

Triratna Dharma Training Course for Mitras

Year Two – Teachers’ Notes by Saccanama

Module 3: Turning the Mind to the Dharma

Contents

1. General Introduction.
2. Ways of reflecting on the material.
3. Vishvapani’s article on ‘The Four Reminders’ previously published in *Madhyamavani*. This includes his version of verses on the Four Reminders which you may wish to use in call and response.
4. Dhammadinna’s notes from the original retreat on which the talks were given. These are just for weeks 2 and 3 – *The Preciousness and Rarity of Human Life* and *The Transitoriness of Life and the Certainty of Death*.
5. Transcriptions of all five of the talks.

General introduction

This will be a new topic for most people, at least in the sense of exploring it in a group. The purpose of it is to take a more reflective approach to material that is crucial to spiritual life, i.e. Going for Refuge. As Dhammadinna says in her opening talk, the reminders explore the false refuges and touch on themes to do with nissarana – the renunciation of saṃsāra. Only by freeing ourselves from the false refuges can we go for refuge more deeply to the true refuges. The module concludes with a look at the levels, dimensions and context of Going for Refuge. There is a jump in format here from the series of talks given at Tiratanaloka to an excerpt from Subhuti’s book. This is not necessarily ideal but it was the best way I could find to cover the Going for Refuge material in one week. It is worth pointing out that the levels, dimensions and context of Going for Refuge are not covered elsewhere in the course and given their significance to Bhante’s approach to the Dharma, it is important that mitras are familiar with them.

Tejasvini, one of the peer-reviewers of this module, very kindly offered to transcribe the talks. Hence they are included in these Teacher’s Notes. However, I decided not to include them in the Student Notes because I would prefer people to listen to the talks. Alongside Kulaprabha’s meditations on the Brahmaviharas in the Year Three module, ‘Freedom of Heart’, these talks are the only time in the course where people will hear women teaching the Dharma. Obviously, if they are just reading a transcript, they won’t pick up on this to the extent that they will from listening to the talks and they will also miss out on the sense of this material being explored on retreat. My experience is that if people have the choice between reading a transcript or listening to a talk, most people will opt for the former so by placing the transcripts here, I hope most people will listen to

them. If, however, you have people in your group who are really stretched for time and you want to give them the transcripts, that is up to you. And obviously you can use them as a reference for the various quotes, etc.

Ways of reflecting on the material

Given the general nature of the material on the Four Reminders, I would tend towards using the group sessions mainly for the purpose of reflection rather than more discursive exploration of the theme. Perhaps the first session, dealing with Dhammadinna's introductory talk, could cover the general issues in a discursive way and then you could use the subsequent 4 weeks for different kinds of reflection and then return to a more discursive mode of exploration in the last week. I would suggest 4 kinds of reflection that could be engaged in with this material as follows:

1. A formal reflection in sitting meditation whereby you read out a specific text, with suitable pauses, on the particular reminder.
2. An informal reflection in sitting meditation where you turn over one of the reminders but without the aid of a specific text, e.g. you take the theme of impermanence and start to reflect on impermanent things or events from your own life. You may need to be familiar with formal reflection before this kind of reflection can be effective.
3. A written reflection whereby you encourage people to write down their thoughts on one of the reminders. This could also work as a journal approach, e.g. at the end of each day during the week you are focusing on impermanence, you write down all the things you have noticed ending that day.
4. Informal reflection in day-to-day life whereby you notice things ending or how your mental states are conditioning your own mind or how you don't always get what you want, etc.

There may be other ways you can think of too – this is just a starter to get you going. So in the groups, you could lead a formal reflection (perhaps using Vishvapani's text copied below, which you may wish to forward on to your group so they can use it during the week) preceding it with a short period of mettābhavana, and then perhaps leaving time for people to take up their own reflections on the issue. And you could precede this with a written exercise. You could also produce a little journal for them to keep through the week. Given that your group may not be that familiar with such reflection, particularly in meditation, you may want to have some time to discuss how they got on with it. One thing to stress is the need to approach such reflections with a basis in mettā and if anyone is getting into depressed, alienated or self-loathing states, they should stop the reflection and come back to just doing mettā bhavana.

The Four Reminders
Collated by Vishvapani

Contents

1. Introduction.
2. Structure for teaching.
3. Verses for reflection.
4. Commentary.

1. Introduction – the Four Reminders

The Four Reminders, or the Four Preliminary reflections, are basic elements of the view cultivated by practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism in the Hīnayāna stage. They are wake-up calls, describing the Buddhist view of life from the point of view of the individual, rather than in the abstract. The Four Noble Truths present the Buddha’s vision of human experience as a doctor’s diagnosis and prescription. The Four reminders present it as the medicine.

I have used these reflections in my own practice and in my teaching. I published verses (2) based on my practice in *Madhyamavani*, along with explanatory text (3). I have also used them as the basis for a series of classes. Very simply the points outlined in (1) are the structure of a talk, followed by discussion; and then I read through the same points in a guided reflection. You could also use the verses at this point.

2. A structure for teaching

The Preciousness of This Life

a. The fortunate character of the human state

- We have a rare and precious opportunity to practice the Dharma.
- We have sound bodies, that offer the chance to live meaningful lives and put our aspirations into practice.
- Whatever their difficulties, we have sound minds.
- Tradition tells us that this is a rare opportunity and not open to non-humans.

b. The availability of the Dharma

- We have access to the Dharma.

- We have been born in a time and a place in which spiritual life is possible.
- The Dharma is alive in the world because of the Buddha and the tradition that followed him.
- It is flourishing in our country due to the efforts of Sangharakshita and his disciples.
- We have had the good fortune to encounter the Dharma at a time when we were open to its message.

c. Therefore we have the opportunity to practice and should make the most of it

'From now onwards I will wholeheartedly devote myself to the practice of the sublime Dharma.

*When having found freedoms such as this
If I do not attune myself to that which is wholesome
There could be no greater deception and no greater fool.*

*Relying on this boat of the human body
Free yourself from the great river of pain
As it is hard to find this boat again.
Free yourself from sleep, you fool!'*

Bodhicaryāvatāra

Death: contemplation of impermanence and mortality

'Meditate single-mindedly on death all the time and in every circumstance.'
Patrul Rimpoche

a. The truth of impermanence

- Everything in the universe, from the smallest atom to stars and galaxies is changing all the time.
- The world around us is changing, and so are we.

b. The universality of death

- Everyone who has ever lived has grown old.
- Everyone who lived in the past – all those billions of people – have aged and died.

c. The inevitability of our own death

- We can observe the effects of aging in our bodies.
- We may harbour the secret thought that this won't happen to us.
- But it will. We too will die, and so will those around us.

d. The uncertainty of the time of death

- We may think we will die in old age, but the time of our death is uncertain. It could be at any time.
- We should be prepared to think that any day may be our last.

e. The consequences of reflecting on impermanence

- We need to face this truth calmly and with loving kindness.
- Change and impermanence mean that we are not fixed. We can change for the better.
- So let us dwell calmly with the facts of change, impermanence, and our own mortality.
- Let us learn to live with these truths, greeting them with openness and hearts full of peace.

Contemplation of karma, or the principle that actions have consequences

a. The principle of conditionality

- All things arise in dependence on conditions.
- This is true throughout the whole universe, from galaxies and stars, to microscopic organisms.
- It is also true of our lives, and the world around us. Everything we experience comes into existence through conditions.
- Our actions, too, have consequences for ourselves and others.

b. The conditioned nature of the mind

- Our thoughts and consciousness, too, are influenced by conditions; from our childhood experiences to what happened today.

- We can't affect what happens to us in life, but we can influence our responses to what happens.

c. Skilful and unskillful

- We can distinguish between skilful actions that are based on generosity, love and wisdom and unskillful ones that are based on greed, hatred and delusion.
- Skilful actions and states of mind lead to positive consequences for others and help bring about our own happiness and fulfilment.
- Unskillful ones have negative consequences for others and ourselves.

d. Establishing positive intentions

Therefore we establish the intentions:

- To commit ourselves to becoming aware of the conditions in our lives and encouraging the positive ones.
- To understand more fully the consequences of our actions.
- To cultivate positive mental states and discourage negative ones.
- To commit ourselves to a path of Dharma practice.

The defects of saṃsāra

a. The existence of duḥkha

- We want our lives to be pleasant and comfortable.
- But if we examine our experience, we find that this is not the case.
- This is also true of others. All our lives are incomplete.

b. The pervasiveness of duḥkha

- We suffer through physical pain, disease, old age and death.
- We suffer because things change.
- We suffer because we inhabit saṃsāra; all things that arise contain the seeds of suffering.

c. The need to transcend saṃsāra

- Suffering is a response to experience.
- Negative emotions are the cause of suffering.
- We go beyond suffering by going beyond attachment.
- Therefore it is possible to have a much more fulfilling existence through renouncing saṃsāra and practising non-attachment.
- Therefore we commit ourselves to going forth from saṃsāra for the sake of nirvana.

3. Verses on the Four Reminders

This Precious Opportunity

Here, now, I have a chance to make something of my life.

I have health.

I have energy.

I have the ability to think and feel freely.

I have enough food and enough money to meet my needs.

I live in a country that is free of war, and many of the other difficulties people can face.

I'm not trapped in a negative state of mind like madness, craving, hatred or depression.

All of these things can change, but while I have these advantages I have a great opportunity.

I have had the great good fortune to meet the Dharma.

The Buddha taught it.

It has been practised down the generations.

Thanks to my teachers it has come to my country and my life in a form I can understand and accept.

I've had the good fortune to meet an effective Sangha, whose members offer me guidance and friendship.

All these conditions have made the Dharma a presence in my life, and made its practice possible for me.

Am I making use of the opportunity this offers?

How much time I waste!

How much of my life passes in unawareness!
How strongly my habits constrain me!
I would be foolish to waste this chance.
So let me commit myself to practising as fully as I can.

Reflection on Death

One day I will die.
I cannot avoid it. It comes to everyone and it will come to me.
Everyone who has lived in the past has aged and died, and those living now are ageing and will die, too.
Think of the millions of people who have lived in the past. Where are they now?
I see myself ageing. Day by day, year by year my body grows older, as I can clearly see.
The causes of life are unstable and impermanent, and when they run out my death will come.
I will have to face death and meet it, the end of my life.
I am like a fish caught in a net.
I am like a prisoner condemned to execution.
I am like an animal in a slaughterhouse.
In my fantasies I am exempted from the general truth of death.
But that is a delusion, and death will come to me, even me, as well.
The time of my death is uncertain.
Even if I live a full span that is just a few decades.
But death could come at any moment - in a few years, or a few weeks, or even today.
There are many causes of death in addition to old age: illness, accident, disaster and violence.
Every day people die in these ways, all of them having expected to live longer.
Therefore death is a presence that should be borne in mind.
My plans should always be provisional; I should not put things off, and live free from regrets and obligations.
Everyone I know will die as well.
One by one we will be taken by death.

All my friends, all my family, everyone I know, everyone I love, everyone who loves me.
In a hundred years we will all be gone.
To face death I will need courage, forbearance, contentment and a clear conscience.
I need to be free of regrets, and that means using my time wisely.
All that will matter at the time of death is spiritual practice.
What will matter is what I have become in myself, the qualities of my mind, and the sense of having lived a worthwhile life through helping others.
So I should live with awareness of the inevitability of death and of its imminence.
And I must make good use of my time through practising the Dharma.

Karma

Everywhere I look in the universe I see things arising and passing away in dependence upon conditions.

From galaxies and stars to micro-organisms, this pattern holds true.

Things aren't random – they have causes and effects.

This is also true of my life.

What I am today is the product of many influences: my family, culture, education and relationships.

It's also the product of choices I've made, of how I've acted, of my mental states and habits.

There are many things I cannot alter, and these I must accept.

But I can change those conditions that spring from my mind.

I can change how I think, I can affect how I feel.

Meditation and Dharma practice give me ways to do so.

I know that skilful actions have brought me happiness and fulfilment and have benefited others.

When I've been kind or generous I've seen others benefit, and it has given me happiness.

I know that my unskilful actions have harmed others and harmed me, too.

When I have been unkind I have seen the pain I have caused.

Those actions have reinforced negative states of mind that make me unhappy and I've felt remorse and regret.

Therefore I should cultivate positive states, practice skilful actions and avoid unskilful ones.

This means practising the Dharma, which offers a sure path to establishing positive conditions.

To this path I commit myself.

The Defects of Saṃsāra

Suffering is part of my life.

Everything I experience is tinged with incompleteness.

I cannot escape unsatisfactoriness.

My life involves stress, striving and struggle.

The same is true of others.

Almost everyone I know is searching for something their lives do not give them.

Everywhere I see this.

People's lives include many other kinds of suffering.

There is illness and physical pain: that goes with having a body.

There is the mental anguish of depression, fear, madness and many other afflictions.

The possibility of such experience goes with having a mind.

All this is within the spectrum of experience I occupy.

This is human life, and these things can happen to me.

When I consider my experience I see that it's in continual flux.

My body changes continually, a mass of processes that never settle.

My mind is an endless stream of thoughts, one after another.

Similarly, people change, situations alter, nothing endures.

The whole world is like this.

Nothing is solid, or final; nothing can be fully relied upon.

Consider this present moment, and you see this is true.

Look around and you see it is true everywhere.

I want the world to be substantial and knowable, but it isn't.

This causes me to suffer.

