

The Four Thoughts that Turn the Mind

[Precious Human Rebirth, Impermanence, Suffering, Karma]

Class notes Dec. 7, 2014

Overview and Context

Having an accurate understanding of ourselves in the big picture.... We need that for superior building blocks for the best possible spiritual orientation to really align with our deepest wishes. "Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life," by Shantideva, says we should consider these things to develop a really strong determination to be free from samsara. These four stanzas from 9th Century monk, Shantideva, show his poetry and probing mind, how he comes to certainty into the Four Thoughts that Turn the Mind: (Shantideva 1997)

4. This leisure and endowment, which are so difficult to obtain, have been acquired, and they bring about the welfare of the world. If one fails to take this favorable opportunity into consideration, how could this occasion occur again?

5. Just as lightning illuminates the darkness of a cloudy night for an instant, in the same way, by the power of the Buddha, occasionally people's minds are momentarily inclined toward merit.

6. Thus, virtue is perpetually ever so feeble, while the power of vice is great and extremely dreadful. If there were no Spirit of Perfect Awakening, what other virtue would overcome it?

7. The Lords of Sages, who have been contemplating for many eons, have seen this as a blessing by which joy is easily increased and immeasurable multitudes of beings are rescued.

Really, the Four Thoughts are so intrinsically core to the Buddhist worldview that these themes are simply assumed as a basic foundation for all the practices, and hold a central place in all the central texts of all the schools of Tibetan Buddhism.

In the *Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, for instance, Buddha Nature is taught first. Then Precious Human Rebirth and then the importance of a Spiritual Master. That text is the core curriculum, if you will, for the Kagyu school in Tibetan Buddhism.ⁱ

When we say, it's great to have a precious human life, we don't get the depth of it until we consider the alternative. Imagine life as a bug. Or as a cat – full of neurosis. Or as a fish, or a ghost, or a hell being. Mostly it's just terrible suffering. And not a good chance of being able to think. Consider that those rebirths are entirely more common for us. Naturally, if we don't create the causes for happiness, (virtue), we won't experience the results. It's basic. But unsettling. All of a sudden,

we want to make sure and get a precious human rebirth. So we need to reflect often on the interconnectedness of all things.

The *Jewel Ornament of Liberation* first lays out the progression for our enlightenment, saying the Primary Cause is our own Buddha Nature. Then comes The Working Basis for our Enlightenment as the Precious Human Life.

Which raises an important question. Do you really think we actually CAN attain enlightenment? If not, why spend any effort “checking it out?” On the other hand, consider the implications of a world in which complete and total enlightenment is possible.

Let’s listen to the Buddha himself in the sutras:

Essence of the Well-Gone One pervades all migrators.

- *The King of Meditative Absorption Sutra*

All sentient beings have the Essence of the Thus-gone One.

- *The Small Parinirvana Sutra*

For example, as butter permeates milk, likewise the Essence of the Thus-gone One pervades all sentient beings.

- *The Sutra of the Great Parinirvana*

And here we are talking about his enlightened intelligence, perfected through the unmistakable understanding of emptiness. *The Ornament of Mahayana Sutra* says:

Even though suchness (emptiness) is not different for any being,
One is called “Thus-gone One” when it is fully purified.

Therefore, all beings are of its essence.

These vivid, vibrant language reflects our spiritual struggle to extricate ourselves from the mundane sufferings of a small, boxed-in life – alienated, vaguely dissatisfied or at least pretty sure we could be getting more out of life. This is called samsara. As a Buddhist principle it is key – the cycle by which we are born, cause karma, pass into a transition state that spoils my plans for enlightenment.

In Buddhism we have a description of realms we can see and those we can’t see. They make up the pantheon of sentient beings and through countless lifetimes we have been born in each one of them countless times. Animals, insects, ghostly beings, they all create karma – both good and bad.

When we get this we REALLY want to work on our karma. Which brings us back to a more down to earth question about our own lives. What was my own past life? What will become of me in the future. The Tibetan lamas talk about the six realms. 3 dark and 3 light. They are Demi-gods, jealous gods, humans, animals, hungry ghosts and the hot and cold hells.

While all six have Buddha nature, humans are the only ones we know about that can communicate the Dharma, discipline their minds to practice.

A Human Life of Leisure and Opportunity

The Precious Human Rebirth provides optimal conditions for accomplishing our own most perfect fulfillment. We all know there are environments that incubate a spirit of awareness, curiosity, and personal growth. So too, with our possible rebirth.

But what, on a personal level, means the most to you? Ultimately, what would you like to be?

In our deepest hearts, there thrives a universal love for all beings – a love that knows suffering, feels compassion, and a sense of peace. When we settle down and look inside, we encounter our own selves, without the window dressing and self-projecting. And we are introduced to a compassionate, kind and caring person.

With that motivation we want to help beings as much as possible.

Eight Leisures and 10 Opportunities

8 Leisures, or Freedoms and 10 Opportunities or Fortunes – The Great Treatise on the Stages of Enlightenment describes them as:

Freedom from:

- 1 Born with wrong views
- 2 when the Buddha has not arisen,
- 3 animal,
- 4 hungry ghost,
- 5 hell being,
- 6 An uncultured person in a border region,
- 7 Having complete sense faculties
- 8 A deity of long life

The first three don't know what to adopt and what to reject

10 Opportunities

Five pertain to one's self

- 1 Being born in a central region,
- 2 having complete sensory faculties,
- 3 having reversible karma
- 4 having faith in the source
- 5 born human

Five pertaining to others

- 1 A Buddha has visited
- 2 The teaching is being taught
- 3 The teaching remains
- 4 There are those who follow it
- 5 There is caring for others (benefactors)

As Tsong Khampa says in his *Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path*, we should meditate such as this:

Why would I waste this attainment of such a good life? When I act as though it were insignificant, I am deceiving myself. Why could

be more foolish than this? Just this once I am free from continuously trekking the many narrow cliff-paths of leisureless conditions, such as miserable realms. If I waste this freedom and return to those conditions, it would be similar to losing my mind, like someone dazed by a magic spell.ⁱⁱ

Some more quotes flesh out the magnitude of this good fortune.

Human life plants the seed
For going beyond cyclic existence,
The supreme seed of glorious enlightenment.
Human life is a stream of good qualities
Better than a wish-granting jewel.
Who here would attain it and then waste it.

- Asurya

Remember, being reborn in the lower realms is tough because while there we inevitably commit non-virtuous acts, because we lack wisdom. Thus it is all the more difficult to ever get a human rebirth.

Difficulty of attaining the precious human life

Humans for the most part
Are involved in things ignoble.
Therefore, most ordinary beings
Will surely go to the miserable realms
- Aryadeva's Four Hundred Stanzas

Looking at our own schedules, and our deepest desires. Do they match?

Thus the Bhagavan said
That this human life is as difficult to obtain
As it is for a sea turtle to put its neck
Into a yoke tossing about on the vast oceanⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ It was started by Gampopa, who was a student of Milarepa, a crazy mountain yogi, and before him, Marpa the Translator, who brought the Dharma from India to Tibet. And he gathered sacred teachings from the most renowned scholars at Nalanda University, at the height of Buddhist culture, art, spiritualism and academics. A succession of benevolent Buddhist kings had established the era in India around 600 C.E. to 1400 C.E., when Buddhism declined in India, where it finally became absorbed/ obliterated and then disappeared. In Tibet and elsewhere, however, it thrived.

ⁱⁱ *The Great Treatise of the Stages of the Path*, Tsong Khappa, page 121-121.

ⁱⁱⁱ Id.