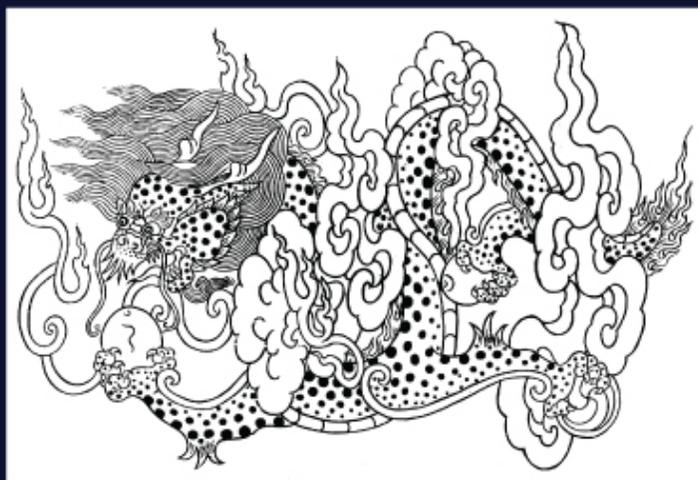


# The Four Thoughts

## Common Preliminaries



by Michael Erlewine

**The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind  
The Common Preliminaries**

**By**

**Michael Erlewine**

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## Introduction

This is a collection of articles on meditation and training the mind, many of which first appeared as blogs. They are not overly formal and most contain personal stories and anecdotes as illustrations. The type of mind training detailed here is the most common form of meditation as used by both the Tibetan and Zen Buddhists.

There is repetition here, which is good.

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## **“THE FOUR THOUGHTS THAT TURN THE MIND”**

[If you ask me, at what point did I know that I was into the dharma, “big time,” as they say around here, that would have to be when I met the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche in 1974. That was the turning point. I also will share, as part of this story, the particular piece dharma that caused me to identify with the dharma. Here is the story.]

As mentioned, when I am asked how I got into the dharma, I mean “really” got into the dharma and knew I was hooked, the story goes way back into the late 1950s and starts from there. Yet, in those early years, I was kind of just flirting with the dharma, not really knowing what it was and so on. The dharma has been recurrent theme in my life, like successive waves rolling up a beach approaching high tide.

Each wave of dharma enthusiasm would take me a little higher, but then roll back leaving me wherever I was at that point. However, as mentioned above, if you ask me what was the deciding wave, so to speak, I would have to say it was in February of 1974 when I met the great siddha Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and here is that story.

As mentioned, I grew up in the late 1950s and early 1960s with Buddhism as one of the topics (along with Existentialism, etc.) that were sometimes savored in late-night discussions, fueled by plenty of caffeine and usually cigarettes. By the early 1970s, it was becoming clear that Buddhism, and Tibetan Buddhism in particular, held something special for me. I had been reading the early books of Chögyam Trungpa, at first stunned by the incredible art on their covers that totally spoke to me, and later by the content. In particular, I read Trungpa’s book “Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism.”

One day, while walking around the campus of the University of Michigan, I spotted a small flyer, just a mimeograph or something like that, and was thrilled to see that Trungpa Rinpoche himself was actually coming to speak in my home

town of Ann Arbor, Michigan. This event was scheduled for February 12<sup>th</sup> of 1974.

There was a phone number on the flyer, so I called the folks that were putting his talk to find more details, and found that they were really short-handed. I was a total stranger, but ended up as Trungpa Rinpoche's chauffeur for the weekend, plus I even designed the final poster announcing the event (shown here). I was pumped.

The days slowly ticked by and I couldn't wait to go and pick Trungpa Rinpoche up at the airport. I went early to the airport, driving my old beat-up ford station wagon and waited breathlessly at the arrival gate for Rinpoche to deplane. This was while they still allowed folks to go right up to the jetway. People began pouring out, but no Tibetans.

I knew that Rinpoche was travelling with Larry Mermelstein, who later headed up the Nalanda Translation Committee, so I looked for the two of them. And finally, almost the last person come down the ramp, there Trungpa was, standing right before me, almost too close, and looking directly at me. I could see that his eyes looked very tired and somehow the whites of his eyes were all yellow. Then, while still looking directly at me, Trungpa rolled his eyeballs upward toward the top of his head until I could hardly see the pupils, and when they came back, all the tiredness and yellowness were gone, and I was staring into the eyes of perhaps the wildest human being I had ever encountered. It was an incredible moment. Suddenly, there HE was. Wow! No disappointment. From that point on, I was just gone. He pushed all of my normal critical faculties right out of me.