These are the defects of saṃsāra.

It's futile to expect the world to make me happy: that expectation is the very source of my suffering.

I must change the way I see the world, and live on the basis of reality, not illusion.

The Dharma offers a way to do this.

It gives a path away from being trapped in saṃsāra.

Therefore let me commit myself to practising the Dharma.

4. Commentary

Sangharakshita comments that a person who has a basic acquaintance with the Buddhist teachings probably has all they need to travel a long way down the path. But what we lack, he says, are emotional equivalents of our intellectual understandings. One consequence is that we simply forget what we believe to be true because we aren't, emotionally speaking, wholly convinced by it. It's easy to be aware, but it's hard to remember to be aware.

For example, we all know that our lives are finite and will end in death. If you keep that thought in mind it lends urgency to your experience, but we typically act as if we will live forever. We know that suffering is inevitable, but considering the moaning, griping and complaints that accompany our lives, it seems that we allow the fact to slip our minds. Similarly, we know that our actions have consequences, and that we can make choices that affect our future experience. And we know, if we consider things, that we have a precious opportunity in our lives to develop, which it would be foolish to squander. But how do we keep such thoughts at the forefront of our consciousness? How do we remember to remember?

These reflections address the emotions and they have the power to motivate and inspire us. But they can easily be ignored in the rubble of our lives, or overlain by the mound of Buddhist teachings and practices that are available to us. The same problem faced the Tibetans when they inherited sprawling traditions of Buddhist practice from India that had developed over many centuries. So the great scholar-practitioner Atisha, and later Gampopa and Tsongkhapa, systematised Buddhist teachings into a progressive sequence which they called *lam rim*, or 'the stages of the path'. They placed these reflections at the start of the path – the stage they called 'the Hīnayāna view' – and they taught ways they could be pondered in preparation for other practices. These reflections precede even 'Going for Refuge' because they concern the reasons we should wish to make the commitment to the Buddhist path that this involves.

The subjects of the four reflections are the precious opportunity offered by human life; death and impermanence; karma, or the fact that actions have consequences; and the disadvantages of saṃsāra, or suffering. These might be called 'the facts of life' in the Buddhist perspective. They aren't news and they aren't contentious, but despite their importance they easily slither out of awareness to be replaced by assumptions that slip into their place. They are wake-up calls, jolts to our complacency, articulations of the

troubling voice of reality as it impacts on our immediate experience. As we go through them we are saying to ourselves, “Remember, reflect, wake up to the truth.” The term I like best for these reflections was coined by the Buddhist scholar, Reginald Ray, who calls them, “The Four Reminders”.

These Reminders are formed into an organised series of observations or reflections that you can turn over in your mind. I have most enjoyed doing the practice on retreat when I have spent perhaps ten or fifteen minutes on each of the four. Having done that I now find that I can bring the essence of each reflection to mind much more quickly. Pacing mindfully up and down a walking meditation space on retreat, I went through the reflections in the form in which they are recounted below, holding each one in my mind until it had sunk in. That’s important or else, like every other practice, they can become mechanical. So you think: “One day I will die,” and then a subliminal response comes to your mind, “Yes, I will, I really will. Isn’t that extraordinary! And how odd that it should seem strange.” And then you pause, you feel it – feel, “Yes, it’s true, it’s really true.” And then you move on to the next reflection.

You can find traditional versions of these reflections in Gampopa’s *Jewel Ornament of Liberation* and Tsongkhapa’s *Lam Rim* texts and many other sources. But many features of the traditional accounts are somewhat alien to people who have not been brought up in a traditional Buddhist culture. For example the section on ‘the disadvantages of saṃsāra’ usually includes lengthy descriptions of the troubles facing non-human beings such as hungry ghosts and angry gods, and there are gruesome accounts of the Buddhist hells. The reflections on karma rapidly involve one in complex presentations of Buddhist teachings on causality and ethics.

The inaccessible character of such ideas is a particular problem because the function of the Four Reminders is emotive and rhetorical. They address our feelings and their aim is to inspire dedication to practice, which means they need to be as direct and accessible as possible. So I have worked out my own version of the reflections that draws on a variety of traditional sources and has evolved as I’ve turned them over in my mind. I have discarded concepts and references that raise difficulties, but I hope I have retained the basic point of each and developed the reflections from there as spurs to action. The reflection which differs most from the traditional versions is the first, on ‘this precious opportunity’, which traditionally centres on the advantages of human birth over alternative forms of existence, and the rarity of achieving it. I have focused on a more general consideration of our ability to make something valuable of our lives.

The verses above are a stripped-down version of my own practice. When I go through the reflections I fill them out with thoughts about my particular circumstances and examples from my own life. I offer this as a starting point for others who might be interested in doing the practice themselves. Some of the thoughts may not apply to you: for instance, you may not be in good health. In that case you should adjust the reflections according to your circumstances. If you do take them up then I would encourage you to explore the reflections in your own way, over a period of time. It might help to go back to the original texts I have mentioned in order to see my point of departure before making your own.

And I can also recommend Ray's comments on the practice in *Indestructible Truth: The Living Spirituality of Tibetan Buddhism*.

Structured reflection is a distinct genre of Buddhist practice rather like pūjā or visualisation, which needs to be explored over time. Although it is not common in the Triratna Buddhist Community (becoming more common in the new mitra course! – Ed.) it is an important part of some other traditions, starting with the Buddha's own teaching as recorded in the Pāli Canon. Reflection differs from study, in which one thinks conceptually and discursively about a Dharma topic. It differs from musing, when one turns over a teaching or an experience while gazing into a fire, perhaps, or walking in the country. It differs from vipassanā or insight meditation, in which one seeks to penetrate deeply into a teaching on the basis of meditative concentration. In a structured reflection you simply rehearse a series of thoughts and this brings them into awareness so that they can inform and guide your experience. Like any other mental exercise it requires concentration, such as can be developed through the mindfulness of breathing. And as its aim is to stir you up it requires a positive emotional base, such as can be developed through the practice of Mettā bhavana.

A friend of mine who had been doing these reflections intensively in the course of a long retreat said he just wanted to get a few basic points into his thick skull so firmly that they wouldn't be dislodged come what may. Even on his deathbed. Even after that. As we turn over these reflections in our minds we can allow ourselves slowly to be convinced by them. Eventually they get under your skin. They wake you up. And just as the entire path can be found in the apparently simple undertaking to go for Refuge to the Three Jewels, so the simple truth of these reflections is a door that opens onto reality itself.

[End of Vishvapani's piece]

Dhammadinna's Notes for Week 2:
The Preciousness and Rarity of Human Life

Notes on precious human birth for study on retreat

The Precious human birth (working basis) is a birth or life with the Eight Freedoms, Ten Endowments (both of body) and the Three Kinds of Faith (mind).

The Eight Freedoms

(From the eight states of no leisure.) (Body.) From Nagarjuna's *Letter to a Friend*. This is also known as *The Unique Occasion*. This is also described as concerning time, leisure, and freedom from hindrances, fetters and bondage that prevent us from realising our true potential.

In a perspective of many births, some may be very fortunate, but have no access to Buddha; or one may be born in the dispensation of a Buddha, but in circumstances where one is unlikely to meet the Dharma, etc. The precious human birth has all eight freedoms and ten endowments.

The Eight Freedoms are freedom from:

1. **Birth as a hell being.** Reaping *karma-vipāka* of hatred, and being preoccupied with this. Experience of intense pain. Think how a bit of pain affects our practice.
2. **Birth as a Hungry Ghost.** Reaping *karma-vipāka* of neurotic craving or addiction, and being preoccupied with this, obsessed by deprivation. Experiencing constant hunger and thirst. Think how we are affected by even slight experience of this.
3. **Birth as an animal.** Reaping *karma-vipāka* of ignorance, being preoccupied with survival, etc. Focus is on food, sex and sleep only. One can't train in the Path.

These three lower realms are realms of suffering and pain, as a result of karma and *karma-vipāka*. While in these realms, people are too overwhelmed by pain to practice the Dharma, or even see beyond their own experience. They do not experience *hrī* and *apatrāpya*. Beings cannot get out of these realms until this *karma-vipāka* is exhausted, or they receive outside help – the Buddha or Avalokiteśvara visiting the Realms with an appropriate remedy or teaching. Plus the tendency while in them is to create further unskillful karma.

4. **Birth as a long-lived god.** (Presumably including the Asuras though this is not explicitly mentioned). The gods experience only pleasure, so do not strive for the good and wholesome, have no motivation to develop further. They are obsessed by

pleasure and are complacent. They do not experience suffering not empathise with the suffering of others. The Asuras are obsessed by envy or jealousy.

5. **Being born in a border tribe, in a barbarian land.** This is not necessarily any one place but any set of conditions where it is difficult to practice the Dharma, which includes conditions without ethical sensibility, or some civilisation and culture which can form a basis for Dharma practice. Culture and civilisation does not necessarily mean a high standard of living or technology.
6. **Being born with or amongst or developing, extreme wrong views that are inimical to Dharma practice.** These would be traditionally: no understanding of karma and karma-vipāka, no acceptance of the possibility of spiritual progress, or of higher states of consciousness. Ours is a materialistic society – we believe that there is only material reality, which can lead to hedonism. We are all born with *sahaja kleśas* arising from the *atma kleśas* (self-view, self delusion, pride of self and attachment to self) but we then construct views around that. We may be born in a family or culture where wrong views are predominant and undercut moral effort, for example. They are hard to counteract if we have no access to anything else. Wrong views are associated with a closed mindedness, dogmatism, and are the main obstacle to practice and faith.
7. **Being born a senseless fool.** (Rather non P.C.!), having inadequate intellectual understanding or faculties to understand the Dharma, i.e. one is unable to follow the teachings. We might have intellectual capacity but lack sense faculties. This will make it much harder for us to practice.
8. **Being born in a place (or time?) where there has never been a Buddha.** There is no-one to show the Way. (Some world systems, time spans do not give rise to an Enlightened being as the conditions are not right). There may be religion but no Buddha Dharma.

The Ten Endowments

(Body.) (From Asanga's *Bodhisattvabhūmi* – the *Srāvakabhūmi*) also know as the *Right Juncture*, and also described as opportunities, advantages and resources, conducive conditions both internal and external, fortune and riches. These are the positive expression of the eight Freedoms with some amplification.

The five personal endowments or internal conditions, that you bring with you by virtue of who you are, i.e. previous karma.

To be born:

1. **As a human being.** With self-reflexive awareness, able to distinguish between skilful and unskilful and make a choice, having a balance of karma and karma-vipāka, and of pleasure and pain.

2. **In a central land or region.** A land or area or set of conditions, with ethics, culture, civilisation, congenial to the Dharma, and where there are opportunities to learn and understand the difference between skilful and unskilful; A culture where some kind of spiritual life is alive and is part of that culture; where you are not under the power of others and therefore without freedom.
3. **With all sense faculties.** i.e. Able to understand and communicate, as this makes it easier to practice. These days people with impaired senses can practice the Dharma as there are more resources available.
4. **Not having an extreme karmic burden.** That is not having committed the five heinous crimes (wounding a Buddha, killing an *Arahant*, causing a Sangha schism, and killing mother and father), or having committed any serious unskilful act which would have a big influence on your consciousness. Angulimala and Milarepa show that one can reverse even such heavy karma as killing but it is obviously more profoundly advantageous not to have performed extreme unskilful acts. Sometimes this is described as being born with reversal karma which you can purify through Dharma practice. Sometimes included here is not having reverted to extreme wrong views.
5. **Having Faith in the Buddha's teaching and confidence in the spiritual life.** (Sometimes this 5th endowment is listed as following Right Livelihood.) Presumably this advantage could mean that we have a capacity for Faith when we meet the Dharma or Truth, or it could be a karma-vipāka from a previous life. Some of us can respond very straightforwardly when we meet the Dharma, for other's of us it is more complex due maybe to our conditioning, and we have to undo a lot first, or along the way.

One commentator likens these to having a car (human body) which is on the road (having the Dharma), with petrol (free of disabilities) with a license to drive (no heinous crimes), and the confidence to drive (Faith)!

The five circumstantial endowments or external conditions – from others.

Being born:

6. **Where a Buddha has appeared and the Path is open.** We live in the time of Śākyamuni Buddha.
7. **And he has expounded the Truth of the Dharma.**
8. **At a time when the Teachings survive and are alive and not corrupted.**
9. **And the Teachings are being practiced by a Sangha.**

10. And we have entered the Teachings and have favourable conditions and support from friends and a Teacher.

The Three Kinds of Faith (mind). (From Asanga and Hsuan Tsang.)

Śraddhā is present in any positive mental event. Can be described as a latent capacity to respond to value, meaning etc. It is natural and intuitive, latent and inherent. It manifests in different areas of life – response to beauty, to ethical behaviour, etc. At its highest it is a response to the Truth and spiritual values as expressed in the Three Jewels in the Buddha-dharma. Faith at its fullest involves a total response, cognitive or intellectual, emotional and volitional.

1. **Faith in realities – trusting or confident Faith – cognitive.** Is a response to what really is and can be a direct response to the Dharma as taught, -especially the truth of conditionality– which reveals the true nature of reality. You have an immediate intuitive understanding. You think, “Yes, this is the Truth,” which leads to a sense of conviction in the Dharma and its principles. Faith is not just feeling, but a form of knowing that prefigures Insight. The intuitive response needs to be deepened through reason and experience.

