

Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind Toward Dharma (Ngondro or Preliminary Teachings)

Most every system of Dharma includes specific preliminary teachings that serve as a solid foundation for correct perception and correct spiritual practice. This preliminary teaching—Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind Toward Dharma—is the very foundation of the Buddhist path. However, these Four Thoughts can serve as a foundational understanding for everyone, regardless of faith, because they provide a clear description of the way reality works. Without this preliminary understanding, we are subject to common misperceptions of reality which inevitably cause confusion, stress, dissatisfaction, and suffering. To make progress in our practice, to attain liberation from suffering in this very lifetime, and to be able to assist the awakening of other beings, we need to radically shift our fundamental perception of reality. As we contemplate the Four Thoughts, integrating this deep wisdom into our awareness, we transform our mind and heart, thus bringing about this most essential and necessary shift in our perception and in our ways of living. In this way, the Four Thoughts help us to purify ignorance, delusion, and attachment, and will continually strengthen and clarify our Dharma practice. By contemplating the Four Thoughts we overcome the eight mundane concerns (fame/disgrace, pain/pleasure, gain/loss, praise/blame), we find the inspiration to transform our non-virtuous behavior, and we are motivated to embrace those aspects of life which are of true and lasting value. This excellent preliminary teaching brings greater insight, wisdom, loving-kindness, and compassion—the very heart of Dharma.

General Instructions for Meditation on the Four Thoughts

It is suggested that you engage in active contemplation of these Four Thoughts by considering the direct importance, merit, and relevance of this wisdom to your own life and to the lives of others as well. Deeply contemplate and reflect upon these Four Thoughts until your mind is weary of thinking, then allow your mind to relax into the natural, effortless, and spacious awareness of non-conceptual meditation. The insights you gain through this contemplation and reflection will expand into deeper understanding and realization as you rest the mind. As you return to active contemplation, you will find that your mind is refreshed by the time spent in non-conceptual relaxation.

Precious Human Birth

Contemplate the importance and opportunity of having a precious human birth. We are very fortunate indeed to be born as human beings and to encounter the Dharma. This human existence is invaluable, for we are endowed with the freedom and conditions necessary for practicing Dharma and cultivating our spiritual development. We have the opportunity to accomplish something meaningful, rather than spending all of our time and energy pursuing the temporary, passing pleasures of this life. To have this precious opportunity and not use it wisely represents a great loss. We can use this precious human birth to attain enlightenment and bring great benefit and happiness to countless living beings.

Contemplate and reflect deeply upon this precious human birth until the fortunate opportunity provided by this human existence, which should never be taken for granted or squandered, becomes clearly apparent. Our first thought, as we begin to practice, must be appreciation for our human birth. Think about those who have a human body but who are not gifted with conditions conducive to their spiritual development. Contemplate those who attain a human birth but spend all of their time and energy on trivial, worldly pursuits or destroy their opportunity by harming others. Allow this contemplation to inspire within you the compassionate wish that all beings find liberation from spiritually impoverished circumstances. Contemplate, "I have attained this extraordinary and precious human birth. This human birth I will use wisely for my own awakening and for the greatest benefit of all living beings."

Impermanence and Mortality

The contemplation of impermanence and mortality (death) is an essential aspect of Dharma practice. Because of ignorance and misperception, we become attached to permanence and solidity. We habitually deny the fact of our mortality, acting as if we will live forever. This misperception of reality only brings more confusion, stress, dissatisfaction, and suffering. However, when we face the inevitability of our death, then we start to wonder what to do about it and how to deal with the uncertainty of life. In this way, contemplating impermanence and death brings great insight and benefit. We purify our ignorance and delusion and we develop a correct understanding of reality. In addition, our attachment to pleasure, possessions, trivial activities, and other material pursuits subsides. We realize that the temporary pleasures of this life can never provide us with lasting happiness or satisfaction.

Everything in this material world, including our own body, is impermanent. Everything changes constantly. Even our state of mind and our feelings are constantly changing and are therefore impermanent. Assuming the permanence of anything except our essential Buddha nature, awakened awareness, will bring dissatisfaction and suffering. We must contemplate the fact that death is inevitable. At some time death will come to each of us. Death is the inevitable result of birth, the natural display of impermanence. With each passing moment we are closer to our death. We will have to leave our body eventually, and death will come regardless of whether we have made time to practice Dharma. Death is certain. The time of our death is uncertain—we do not know when death will occur. Each day we encounter numerous dangers that could cause death at any moment. At the time of death, our wealth, possessions, and even our most cherished friends will not be able to help us. Money cannot buy us more time nor will it buy us happiness or peace. Our friends can offer their love and support, yet they cannot hold us back from death. Our body, no longer able to support us, will be of no assistance at the time of death. Only the wisdom we have developed by practicing the Dharma will remain with us continually. Nothing but the Dharma, our inner spiritual wealth, can be of benefit to us at the time of death. By understanding impermanence and death we realize the preciousness of life and we can choose to embrace what is truly of value. We will wisely discern how we spend our valuable time and energy and will make a determined effort to practice the Dharma, cultivate virtue, and serve the welfare of all living beings.