I drove the two of them back to the professor's house, the home of Pete and Judith Becker from the university, where they were to stay. I had done my job as chauffeur, but did not want to leave, so I kind of hung around the edges of the room hoping to get some more clues as to what this incredible man or being was all about. I didn't know if I was welcome there or should politely leave, I just stayed way back.

And to my astonishment, suddenly everyone but Trungpa got up and left for a tour of the U. of M. campus. Trungpa said he wanted to take a nap, so I let them all file out, and as I also turned to leave, Trungpa Rinpoche beckoned me and said to stay. He then led me into a small library/office room and sat me down on a chair. Well, this was beyond my wildest fantasies. And there I sat, not knowing just how to behave or what was happening.

Next, Trungpa opened a small bottle of sake, drank some, and proceeded to inspect just about every item in the room. He was very animated, lifting each little memento from its shelf, sometimes holding things up to the light and peering through them, and so on. He did a pretty complete inventory of whatever was in the room. And all this time I sat there, afraid to move, taking this all in. I was learning what 'activity' could mean. I would never have been brave enough to do that, go through all the things in someone's room.

Then, before I knew it, he was inspecting me, and he then proceeded (for the next hour and some) to instruct me in meditation and topics like that, but he never called it that. He never said anything about what he was doing. He just told me what to do, and had me breathe, teaching me to follow my breath, watching the breath go out, and watching it come in again. And he carefully monitored what I was doing. In particular, he was concerned with my "out" breath. I was not letting it go out far enough for him. "Michael," he said, "Let your breath go all the way out... all the way out!" As I struggled to exhale, he remarked, "Don't worry, it will come back!"

And I did this, but it was not as simple as just following his directions. A lot of deep stuff within me was happening at the same time. As I breathed out, my whole life-long fear of letting go, of dying and death, flashed through my mind. I struggled with it for a moment, and then just gave up and let the breath go. As the breath went out, my habitual fears vanished. Perhaps this moment marked the beginning of my actual dharma practice.

And although, after that weekend, I did not see Trungpa

Rinpoche again, I have never forgotten his concern for and kindness with me. I went on to discover my root lama in the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche and become very involved with KTD Monastery in Woodstock, NY, and have trained there for the last 36 years or so. However, Trungpa Rinpoche opened a door for me that has never closed.

I have a couple more anecdotes from his visit to Ann Arbor that year. One was the local occult bookstore owner, a good friend of mine, Robert Thibodeau. We were back in the wings behind the stage of Rackham Auditorium on campus, kind of hanging out with Trungpa Rinpoche. Robert was shocked to see Trungpa standing there and smoking a cigarette, and he was brazen enough to ask Trungpa in front of everyone about his smoking. Trungpa, who never missed a beat, responded with "Someone might like to see me smoke."

The other event was when, after the weekend was over, and I dropped Trungpa Rinpoche and Larry Mermelstein off at the airport. I tried to tell Trugnpa Rinpoche that he was just about the first person I had ever met in my life that I did not feel any personal resistance to or criticism of. And his response to me was: "Well Michael, we are both married men and we are about the same age." With that he said goodbye. And here is the reason for this blog:

While we were in the professor's house, and walking down a hallway together, there was the poster I made for him, hanging on the wall. Trungpa stopped at the poster and asked me if I knew what this dragon was about. I told him that I did not know, and that to me the image was just striking and suited (in my mind) his visit.

He then proceeded to point out to me that the flying dragon in the woodcut holds four precious pearls or gems, one in each claw. As long as the dragon has a grasp of all four pearls, he can fly, but if he drops even one of them, he plunges to the ground. I later came to understand that these four jewels represent the Common Preliminaries, the "Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to the Dharma," also sometimes called "The Four Reminders." These four thoughts are essential for any further

dharma practice – all four of them.

For those who don't remember or have never seen the four thoughts are:

- (1) The Preciousness of Human Birth
- (2) Impermanence
- (3) The Inevitability of Karma
- (4) The Undependability of Samsara]

These are the four thoughts that turn the mind, and for many of us, these are the door through which we entered the dharma, why? Because these four thoughts are obviously so important to all of us. When I first encountered the Four Thoughts, they were almost exactly what was in my own mind. They struck me to the heart, not only then, but decades later, as I was being introduced to the more advanced Mahamudra Meditation, I took them up again, for several years and intensely, at perhaps another level. I wrote a little poem on the four thoughts.

#### THE FOUR THOUGHTS THAT TURN THE MIND

This precious life,  
Impermanent and brief,  
I know.  
My actions keep on piling up,  
And I can't quite get my ducks all in a row.

Trungpa said to me,  
So many years ago,  
By grasping just one thought or two,  
We'll never turn aside.

We must, he said, maintain all four,  
And leave not one behind.

Four precious thoughts that touch the heart,  
nly they can turn the mind.

