

The Four Mind Turning Reflections

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The Four Reflections are connected with Going for Refuge

This is an introductory talk about The Four Mind-Turnings together as a set of the Reflections as an introduction to this retreat. As Maitreyi and I both said last night, we did these reflections in our kula on a couple, if not more, of retreats last year and thought what a good retreat it would make to explore them in more depth.

In terms of the retreat themes we used to do, we used to have a Going for Refuge theme: exploring Going for Refuge in its levels and dimensions as a central teaching of the Movement. This particular retreat, this Four Sets of Reflections, is very much connected with Going for Refuge. Because they are designed, as a set of reflections, to turn our minds away from illusory involvement in *samsara* towards Dharma practice. So there is a sense of going forth from what we would call ‘false refuges’ (the things that we engage in which we think are going to give us lasting pleasure) and towards ‘true refuges’ which are, ultimately of course, The Three Jewels. So there is a very strong emphasis on renunciation: from going forth from false refuges in this set of Reflections and turning towards the Dharma, towards the True Refuges.

I know some of you have read around this material, and in some sets of reflections you come across the last reflection Reflecting on the Inadequacy of Samsara and sometimes it’s just left like that, and that gives you impetus to want liberation from the cycle of birth and death. But the way that other Sets of Reflections are written, you also look at the Six Realms in that last Reflection to empathize, not just with your own suffering, but the suffering of other beings. So the impetus to escape from Samsara is very much associated with doing that for the sake of all sentient beings and very much associated with the Bodhisattva Ideal. This, of course, is again very much associated with our ways of looking at Going for Refuge as an altruistic dimension of Going for Refuge.

The Four Mind Turnings together are a set of Reflections. They also encompass a lot of dharmic teaching as we look into them. They are a method for turning our mind from just being involved in the pleasures of Samsara towards the Path and towards the Dharma. They’re called different things when you come across them:

- **The Four Mind Turnings**, which is what I’ve called them here.
- **The Four Ordinary Preliminary Practices**, because they precede other preliminary practices
- **The Four Thoughts that Transform the Mind**
- **The Four Reminders**, so the reminders to turn from Samsara towards Nirvana and towards the Dharma.
- **The Four Thoughts that Touch the Heart**, which change the heart, which I thought is nice. So that very much brings into play the idea in Buddhism that *citta* is heart-mind, and not just a

conceptual thing but heart based also. So you are trying to turn your whole being away from illusory involvement and attachment to Samsara and towards the Dharma.

The Four Mind-Turnings are often said to be the bedrock of Buddhist or dharmic practice, in that they encourage us to make our lives meaningful. They also act as a mirror, as they are all to do with the nature of existence, so if we reflect upon them we are confronted with Reality, the reality of our life and of life in general. So that enables us to generate faith in the Dharma and gives us motivation to practice the Path.

Foundations for Practice and a Path for Regular Steps

It's often said that they are like the foundations of a house or a building, and I think that's a good metaphor for them. If we think about building anything, if we build a building on sand its going to collapse, so we need to build the whole of our Dharma life, our practice, on good foundations. There's a quote I came across, which says"

"They are like the foundations of a house or building - without them nothing can be perfected. Therefore, cherish persistent recollection of them. This is my heart advice. "

So they are both seen as a foundation, but you continue to reflect upon them throughout your Dharma life. I think this very much connects for us in the Teachings of the Path of Regular Steps.

Many, many years ago Bhante gave a talk on the Path of Regular and Irregular Steps and some of us were quite drawn to the Path of Irregular Steps. He also posited No Steps, which was quite exciting [Laughter]. But what he was encouraging us to do in that talk, and I think in his whole teaching of the Dharma, was to follow a Path of Regular Steps to build our practice up on good foundations. This very much accords with that approach to the Dharma. Sometimes the Path of Irregular Steps is good and sometimes the Path of No Steps just comes to one, but in terms of a lifelong engagement with the Dharma the Path of Regular Steps is a good strategy. We can have a tendency to have great bursts of enthusiasm, "Oh that's great", but we aren't always able to follow that through with continuity, continuity of interest. We also tend to have quite high expectations. So we can have the initial great enthusiasm and high expectations, but that doesn't work [Laughter] because we expect things to happen very quickly and we have ideas about change and how quickly we are going to change. Maybe as we mature we are a bit more realistic. I remember as a very young Dharma practitioner I thought I was going to get Enlightened next week, but I've learned differently over time. The thing about that combination of interest and enthusiasm, and high ideals and high expectation is that it can so easily turn into disappointment and disillusionment. And then we can't really settle into a regular meditation practice, our minds aren't settled because we are all over the place. So building a firm foundation of practice is very important for us.

