

The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind

There are times when many of us don't feel strongly motivated to do our Buddhist practices, and out of laziness and indifference we procrastinate. Our attachment to samsaric activities and to this life is strong, and we find it difficult to seriously apply ourselves to Dharma practice. In those situations it is essential to constantly contemplate the Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind.

We are so attached to samsara. We enjoy the pleasures of samsara and mistakenly think that these temporary, limited pleasures are true happiness. But when we understand the real nature of samsara, we know that no true happiness is to be found there. Therefore, we apply ourselves single-pointedly to attaining liberation.

In this way, the Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind become the foundation of the path to enlightenment. In order to practice the path, we must turn away from attachment to this life. We must turn our minds away from worldly concerns towards the unchanging supreme happiness of liberation and enlightenment. We don't contemplate the Four Thoughts just to become depressed about the suffering of samsara, but so our disenchantment with cyclic existence inspires a longing for liberation and enlightenment.

The first of the Four Thoughts is to contemplate the preciousness of a human birth with the full complement of pleasures and endowments.¹ The second is to contemplate death and impermanence. The third is to contemplate the truth of karmic cause and effect. The fourth is to contemplate the faults of samsara. The result of these four contemplations is that we turn away from the suffering which pervades all of samsara, sometimes called the six realms² or the three realms³ of cyclic existence. By contemplating the Four Thoughts we come to realize that, no matter what we do in samsara, no matter how high or low the realm we are born into, suffering is inevitable. We therefore become thoroughly disenchanted with samsara, turning away and letting go of our fixation to worldly attachments.

In the first contemplation, the first Thought, we develop a true appreciation for the preciousness of a human birth complete with the pleasures and endowments. The opportunity to attain liberation from samsara arises very rarely, and in fact, among all the beings of the six realms, the only ones to have that capacity are some human beings. Therefore, to obtain a human birth, and especially one with all of the pleasures and endowments necessary to engage in Dharma practice, is extremely rare and precious.

Traditionally there are three ways in which the rarity of our situation is explained. It's explained by looking at the cause, comparing numbers, and looking at analogies. When we consider the cause, we realize how very difficult it is to achieve rebirth in any of the higher realms, let alone rebirth as a human being. Just to attain rebirth in one of the higher realms, we need to accumulate a lot of virtuous karma. When we reflect on our own actions, we see how easy it is to create non-virtuous karma and how much more effort it takes to engage in virtuous deeds. When we consider all our past lives, we must have accumulated far more non-virtuous karma than virtuous karma. In order to have this fortunate rebirth as a human being, and particularly this connection with the Dharma, we must have maintained pure ethical discipline, made pure aspiration prayers, practiced generosity, and so forth. The only way we could have obtained this human birth is through a vast accumulation of merit, which is so much more difficult to achieve than the ordinary person's unthinking accumulation of non-virtuous deeds.

To understand the statistical rarity of a precious human birth, first compare the number of humans to the number of animals in this world. You can easily see that the animals far outnumber humans when you think about all the variety of animals there are, wild and domesticated, birds, fishes, and other sea creatures. Even though some of the larger species are becoming rare, there are still so many small fish, reptiles, amphibians, tiny insects, and microscopic bugs living everywhere. There are so many

animals and so few humans. And those are just the realms we can see. Tibetans and many others believe there are four more realms invisible to our ordinary human eyes, although great meditators can perceive them. It is not so difficult to create the karma to be born as an animal or insect, so it is much more likely that you will take rebirth in the animal realm or one of the others. Not only is a simple human rebirth incredibly rare, one with the inclination and capacity to practice virtue and who meets with and enters the path of Dharma, is exceedingly rare. Think about all the people on this planet, and how few of them are actually engaged in the practice of Dharma. This contemplation should inspire us to appreciate how rare and special it is to have this human birth with all of the pleasures and endowments.

There are several analogies that illustrate the difficulty of attaining human birth, but perhaps the best-known one is the blind turtle at the bottom of the ocean. Imagine there is a blind turtle at the bottom of the ocean who surfaces only once every hundred years, and floating on the surface of the ocean is a wooden yoke, constantly moving from place to place, carried by currents and blown by the wind. How likely is it that when the turtle surfaces he will stick his neck through the central space of the yoke? It's extremely improbable. But it's said that the likelihood of attaining a human birth complete with the pleasures and endowments is even more improbable than that blind turtle

sticking his neck through the wooden yoke when, once every hundred years, he happens to surface.

The second of the Four Thoughts is the contemplation of death and impermanence. We must become aware and constantly mindful of the fact that our death is a certainty. There is nobody who, having been born, doesn't die. Once we are born, death is inevitable; that is 100% certain. No matter how great or powerful someone may be—a great king, a powerful president, a noble holy being—everybody who is born must eventually die. We know this, but we must also become constantly aware of the fact that, from the moment we are born, every day only brings us closer to our death. There is no way to push death further away, or even keep it at bay; our death approaches relentlessly. We need to think about this so we don't become lazy. We have to really understand how little time we have. Some people may find this depressing, but that is not the point. The point is to inspire sincere interest and determination to achieve liberation. There's no way to repel death, so it's better to prepare ourselves for that moment by practicing, so that we don't have any fear of our death.