## **THE COMMON PRELIMINARIES**

### **THE FOUR REVERSALS**

In the next few blogs let's look at the Common Preliminaries, which are also called "The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind Toward the Dharma," "The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind," or just "The Four Thoughts." They are sometimes called "The Four Reminders" and "The Four Reversals."

However you want to spell it, the import is that these four thoughts or concepts are capable of turning us away from our everyday distractions toward discovering the actual nature of our mind. And that is the whole point of dharma practice.

They are termed the Common Preliminaries because they are common to all forms of Tibetan Buddhism and they go before any other practices. By "go before," it is meant that before you begin any dharma practice, one should review the Four Thoughts. And by "review," it is not meant to simply read through them, but rather to bring their import to mind, as in: get serious about them. In other words, we usually have to turn our mind away from our everyday preoccupations in order to get anything done dharma-wise. So, we have to actually contemplate these four thoughts as they pertain to us. If these four thoughts do not impact us, then we have a problem; we must be ignoring them to protect ourselves from feeling.

I was raised Roman Catholic, so I was used to things such as the Ten Commandments and the like. But "The Four Thoughts" are not written in stone somewhere; rather they are inherently inscribed into our mind and consciousness,

already an intrinsic part of who we are. All we have to do is bring them to mind and become aware of them.

In fact, a large part of why I originally became serious about Buddhism and the dharma was because when I encountered the “Four Thoughts,” I was already instinctively familiar with them and had been thinking the same things myself. They were as natural as anything I knew and I already were in the back of my mind much of the time.

So, for me these four thoughts were a sign that the dharma is something that I could easily understand, and that proved to be true.

And unlike the Ten Commandments, which are imperatives, the Four Thoughts are meant to serve as just reminders of something we intuitively already know, at least the first three of them. These four thoughts were how the dharma first caught my attention and what flagged me down in the first place. It was like finding my own form of religion, although I consider the dharma more of a psychology and a path than a religion, but you get what I mean.

As I have written in previous blogs, the “Four Thoughts” were not only my introduction to the dharma as a newbie. When, after a great many years of practice, I finally was ready to start learning Mahamudra Meditation, said to be the tip of the top of meditation practices in our lineage, the first thing I was told to do is to spend some time once again on the “Four Thoughts.” I then spent something like three years working just with those four thoughts. They are that important.

So, as they say, without further ado, let’s look at the “Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind Toward the Dharma.” We will do this in the next few sections, but as we go in, here are

the “Four Thoughts” as I originally encountered them. This is how they appear in the Tibetan practice sadhanas:

## **THE FOUR THOUGHTS**

### **(1) This Precious Human Birth,**

This precious human birth,  
So favorable for the practice of the dharma, Is hard to obtain and  
easily lost.

At this time,  
I must make this meaningful.

### **(2) Impermanence and Death,**

The world and all its inhabitants are impermanent. In  
particular,

The life of each being is like a water bubble.

It is uncertain when I will die and become a corpse. As it is  
only the dharma that can help me at that time,  
I must practice now with diligence.

### **(3) Karma and its Consequences,**

At death, there is no freedom,  
And karma takes its course. As I create my own karma,

I should therefore abandon all unwholesome action,  
And always devote my time to wholesome action.

With this in mind,  
I must observe my mind-stream each day.

### **(4) The Shortcomings of Samsara,**

Just like a feast before the executioner leads me to my death,  
The homes, friends, pleasures, and possessions of samsara,  
cause me continual torment by means of the three sufferings.  
I must cut through all attachment and strive to attain  
enlightenment.

As mentioned, it was the “Four Thoughts” that got my  
attention when I first encountered Buddhism. They indeed  
turn my mind. I had looked into many spiritual directions,  
had read about the trinity of this and the sacredness of that  
religion, all of which seemed so abstract to me, so distant  
and other-worldly – a world I did not know.

When I came across the “Four Thoughts,” they seemed so  
down to earth, so very natural. In fact, they made clear to  
me what I had pretty much come up with on my own. They  
spoke right to the heart. They were better than any religion  
I knew, and I had enough experience with organized  
religion.

Having been raised Catholic, I went to Catholic school for  
a while, was an altar boy, learned church Latin – the  
works. But I left that. I never had a quarrel with Christ (still  
don’t!), but organized religion and the behavior of its  
authorities appeared arbitrary and cruel to me. It lacked  
the intimacy laced with the taste of blood or reality that  
Mother Nature showed me – something real. Enough said.

That First Thought, that “Life is Precious,” did not need to  
be explained to me. I had always thought that my life was  
precious and hoped that I might be put to some good use  
and not just wasted. And here was an acknowledged  
spiritual direction telling me straight out that my life was  
precious. I just inhaled it. And that was just the “First  
Thought.”

