

Four Contemplations to Turn the Mind Toward Dharma

(four “Mind Changings” arranged by Kokyo, based on Dogen Zenji, Jigme Lingpa, and others)

Contemplating the rarity of human life

In this life I have been given a great opportunity with the wondrous endowments of human birth, with complete sense faculties, in a land where Dharma is taught and practiced, not having committed horrible deeds, and with faith in the Buddha-Dharma. Even though I have been blessed by such gifts, they may be easily wasted in this life by unknown circumstances, giving rise to ignorant birth again into this confused world. Once the merits that gave rise to this fortunate life have been exhausted, I may wander into the lower realms, without knowing virtue from non-virtue, not hearing the Dharma, nor meeting spiritual guides. Just to think about the infinite types of living beings is to realize that receiving a human body and mind is extremely rare. To see humans committing non-virtuous harmful deeds is to realize that spiritual practitioners are even more rare. May I fully appreciate and take advantage of this blessed human life.

Contemplating the impermanence of life

I have been blessed with the auspicious conditions and great freedom to practice Dharma, not tormented by sickness and pain, not bound by worldly obligations or being under the control of others. If I waste this fortunate human life by meaningless distraction, at death all relatives, friends, and possessions will be lost, and even this body I hold so dear will decompose into soil or be burned to ashes. This life is like the dew on the grass at dawn. Death is certain to come, it could come at any time, and at that time the Dharma and my spiritual practice will be the only help. Remembering my impending death always, may I give up all selfish concerns for this life, and learn to practice Dharma with the resolve of someone putting out a fire on top of his head.

Contemplating the effect of actions

The effects of my non-virtuous and virtuous actions will come to fruition in this mind without fail, life after life. In learning to practice the Buddha-Dharma, the first priority is not to obscure cause and effect. If I ignore karmic causality, this will give rise to the view of nihilism and will cut off the roots of wholesome actions. The truth of cause and effect is vividly clear: those who practice non-virtue fall into suffering and those who practice virtue rise into happiness, without the slightest discrepancy. May I always refrain from the ten non-virtuous actions of killing, stealing, and misusing sexuality; from speaking falsely, of others' faults, abusively, and idly; from possessiveness, anger, and holding false views.

Contemplating the discontent of cyclic existence

In the realm of hell, beings are burnt, frozen, crushed, and tormented by unbearable suffering. This is the result of anger and hatred. In the realm of hungry spirits, food and drink cannot be found or swallowed. This is the result of possessiveness and greed. In the realm of animals, there is confusion and great fear as various creatures eat one another. This is the result of holding false views and the darkness of ignorance. Even in the higher realms of gods and humans, there is the suffering of birth, aging, sickness, and death; of sorrow, lamentation, pain, and despair. There is dissatisfaction even in pleasure, knowing it must come to an end, and the ever-present subtle uneasiness of living in a conditioned impermanent body. Aware of the all-pervasive discontent throughout the relentless habitual patterns of cyclic existence, may I develop renunciation of its causes, and compassion for all living beings.