

The Four Foundation Thoughts

Before we actually start studying how to practice, it is necessary to first understand the four foundation thoughts. These are also called the “four ordinary foundations,” the “four ways of turning the mind,” or the “four contemplations that turn the mind.” Without these being well-established in the mind, it is difficult to develop a pure motivation and to have a sincere sense of taking refuge in the Triple Gem. Therefore, it is crucial to understand these well. It is important to be able to actually feel an awareness of them and to penetrate their nature in order to cultivate the pure motivation that wishes to achieve enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. Without that pure motivation we will remain attached to samsara.

In *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, Gampopa mentions that since we have been in samsara from beginningless time, we must have also been born a human being on some other occasion. And we must have met some spiritual teachings and studied them during that time, so why are we still in samsara? Why could we not free ourselves from this state of suffering? It is due to the power of four basic obstacles that we continue to wander in samsara. These obstacles are:

- * attachment to this life;
- * attachment to the next life;
- * attachment to peace; and
- * not knowing how to achieve enlightenment.

Attachment to this life. Most of us are attached to this life. We consistently put most, if not all, of our time and energy toward success in this life. We may talk about spiritual matters, or meditate and recite mantras a little, but very few of us actually work toward enlightenment. People are interested in things like dream yoga and spiritual healing power, but what are they really concerned about? Investigate deeply and see for yourself what the underlying motivations are for these types of interests. Whether it is material or spiritual activity, we usually engage in activities only for this life’s benefit and to be more comfortable in this life. This way of thinking is called “attachment to this life” and is an obstacle to freedom from samsara.

Attachment to the next life. Some people look a little farther ahead and are attached to the next life. They think this life is okay, but they want to be more successful in their next life. They want to be born in some better place or better situation. This too is an attachment to samsara which, of course, causes them not to be free from samsara.

Attachment to peace. Then there are those spiritually inclined persons who have self-cherishing and work only for their own liberation. They are satisfied with less than full enlightenment and, therefore, do not become completely liberated. These are called *sravakas* (hearers) and *pratyekabuddhas* (solitary realizers).

Not knowing how to achieve enlightenment. We frequently talk about spiritual matters, but what about the actual achievement of enlightenment? To carefully investigate what samsara is and how to free ourselves from it is very, very difficult. Left to our own devices we simply do not know how to achieve enlightenment and this, combined with the previous three obstacles, comprise the four basic obstacles that have caused us to wander in samsara from beginningless time until now.

In order to overcome these four obstacles, there are four thoughts that we must contemplate as an antidote. These contemplations are the very foundation of our refuge in the Triple Gem.

Without a firm understanding of these four, it will be difficult to develop the pure motivation that wishes to achieve enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings, called bodhicitta.

Without this motivation, enlightenment eludes us. The four are:

- * the contemplation of impermanence;
- * the contemplation of the rarity of attaining leisure and fortune;
- * the contemplation of the faults of cyclic existence; and
- * the contemplation of the benefits of attaining liberation.

When contemplated deeply, these antidotes become the four thoughts that turn our mind to the path of Dharma.

The contemplation of impermanence as the antidote to attachment to this life.

Impermanence is a vast and profound teaching, and is one of the best subjects of which to be aware and mindful. Some people think it is akin to a kindergarten class and that only the higher teachings like mahamudra, dzogchen and high tantra are profound. Such thinking is wrong. A deep understanding that all is temporary and impermanent, that even we are temporary and impermanent, is much more profound and important than any other teachings.

The experience of real impermanence in the mind helps free us from ignorance. As we perceive more and more clearly what is happening in the mind, it begins to liberate us from aversion, desire, pride, and jealousy. When we become involved in some kind of attachment or desire toward something we would like to have, if we have the experience of impermanence in the mind we can clearly see that the very things we desire are temporary. When we have a sense of impermanence and someone causes us a problem, we can practice by thinking, "This situation is momentary. It will change on its own, so why should I make it so important?"