It was the “Second Thought” that struck me to the core,  
impermanence. Death and impermanence had always  
hovered just out of eyesight in the peripheral vision of my

life. I had never looked it straight in the eye and here was an instruction to do just that. There was nothing churchy or 'clergy' about this. It was what was always in the back of my mind anyway, part of what I sensed to be true. And Mother Nature had always confirmed this.

And the idea of rebirth (that not only had we lived before and would again, but had done this innumerable times) was more than I could hope for. After all, I was raised with the deep impression that (as the beer commercial says) "we only go around once" and that without warning we are tossed into this world and have to figure it out (heaven or hell) on our own, and in one shot. No "Groundhog Day."

It took years for me to realize that the great majority of people in the world believe in rebirth and it was still more years before I dared believe it myself, and that only those of us here in the West are stuck in the view that at our core, beneath everything, we are sinners.

The Dharma teaches just the opposite: that our obscurations, our so-called "sins" are just on the surface and that beneath that we all have Buddha Nature. All we have to do is to become aware of this by removing our obscurations, one by one. After all, the word "Buddha" simply means "awareness" or "the one who is aware."

To a young person, this seemed too good to be true. But when I began meeting these high Tibetan lamas and rinpoches, arguably the most authentic authorities I have even known, they spoke of rebirth as a fact, as a personal experience and not as an abstract idea. Here were authorities who actually were authorities. Imagine that!

And it was those "Four Thoughts" that first got my attention, that turned my mind or that I recognized without a doubt to be the truth as I already dimly knew it. All I had to do was to work on removing my own obscurations,

which is what mind training or ‘meditation’ is all about.

In the next sections, I will describe each of the four thoughts in more detail.



## **THE FIRST THOUGHT: PRECIOUS HUMAN BIRTH**

“First,  
This precious human birth,  
So favorable for the practice of the dharma, Is hard to  
obtain and easily lost.

At this time,  
I must make this meaningful.”

The “First Reversal” or first “Thought That Turns the Mind Toward the Dharma” is the precious human birth. I have been to Tibet, China, India, Nepal, etc. and I have watched the lamas carefully brushing mosquitoes off their arms, so I

know that Buddhists value all sentient beings, even gnats and mosquitoes. In Nepal I was told you get life in prison if you hit and kill a cow with your car, and there are cows wandering everywhere in the streets over there -that kind of thing. How “foreign” to those of us over here in America.

The Buddhists are even more concerned with human life. And while all human life is to be treasured, Tibetan Buddhists reserve the words “precious human life” to refer to those of us fortunate enough to be born physically able to learn the dharma (have the necessary senses) and in a country or place where the dharma is available. The fact that you are reading this here and now means that you are such person.

It might sound trite, but the Tibetan Rinpoche I have worked with for almost thirty-six years has reduced me to rapt attention (and tear-filled eyes) a number of times when he has gently and clearly pointed out to me that if we are here right now learning the dharma, we are one of the very, very few --the 99th percentile. He states that to have the good fortune to be born in a place where (and time when) the dharma is actually taught means that we have accumulated an enormous amount of merit in our past lives to (no pun intended) ‘merit’ this.

He goes on to point out that many of us might be alive now but born not in a country where the dharma is taught. Or we may glance over these words and never take them in or actually even be repelled by them entirely. Or we could have severe mental or physical problems that make learning the dharma impossible. Or we may be so obscured by anger and desire or just busy with nonessentials that there is no way we can overcome our condition enough to actually hear and practice the dharma. We don’t get it.

Rinpoche’s point seemed to be that if we are open to these

concepts, we already have come a very long way and that in our past lives we have somehow accumulated enough merit to deserve such a precious human birth as we have now rather than some other birth, like an animal, in which bewilderment and desire may cloud any other possibilities. In other words: in our own way we already have great merit. That's the idea.

And in Tibetan Buddhism, as I mentioned in a blog not too long ago, they put great value on the concept of motherhood. In fact, they say that all beings (not just human beings) have been our mother in past lives and have given birth to us, wiped our bottoms, and cared for us like no one else ever would. Every being has been our mother and we have been the mother of every being. I grant you that this concept is foreign to those of us here in the west and takes real time to sink in, that we are all that close. Every Tibetan is raised with this thought. Anyway, you get the point.

Buddhists feel that all life is sacred and that this precious human life in particular is a rare opportunity to be able to hear and practice the dharma, the path to greater awareness of our own mind. In this short article it is difficult to present in enough detail the "First Thought That Turns the Mind," how very precious our life is and how each of us wants to make it count for something and for it not to be wasted.

