

Four Thoughts

From *Mind Training*, By Ringu Tulku

We begin with the Four Thoughts or Contemplations. They are not sermons or holy rules but truths which we can reflect upon and use in our own way to revise and clarify our thinking about the world. They make us aware of our true situation and give us a sense of urgency about going forward on our spiritual path. Understanding the four preliminary thoughts is the first step in refining and directing our compassion. They are the groundwork of liberation.

Precious Human Birth

This is traditionally always the first principle we think about. No matter what our hardships or handicaps, it is important to appreciate the life we have been given. Even if we have nothing, no home or wealth or education, we are human and that in itself is a very great blessing.

A human birth is not more valuable than any other life form, but it has greater possibilities and responsibilities. Human beings can destroy the world, animals and trees cannot. Our actions can be very positive or very negative. We are in a position to help thousands of other beings or to harm them, and this is why we need to understand the significance of this birth and use it mindfully.

It does not take any special talents to manage ordinary survival, even a worm can do that. Our human consciousness gives us exceptional potential. We are aware of our own thoughts. We can examine and reflect on the shortcomings of life. We have freedom of choice and can make our own decisions. We understand the difference between good and bad. Finally, our physical existence is not so partial or precarious that it prevents us from following the spiritual path. Only human beings can fully recognize the misery of birth, old age, sickness, and death. This realization was the first step in the Buddha's liberation. We can develop the same enlightened strength and use the advantages of this birth by training our mind.

Just being alive is a great thing. It is such a pity when we break down or become self-destructive and forget all our advantages. A woman I know had an accident climbing in Japan. She slipped and fell into a crevasse in the ice and almost died. When she was rescued, she said that all her worries had gone. She had no more complaints, she was just happy to survive. If we live like this, our cynicism and melancholy will disappear.

Impermanence

According to Buddhist thinking, something can only be “permanent” if it exists independently of everything else, is not caused by any conditions, and does not change. It is actually impossible to find anything like this. Everything that exists is interdependent, conditional, and subject to change. We can see this for ourselves. It is obvious. Nothing around us remains the same. We know things are impermanent, but we do not always accept it.

Our lives are fragile. The physical and mental capacities we have taken for granted are gradually wearing down. Our body can be damaged or destroyed in a second. We will all die. That is certain, but we do not know when our death will take place. The suspense about our time of death allows us to feel eternal and gives us a false security about time. We behave as though our lives will last forever. A sense of timelessness makes the mind passive and lethargic. It also causes insecurity and impatience in our daily lives.

Life would be unbearable if everything stayed the same because human beings find situations that are fixed and predictable very hard to tolerate. Even in small matters, we become uneasy if we feel there is no end in sight. I know of couples who live harmoniously together for 10 years then marry and are divorced within a year. As soon as they feel bound to each other for the rest of their lives, they begin to fight. Impermanence removes our reasons for quarreling with each other. Arguments only break out if we imagine that our relationships are endless. When we appreciate that our time with our families, partners, and friends may be shorter than we think, we get on better with each other. Awareness of impermanence gives us extraordinary inner strength and resilience. I’ve experienced this myself. When I left Tibet, I travelled to India with thousands of other refugees. We had lost everything: our homeland, our property, families, and friends. People in the outside world who met us were struck by our reaction to exile. It surprised them that we all seemed so cheerful. We had arrived in the country that was completely unlike Tibet. The language, food, and weather were all totally different. It was terribly hot and the camps were crowded and noisy. The area was full of mosquitoes and leeches. Many of us had fevers and illnesses. It was a little bit like hell. People expected us to be gloomy, but we were in good spirits. During the evenings when we could not sleep because of the heat and insect bites, we laughed and joked and sang together. Although our future was uncertain, we enjoyed ourselves and I believe our Buddhist background was the reason for this. We had lost our country, but life felt very precious to us. We accepted that suffering was not unusual and many other people had undergone similar ordeals before us. Among over 100,000 people in the camp there was death, disease, and hardship but there were remarkably few breakdowns or mental problems.

