

THE FOUR THOUGHTS IN FIVE PARTS

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THE FIRST REVERSAL: THE PRECIOUS HUMAN BIRTH

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The First Reversal or first “Thought That Turns the Mind Toward the Dharma” is the precious human birth. I have been to Tibet, China, Sikkim, 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 mosquitoes. In Nepal I was told they give you life in prison if you hit and kill a cow with your car, and there cows wandering everywhere in the streets over there - that kind of thing. How “foreign” to those of us over here in America.

And 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 we are reading this here and now means that we are such people.

It might sound trite but the Tibetan Rinpoche I have worked with for almost thirty 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 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.

His 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 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. We are all that close. Every Tibetan is raised with this thought. Anyway, you get the idea.

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 blog 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.

Tomorrow I will wrap this up with the story of how I first came upon these four concepts that can reverse our direction, that can turn our mind toward greater awareness.

THE SECOND REVERSAL: IMPERMANENCE

October 31, 2011

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. Our eventual impermanence is something that we acknowledge only when put on the spot.

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

And it was the Four Thoughts that got my attention when I first encountered Buddhism. They turned 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 some 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. 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 in one shot.

It took years for me to realize that the great majority of people in the world believe in rebirth and 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 Buddhist teach just that 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. After all, the word “Buddha” simply means ‘awareness’ or “the one who is aware.”

It 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. Here were authorities who actually were authorities. Imagine!

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.

THE THIRD REVERSAL: KARMA
October 30, 2011

Called the “Third Reversal,” it is taught at the very beginning as one of four ‘reversals’ that are said to cause us to suddenly stop our business of life-as-usual that we are living, reflect, pause... and then reverse ourselves, reverse our direction of ignoring everything important and get real, if only for a day or part of a day.

The Four Reversals are taught to most students of the dharma somewhere at the very beginning. But we meet them again much later as the basis of the most advanced teachings in the Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, what is called Mahamudra meditation. They are that important.

The Four Reversals are also called “The Four Thoughts” or the longer version “The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind Toward the Dharma.” As mentioned, when we reflect on these thoughts, any one of them, they have the ability or power to stop us in our tracks, to give us

pause, and the power to turn us from wherever we were blindly heading and redirect us back home to where our heart is, to what is really important.

They could also be termed “The Four Reminders” because they are always a wakeup call to remember what is actually most important. The Four Thoughts are:

- (1) That life is precious.
- (2) The fact of impermanence.
- (3) That everything we do has an effect.
- (4) That we will never be able to game the system.

The Third Reversal or Third Thought that can turn the mind is the law of Karma, the law of cause and effect, the idea that the things we do (all of them) inexorably have an exact effect. And it is not just what we might all agree are mistakes like killing or stealing, and the like. Of course these “big” mistakes leave a track in our mindstream but it is the little mistakes that we do all the time that really add up and that imprint our mind with indelible tracks or grooves that are almost impossible to erase. And it is these deep marks that are reinforced on a daily basis that accumulate to unimaginable proportions.

And every so-called mistake or error is not judged by the conventional laws of society or by “someone up there” but rather is determined solely by our intent. It is our own intention in every thought, word, and deed that determines the kind of karma we are creating for ourselves. We do it to ourselves by increments and by degrees. We dig our own graves in the mindstream.

There is a bright note to all of this.

It is possible to become aware of what we are doing and to catch ourselves before we make mistakes and to stop reinforcing karmic tracks that will have to resurface later very painfully. We can stop pinching ourselves but it does take some practice. That is why dharma practice exists.

And like all things related to the mind, it depends on our becoming aware of what we are doing enough to stop doing it. I am reminded of our dog and when he finds some horrible dead thing in the road that he wants to pick up and carry home. We say to him “Leave it!” Just leave it where it is and move on. This same concept works for much of the bad karma we create.

There is a moment when we first become aware of whatever situation that has arisen that we could go negative on. It could be as simple as that someone walks around the corner that we really don’t like and the mere appearance of them will upset us to the point of spending seconds, minutes, or hours rehashing whatever happened between us that resulted in the negativity – the anger, humiliation, sorrow, etc. We go over and over it trying to make it right, trying to get on top of it so that we can put it right.

That first moment is when we can learn to just leave it. Instead of following that thought, instead of indulging it for the nth time, we can just leave it. Yes, we take note of it arising. We recognize it but that can be the end of it. We are aware of it but we leave it there at that.