In summary, the first of the four thoughts is that this human life we have is precious and rare, hard to come by. It should not be wasted. Buddhists believe that all life is precious, not only that of every last human being, but all the way down the tree of life to the very tiniest sentient beings, perhaps some kind of microbe. All sentient beings are precious. Life itself is precious, human life in particular, because as humans we can have the opportunity to encounter and learn the dharma. Animals can't do that.

This first of the four thoughts instantly rang a bell with me the moment I heard it because internally I had always felt the same way. I worried about wasting my life, having it amount to nothing. I wanted to be used up in some meaningful way, for this life I live to count toward something.

My point here is that I became a Buddhist, not because of rules and thoughts laid on me from on high, but rather I discovered that I already was (and always had been) a Buddhist. I just didn't know it. I don't even really like being labeled a "Buddhist," but rather that I hold the Dharma to be true. Before the any Buddha, there had to be dharma, because that is what the Buddha discovered and taught.

The "Four Thoughts" made perfect sense because they had already always been on my mind anyway, ideas like not wasting my life, coming to terms with my eventual death, watching the results of my actions, and hoping to find ways to wake up from the rat race I often found myself in.

None of this was news. This was my life.



## **THE SECOND THOUGHT: IMPERMANENCE**

“Second,  
This world and all its inhabitants are impermanent, In  
particular, The life of each being is like a water bubble,

It is uncertain when I will die and become a corpse. As it is  
only the dharma that can help me at that time, I must  
practice now with diligence.”

Impermanence is a fact worth our consideration. Of the  
four reversals (The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to  
the Dharma), the best known of course is the second one,  
“Impermanence,” but it is also the most ignored -- our  
great ignorance. Ignorance can also be willful, as in “to  
ignore.” We agree to ignore what we find too hard to  
remember.

It is a cliché that most of us act like we are going to live  
forever and it takes some life-shattering experience (the  
death of a loved one) to remind us that death is perhaps

the one thing we do know for certain. However, our eventual impermanence is something that we tend to acknowledge only when put on the spot. Otherwise, it is unspoken.

I call impermanence the “smelling salts of the dharma,” because even a little whiff of it wakes us up to the actual reality. The great Tibetan Rinpoche Chögyam Trungpa once opened an evening talk with these words:

“Some of us will die soon, the rest a little later.”

Steve Jobs, who was a practicing Buddhist, was very aware of the Four Thoughts, in particular of the thought of impermanence since he was dying of cancer. It is said that his awareness of his mortality (the Second Reversal) kept him focused almost mono-maniacally on perfecting the iPhone and the iPad. At least that’s what I understand. In a eulogy read by his sister at his funeral she said that Jobs had “achieved death” and that his last words were “Oh wow. Oh wow. Oh wow.”

This is why these are called “The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind,” because only they are strong enough medicine, or remedy enough, to tear our attention away from our often-mindless day-to-day busyness.

Only these four thoughts are capable of turning the mind from its freight-train rush at nowhere to an awareness of what is important.

Now, let's look at the thought of impermanence, so appropriately listed as the second thought, because we all have second (and further) thoughts about death and impermanence. The Buddhists state that this universe and everything in it is impermanent, and moreover that the lives of beings are fragile like bubbles on the surface of water.

Nothing lasts forever. Even the hardest diamond-like substances eventually wear themselves out of time and into essence. Any of us over thirty have at least begun to realize impermanence and those of us over sixty have probably begun to be humbled by it. And I expect to become increasingly more aware of impermanence to the very end. At almost 80 years now, it is happening.

The goal of considering our impermanence is not to have us huddle in a corner afraid of our impending death. Rather, it is to realize that all that we have, including our entire self, is ephemeral. It will not last.

Instead of being paralyzed in fear and fruitless worry, our time is better spent working on those things we do take with us when we die, like our karma, any merit we may have accumulated, and our potential awareness of the true nature of the mind. These are treasures that survive the death of the body and the inevitable abandonment of the Self and its personality, as lovely as it may be.

In my opinion, there is no better teacher and constant reminder of our own impermanence than Mother Nature. She treats every sentient being absolutely equally and never blinks when showing us exactly where things are at. For me, even a morning walk can suffice.

It can be as simple as a country road filled with night-crawlers struggling to get across the tarmac before the rising sun fries them to a crisp... or the huge Luna Moth fluttering to seek refuge in a tree after a long night, when a passing bird swoops down to make a meal of it. The list of these events is endless and obvious.

Most living beings struggle to avoid being eaten, while at the same time struggling to find some other critter to eat. I mean, the writing is on the wall my friends, if we will just read it. Nature is a harsh mistress indeed. And we are

subject to Mother Nature (the laws of physics) from the moment we are born.

