

The Three Dharma Seals

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Good morning! Welcome to the International Buddha Dharma Society of Cosmic Law to listen to today's Dharma talk! Our July subject is the Three Dharma Seals. The Three Dharma Seals are as follows:

1. Impermanence
2. Non-self
3. Nirvana

The first Dharma Seal is impermanence. It means that all phenomena in the world are in the process of birth, living, changing and extinction. Those which lived past have changed now; those living now will eventually extinct. Everything in the world is flowing and changing in any instant and nothing is long-lived and not changing. All conditioned dharma phenomena are impermanent while the living beings are attached to the thought that everything is real and true. So, they rise all sorts of false thoughts. Some want to live long and never die and some try to adorn their physical body in vain. They don't realize that 'the imperishable' still cannot avoid 'the sudden change'. Impermanence is the Natural Principle of the world and is the real existence. Understanding that changing and impermanence is the characteristic of life, one would live peacefully under all conditions and see the ultimate meaning of life in great compassion and great wisdom. To live happily, one would need to start from understanding the truth; to understand the truth, one would need to start from the mind; the mind needs to contemplate on all phenomena. To understand all phenomena, one would need to observe the impermanence. If one can observe the impermanence, the great compassion will arise and also one will not be worried about gain

and loss. If one loses something, one will not feel painful because you know that this is impermanent.

The second Dharma seal is non-self, which means that in all phenomena, there is no existence of self. The existence of self that in the living beings' mind is just physiological and psychological illusions. It means that all phenomena in the world, regardless of the conditioned and the unconditioned, are compounded and out of illusion. Nothing is constant invariant; nothing exists by itself and nothing is dominant.

The Buddha once exhorted, "One should observe 'non-self and non-mine'"

The physical body is the compounded illusive body of the Four Elements. All mine are for me to use, and actually not mine. If there was really an 'I', then why cannot 'I' control my mood, my birth and death? So you know 'I' cannot control mine. If there was an 'I', there would be an opposite of 'I', while self-attachment is a universal feature of all living beings. Only when one puts down self-attachment, can one find the true-self. Only when one knows that there isn't an 'I', can one live peacefully with the world.

Nirvanic Tranquility refers to the realm of Nirvana where the pain of birth and death has been extinguished and only unconditioned happiness exists. So Nirvana is quiet. It refers to a liberated state of no birth and death where both the body and the mind become still. Without Nirvana, the Buddhism is no difference from the worldly dharma and can only be said to persuade people to do good deeds while not be able to understand the causes are originally empty and the effects are originally empty. For those who don't have proper belief yet might think that Nirvana is death which is completely wrong. If Nirvana is death, then it would be the beginning of another life because birth and death are the cycling of life which is determined by the karma and cannot be controlled by the living beings.

The three Dharma Seals are the norm used to differentiate true Buddha Dharma and False Buddha Dharma: If the Dharma is against the Three Dharma Seals, even if it was said by the Buddha, it would not be Dharma of liberation; if the Dharma is not said by the Buddha, but in accordance with the Three Dharma Seals, then it could be taken as what the Buddha said.

In all the recorded sutras said by the Buddha, not many include the Three Dharma Seals except the following two sutras. Now we shall read these two sutras and learn from the Buddha.

The Buddha's Discourse on the Dharma Seal

I heard these words of the Buddha one time when the Buddha was residing in Śrāvastī with his community of bhikshus. One day, he told the community, “Do you know of the wonderful Dharma Seal? Today I would like to tell you about it and explain it to you. Please use your pure mind to listen and receive it with care, and make the best effort to remember and practice it.” The community of bhikshus replied, “Wonderful, World-Honored One! Please teach us. We will listen carefully.”

The Buddha said, “Emptiness is neither being nor non-being. It is free from all wrong views. It is neither produced nor destroyed, and it cannot be grasped by views. Why is this so? Because emptiness cannot be located in space. It has no form. It is not an object of perception. It has never been born, and the intellect cannot grasp it. Because it cannot be grasped, it embraces all dharmas and dwells only in non-discursive, nondiscriminative wisdom. This is the only true and right understanding, bhikshus! You should know that not only emptiness, but all dharmas are like that. This is the Dharma Seal.

“The Dharma Seal is also called the Three Doors of Liberation. It is the basic teaching of all Buddhas, the eye of all Buddhas, the destination of all Buddhas. Listen and receive it with care. Memorize it well and practice it right in the heart of reality.

“Bhikshus, find a quiet place to meditate, such as in a forest under a tree. There you can see that form is painful, empty, and impermanent, and as a result, you will not be attached to form. You will reach the nondiscriminative understanding of form. Then do the same for feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousnesses. See that they are painful, empty, and impermanent, and rise above wrong views about them. Realize the nondiscriminative understanding of feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness.

Bhikshus, the Five Aggregates are empty. They are produced from the mind. Once the mind stops operating in its usual way, the aggregates stop operating as well. When you see this, you will be liberated, free from all views. This is emptiness, the First Door of Liberation.