Our body is formed by the five elements—fire, water, earth, wind and space—all coming together, and it's very difficult to always keep them in a perfect harmonious balance. This is why we experience illness. Once we have a physical form, it's inevitable that we will sometimes suffer from illness. The

balance of the elements in the physical form is very delicate, and it is very easily disturbed, which is why we become sick, and eventually die.

We should contemplate death and impermanence when we watch the news. Deaths are reported in the news every day. We tend to mentally distance ourselves from it, thinking *Those people are dying, but not me. It has nothing to do with me. That's just them and I'm healthy and safe.* But when there is some sort of disaster and many people die, you should think that you could also find yourself in a situation like that. Somehow we always think that it won't happen to us, but it's quite possible that our lives could be cut short by a natural disaster. There are always reports of floods, earthquakes, tsunamis, war and violence. There are so many different events that could become the cause of our death. Some of us may think that we are still young so it's not our time to go yet, but that is completely illogical because accidental death can happen to anyone, young or old. Think of how many people die in plane and car accidents. When we compare the number of things that can cause death to how many things can protect or sustain our life, we see that there are many more causes of death. This life is as tenuous as the flame of a candle in the wind, all it takes is a strong gust and that flame is blown out. In the same way, our body is very fragile and we're constantly encountering conditions that could very easily become the cause of our death. It's very important to remain constantly aware of this.

At the time of death, we will have to leave everything behind. Our wealth and possessions, family, loved ones and friends: none of them will be of any use at the time of death. Everything will be lost. The Buddha taught that the only thing that will be of any benefit to us at the time of death will be our accumulation of merit and virtuous karma. None of our material possessions will be useful, and our non-virtuous karma will only harm us. Everything that we do in this life creates karma, virtuous karma or non-virtuous karma, That is what will accompany us at the time of death, so it is important to do only things that are virtuous.

The third of the Four Thoughts is the contemplation of karma, cause and effect. In a nutshell, whatever we do that is based on a virtuous altruistic intention is virtuous and creates positive karma, and whatever we do with a mind of harmful intent towards others is non-virtuous and creates negative karma. This is a reality whether you believe in it or not; whoever engages in non-virtuous actions creates negative karma, and as a result of that negative karma they will later experience suffering.

Likewise, whoever engages in virtuous actions later experiences their karmic result as happiness. There is no way that karma can be avoided. There is nobody who is exempt from karma. It is just a reality. Someone who understands karma well can use virtue like medicine. We all experience the suffering of samsara and afflictive emotions, but the more we practice virtue, the

more we heal from the illness and suffering of the afflictive emotions. Someone who takes the medicine of virtue experiences happiness as a result, so we should develop confident faith in the infallibility of karma and learn how to use it to heal our afflictions.

Karma, cause and effect, is a natural law, not a philosophy that was created or imagined by the Buddha. With his complete omniscience the Buddha perfectly saw how all phenomena function just exactly as they are, through the laws of karmic cause and effect. At the simplest level, whatever one engages in with a negative intention is non-virtuous and results in suffering. The non-virtuous actions of the body, speech, and mind are based on negative intention--for example, killing is based on ill will. On the other hand its opposite, whatever we do to protect beings, based on the intention to benefit beings, is virtuous and results in happiness. So the virtuous actions of body, speech, and mind lead to happiness. However, because karma is very subtle and profound, it is difficult to understand all of the details of exactly how it ripens. Sometimes karma ripens immediately, in the same lifetime that it was created, but there are also karmic results that don't appear until much later, many lifetimes in the future. Karmic actions are like different seeds, and the time until maturity and final fruition will vary depending on the type of seed and the growing conditions. Some plants grow and bear fruit in a single season, while others, for example nut trees, can take many years. In the same way, karma ripens at different

rates, depending on the causes and conditions that are connected with it.

Karma isn't something that we can see with our eyes; it is more like a force or energy. It is like the electricity that powers a lamp. Turning on the light switch lights up the room so we can see, but what causes the lamp to emit light is the stream of electricity flowing to it, which we couldn't see even if we were looking at the bare wire. If we touched that wire the electricity would shock us, so we can definitely feel it and experience its effects, but it isn't something that we can see directly. In the same way, our karmic propensities or seeds are the driving force behind everything that we see and experience. We don't have to see the actual karma to know that it is there, we can infer its presence from its effects, just like we can infer there is electricity flowing when we flip the light switch and the light turns on. A human birth is powered by karma just as a lamp is powered by electricity.

The last of the Four Thoughts is the contemplation of the defects of samsara. Most people think samsara isn't so bad, that it is actually rather pleasant. Most people think there are many pleasures to be enjoyed in this life. Perhaps there are some fleeting pleasures that can be found, but as long as we remain within cyclic existence we will not find ultimate happiness. Even if we do gain some temporary happiness, it will eventually turn into suffering, because everything that is the result of

causes and conditions has the nature of suffering. It has the nature of impermanence and change. Eventually, every pleasant situation will end or lose its aspect of pleasantness, and suffering will ensue. For example, when we get something very special or expensive, such as the latest electronic gadget or some nice clothes, at first we feel excited and happy to have that special thing, but before long its luster wears off and it is no longer so exciting. An updated version or a newer fashion comes out, or maybe it doesn't work so well anymore, or it gets stained and looks worn. This is why we say the pleasures of samsara are temporary. They are not stable or reliable.