Impermanence informs us that our fear of death is only adding insult to the perceived injury of death itself. I am reminded of that great film by director Arthur Penn, "Mickey One," a Kafkaesque study of paranoia, where the protagonist (played by Warren Beatty) has to choose between, as he puts it, the "crush out" or the "fade out." I put it this way: we can masochistically wait until the forces of time drag us to our eventual fate or we can stand up and look fate in the eye. We can choose to go to meet our maker.

I favor the second option over being dragged kicking and screaming to the end of life. I would rather learn to become increasingly aware of the nature of the mind (and thus of the nature of death itself).

A whiff of impermanence, as I like to say, is the smelling-salts of the dharma. It is one of those four reminders or thoughts capable of waking us from our tendency to snooze our lives. A close brush with death sobers up even the most jaded of us rather quickly.



## **THE THIRD THOUGHT: KARMA**

“Third,  
At death there is no freedom, Karma takes its course, As I  
create my own karma,

I should therefore abandon all unwholesome action. With  
this in mind, I must observe my mindstream each day.”

Karma has been a buzz word in the West for decades,  
gradually working its way into the popular idiom. What is  
meant by karma I am sure varies widely, but the basic idea  
is that for every action there is a reaction, for every  
statement, a response.

And, yes, there is good and bad karma, although what we  
worry about as bad karma may not be what really takes a  
toll. The Ten Commandments in the Bible are definitely  
karma producing when they are violated, but habitual  
micro-karma appears to be even more overwhelming for  
us in the long run.

Of course, actions like killing and stealing create what we could agree is bad karma, but what really adds up is the gradual accumulation of low-level karma due to our own thought processes. Let me give an example.

You might say something accidentally (or purposefully) that hurts my feelings. I walk away from our conversation thinking about what you said, going over and over it in my mind, all the time recording this in my mindstream. This might go on for hours, all day, or even persist for weeks on end. Every time I review it in my mind, I am inscribing this event deeper and deeper in my mind, digging a groove until it becomes a trench. This too is karma, big time.

And this particular kind of micro-karma really adds up. It not only obscures our mind as it goes down, but like all karma, it has an afterlife. It grows and eventually ripens in our mind, creating even more obscuration.

And unfortunately, most of us do this all the time, day in and day out. And it is mindless, meaning we are not even aware of it. Or we may be dimly aware of it, but think nothing of it.

One concept to take to heart is that karma, large or small, is infallible. What goes up, comes down, and what goes down in our mindstream will eventually come up as ripened karma. You can count on it. As they say, "You can take it to the bank." It is also said that karma burns twice, once when we create it and again when the results of our karma eventually ripen.

What was harder for me to understand, at least in the beginning, is that karma is infinitesimally fine, as exact as exact can be. And it is not just limited to what we might have a conscience about. Ignorance is not bliss when it comes to karma. You don't have to be aware that you are creating "bad" karma to accumulate it. This should be

obvious to any reasonable person. Just consider what various societies (in particular our own) are accumulating.

Look around you. Global warming and ozone holes are probably examples of collective karma that the entire earth is accumulating, whether or not we are aware of it, whether we believe in it or not. Like the proverbial ostrich, we can stick our heads in the sand, but the clock of karma ticks on nevertheless.

My point here is that karma does not only depend on our ability to distinguish right from wrong, although "intent" is important. It is way finer (and more insidious) than that. Karma goes beyond ourselves (the Self), so great care is required when considering actions, like each and every one of them.

Not to upset you, but in evaluating actions, we can't just assume we have good sense when it comes to our actions and the karma they accumulate. After all, we are not examining the world outside ourselves, but in mind training we are examining the mind itself (our attitude) that projects this world around us. Even a tiny change in attitude (a slip of the mind) can produce a big change in how we see things, and influence our actions one way or the other.

My point here is that we may want to err on the safe side of karma, and not just assume that our mind (just as it came out of the box) is good-to-go, and that we actually know what is best for us and can tell the good from the bad. Can we? We may be walking a high-wire karmic tightrope hundreds of feet in the air and not even know it. That's how vulnerable we are in this area.

The older I get, the more I realize that my approach to karma has been way too general and that, while avoiding the "big-bad actions," I have consistently engaged in a myriad of smaller karmic actions (of which I am only

somewhat aware) that I never take very seriously. And karma sneaks up on you.

And while I don't want to become a mind-Nazi to my own life by second-guessing every last decision, I need to clean up my actions and stop laying waste to my own potential clarity through micro-karmic accumulation.

To use a phrase from Aleister Crowley: "To snatch at a gnat and swallow a camel." In this analogy, I have to reverse Crowley's phrase to something like: While watching to avoid the big karmic mistakes, I habitually and often consciously) accumulate and record an avalanche of micro-karma, my every passing reaction, like and dislike.

