

4 Thoughts That Turn the Mind to Dharma
Lecture given by Fred Cooper at the Bodhi Stupa in Santa Fe
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Gampopa's Jewel Ornament of Liberation

These are the Fundamental Preliminary Contemplations that confirm the human condition. We do these contemplations to truly and clearly understand and confirm that this life is precious. We can lose it at any time. It is impermanent. How did we get this precious human life? And how will we lose it? Everything happens as a result of karma. As long as ego is the main source of manifestation there will always be suffering. Suffering can exist in many ways. So these contemplations are a confirmation about what everything is, what we are, what has been happening to us and what is going to happen to us. If we don't understand this clearly, none of our practices will be very effective.

I -Precious Human Life.

On the surface level the human realm is in the middle of the 6 realms. We are capable of experiencing joy and happiness as well as pain and suffering. The human realm is special because we are capable of taking the time and effort to develop ourselves. On a deeper level, we are human beings, I am talking to you, you are listening to the dharma, we have Buddha nature and we have all the conditions to overcome anything. We don't have to go anywhere to overcome external and internal suffering. The condition for overcoming our suffering is inside of us. It is our Buddha nature. So we are very fortunate. This life is very precious and we should not waste it. We should appreciate it.

We have to acknowledge what we are and what we have. All the conditions to develop further are present. Nothing is missing. That is we go through the 6 unfavorable conditions and we verify that we do not have these. What are these? These are the conditions that make it impossible to practice or understand Dharma.

1- Being born as a hell being-totally preoccupied with suffering-overwhelmed by anger. This can happen in the human realm also.

2-Being overwhelmed with greed and avarice- Hungry Ghost. Also makes it impossible to practice.

3-Being born in an animal condition—or not having any sense of shame and being ignorant.

4-Being born as a Barbarian —being in a place where there is no knowledge of the Buddha.

5-Being born as a god. Things appear so good that there is no motivation to practice dharma. Attachment to comfort.

6-Born with wrong views—not knowing the difference between right and wrong.

7-Born in a time without enlightened beings

8- Being born with a severe understanding impediment.

Possessing 10 Assets 5 are internal – 5 are external

5 are Internal

- 1- To be born as a human
2. To be born in a land where there are teachers of the dharma
- 3-To have one's faculties complete-no impediments.
- 4-Not to have done very harmful actions such as killing an arhat or your parent.
- 5-To have faith in the dharma declared by the Buddha and in moral conduct.

5 are external:

- 1-Buddha has appeared on one's world
- 2-The Dharma has been taught
- 3-The Dharma is still existent
- 4-There are lineage holders who maintain the teachings
- 5-There are teachers who inspire love and Compassion

Also-Contemplate that having this situation is a "rare" occurrence.

This is because being born as a human requires the accumulation of virtue in previous lives. Once one is born in a lower realm-such as an animal realm it is hard to accumulate virtue. Look at all the people you know and see how many are involved in virtue, and how many in non-virtuous actions.

Also realize there are so many more insects than humans, so by numbers obtaining a human birth is quite rare.

Also even when born as a human, the conditions, which allow you to practice are extremely rare, look around and verify this among the people you know.

Contemplate that one should not waste this condition because a human existence so easily destroyed!

One also has to have trust—

Trust in enlightenment, in the teachings of Buddhas.
Especially one needs to trust one's Buddha nature....

We are in a realm of pain and pleasure. Because of this the human mind is able to appreciate happiness and overcome suffering. Humans can see the suffering of others and see the needs and wants of others. We can appreciate other people's happiness and suffering. We can also share the Buddha's understanding.

However!!! This situation of having a human body is temporary... so we must make use of it.

II-Death and Impermanence

Our human existence is not going to last. Very few people prepare for that. We prepare to live forever. Contemplating on Death and Impermanence allows us to face the reality of our Physical Condition. Although our Buddha nature does not die, our precious

human life does. Will we get another one? Everything is impermanent. When we study impermanence, it helps us not to fool ourselves. For example in the future my guru's monastery might become a motel. We have to understand that.

In our everyday life with its ups and downs it is good to know that whatever happens is impermanent.

If something wonderful happens—we will handle it wisely and not get too excited

If something bad happens- we will handle it wisely and not get too depressed.

Understanding impermanence is the foundation for clarity in all situations.

In the sutras, Lord Buddha said, “ Bhikkus, anything that is created is the composition of many things, and came about as a result of many conditions. Anything that is created is impermanent”. Everyone knows that we are going to die one day, but many people don't want to think about it, don't want to hear about it. If someone says something about it, they become irritated. People who have that kind of reaction have a lot to learn. We all try to achieve something in life and although these things we strive to achieve are important to us, we should know they are impermanent. For example, some people strive to create a successful dharma community where a large number of people can come together to practice, meditate and share knowledge and wisdom. They try to help others improve their physical and mental living conditions. This is very good. But we have to know this is also impermanent. Even the teaching of Buddha itself, which has evolved for the past 2500 years, is impermanent. So there is much more to do than simply confirm, “I am going to die one day” you must go on and on until you reach beyond the true understanding of impermanence itself. We have to understand that whatever is built will disintegrate. Everything is created and destroyed again and again.

