



MINDROLLING INTERNATIONAL

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Transcripts & Documents

Contemplating the Four Reminders

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The following is drawn from Her Eminence Jetsün Khandro Rinpoche's teaching on Lochen Dharmashri's commentary on The Gathering of the Sutras, the Dü pa'i Do, given on 9th August, 2008 at Lotus Garden.

Ngöndro is the foundation of the vajrayana teachings—the pillar of the outer and inner preliminaries and probably the most important stepping stone into the vajrayana.

If forced to identify the most important structure within the buddhadharma—especially the vajrayana—I would say it is the Four Reminders, which is the very foundation of ngöndro practice

Because of our pre-occupation with the mundane—with ordinary unimportant things—we entangle self-grasping with laziness, doubt and hesitation. Every time one doubts the buddhadharma, it is because understanding of the Four Reminders is weak. Lacking awareness and a strong understanding of the Four Reminders is also the cause of harboring misconceptions.



Every misconception, doubt, or hesitation that impedes progress on the path of practice will be dissolved through contemplating these outer preliminaries, which are also known as the Four Thoughts that Transform the Mind. They are essential in bringing wisdom to a common ordinary mind submerged in deluded thoughts and habitual tendencies.

1st Contemplation: Preciousness of Human Existence

Anyone who understands the rarity of a supreme human body could not easily waste it. Not understanding the importance of human existence, one doesn't realize how hard one has worked to obtain it. You're more careful about your car.

Why do you waste this precious human existence doing silly unnecessary things? No possession could ever be as valuable as this precious life, yet when we make our habitual patterns of ignorance, laziness, small doubts, and

hesitation so important, we foolishly let this precious jewel-like human life go to waste.

It is very tricky to think that after death we will continue in another human form. Truthfully and realistically speaking, you are never going to get another chance like this one. So, it is best to see whether what you are doing in this life with all its challenges, will sum up in such a way as to produce another lifetime gifted with the same kinds of opportunities.

All the good causes and conditions from the past, resulting in this life, are so very rare, and therefore, there is no time to waste. There is no time to waste because another opportunity like this will not easily come again. Don't just say, "I know this is a very precious human existence." but truly contemplate it.

Throughout your ngöndro practices allow all adverse moments to deepen that understanding. Instead of succumbing to laziness when it arises, face the laziness by contemplating the preciousness of human existence. When you are overcome by depression, disappointment, or sadness, turn your mind to the contemplation of the preciousness of human existence.

2nd Contemplation: Impermanence

The Buddha himself said, "Discontentment and not knowing impermanence are the two main reasons why we create and allow suffering and the causes of suffering to continue." If one understands the non-necessity of discontentment, and is able to genuinely enjoy a sense of fulfillment or contentment in what one has, it better equips one to use each moment properly.

One who is unable to use the present moment properly is usually the one who succumbs to discontentment—always reflecting on something in the past or something to obtain or hope for in the future. Such a person focuses on what is missing, and in pursuit of that is unable to see what they are faced with in the present. Not having a sense of rest or knowing the ease of abiding in the present moment, karmic patterns continue. This discontent, along with not knowing impermanence, allows habitual tendencies and karmic impulses to continue.

A mind which does not reflect upon impermanence is a weak mind that will create non-virtuous acts. A mind that reflects upon change and impermanence, and realizes how fragile and how precious everything is, will treasure the present moment. Such a mind will find the wisdom to generate virtue in this moment.

When things of the past are gone and things of the future haven't arisen, one must know how to use this present moment. Our teachers often say that it is only the moment's breath that you can be faced with directly. A meditator who works with oneself and uses that breath gains strength in awareness and does not waste a precious human life.

When impermanence is not considered and mindfulness is not generated, planning begins. Planning keeps one busy wasting a precious human existence. Resentments become stronger and pretentiousness develops. Objects and one's attachments to them gain importance. These attachments give birth to all the kleshas and the root poisons gain more strength and power.

When impermanence is considered, there is a greater probability that the mind will generate wisdom to discern between things that are necessary versus things that are unnecessary. It is now possible to prioritize one's life according to that wisdom.

Many of us, not thinking about impermanence, become paralyzed with fear when someone close to us dies. It is now the fifteenth day since one of our Lotus Garden members passed. Many of you momentarily thought about your own mortality, but I'm not entirely convinced that your consideration will be long lasting.

Our teachers die. Our sangha members die. One gets a tumor or a pain and panics. "My breast is going to be cut off," or something is going to be cut, or put into the body, or attached to the body. I think most of you are dealing with some medical issue at this point and the others are reminded that it could be you.

Yet, rather than taking these events as true indicators of impermanence, one places more reliance on defying impermanence, rather than seeing what a short time there is left.

When His Holiness passed and I was collecting information about his life, it was very interesting to see Rinpoche's whole life on a piece of paper. What we call life can be divided into chunks of time, for example, when Rinpoche was in retreat for nineteen years, when and what he taught, or what he constructed. But there was no personal life information. I was talking with Jetsun-la and I said, "Where did he do anything for himself?"

I think this is a good way to look into your own life and inquire, “Exactly what is life?” It’s all broken into pieces -- winter, summer, autumn, spring, one year to the next. How many years do we actually live a life? What is the substance, the essence that can be gathered from having lived? This precious and rare human existence goes quickly. How much time is left? I don’t know, but ultimately what does matter is how deeply practice is actualized within oneself. Talking about dharma is one thing. Realizing dharma is entirely different.

It may be very important at the next Sukavati that we ask for whom we are doing it. Those who live longer will be responsible for a lot of Sukavatis.

When thinking about impermanence in this way, who has time to waste creating big issues in life— whether it is winning arguments, making plans, harboring distractions, or getting lost in intellectualization of the dharma? Despite your contemplation on impermanence, if you must maintain klesha activity, keep it to a minimum.

Be clear about what is important and act in accordance with that. Take your contemplation on impermanence to heart and you will find the strength, wisdom, and courage to make the right choices. The power of impermanence will make it easier to drop anger, hatred and jealousy and will provide the strength to lessen attachment.

3rd Contemplation: Karma

Reflect on the force of karma that has created your existence. Everything you think and do has a consequence, a result. Reflect on the rapidity with which you create whole lifetimes of karma. Own up to that karma. Take responsibility for it. All experiences are created by karma itself, so ask yourself, “What kind of karma have I created?”

The adorning quality of this human existence is that one’s karma can be transformed. No matter how fragile and impermanent one’s life, one can transcend and purify one’s karma. If there is such a thing as cause and effect, then it also contains within it the wisdom of knowing that it can be a cause of happiness and liberation. So, take responsibility for this. Consider that when faced with karma today, you may be able to transform that karma to the path of enlightenment, to the path of bodhi .

May any further practice understanding or exertion on the path become a karma of blessing, a karma of showers, a rain of blessings, and genuine cause of goodness, peace, and happiness for all sentient beings.

4th Contemplation: Suffering of the Six Realms

It is only by taking responsibility for one's own karma that the sufferings of sentient beings can be lessened. By using this precious human existence to its fullest potential, bringing about an absolute exhaustion of the suffering of all sentient beings is within reach.

If one's contemplation on the suffering of the six realms is weak, selflessness, compassion and genuine sympathy for other sentient beings cannot arise in the mind of the practitioner.

When one is practicing ngöndro the Four Reminders must be pervasive at all times. Most importantly, one's mind should be almost obsessed with these contemplations.