“Bhikshus, dwelling in concentration, see the dissolution of form, and be free from the illusory nature of perception vis-à-vis form. See the dissolution of sound, smell, taste, touch, and mental formations, and be free from the illusory nature of perceptions vis-à-vis sound, smell, taste, touch, and mental formations.

This meditation is called signlessness, the Second Door of Liberation. Once you have entered this door, your knowledge will be pure. Because of this purity of understanding, the three defiling qualities of mind — greed, hatred, and delusion — will be uprooted. With these uprooted, you will dwell in the realm of nondiscursive, nondiscriminative knowledge. When you are dwelling in this knowledge, views concerning ‘me and mine,’ and thus all views, no longer have the bases and the occasions to arise.

“Bhikshus, once you are free from the view ‘I am,’ you no longer consider what you see, hear, feel, and perceive as realities independent of your own consciousness. Why? Because you know that consciousness also arises from conditions and is impermanent. Because of its impermanent nature, it cannot be grasped either. This meditation is called wishlessness, the Third Door of Liberation. Once you enter this door, you experience fully the true nature of all dharmas, and you no longer cling to any dharma because you have seen the unconditioned nature of all dharmas.”

The Buddha told the community of bhikshus, “This is the wonderful Seal of the Dharma, the Three Doors of Liberation. If you learn and practice it, you will certainly attain pure knowledge.”

The monks were very happy to hear the teaching of the World-Honored One. They paid respect to him and promised to learn and practice this wonderful teaching.

The Dharma-Seal Sutra Spoken by the Buddha for Ocean Dragon King

Thus have I heard, At one time the Bhagavan was in Ocean Dragon King's palace, along with one thousand two hundred and fifty great monks, and many Bodhisattva-Mahasattvas.

At that time, Sagara the dragon king arose from his seat, went ahead, bowed to the feet of the Buddha, and said, "World-Honored One, is it possible to accept and uphold a few Dharmas but gain a lot of blessings?"

The Buddha told Ocean Dragon King: "There are four especially exalted Dharmas, if one can accept, uphold, read, and recite them, and can understand their meanings, although he spends little effort, he will gain lots of blessings. The merits and virtues that he gains will be the same as reading and reciting eighty-four thousand Dharma-Stores."

"What are these four? They are:

All movements are impermanent.

All beings suffer.

Everything has no ego.

The tranquil extinction is the Bliss."

"Dragon king, these are the four especially exalted Dharmas, which can grant the exhaustless Dharma-wisdom to the Bodhisattvas, make them achieve the uncreated stage earlier, and reach the Perfect Tranquility quickly. Therefore, you all should often recite and be mindful of them."

When the World-Honored One spoke this Dharma-Seal Sutra of the four sentences, those Voice-Hearers, great Bodhisattvas, and the eight kinds of super-mundane beings, including the gods, dragons, Asuras, Gandharvas, and so forth, having heard the Buddha's words, were greatly delighted. They accepted the teachings with faith, and began upholding and practicing them.

All phenomena are impermanent and non-ego. Seize the present moment and return to the pure self-nature. Now, I would like to share a story with you.

One day after the Buddha turned the Dharma wheel in Sarnath, he left Sarnath and went to Rajagriha by himself to meet the King. On the road, he met some big fellows. When they saw the Buddha they asked, "Have you seen a woman walking by here?"

The Buddha said, "No, I haven't. What happened?"

One man said, "She is a prostitute. Last night, she offered us wine and we all fainted. This morning, we found out that our money were gone."

The Buddha said, "She took away your burden. Are you complaining instead?"

One man asked, "Are you playing us? What we care is our treasure, not her."

The Buddha said, "Those lost cannot be recovered."

One man said, "You probably have never seen that much money in your life."

Another man said, "To tell you the truth, I was really entranced by her. We were all fascinated by her beauty. Otherwise this would not happen."

The Buddha said, "She is still robbing you. Before she robbed your money and now she is robbing your present. You answer me one question: right at this moment, is she worrying about you just like you are worrying about her?"

One man said, "Why would she worry about us?"

The Buddha asked, "Then why would you worry about her? She robbed you, then you go to catch her and punish her. But in the future, your past would keep up with you. You carried the burden of the past and tried to change the unpredictable future, then you are losing the present moment."

One man said, "You are right. What will it be like if we live in the present moment?"

The Buddha said, "Then you will find yourself and understand what make you painful."

One man asked, "Can you find yourself? And what can we do if we find ourselves."

At this time, the Buddha took a flute from one of them and started to play. Many birds flew over, chirping on the ground. The Buddha said, "I have not played the flute for many years and it's even better than before. It's because I have known myself. If you want to play a moving tune, you don't focus on the flute, but on yourself."

All movements are impermanent and everything exists due to causes and conditions and is changing all the time. Nothing is invariant and unmoving. Focus on the present moment and focus on yourself. Know yourself. Find yourself. Amitabha! See you next week!