It is written in the teachings that if we can do that, just see it for what it is, note it, and let it end at that, that we can avoid accumulating all of the karma that results from going over and over and over it in our mind. By not indulging it, we don’t reinforce that karmic track in our mindstream and we take one small step toward freedom from that obsession. We let it liberate itself on its own. We don’t add to the injury of the original event the insult of carrying it onward.

As usual, I can never say things in a few words and I could go on defining this, but the message is this:

Training the mind, mind training or meditation, is about becoming aware of what we are already habitually doing and learning to stop reinforcing habits that only leave deeper and deeper tracks in our mindstream, that mark or obscure our inherent brightness and consciousness.

The majority of the karma that we accumulate, the sheer bulk of it, comes from our habit of embellishing, annotating, and endless rewriting the things that disturb us constantly all day long. By learning to just gently leave those thoughts that are not beneficial to self-liberate on their own, just as they are, the constant accumulation of obscurations ceases and our mind clears up. This is what the Third Reversal, the law of karma, is about.

THE FOURTH REVERSAL:
THE DEFECTS OF CYCLIC EXISTENCE
November 1, 2011

This fourth “Thought That Turns the Mind Toward the Dharma” or fourth reversal of mind was the hardest one for me to get my arms around and to take seriously. In a word, some of the texts made this thought (the defects of samsara or cyclic existence) read more like an admonition that this world I love is no good and should be given up entirely. Actually I like a lot of what this world I live in offers and am not about to just ‘give it up’ and go where, do what? I had no idea.

It took many years for me to warm to this concept, much less to willingly try and keep it in mind. But like some hard stone, the winds of time and change gradually erode even my heavy obscurations enough that some light peeks through, and a couple of insights have emerged.

The first was that this cyclic-mundane world we live in is inherently undependable meaning that I tend to be up one day and down the next. I can’t depend on it. It’s not stable. Like some great pendulum I swing from being happy and seemingly heading toward reaching my goals one day to feeling down and thwarted (with nothing working out) the next. The time I spend being stable between these two extremes is little to none. I seem usually to be at one extreme or the other: overly positive or overly blocked and frustrated. Working the extremes out of this equation is what mind training is all about.

By “inherently undependable” I mean I can’t count on this world to be stable because it’s not. Just look at the stock market or any of a dozen other indicators out there. Change seems to be the only constant. There is no real rest or stability to be found. This is the nature of cycles.

Then it occurred to me, although I have always implicitly assumed that one day I would get all my ducks in a row, that I am getting old and I have yet to get them all in a row. I used to think that although others don’t seem to be able to game the system that I could do it and that I am different. I am special. I certainly can get ‘my’ ducks in a row and figure out a way to game the system that will be a win/win for me. Well friends, this does not seem to be happening. I have given it seventy years and that’s a fair try.

The system can’t be gamed. What goes up, comes down, and so on. Finally I began to examine the word “samsara” in the phrase “Contemplate the defects of samsara.” The Sanskrit word

“Samsara” refers to this world of everyday cyclic existence we are living in. It is the world I project outside myself on the movie screen of my life and then take to be reality. In other words the Fourth Thought is talking about the projected world of my own obscurations that I carry around inside me. Of course I can’t escape it or game that system. Those ducks will never be all in a row, not ever. And why?

The reason is that it is my own mental ‘eyeglasses’ or mind that is obscured, that needs cleaning, and not the outside world. Like rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic, I can try to rearrange the outside world until the cows come home and nothing will ever really change for me. I will never get my ducks all in a row and I will not game the system. What to do?

As it turns out the answer is very simple and I don’t know why it took me so long to understand it. I can simply clean my dirty eyeglasses; I can get busy removing the mental obscurations that are like clouds in the sky of my mind and just let the Sun shine through. And I am. I am learning to do this by the traditional mind-training methods (meditation and so on) that are available to all of us.

Anyway there you have some comments on the Fourth Thought That Turns the Mind Toward the Dharma, the inherent undependability of samsara, our obscured vision of this world of cyclic existence.

THE STORY OF HOW I MET THE “FOUR THOUGHTS”

November 3, 2011

I will end this short series of blogs on the Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind Toward the Dharma (the Four Reversals) with the story of how I met the great lama Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche who first pointed the Four Thoughts out to me. Trungpa Rinpoche founded Naropa Institute in Boulder Colorado and is credited with introducing thousands of students to Buddhism as a path rather than just a bit of Asian philosophy.

