



Turning the Mind Toward the Dharma

Dekeling Community

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**DALJOR NYÉ KA CHIWA NYUR DU ONG
LÉ DRÉ KHORWÉ NYEMIK SAMPAR JA**

**The freedoms and advantages are hard to find, and death comes quickly;
Actions have their effects, and samsara its trials—on these, I shall reflect.**

~ Concise Preliminaries by Shabkar Tsokdruk Rangdrol (Lotsawa House translation)

Introduction to the Four Thoughts

These freedoms and advantages are hard to find and easily lost;
Everything changes, nothing stays the same, and death comes quickly;
Every thought, word, and deed is a seed that inevitably grows into experience;
And cycles of confusion and conflicting emotions do not lead to happiness or peace;
— on these I shall reflect.

Why reflect on the four thoughts that turn the mind to the Dharma?

Do not run full tilt at tranquility and insight.
First cultivate a fertile ground for positive qualities within yourself.
~ Jamgon Kongtrul, *The Torch of Certainty*

If our mind has not assimilated the four thoughts...
Were we to meditate for years,
We would most likely just become more rigid and more attached.
In this way they are indispensable as a basis for practice.
~ Kalu Rinpoche, *Luminous Mind*, p.197

Through carefully contemplating the difficulties
of acquiring the pleasures and opportunities [of a precious human existence],
the way to make it meaningful once acquired,
the way it can quickly change due to its impermanence,
the way our karma takes control once we die,
the way karma will mature without losing its potency,
how we will experience actions and their results in the three ways,
the attendant sufferings of the six classes of beings,
and the problems of the seeming happiness within existence [samsara],
we will arouse a strong motivation to strive for liberation.
Since that is the root of Dharma, it is most important at all times...
If we leave those contemplations as a one-time theoretical understanding,
at first our meditation may develop, but afterwards,
not only will we be unable to suppress our attachment, aversion, and confusion,
we will be under the sway of the sense pleasures,
such as food and clothing, and the seduction of fame and desires.
The reason it is so rare that practice is brought to fruition comes down to just this.
~ Dakpo Tashi Namgyal, *Moonbeams of Mahamudra*, p.15

Essential aspects of the four thoughts

Dharma practice is about *directly knowing* the way things are, and *making choices* about how to move toward genuine happiness and freedom. Contemplating the four thoughts is an essential Dharma practice that does both. The four thoughts are four facts of life -- reminders of the way things are. And they are a compass for navigating and conducting life.

Each of the four thoughts is a powerful motivation, a sobering insight, and a potentially life-changing opportunity -- if you take them to heart. The contemplations can also transform through delight. Precious life is a reminder of the wonderful embrace and support of nature. Impermanence is a reminder that difficult experiences will disappear. The inevitability of karma points to the iron-clad law that the good seeds we plant will make good fruits. And even the futility of samsara is a reminder that there is a path out.

The four thoughts are a unit. The four overlap and each contains the others -- each leads to all four. An example is Gampopa JOL p.325ff on how contemplating impermanence is the root cause.

Traditional teachings are detailed and deep, but there is no one text or structure to rely on. The reminders are everywhere in the sutras and shastras and modern commentaries, and they can evoke insight and experience if you learn how to use them.

Readings can be a step toward relating and integrating the reminders into your own life. But we can't expect a text from a very different time and place and culture to just make sense; we need to make sense of them. That is our work. You should be able to rattle off any number of points under each of the four reminders that relate directly, to your actual life, just as it is.

No freedom without insight. No insight without stability. No stability with the property motivation. Motivation comes from the four thoughts. If you're bored, frustrated, longing, confused -- whatever gets in the way of progress in your spiritual path -- the four thoughts will help you work your way through.

Learning contemplation as practice. We learn Dharma three ways: by hearing (studying), by reflecting (contemplating), and by meditating. (Actually there's a fourth: carrying the Dharma onto the path by integrating the view and behavior into daily life). Reflection is a different kind of object of attention, which requires adjusting and mastering. To contemplate means to return to something again and again, until it reflects your own experience back to you. You come to see how precious resources and opportunities, impermanence, karma, and samsara are actually true, in your life.

Signs of realization

- Seeing clearly how the four reminders connect and support and balance each other.
- Relating all four to your own life and experience.
- Actually turning your mind to the Dharma: being moved to practice.
- Developing compassion for all suffering beings (relative bodhicitta).
- Developing insight and wisdom into how things are (ultimate bodhicitta).
- Letting go of confusion and clinging.
- Living and dying without regret.

Verses for Contemplation

First, I consider this jewel [of a human form]
With its blessings and opportunities,
Obtained with difficulty, destroyed with ease;
I must make it purposeful!

Secondly, the external world and all therein are impermanent;
Particularly, the life of each being, which is like a water bubble.
The time of my death is uncertain; my body will become a corpse at death.
Since Dharma is beneficial then, I must practice diligently.

Thirdly, at death my own power is dispersed and karma takes its course;
To overcome this, I have to cease doing evil and practice virtue.
Bearing this in mind, I must examine my way of life daily.

Fourthly, because I am continually tormented by the three sufferings,
Homes, friends, joys, and possessions in the cycle of existence
Are like a condemned man's feast before his being led to his execution;
I must sever my attachments and strive vigorously for enlightenment.

From *The Chariot for Travelling the Supreme Path* by the Ninth Karmapa Wangchuk Dorje.
English translation by Ingrid McLeod.

[Brief Version of the Four Thoughts from Rigpa Wiki:](#)

This free and well-favoured human form is difficult to obtain.
Now that you have the chance to realize the full human potential,
If you don't make good use of this opportunity,
How could you possibly expect to have such a chance again?
~ Shantideva, The Way of the Bodhisattva

This existence of ours is as transient as autumn clouds.
To watch the birth and death of beings is like looking at the movement of a dance.
A lifetime is like a flash of lightning in the sky,
Rushing by, like a torrent down a steep mountain.
~ The Play Sutra (Lalitavistara Sutra)

When his time has come, even a king has to die,
And neither his friends nor his wealth can follow him.
So for us—wherever we stay, wherever we go—
Karma follows us like a shadow.
~ Sutra of Instructions to the King (Rajavavadaka Sutra)

Because of craving, attachment and ignorance,
Men, gods, animals, hungry ghosts and hell-beings
Foolishly go round,
Like the turning of a potter's wheel.
~ The Play in Full Sutra (Lalitavistara Sutra)

Shangpa practice reminders

Verses in italics were composed by Jamgon Kongtrul (1813-99), translated by Ken McLeod.
Commentary by George Draffan.