Abhisampratyaya Śraddhā

Abhi – expressive of intensity, very, superior, higher.

Sam – assent, perfect trust, right conception.

Pratyaya – cause or basis, or in this context, belief from conviction, trust, faith, certainty, proof, understanding, intelligence, intellect.

2. **Faith in qualities – lucid or serene Faith – emotional/affective.** Is a profound faith in the pure qualities of the Three Jewels from a more aesthetic, emotional point of view and a strong attraction to them. Taking delight in them because of your experience of their qualities. The result is a feeling that everything falls into place. This aspect of Faith gives a sense of clarity, poise, calmness, balance etc.

Cetasah Prasada Sraddha

Cetasah (Cetasa) = pertaining to the mind, mental.

Prasada means, clearness, clarity, brightness, pellucidity, purity, clearness as well as serenity, graciousness and kindness.

3. **Faith in capacities – longing Faith – volitional.** You feel that you are capable of attaining and have a strong desire to attain Enlightenment. You can and you want to do so. The Truth is not something far above or beyond you, but something you are connected with, resonate with, from your own capacity.

Abhilasa Śraddhā

Abhi – as above.

Lasa – longing.

So Śraddhā involves all these three aspects, is a kind of orientation of your whole being, not necessarily associated with pleasure, we can have faith when the going is tough. It may manifest as devotion, but devotion in itself is not enough. It purifies the mind, and tends to action and is manifested in Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels. Śraddhā is also the basis for Hrī and Apatrāpya – positive but painful states of mind that guard our ethical lives – conscience, positive shame, and respect for wise opinion.

We may notice that we favour one more than the others. Good to know this and work on our strengths as well as developing the other aspects of Faith.

The precious human birth is both precious and rare

Traditionally the body is said to be like a wish-fulfilling gem, a *Cintamani*, a precious vase capable of containing the elixir of immortality (Enlightenment). It is the working basis for gaining unsurpassable Enlightenment. It is like gold.

It is also rare, difficult to find, obtain, with its freedoms and endowments etc.

It is as rare as a daytime star. Cherish this life; it is yours this one time only.

We can reflect on this through these means:

1. **Classical – recalling the story of the turtle and the yoke.** The story goes that there is an old blind turtle that lives for 1,000's of years at the bottom of the seven oceans. Once every 100 years it surfaces for breath. There is also a golden or wooden yoke, floating on the surface of the vast ocean never staying in one place for more than a second. What are the chances of the turtle putting its head through the yoke? If it surfaces without, this can be taken to mean a positive, skilful life but in a time without the Dharma; if it does manage to surface through the yoke, this is equivalent to the human birth and Going for Refuge.
2. **Causal.** The human birth does not arise by chance; it comes about due to ethical, skilful actions performed in the past. Not many human beings have not only the human form but also the freedoms and endowments that arise as a result of pure ethics.
3. **The Wheel of Life.** Reflect that there are so many more beings in the wheel than human beings; or that even within the realms that we know – humans and animals, that there are many more animals, including microbes, insects etc, than humans.

Reflection

So reflect on this precious human birth by looking at Eight Freedoms, Ten Endowments and Three kinds of Faith, and its rarity.

We can ask ourselves in more modern terms, what are we free of? What advantages do I have? Life is by no means perfect but we are free to practice, we do have some time and leisure to study, meditate, keep up our friendships and go on retreat; we are free to practice the Dharma in this country, we can think and feel freely; we probably do have enough food, money, shelter, probably more than enough. We probably have enough health and energy. We do live in a democracy however imperfect, and are reasonably free from fear and subjugation. Think about the lives of others who live without these advantages.

We are fortunate to have been born in the dispensation of Sakyamuni Buddha, and during a time when the Dharma, though disappearing from some countries, is available to us. We have met the Dharma and a Sangha; we can develop Sangha friendships and mentors. It is worth reflecting that we live at a particular time in the history of the Dharma, when so many teachings, practices and traditions are available in the West. When I was a young Buddhist, there were so few books available. There were so few translations. Things have changed enormously in the last 30 years. There is too much to read and take in! Plus there are people who have been practising seriously in this Western context for many, many years. Think about others without access to these advantages.

So ponder and reflect on all this, as well as whether you really think the precious human birth is rare? What advantages etc do I have, if I have them am I making the most of them? Could I create them, both for myself and others.

And allow whatever feelings to arise – perhaps feelings of gratitude and appreciation for benefits received, self-confidence, faith in our potential, a sense of value and meaning in our life, a wish to treasure our life and body, *and a strong wish to turn towards the Dharma*. If we believe it is possible to create something in this life, we will make the most of every circumstance. We will develop the optimism that we can make something of our human life, even gain Insight, Enlightenment, which will contrast to a more reactive optimism which these reflections counteract: *that we can improve and perfect Samsāra*.

Selection of quotes from verses in this section

- *Use this opportunity well, don't be sidetracked by meaningless pursuits and fritter it away, as you may not obtain this precious human birth again.*
- *Don't remain at ease now, seize the opportunity now and practice the Dharma day and night.*
- *Be grateful for a single phrase of the Dharma and reflect on its benefits.*

- *Make the best of this opportunity, choose well, and choose the Dharma.*
- *Strive to make fruitful your opportunities and advantages.*
- *Our lifespan is short, so do not waste time.*

What makes a human being a human being?

Within the context of the six realms, human beings have distinctive features – primarily having self-reflexive awareness, and the capacity to choose and change.

Human beings are also said to be central in respect of the other realms in that we have:

- **A balance of pleasure and pain.** Enough pleasure to help us to aspire to the unconditioned and not too much pain – slight misery, so not enough to overwhelm us, but to give us enough discontent with Samsāra and empathy with the pain of others. The pain also mitigates our human poison of haughtiness, pride and intoxication.
- **A balance of karma and karma-vipāka.** We are not just reaping the consequences of our actions, and creating more unskilful karma within that realm, as are the beings in the other realms, but we can create fresh karma and its results, especially along skilful lines.

All of this is the prerogative of the truly *human* being, and is rare, valuable and incomparably precious.

This centrality means that we could symbolically place the human realm central and slightly higher than the other five realms (remembering that within the Wheel we are not unique, but one manifestation of a flow of energy that manifests in different forms and realms in accordance with the laws of karma. Traditionally there is a difference of degree rather than of kind, between the beings of the different realms). Our balance of pleasure and pain, karma and karma-vipāka, enables us to have a sense of perspective. Beings in the other realms are obsessed with their particular mental states and identify with them, thus creating that realm. We can experience all those mental states, but by recognising them, not identifying with them, we can have a balanced view, a breadth of experience, a sense of perspective, equanimity and depth. We understand that any state will pass. We don't illegitimately generalise from our present experience (well we often do, but we catch ourselves at it).

Bhante says that this ability to have a perspective leads to wisdom. The precious human birth has the capacity for Enlightenment.

Choice and Ethics

Our ability to have a sense of perspective, to choose and direct our actions is a

characteristic of our human life. Ethics is not something artificially imposed from without, but arises from within as a natural expression (particularly natural morality as expressed in the precepts) of our humanity. A truly human being is an ethical being and vice versa. We would naturally empathise with other beings and be sensitive to their pain and their potential etc, and not wish to harm them. The precepts can be used as rules of training helping us to choose more skilful paths, redirect our energy, and make us more human, but essentially they express how a precious human being would naturally behave.

So what is a human being? A human being, with all the above characteristics is: precious, lucky, auspicious, fortunate, wonderful, of immense benefit, with all the resources and requisites and conditions; i.e. time, leisure, freedom, motivation, opportunity, ability, circumstances, faith, energy, intelligence, diligence etc.

Bhante said when studying this from the *Jewel Ornament of Liberation* by Gampopa, that we have so many of these advantages, that we could think that we are 2/3rds of the way there! It's only a few extra steps to Stream Entry! Is this how we feel? Ask ourselves now and at the end of the retreat when we have studied and reflected fully on the Four Reminders.

This is a very positive view of the human being. It is within this context that we consider the impermanence of our body and life. We may not find some of the methods of analysis of the body easy (particularly looking at its repulsive aspects), but remember they are methods for freeing ourselves of our attachment to something ultimately impermanent (we do the same with the mind – analyse it into parts and recognise its negative mental states), while at the same time understanding that *'outside living being, no Buddha, this very place is the lotus paradise, this very body is the Buddha.'* It can be viewed as either a *ship to liberation*, or otherwise *an anchor to Samsār*.

This reflection as I said earlier is very closely associated with the second reflection – on Impermanence and Death. While the first reflection builds appreciation, self-confidence and Faith, we should not get complacent. Life is comparatively short, and this life is fragile:

'like a tiny splash of a raindrop, like lightening in the sky, transient like the dew, like a bubble, foam, a mirage, like chaff in the wind, rushing by like a torrent, time flies faster than an arrow', etc.

And this all provides a sense of urgency.

Dhammadinna's Notes for Week 3:
The Transitoriness of Life and the Certainty of Death

Actual meditation with nine points of reasoning, and three resolutions

Death is certain

1. It will come and we can't prevent it.
2. We can't increase our lifespan.
3. It will come whether we practice or not.

Resolution – I must practice.

The time of death is uncertain

4. Our lifespan is not fixed.
5. There are more conditions leading to death, than not.
6. The human body is fragile.

Resolution – I must practice now.

At the time of death, only the Dharma is of benefit

7. Wealth is not of benefit.
8. Friends and relations are not of benefit.
9. Our body is not of benefit.

All these things we have been attached to, we cannot take with us.

Resolution – I must practice purely.

Also, results of meditating on the rarity of precious human life

I need to practice the Dharma:	<i>I will practice the Dharma</i>
	<i>I can practice the Dharma</i>
I must practice the Dharma in this life:	<i>I will practice in this life</i>
I must practice the Dharma now:	<i>I will practice the Dharma now.</i>

The Four Mind-Turning Reflections: Introductory Talk

by Dhammadinna

The preciousness and rarity of human life

The transience of life and the inevitability of impermanence and death

Karma and the consequences of our actions

The defects and dangers of saṃsāra

This is an introductory talk about the Four Mind Turnings together as a set of reflections. Maitreyi and I did these reflections in our kula on several retreats last year and thought what a good retreat it would make to explore them in more depth. We used to have going for refuge as a retreat theme, exploring going for refuge in its dimensions and its levels and so on, which is a central teaching of the Movement. I think this particular retreat, the Four Mind Turnings, is very much connected with going for refuge because they're designed as a set of reflections to turn our minds away from illusory involvement in saṃsāra towards Dharma practice. There's a sense of going forth from false refuges, the things that we engage in that we think are going to last and give us lasting pleasure, towards true refuges, which ultimately of course are the Three Jewels. So there's a very strong emphasis on renunciation in terms of going forth from false refuges in this set of reflections, and turning towards the Dharma and true refuges.

These reflections are written about in different ways. In some sets of reflections, the last reflection, reflecting on the inadequacy of saṃsāra, is sometimes just left like that. It gives you an impetus to want liberation from the cycle of birth and death. Other sets of reflections are written about so that as you look at the six realms in that last reflection you empathise with the suffering – not just your own suffering but that of other beings. The impetus to escape from saṃsāra is very much associated with doing that for the sake of all sentient beings; so very much associated with the Bodhisattva Ideal, which of course is very integral to our own way of looking at going for refuge, that there is an altruistic dimension of going for refuge.

So the Four Mind Turnings together are a set of reflections, but they also encompass rather a lot of Dharma teachings as we look into them. They're primarily a set of reflections, so they are a method for turning our mind from just being involved in the pleasures of saṃsāra towards the Path and towards the Dharma. They're called different things when you come across them. Sometimes they're the *Four Mind Turnings*, which is what I've called them here. Sometimes they're called the *Four Ordinary Preliminary Practices*, because they precede other preliminary practices, and sometimes they're called the *Four Thoughts That Transform the Mind*, and sometimes they're called the *Four Reminders*, to turn from saṃsāra, towards nirvana, towards the Dharma, and sometimes the *Four Thoughts That Touch the Heart or Change the Heart* which I thought was quite nice. That very much brings into play the idea in Buddhism that *citta* is heart-mind, so it's

not just a conceptual thing, it's heart based also. So you're trying to turn your whole being away from illusory involvement and attachment to samsāra towards the Dharma.

They're often said to be a bedrock of Buddhist or Dharmic practice in that they encourage us to make our lives meaningful. They also act as a mirror because they're all to do with the nature of existence, so if we reflect upon them we're confronted with Reality, the reality of our life and the reality of life in general. That enables us to generate faith in the Dharma and gives us motivation to practise the Path.

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

“They're 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're seen as a foundation, but also you continue to reflect upon them throughout your Dharma life, and I think this very much connects for us in the teachings of the Path of Regular Steps. Very many years ago Bhante gave a talk on the Path of Regular and Irregular Steps. Some of us were quite drawn to the Path of Irregular Steps. He did also have a Path of No Steps which was quite exciting (!), but what he was encouraging us to do in that talk and in his whole teaching of the Dharma, was to follow a Path of Regular Steps to build our practice up on good foundations. So it 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, but we aren't always able to follow that through with continuity of interest. We can also have high expectations, so we have initial great enthusiasm and high expectations. That doesn't work because we expect things to happen very quickly, or we have ideas about how we're going to change very quickly. As we mature we may become more realistic, but I remember that as a very young Dharma practitioner I thought I was going to get enlightened next week! I've learned differently over time, but the thing about that combination of interest, enthusiasm, high ideals and high expectations is that they can so easily turn into disappointment and disillusionment. Then we can't really settle into a regular meditation practice because our minds aren't really settled and are all over the place. Building a firm foundation of practice is therefore very important for us.