Bearing impermanence in mind pacifies our anxiety and fear. The factors causing our troubles are temporary and only here for a short time. Even the lowest state of despair, there is the solace of knowing that things will sooner or later get better. We will also take greater pleasure in things and enjoy ourselves more if we realize that our joy will soon fade.

This thought is not about passively allowing events to control us or surrendering to circumstances. On the contrary, a sense of how transitory our lives are works against wishful thinking and lethargy. Nothing can be held back. The basis of our lives is change so there is no time to lose. We should make good use of every moment. So many complications come from holding on to the past. It is already gone, let it go. What will happen next? We do not know. By contemplating the impermanence of everything in existence, we discover a basic truth about the nature of mind.

The Deficits of Samsara

Samsara is not a place or a situation but a painful state of mind, dominated by confusion and ignorance. This ignorance is subtle, it is not so much a lack of information as a lack of clarity. We do not know who we are or what we are doing. We wander in samsara and return again and again to the cyclic existence of samsara.

Our true nature it is absolutely pure and luminous. We lose sight of this purity when conflicting concepts from our senses and the ego cloud our minds. Our awareness is dulled by the repeating cycles of pleasure followed by pain, expectation followed by dismay, and desire followed by loss. The illusions and conflicts of samsara do not really exist. They are myths, constructed by the mind.

The mind creates samsara because it is the mind which interprets the body experiences in an incomplete and deceptive way. Our eyes are engineered to picture something visually. We respond to the object with our sense of sight but when we close our eyes we can only see what we mentally recall, not the original vision. We are never able to reproduce exactly what our senses received because the mind records the information in our imagination, under the influence of former associations and memories. These subjective mental patterns and shape our whole perception of reality.

Each of us has a characteristic blueprint for the external world and the impressions which do not fit into this model are simply ignored or overlooked. When we are introduced to new ideas, we try to adapt them or cut them down to size, but if they still do not match our mental expectations, they will be discarded. I encounter this in a very vivid way when I arrived in India after leaving Tibet. I was told about something called a "train." I had never heard of one before, there was no such thing in Tibet. We had no trains there. People told me the train was made of metal and travel down to iron tracks. You could ride in it drinking a cup of tea and the tea never spilled. I tried to imagine this. I pictured a ball rolling down an iron road and myself turning around and around inside it, but I could not imagine drinking a cup of tea without spilling it because the image my mind produced gave me only a very partial understanding of the train. With practice we can confront the delusions of cyclic existence and free ourselves from them.

Being human means we are likely to be unhappy, but it is possible to look for a way out; to renounce the suffering of samsara, to transcend it.

Karma: Action, Cause and Effect

Just as each seed has a flower, every action has a consequence. This is the law of karma. Our karma is everything we are from our past lives; through this lifetime from birth until now, today, and yesterday. Our karma can be plus or minus. We do negative things when emotions like anger, pride, jealousy, and greed take over and this leads to negative results.

Memories of the virtuous things we may have done before, or our plans to do better in the future are not going to make any difference now. The impact of our immediate thoughts is what truly matters. This moment is the outcome of our previous actions and if our situation is unfavorable, it is the effect of our past negativity. The future is created by what we do now. This makes liberation possible.

By recognizing and regretting negative conduct, our karma can be changed. The best way of improving our actions and their outcomes to purify the way we think. When our mental attitude is more wholesome, our physical and verbal behavior will be better. It is always possible to turn bad mental habits into good habits, but we have to be skillful to remedy our karma. We cannot push too hard. The mind is very sensitive and subtle and too much pressure will not work.

People sometimes have the impression that Buddhist philosophy is dull and serious, but it is actually an extremely optimistic way of life. If we follow the preliminary thoughts, we are in no doubt that our human existence is valuable. We know that nothing in the world is permanent or lasting and we recognize suffering as an inevitable result of our own negative actions. These are all insights which lead to peace of mind.