Precious Human Life

*To have the eight freedoms
And the ten favorable conditions in this human form
Is so much better than being a god;
It is just like a pauper's finding a jewel.*

*For so many reasons —
Cause, number, example and others —
It is difficult to find it but for this moment.*

*It is impermanent too, like a bubble of froth, certain to perish soon.
At that time, nothing but Dharma is even a hair tip's help.
Hence, I practice the profound path, the pith of the supreme Dharma.*

Of all the planets in the universe, I am on this one — warm, green, hospitable. Of the billions of creatures on this planet, I am a human being. Of all the times and places I could have been born, I am in this time and place.

Many people live in poverty, lacking adequate food, shelter, and health care. My life is free from war, from oppression, from grinding poverty, from debilitating addiction or crippling mental illness. I enjoy basic health, with my senses and intelligence intact.

I have all the freedoms and conditions necessary for spiritual practice. I am endowed with natural awareness and the ability to respond to imbalance and suffering. I have access to authentic spiritual teachings by qualified and compassionate teachers. I can rely on the support of experienced companions on the path.

This life has great potential for good or harm. The coming together of all these freedoms and conditions is fragile, and may end at any time. I want to understand my life and make the most of it. I don't want to waste these resources and opportunities.

All human beings should try to learn before they die what they are running from, and to, and why. (James Thurber)

Impermanence

*The universe, this external world,
Will be destroyed by fire and water.
The four seasons, mere moments, come and go.
Everything is impermanent, bound in the four ends.*

*There has never been a person born who doesn't die.
Life and breath are like lightning and dew.
It is not even certain which will come first,
Tomorrow or the next world.*

*If I only think about dharma but don't practice it,
The demons of distraction and laziness carry me away.
Since I must go empty-handed and naked
I should practice the supreme dharma without delay.*

Every event and circumstance in this world is dependent on complex causes and conditions that are constantly arising and disappearing.

The pleasures, conditions, beliefs, and relationships that I rely on — which of them is genuinely reliable and lasting? What am I taking for granted? As I observe the world about me, I can see that everything changes — nothing stays the same.

The inhabitants of the world come and go. Every one of them will die. Though I see change, impermanence, and death all around me, I act as though I were going to live forever — but I too will die.

My death will definitely come, and I have no idea when. I may live a long time, or I may die today. What I do know is that each day brings me one day closer to my inevitable death. Nothing — not wealth, intelligence, strength, power, friends or family — will prevent me from dying.

Where in my life do I ignore change? What am I trying to cling to?

What is really important to me? Am I living the life that I want?

Today you live, and tomorrow you are dust. One fever will quench your pride.
(Romanus)

The Four Ends

the end of accumulation is dispersion

the end of building is ruin

the end of meeting is parting

the end of birth is death

Karma

*At death, everyone, even a universal monarch, leaves power and influence behind.
I wander alone in limbo.
The effects of my actions follow me
Like my shadow follows my body.*

*I will experience the effects of every one of my actions.
I will not experience the effects of actions I haven't done.
My actions keep evolving into experienced results.
The virtue and evil that I do inevitably ripen as happiness and suffering for me.*

*I am only here in this world for a moment, but samsara is long without end.
To avoid bringing about my own downfall, I must accept the principle of
action and result.
In particular, I must abide by my commitments
And let no failing stain my experience.*

Though I may not be able to see all the impacts of my actions, I know that acts do have consequences. Everything I think, say, and do has consequences, large or small, immediate or distant.

Karma is the evolution of action and result. Each action's intended and unintended consequences become new seeds, setting up conditions that influence my future actions.

Every action I do becomes easier to repeat. Repeated actions become habits, and habits become character. My actions inevitably ripen into my experience of happiness and suffering. Ignoring the effects of my actions does not relieve me of the consequences. I alone am responsible for my actions and my experience of life.

Everyone has the potential to wake up, to see how things are, to stop creating suffering, to help others. But not everyone does. This brief, precious life can be used for good or ill. Is my life my own, or is it being directed and consumed by habitual patterns I do not choose?

When you really know yourself, you will realize how important it is to practice zazen. Before you know what you are doing, you don't know why we practice. You think you are quite free, that whatever you do is your choice, but actually you are creating karma for yourself and others. You don't know what you're doing, so you don't think there is any need to practice... But we have to pay our own debts; no one else can pay our debts. That is why we practice. To fulfill our responsibility we practice. We have to... (Suzuki Roshi)

*We have about as much room to move as a violin in a violin case. And that's enough.
(Lama Michael Conklin)*

Samsara

From the pinnacle of existence down to the depths of torment,
From top to bottom, the regions of samsara
Are like a fiery trench or a thicket of razors.
No chance for happiness ever appears.

Until now, I have wandered in samsara.
Ignorance, confusion, and samsara haven't come to an end.
Now that I understand this intolerable unhappiness
A fierce determination rises in me.

I enter the path to freedom and true happiness
And follow the freedom of the lineage teachers
To awaken fully in this one life.

The aches and pains of the physical body, the grief of losing what one holds dear, old age, sickness and death — some things are unavoidable. But I create extra suffering for myself and others with craving, aversion, and delusion.

When I define my life by wealth, pleasure, praise, and reputation, then my happiness depends on circumstances and conditions.

Reactive emotions do not bring me happiness; they produce exactly what I am trying to avoid. Samsara, the life of reactivity, is a never-ending cycle through realms I am creating:

- Caught up in anger and aggression, I find myself in a realm of conflict.
- Consumed by grasping and neediness, I never seem to get what I want.
- Seeking security and comfort, I get stuck in the same old ways of doing things.
- Jumping from desire to desire, chasing possessions and pleasures, my desires are never satisfied for long, and my busyness is endless.
- Feeling inadequate, jealous and competitive, I'm compelled to accomplish more and more.
- Self-satisfied, trying to maintain my position, I'm blind to the inevitability of change.