So yes, "*Cherish persistent recollection of them*". Implied in this set of Teachings, this set of Reflections is a need to reflect on them constantly and integrate them into our lives and to begin to experience them into our being as it were. They point to attitudes. They are a crystallization of particular reflections that we need to be in touch with all the time. We may not need to do that through a formal reflection on them daily. They are such big topics that in a way we are confronted with them all the time. So we are alive, and our life has certain opportunities and freedoms and so on and so we

may just be thinking about that anyway. Impermanence constantly impacts upon us in various ways. So that's very much part of nature, part of life. We are continually acting, and our actions continually have consequences and we reap those consequences in our life stream. We are living in Samsara and if we look at the Six Realms psychologically our mental states continually fluctuate dependant upon our previous actions. As a set of Teachings, it's drawing on very general Buddhist teachings and crystallizing them into a set of Reflections. So we have probably been thinking about these things anyway.

I came across a quote by Keith Dowman who said, "*They are okay as a set of reflections but you can't beat real experience*". By which I think he meant that real life experience of impermanence and death in our life, for example, is going to have an impact on us, maybe a bigger impact than just sitting and reflecting on impermanence. But of course there's a feedback process in there, in those reflections and our life experience. So we've all got life experience in these areas, that's what I'm trying to say. So in a way, when you come to do the reflections you are drawing on your own life experience.

They are also said as a set of Preliminary Practices to be 'more profound than the actual teachings', which is a bit odd as they are actual Teachings [Laughter]. I think they are very much seen as a set of Preliminary Practices and someone else is saying, "Well they are not just preliminary they are a very profound set of teachings". And perhaps there are other meditation practices which are more profound, but you won't reap the benefit of practices further on in a path unless you've really engaged in your preliminary practices and you've engaged in these Four Reminders because they generate good motivation for practice.

The Teachings crystallized in this set of Reflections are found all the way through the Dharma and early Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism. They are crystallized into this set of Reflections particularly in Tibetan Buddhism. They are used in that context, in that tradition, as the Preliminary Practices in the Graded Path, the Lamrim set of Practices. So if you've read the Jewel Ornament of Liberation for example by Gampopa, who is a disciple of Milarepa and also Atisha, you've got a very early book, text applied to the Graded Path. And if you read books on Tibetan Buddhism, often those books will begin with some kind of exposition of The Four Mind-Turnings. So you find them in works by Atisha, by Gampopa and, particularly in the Galupa tradition, one of the chief teachers is Tsongkhapa. Tsongkhapa is the author of the poem that we are going to use throughout the retreat and he comments on The Four Mind-Turnings a lot in his works. So you've probably come across them if you've read any works on Tibetan Buddhism, you've come across The Four Mind-Turnings.

Nisarana – The Renunciation of False Refuges

As a Set of Reflections they are very important and they counteract certain basic delusions that we carry around with us, which I will come onto later, and they can have a very powerful effect on our practice. They enable us to do a variety of things.

They enable us, particularly the first one, to realize our potential as human beings. They enable us to turn towards the Dharma more deeply and to take up a path of practice more deeply. So they are called The Four Mind-Turnings, The Four Thoughts that Transform the Mind. So reflecting on these four deeply enable us to transform our minds and the ways in which we view the world. They highlight the fact that we have got great opportunities and not to waste those great opportunities. So they give us

inspiration to practice the Dharma and keep us focused on the goal. They help us to create a good motivation. Continuing motivation is one of the things we find difficult, to maintain our interest and motivation and to make progress on the path.