The experience of real impermanence in the mind allows us to know that everything is in a state of constant change; nothing is solid or concrete. It allows the mind to channelize in one place and become more stable. Eventually, as you are increasingly aware of it, this becomes the start of understanding mahamudra.

You can look at impermanence from inside and outside. Looking outside of yourself, you can see how many great spiritual teachers and political leaders have lived in the past. You can read the history of each country and see that no one, no event, nothing from the past exists now. All are gone. Even the Buddha, who achieved the highest enlightenment and who had the complete form of wisdom and compassion, has also passed.

Looking inside yourself, you can also recognize impermanence. Usually our mind does not stay with us; it is constantly projecting outward here and there. It is constantly going somewhere else and focusing on something outside of our own mind. This makes it difficult to be aware of the mind itself. But if the mind stays where the body is, stays focused inside, then it is a little easier to be aware of how the mind is working and what is happening with it.

In the Madhyamaka texts, there is an analysis of coming and going that leads to the idea of impermanence. We are to deeply contemplate as follows.

What is really coming or going? What is gone is gone; it does not exist here now. The future is coming, but has not come yet and so is like a beautiful sky flower...there aren't any sky flowers, but the idea of them sounds so good. The future is not here now, so how can we say it exists? One is finished, the other has not come. Therefore how can we say that there is coming and going? Is there really any existence?

In the mind, a thought is a thought; once it is gone, it is gone. When you think again, it is not the same as the previous thought; it is a new one. What was a thought is now gone; a new thought has not come yet, in-between there is nothing. Impermanence is a very profound teaching when we think like that. In this way it teaches mahamudra. This analysis creates a very subtle mind.

Put another way, when you are moving the rosary beads – that which is already moved is moved. That which has not moved is not here now and there is no in-between. As you investigate more subtly in this manner you become aware of impermanence. We should meditate on this very subtle state.

The contemplation of the rarity of attaining leisure and fortune¹ as the antidote to ill-directed activities and laziness. Through the deep investigation of phenomena, we can see both intellectually and inside ourselves that all things are interdependent and that the nature of all phenomena is empty of inherent existence. The suchness of that nature, the way that it is, its mode of abiding, is the same for all. Thus no one sentient being is better than another; all beings are the same. Whether in a buddha-state or not, they are no different. In this way, buddha nature – the essence of enlightenment – is understood to pervade all sentient beings. But this alone is not enough to achieve enlightenment. To achieve enlightenment we need to have the special gift of intelligence to be able to understand this reality. For that reason obtaining a precious human body is most important.

Consider the beings who reside in a hell realm. Even though they have some awareness, they are so tortured, so overpowered by their suffering, that they have no opportunity to study or practice. The same is also true for us; when our minds are overpowered by suffering, there is no space to study or meditate.

Similarly, beings in the animal realm have little intelligence and mental power. If you put gold in front of a dog and say, “This is precious, you should guard it well.” he will just smell it and walk away. No matter how smart a dog is, he has no sense that one thing is more valuable than another. Sentient beings in the animal realm do not have the special awareness that human beings have available to them.

¹ According to Gampopa in *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, “leisure” means being free from the eight unfavorable conditions mentioned in the *Sutra of the Sublime Dharma of Clear Recollection* which are: rebirth as a hell being, hungry ghost, animal, barbarian, or long-life god, holding wrong views, the absence of a Buddha in this world, and being mute. The ten “fortunes” or “endowments” that Gampopa lists are: being human, being born in a central country, having all the senses, not reverting to evil deeds, having devotion for the teachings, a Buddha has appeared in this world, a Buddha taught the precious Dharma, the Dharma that was taught continues, there are followers of the Dharma that continues, and there is love and kind support from others.

However, if we use our special qualities in a wrong way we may do worse than an animal. Human beings can destroy the whole world, animals cannot. We have such power that we can either benefit countless sentient beings, or make countless sufferings for them. Conversely, if our special qualities are used in the best way, we can become utterly free from samsara. It is this capacity which makes the human life so precious. It is crucial for all human beings to understand this kind of Dharma.