All experience is preceded by mind, led by mind, made by mind. Speak or act with a corrupted mind, and struggle follows, like the wheel of the cart follows the beast that draws the cart. (Dhammapada)

The cycles of reactivity and suffering can be brought to an end. Our fundamental nature is goodness and awareness. A path of awakening and freedom has been developed and refined over many centuries of experience. I can place confidence in the teachers and practitioners of that path, and in my ability to travel it.

The verses from the Tibetan Shangpa Kagyu Rime master Jamgon Kongtrul (1813-1899) were translated into English by Ken McLeod. The commentary was written by George Draffan.

Precious Human Life

Eight freedoms and ten endowments

- **Freedom from four non-human states:** hell being, hungry ghost, animal, and long lived god.
- **Freedom from four human states:** in an uncivilized land, holding wrong views denying karma etc, a land that lacks Dharma teachings, and being incapable of understanding or communicating.
- **Five personal advantages:** being a human being, born in a central land, with faculties intact, with lifestyle uncorrupted, and with faith in the proper objects.
- **Five circumstantial advantages:** a Buddha has come into the world, he has taught the sacred dharma, these teachings still survive, there are other individuals who follow them, and there are benefactors who provide food, clothing, etc.

*Hell beings, hungry ghosts, animals,
Barbarians, long-lived gods,
Those with distorted views, people unexposed to Buddha,
And mutes -- these are the eight unfavorable states.*

*Born human, in the center, faculties complete,
Karma uncorrupted and with faith.
The Buddha came, taught the Way;
The teaching survives, with many followers;
There are those with loving hearts toward others. (Taranatha, p.7-8)*

Even if we have the eight freedoms and ten endowments, we may not be able to practice the Dharma. Patrul Rinpoche (p.30-31) describes various intrusive and incompatible circumstances that get in the way.

- People in whom the five poisons are too strong
- Someone under the influence of a false spiritual friend who leads them astray
- People who are ensnared in indolence and procrastination
- Obscurations and negative actions can overwhelm confidence in the teachings.
- Being dominated by someone and losing the freedom to practice.
- Taking up the appearance of Dharma practice in order to gain possessions, services, and prestige.
- Being so tightly bound to worldly commitments, wealth, pleasures, relatives, etc that there is no time for Dharma practice.
- Feeling little consternation about suffering and the ills of samsara, one has no determination to be free.
- Having no faith in Dharma or in teachers.
- Taking pleasure in harmful actions and failing to control thoughts, words, and deeds.
- Breaking vows and commitments to oneself and to one's teachers and Dharma brothers and sisters.

Rare by cause, by number, and example

- **Cause (nature):** To gain a human birth depends upon having carried out many positive actions. The human existence is as rare as a star in broad daylight. Even if one is born a human, in a favorable land, with access to teachings, etc, one must be interested, inspired, and actually set out on the path of Dharma.
- **Number:** Compare the number of animals you can see on the surface of the earth to the number of organisms in your own body. Compare the dust on your fingernail to the dirt in all the earth. There are approximately 1.4 billion to 2 billion insects for every human. There are 400 trees per person.
- **Example:** It is rarer for someone to have all the feeding and advantages that it is for a one-eyed turtle living in the ocean depths, rising once every hundred to place its neck through a yoke bobbing on the surface and being blown about by the wind.

Gampopa ends his chapter on precious human life with a description of **three kinds of faith**. **Trusting faith** depends on the truth of karma and trusting that happiness is the fruit of virtuous causes. **Longing faith** understands the extraordinary nature of unsurpassable enlightenment and follows the path with respect and reverence in order to obtain it. **Clear faith** arises by depending on the Three Jewels: interest in and devotion to the Buddha as the teacher who shows the path, the Dharma which becomes the path, and the Sangha which guides one to accomplish the path.

We all have buddha nature. Fundamentally we are inherent inalienable awareness, compassion, and responsiveness. We have the potential to fully awaken to the nature of reality for the benefit of all beings.

Right now we have a precious opportunity, endowed with many freedoms and resources — the coinciding of many causes and conditions, which can come to an end at any time. We are not overwhelmed by danger or survival needs. Our suffering is much less than what many others experience. For now, we are free from war, oppression, grinding poverty, debilitating addiction, crippling mental illness, and many other miseries.

We have intelligence, common sense, empathy, and many other positive qualities.

We have an authentic spiritual practice and a community of support.

*This human life with its freedoms and endowments is very hard to obtain.
If you find a meaningful life,
But do not put it to good use,
How will you ever receive this perfect gift again?
~ Taranatha, p.11*

*Relying on the boat of a human body,
Free yourself from the great river of pain!
As it is hard to find this boat again,
This is no time to sleep, you fool.
~ Shantideva 7:14*

Questions about precious human life

Contemplation (reflection) practice: Pose one of the questions and sit in the breathing body. Don't rush to answer the question; simply pose a question and rest in open awareness, including any sensations, feelings, and thoughts that arise in response. Please note any additional questions that occur to you, and consider sharing them in class.

- ❖ What in my life is most important to me?
Reflect on the three classic motivations:
 - personal happiness and gain;
 - personal freedom from the constant pursuit of happiness and gain;
 - freedom for all beings.Am I truly taking advantage of this precious human life, and for the best reasons?

- ❖ Which of the eight freedoms and ten endowments had not occurred to me?
Which of them do I tend to assume and take for granted?
Are there any of them that I could not lose in a moment?

- ❖ Pleasure and pain, loss and gain, praise and blame, good and bad reputation -- how distracting! Are these eight vicissitudes worthy of my life's time and energy?
Given the world we live in, how can I avoid wasting my time and attention?

- ❖ This life has great potential for good or harm. How unfortunate it would be to waste this life. How could I take better advantage of the resources and opportunities that surround me?

- ❖ How might I make my freedoms and endowments more appreciated, more enjoyable?
How might gratitude and rejoicing become genuine in my mind stream?

- ❖ How sweet is this life! How uncertain! How fragile!

The Truth of Impermanence

The three marks: All phenomena are impermanent, dependent, and unreliable. Because everything is dependent upon causes and conditions, it is empty of any inherent, fixed characteristics. Nothing that is impermanent is ultimately dependable or satisfactory.