Karma – the Consequences of Karmic Actions

It is wise for us to contemplate that the quality of our life is fully determined by the quality of our behavior. Our thoughts, feelings, speech, and actions, virtuous and non-virtuous, create the intricate patterns of our life experience. We ourselves create the causes for our own happiness or our own suffering. When we understand the unwholesome, non-virtuous actions that cause suffering, we can eliminate those causes. When we understand the wholesome, virtuous actions which bring happiness and benefit to ourselves and others, we can cultivate those causes. We must begin by acknowledging that our situation in life is the result of our own actions.

Karma and its results are certain and unfailing. Karma is the inevitable results which come directly from specific causes. Positive actions of body, speech, and mind will always bring the positive result of some form of happiness and benefit. Negative actions of body, speech, and mind will always bring the negative result of some form of suffering. Karma and its results are exactly like a seed and its fruit. If we plant the seed of a sweet fruit, this is exactly what the seed will produce. If we plant the seed of a poisonous fruit, this is exactly what this seed will produce as well. Karma works in the same way. If we act negatively, the seeds of our actions will produce the fruit (experience) of their kind. If we act in kind and virtuous ways, the seeds of these actions will also produce the positive fruit of their kind. Even a very small seed can grow into a large tree. In this same way, just a small negative action can bring a large amount of suffering if it is not purified. An apparently small and insignificant positive action can bring a great amount of happiness. A specific action leads to a specific result. Actions not engaged, will not bring results. If the cause has not been created, the effect will not be experienced.

An action done is not lost and will definitely ripen and bring a result. Negative actions to be abandoned are killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, divisive speech, harsh speech, idle gossip, covetousness, malice, and wrong views of reality.

By understanding karma, by purifying our delusion and negativity, and by engaging in virtuous behavior, we change the entire course of our life experience and move swiftly toward liberation. If we use adversity as an opportunity for developing compassion, wisdom, and love, the purification of our karma will be rapid and profound. Closely examine the karmic circumstances in your life. Consider deeply that there is a continuum, an interconnection between your present life, your previous lives, and your future lives. Observe your present thoughts, feelings, speech, and actions. Use this observation as a precise indication of what you are creating for your future experience.

The Disadvantages of the Worldly Life (*Samsara*)

A very large obstacle to success on the path of enlightenment is our attachment to *samsara*, to the worldly life. Because we are all so strongly attached to this material world, we need to examine with great care whether worldly activities will benefit us eternally or not. For example, most of us desire possessions, pleasure, comfort, and we also want love and acceptance from others. We work hard to obtain these things, going through much discomfort and even suffering to get them.

Ultimately, we will find that clinging to this world as the source of our safety, happiness, and satisfaction is fruitless and futile. First we must understand and embrace the truth of our stress and suffering. We will then be motivated to identify and finally renounce the causes of this stress and suffering. It is necessary for us to fully understand suffering and its causes so we are able to generate this renunciation and enthusiastically practice the path to liberation. Most all of us experience some amount of suffering. Not many of us experience permanent happiness. We experience stress and we suffer because of our own ignorance, our selfish attachments, and our negative behavior. However, we cannot attribute our suffering to circumstances outside of ourselves. Happiness and suffering originate within our own mind. The origins of our suffering begin within our own mind and heart when our perception of reality slips into the delusion of duality, permanence, and selfish desire. We become attached to the things of this world thinking they will bring us happiness and satisfaction. This leads to more clinging, delusion, stress, greed, and hatred. This is the cycle of *samsara* (suffering). Attachment to this *samsaric* life can distract us from practicing the Dharma.

In the relative peace and stability of our human existence, it is wise for us to contemplate and deeply reflect upon suffering. In this way, we will develop a deep renunciation of the causes of our suffering and deep compassion for all beings who experience suffering. Birth, old-age, sickness, and death can bring suffering. Suffering may arise from being associated with people or conditions that are unpleasant, from being separated from people we love or conditions we enjoy, from not being able to satisfy our desire, or from getting what we desire then losing it. Contemplate human suffering. Allow yourself to feel the tragic, heart-rending experiences of others and your own life as well. Embrace, feel, and truly experience what you and others have felt. Allow deep compassion to arise within your heart. It is wise for us to perceive our suffering as a form of karmic purification, because we learn through our suffering. For the welfare and benefit of all living beings, we should make a firm commitment to renounce *samsara*, a firm commitment to study and practice the Dharma until we attain joyous enlightenment; liberation from suffering. Through skillful practice of Dharma, there is an end to suffering (the cycle of *samsara*) and there is lasting happiness. Therefore, make a firm dedication to Dharma practice, renouncing the suffering of cyclic existence, determined not to be overcome by delusion, and not abandoning other beings.

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