Compared to the number of beings in the hell realms, or in the hungry ghost realm, the number of beings abiding in the animal realm is very few. Compared to the animal realm, human beings are much, much fewer still. You can easily see this for yourself if you take a handful of earth and count how many bugs there are in just one handful of dirt. There are so many that you probably cannot count them. We cannot count the entire number of animal beings on the earth, but we can at least approximate how many human beings are on the planet.

It is much easier to be born in the lower realms than to be born in the human realm. To be reborn as a human does not just happen without cause, or due to wrong causes. It has to happen from a complete cause. We have a tendency to create negative causes and conditions without much effort – it is very easy to go that direction, but we have to make a lot of effort to do good things. Even to recite one mantra, you have to be a very strong person.

So how can smaller animals, like ants, become human beings? How can animals get the opportunity to do virtuous deeds that can lead to higher rebirth? It is very rare for this to happen and occurs to very few. Therefore, we need to investigate and become aware of these facts, and then we can appreciate that we have a precious human life. It is so very important to be aware of how precious it is. With this opportunity we can become free from samsara and benefit limitless sentient beings. That is precious.

Once obtained, there are three conditions of human life: luxurious, precious, and poor. Some people are born into a very good and luxurious condition. They live out their lives in that situation and have no inclination to study Dharma. If you explain about Dharma they say, “Oh, that’s nice, but I’m not the kind of person who needs to do these things.” Other humans are born into difficult and poor conditions, live their entire lives that way, then die that way. Even when you talk about Dharma subjects, they are not interested at all. These two human conditions have no chance to become free from samsara so, even though they are human lives, they are not necessarily precious human lives.

For those who have a specially gifted mind, it does not matter if they are born in a good condition or not. When they hear the Dharma and understand it, they feel that it is the most important thing to do, are fully interested and want to put their time and energy into the Dharma. This life is called "precious" and is very rare. However, even though some may have interest in Dharma and wish to study and practice, they may have no opportunity and their circumstances may not allow it. This is a tragedy and an obstacle to spiritual progress. Because of these reasons, we see that a precious human life with the interest to study Dharma and the opportunity and circumstances to pursue that interest, is very rare.

When we have obtained a life such as this, it is a gift. We cannot get this gift from anywhere, nor

buy it from any source. It has to come about from our own past efforts. And now that we have this gift, it is most important to be aware of it and feel good about ourselves. Relax! This is a great cause for rejoicing but not for building the ego. Rather, just think about how wonderful it is that we have a precious human life with an interest in the Dharma and the circumstances that allow us to study and practice. This is our own inner resource -- the experience from past lifetimes coming to fruition.

Once we know this, we cannot be lazy. Laziness is very powerful. There are different types of laziness: laziness of attachment to worldly pleasure; laziness of looking down on oneself; laziness of attachment to samsaric activities. Looking down on oneself is saying things like, "I am not a good person. I don't have enough intelligence; I cannot study or practice Dharma well." When this comes, we should encourage ourselves by recollecting that we have a precious human life. We should think, "I have the buddha-nature, which is the basis for enlightenment. So if I make an effort, why shouldn't I, too, achieve it?"

When attached to this life's activities, consider what real essence there is in the activity. Especially at the time of death, what benefit will be there? Since there is no benefit, our time and energy should be used to achieve enlightenment. Work with that.

To counteract laziness, it is necessary to be aware of impermanence. Think, "Now I have a precious life and such a great opportunity, but it is not permanent. I cannot stay here forever, so I should not waste this precious chance." To overcome laziness we can think about our clothes catching on fire. Would we stay still and just let them be burned by the fire, or would we immediately try to put the fire out? Or if a snake crawled up onto your lap, how urgently would you stand up and shout? We should act in these ways in the face of the dangers of samsara.

The contemplation of the faults of cyclic existence as the antidote to attachment to the pleasure of peace. Regarding the faults of cyclic existence, we first contemplate impermanence, then precious human life, then positive and negative karma and then the results of karma. Karma is a most important subject, yet it is a very complex subject to be aware of and to understand. To help us begin to think about it I will relate a story.