The four ends: The end of accumulation is dispersion. The end of building is ruin. The end of meeting is parting. The end of birth is death.

The outer world and the beings in it are impermanent. The world will eventually be destroyed by fire, water, and wind. In the meantime the four seasons revolve, the sun and moon rise and set, and each moment vanishes in turn. We are impermanent too. As we observe others age, weaken, and die, we should recognize that we too are of the same nature, the same condition, of the same character; we are not beyond this reality. (Gampopa, p.84-85, 90).

Meditations from chapter 4 of *Wake Up To Your Life* by Ken McLeod:

Consider how everything changes, nothing stays the same

- *Change in the world:* Galaxies, stars, and planets; oceans, continents, mountains, plants, trees, animals; human society, empires, countries, governments; fashions, philosophies, theories, artistic forms; weather, seasons, day by day, moment to moment change in the world around us.
- *Change in the body:* Changes in hair, skin, nails; muscles, bones, blood, heart, lungs; abilities to see, hear, taste, touch, smell, think, remember; height, weight, shape, cellular and metabolic changes.
- *Change in personality and belief systems:* Personality traits, likes and dislikes, beliefs and ideas about who we are, how we are in relationships, how we see and experience the world, how we interpret our experience.

Reflect on the many who have died

- *People throughout history:* Prehumans, ancient civilizations, recent cultures.
- *People with exceptional abilities:* Athletes with strength, rulers with great power, scholars with great intellects, artists with creative abilities, sages with intuitive and miraculous powers, saints with spiritual insight and understanding.
- *Your family and you:* Ancestors, parents, relatives, people you love and hate, and you.

Death can come at any time

- *Death can come in many ways:* Walk through a typical day, observing how many ways you could die. Inventory your home and your work; observe how many things could cause your death. Bacteria, viruses, surgery or medication, food poisoning, and accidents.
- *Death can come at any time:* Is there a time when it would be impossible to die?
- *Death cannot be prevented:* Is there anything in the body that prevents you from dying? Can wealth, possessions, friends, or abilities prevent you from dying?

The three by three contemplations

The classic “three by three” contemplations were taught by the Kadampa masters, Gampopa, Taranatha, and many others from various lineages:

I will definitely die

Death is inevitable.
Life cannot be extended but is always diminishing.
We cannot avoid death through circumstances (spells or medicines).

The time of death is uncertain

Lifespan in this world is not fixed.
There are many causes of death and few for sustaining life.
Even the causes of sustaining life can cause death.

Nothing can help at the time of death aside from Dharma

Our possessions cannot help us.
Friends and relatives cannot help us.
Our body cannot help us.

Shabkar’s 3x3 contemplations on death and impermanence

A student of Shabkar Rinpoche requested: “Pray grant me a clear and concise summary of the methods with which to contemplate death and impermanence based upon the three causes, nine reasons, and three conclusions.” Shabkar replied:

Death is certain. “The first causal instruction for meditating upon death and impermanence is to consider how death is certain. There are three reasons to contemplate:

1. *The lord of death is certain to come for you and nothing can turn him away.* This holds true for all beings, regardless of the status and no matter how proficient they may be in ritual ceremonies, casting of spells, or dispensing of medicine. Whatever your strengths or means, you can do absolutely nothing to avoid death. contemplate this until the utter conviction of your own mortality dawns.
2. *Your life span cannot be extended; it just keeps on diminishing.* Your food and wealth may increase and decrease, but not your lifetime. It is continually decreasing, and even the slightest extension is out of the question. Contemplate this until the absolute certainty of your own death dawns.
3. *Convinced of your own mortality, even the time you have left you still give little over to practice.* Half your life is spent in sleep. As a child, you didn’t know how or forgot to practice, and when you are old enough even though you may remember to practice, you’ll be unable to. During your youth, you are continually distracted: making friends and fighting enemies, in business deals and other money-making ventures, worrying over food and drink, given over to idle chatter, so much so, that even in the light of the certainty of your own demise, your life is still wasted.

“These will lead to the first of the three certainties: death, the enemy of life cannot be stopped, and your meeting with him is inevitable. This will cause you to become disillusioned with the ways of the world and think only of practice. You’ll become certain of the need to practice the dharma and will continually promise yourself to do so.

The time of death is uncertain. “The second causal instruction is to contemplate how the time of death is uncertain. Again, there are three reasons to contemplate:

1. *The duration of any life span in our world isn’t certain.* Beings in other world systems have a fixed life span, however, beings of our southern continent of Jambudvipa do not. Contemplate how the length of your own life is uncertain.
2. *The causes of death are many while those that sustain life are few.* Consider the uncertainty of your own life; it’s like a candle flame in a storm. Amid manifold causes of death such as the 430 types of illnesses, the eight thousand malevolent spirits, elementals, and so on, consider how the causes that sustain life are very few indeed.
3. *This illusory body of ours is extremely fragile, like a water bubble;* meeting with the tiniest condition, possibly something you wouldn’t even consider to be destructive, like a thorn prick, can easily serve as the circumstance of your demise. Thereby contemplate life’s uncertainty owing to the fragility of your body.

“These contemplations will take you to the second certainty: since there is no certainty as to when the lord of death will destroy your body and life, examine what is really important and quickly make the decision that, besides dharma practice, nothing else is worthwhile; take a pledge to practice and recite it to yourself over and over again.

Nothing can help at the time of death except Dharma. “The third causal instruction is to contemplate how, at the time of death, nothing besides your Dharma practice is of any value. Once again there are three reasons to contemplate:

1. *When death comes to you, no matter how many loving and concerned friends and relatives are by your side, you cannot take even one of them along with you.* As such, contemplate that at the time of your death your friends cannot help you.
2. *At death, your possessions cannot help you.* Imagine that you own heaps and heaps of jewels; when death comes for you, you won’t be able to take the tiniest of gemstones with you.
3. *Contemplate how you’ll have to leave your own flesh and bones behind on your death bed;* at the time of your passing even your cherished body is of no use to you.