‘Cherish persistent recollection of them’.

Implied in this set of teachings and reflections is the need to reflect on them constantly and the need to integrate them into our lives, and to begin to experience them in our being.

They point to attitudes – they’re 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’re such big topics that in a way we’re confronted with them all the time. We’re alive, and our life has certain opportunities and freedoms and so on, so we just may be thinking about that anyway. Impermanence constantly impacts upon us in various ways so that’s very much part of the nature of life. We’re continually acting, and our actions continually have consequences, and we reap those consequences in our life stream. And we’re living in saṃsāra. If you look at the six realm state psychologically, our mental states continually fluctuate dependent upon our previous actions. So as a set of teachings it’s drawing on very general Buddhist teachings and crystallizing them into a set of reflections, but we’ve probably been thinking about these things anyway.

I came across a quote by Keith Dowman who says, “*They’re ok as a set of reflections, but you can’t beat real experience*”, by which I think he meant that real life experience, real experiences of impermanence and death in our lives for example, is going to have a bigger impact than just sitting and reflecting on impermanence. But of course there’s a feedback process in those reflections and in our life experience. We’ve all got life experience in these areas, so when we come to do these reflections we’re drawing on our own life experience.

They’re also said, as a set of preliminary practices, to be more profound than the teachings, which is a bit odd as they are actual teachings! So although they’re a set of preliminary teachings, they’re not just preliminary, they’re a very profound set of teachings. Perhaps there are other meditation practices which are more profound, but you won’t reap the benefits of practices further on in a path unless you’ve really engaged in the preliminary practices; unless 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, in early Buddhism and in Mahayana Buddhism, and particularly in Tibetan Buddhism. They’re used in that tradition as preliminary practices in the graded path; the Lam Rim teaching. *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, for example, by Gampopa, who was a disciple of Milarepa and also of Atisha, is an early text applied to the graded path. If you read books on Tibetan Buddhism often they will begin with some kind of exposition of the Four Mind Turnings.

You find them in works by Atisha, by Gampopa and particularly in the Gelugpa tradition, one of whose chief teachers was Tsongkhapa. Tsongkhapa was the author of the poem we’re going to use throughout the retreat and he comments on the Four Mind Turnings quite a lot in his works. You’ve probably come across them if you’ve read any Tibetan Buddhism; you’ve come across the Four Mind Turnings.

As a set of reflections they’re very important and they counteract certain basic delusions that we carry around with us, which I’ll come on to later. 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. They're called the Four Mind Turnings, the Four Thoughts that Transform the Mind, so reflecting on them more deeply enables us to transform our minds and the way in which we view the world. They highlight the fact that we've got great opportunities and not to waste those great opportunities.

They give us inspiration to practise the Dharma and keep us focussed 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 saṃsāra, so that we've got a good basis of renunciation upon which we can begin to meditate.

They are concerned with renunciation. If I say the word 'renunciation' and I give you a few minutes to let that impact on you and think what your physical and emotional feeling is in relation to that, dwelling on 'giving up' might not be a very comfortable experience. It can tap into feelings of nihilism and that kind of thing in our own conditioning. But renunciation is often a translation of '*nissaraṇa*': 'not going for refuge'. So the Four Mind Turnings are often a turning away from inadequate refuges. It's renunciation in that sense; turning towards real refuges. The difference between inadequate or false refuges and real refuges is that we sort of pile on the inadequate refuge what it cannot give us. We see conditioned things as permanent rather than impermanent. Even though intellectually we know things are impermanent, our emotional responses towards the things of this life is that they're going to last and give us lasting pleasure. In some senses the things we load those false views onto are OK in themselves, if we see them for what they are. We're not talking about the sort of renunciation that says that things in themselves 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. We would have some sort of reaction at some point if we think that, but it's not that.

A gradual reflection on the Four Mind Turnings enables us to have a more positive relationship and association with *nissaraṇa*, with renunciation, rather than with as we do: "*I don't want to do that – I like the things I like – I want to do them!*" From that point of view they're a good set of practices.

The order I've put them in here is the most 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, and I'll come back to that later. Usually you come across them in this order, and this is how we're going to explore them on the retreat.

Also in later commentaries, particularly by Tsongkhapa, they're divided into two sets of two: they may not be looked at in this way in early commentaries but Tsongkhapa does this. He looks at the first two, reflection on the preciousness of human life and reflection on impermanence and death, as a way of bringing about renunciation of the pleasures of this life, or as a way of letting go of the hankering for the pleasures of this life in a particular kind of way. It's not being attached to the pleasures of this life. Attachment is the important word. It's not that life doesn't have pleasures. Life has many, many

pleasures, but it's to do with not living merely for the pleasures of this life, not living merely a purely hedonistic life: in a way not looking for a happy outcome in this life, in the sense that saṃsāra will work for us or that the things of saṃsāra will give us lasting pleasure and happiness. We may think life is about having a great time, making lots of money, being famous, and all the things that saṃsāra is about, money, fame health, happiness, and wonder, what's wrong with that? There's a tendency, if that's your total focus, not to be looking at suffering and pain, either your pain or other people's. And with that attitude we're not really faced with the way things really are, with Reality. It keeps us attached to the pain/pleasure cycle. 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, unhappiness and suffering.

The first two reflections are working against that kind of delusion. For all of us, the fact that we're practising the Dharma means that we've seen through that delusion to some extent already of course. Perhaps using these four reflections might take us into seeing through it much more deeply. Also if we think about saṃsāric pleasures, if we start to reflect on impermanence and death more deeply, we see those mundane pleasures in a different perspective, in the perspective of impermanence and death, so quite naturally then we start to withdraw from things. We're less interested in those things because they're not going to satisfy our deepest needs and desires.

The first two mind turnings enable us to invest more deeply in our inner life, in our spiritual life, in our Dharma life. It doesn't mean we're not going to carry on enjoying the pleasures of saṃsāra, but we'll have a different perspective on life.

We're beginning to let go of our preoccupations with the things of this life, sometimes talked about in terms of the eight worldly winds, and also in terms of a preoccupation with food, pleasure and reputation. We realise we can't take the things which we enjoy so much with us.

First of all, this 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 the precious human birth and its freedoms and opportunities – which I'm going to go into more detail about tomorrow – enables us to have a sense of faith and confidence in our potential, in what we already have in our lives and in our Dharma practice. It gives a very positive basis for practice. We can tend to take life for granted. This is one of the saṃskāras that we can turn around. We don't even think our life is up to much or worth much, or that we've got much going for us. There's a very common practice in the Dharma, which is to reflect on the benefits of whatever it is you are trying to develop. For example, if you want to generate mettā, you reflect on the benefits of mettā. If you want to generate the Bodhicitta, you reflect on the benefits of the Bodhicitta, and the first chapters of the Bodhicaryāvatāra are a sustained reflection on the benefits of the Bodhicitta. It's a very simple and effective practice, to turn your mind to the benefits of something you do want to generate or develop, and focus on that. It gives you a lot of positive energy. So reflecting on the precious human birth, the precious life, and on its freedoms and opportunities, generates gratitude for the things that you do have and generates

appreciation for yourself and for the context in which you find yourself. It gives birth to self confidence in our potential. It generates faith. All that intensifies our motivation to practise. So it's an incredibly positive basis for practice.

We'll take the next couple of days tomorrow looking at that in much more detail. I think it's a good place for us to start. Maybe because of the nihilistic, materialistic values in our culture, we often don't value what we have or the context in which we find ourselves, and we are often not deeply in touch with our own very positive potential. This highlights all that. On the basis of that and perhaps 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 is yours this one time only.
It is won with difficulty and is easy to lose.*

Cherish your body, cherish your precious human life. The reflection brings about a cherishing of our life and opportunities. Then within that context you reflect that it's won with difficulty and it's easy to lose, and that:

*All worldly things are brief,
like lightning in the sky.
This life you must know
as the tiny splash of a raindrop;
a thing of beauty that disappears
even as it comes into being.*

On the basis of that very, very positive first reflection, you can then start to reflect well, yes it's a very positive opportunity we have, but our human life is brief, 'like the tiny splash of a raindrop'. It's a beautiful image. All the images of impermanence are very beautiful. Maybe focussing on the images engages with the positive aspects of reflecting on impermanence. Our life is 'like a dewdrop, like a bubble, like a flash of lightning, like a raindrop.' So we reflect that it's very positive, our human life, but it's fragile and it's impermanent.

In the second one we reflect on the impermanence of all worldly things, but perhaps particularly on the fragility and impermanence of our own life, the knowledge that we must die, that we will die, that there's no escaping it. We do have a very strong tendency, to disregard our own mortality. It's very hard for us to really think we're going to die. We have moments – either because we're very ill or we have some kind of accident – when we realise how close we've been. I'm not a mother, but sometimes people who have given birth say that they feel at that moment very close to death as well as life. And also when close friends or relatives of ours die. When we see somebody die, we feel that possibility much more tangibly, but it 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. This whole set of reflections enables and helps us to do that.

These first two mind turnings are in a very creative tension, as it were. You don't want to go into reflections on impermanence and death and fall into nihilism and despair. You want to maintain the reflections on the preciousness of human birth and all the opportunities that you have, but you don't want to get complacent about that and think you'll live for ever.

This reflection gives us a sense of urgency. The message is, don't waste time. Tsongkhapa is saying,

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

With this reflection, and it's the reflection Vajradarshini will be talking about in a couple of days' time, we keep alive in our hearts that sense of death and impermanence in a creative way and a positive way, and the effects of that. We'll see those effects, as we reflect throughout the retreat, if 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 we have in our own potential and that gives us a positive basis for reflecting on impermanence and death. We begin to see through the illusions of saṃsāra without falling into nihilism or despair, and we realise we can make something of our lives in a Dharmic sense, but not in the sense of finding perfection in saṃsāra.

The second two mind turnings, karma and karma-vipāka, actions and the consequences of actions, and the faults of saṃsāra or conditioned existence, in Tsongkhapa's commentaries on these, are said to overcome clinging to future pleasures.

I think in the second two mind turnings everything opens out into a bigger perspective: the wheel of life and the twelve nidānas, and that whole perspective, karma and the wheel of life. We might be thinking, well, we've got this life, but if we have some kind of belief in karma and rebirth that we've got lots of lives, then we can cruise in this one and we can have another one, and so we've got plenty of time, as it were. We might have a nice future rebirth. The traditional teaching says that you don't know that you're going to have the same opportunities and freedoms in your next life. Your next life in the 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 relates of course to the whole teaching of karma and of karma and rebirth. In some ways it is a simple teaching, in terms of the teaching that actions do have consequences, which is what we're trying to reflect on and understand more and more deeply. Skilful actions generally have skilful consequences, and unskilful actions generally have unskilful consequences. But of course in the bigger perspective the teachings of karma and rebirth are quite complex, and you'll be in Ratnadharini's hands as she explores that with you more deeply later on in the retreat.

But if we reflect on these two, on karma and karma-vipāka, and on the wheel of life and the six realms, we see that things go up and down in the wheel of life. Saṃsāra is a cycle and we cycle through it in dependence upon our intentional mental states. That's true cosmologically, but it's also true if we look at it psychologically. The sort of mental states we get into is very much dependent on 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. By reflecting on karma and karma-vipāka, and by reflecting on karma and saṃsāra as a whole, we see that even pleasant states end. It's seeing the limitations of merely pleasant 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 in our next life. We don't know what circumstances or external conditions we are going to find ourselves in, so we really don't know that we're going to have the same opportunities and freedoms in a future life. We can't necessarily just bank on it being great next time around.

If we have any tendency to think it'll be great in the future and we'll have a hedonistic life this time around, then reflecting on these two may perhaps bring home the fact that next time around we may not find these fortunate circumstances again.

I think the tendency which reflection on karma and karma-vipāka counteracts is that sometimes we think that 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. Our actions matter. Your actions matter. My actions matter. It's not that there's some sort of external law that's going to punish us if we're bad, it's just that the things that we do with body, speech and mind are deposited, as it were, speaking metaphorically, as seeds in our mind stream. Those seeds will bear fruit. They're more likely to bear fruit than not bear fruit, so our whole being is modified by our intentional actions.

But how seriously do we take that? If we really took it seriously then we would be acting skilfully all the time. That's not true! So we can always take our understanding of karma and karma-vipāka more deeply and see on more levels that our actions of body, speech and mind do modify our life and the world in which we live.

It's a bit of a wake-up call. This is going to lead us to going for refuge more deeply and in particular it's going to lead us to choose our actions of body, speech and mind more consciously, more carefully, and to direct those actions more and more along skilful channels rather than along unskilful ones, which of course is reflected in our practice of the precepts. It's by reflecting on karma and karma-vipāka that we engage with the practice of ethics in the Buddhist tradition.