Once there was a great person who was wandering from place to place and happened to enter a hungry ghost realm. While on the road in that realm he came to a beautiful palace in an empty valley. Inside the palace there was a lady and four hungry ghosts who were tied by ropes to the corners of a bed. Since the great person had come from a long distance, the lady of the palace offered him a special meal. While he was eating the lady declared that she had to go out and said, "If these four hungry ghosts ask you for anything, do NOT give it to them." Then she left.

The four hungry ghosts were suffering intensely and begged the traveler to give them something to eat. He decided to give them each just one piece of food. The first piece he gave turned into a piece of metal, the next one turned into chaff, the next turned into the ghost's own flesh and blood, and the last piece of food turned into dust. Now the hungry ghosts were suffering even more than before. At this

point the lady came back, saw what had happened and scolded him saying, “I told you not to give them anything. Do you think you are more compassionate than I am?” He was contrite and asked her to please tell him the cause of the hungry ghosts’ condition.

She said, “One was my husband, one was my son, one was my daughter-in-law and one was our housemaid. For a special occasion, the housemaid made some exceptionally delicious food. Before my family came home to eat, however, some of the Buddha’s disciples came and the housemaid offered them some of the food. When my family finally arrived the lunch was finished, but instead of rejoicing in the offering that had been made, they were upset. My husband declared that the Buddha’s disciples deserved to eat metal rather than our delicious food. My son said that the disciples deserved to eat a piece of chaff rather than our food. That caused them to be born in this state.

“At another time and place, my daughter-in-law made some delicious food but ate all the best food herself. When I asked if she had eaten the food, she said, “No, I haven’t. I would rather eat my own flesh and blood than eat that food.” So because of telling that lie, she was born like this. Then my housemaid was out delivering our family’s food here and there and she too told a lie. Because of that she was born in this state. Just one negative karma committed by each and they were reborn in this state. Karma cause is very strong.”

We can enjoy a story like this, but we should also reflect in our own mind and see that we, too, are committing a lot of actions like these. We need to be very careful and aware of what we are doing. Even if we recite many mantras, if we are not careful of our motivation we may create a lot of unwanted results. By creating just one negative karma, we can be reborn in the lower realms. That is why mindfulness and awareness are so very important. We should act very gently.

Karma cause is called ‘inevitable’ which means it cannot be exchanged - positive karma cannot be changed into negative and negative karma cannot be exchanged for positive. They each have their own distinctive quality, which we cannot disregard. In the United States there is a saying, “Ignorance of the law is no excuse.” In the law of karma there is also no excuse; it doesn’t matter if you are Buddhist or not a Buddhist.

Lord Jigten Sumgön taught that ignorance is the worst condition to be in because when you are ignorant, you do not regret making a mistake; therefore, it becomes very heavy negative karma. But when you make a mistake, create some bad or negative karma and are aware of it, you then have an opportunity to recognize the mistake and regret it which is part of the process of purification. However, without awareness we can have no regret.

That is why life as an animal is the worst for creating karma. During an animal life, because of the lack of awareness, one creates more and more negative karma. Negative karmas constantly come one after another and the animal’s future lives will degenerate more and more – for example, to a hungry ghost or hell realm. That is the effect of ignorance.

Karma all goes back to the mind: how our attitude is, what kind of motivation we have. When we have a very pure attitude, the karma we create is not negative, even though our action seems to be negative, due to the power of the motivation. However, if our attitude is not pure relative to the three poisons of ignorance, attachment, and aversion, then even if our actions seem to be nice, they go to the wrong. As the Tibetan verse says, "If the tree trunk is poisonous, then the flowers will still be poison even if they appear to be beautiful."

Karma cause is a very complex subject, yet is one which we all experience. By always watching the mind and the action of the mind, and by watching the physical actions that we do, we can live in the Dharma day-to-day. Thus Dharma practice is a way of living in a positive way. We should carry everything into Dharma practice daily. This makes the mind very broad. That is why I say Buddhism is a way of living.