“And through their contemplation, you’ll arrive at the third certainty: at the time of death the only protector, refuge, and guardian is your Dharma practice. All the enjoyments of the world will leave you behind and similarly you will leave them behind. As the time for your parting from the world isn’t fixed, there’s every chance it could happen this very night! With conviction, give up all your worldly activities and concentrate only on practice. Certain of your commitment to practice, make a pledge to do so and repeat it to yourself time and time again.” (Shabkar, *The Emanated Scripture of Majushri*, p.24-26)

Taranatha's five-part contemplation from *Essence of Ambrosia*:

“First consider that nothing stays the same; everything changes. For each of us, from the time we are born until we die, this continuum of aggregates changes and develops. First, when I was a little baby, I was like that. When I was a child, I was thus. At the time of my youth, I was so. Now I am like this, coming closer and closer to death. Nothing has been of any benefit. In a subdued frame of mind, cultivate a sense of disenchantment.

Think about the many others who have died. Recall impermanence clearly. Then enumerate individuals you have heard about or knew, who have died in your area of residence and reflect: how many people older than me have died? How many people my age or younger have died? When I think about it, More people have died here than are alive now, And for the most part, people die in their prime. I am of the same nature as they are. I do not transcend this situation. Thinking I will not end up among them is idiocy. Before I die, I must practice [Dharma] purely. With an acute awareness of impermanence, think about people and animals you have heard of or have known who have died. Think about those who are alive -- acquaintances and those who you have heard about -- who went from being very powerful to very weak, or from weak to powerful, from rich to poor, and so forth, then consider: I, my affairs, my enjoyments, and so forth are of this nature. They too are transient.

Think again and again about the many potential causes of death. [T]here is nothing about which it is said, “This cannot be the cause of death.” Those things asserted to be causes for not dying and remaining alive dead. Food, clothing, my home, bed, medicine, and so forth. Dash. At some point may become circumstances for death, such as when food becomes rancid or when 1 takes the wrong medicine. I am living in the center of a swirling Blizzard of circumstances adverse to my body and life, and know nothing of when I will come to die! I do not even Know how all the things right around. Contribute to the circumstances of my death. I do not know how things may change spontaneously at any moment.

Meditate, “What will it be like while I am dying?” When I am dying in, if my mind is in a non-virtuous state, I will experience terrifying suffering -- the karma of my life, force being severed and so forth. Death is not desired or joyfully welcomed. Undesired, it comes all of a sudden. People do not die happily and full of delight. They die accompanied by powerful, intense suffering. The next world is not one about which I know and am familiar. I am about to wander without directions in an unknown land.

Contemplate what will happen after death. When I die, my body and mind will separate. This body will be buried and become a mass of worms, or be thrown in the water to be eaten by fish in otters, or be cremated and reduced to a handful of bones, or be carried to the mountains or plains, to be strewn about and devoured by birds and jackals. In the end, after some days there will not even be a trace left. The demise of this body, nurtured so carefully now, will be like that. If the mind carrying the burden of karma must go to a birthplace unknown, is there any way I am not going to practice [Dharma] right now? or, If I have been practicing, is there any way I am going to put it off to later?” (Taranatha, p.17-18)

Questions about impermanence

Resting in the breathing body, pose one of the questions to yourself. Don't rush to answer the question; simply pose the question and rest in open awareness, breathing in awareness and letting sensations, feelings, and thoughts arise in response. Note any additional questions that occur to you, and consider sharing them in class.

- ❖ From one moment to the next, experience is an ever-shifting heap of sensations, feelings, thoughts, memories, and impulses. Can you find, in you or in the world, anything that actually holds still?
- ❖ Where in my life do I ignore change?
What changes have been difficult?
What am I trying to cling to?
- ❖ What transitions have turned out to be positive changes?
What opportunities might I be missing by resisting change?
- ❖ Reflect upon time spent sleeping, pursuing meaningless activities, daydreaming, and waiting for conditions to be perfect. How much time do I actually have left in this life?
- ❖ It is true that I will die, and that I do not know when, or how.
Do I hold any assumptions about how much time I have left to live?
If I were to die this very day, would I have regrets about how I had spent my time?
- ❖ Does the contemplation of death seem depressing?
Does the certainty of human life being rare and precious change that?
- ❖ What about the admonition to give up worldly activities and devote yourself to Dharma practice? Is that unattractive? Unrealistic? An evasion of responsibility?
Take the time to clarify what Dharma practice means, and what it consists of given your actual life?
- ❖ What seeds am I planting?
What is most important to me?
Why aren't I doing that?

The Inevitability of Karma

We sometimes blame other people and external phenomena for our troubles, but humans are well known to misattribute cause and effect. We ourselves are the main cause of our experience. Our thoughts, words, and deeds evolve into our experience; no one else is responsible.

Karma is the interdependence of action and result, seed and fruit. Depending on our intentions and actions, karma becomes a trap or a source of great power. The momentum of karma is a challenge, but the momentum can be broken with stable attention and right intention.

Disciplined, intentional behavior is key to karma. The “ten acts” are traditional expressions to support refraining from negative acts and cultivating positive ones. Three acts of body: killing, stealing, sexual misconduct. Four acts of speech: lying, divisive, harsh, and idle speech. Three acts of mind: coveting, harmful intent, and wrong views.

“What causes us to be reborn in the higher and lower realms of samsara is the good and bad actions that we ourselves have accumulated. samsara itself is produced by actions, and consists entirely of the effects of actions -- there is nothing that consigned us to the higher or lower realms. Neither is it just chance.” (Patrul, p.101).

Karma is not fate. I cannot know exactly when or how karma will play out, but I can be sure that actions have results. *“We have about as much room to move as a violin in a violin case. And that’s enough.”* (Lama Michael Conklin).

The results of negative actions can be altered with *four opponent powers*. *Regret* is a rational and constructive remorse that aspires for a remedy. *Reliance* acknowledges mistakes, requests forgiveness and guidance, takes refuge and wishes to benefit all beings. *Remedy* is any positive acts that counteracts negative acts or generates (merit) goodness or wisdom. *Resolve* intends not to repeat negative actions, counteracting the tendency to repeat.

