

THE FOUR THOUGHTS THAT TURN THE MIND

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By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

When I first heard about the Four Thoughts, I immediately recognized that they were simply the truth. In fact, they were already rooted in my mind as how things just naturally are. They were confirmation of what is, not revelation of something new. I didn't have to get with the program, listen up, or take anything on faith. Instead I recognized that these four thoughts were simply the truth as I had come to know it myself. Here are the Four Thoughts, simply put:

- (1) This human life is precious. Use it well.
- (2) Impermanence. Life is fragile, brief, and death is inevitable.
- (3) Karma. Our every action or cause (however small) has an effect.
- (4) This up-and-down samsaric world we find ourselves in is inherently undependable. We will never get our ducks all in a row, and never game the system.

These four thoughts are intended to catch our attention, give us pause, and help to turn our mind away from our endless busyness and toward becoming more aware of the nature of the mind itself. This is what dharma is all about.

Buddhists call these Four Thoughts the "Common Preliminaries" because they go before all else; they are common to us all. I found myself agreeing. Here were ideas I did not have to take on faith or "believe in." They were obviously just the way things naturally are. And it seems I had been waiting for some way to opt out of the rat race I found myself in and wake up to something more. The dharma was a path to waking up.

And much later in my Buddhist practice I was surprised, after finishing a great many of the more advanced practices (including a couple of rounds of Ngondro -- what amounts to a dharma boot camp) to encounter the Four Thoughts once again. This was when I began to seriously practice Mahamudra meditation, considered to be the tip of the top of meditation techniques practiced by the Karma Kagyus, the lineage I identify with and feel I naturally belong to.

There, at the very doorway to Mahamudra meditation, I was asked to once again seriously devote major time to the Four Thoughts. For me this amounted to a couple of

years of quite intense focus and concentration on the common preliminaries, and little else. In other words, there is nothing just preliminary about the "Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind." For me they have been both the Alpha and Omega of getting my mind right for Buddhist practice. Let's look at the first of these thoughts.

THE PRECIOUS HUMAN BIRTH

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.

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.



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