Suffering is kind of unpleasant so we do not like to talk about it. But if we know about all the samsaric states and how all sentient beings are suffering, it makes our mind very broad and expansive. Since we are not free from suffering, it is good to know about it and be aware of it. It helps our Dharma study and practice so much if we develop this understanding. With too much suffering we cannot study or practice Dharma, but a little suffering is good. With a little suffering, there are great qualities that can be developed.

A little suffering helps lower our haughtiness and pride. When pride arises, you can counter it by thinking, "I am not free from suffering, so I am not really that great." A little suffering helps us develop compassion for all sentient beings and for ourselves. A little suffering helps us to be aware of karma cause: "This suffering comes from negative karma, so I should be more careful about my actions." A little suffering helps us to renounce samsara: "Samsara is not really a good place to stay; I have to work hard to get free of this state." Thus there are many good qualities to suffering.

We study all these things – precious human life, impermanence, karma cause, and suffering – and through this kind of study we begin to feel that we have to do something different, that we need to become free from this cycle. Because staying in the cycle has no essence and no benefit in the absolute state. But what should we do? Even if we sit and meditate a little, it is not permanent. Even if we study and know many different things, this is still the state of samsara. We have to do something different and so, here then, comes in the idea of refuge.

The contemplation of the benefits of attaining liberation as the antidote to not knowing how to achieve enlightenment. To free ourselves from the cycles of samsara, one has to have a special wisdom and also a method, way, or path. The Buddha became free from the entire circle of confusion. He saw suffering itself and the cause of suffering, and achieved complete wisdom and compassion. So buddhahood, enlightenment, the fully-awakened state, becomes our goal. In a real sense, taking refuge is declaring, "I want to become a buddha!" This is called taking refuge in the Buddha, who is the example of how to achieve enlightenment.

There are many different ways of explaining the Buddha. We can look at a statue and say that it is the Buddha, but it is just an image, an example. The actual Buddha is enlightenment; the real

Buddha is the fully awakened state of mind complete with all the qualities and purified of all obscurations. You hear of the two forms, or three forms, or four forms of a buddha. What is important is that the Buddha completely purified all the obscurations, gross and subtle, and completely developed the two wisdoms. That state is the dharmakaya – the highest state of enlightenment. Dharmakaya itself does not have a specific form; it is the state of enlightenment, a collection of all the good qualities, which forms the basis for manifestation.

To benefit all other sentient beings, the Buddha manifested in the sambhogakaya form and in the nirmanakaya form. Sambhogakaya is the enjoyment body. For all the great bodhisattvas, in all the different buddhafi elds, the Buddha manifests in the sambhogakaya form to give all the profound teachings. For ordinary people, the Buddha manifests the nirmanakaya form, or manifestation body. The unity of these three natures is called svabhavikakaya.

When we put pictures of the Buddha and other enlightened beings on the shrine, it is not idol worship, although some people think it is. If you do not know the meanings behind the images then it is like idol worship, but when you know the meanings, it is not. The shrine images are examples for us to follow. Therefore, when you come to the shrine you have some special awareness and think, “This is a shrine. I must be careful and respectful.” You may feel the presence of the Buddha, like the Buddha was actually there. That is an example of what we are supposed to achieve, so we feel respect for that. Showing respect is quite different from idol worship.

Through many kalpas (eons) these great beings studied and practiced. Finally they achieved enlightenment and can benefit all sentient beings. When we think, “I should do the same thing,” they become our examples and models. Therefore, when there are pictures or statues on the shrine we should respect them. Do not step on them or over them, but put them in a high place. This is not just a cultural practice; it is a teaching on awareness and of how precious these beings are to us.

But what should we do to achieve buddhahood? To become a buddha, we have to study and practice Dharma. The Dharma explains what samsara is, how to free ourselves from samsara and how to achieve enlightenment. Right now we do not have wisdom, compassion or power, so we are to concern ourselves with that. We are to apply the Dharma in our life – day-to-day, slowly progressing. Here the real sense of taking refuge means that we apply these examples, these teachings, to our life. It is the path and so we take refuge in the Dharma.