The dynamics of karma

Karma is action and result on multiple levels. In this life, my smoking can result in cancer; in the future, craving results in my birth in a hungry ghost realm. Actions I do become easier to repeat. Actions become environments: lying and gossip result in hostile, untrustworthy environments; theft creates environments of scarcity and aggression. Actions done with intention will definitely bear results. And small causes can have large results.

Karma isn’t simple cause-and-effect. Ken McLeod (ch. 7) describes complex dynamics: *Seed and fruit*: actions are seeds that come to fruition later depending on many supporting conditions; and fruit contains more seeds; one seed can lead to a grove of trees. *Webbing and layering*: patterns resonate with each other to form webs of interactions, with patterns becoming components of other patterns. *Resonance*: patterns absorb the energy of attention and cause attention to decay, leading to the mechanicality of automatic, nonvolitional behavior patterns. *Habituation*: the accumulation of energy in the operation of a pattern so that the more often it occurs, the stronger

it becomes. *Crystallization*: patterns form internal structures that result in fixed behaviors, positions, and beliefs. (See McLeod, chapter 7)

With stable calm abiding (*shamatha, shinay*) and clear seeing (*vipashyana, lhatong*), we can recognize the dynamics of karma in our direct experience.

Here are traditional terms for how karma arises and persists. Do you experience these?

Abhinivesa: *insistence*; automatic perceptual and conceptual belief in the apparent existence of self and objects; the way things appear due to conditioned patterning of perception and thought.

Prapanca: *conceptual fabrication*, the stream directed by imprinted preconceptions, including the internal flow of thought constructs and the self and the environment they create. Conceptual elaboration... clinging to words or concepts... the web of words and concepts in which one gets entangled when clinging... the root of all contentions.

Samsara: *the projected world of habitual patterns*; from *sam*, together, intensive; and *sara*, to go, run, flow, hasten. So samsara means going about — endless migration, unceasing commotion and unrest. Samsara is the created experience of dissatisfaction and struggle.

Samskara: *conditioned mental formations*, all constructs, good, bad, or indifferent: dispositions, tendencies, volitions, impulses, emotions, strivings, and reactions. The process by which reactive emotional patterns are formed by, and then continue to form, our experience of the world. The volitional factor in samskaras is motivated by desire, which gives rise to karma.

Samyojana: *internal formations; knots*; agglomerations; binding together; fetters. In the Theravada tradition the fetters are the five lower (belief in a self, doubt and uncertainty, attachment to rites and rituals, sensual desire, and ill will) and the five higher (lust for material existence, lust for immaterial existence, conceit, restlessness, and ignorance). In the Mahayana tradition there are five dull knots (confusion, desire, anger, pride, doubt) and five sharp knots (viewing the body as self, extreme views, wrong views, perverted views, and superstitious views).

Upadana: *compulsive automatic grasping* at perceptions, thoughts, and emotions according to the conditioning of past experience.

Vasana: *tendencies and inclinations*; literally, fragrance, from *vas*: dwelling, residue, remainder. Subliminal inclinations and patterns, traces of past experience and action, residues of thoughts and actions, particularly the residue of ignorance. The driving forces that color and motivate attitudes and future actions; habit energies giving rise to samsara.

Vikalpa: *patterning*; the structuring of cognition due to past experience and the traces they have left. *Vikalpa* gives rise to the apparent world of self and environment and all our emotional reactions to such appearances.

12 links of dependent arising

1. *Ignorance* (avidya), a moment of not knowing how things are, leads to...
2. *Formations* (samsakara), habits of seeing, feeling, and doing, lead to...
3. *Consciousness* (vijnana) split into subject and object, leading to...
4. *Name and form* (namarupa) or identity arises based on past conditioning lead to...
5. *Sense fields* (ayatana) arising to perceive various aspects of experience lead to...
6. *Contact* (sparsha) between objects, sense faculty, and consciousness lead to...
7. *Feeling-tones* (vedana) of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral lead to...
8. *Thirst* (trshna) emotions of attraction, aversion, and indifference lead to...
9. *Grasping* (upadana: clinging) behaviors of grasping, rejecting, and ignoring lead to...
10. *Becoming* (bhava) an existence with a body, speech, and mind, leading to...
11. *Birth* (jati), the arising of a self in an environment, leading to...
12. *Aging, declining and dying* (jara-marana) with the associated suffering, leading... back around to *Ignorance*...

<p>Ten fetters that bind us to samsara</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Belief in a self Scepticism or doubt Attachment to rules and rituals Sense desire Ill-will Craving for forms Craving for the formless Pride or conceit Restlessness Ignorance 	<p>Five kleshas (conflicting emotions)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ignorance: Confusion, bewilderment, delusion, not understanding the way of things. Attachment: desire and grasping at what is pleasant. Aversion: hatred and rejecting what is unpleasant. Pride: Arrogance and conceit, an inflated attitude of oneself and disrespect toward others. Envy: Being unable to bear the accomplishments or good fortune of others.
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Craving is never fulfilled because it is based on the delusion of separation between an independent, permanent self and an independent object that can ultimately satisfy.

All things are impermanent, and decay and death inevitably follow the becoming and birth of any sense of self.

“Grasping at things can only yield one of two results: either the thing you are grasping at disappears, or you yourself disappear. It is only a matter of which occurs first.”

~ S.N. Goenka

“This, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the cause of suffering: it is that craving -- compelling, intoxicating -- which causes us to be born into things again and again, ever seeking fresh delight now here, now there; it is namely the craving for sensual delight, the craving to be something, and the craving to feel nothing.”

~ Sutta on Setting the Wheel of Dharma in Motion

Cultivating positive actions

Taranatha's contemplations on karma from *Essence of Ambrosia* (p.31, 37-38):

“Happiness comes solely from positive or virtuous actions. Suffering comes only from negative or harmful actions. Since virtuous and harmful actions ripen inevitably in this way, I should adopt some actions and abandon others. Whether my actions are virtuous or negative, at the time of the causal action, what I do may be minor. But at the time of the ripening of the action, the result increases considerably in magnitude. The smallest increases are a hundred or a thousand-fold. The largest increases are immeasurable. Therefore, giving up negative actions and adopting positive ones is very important. If I do not take steps to repair the negative actions that I have committed, [the karmic imprints] of those actions will not diminish in the least until the action fully ripens as an effect. If I have not done something, it is impossible for the corresponding positive or negative karma to arise in my continuum. Therefore, it is very important for me to be careful about what I do and what I avoid.”