In general, they bring about an abandonment of attachment to Samsara, so that we've got a good basis of renunciation upon which we can begin to meditate. They are concerned with renunciation. I know renunciation... if I say the word renunciation and gave you a few minutes to let that impact on you and think what your physical and emotional feeling was in relation to that, quite often its not very comfortable experience is it? Renunciation and 'giving up' can tap into our own conditioning and lead to nihilism and that kind of thing. But renunciation is often a translation of *nisarana*, Not Going for Refuge. So The Four Mind-Turnings are a turning away from Going for Refuge to Inadequate Refuges. It is renunciation in that sense and going towards Real Refuges. The difference between an Inadequate Refuge or a False Refuge and a Real Refuge is that with the Inadequate Refuge we pile on it what it cannot give us. So we see conditioned things (Inadequate Refuges are anything that's conditioned), as permanent rather than impermanent. Intellectually we know things are impermanent, but often our emotional response is that the things of this life are going to last and they are going to give us lasting pleasure.

In some senses, the things that we load false views onto are okay in themselves if we see them for what they are. So its not the things in themselves which are bad, which is what we can tend to think and then go into a very strong aversion and nihilism and renunciation in *that* sense, to which we will have some sort of reaction to at some point. So that's not what we are talking about when we are talking about renunciation.

A gradual reflection on the Four Mind-Turnings enables us to have a more positive relationship and association with *nisarana*, with renunciation, rather than if we do "Oh I don't want to do that – I like the things I like ... I want to do them". So from that point of view they are a good set of practices.

Preciousness of this Human Life and Impermanence and Death

The ways I've put them up here is the usual way we work through them as a set of Reflections. If you've read about them, you may have come across them in a different order, I'll come back to that later. Usually you come across them in this order, and this is how we are going to explore them on the retreat. Also, in later commentaries, particularly from Tsongkhapa, they are divided into two sets of two. They may not have been looked at in this way in early commentaries, but Tsongkhapa does this.

He looks at the first two: The Preciousness of this Human Life and Impermanence and Death as a way of bringing about renunciation of the pleasures of this life or the 'letting go' of the hankering for the pleasures of this life in a particular kind of way. This is not being attached to the pleasures of this life and 'attachment' is the important word. It's not that this life doesn't have any pleasures. Life has many, many pleasures. But it's to do with not living *merely* for the pleasures of this life and not living a purely hedonistic life. And sometimes it's put as not looking for a happy outcome in this life, in the sense that Samsara will work for us or that the things in Samsara *will* give us lasting pleasure and happiness. So we may think that life is about having a great time, making lots of money, being famous – all the things that Samsara is about: money, health, fame, happiness. You might think, "Well what's wrong with that, what's wrong with those things?" There's a tendency, if that's your total focus, to not

be looking at suffering and pain (either your own or other peoples') and to have that kind of attitude, well we are not really faced with the way things really are with reality. The tendency is that it keeps us attached to the pain-pleasure cycle. So we look for pleasure, and the things in which we look for pleasure aren't lasting. So the pleasure isn't lasting and that leads to disappointment and unhappiness and suffering. The first two Reflections are working against that delusion, and of course all of us, and the fact that we are practicing the Dharma, have seen through that delusion to some extent already. Perhaps using these Four Reflections can take us into seeing through it much more deeply. Also if we think about samsaric pleasures, if we start to reflect on impermanence and death more deeply, we see those pleasures - those mundane pleasures - in a different perspective, in a perspective of impermanence and death. So quite naturally then we start to withdraw from things, become less interested in things, because we realize they are not going to satisfy our deepest needs and desires.

So the first two Mind-Turnings enable us to invest more deeply in our inner life, our spiritual life, in our Dharma life. It doesn't mean we are not going to still carry on enjoying the pleasures of Samsara, but we will have a different perspective on life. So we are beginning to let go of our preoccupations with the things of this life. Sometimes it's talked about in terms of the Eight Worldly Winds and sometimes in terms of a preoccupation with food, pleasure and reputation. We realize that we can't take the things that we enjoy so much with us.

