



Buddhist
Practitioners
Program

Four Thoughts that Turn the Mind: Precious Human Life and Impermanence

March 6, 2025

Study and reflect on the Four Thoughts

ONE: STUDY: Every day, recite some verses or teachings on the Four Thoughts. There are several versions on the BPP class webpage.

TWO: REFLECT: First, establish a base of attention by resting attention in the the breathing bodymind. Then slowly read one of the contemplations. (3) When something stirs in you, sit with your response, whether it appears as shock, fear, appreciation, gratitude, or resistance. Gently include what arises in your awareness, simply breathing and feeling what you feel.

Reflect on the Four Thoughts in the usual order. Reflect on them in reverse order. Reflect on them singly, and in combination. Notice these four facts arising in daily life.

☸ What do you value about your life?
What seems most worthwhile?

☸ What in your life seems permanent?

☸ What in life seems impossible to influence? What seems possible to influence?

☸ Which kinds of suffering seem possible to bring to an end?

☸ Does impermanence make life precious? What if you have only ten years to live? Five years? One year?

☸ Do karma and samsara make life precious -- that we can be of some benefit to beings?

☸ Do your freedoms and opportunities engender compassion for the beings in the six realms?

☸ What if half of your experience is the result of your actions? What if 90% is?

☸ Does the inevitability of karma concern you? Make you more careful of your actions?

☸ Look into your own experience to explore the meaning of revulsion and disenchantment; notice fear and attachment that arise to resist the Four Thoughts.

☸ If the Four Thoughts seem obvious or simplistic, superstitious or heavy-handed, reflect upon them as hypotheses to be tested.

☸ Contemplate each reminder again and again, over time. See if carrying them changes your view and your intentions.

Precious human life: resources and opportunities

Feel how fragile your body really is, the bones and flesh, the organs and veins. Take a moment of gratitude for your breath and your body. Can you appreciate the preciousness of this amazing manifestation? (Kevin Griffin, Living Kindness, p.24)

All sentient beings have Buddha-nature. That being the case, do all beings in the five realms, such as hell-beings, hungry ghosts, and so forth, have the capacity to work toward enlightenment? No. Only a "precious human life," which has the two qualities of leisure and endowment, and a mind which holds the three faiths, has a good basis to work toward enlightenment. (Gampopa, Jewel Ornament of Liberation, p.61)

Eight Freedoms and Ten Endowments	
<p>Eight Freedoms</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Freedom from birth in the hell realms Freedom from birth in the preta realms Freedom from birth in the animal realms Freedom from birth in a barbarous place (among humans without virtue or right views) Freedom from birth in the god realms Freedom from wrong views Freedom from birth in a place without a buddha Freedom from being born deaf and dumb (impaired faculties or intelligence, unable to hear and learn) 	<p>Five Self-Endowments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Having a human body and a mind capable of compassion and wisdom Having a human body in a central land (where Dharma is taught) Six senses intact Right view and livelihood with good intention Interest, confidence and devotion to Dharma <p>Five Circumstantial Endowments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A buddha has come into the world A buddha is teaching The Dharma continues to be taught There are living examples of Dharma practice Teachers are kind and supportive
Sixteen Conditions that Preclude Dharma Practice	
<p>Eight Intrusive Circumstances</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Turmoil from the five emotions Stupidity Being dominated by evil influences Laziness Being inundated by effects of past evil actions Enslavement to others Seeking protection from dangers Hypocritical practice 	<p>Eight Incompatible Propensities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Being bound by one's ties Flagrant depravity Lack of dissatisfaction with samsara Complete absence of faith Taking pleasure on bad actions Lack of interest in the Dharma Heedless of vows Heedless of samayas

Impermanence: everything changes, nothing stays the same

There is absolutely nothing in the universe, animate or inanimate, that has any stability or impermanence. Whatever is born is impermanent and is bound to die. Whatever is stored up is impermanent and is bound to run out. Whatever comes together is impermanent and is bound to come apart. Whatever is built is impermanent and is bound to collapse. Whatever rises up is impermanent and is bound to fall down. So also, friendship and enmity, fortune and sorrow, good and evil, all the thoughts that run through your mind -- everything is always changing.
~ Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, p.46-47

Reflections based on Gampopa, *Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, and Ken McLeod, *Wake Up to Your Life*:

Reflect on the impermanence of the outer world: it will be destroyed by fire, water, and wind.

Reflect on the impermanence of sentient beings: physical and mental and emotional changes moment by moment, month by month, year by year.

Reflect on the subtle impermanence of the outer world: changing seasons, day and night, and changes moment to moment.

Recollect the many who have died.
There are 8 billion people living in the world; 100 billion have died in the past.

Nine-point reflection from the Kadampa

Death is inevitable

- You cannot prevent death no matter what you do or where you go.
- Your lifespan is constantly getting shorter.
- If your time is being wasted death will not wait for you to catch up.

The time of death is uncertain

- Our lifespan is not fixed; death can come at any time.
- There are any number of factors that can contribute to your death.
- The body and what keeps it alive are fragile.

When death comes nothing will help (except virtuous karma)

- Wealth cannot help you.
- Friends and relatives and allies cannot help you.
- Even your body cannot help you.

Now that you have this unique opportunity, free and well-favoured, Use it, I beg you, to practise Dharma for the benefit of future lives.

Human life is like the sun shining between the clouds:

It can be gone in a moment, with nothing accomplished.

And regret at the moment of death will be to no avail.

So practise straightaway with diligent enthusiasm.

~ Jamgon Kongtrul, *Mahāmudrā: The Swift Way to Become a Lord of Realization*