“Not only will I avoid the ten non-virtuous actions, I will also not commit any actions large or small that are associated with non-virtue. I will steer others away from negative actions, and I will not rejoice when I see others engaging in them. I will not praise or glorify these actions. Not only will I practice the ten positive, virtuous actions, but I will also engage in everything that is related to virtue. I will save lives, give away sustenance and material things, maintain ethical conduct, make offerings to the Three Jewels, engender faith and so forth. I will encourage others to engage in virtue, will rejoice in the virtuous actions of myself and others and will praise virtue. In addition, there are neutral actions that are neither virtuous nor evil, such as going, standing, sleeping, sitting and so forth. Although these do not have a fully ripened result, they are a meaningless waste of time. I will not let myself fall into the power of laziness and distraction! When I find myself in a state of indifference, I will turn my mind and behavior toward virtue.”

Five lay precepts to refrain from killing, stealing, lying, sexual misconduct, and intoxication.

Ten actions of body, speech, and mind:

Non-virtuous actions of body

- Taking the lives of other beings
- Stealing, covertly or openly
- Sexual behavior that causes harm

Non-virtuous actions of speech

- Lying
- Slander, causing spite and malice
- Speaking harshly, of others' faults
- Meaningless chatter, gossip, etc

Non-virtuous actions of mind

- Coveting (greed)
- Ill will (wishing harm)
- Wrong views (delusion)

Virtuous actions of body

- Saving lives
- Giving generously
- Guarding sexual conduct

Virtuous actions of speech

- To speak the truth
- Reconciling those divided
- Speaking gently
- Speaking meaningfully

Virtuous actions of mind

- Generosity and contentment
- Good will (harmlessness)
- Right views (wisdom)

Questions about karma

- ❖ The teachings say all experiences and phenomena are dependent upon innumerable causes and conditions. Do I actually see things that way? Or do some experiences and phenomena appear to be independent, existing on their own?
- ❖ When an impulsive thought or action begins to arise, can I see and feel the stickiness and momentum that drives habitual actions?
Recall an experience of breaking a chain of dependent arising (attraction turns into grasping, aversion turns into rejecting, indifference turns into ignoring).
How do attention and intention actually affect the repetition, or the interruption, of habitual behavior?
- ❖ Do I assume that the consequences of my actions will occur in a certain way or a certain time frame?
- ❖ Are there habits and actions I tend to justify on the grounds that they won't have consequences?
- ❖ When I look at the ten actions, do I have a clear sense that "virtuous" acts do indeed bring happiness, and "nonvirtuous" acts do bring harm?
- ❖ How true does it seem that my experience is the result of my actions?
Do experiences seem to unfold that are not at least somewhat due to my actions?
Is my experience ten percent due to my actions? Fifty percent? Eighty percent?
- ❖ We are influenced by the actions of others, and we are embedded in a culture of collective karma. What is still within my power? How do I view personal responsibility?
- ❖ Do I see the positive sides of the inevitability of karma?
What positive actions do I wish to do more often?
Do I understand and feel confidence in the value of aspiring, intending, rejoicing, and dedicating positive actions?

The Faults of Samsara

*For beings long to free themselves from misery,
But misery itself they race to catch.
They long for joy, but in their ignorance,
Destroy it, as they would a hated enemy.
~ Shantideva, 1.28*

Kinds of suffering

Shabkar's verses on the unsatisfactory nature of samsara:

All beings suffer from birth, aging, sickness, and death.
Meeting with the unpleasant -- enemies,
Separation from the pleasant -- loved ones,
Not finding that which they desire,
And the suffering of the five appropriated aggregates.

The suffering of uncertainty between friend and enemy,
A lack of satisfaction, repeatedly casting off bodies,
Repeatedly reborn over and over again from a mother's womb,
And the continual ascent and inevitable fall.

The suffering of being without companionship,
The sufferings of change, the sufferings of suffering itself,
And the suffering of conditionality -- many sufferings indeed!

In particular: beings in hell suffer from heat and cold.
Hungry spirits suffer from hunger and thirst.
Animals suffer from exploitation,
Humans suffer from birth, aging, sickness, and death.
Demigods suffer from quarrels,
And gods suffer from death and transmigration. (Shabkar, p.37-38)

“Reflect on the suffering endured in the realms of hell, spirits, and animals and how you wouldn't be able to endure so much as a fraction of it.... Reflect with compassion, how all your mother / parent sentient beings are experiencing these sufferings of heat, cold, hunger, thirst, stupidity, and dumbness right now. Meditate strongly until compassion arises, after it has arisen reflect how you might eradicate these sufferings and place all your mother beings in bliss.” (Shabkar, p. 52,53)

“Everyone throughout the whole of samsara, from the summit of existence downward, is constantly affected by the pervasive suffering of conditioning and dysfunctional tendencies. This is because they have not gone beyond tainted causes and effects.... Still, the spiritually immature who are ignorant of reality continue to regard everything as pure, blissful, lasting, possessing self-identity, and so on. This is because their minds are disturbed by the perverse attachment that is the source of all ruin...” (Ga Rabjampa, p.76).

Three kinds of suffering:

The suffering of suffering includes physical discomforts such as aches and pains, heat and cold, hunger and thirst, old age and disease; mental difficulties such as anger, loneliness, depression, and grief; and the ongoing phenomena of poverty, natural disasters, and war.

The suffering of change: What begins strong eventually weakens. Experiences we consider pleasurable last only a while, and then disappoint or disappear. Pleasure and beauty arise but do not last.

The pervasive suffering of conditional existence is the basis of the suffering of suffering and change. All things are made of other things, and all things are dependent upon cause and conditions. Samsara by definition arises from delusion and karma, and the constituents of our bodymind are subject to suffering.

Six sufferings: The distress of uncertainty regarding friend and foe, of lacking contentment with possessions, of abandoning the body again and again, of taking up countless further existences, and the vicissitudes of status, pleasure and wealth, and the distress of lacking companions.