The faults of saṃsāra is looking at saṃsāra as a whole, looking at the six realms, whether we look at them cosmologically or psychologically. We're looking at the wheel of life, we're looking at the nature of conditioned existence. Again, Maitreyi is going to introduce us to this later on in the retreat in more detail, but primarily we're looking at

saṃsāra in terms of the three lakṣaṇas, or the three marks: that 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 with the marvels of saṃsāra (of which there are many!) - conditioned existence gives us much pleasure - but beginning to see it can't and won't give us total happiness. And understanding that even within pleasure there is sometimes 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? Focussing on pleasure as a reflection is quite interesting. What is pleasure? Sometimes if we look at things in that way we can see how momentary the pleasure is. Even when it is associated with something very pleasurable, often there are deeper anxieties about losing the things which we enjoy. These reflections point at that. I suppose what the four mind turnings do in leading us to renunciation is that they're quite a strong, but also quite a gentle way, of bringing about insights, which quite naturally turns us away from delusion to a more realistic understanding of life and existence. Withdrawal then is a natural withdrawal rather than a kind of, "Oh! I mustn't do that!" Which probably means you'll do that thing later on, in my experience!

There's a wonderful line in Piṅgiya's praises of the way to beyond, which is a favourite reading in Triratna. Piṅgiya 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 think it's a wonderful phrase. So often we fall in to thinking we have to give things up in an alienated, ascetic kind of 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 possible pleasures of the next life, without harmful side effects, in a natural kind of a way. That is what I hope will come out of this retreat.

That is a brief overview of what we're going to be exploring in the retreat. Sometimes they are expressed in a different order. Personally I think this one is good for us and 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. It's a truth that's there. It's an actual characteristic of existence, one of the lakṣaṇas, an definitive mark. If we engage in a reflection on impermanence we also understand that attachment to impermanent things brings suffering, so we're very much involved in reflections on the Four Noble Truths as well. The Four Mind Turnings do associate with the Four Noble Truths. That may lead us to think, "Well, we really just need to practise the Dharma." We may then realise we have got the means to practise the Dharma: we've got the precious human birth, we've got the freedoms and opportunities, we've got the context. So that would lead us into the first reflection as the second reflection. Sometimes saṃsāra comes third: we see the nature of existence and our attachment to it through our reflection on impermanence. Then we realise we can abandon our attachment to saṃsāra, because of the truth of karma and karma-vipāka. This is the truth that actions do have consequences and that what we do does matter. We have the power and the ability to change what we do and to engage in a path of practice,

developing more and more skilful actions. It is in dependence upon these that insight can arise. So you turn around one and two, and turn around three and four.

I think it's probably better to approach them in this way, but they're so interconnected that you approach one and you can arrive at any of the others. This is because the Dharma is a total truth in which everything does interconnect. For methodological purposes we'll take them up as a set of reflections in this order.

We'll start with the precious human birth and we'll really explore our opportunities, our freedoms and our own potential and the context in which we find ourselves. As feelings of appreciation for what we've got begins to arise, along with feelings of gratitude and feelings of faith, that allows us to explore death and impermanence and understand that our context can change. We may live a long life, but we don't know what's going to happen with our context and our circumstances. That gives us a positive sense of urgency to practise more deeply and to understand that we do have the possibility of directing our life. By understanding karma and karma-vipāka we can choose skilful actions of body speech or mind, and we can direct our life skilfully through the practice of the precepts. We can understand more and more deeply that conditioned existence has nothing ultimately to offer us, and allow that understanding to give us a sense of very strong motivation for liberation for ourselves and all sentient beings.

The Preciousness and Rarity of Human Life

by Dhammadinna

Yesterday we looked at the four mind turnings collectively, and today we're going to start looking at each one individually, starting with the precious human birth. Yesterday I said I thought this was a good place to start, because it's such a positive take on human life, human birth, human body. I said the reflections hopefully would lead us to appreciation, gratitude, self confidence, faith and motivation to practise, and I get the impression from many, many retreats that we Westerners often find it quite hard to value our life and our experience. We're quite conflicted sometimes. We've all sorts of conditionings which affect the way we look at our lives and at ourselves. Hopefully this very positive take might help us to begin to overcome that if we suffer from self doubt, etc.

You could say this talk was subtitled, '*What does it mean to be Human?*' I'm going to explore it from a traditional Buddhist point of view; what a traditional Buddhist point of view thinks it means to be born a human being, but I think it would be quite interesting for us to look at that and think whether we think that is what a human being is, or a human life is. We have a human consciousness obviously, but we come from very different cultural contexts and so on from when these teachings were developed.

It's not just what it means to be a human being in a human body. The 'precious human birth' is a translation of a term in Tibetan which is used not just for someone with a human form, but for someone with a human form or birth with the eight freedoms, the ten endowments, and the three kinds of faith. So it's a very highly endowed human existence. It's the human form, the eight freedoms, the ten endowments, and the three kinds of faith that we're going to explore today. They are listed on the accompanying sheet, and comprise the traditional take on the precious human birth.

We're also going to look (and this is traditional) at the human birth, the human realm in comparison with beings in other realms. Implicit – and I'm making it more explicit in this – are the six realms of the wheel of life. We're looking at a particular realm, the human realm. The other realms of course are the long-lived gods, the asuras, and then the lower realms of the hungry ghosts, the hell beings and the animals.

Within the six realms the human beings or the human realm is not unique. It's just one manifestation of a kind of flow of psychophysical energy. Buddhism says that consciousness is what is most important, consciousness or mind. That is what precedes and determines being. Life-streams of psychophysical energy carrying karma and karma-vipāka determine your realm and your body, your birth and your experience. The human realm is just one realm in the cycle of the six realms. The universe from a traditional Buddhist point of view teems with consciousness. I think it's worth making the point when we're looking at what a human being is that, because we're looking at this kind of model – whether we look at it cosmologically or psychologically, the six realms – Buddhism does not think that the human being is different in kind from other life forms. This is different from the Judeo-Christian tradition, which holds that because human

beings have a soul there is a difference in kind between us and other life forms. I don't know if people still think that.

So this model is that a human being is different in degree rather than in kind. It's one manifestation of consciousness which comes into being in dependence upon karma. In the six realm model all beings have Buddha nature; all beings have the potential for Enlightenment. The Jewel Ornament of Liberation starts by saying this and then says the most conducive state of birth from which to realize Enlightenment is the precious human body, with its freedoms, endowments and its faith.

The human body is like a precious vase, capable of containing the elixir of immortality.

That is a general point about the human body in relationship with the six realms. We're going to come and look at the six realms in a bit more depth in the talk on saṃsāra.

Traditionally – and I think this is true of our human existence – the human realm has distinctive features in comparison with the beings in the other realms. I think the main thing we have as human beings is self-reflexive awareness: the ability to choose and therefore change. That's considered rare and priceless, one of the privileges of human life, hard won, and it comes with responsibilities to choose well, and possibilities for Enlightenment.

We can choose and change. We can affect our experience and channel our mind stream along more and more skilful channels. Choice and karma are equivalent: choice, karma, intention, motivation, volition, direction. We modify our karma and karma-vipāka through choice. The distinctive feature of the human realm compared with the other realms is that we have that ability. We have a balance of karma and karma-vipāka, so in the gap we can choose a new direction, we can change a habit, we can get off the wheel to some extent and onto the spiral. We have that ability: to create fresh karma-vipāka.

If we look at the other realms in comparison, they are realms purely of karma-vipāka. In the lower realms, the animals, the hell realms and the hungry ghosts are reaping the fruits of previous unskilful actions and they're painful realms. I think you can include the asuras in that. They're not always mentioned – they're sometimes left out. The god realm is purely pleasurable. They are reaping the consequences of previous skilful actions.

There's a balance of karma and karma-vipāka in the human realm, and a balance of pleasure and pain, and the other realms are imbalanced in both those ways. The way you get out of one of the other realms, is that either your karma exhausts itself (and no-one is in any realm for ever – it's not that fatalistic), and other karmas come into fruition, which may take you into another birth, perhaps a better one, or you need outside help. That's why you have the Buddha or Avalokiteśvara appearing in the six realms and offering the help those beings in that realm need.

You can create fresh karma in those other realms, but unfortunately it's usually along the line that you're already going, and we know this don't we, psychologically! If you're already in a not very skilful mental state, you're more likely to do something unskilful and more likely to dig yourself in deeper! You're on a sort of downward spiral, hopefully not a path of no return, but more and more difficult to get out of.

Those are the two distinctive features of being in the human realm: we have the ability to choose and change and we have a balance of karma and karma-vipāka – we can change the direction of our lives – and we have a balance of pleasure and pain. We experience both pleasure and pain, whereas in the other realms it's either one or the other. The pain in the human realm doesn't overwhelm us. It isn't too much, but it's enough pain to make us think about saṃsāra and the nature of life. Maybe we're caught up in a pleasure-pain cycle, and we're attached to things that are pleasurable, which don't bring us lasting happiness. If so, the amount of discontent that we experience can motivate us to practise.

There's also pleasure, so we can enjoy things. That can open us up to the unconditioned and so we respond to beauty, nature, friendship, people and eventually to the transcendental. We've got that balance in the truly human realm.

I think the small amount of pain or misery also works against the human poison which is pride. If we go into a god realm for a bit, and get too 'up ourselves' that we're having a great time, sooner or later it'll end and that pride will be transformed to some extent.

You could see the model of the six realms differently, and put the human realm in the centre. This is something Bhante talks about in *The Human Condition*, in *The Three Jewels* which you were asked to read. He goes a little bit further in his seminar commenting on that chapter. If you imagine the five realms with the human realm in the centre, he says it's the central realm, it's axial. Not only is it central in this new model, it's also slightly raised up, because that balance of pleasure and pain and of karma and karma-vipāka give us a perspective on our experience, whereas if you're in one of the other realms either psychologically or cosmologically you don't have a perspective. You've lost your perspective on your experience.

I think that's very, very interesting. It's one of the marks of human existence, that we have a perspective on our experience, a total all-round view, and that can lead to equanimity. What he says is that that perspective from a human point of view is the beginning or the precursor of wisdom, of total panoramic awareness. For example, if we're in a reasonably good mental state, we may have mental states that are more associated with a hungry ghost realm – we may have an extremely neurotic craving for a chocolate biscuit or whatever! - or we may be unhappy, and we may have mental states that pertain to those other states, but if we don't identify with those mental states, we won't go and live in that realm. If we can keep a perspective, the mental states come and go, and we stay aware of those mental states, we'll stay in the human realm. That's what we're trying to do in any awareness practice and in meditation. All kinds of mental states come and go, and we're trying to see them for what they are. We see them come and go,

and we maintain a perspective. So that's a quality of the human realm which the other realms lack.

If we can maintain a perspective on our experience, we won't illegitimately generalise from our present experience. It's that tendency that takes us off into another psychological realm. In the seminar on this, Bhante uses a couple of very mundane examples. He says, say you've got toothache; *duḥkha duḥkha*. You've got pain, and that pain can be quite overwhelming, toothache. So you could just sit with the pain, but what we do so quickly is that we load on top of that all kinds of mental attitudes. We 'always' and 'never'. We never should 'never'! We never should 'always'! We think things like, "*I always get toothache before I go on holiday... it always happens to me... it's completely ruined my life...*" You've made it into a whole thing. You get very angry, for example. You've over identified and over generalised from this present experience. That is going to take you into a more and more painful mental state.

The other example he uses which is quite funny is that you have to write something and you break the lead in your pencil. Maybe that's a bit more everyday. Maybe it's at your computer, and your lovely new computer doesn't work. Instead of thinking, "Oh dear, the technology's not quite up to it," you go into a completely frenetic, hysterical, frenetic mental state which carries you off into another realm.

It's interesting to reflect on that quality of human existence, that we have those balances of karma and karma-vipāka, and pleasure and pain. That gives us a sense of perspective on our mental states, and that 's a precursor to wisdom. He says that on this axis, where the human realm is in the centre, you're on an axis to Buddhahood. '*Outside living beings, no Buddhas. This very body the Buddha.*'

That's a general look at some of the qualities of a precious human birth. Traditionally it's also said that we don't have a precious human birth just by chance. In exploring this mind turning and the other mind turnings we are looking at experience within a perspective, not just of karma and karma-vipāka, but also of karma and rebirth. I don't know if you believe in the cycle of karma and rebirth, but maybe for the present try to take it provisionally. This is one of the frameworks we're looking at, and we'll explore it in more depth later. Traditionally we have a model of different realms in which we're born. We are not just born in the human realm out of chance, we are born there because of previous skilful actions. If we continue to practise ethically we can become more and more truly human and then enlightened.

That's interesting in terms of the nature of Buddhist ethics. Bhante makes a couple of points – I can't remember which seminar it's in – in which he is talking about both ethics and the ideal of human Enlightenment as natural. He says that in Buddhism, ethics isn't something that is imposed from the outside artificially, it's something which is implicit in our self-reflexive awareness, in our consciousness. Ethics is a natural expression of our humanity. If we were truly human we would act in an ethical way. If we were happy, if we were aware, if we were sensitive, why would we choose to harm other beings? Surely we would choose to respect other life forms and understand that they suffer, just as we

do. You can follow that through all the precepts. You can take the precepts as rules of training and guidelines, but essentially they're a natural expression of our human nature.

He goes on to say in the same way in what is sometimes called 'the ideal of Enlightenment', this precious human birth is the crucial realm or birth from which to attain Enlightenment. From that point of view again, it's as though the ideal of Enlightenment is a natural ideal.