The Precious Human Life in this set of two is a very positive place to start. Sometimes we start with Impermanence, but I think for us reflecting on This Precious Human Birth and its freedoms and opportunities (which I'm going to go into in much more detail tomorrow) enables us to have a lot of faith and confidence in our potential, in what we already have in our lives and in our Dharma practice. It gives us a very positive basis for practice. We can tend to take life for granted, so this is one of the *samskaras* that this can turn around. We may even think that our life isn't up to much, worth much, or have much going for us, and there's a very common practice in the Dharma applied to many, many different things, which is to reflect on the benefits of whatever. So if you want to generate *metta*, then you reflect on the benefits of *metta*, if you want to generate the *bodhicitta*, you reflect on the benefits of *bodhicitta*. The first chapters of the Bodhicaryavatara are a sustained reflection on the benefits of *bodhicitta*. It's a very simple and very effective practice to turn your mind to the benefits of something that you do want to generate and develop, and to focus on that gives you a lot of positive energy.

So reflecting on the Precious Human Birth, the Precious Life, and its freedoms and opportunities generates gratitude for the things that you do have. It generates appreciation for your self and the context in which you find yourself. It gives birth to self confidence in our potential, it generates faith, and all that intensifies our motivation to practice. So it's an incredibly positive basis to practice. We will take tomorrow and the next couple of days looking at that in much more detail. I think it's a good place for us to start, because we so often don't have, maybe because of our materialistic and nihilistic tendencies in our culture, we often don't value what we have and the context in which we find ourselves in and we aren't often deeply in contact with our own very positive potential. This highlights all that, and on the basis of that, maybe only on the basis of that, we can begin to reflect on impermanence and death.

Tsongkhapa's poem of course really highlights these first Two Mind-Turnings. He says:

Cherish your body

*It's yours this one time only
It's won with difficulty
And it's easy to lose*

So cherish your body, cherish this precious human life. The reflection very much brings about the cherishing of our life and of our opportunities. But then within that context you reflect that it's won with difficulty and easy to lose.

And then Tsongkhapa writes:

*All worldly things are brief
Like lightening in the sky
And this life you must know
Is a tiny splash of a raindrop*

So, on the basis of that very, very positive first reflection you can then start to reflect, "Yes it's a very, very positive opportunity you have, but our human life is brief like a tiny splash of a raindrop. This is very beautiful; images of impermanence are very beautiful aren't they? And I think maybe focusing on the images engages us with the positive aspects of reflecting on impermanence. Our life's like a bubble, it's like a dew drop, it's like a flash of lightning, like a raindrop.

So we reflect, "Yes its very, very positive - our human life - but its fragile and impermanent. So we reflect on the second one, the impermanence of all worldly things but perhaps particularly the impermanence and fragility of our own life. Knowledge that we must die, we will die. There's no escaping it. We do have a tendency, a very strong tendency, to disregard our own mortality. It's very, very hard for us to really think that we are going to die. We have moments when that's very real for us, either because we are very ill or we have some kind of accident and we realize how close we've been. I'm not a mother, but sometimes people giving birth say that they feel at that moment very close to death as well as life. And also when close friends and relatives of ours die and when we see somebody die, we feel that possibility much more tangibly. But it so easily fades, so easily fades: some of it remains with us but it's very hard to keep it as a reflection. It's a positive reflection. So this whole set of Reflections is enabling and helping us to do that.

I think these first two are in a very creative tension as it were. You don't want to go into reflection on impermanence and death and fall into nihilism and despair, you want to maintain the basis of the reflection on Precious Human Birth and all the opportunities that you have. But you don't want to get complacent about that and think you are going to live forever. So this reflection gives us a sense of urgency. The message is "don't waste time". That's what Tsongkhapa is saying, he is saying:

*Set your goal
And make use of every day and night
To achieve it.*

So we need with this Reflection, and this is the Reflection that Vajradarshini will be talking about in a couple of days' time, to keep alive in our hearts that sense of death and impermanence in a creative way and in a positive way. The effects of that, and we will see the effects of this as we reflect on it more

deeply throughout the retreat, is that we can be more fully alive in the present moment, and perhaps overcome our fear of death.

So these first two reflections are very important. We build our faith and confidence in the opportunities that we have and in our own potential. That gives us a positive basis for reflecting on impermanence and death. Then we need to see through the illusions of samsara without falling into nihilism or despair. And we realize we *can* make something of our lives in a dharmic sense but *not* in the sense of finding perfection in Samsara.