There is really no worldly thing that can bring us true happiness. As long as we have the bodies of sentient beings, we are subject to the sufferings of birth, illness, old age, and death, as well as many other forms of suffering too numerous to list. Even if we have what is considered a "comfortable life," we experience all sorts of suffering throughout our life. The Buddha pointed out that even the moment we are born is one of great suffering and discomfort for both the child and the mother. Then, from that moment on, we go through many different forms of suffering associated with growing older. At some point, everyone becomes ill, and eventually we all experience the great suffering of death. Our body deteriorates and we experience the dissolution of the elements. Our faculties wane, and most people feel great fear at the moment of death.

As humans we are aware of these sufferings, but we rarely consider that it is not just human beings who suffer, but all beings of the six realms. When we look, we can see that animals experience even worse suffering than we do. Wild animals live in constant fear of being eaten, either as the prey of another animal or by human beings. They are unprotected from the climate, and their sources of food and water are unreliable. Domesticated animals are bound into servitude and used by human beings as food or to carry heavy loads and so forth. There are limitless ways that those beings in the animal realm suffer, and the suffering of beings that we can't perceive, hell beings and hungry ghost beings, is inconceivably worse. Based on the perceptions of the Buddha and other highly realized meditators, many scriptures describe what the experiences of the lower realms are like. Although the extremity of their suffering is inconceivable, we can get some idea of it; for instance, the extreme heat and cold of the hell realms can be imagined when we think of animals freezing to death or being burned alive in a forest fire, or crabs and lobsters dropped into a pot of boiling hot water. Many animals eat their prey alive, and humans sometimes skin animals while they are still living, so this is also similar to the experience of a being in the hell realms.

Many human beings, as well as animals, have experiences like the hungry ghost realm. In lands of extreme famine or drought, where people can't get enough to eat or drink, human beings experience the hungry ghost realm. In the demi god realm, the

beings suffer greatly due to the jealousy they harbor for the beings in the god realms. They experience both the mental anguish of jealousy, and the physical suffering of pain and injury that result from the fighting that ensues. The beings of the god realms do not experience physical pain as a result of this fighting. However, beings in the god realm experience the suffering of change and falling to lower rebirths. They experience intense mental suffering as a result of their knowing that they will soon die and fall to a lower realm.

In this way, we have to realize that all of the six realms are pervaded by suffering and change. The only way we can achieve stable unchanging happiness is to enter the path of virtue to purify our obscurations and gather the accumulations of merit and wisdom. With his omniscient wisdom, the Buddha saw the suffering that pervades all the realms of cyclic existence, and he taught the perfect path of Dharma so that beings could gradually escape suffering, first attaining rebirth in the higher realms and then eventually attaining final liberation and enlightenment.

Our first step is to clearly distinguish between the suffering of samsara and the ultimate happiness and peace of nirvana.

The benefit of contemplating the Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind is that we become inspired to fully engage in Dharma practice. When we contemplate how difficult it will be to get another opportunity to practice in a precious human rebirth complete with the leisure and endowments, how death can end

this opportunity at any moment, how karma is the key to all our future experiences, and how remaining in samsara only brings endless suffering. Then we should feel inspired to make every effort to attain liberation and enlightenment. At this point we may intellectually recognize the suffering of samsara and so forth, but if it has not fully penetrated to a profound conviction, it is important to contemplate these things until we really see them clearly for ourselves. When we have a heartfelt understanding of these Four Thoughts, we will maintain mindful awareness throughout our lives to make sure that we avoid non-virtuous deeds and take up virtue. As a result, our attachment and fixation to the concerns of this life will diminish and we won't experience great fear and remorse at the time of death.

¹ The eight leisures are: Not being born as a (1) hell being, (2) hungry ghost, (3) animal, (4) demi-god, or (5) god; (6) not having impaired physical or sensory faculties; (7) not having committed one of the five heinous acts; and (8) not having ideas opposed to the Dharma. The ten endowments are: (1) being born as a human; (2) having all physical and sensory faculties intact; (3) not having committed one of the five heinous acts; (4) not having ideas opposed to the Dharma; (5) having a sound mind; (6) living in a time when the Buddha has appeared; (7) not living in a barbarian country; (8) living in a place where the Dharma remains; (9) having the opportunity to meet with Dharma teachers; and (10) living where there are sponsors and patrons of Dharma activities. The five heinous acts are: murdering (1) one's father, (2) one's mother, or (3) an arhat; (4) causing a Buddha to bleed; and (5) causing a schism in the sangha.

²The realms of gods, demi-gods, humans, animals, hungry ghosts, and hell beings³
The desire, form, and formless realms.