We can do odd things with ideals. We can be naively idealistic, as we know, and we can make ideals as a sort of whip to beat ourselves with. We can alienate them from our natural experience. So he's trying to point out that although we may do that, it's not really like that. It's a natural ideal, it's not imposed from the outside. It takes the person into account. It goes back to that statement at the beginning of *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation* that all beings have Buddha nature. We have the potential for Enlightenment, so the ideal of Enlightenment is to activate our potential. We can grow towards that potential; we have a natural affinity with Enlightenment. It may be from some points of view a long way away, or deep within, depending on how you look at it, but there is an affinity. If there wasn't that affinity and we didn't have Buddha nature and some sort of potential within us, we couldn't resonate with the Dharma.

So there's a very, very positive focus in traditional Buddhism on the precious human birth, on the human realm, on the precious human body. It may be surprising if you haven't come across these teachings before, because there are also other teachings in Buddhism that say that the body is a heap of filth, for example Śāntideva, in the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (however he also says the body is the elixir of immortality). I think if you've come across that and think it's horrible, it's important to try to see it in perspective. The *asubha-bhāvanā* methods of looking at the body and analysing it into its component parts is a method for breaking our attachment to the body in a particular way, for example if we think we need lots of pleasures for the body and that's going to make us ultimately happy. It isn't telling us that we shouldn't look after our bodies, but that we're trying to break an attachment to the body so that it doesn't lead to suffering.

These two things are usually held in balance. You have those kind of methods, but at the same time you value your body and your life as your basis for Enlightenment, because you haven't got anything else! If you haven't got a body, you can't sit and meditate. A disembodied mind doesn't seem to work that well if you think about the bardo. So we value the body as the basis for Enlightenment and treat it as precious, so the body is not to be despised, punished or treated badly in Buddhism.

In terms of the method for analysing the human body, that same method is applied to the mind as well in Buddhism. We look at our mind analytically, and see what mental states we're made up of. So it's a method to see that there isn't enduring self or soul. That is what leads us to suffering.

We're going to look at the eight freedoms, ten endowments, and the three kinds of faith which traditionally make up this precious human birth.

I'll just give you some different ways in which 'precious' is glossed in some of the traditional texts, because I think it gives a very, very positive impression of these teachings. Sometimes 'precious' is glossed as lucky, auspicious, wonderful, of immense benefit, with great resources and requisites, with the potential for Buddhahood. It's a human life or a human being with time, energy, freedom, a certain amount of leisure, motivation, opportunity, ability, capacity, good circumstances, faith, energy, intelligence, confidence, diligence, wisdom. Those are things we're going to be reflecting upon, whether we have them or do not have them, and see whether we have got these freedoms and advantages.

In the modern West we do have so much going for us. I know we've got psychological stuff that undermines all that, but we do have so much going for us. I think the challenge for us in the West is to know what to do with the resources we have available to us. Can we make something of it? Can we make our life meaningful in the midst of our rich, consumer society?

First of all we're going to look at the eight freedoms. This is sometimes known as a unique occasion. The precious human birth has eight freedoms, freedoms from certain conditions. Freedom from hindrances and fetters and bondage that would prevent us from realising our potential, and this is particularly concerning time and leisure. The eight freedoms and the ten endowments are in the perspective of many births. You might have one birth and it might be more or less fortunate, and you might have some of these freedoms and some of the endowments but not all of them. You might be quite healthy, you might live in quite a cultured environment, you might not have wrong views but actually you're born in an aeon without the Buddha and without the Dharma. So you have to look at these that you might have some and not others. Ideally you would have all of the eight freedoms and all of the ten endowments.

First of all it's put negatively, freedom *from*. Firstly it's freedom from being born in a hell realm, a hungry ghost realm or an animal realm. We have taken birth not in one of the lower realms. As I've said, those three realms are realms of pain. They're realms where you're just reaping your previous karma. It might just be worth reflecting that as a hell being you're reaping a karma-vipāka of hatred, being preoccupied with hatred, and it's a realm of intense pain. Even a small amount of pain affects our practice, so just think how fortunate we are not to be born in one of those realms.

We're not born in a hungry ghost realm. Psychologically at the moment we're not in a state of intense neurotic craving or addiction, with which we're totally preoccupied and identified. This is a definition of one of these realms. You might be feeling a bit angry this morning, but you're not necessarily in a hell realm! This is a realm preoccupied and obsessed with intense feelings of deprivation. Intense hunger and thirst. Just think we're not in that experience at the moment. Just think if we are affected by just a slight experience of this, how it affects our experience, and I suspect that in terms of hunger and thirst, very few of us have experienced intense hunger. I don't know, but we tend not to in our modern society. And we know that there are beings now on this planet, starving with

very intense hunger. So just think how fortunate we are that we've got food coming our way.

We're not in an animal realm. This is reaping the karma of ignorance. The focus is on food, sex and sleep only. OK, so we need food, we need sleep, and maybe we need sex – we could discuss that! But it's a complete preoccupation with those things, with no perspective beyond that.

So these three lower realms are realms of intense preoccupation with different kinds of suffering. And there's no opportunity in them to hear the Dharma, to understand or to practise it. It's very hard to get out of those realms. We're not in one of those realms, and that's one of our freedoms. We have freedom from birth in one of the lower realms. That's the first three freedoms. Maybe the asuras are included in that. It's not often explicitly mentioned. That would be a realm where you're completely obsessed with envy and jealousy. The long-lived gods are in a pleasure realm, so that removes motivation. When you're cruising, and having a really good time, it's harder to be motivated (a) towards practice and (b) you're not really that aware of other people's suffering. You can get intoxicated with your own pleasure. They are very complacent. They're not motivated to practise.

We're in a human condition. We have a balance of pain and pleasure. The first four freedoms relate to realms, and the next four are slightly different. We're free from being born in a border tribe in a barbarian land! (I think Wales used to be seen as a border tribe! I don't know if there is anyone Welsh present – they're only seen in that way by the English. The terrible English!) So that's how it's described traditionally – a border land, a barbarian land, the barbarian hordes. But I think it doesn't necessarily mean one place or a geographical place, it could be any set of external conditions culturally where it's difficult to practise the Dharma, so it could be a set of conditions where it's very difficult to develop ethical sensitivity, if there's not any kind of civilization or culture there as a basis for Dharma practice. And I don't think culture and civilization mean that you have to have a high standard of living, or a high standard of technology. We tend to think it does, but it doesn't necessarily. If we think about what that means for us in our own experience, what a border tribe or barbarian land means. There are pockets in places we live where people are going to find it much more difficult to practise even ethically before they can get to Dharma practice, just because of how that realm is, how they've been brought up and conditioned. So we may have started off in conditions like that but through good fortune, perhaps good karma, we've found ourselves able to live in what's called a central realm.

We're free from being born amongst or developing extreme wrong views that are inimical to Dharma practice. Traditionally I think extreme wrong views would mean being conditioned or surrounded by wrong views which would not think about karma or karma-vipāka, or maybe not in those terms. So there isn't an understanding that actions have any kind of consequences, so it doesn't really matter what you do. There isn't any possibility of spiritual progress or human growth. We live in quite a materialist society, quite a secular society. We are surrounded by quite mixed views. It might be good to reflect on

what kind of views we think do surround us in terms of ethics. Does our society support spiritual practice, and so on? In terms of views.

We may be born in a family or culture where wrong views are predominant, and therefore undercut moral effort. They may be very hard to counteract because we don't have access to anything else. There are beings born in these kind of conditions. Wrong views are closely associated with closed-mindedness. Wrong views are strongly held wrong views. We may have questions about karma and karma-vipāka, and actions having consequences, but we're thinking it over from an open-minded point of view. Closed-mindedness and dogmatism are very strong obstacles to practice and faith. Wherever we were born we are now practising in a way in which at least we are trying to expose our wrong views, see them for what they are, and practise differently.

We're free from being born a senseless fool, which is politically rather incorrect. It's sometimes put as 'we've got sound body and mind'. We've got an adequate intellectual capacity for understanding the Dharma. If we were born without that, impaired in any way whatsoever, it would be much harder for us to come into contact with the Dharma and then to practise it. I think this also means not just mind, but body. It's sometimes put as 'with senses impaired'. I think again people in the modern West who are blind or deaf or who have some kind of sensory difficulty, have more resources available these days – there's Braille, and people can read the Dharma and have ways of getting in touch with the Dharma. We have a woman who comes here who is deaf blind who can practise the Dharma. This was probably written at a time when those resources just would not have been available. In terms of being fortunate, if we've got our complete senses and we've got a reasonable mind, it's just much easier for us to practise the Dharma.

Lastly we're free from being born in a place and also a time where there isn't a Buddha. Again this is looking traditionally in the whole cycle of aeons and rebirths. Not every aeon or every kalpa has a Buddha. You may remember if you've done the Transcendental Principle retreat and looked at all that cosmological stuff, in some aeons there is no Buddha, because a Buddha only arises when the conditions are there which are conducive. It's an example of the law of conditionality. We may be born with many of these freedoms and endowments, but not born in an aeon where there's a Buddha, so there's no access to the Dharma, so that would not help you in your path to Enlightenment. Or you could say less cosmologically that you could be born somewhere where there is religion, ethics and so on, but there isn't the Dharma. You don't have access to that.

Those are the things that ideally, having a precious human birth, we would be born free of those restrictions. We can reflect whether we are free of those restrictions, or to what extent, and how we feel about that.

Then they're put positively in terms of the ten endowments. Some of these overlap. These are the freedoms, the opportunities, the resources, the conducive conditions internal and external, which help us to practise.

There are five personal endowments or internal conditions that we bring with us, it says, by virtue of who we are, from our previous karma. Some of these counteract the freedoms. We're born in the human realm, as a human being, with self-reflexive awareness, with that balance of karma and karma-vipāka, pleasure and pain, and we can distinguish between skilful and unskilful actions. We can think, how much have we developed our humanity? We have that as a basis. We're born in a central land or region, so we're not born in a borderland or amongst a barbarian horde, we're born in a land or a set of conditions where there's some degree of understanding of ethics, some degree of civilization and culture, congenial to the Dharma, where there are opportunities to learn and develop, and also learn and develop ethics, with some kind of cultural life, and even maybe some kind of spiritual life is alive. So we've got freedom, and we're not under the power of others.

We're born with sound mind and body so we're able to understand and communicate the Dharma as well. We haven't been born with, or we are not living under, an extreme karmic burden. We're said not to have committed the five heinous crimes: wounding the Buddha, killing an Arahant, murdering our mother or father, or causing a schism in the Sangha. These are said to be very heavy karmic things to do and would bring about weighty karma-vipāka. They would obviously weigh very heavily on one's consciousness and therefore affect one's rebirth. You could say we haven't committed any serious unskilful actions which would have a big influence on our consciousness. I don't know you well, but maybe you have. I don't know where you've come from or what you've done. You may have done something that you think is really quite unskilful in your life. Sometimes it means that you haven't committed any karma that's difficult to reverse. The weighty karma is quite difficult to reverse. We've got examples of Milarepa and Angulimala, who did reverse the weighty karma of murder, and serial murder. Very heavy karma. But they did manage to reverse it, Milarepa by going through hardship practice, and Angulimala by just meeting the Buddha.

One of the things about the positives of Buddhism is that even if you or I have committed a weighty act, even if it's quite unskilful, we can turn that around even if it takes us a long time. With practice, especially regular practice, we can turn it around. Obviously if we've come into this life, as some human beings do, very positive, and they continue that, it's very fortunate. Maybe it depends on their previous karma. We come mixed. We come to this life with very mixed karma and we can turn our karma around. Some of us – you see this when you've done a lot of teaching – some people seem to come along quite young, and meet the Dharma, and it's very straightforward and their practice seems very easy. It's hard not to envy it sometimes, when it's not been one's own experience! For others of us it's more complex and that may be due to all kinds of things. We can't just say it's due to previous karma – that would be very literalistic. It can be partly due to that, we don't know, or due to our conditioning, and we may have a lot of undoing to do along the way. That's where we're at. I remember Bhante talking about years ago there being four paths, or four ways of experiencing the path in Buddhism: Easy all the way through. Hard in the beginning, easy at the end. Easy in the beginning and hard at the end, and hard all the way through! All bases are always covered in Buddhism, aren't they!

You may have a lot of positive karma and *punya* (merit) so you may find your practice easy all the way through. You may find it hard in the beginning and who knows how long the beginning's going to be – you don't know that till later! And then it starts to get easier. Easy at the beginning and hard at the end is kind of interesting. Maybe your practice is easy, but conditions are very difficult, and you find yourself in quite difficult conditions even though mentally things are good. Hard all the way through – maybe we shouldn't go there! Anyway, he said it doesn't matter which one you are, you just keep practising!

That's the first four. Number five of the internal conditions – having faith in the Buddha's teaching and confidence in the spiritual life. That's also reflected when we look at the three kinds of faith, but I suppose this means you have come with quite a positive sense of your own potential. You have a capacity for faith. It may not be developed in terms of complete *śraddhā* but then when you come across the Dharma and you hear a Dharma talk, you respond. That is all our experience, somewhere along the line whatever you were doing beforehand, sometimes it's sudden, sometimes it's gradual, we've responded to the Dharma. We have that capacity for faith.

One commentator likens these five endowments to having a car (we've got a body), which is on the road (we've met the Dharma), so it's faith in the Buddha and the Dharma, the car's got petrol (so it's free of disabilities – it's got all its engines working), you've got a licence to drive (you've committed no heinous crimes) and you've got confidence to drive (you've got faith). I don't know if that helps – I don't drive! Good thing about riding a bike, I suppose!