We should always be very respectful of Dharma texts. If we put them in a higher place that shows some respect and shows that we are aware that these are the teachings that we study and practice. Our wisdom, awareness and all the good qualities that we achieve are through these teachings; they are so precious and holy. The Buddha himself said that in the future he will manifest in the letter form of teachings. So we should respect these texts as the Buddha himself. If the Buddha himself came here, he would teach you not to do negative karma and to create positive karma – these are the same teachings that we get from the texts.

Once we have fully studied and practiced, we become the embodiment of refuge, Sangha. There are many, many highly realized teachers who have studied and practiced Dharma, achieved

realizations and, finally, attained buddhahood. Sangha practitioners are very precious because they are unlike ordinary people. Their minds are motivated to achieve enlightenment with the wish to be free from samsara. They become objects of refuge. This is called taking refuge in the Sangha.

All Sangha members should highly respect each other. Even though we are not perfect and make a lot of mistakes due to our habitual tendencies from many lifetimes, we still study and practice Dharma, try to understand Dharma and try to improve ourselves. More or less, we are making an effort and that is very precious. Most people never try to do these things at all. Compared to them, we are at least making an effort. So respect each other. Eventually, sometime in the future, we will achieve enlightenment.

So, there we have the complete idea of refuge - Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. This subject is very important. Whether we are studying and practicing Dharma successfully depends on our attitude and on our correct understanding of the meaning of refuge. If we do not have a correct understanding of the meaning of refuge, it will not lead to enlightenment no matter what kind of high teachings we are practicing.

Though we may be practicing the highest tantra practice and studying many great and marvelous teachings, without the correct understanding of refuge we will remain in the samsaric state. There are some who may have miraculous powers, fly in the sky and manifest many things, but without the motivation to be free from samsara all those miraculous things are just samsaric stuff.

Everything is always subject to change, impermanence. If we want protection from this, refuge is the best protection we can have. Wanting to achieve enlightenment, studying and practicing Dharma, taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha – these three are the best protection. With this kind of attitude, if we recite the refuge mantra and do prostrations 100,000 times we have the best protection possible. It will even protect us from temporarily undesirable circumstances. Eventually refuge will lead us to be free from all samsara.

These are some fundamental teachings on refuge. Basically, all teachings are encompassed in refuge. In any practice you can find, no matter how high, you are studying refuge. Mahamudra? That is a Dharma teaching. The four kayas? That is talking about the Buddha. In the many life stories of the bodhisattvas and all the great masters, they are talking about practicing refuge.

It is critical to understand the starting point of our studies, to establish the ground very firmly. We tend to forget refuge and get involved in so many different things and think refuge is not important. If we first miss the meaning of refuge and do not see how important it is, our other practices may not go into the path. But if we successfully cultivate the mind in the proper way, then all our other practices will surely follow in the right path

Without refuge first, one cannot become an *upasaka/upasika* (layman/laywoman), one cannot receive the bodhisattva's vows. Refuge teaches how to cultivate the mind. There are no empowerments or initiations without refuge. No matter what else these ceremonies do, they always start with refuge. Even when we do highest tantra ceremonies, they all start with refuge.

Refuge is the first gate, thus it is the most important.

We continue to wander in samsara due to the four basic obstacles of attachment to this life, attachment to the next life, attachment to only our own peace and not knowing how to get out of the cycle of rebirth after rebirth. In order to break the circle and turn the mind, we contemplate as antidotes the four foundation thoughts of impermanence, the rarity of attaining leisure and fortune as a human being, the faults of staying in cyclic existence and the benefits of attaining liberation to attain a meaningful life. We develop a longing to find a way out of our misery, to become a buddha ourselves and we seek refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha to accomplish this. Through the transformational power of sincere, consistent practice and study, we begin to put others before ourselves and wish to bring them to buddhahood. This pure motivation becomes the fuel that drives us to full awakening, to our own buddhahood.

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