Eight sufferings: Birth, aging, illness, death, encountering the unpleasant, being separated from what is dear, not finding what you want, and the body-mind aggregates that are the basis of all suffering.

Six realms of samsara

“All experience is preceded by mind, led by mind, made by mind.
Speak or act with a corrupted mind, and struggle follows,
like the wheel of the cart follows the beast that draws the cart.”
~ Dhammapada 1

The pursuit of happiness and freedom within samsara is futile; not knowing the nature of samsara, I am propelled again and again by confusion and conflicting emotions into the six realms. Reactive emotions do not bring happiness; they produce exactly what I am trying to avoid.

1. Anger leads to the hell realms of conflict. Caught up in anger and aggression, I find myself in a realm of conflict.
2. Greed leads to the hungry ghost realms of insatiable desire. Consumed by grasping and neediness, I never seem to get what I want.
3. Ignorance and blind instinct lead to the animal realm. Seeking security and comfort, I get stuck in the same old ways of doing things.
4. Desire leads to the human realm. Jumping from desire to desire, chasing possessions and pleasures, my desires are never satisfied for long, and my busyness is endless.
5. Jealousy and competition lead to the jealous god realms. Feeling inadequate, jealous and competitive, I'm compelled to accomplish more and more.
6. Pride leads to the god realm. Self-satisfied, trying to maintain my position, I'm blind to the inevitability of change.

The causes of suffering are described by Taranatha: “All of these great sufferings of cyclic existence do not arise without causes and conditions. Once the cause of suffering is given up, it is possible to avert a cyclic existence.. What is the cause? All sufferings arise from the accumulation of karma. Or karma to arise, the emotional afflictions must be manifestly present. If there were no emotional afflictions initially, karma would not ripen in the future. Therefore, the root of all suffering, the basic cause of myself and all sentient beings wandering in cyclic existence, Is the emotional afflictions. They are described using various classifications. Sometimes they are presented as six: attachment, anger, pride, ignorance, having Perverted views and harboring doubts. Sometimes they are presented as nine. No matter what the presentation, the root of the mall is the three poisons; attachment, aversion, and ignorance.” (Taranatha, p.53)

The aches and pains of the physical body, the grief of losing what one holds dear, old age, sickness, and death — some things are unavoidable. But I create extra suffering for myself and others with craving, aversion, and delusion.

There are three levels of suffering: the suffering of physical and mental pain, the suffering of change and impermanence, and the suffering of conditioned existence itself.

My fundamental buddha nature is wisdom and compassion. It is possible to free myself from samsara; rebirth can be stopped. The cycles of reactivity and suffering can be brought to an end.

A path of awakening and freedom has been developed and refined over many centuries of experience. I should be determined to place confidence in the teachers and practitioners of that path, and in my ability to travel it.

*Suffering also has its worth.
Through sorrow, pride is driven out
And pity felt for those who wander in samsara;
Evil is avoided, and goodness seems delightful.
~ Shantideva 6.21*

*"When touched by painful feelings,
they arouse great compassion for all sentient beings
who have been born in the lower realms
or without the opportunity to practice..."
~ Akshayamati Sutra*

Questions about samsara

- ❖ Do I see patterns of imbalance, dissatisfaction, or struggle in my experience?
When I'm dissatisfied, I tend to... get angry? Plan ways to escape? Feel compassion?
- ❖ Distinguish between the pain of pain and the struggle of suffering (for example, the pain of losing someone I hold dear, and the suffering of feeling that my loss is unfair and special to me).
- ❖ How do I relate to the *kleshas* (conflicting emotions and reactions)?
Which *kleshas* do you especially relate to? Which do you feel immune from?
- ❖ The six realms are projections of six *kleshas*.
Are there one or two realms that I regularly spend time in?
Has that changed over my life time?
Is there a realm that I have never experienced?
- ❖ Do I recognize the futility of *samsara*, or do I hold out hope that *samsara* turning out well?
- ❖ Compare how I tend to regard my own dissatisfactions with the dissatisfactions others experience.
- ❖ Can I look back on a period of suffering and see now that it also led to insight or growth, or empathy and compassion, or some other positive experience or quality?
- ❖ From day to day, in what do I actually take refuge?
What do I rely on when I'm happy? When I'm fearful? When I'm under stress?
How about when I'm confident -- what do I tend to take refuge in then?

Concise Mahamudrā Preliminaries Arranged for Recitation by Karma Chakme

First, meditate on the difficulty of obtaining the freedoms and advantages.

From the *Bodhisattva Pitaka*:

Rare it is to become a human being,
Rare to obtain a human life.
Rare to encounter the sacred Dharma.
Rare for a Buddha to appear.

Second, meditate on impermanence.

The Bodhicaryavatara says:

There's no telling which will come first:
Tomorrow or the next life.
So instead of striving for tomorrow's sake,
It would be better to work for the next life.

Third, meditate on cause and effect.

The shorter Sutra on the Application of Mindfulness says:

It is through virtue that one gains happiness;
It is through non-virtue that suffering arises.
Thus, the fruits of virtuous and unvirtuous
May be clearly demonstrated.

Fourth, meditate on the trials of samsara.

The Sutra of the Meeting of Father and Son says:

Seeing the tribulations of samsara
Engenders a mind of disenchantment.
In terror of the prison of the three realms,
Strive with diligence to leave it behind.

~ *English translation from Lotsawa House.*

Additional Reading on the Four Thoughts

Virtually every Dharma text includes something on the four thoughts. The following texts (listed in chronological order) are especially good for their detailed teachings, or their insightful contemplations, or their inspiring poetic expressions, or for integrating the four thoughts with other Dharma practices.

Shantideva. *The Way of the Bodhisattva*

Gampopa. *Jewel Ornament of Liberation*

Tsongkhapa. *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path of Enlightenment*

Ga Rabjampa. *To Dispel the Misery of the World*

Taranatha. *Essence of Ambrosia*

Shabkar. *The Emanated Scripture of Manjushri*

Patrul Rinpoche. *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*

Kangyur Rinpoche. *Treasury of Precious Qualities*

McLeod, Ken. *Wake Up To Your Life*

Khandro Rinpoche. *This Precious Life*

Hunter, Dennis. *The Four Reminders*