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 late at night along with plenty of caffeine and 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 Chogyam Trungpa, at first stunned by the incredible art on the covers and later by the content. Sometimes probably late in 1973 I was thrilled to see a notice that Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche was coming to speak in my home town of Ann Arbor, Michigan in February of 1974. I wanted to meet him in person.

I called the group that were putting his talk on to find more details, found that they were really short-handed, and ended up as Trungpa Rinpoche’s chauffeur for the weekend plus I designed the poster for the event. I couldn’t wait to go and pick him up at the airport.

In my old beat-up ford station wagon I waited breathlessly at the airport for him to deplane. People poured out, but no Tibetans. I knew he was travelling with Larry Mermelstein who later headed up the Nalanda Translation Committee. And finally there Trungpa was, standing before me and looking directly at me. I was really close to him. I could see that his eyes looked very tired and somehow the whites were all yellow. Then 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.

We drove back to the professor's house where they were to stay and I brought in his luggage. My job for the moment was done but 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 hoped I would not be kicked out. But the whole group of them were leaving for a tour of the University of Michigan campus. I, of course, was not invited so I prepared leave too.

As the last moment Trungpa Rinpoche decided that he was not going but would stay by himself at the house and get some rest. Everyone was filing out and I waited off to the side as they came past me. And then to my astonishment Trungpa Rinpoche looked directly at me and beckoned me to stay with him. I was only too eager. He led me into a small library/office room and sat me down on a chair. This was beyond my wildest fantasies. And there I sat, not knowing just how to behave.

Next Trungpa Rinpoche opened a small bottle of sake, drank some, and proceeded to inspect just about every item and knick-knack 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. He was very animated.

Then before I knew it he was inspecting me and for the next hour or so proceeded to instruct me in basic meditation and related topics but he never called it that. He taught me how to watch my breath, watching the breath go out and watching it come in again. And he very carefully monitored what I was doing. In particular, he was concerned with my "out" breath, how I breathed out. It seemed to him I was not letting it go out far enough. Needless to say I was nervous being on the spot. At one point he said "Michael, let your breath go all the way out... all the way!" As I struggled to relax and let this happen, 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 internal stuff was happening at the same time he was speaking to me. As I breathed out, my whole life-long fear of letting go, of dying and death flashed through my mind. I struggled to suppress it for a moment and then finally just let go. As the breath went out, my fear vanished. Perhaps this moment marked the beginning of my actual dharma practice, the end of Buddhism as something to think about and the realization that it was a path and method, not just a philosophy.

It was only much later that I understand that Trungpa Rinpoche was teaching me basic meditation. At the time it seemed like my whole life was changing around me as he spoke. And later, as I was getting ready to leave and we were walked down the hall toward the front door we came upon the poster I had designed for his public talk hanging on the wall. It has an image of an Asian dragon flying in the clouds on it. I enclose it here.

For those of you who don't know the oriental dragon is a far cry from the Western idea of the medieval dragons that knights in armor fought. In the east the dragon is a heroic figure, one of the most abiding signs of good fortune. Trungpa Rinpoche pointed to the poster and asked me if I knew what this image represented. I told him that I did not know much about it and that to me the image was striking and suited (to my mind) his visit here.

He then proceeded to point out to me that the dragon in the woodcut holds four precious pearls or gems, one in each claw. He said that 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. These are the Four Thoughts that we have been discussing here, what are called the Common Preliminaries or the "Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to the Dharma." He was pointing out to me that we need to keep all four thoughts in mind and not just one or two of them if we want to turn the mind toward the dharma.

I understood that these four thoughts are essential for any further practice – all four of them. I have never forgotten this.

This experience with Trungpa Rinpoche had a deep and lasting effect on me. And although after that weekend as his driver I never saw Trungpa Rinpoche again, I will always remember his concern for and kindness with me. I went on from there (a few years later) to discover my main teacher in the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, the abbot of KTD (Karma Triyana Dharmachakra) Monastery in Woodstock, NY and have trained there for the last 28 years or so. However Trungpa Rinpoche opened a door for me that has never closed.

Some time ago I wrote this little poem about the Four Thoughts and my experience with Trungpa Rinpoche:

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 into 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,
Only they can turn the mind.

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

- (1) The preciousness human life
- (2) Impermanence
- (3) The inevitability of karma
- (4) The undependability of Samsara]