Mahamudra will never assert that something is permanent, because permanence is the opposite of impermanence. The essence of understanding impermanence is that ultimately nothing is happening, nothing ever happened and ultimately nothing is going to happen to anyone to anything. Relatively, everything is happening, everything happened and everything is going to happen- to everyone and everything. This is the first understanding of relative impermanence- death and impermanence. Then you have to go beyond the basic understanding of impermanence in order to understand the ultimate.

No matter how many years you have meditated and practiced, the basic teaching on impermanence and the precious human life are still important. There is still more to learn about them. So we have to contemplate on them forever, until we reach enlightenment. Until we become Buddha, we don't know everything about precious human life, death and impermanence and strictly speaking we don't know everything about the spoonful of rice we eat every day. We don't know everything about it until we become Buddha. So these basic contemplations are extremely important.

If you have a problem that is so big that it can obscure everything else about you, about other people, about everything, still that big problem is impermanent. It is not only the good things that are impermanent it is also the bad things.

Contemplation on Impermanence of the Outer Environment

The Universe is continually changing from the Big Bang to the final burn out of all the stars. The seasons continually change, everything is continually changing. Moment by moment everything is changing, all your atoms are moving and are in different places each moment. Things just appear solid and unchanging. Even mountains are changing moment by moment.

Impermanence of Conscious Beings- Contemplations on Death.

This has three parts: to contemplate the certainty of death, to contemplate the uncertainty of the time of death, and to contemplate that only Dharma will benefit you at the time of death.

As is said in the sutras “Since no one knows which will come first-tomorrow or the next life-it makes sense to strive for what has meaning in the next life and not to put a lot of effort into what is just for tomorrow!”

If you look around you realize no one avoids death, no one knows when he or she will die,
One cannot take anything with you when you die EXCEPT the state of your mind.

Doing these contemplations is a remedy to being too attached to the experiences of this life.

III Karma Cause and Effect.

Dying itself is not the end... we carry with us the Karmic imprints of this and previous lives. Thus to ensure a good rebirth we must strive for virtue and abandon non-virtuous actions.

Nothing happens without Causes and Conditions. The Buddha said that the universe is the magical manifestation of Karma.

If we understand Karma then we never say “Why me” ... instead
Since there is only one me and many “others” we should think “Why not me?”
It is very selfish to think “why not someone else?” since there are so many someone elses.

It is misunderstanding of Karma to think that because of Karma nothing can be done.
This is because Karma exists only relatively.

The ultimate is beyond Karma.

Once one has recognition of the nature of the mind and is acting in a non-dualistic fashion then one is no longer creating any Karma.

Karma is just a relative truth. Any good or bad Karma can be destroyed.

For example first degree “good karma” can overcome 2nd degree “bad karma” etc.

Karma motivates us to become better. We understand why people have suffering—they must have the causes and conditions for that suffering.

It also tells us how to be happy relatively—How do we do this—we accumulate good Karma.

The reason everything is what it is and everyone manifests as he or she manifests is the result of cause and condition. This is a simple but important explanation of why we feel the way we feel, why we appear as we appear and why some of us sometimes feel one way and at other times feel other ways. Always there is change—not only differences between one person and another, but differences between one person himself or herself at one time and another. More and more vivid and disturbing is that although every sentient being is equal as far as ultimate potential is concerned— to the Buddha, everyone is equally perfect ultimately—relatively, nobody is equal to anyone else, and everyone is different. That is because people’s karma is different. Everyone has done different things, thought different thoughts, said different things etc.

Once we understand karma we will be relatively at peace. We will stop torturing ourselves by resenting what we manifest and we will not get so emotional and confused over anything good or bad that happens. We will be able to say to ourselves, “Ultimately I am perfect, but I am not equal to my ultimate, so I am not so perfect relatively. And I have all the hope that there is that I become what I ultimately am.” So this can be very enlightening. Because of our Buddha nature we can experience our ultimate nature that is perfect.

The purpose of contemplating on karma, cause and result is that basically we clarify to ourselves that anything that is happening here has a cause and condition. Since it is happening to me, the causes and conditions relate to me. If I don’t have the cause for something to happen, it will not happen to me. One should not be disappointed if something does not happen... since this only means you did not have the karma for that to happen.

Karma can be explained in three basic categories. Karma cause, Karma condition and Karma result.