We could think, how are we doing with those? We are in a human realm, we've got opportunities for developing ethics, a reasonable amount of culture in our civilization, we've got our sense faculties and our mind, we know we can reverse our karma through our practice, and we know we can develop our faith, so we're doing pretty well!

Then come the five circumstantial endowments, or external conditions. We have been born in an era or time when the Buddha has appeared. The Buddha doesn't live down the road, and he didn't live yesterday, but we live in the dispensation of Śākyamuni Buddha. His teachings are still alive, so we are in his time, as it were. We have that endowment. Secondly he has expounded the truth of the Dharma. He wasn't just born and then didn't teach. He did teach, and that Dharma is available to us. Also we live in a time when the teachings are not only available, but they survive. They're being practised, so we have that endowment. And they're being practised by a living Sangha, so we have that contact with other people practising. We've taken up the teachings, we've come into contact with the Dharma and we've taken up the teachings, and we've got favourable conditions in which to practise those teachings. We've got support from friends, other Sangha members and a teacher.

So those are the ten endowments. We can reflect on each of the eight freedoms and ten endowments and think about where we stand.

Lastly, the precious human birth not only has the eight freedoms and the ten endowments, but also the three kinds of faith. I won't go into these in too much detail; maybe we can do these more in the groups, otherwise I'll run over time!

Faith is contained in one of the endowments, but maybe we can unpack what śraddhā is in more detail and more depth. The three kinds of faith really point to the fact that śraddhā is not just an emotion. There are three aspects: a more cognitive aspect, a more emotional aspect and a more volitional aspect. The first is said to be faith in realities, the more cognitive aspect of faith, a response to the Dharma, a response to the Truth, a response to what is. Maybe it's a response to the truth of karma, the truth of conditionality. You think, "Yes, that is the truth." That leads you to a sense of conviction in the truth of the Dharma and that helps you practise. So it's faith not just in the mind, but faith with a more cognitive tinge.

Secondly faith in qualities. This is much more emotional and affective. You really respond to the qualities of the Three Jewels in a more emotional, aesthetic way. It's a very strong movement towards, through feeling. You take delight in the Buddha, Dharma or Sangha, or in some aspects of the Buddha, Dharma or Sangha. When that aspect of faith is in place it is said to feel like everything drops into place. You feel like your life has been confused and then everything starts to drop into place. Faith is said to be like a water purifying gem: all the filth and muddiness are purified and you have a sense of clarity, poise and calmness in your life.

Faith in capacities is the more volitional aspect. Faith in capacities is sometimes called longing faith. This is very important for us. You not only have the other two aspects of faith, but you feel you are capable of attaining Enlightenment. You are capable of following your potential through. You can do, and you want to do, you want to practise. The truth is it might take a long time but it's not infinitely remote. It is something intimately connected with you, that you resonate with and have the capacity for.

We can reflect on those three aspects of faith, and most of us probably have one in play more than the others, and we can think about how we can balance them up, or why that is.

With all those things, freedoms, endowments and faith, we have the precious human birth. Like a wish-fulfilling gem, a chintamani, a precious vase, it's like gold because it enables us to achieve unsurpassable Enlightenment.

It's also said to be rare and difficult to find. This is one of the other things that we reflect upon. We reflect upon its preciousness and then we reflect upon its rarity. There are different ways of thinking about the fact that the precious human birth is rare. You've probably come across the traditional story of the turtle and the yoke. This is the way it's done classically. We can think about the turtle and the yoke.

The story is that there's a blind turtle that lives for thousands of years sitting at the bottom of the seven oceans. Once every hundred years it comes up to the surface to take a breath. There's also – sometimes it's wooden and sometimes it's golden – a yoke, floating

on the surface of the ocean, never staying in one place for longer than a second. What are the chances of the turtle sticking its head through the yoke? That's said to be the chances in this whole vast perspective of us achieving a precious human birth. If it surfaces and doesn't manage to get its head through the yoke, that's sometimes said to be a positive, skilful life, but without the Dharma. If it gets up to the top all the way from down the bottom, and gets its head through the yoke, well that's equivalent to a human birth and going for refuge. So it's a story you can think about...

If that's a bit fanciful, we can reflect that it's rare in the sense that the human birth doesn't arise through chance. It arises through previous skilful, ethical actions. Not many human beings have, not only the human form, but also the freedoms and endowments that arise as a result of ethical action or lead to ethical action. If you look at the wheel of life – and this is the third way of looking at the rarity – at all the beings of the wheel of life, you can reflect that there are many more beings in that wheel of life than there are human beings. There are loads of gods, and animals, and pretas, and hungry ghosts: all those different realms.

If that's too fanciful, and you think, well, I only ever see humans and animals, you could think that if you include microbes and atoms and insects, there are lots more animals than there are humans. You might think, "Do I really think it's rare? There are so many human beings on the planet, is it really rare?" But we're trying to think of the rarity and preciousness of the human birth, with all those freedoms and endowments and faith.

We can take all that and use it as a basis for reflection. We can ask ourselves in more modern terms, what are we, now, in my life, what am I free of? What advantages do I have? Life for any of us is by no means perfect. I don't think any of us would say we have a perfect life, but each one of us is free to practise. We all have time and leisure to practise. That may vary from individual to individual, depending upon other commitments and so on, but we all have time and leisure to practice. We're here on retreat for example, we've got time and leisure to meditate, to develop our friendships, we can go on retreat. We're free to practise the Dharma in this country and probably in the countries from which others of you come at the moment. We don't know when these things are going to change. We can think what we want to think, and feel what we want to feel, and explore what we want to explore. We probably do have enough money, food, shelter, and in fact many of have probably got more than enough basic food, shelter and money. We've probably got enough health and energy. Maybe we've got illnesses, things wrong with us, but we manage to practise, we manage to meditate, we manage to get on retreat. We in Britain and other Western countries do live in a democracy at least, however imperfect we think that might be, and we're reasonably free from fear and subjugation. So there are lots of things in the world that are going on that we're not happy about, but in terms of our own lives and ability to practise, we've got quite a lot going for us.

We just have to think it through and how that pans out for us. At the same time we can think about the lives of others in comparison, others with fewer of those advantages. We're born in the dispensation of Śākyamuni Buddha at a time when the Dharma, though

disappearing from some countries in which it was first alive, is available to us in the West, in fact more and more available to us in the West. We have met the Dharma. We've met a Sangha and we can be part of this Sangha if we choose. We can develop friendships. We can have mentors. I think it's worth reflecting in terms of the Dharma, that we live in a very particular time in the history of the Dharma where so many teachings, practices and traditions of Buddhism are available to us in the West, all at the same time. It's an extraordinary period in Buddhist history. I don't think that there's been one ever quite like it before. There are times like in China which have parallels, but they didn't have the internet! So not only is it available, it's available on the internet, as well as in books. If you just think about books in the last 30 years. I got involved in the Dharma when I was in my early 20s, in 1967 and there were so few books on the Dharma available, and I read them all, in about a week! There were so few books, so few translations, and although some of those translations have since been much improved upon, one felt very grateful, for example, to read the Evans Wentz books on Buddhism, even though the more sort of Jungian way he looked at them is less accurate these days, but you were so grateful to have a book on Buddhism. If I think about that, in my lifetime – not all your lifetimes, but some of us - in my lifetime, if you think about what is available now, you look at the catalogues of Windhorse or Wisdom or other Buddhist publishing houses, there are so many books you can't possibly read all of them. There's so much available for us and really good translations, done by Buddhist academics, and Buddhist translation groups, and so on. There are fantastic opportunities that are very, very new. Then we've got Google! You just put a topic in Google, and off you go! You can spend hours researching the Four Mind Turnings! I'm sure you have.

Then maybe we could ponder and reflect – well, do we think this human birth is precious and rare? What do we think about the turtle, and other realms, and so on? And then we could think, “Ok, what do I think about all that? The advantages I have, so what am I doing with the advantages?” Not in the sense, “I'm a bad person and I watch TV and I should be meditating!” way, but, “Could I make more of them? Could I help create better conditions for myself and others? What could I do?” As we're reflecting in this way, which we will be doing in the reflections, you can just see what feelings arise. It's not that certain feelings should arise, that it's prescriptive, that you should feel grateful, but reflect and see what happens. It may be that more feelings of appreciation arise than you thought you had and that that does give you more self confidence in yourself and in what you have, as well as a greater sense of meaning and value in your life. Maybe you do treasure your life and body as the basis of practice. In Bhante's seminar on the Jewel Ornament's chapter on the precious human birth, which I was on, he said that if you looked at all of these and thought about it, you could think that you were two thirds of the way there. I can't remember if he meant to Enlightenment, or stream entry, but I remember being really struck with it at the time, because two thirds is quite a long way. He was giving it a very positive take.

Some quotes from verses on this section, which often merges into the next section:

It's precious and it's rare, valuable, has meaning and it's fragile.

These are some lines from different verses. So:

Reflecting on all that, use this opportunity well. Don't be side tracked by meaningless pursuits and fritter it away as you may not obtain this precious human birth again.

We don't know what's going to happen to us down the track.

Don't remain at ease now. Seize the opportunity and practise the Dharma day and night. Be grateful for a single phrase of the Dharma and reflect on its benefits. Make the best of this opportunity, choose well and choose the Dharma. Strive to make fruitful your opportunities and advantages. Our life span is short so do not waste time.

The Transitoriness of Life and the Certainty of Death

by Vajradarshini

I drew the short straw! Actually I'm beginning to think maybe they're all short straws on this retreat! In our group people have found that reflecting on the precious human life has been quite difficult and quite challenging. In our team meeting yesterday when we were talking about this, we were saying it was supposed to be the easy bit, the uplifting bit at the beginning! So maybe it's all quite challenging in different ways. What I'm going to talk about is death and impermanence.

*Many things threaten life, which is even more ephemeral than a bubble full of air.
How amazing is the opportunity to exhale after inhaling, and to awake from sleep.*

This is Nāgārjuna. I really like that, particularly that last line, "How amazing is the opportunity to exhale after inhaling, and to awake from sleep." We take it so much for granted that after each breath there will be another breath, and that each time we go to sleep we will wake up again.

Because I've been thinking about this talk, and Dhammadinna's been talking about reflections on the precious human life, I think I've seen how closely they're connected and how much they go hand in hand. They only make sense together. I was thinking that in a way we only really experience life as being precious when we have a sense of it being quite fragile or frail. And by having that sense of it being fragile, we realise the preciousness of it. So they very much go hand in hand. What we're trying to do is have a heightened sense of both of those things, of the fragility of life and of the preciousness of life, as opposed to having a dull sense of both of those things. I know for me that dull sense is like, "Well, life's not so great anyway, so what if I die?" There's a dull sense of both, but what we're looking for is a heightened sense of both.

I'm going to talk about these reflections in this context. I'm going to talk about death in the context of these mind-turning reflections. What I've realised is that it's quite a particular reflection on death. It's not just a general musing on death. It's thinking about death in a certain way for certain reasons. So I'm going to talk a bit about that sort of reflection on death. I'm also going to talk a bit about my own experience since my dad died. My dad died at Christmas this year, quite unexpectedly, and I've thought quite a lot about death for the last nine months, so I'm going to bring in some of those things that I've been thinking about.

First of all I'm going to talk a little bit about dew drops. I'm going to talk about an image of impermanence from the Zen tradition and from Zen poetry. I'll start with a little poem.

*The lakṣaṇas can cut like blades sometimes
While the dew drop world is the dew drop world
But yet, but yet*

This is a poem by Issa, a Japanese poet who lived in the 18th century. He had a really difficult life. His mum died when he was very young, and he had a stepmother who made

his life hell, so he left home as soon as he could and eventually he married when he was about 50 and he had four children and they all died in infancy. Then his wife died in childbirth. Then his house burnt down. Eventually he re-married when he was quite old and he had a daughter who lived, but she wasn't born until after his death. He died when he was 65. That is a little life story of Issa. If you read his poems, he just writes the most beautiful, simple, sad poetry. He has the quality of empathy. He often writes about things like flies, but with a huge amount of empathy, as if he's put himself in the fly's shoes, so to speak – flies don't really have shoes! But it's just beautiful, simple poetry filled with empathy.

*This world of dew is nothing but a world of dew
And yet, and yet.*

I'll come back to that in a minute, this 'world of dew'.

I was also reading a book about Dogen's poetry, and he's the same in that he uses this image of dew and dew drops. He lived in the 13th century and is one of our teachers on the refuge tree. His mother and father both died when he was quite young, and he had quite a strong insight as a very young boy into the whole of life being quite fragile, loss and grief. He decided to become a monk when he was about 14. He writes:

*Dew drops on a blade of grass
Having so little time before the sun rises.
Let not the autumn wind blow so quickly on the field.*

If you read this Zen poetry, this Japanese poetry, and you read about it, you realize there are a number of themes, which mean definite things and they are re-occurring. One is the seasons, and each season is a symbol for something else. It's interesting because we're in the season of death and impermanence, being autumn. Also apparently in this poetry, whenever dew appears as an image, it always means autumn, interestingly. It's like fleetingness, something disappearing in the dew.

There is the image of dew being an image of impermanence, an image of transience of things. There's a little saying that goes, "Which will last longer, the master or his dwelling?" It's said to be like asking, "Which will last longer, the dew on the morning glory, or the morning glory itself?" We've got a morning glory here, and the flowers come out, and they don't last a day. They last about half a day. When we ask the question, which lasts longer, the dew or the morning glory, it's like maybe the dew will fade before the flower does, or maybe the flower will fade before the dew does, but either way by evening time they'll both be gone.