It is possible to stop recording all this micro-karma, but it takes some serious mind training, which I have detailed elsewhere, i.e. Reaction Tong-len. Suffice it to say that it involves relaxing the mind and learning to recognize and drop the obsessive thoughts or see through them. If you don't record them, the karma does not accumulate. Less karma accumulation means less obscuration. Less obscuration means greater clarity. It is that simple, but easier said than done.

In this short blog I have only scratched the surface of this topic. The bottom line is that it would help if we can become more aware of what we are doing in each and every action. As we better understand the laws of karma, we stop acting like the bull in a china shop and suddenly find ourselves walking on tiptoe.

I am reminded of the cliché often used to explain chaos theory, that a butterfly flapping its wings in Brazil sets off a tornado in Texas. Karma is sensitive like that.



## **THE FOURTH THOUGHT: SAMSARA**

### **(1) The Shortcomings of Samsara**

“Fourth,  
Just like a feast before the executioner leads me to my  
death,

The homes, friends, pleasures, and possessions of  
samsara cause me continual torment by means of the  
three sufferings. I must cut through all attachment and  
strive to attain enlightenment.”

The language is a little strong, especially that fourth  
thought. I also spent a few years on these same four  
thoughts when I seriously begin to study and practice  
Mahamudra meditation. They were all I needed to get my  
mind right, with one exception, which is what I want to  
discuss here, and that was the fourth thought, the one  
about the shortcomings of Samsara, you know, the  
problems with this world we live in.

Sure, I understood it somewhat, but I also found that I wanted to edit it a bit, give my own interpretation. I insisted on having a little more wiggle-room, which is not a good sign with dharma teachings. For some reason I could not as deeply embrace it as I had the first three thoughts.

"The Shortcomings of Samsara," Samsara being this cyclic world of existence we all find ourselves embedded in – our ups and downs. Sometimes the fourth thought is translated as "Revulsion at Samsara," suggesting that we reach a state of being repelled by this world. Well, I didn't like that translation at all, the idea of being revolted by this world, because in so many ways I love this world. So I kind of translated it for myself as "I will never get my ducks all in a row." In other words, we can't game the system. Not only does death claim each one of us (second thought) but, like a casino, the odds are in the house's favor (fourth thought). We will never game life. It games us, if only because we lose everything mortal at death.

Now, that was hard for me to accept, because I am reasonably clever and somehow thought that at least I could game the system. I could probably get all my ducks in a row, at least enough to be content, if not happy. But I failed to understand one basic principle, and that was compassion.

Compassion is like what happens when a drop of water hits the surface of a still pond; a ring of concentric circles gradually spreads out embracing more and more of the pond. Compassion grows and is ever more embracing, the more realized we become. It is a simple law of nature, but one I failed to understand coming in.

Way back then, it was just me. I was on my own and could take care of myself, and everyone else was in the same boat, taking care of themselves. This was before I had a wife, before I had kids, before I had grandkids, and before I

was that much interested in the welfare of my fellow travelers in this world we live in. That was a simple mistake (missed-take).

Like the ever-widening embrace of those concentric circles in the pond when a drop of water falls, my care for just me, myself, and I gradually broadened to include a wife, kids, grandkids, friends, co-workers, and more. It was no longer just me I cared about.

I knew little to nothing about compassion early on. Sure I felt compassion for the animals that suffered in the harsh Michigan winters, and beings like that, but people? I didn't dare start caring about people. That was just too much responsibility for essentially a kid, a kid that, as concerns compassion, refused to grow up.

My point is that as compassion grows, and as it does with age and experience, our mandala or the envelope of what we can embrace and care for widens. It becomes ever more inclusive. It is no longer just myself that I care for, whether I am personally content or not, but all of those I have come to know and love. How is it with them?

Sure, I can try to maintain a cheery attitude when all is well with me, while others I love around me are suffering and in trouble. My previous attitude was something like "Of course I wish everyone well, but not at the expense of my feeling content" – that sort of thing. But I find that this kind of attitude does not extend to my family, to my wife, kids, and grandkids. When they are hurting, I am hurting. And where does the line stop? The simple truth is that it does not stop unless we stop growing inside.

This simple principle is what leads to what is called the Bodhisattva Vow, the vow (as Buddhists point out) to not find peace until every last being is enlightened and finds peace. I don't see there is a choice here.

The moment we care or feel compassion for at least one other person (or being) in the world, our choice is made for us. There is no turning back. We are ultimately all bodhisattvas in the making, like it or not...

And so, at my age I finally begin to understand that "Revulsion at Samsara" is a natural correlate to having compassion. How can I be happy if one of my family or friends is deeply suffering? The bottom line is that I can't, not if I care, and I do.