Karma and Karma Vipaka

So the second two Mind-Turnings, Karma and Karma Vipaka, actions and the consequences of actions and the faults of samara and conditioned existence, in Tsongkhapa's commentaries these are said to overcome clinging to future pleasures. I think in the second two Mind-Turnings, everything opens up into a bigger perspective: the Wheel of Life and the Twelve Nidanas; that whole perspective of karma and the Wheel of Life. We might be thinking, "Well we've got this life but if we've got some kind of belief in karma and rebirth then we've got other lives so we can cruise in this world and we will have another one" and we've got plenty of time as it were and, you know, we might have a nice future birth. Spiritual teaching says, "Well you don't know you are going to have the same opportunities and freedoms in your next life". Your next life, in this context of rebirth, is uncertain. You don't know what your rebirth is going to be, you don't know which realm you might be born into. This obviously relates to the whole teaching of karma, and karma and rebirth, which in some ways is a simple teaching in the sense of the Teaching that actions do have consequences. This is what we are trying to reflect on, and understand more and more deeply: that actions have consequences so that skilful actions generally have skilful consequences and unskilful actions have unskilful consequences. But of course, in the bigger perspective, the Teachings of karma and rebirth are quite complex, and you'll be in Ratnadharani's hands as she explores that more deeply with you later on in the retreat.

If you reflect on these two, on Karma and Karma Vipaka, and on the Wheel of Life and the Six Realms, we see that things go up and down in the Wheel of Life. Samsara is a cycle and we cycle through it dependent upon our intentional mental states. That's true if you look at it cosmologically and if you look psychologically – that the mental states we get into are very much dependent upon the actions, the intentional actions, of body, speech and mind that we perform. So we go up and down in this life, and we go up and down over births and by reflecting on Karma and Karma Vipaka, and karma and Samsara as a whole we see that even pleasant states end. Seeing the limitations of merely pleasure or pleasurable states of mind. If we look at the bigger picture, we see that even having a Precious Human Birth in those six Realms is not enough because life comes to an end, and we don't know what seeds of karma are going to come into fruition next life, we don't know what kind of set of external conditions we are going to find ourselves in. We really don't know that we are going to have the same potential opportunities and freedoms in the future life, so we can't just necessarily bank on "Yeah it'll be great next time round". So reflection on these two, if we have any tendency to think "Yeah it'll be great in the future and we will have a hedonistic life this time round" brings us perhaps to understand that we may not find these fortunate circumstances again.

So I think also that reflection on Karma and Karma Vipaka counteracts this tendency to think we can act with impunity, that actually our actions don't matter that much. This reflection says our intentional

actions matter, because Buddhist ethics is an ethics of intention by and large. So our actions matter, your actions matter, my actions matter. It's not that there's some external law that is going to punish us if we are bad, it's just that the things that we do with body, speech and mind are deposited, speaking metaphorically, as seeds in our mind stream. And those seeds will bear fruit, are more likely to bear fruit than not bear fruit. So our whole being is modified by our intentional actions. How seriously we take that, if we really took that seriously, then I suppose we would be acting skilfully all the time [Laughter] and that's not true. So we can always take our understanding of Karma and Karma Vipaka more deeply and see on more levels that our actions of body, speech and mind *do* modify our life and also the world in which we live. So it's a bit of a wake up call, and this is going to lead us to Go for Refuge more deeply. In particular its going to lead us to choose our actions of body, speech and mind more consciously and more carefully and to direct those actions more and more along skilful channels rather than unskilful. This of course is reflected in our practice of the precepts. This is very much, by reflecting on Karma and Karma Vipaka; we are engaged with the whole ethics in the Buddhist tradition

