

The Four Thoughts that Turn the Mind

[Precious Human Rebirth, Impermanence, Suffering, Karma]

Class notes Dec. 14, 2014

Overview and Context

Impermanence –

We all will die.

We don't know when.

Nothing at the time of death will help

O monks! All composite phenomena are impermanent. - Buddha

The end of accumulation is dispersion. The end of all construction is falling. The end of meeting is separating. The end of life is death. – Gampopa

Gampopa presents in the *Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, a classification of the topic that helps build a complete understanding of this simple idea.

I. Impermanence of outer world.

A. Gross impermanence – “From down below this cosmic circle of wind up to the fourth stage of meditating concentration, there is nothing that has the nature of permanence or solidity; nothing is unchanging.”ⁱ

B. Subtle Impermanence of the Outer World.

Consider the seasons, which have enormous changes in our lives. At every moment, the season affects the ground, the smells, the beings. It makes a HUGE effect on people's moods, our food, our well-being, our health. It is life and death to countless beings and yet constantly changing. The position of sun and moon are in motion. So is the earth. We are all whizzing through space faster than a bullet. Highly impermanence, and yet it doesn't feel like it.

C. Impermanence of the Inner Sentient Beings – everyone we know, or have ever known is constantly changing. Look at pictures of them. Consider the animals that gave their lives for our food.

We are in flux – physically, with every breath. Our biome, as we know, is made up of countless other creatures. And, the fact is, the life that is within us will leave. It will be exhausted and there will be separation. The breath ceases. The body is considered a corpse. The mind stream has become a wanderer, adrift to its next rebirth.

Definitely remaining neither day nor night,
Life is always slipping by
And never getting any longer,
Why will death not come to one like me?
- Shantideva

Whether on earth or in the heavens, have you seen any who were born who did not die or have you even heard of any? And still you have doubt? – Ashvaghosha

Even the Buddha had to leave his body.

“Alas! As all that are composite are impermanent, they are subject to birth and death.”

Buddha, in *The Verses Spoken Intentionally*.

To continue with the Jewel Ornament of Liberation:

The time of death is uncertain because:

1. a human life span is indefinite
2. the body has no essence
3. there are many possible causes of death

Nothing will help at the time of death because:

1. we cannot be helped by our wealth,
2. we cannot be helped by our relatives or friends,
3. we cannot be helped by our bodiesⁱⁱ

Meditating on the death of ourselves and others helps to release attachment to this life. It nourishes faith, supports perseverance, and quickly frees one from attachment and hatred. It becomes a cause for the realization of the equal nature of all phenomena.

Another way to look at this topic is to see how it fits in Buddhist psychology. Thinking about our own death will naturally sober up the mind, which will behave more responsibly and not be so arrogant. Also, impermanence is essential to cut off attachment to this life. ⁱⁱⁱ

Meditation on the impermanence is the root cause for a person to develop Renunciation, the determination to be free from cyclic existence, (samsara), and to take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Not entirely out of fear, but out of informed self-interest and altruism. Naturally we want to create the causes for our rebirth as human, and to work towards perfect enlightenment, so that I can benefit others and bring them to the state of perfect bliss and wisdom.

“Death does not differentiate between tasks done and undone.” – Shantideva

Also, giving up the idea ‘I will live forever’ we encounter the same kind of resistance that we find when contemplating emptiness. These two practices intersect and help each other along. Remember the goal is not to psych ourselves out, but to look realistically at the incontrovertible truth about our own existence.

Just as we shed the delusion of impermanence in this body, so, too, must we shed the delusion that the self is a permanently, solid, inherently existent thing.

- The fabric of our lives is like a dream, or a movie, only we don’t know it’s not real. It looks like a package deal. But we don’t know when the film will snap.
- The realization of impermanence naturally reverses the desire to accumulate worldly objects. It reduces desire for worldly pleasures. It improves our yearning for spiritual guidance, and opens the door to spiritual satisfaction and bliss, contentment and perspective

ⁱ Gampopa, *Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, page 84.

ⁱⁱ Id., page 88 -91

ⁱⁱⁱ Atisha, *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*, pages 27, 28.