Karma-Cause

Karma-cause is whatever we have thought, whatever we have said, whatever we have done, how serious, how strong and how definite the karma-cause will be, whether it is good karma or bad karma depends on our motivation for doing whatever it is, and our actual effort to do it, say it or think it. Then at the end what is our sense of achievement about it.

Suppose you do something wonderful. If you really wanted to do it, exerted great effort to do it, and when it was done you rejoiced about it—then that is complete karma. It is strong and deep. However if you just thought about it a little, exerted just a little effort

and was indifferent or even regretted the outcome, then it is not complete. It will not be finalized.

As another example, if you want to steal something, put a lot of effort into doing it and then at the end you are happy about having done it, then that is a bad karma that is quite strong and serious. However if after doing it, you feel very bad and regret doing it is not that strong. If further you confess, return the item and apologize then that will be very weak bad karma. For good karma to be weak is bad, and for bad karma to be weak is good. Cause-karma is like that.

Karma-condition.

Karma –condition is very complex, because the conditions for the karma to ripen, if it is not very strong might take one billion years. This is something that is carried through with our mind (actually in the store-house consciousness or alaya vijnana --the eighth consciousness). Serious Karma can manifest quicker. For example, if we have been a very good meditator in this lifetime, we can attain some realization in this lifetime. Something wonderful can happen and we can then remember its cause. If something wonderful happens next lifetime, we will be happy but we don't remember the cause.

Karma-Result

Result and condition go together. Cause is cause and it stays there waiting to ripen. When the condition is there, the result will manifest, because the result is facilitated by the condition. So this is the cause, the condition the result. This is what is involved in Karma.

And the result of one's karma also becomes a cause. It, in itself, becomes karma. It will not just remain the result of our past life's karma with no strings attached to the future. There is no such thing. It is a happening. It is a thought. It is a word. It is an action. So this way it becomes a cause in itself.

Once something negative happens, it is difficult to get out of it, because the result is also negative. Therefore, further negativity is more likely to come out of it rather than something positive. It is like when we fall into the water we drink more water and we become heavier and go deeper. Bad karma sows the conditions for more bad karma.

On the other side, the result of good karma can bring the conditions for better karma. However it is not that simple. We cannot say that this is like black and white.

The beginning of getting out of the cycle of producing Karma is through the process of purification and the accumulation of merit. One purifies and accumulates merit, physically, orally, mentally and forcefully. One does practices to purify our negative deeds (Cause and condition) and the result is purification. Once that stage is completed, then more subtle purification and accumulation begins. And by doing this one becomes more compassionate, and develops wisdom.

When we are able to recognize the perfect essence in everything, the perfect potential of everything about ourselves (i.e. when we recognize the nature of mind) then there is a domino effect. One positive thing pushes another positive thing and everything continues that way. At that point, it is very hard to go back, very hard to fall into a lower realm or become more neurotic.

If you have a reason to show aggression or anger, you will have to pretend to be angry, but you really cannot be angry inside. You cannot be furious. And it is totally impossible to do anything wrong like telling lies or stealing or even thinking about it. It will become much easier to do good things than bad things. To become what we want to be we need lots of patience, time and effort and then we have to climb up the stairs. We have to apply effort to progress.

As long as we have an "I" then there is karma. Once we are able to overcome this "I" by starting this process of liberation, by recognizing the essence of that I, why we have that I, who is that I—when we recognize the ultimate of that, then we start to overcome the influence of ego, and then we might be able to influence our karma. Then we will not become the slave of ego and will not become the slave of our karma. We then might be able to use our karma and our ego to have further liberation and realization. So we need to contemplate on this.

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What are the non-virtuous actions?

Each of these acts has three categories- depending on the causes

For killing the causes are desire and attachment, anger and aversion or stupidity.

The results of the action are explained by fully developed result; result corresponding to the cause, and the environmental result.

For example: Killing-

Fully developed result—born as a hell being

Result corresponding to the cause—one has a short life and many sicknesses

Environmental result—reborn in an unattractive land (desert etc.)

10 non-virtuous actions are:

Killing, Stealing, Sexual Misconduct, Lying, Alienating speech (slander), Wounding Speech (making known their weaknesses), Useless speech, Greed, Malevolence, Aberrant belief (not believing in Karma, 4 Noble Truths etc.)

10 Virtuous actions are to give up the 10 non-virtuous Actions and to engage in their counterparts:

protect the lives of others, give lavishly, maintain sexual purity, speak the truth, dispel unfriendliness and bring harmony, speak pleasantly, speak meaningfully, be content with what has, cultivate loving kindness, and gain wisdom.

From the Sutras..

From Virtue arise all the higher states of existence and happiness in all lifetimes.

Meditation: go over all your unskillful actions; vow to not do them again. Make aspirations to do virtuous actions.

IV-Unsatisfactory nature of Samsara- Suffering of Samsara

As long as there is clinging to a permanent self, suffering exists and is inevitable.

