

The Four Seals

The book for Module VII is *What Makes You Not a Buddhist* by Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse. This is a very simple and profound book. Khyentse Rinpoche is a great teacher who always thinks outside the box, as well as a motion picture writer and director.

In the introduction of the book, he lists what are known as the Four Seals:

- All compounded things are impermanent.
- All emotions are pain.
- All things have no inherent existence.
- Nirvana is beyond concepts.

Khyentse Rinpoche writes that if you cannot accept these, then you are not a Buddhist. It is that simple. Everything we teach is for the purpose of bringing these four into our direct experience. This is what we explore in depth in the book and in the class.

Indisputable Truth by Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche is another book on the Four Seals. Chökyi Nyima is an excellent teacher but more traditional. His translation of the Four Seals is:

- Everything conditioned is impermanent.
- Everything defiling is painful.
- All phenomena are empty and devoid of self.
- Nirvana is peace.

In Module II, April and May 2014, we discussed the Four Immeasurables, which is a Mahayana contemplative Practice for arousing bodhichitta. It is definitely a practice, and often precedes the practice of Tonglen. The Four Immeasurables are:

- May all sentient beings enjoy happiness and the root of happiness.
- May they be free from suffering and the root of suffering.
- May they not be separated from the great happiness devoid of suffering.
- May they dwell in the great equanimity free from passion, aggression, and prejudice.

Questions for Module VII

These questions are for the whole module and not just for the first talk. They will be posted on the website, and more questions may be added. Although numbered for convenience, the questions are in no particular order, so you are free to make use of whichever ones are useful in any order. Most of the questions pose two alternative views, and the best way to use them is not to accept either view, but to go beyond the question, using it as a way to gain insight into one or more of the four seals.

1. Do the four seals present a gloomy or stoical view of reality as a fundamental disappointment? Or are they good news when understood properly because they lead to enlightenment?
2. What is renunciation? Does it have a value? What is being renounced? Is it necessary to become monastic, leave one's family, give away wealth, abstain from sex and eat only pure food in order to be a Buddhist?
3. Is there a value to practice? Will spending a lot of time in practice – spending long hours in meditation or mantra recitation – lead to nirvana or enlightenment? Should one abandon meditation as not being of the essence and not needed?
4. Why do we teach the practice of tonglen? Is tonglen a painful exercise to force us to become more compassionate? Will it make us sick? Is it capable of leading one to joy and ultimate compassion?
5. Is there value to performing rituals? Does performing rituals mark one as a genuine Buddhist? Are rituals merely “empty rituals,” cultural relics that one should abandon?
6. Why should we practice seeing the self as without inherent existence or empty? Is this a nihilistic view? Might it make one passive, dysfunctional or even psychotic? On the other hand, is emptiness important to study because it leads to liberation?
7. If we accept emptiness, does our world become less colorful, intense, interesting or beautiful? Does it help us to become more open, available to others, and powerful?
8. Do we habitually live within a wall of fear which limits our compassion, warmth, power and availability to others? Is it healthy to touch this wall or even break through it, or is it dangerous and better left undisturbed?