

## THE DHARMA SEALS

**P**RACTICE CAN BE DESCRIBED in four steps. The first is, listen to the dharma. How do you listen? You can listen with your ears. You can also listen with your eyes, as you do with a written document. Next, reflect upon the teachings that you have heard. If you think the teachings are true, then the next step is practice. Work with the teachings. There are all kinds of teachings, and even when you practice them, the important points may not be clear to you. So the fourth step is to verify the teachings through your practice. Confirm the teachings—experience the teachings—not in your head but throughout your whole being. This is the experience of realization.

The dharma seals are impermanence, no-self, and peace. Do you understand the plain fact of imperman-

ence? Everything is in constant change. I've already mentioned one of the teachings of the Abhidharma,<sup>1</sup> that in just one second life is changing thousands and thousands of times. In one second! Our conscious awareness simply cannot follow such rapid change. And yet we are living this life. How are we living it? What kind of things do we spend our time thinking about? The past is already gone, yet we cling to it. The future is not yet here, but we dwell on it. Even when we talk about *now*, there is no such thing. Even as we talk, the *now* we are talking about is already gone.

The life in our heads, the life we think is our life, is not our real life. Our real life is the life of everything and everyone. We constantly talk about doing this and doing that, about things already gone or yet to come. We play with our life in our heads, but this is not our real existence. We should not mix them up.

I am not devaluing thoughts. Just do not mix up what we *think* with what actually *is*. Buddha said that everything is constantly changing. Constant change *is* the real life, and is therefore unknowable. Since we also are constantly changing, each of us is also unknowable. And this unknowable, impersonal no-self, not fixed in one way or another by any kind of values or attachments, is working perfectly. That no-self is not attached to anything, so

it can work with everything. Do you understand impermanence, this no fixed thing, which is no-self? When you do not see this no-self, suffering is waiting for you. When you see that nothing is fixed, there is peace.

Impermanence is also an encouragement for our practice. When you enter practice through feeling impermanence, your practice will be stronger and you will not easily regress.

These three dharma seals are not three different things but rather one thing—your life—from three different perspectives. Sometimes a fourth dharma seal of suffering is included. This suffering is an ongoing sense that you are somehow not complete, that your life is somehow not whole. So you can appreciate your life from these perspectives and see how easily they overlap. For example: When you understand impermanence, you understand the nature of suffering and no-self. When you understand no-self, that is the peace of nirvana. The word *nirvana* is translated in different ways, such as “perfect bliss” or “extinction of all desires.” But nirvana and impermanence are like front and back. When you understand imper-

manence, you find peace. When you truly see your life as nirvana, then impermanence is taken care of. So rather than figuring out how to deal with impermanence, consider these dharma seals all together as the dharma to be realized.

Remember the four steps of practice that we described in the beginning: listen to the teachings, reflect on them, practice them, and finally experience them in your life. Examine your practice. Refresh and encourage yourself. Realize your life as peace itself, your life as it is now. We do not need to expect anything; in a sense we do not need to try to do something about being peaceful. The reason is simple: peace is already here as your life. Isn't it fascinating? Realizing constant change and no fixed self, you yourself are peace. Then being peace, how are you living?

1. The *Abhidharma* is a collection of doctrinal commentary on the Buddha dharma and is the earliest compilation of Buddhist philosophy and psychology.