No matter how ignorant one is, one knows suffering.

No one appreciates suffering.

No matter how powerful we are, our relationship to suffering is the same.

Suffering IS the definition of Samsara. There is no escape IN samara.

GOOD NEWS: Suffering is not ultimate.

The only way to be free from suffering is enlightenment, which is ultimate, and beyond suffering, beyond karma. Until enlightenment is attained there is suffering. Ultimately no one deserves suffering, but everyone is overwhelmed by and involved with suffering.

Everyone has the potential to overcome suffering but instead they create more suffering. When you personally see this then true compassion arises—Bodhicitta.

According to dharma there is no ultimate purpose in suffering. After being in hell one can still go back. Suffering is just a temporary defusing of Karma; nothing is really gained by it.

As long as there is self then there is suffering.

Samsara is the continuous manifestation of all the causes, the results of which become the cause for further results. This never ends until we are liberated from the cause and result. It is like a circle that never ends.

As we learned before, samsara is relative, not ultimate. But knowing that samsara is relative doesn't change anything. Whether or not we understand that samsara is relative, our suffering is inevitable. Even if we know that our suffering is like an illusion, we suffer just the same. The goal of every Buddhist is to liberate himself or herself from this suffering and help others to overcome their sufferings. From the point of view of dharma no sentient being has to go through this suffering. But until that particular sentient being overcomes the causes of their samsaric suffering, it is irrelevant how unimportant the reason for their suffering is. Short of liberation, short of realization, there is no way to avoid suffering. No matter how powerful, brave, rich learned you are, you cannot overrule the suffering of samsara. The only way to overcome suffering is through realization, enlightenment. That is why Lord Buddha taught for so many years after his enlightenment. This teaching by his followers has continued until now.

Because we have the ultimate potential to overcome suffering and instead of overcoming our suffering, we get into more suffering, our compassion becomes more intimate, more

limitless. Seeing what is happening, that our suffering is not an end but rather a result that in itself becomes the cause for further suffering, our compassion goes deeper. So the suffering of samsara is an important subject for contemplation. When we experience the nature of mind and realize that all beings have that potential but do not yet realize it, then our compassion grows greatly since this lack of recognition is the cause for all their suffering.

Three kinds of Suffering

1) Limitation caused by attachment to a self-dualism. —Basic Suffering

Since you know your potential is limitless and you are not experiencing this. This is the dissatisfaction that everyone has and cannot identify.

If you realize your limitation then you feel this-
But if you don't know your potential you don't see this type of suffering. The example given is that if you place a hair in your hand, you can't feel it but if you put it in your eye you can feel it. So when you have some awareness, you can see the basic suffering of samsara more clearly.

If you are first level Bodhisattva- can be in 100 places ...
But then why not 1000 places simultaneously...
Until your limitless potential is achieved... there is suffering and dissatisfaction.

This is seen in the negative fashion—limitless desire for interesting food,
Clothing, houses. limitless greed!

2) Suffering of Change.

When you possess a wonderful situation, then the conditions for suffering from losing that is established. From the fear of losing your good condition, then you try to protect it. This causes greed paranoia, etc.

3) The suffering of suffering. Being sick, having a broken leg, mental suffering. Human beings going through real emotional, mental, physical pain, suffering, and loss.

Causes and Conditions of suffering in the 6 realms.
6 defilements cause birth in the 6 realms.

The human body is the manifestation of attachment and desire. It is natural for human beings to have attachment.

In the animal realm, there are no attachments. They need to eat etc. Their problem is ignorance. Humans will round them up and corral them and eat them. Cows don't know that. If cows knew that, we could not round them up!

From our ego arises all the defilements; therefore aspects of all 6 realms occur even in the human realm.

When you start to contemplate, first try to personally understand the meaning of samsara and then personally see, or understand and have a personal conclusion to the suffering of samsara. Then carefully contemplate on each of the six realms and six aspects of suffering and the three basic categories of suffering will help us to understand it deeper. So that is the method for contemplating on the suffering of samsara

The basic purpose of contemplating is for us to understand the causes of the suffering of samsara in others and ourselves. And we sincerely, happily, gently clearly see that it is necessary for all of us to have some realization in this life. If one can improve yourself 1% in this lifetime then in 100 lives you will be Buddha! That is quite ambitious.

Why are we doing these 4 contemplations? We want to understand the truth. We need to contemplate our condition and reach a correct conclusion about the nature of the human realm. Except by becoming enlightened we will not overcome samsara. We need to know the value of this life, that it is impermanent, and that until we become enlightened we will not overcome our suffering.

One needs a clear personal confirmation of the 4 contemplations.

The next step is doing the 4 Ngondro. We need to do whatever is necessary to liberate our ultimate limitless potential. We need to purify our relative obscuration and accumulate merit and wisdom.

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