Seeing Conditioned Existence in terms of the Three Laksanas or Three Marks

Just looking at Samsara as a whole, whether we look at those Six Realms cosmologically or psychologically, we are looking at the Wheel of Life and looking at the nature of conditioned existence. Maitreyi is going to introduce us to this later on in the retreat in more detail, but primarily we are looking at Samsara in terms of the Three Laksanas or the Three Marks. That is conditioned existence is painful, impermanent and insubstantial. In looking at the bigger picture and reflecting in this way, we are beginning to overcome our fascination as it were with the marvels of Samsara, of which there are many, and conditioned existence gives us much pleasure. But we are beginning to see that it can't give us total happiness, and understanding that even within pleasure sometimes there is hidden or latent suffering. So we enjoy many things, but it's interesting to reflect how much pleasure there is actually in the things that we enjoy. How much is there in the moment or is much of it anticipation and memory. Focusing on pleasure as a reflection is quite interesting, "What is pleasure, what is it?" Sometimes if we look at things in that way, we see how momentary the pleasure is, and even associated with something very pleasurable often there are deeper anxieties about loss and losing the things we enjoy. These reflections point at more at that way of seeing. What the Four Mind Turnings do in leading us through renunciation is they are quite a strong and at the same time quite a gentle way of bringing about insights which quite naturally turn us away from delusion towards a more realistic understanding of life and existence. So the act of withdrawal is a natural withdrawal rather than an "Aah, mustn't do that!" which probably means you'll do that thing again later on in my experience [Laughter], you know react in and out of things.

There's a wonderful line in Pingya's Praises of the Way to the Beyond, it's a favorite reading in the FWBO (Triratna Buddhist Community), where Pingya is talking about the Buddha and what the Buddha teaches and he says:

He shows the way to give up craving without harmful side effects.

I'd love to give a talk on that one day, I must get round to it one day. I think it's a wonderful phrase, and so often we can fall into thinking we have to give things up in an alienated and ascetic way, which will give us harmful side effects and reactions. I think the Four Mind Turnings are a way of giving up addiction to the pleasures of this life and of any addictions we have of the possible pleasures of our

next life without harmful side effects and in a natural way. So that's what I hope will come out of this retreat.

Summary

So that's a brief overview of what we are going to be exploring in the retreat. Sometimes they are expressed in a different order, and you may come across them in a different order. I think this one is good for us and I think it is the more usual one.

But I have seen them approached with Impermanence first. In a way that's understandable, because that is the actual nature of ourselves and existence generally and it's a truth that's *there*. It's an actual characteristic of existence, it's a *Laksana*, it's a definitive mark. If we engage in a reflection on Impermanence, we also understand that attachment to impermanent things brings suffering, so it's very much involved with Reflection on the Four Noble Truths as well. The Four Mind-Turnings do associate with The Four Noble Truths, so that may make us think that we really need to practice the Dharma, and then we realize well we have got the means to practice. We've got The Precious Human Birth, we've got freedom and opportunities, and we've got the context so that would lead us to into the First Reflection as a Second Reflection. Sometimes Samsara comes third, where we see the nature of existence and our attachment to it through our reflection on Impermanence as it were. Then we realize we can abandon our attachment to Samsara because of the truth of Karma and Karma Vipaka. Because of the truth that actions do have consequences and what we do does matter because we have the power, we have the ability to change what we do and to engage in the Path of Practice: developing more and more skilful actions and, dependent upon which, insight can arise. So you can turn around 1 and 2, and turn around 3 and 4.

I think it's probably better to approach them in this way (how set out in the retreat). I suppose really they are just so interconnected aren't they? You approach one and you can arrive at any of the others because the Dharma is a total truth in which everything does interconnect. But for methodological purposes we will take them up as a set of Reflections in this order.

We will start with Precious Human Birth and will really explore our opportunities and freedoms, our own potential and the context in which we find ourselves in and to allow that to unfold over the next nine days to see what happens. What should happen is that feelings of appreciation for what we've got, feelings of gratitude, feelings of faith begin to arise. That allows us to explore death and impermanence, and understanding that our context can change. We may live a long life but we just don't know what's going to happen to our context and our circumstances, so that probably gives us a sense of urgency to practice more deeply. To understand that we do have the possibility of directing our life by understanding Karma and Karma Vipaka, we can choose at any moment in time skilful actions of body, speech and mind. We can direct our lives skillfully through the practice of the precepts and we can understand more and more deeply that conditioned existence has nothing ultimately to offer us. And allow that to give us a sense of a very strong motivation for liberation for ourselves and all sentient beings.