

## **Introduction to the Three Dharma Seals**

The Three Dharma Seals are also called the Three Samadhis or the Three Doors of Liberation. The dharma seal is a standard specially established by the Buddha to verify practitioner's realization of the Buddhadharma. Hence, any "Buddhist" teaching that fails the verification of the Three Dharma Seals is considered incorrect.

What are the Three Dharma Seals? The Three Dharma Seals are: (1) all formations are impermanent, (2) all dharma are selfless, and (3) nirvana is perfect quiescence. They can be classified into two classes: the arising-and-ceasing dharmas and the neither-arising-nor-ceasing dharma. The "all" in "all formations" and "all dharma" of the arising and ceasing class implies that the formations and dharmas are numerous. On the other hand, nirvana, which is not quantified, refers to a specific unique dharma. Nirvana is without origination or cessation; nirvana is also real, quiescent, and everlasting. It belongs to the neither-arising-nor-ceasing dharma.

The class of dharmas that are arising and ceasing can increase or decrease in quantity. Take the First Noble Truth of Suffering in the Four Noble Truths as an example. Based on the observation on the three realms and six paths of rebirth, Sound-hearers will sometimes declare that all experiences are afflicted with suffering and refer to such a statement as the fourth Dharma Seal. Therefore, the number of dharma seals for the class of arising-and-ceasing dharmas can change. The number can increase to limitless or decrease to zero. Hence, in summary, the arising-and-ceasing dharma seals can increase or decrease in numbers just like the arising-and-ceasing dharmas.

The Dharma Seal of Nirvana, on the other hand, is the only dharma seal in the neither-arising-nor-ceasing and everlasting class; its quantity cannot be increased or decreased. The Buddha established the Three Dharma Seals to capture the characteristics of the life of each and every sentient being. The life of each sentient being consists of two parts, one is of the arising-and-ceasing nature whereas the other is of the neither-arising-nor-ceasing nature. The part that is neither-arising-nor-ceasing

is the eighth consciousness *tathāgatagarbha*, while the arising-and-ceasing dharmas are the ever-changing five aggregates.

Could any one of the Three Dharma Seals encompass the other two? The answer to the question is as follows: it is erroneous to use the impermanence and selflessness in the seals of “all formations are impermanent” and “all dharmas are selfless” to encompass all Three Dharma Seals. “All formations are impermanent” can encompass “all dharmas are selfless” because both belong to the arising-and-ceasing dharmas. However, the seal of “all formations are impermanent” cannot encompass the seal of nirvana because the latter is an everlasting neither-arising-nor-ceasing dharma. Nirvana is a state of ultimate, eternal, and permanent liberation and hence cannot be encompassed by the seal of impermanence.

We can use a different perspective to illustrate why it is erroneous to use the selfless dharmas to encompass all Three Dharma Seals. The connotation of “self” implies that the dharma is capable of existing by itself and exerting control over oneself; only then can it be termed a “self”. “All formations are impermanent” and “all dharmas are selfless” by nature do not fulfill the requirement of a “self.” On the other hand, the perfectly quiescent nirvana possesses the firm and indestructible dharma nature of the law of causality, and therefore is the master of everything within the three realms. All sentient beings’ transmigration within the three realms, their liberation from the cycle of birth and death, or achieving Buddhahood must all be circumscribed by the dharma nature of the *tathāgatagarbha*. One can only become liberated or become a Buddha by adhering to the rules of the *tathāgatagarbha*. The *tathāgatagarbha* is the master of the dharma realm. Therefore, using the “selfless” dharmas to encompass the Three Dharma Seals that include the self-existing nirvana or *tathāgatagarbha* is inappropriate or incorrect.

Why are the Three Dharma Seals also called the Three Samadhis (samadhis of emptiness, signlessness, and wishlessness, or sometimes referred to as samadhis of emptiness, signlessness, and noncontrivance)? This has something to do with cultivation and true realization. At the stage of learning and trying to understand the connotation of the terminologies, we call them the Three Dharma Seals. However, when one has realized the Three Dharma Seals, one’s wisdom will be elicited and

the Three Dharma Seals will then be called the Three Samadhis. Thereby one will associate better with the mental factor (concomitant) of concentration and gain a decisive and unwavering understanding of the whole dharma realm. Such understanding and the subsequent wisdom generated from that understanding are unshakable. Since they are unshakable, one attains liberation with firm certitude. In this sense, one is said to have attained samadhi. Therefore, the realization of the Three Dharma Seals leads to the Three Samadhis.

For a Sound-hearer, realization of the Three Dharma Seals is the result of the realization of the fruition of a stream-enterer (*srotaapanna*)—one who has attained the first fruition in the Path of Liberation, and he will gain the fundamental appreciation and understanding of the Three Samadhis. Thereupon, the Three Samadhis is called the Three Doors of Liberation. He will realize that liberation actually starts from emptiness, then progresses to signlessness, and eventually reaches the state of wishlessness. Or he may begin with samadhi of emptiness, and then proceed to samadhi of signlessness, followed by samadhi of noncontrivance, and eventually to the attainment of the complete liberation from the cycle of birth and death.

The Three Samadhis attained by a Sound-hearer are different from those attained by a Bodhisattva. When a Sound-hearer has truly realized that all formations are impermanent and all dharmas lack a lasting self, and subsequently eliminated all the arising-and-ceasing dharmas, he is said, expediently, to have realized nirvana since he will not be born again upon complete elimination of all arising-and-ceasing dharmas. A Bodhisattva, however, has realized not only the arising-and-ceasing dharmas but also the neither-arising-nor-ceasing *tathāgatagarbha* when he has realized the Three Samadhis. Hence, his realization of the Three Dharma Seals is more comprehensive than that of a Sound-hearer.

When the Sound-hearers state that sentient beings are impermanent and empty, they refer to the ceasing-and-arising attribute of the five aggregates. However, it should never be forgotten that when making such statement, they have in mind that there is an everlasting underlying foundation/condition, *tathāgatagarbha*, that coexists simultaneously. Only then can it be consistent with the rationale behind the Three Samadhis. Looking at the Three Dharma Seals as a whole, how can a person exist while all formations are impermanent and all dharmas

are selfless? It is because there exists an everlasting dharma, nirvana—the *tathāgatagarbha*—together with this person. The *tathāgatagarbha* enables all dharmas as well as all formations to arise and cease unceasingly. In order to use only one dharma seal to encompass the Three Dharma Seals, it has to be the seal of nirvana. This is called the one and only seal of the true reality in Mahayana. Therefore, the Three Dharma Seals can also be encompassed in the one and only seal of the true reality in Mahayana.

