenteredness and self-cherishing—whereas a table has none of these. As long as my mind is obscured by all these delusions, it is very difficult to penetrate that fundamental nature, that absence of inherent existence. That makes the difference—but it does not mean that it is impossible.

There is a strong connection between liberation and emptiness. To understand liberation, we have to understand emptiness, otherwise we cannot see where we are caught up. The meaning of liberation is to be free from something. But it will never be more than the most abstract concept until we know what we need to be free from, and it is in the teachings on emptiness that we come to understand exactly what binds us. Fully realizing the nature of reality is the second of the obscurations, not the obscurations of defilements but the obscurations of

knowledge.

The Four Characteristics of True Cessation

Like the other noble truths, the noble truth of the cessation of suffering has four unique characteristics. They are:

- cessation
- pacification
- being superb
- definite emergence

Like the other characteristics, these are specific qualities that belong uniquely to this noble truth and can help us fully understand and, in this case, realize it. The first quality, *cessation*, describes the noble truth itself—it is the ceasing of all delusions and ignorance, not only temporarily but forever. These negativities will never again occur in the mindstream.

The second characteristic is *pacification*. Cessation pacifies the torment of suffering, bringing the result of nirvana or enlightenment, complete and never-ending peace.

Because cessation is the ultimate goal of all spiritual paths, it is considered to be *superb*, the third characteristic, in the sense of being supreme in bringing about the source of all health and happiness. It is the quality of real trustworthiness, never changing or turning into something different or less supreme.

The fourth characteristic of cessation is that it will definitely bring us out of samsara, and so this characteristic is called *definite emergence*. By realizing the truth of the cessation of suffering, we are totally released from samsara and free from all sufferings and delusions.