When I witness the sufferings of those around me, I get world-weary, just tired of ignoring all the suffering in the world, and I feel less game, not willing to just go along with my normal attachments, not feeding them so much.

I guess what I am saying is that, at long last, I am beginning to understand that "Fourth Thought That Turns the Mind," the "Revulsion of Samsara," this world and its shortcomings.

As John Donne said: "No Man (or Woman) is an island."

In summary, it was that fourth thought that gave me pause. What was that all about?

To repeat, this fourth thought was hard for me to grasp, not because it actually is that difficult to understand, but because like years ago when I first tried to give up smoking or coffee, inside of me I did not yet really want to give them up, so my non-understanding was driven by my secret joy in still pursuing them. That secret joy had to be plumbed to the very bottom and found to be what was causing me real physical suffering before I could tear myself away from it. And it took me a long time. I was sure that there was a backdoor to life, a way out. This is not uncommon.

With that fourth thought that turns the mind, the idea is that

life is inherently undependable and the fact that this cyclic existence we are attached to (life as we know it) will eventually wear us down and out of memory before we figure it all out, before we actually get all our ducks in a row. But we keep trying anyway. Only we know if we are successful.

And with the end of life, with death, there is no such thing as success, except learning to fail successfully. That is as close as we come.

Anyway, I was certain that I could somehow game the system and, in fact, get all my ducks in a row. I could master life so that it behaved as I wanted it. All around me, if I looked, other people were suffering, struggling, dying, etc., but somehow I knew I was the exception and that I (perhaps only me) could beat the system. I could make it all come out right. If I was only good enough, worked hard enough, and was careful enough to think of everything, that then, for me at least, life could be mastered. It all could be good. I could have only the high parts of the cycle and escape from the low sides of life's cycles that I repeatedly found myself mired in and unhappy about.

We each have to find out for ourselves if life is cyclic. Does your life go up and then down, and around again? If it does, we go with it, like it or not. And so on, which brings me to my point here:

Life can't be rigged, no matter how smart we are. "Smart" is not the same as intelligent. A wound smarts. Life can't be taken by force, by cleverness, by scheming, planning, or any other approach than that taken by the historical Buddha, which is why he took it.

And that approach or path is "awareness." In fact the word "Buddha," in ancient Sanskrit, simply means "aware one" or "awakened one." It is all a question of awareness. We

are all aware, but to what degree?

The Buddha's entire path or method, which is called the "dharma" is about one thing only, waking up, becoming more aware so that we can respond appropriately to the ups and downs of the life we now live, so that we can learn to fail successfully as life ends, which it, of course, eventually will.

Without that awareness, we are subject to being torn apart by the tides and cycles of life, a piece at a time, and can't seem to control it, can't get all of our ducks in a row, so to speak.

So, the point is that in my priority list, at the top of that list, before everything else, is the need to develop increased awareness, so that I can respond to the exigencies of life that confront me daily in a useful and successful manner.

It came as a real shock to me to learn from the highest Tibetan lamas that we have about zero chance of figuring out how to become aware of the true nature of our mind and existence WITHOUT guidance and help. In fact, they use this analogy, which was a show-stopper for me:

Imagine the entire earth covered by water. Into this we toss an inner tube with a single hole in it. Winds from the four quarters would push this tube every which way, constantly. In that ocean of water is one blind turtle that comes to the surface only once in a hundred years and pokes his head out. How long will it take for that turtle, as it surfaces, to coincidentally stick his head through the center of the innertube?

That is how long it will take us, life after life, to discover the true nature of the mind and be able to respond to life in a workable and enlightened way...WITHOUT a guide from someone who has themselves recognized the true nature of the mind.

That is something to think about. We need help to learn how to become more aware. We need someone to point out to us how the mind works.

One last comment that points out how we may not yet be sensitive enough to grasp the traditional concept of the “revulsion of Samsara.” This excerpt is from a teaching by Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, translated by Lama Yeshe Gyamtso:

“It says in the commentary on The Abhidharmakosha, If a hair were to be placed in the palm of our hand, we would not notice it particularly and certainly would not experience it as painful. But if the same hair were to be stuck in our eye, we would not only notice it, we would experience it as uncomfortable and even painful. The childish are like those with the hair in the palms of their hands. They do not realize or recognize pervasive suffering. Aryas, Bodhisattvas, and Arhats are like those with the hair in our eyes. They see pervasive suffering as suffering.”

So, the idea here is that we, you and I, are not sensitive enough to what is called the all-pervasive suffering around us. We are the “childish,” with the hair in the palm of our hands, not aware enough to experience it as a hair in our eye. That is why we feel so little “revulsion.” If you lack the faculty, you can’t see the phenomenon.