You also have another image to do with dew which is dew frost. I've just come across this idea of dew frost. If you go out very early in the morning on a morning – I don't know what weather conditions cause this but sometimes there's just lots of dew and it's very wet on misty mornings. If you go up by the reservoir where there are fences, they are full of cobwebs. Obviously they are there all the time, but you don't normally see them,

but because they're covered in dew in this dew frost, you can see all these forms out in nature that you don't normally see. This dew frost is used as an image for things being insubstantial. It's as if we need to reflect that we are as insubstantial as that dew frost, those forms made of dew, of nothing, that will fade as the sun comes out.

In this poetry when he talks about the dew drop world, the image of dew drops is an image for tears, so it brings in the emotions that go with the reflections on impermanence and insubstantiality. That sort of reflection has got a certain kind of flavour and the flavour is sadness, so these dew drops represent tears. It's a kind of painfulness. It's quite interesting because it's the three *lakṣaṇas*: the dew is impermanence, the dew frost is insubstantiality, and the dew drops are painfulness, suffering, sadness.

So you also see in this kind of poetry, e.g. if you're familiar with the poetry of Ryokan, there's quite a strong connection between sadness and awakening, so sadness is a definite flavour in this kind of poetry. That sadness is '*sabi*', for those of you who don't know that I talk about *wabi sabi*. The sad part of that is *sabi*, which is not an unpleasant sadness. It's just a sadness at the fleetingness of life. But in terms of Zen poetry, there's quite a strong connection between that feeling of sadness and insight.

I was struck by Dhammadinna talking about Keith Dowman saying nothing beats real experience. It's all very well to reflect on things or even sit in bed reading this lovely sad Zen poetry, but it's quite different to actually experiencing death or loss and the sadness that comes with that. There's quite a strong connection between real experience and reflection, because what we reflect on affects how we experience the world. How we experience the world will be reflected in our reflecting. They feed into each other. If it was the case that things would never die, they would lose their power to move us. We are only moved by the dew or the morning glories because they fade away and we too are going to fade away. That's why we're moved by them. Because we reflect on those things and those things will fade away, we have to take in more that we will fade away. They feed into each other, our reflections and our experience.

It's a bit like death seems to be the ultimate *koan*. What particularly moves me about this Issa poem, *the lakṣaṇas seem to cut like blades sometimes*, is that the painfulness of existence, and yet he talks about it as a dewdrop world, this world of dew, this world of illusion that is also very really painful. For me that is a koan. How is it that this world is an illusion, and yet it's so real in terms of the painfulness of it?

There's a story about Marpa. His son dies and he's absolutely filled with grief at the loss of his son, and his disciples are quite shocked that he's grieving so much, and they say, "How come you're grieving so much, because you've taught us that everything is an illusion? How come you're grieving so much at the death of your son?" He says, "Yes, everything is an illusion, but the most painful illusion of all is the death of one's child." It's this koan that *saṃsāra* is a painful illusion. Because it is a koan, it keeps us reflecting on it. It's really hard, if we have some experience of death, not to keep on reflecting on it. It evokes really big questions. It's a time when you ask yourself really big questions. For that reason, it does take us deeper. The Buddha says, "Of all footprints, those of the

elephant are the broadest and deepest. Of all meditations, that on impermanence is the strongest and most beneficial.”

Coming on to this mind turning reflection on death and impermanence, what I’m going to talk about is three things: that death is certain, that the time of death is uncertain, and that at the time of death only the Dharma is of benefit. That’s the kind of framework of this reflection.

First of all, death is certain. I will die and you will die. Everybody dies, even the Buddha died. This is quite hard to reflect on because we think, “Of course I know I will die.” End of reflection. So what does it really mean to know that I will die? One of the things I was thinking about was that I think that I will die, but when I die it won’t be me that dies. It’ll be this old lady called Vajradarshini that I’ve distanced myself from. So we do think we will die, but because we’ve projected that person who is going to die into the future, we disassociate with that person who is going to die: it’s not really us, it’s that old lady Vajradarshini. That’s one thing to think about, that when you die it will be you, with all your clothes and your things and your habits and so on. However you are then, when you do die, it won’t be that different from how you are now. You can’t really disassociate from it.

Then I was imagining taking myself out of this world. I was imagining, what if I did die? I was doing this on this retreat, what if I did die? What if I do die before the end of this talk, what will happen? I was thinking there would be a lot of grief if I died during this talk! I’m pretty sure. There would probably be quite a big funeral, and people would do me proud. Then everybody would start sorting out my stuff, and somebody would have my computer – that was one of the first things I thought! And there would be a few things in my room that people would want to have, but most of it nobody would want because it would just be rubbish. They’d clear all my files off the computer. Somebody else would put an ad in Shabda saying, in the unfortunate event of Vajradarshini’s death we are now looking for someone to replace her. And then people would start getting quite excited about this new person who had applied for my job, and somebody would say, “Oh maybe you could be the chairman now that Vajradarshini’s dead.” All my responsibilities would be taken over by somebody else. For a while people would be quite sad, and they’d sit around the table in the community and they’d say, “Can you remember that syrup pudding that Vajradarshini used to make?” And they might have a few tears. But then, after quite a short amount of time, hours would go by where nobody had even thought about me. Then there would be days go by, and I might be mentioned every now and again, every week or two, but mostly people would just be carrying on with their lives. It’s quite a reflection really to think that we’re not that significant. It’s quite hard to take that in. It doesn’t mean that we’re not loved. It’s that even for the people that really love us, we’re not that significant. We’re not insignificant, but we’re not the centre of their world in the same way that we’re the centre of our world. Hard to believe, I know!

Also it’s quite a nice thought in a way, because you realize that everything would go on without you, so there’s a certain amount of freedom in there. There’s a certain amount of just knowing that you’ve got a choice about what you do. I’ve got a choice whether I’m

here or not because if I died I would just be replaced, so it's not like Tiratanaoka would shut down. There's a freedom in realising we're not that significant: life goes on without us.

Then there's the whole area of how permanent and how substantial we see things or experience things to be. We know that everything is impermanent, but we think that some things are more permanent than others. We think that we are quite high on the scale of permanence, and probably our families and friends. Other things, like the dew drops and so on, we know that they're impermanent. The other day I just got a pen out of my thing to write something, I got my pen out – which is a really horrible pen, actually! – and I just thought to myself I think my dad gave me this pen. I have a memory of in the conservatory where my parents lived. He didn't give it to me as a present – I just took it or he said, "Just take that pen," or whatever. I thought, "That is absolutely mad that this horrible disposable pen is still here and my dad isn't." If you had told me that at the time, it would be so hard to believe that my dad was less substantial or less permanent than this pen. This pen is supposed to be disposable. It's things like that and you think, "That's just not right that this pen is still here." We're so geared to not take in our own impermanence, our own fragility.

I was on an aeroplane once. I always think I might die when I'm on an aeroplane. I'm not particularly scared of flying, but it's just that you're completely out of control, and if something happened that would be it. I always like to sit next to somebody that I wouldn't mind dying sitting next to – I have this thought, "Oh no, I don't want to die sitting next to this person!" Anyway I was on this aeroplane and I just thought to myself, "What would happen if suddenly we realised we were going to die?" and I had this image of everybody would be running up and down the aisle, hysterically screaming, "We're all going to die! We're all going to die!" Then I thought, "Isn't it funny that we're not doing that already?" Isn't it funny that we're not running up and down the aisle of life, shouting, "Oh my god, we're all going to die!" Because it's only a matter of a slightly different time scale, but we don't realise. We listen to the news and hear about these disasters, but actually we are in a disaster. Saṃsāra is a disaster, and none of us are going to survive it in that sense, within saṃsāra. Not that I'm suggesting we all get hysterical.

I've got some quotes here that I got from Dhammadinna. This is one of them. Longchen Rabjang says,

With your heart, contemplate the certainty that all your relations and all your wealth will be as nothing, like a deserted city. Everything is impermanent, so be detached. With your heart, contemplate the inevitability of death. When it comes, your home and possessions, your friends and famous colleagues will not accompany you. Realize absolute truth.

The next of these reflections is that the time of death is uncertain. Death is certain but the time of death is uncertain. I was reading some poetry the other night and I came across a poem which I'm not going to read, but the idea of the poem was that one of these days is the anniversary of our death already. It just made me think, "What day is the anniversary

of my death?” Each year we go round the calendar and go past the day, and that day is the anniversary of our death in time. It’s things like that that help to make it feel a bit more real, that that’s really going to happen.

Another thing that I’ve been thinking about recently is near misses and how difficult it is to experience a near miss as a near miss. I spilt my coffee in my bed the other morning. I have a little shelf by my bed and it’s not really big enough for all the things I tend to put on there. It was first thing in the morning and I was a little bit sleepy. What I realized is that I’ve often nearly spilt my coffee. You know you put your coffee down and it goes whoa! like that, and that’s a near miss. But sometimes very occasionally you don’t catch it in time, and it’s all spilt in your bed, and you’ve got to make more coffee, and take your duvet off and do all these things. In terms of the results of that, there’s such a big difference between spilling your coffee and not spilling your coffee. In terms of the consequences there’s such a big difference, and in terms of the action there’s such a tiny difference as to whether you catch your coffee or not. I don’t know why, but every time I have a near miss with something, I just think it’s really interesting because if it wasn’t a near miss, if it was a miss, and that thing had happened, the consequences would be completely different and a whole chain of something would be set up. Our life is probably like that. We probably have loads of near misses, but we don’t experience them necessarily as near misses, because we’re still here and nothing has happened to us. We haven’t spilt the coffee in a sense. But it’s perhaps just by a very tiny thread that we’ve managed to hang on to our lives.

Any moment could be our last moment, and all the plans that we make are provisional plans. I used to go and see my nanny when she was still alive – she lived until she was well into her 80s - and I used to say, “I’ll see you on Sunday,” or something, and she always used to say, “Yes, God willing.” I noticed that this happened as she got older more, and we’d talk about my brother’s wedding, and she’d say, “Well, if I’m here then.” I suppose it’s quite a good thing to do.

Another reading I’ve got here is by Patrul Rimpoche, and it’s about this as a practice. This, “Well, if I’m here then.” Anything we plan to do is provisional, because we might not be here:

Meditate single-mindedly on death, all the time and in every circumstance. While standing up, sitting or lying down, tell yourself, This is my last act in this world and meditate upon it with utter conviction. On your way to wherever you might be going, say to yourself, “Maybe I will die there. There is no certainty I will ever come back.” Wherever you are, you should wonder if this might be where you will die. At night when you lie down, ask yourself whether you might die in bed during the night, or whether you are sure if you are going to get up in the morning. When you rise, ask yourself whether you might die some time during the day. And reflect that there is no certainty at all that you will be going to bed during the evening. Meditate only on death, earnestly and from the core of your being. Meditate like the Kadampa Geshe of old, who were always thinking about death at every moment. At night they would turn their bowls upside down, which is only done

when a person died. And thinking how the next day there might be no need to light a fire because they had died, they would never cover the embers for the night.

It's quite something, isn't it, that you don't keep your fire in over night because you really think that you might die in the night.

I was thinking how much we forward plan. I can tell you what I'm doing every day of 2006 pretty much, God willing! If I get to be there. But we don't know that we're going to be doing those things because it is all provisional. We have an idea that there is going to be some time later when we die, or some time later when our parents die, or other people die, but not yet.

I remember this thing 'not yet', and I think that's quite interesting as well. I have this quite strongly. I try to be prepared for things I know I have to face, but I have this 'not yet'. I'm willing to go there, to do whatever it is, but not yet. I know when my dad died, the thing I was most shocked by was that I was 37 and I'd thought about my parents dying and what that might feel like and how I might handle it, but I'd always thought I'd be in my 50s. Unconsciously obviously but I'd got it somewhere that I'd be in my 50s. And I was, like, I'm 37 and this is not right. This pen and me only being 37. We're prepared for something, but we've got a certain idea of how and when that's going to happen and actually we just don't know how and when that's going to happen.

The third of the reflections is 'at the time of death only the dharma is of benefit. All you take with you is the core of your being.' With my dad, I was shocked by that: not his watch, not his vest; he took nothing with him. You leave everything behind. You go completely alone. Nobody can go with you. You go mostly completely unprepared. It's not even like going on retreat or on holiday where you will perhaps finish things off: do the washing up before you go and do your laundry. Most of us probably there won't be time to finish anything off. You'll just go mid-life. When I was at my parents' house after my dad died, I was really... he's a gardener, and there's the greenhouse, and he's got his sweet peas ready to go in, and he'd got all these things that were half done. It seems so strange and unbelievable that you can be gone, and there's all these things that you'd thought you were going to carry on with. All your plans, I suppose. We don't have that chance to finish anything off. Nothing, nobody, will be of any use to us. All that will be of any use to us is how much of the Dharma we've really integrated into the core of our being: how much love we have, how much fearlessness we have, how much insight we have, is all that will be of any use to us. It's very difficult to know how much of all those things we do have.

You often hear about people who have practised the Dharma to varying extents and you hear about how they die and how they seem to die quite well, with quite a lot of fearlessness. I don't know how I would be if I was facing my own death at all, and I imagine that I would be really frightened. I was with my dad when he died, and although I was really, really upset, I had no fear. That was quite a shock to me, that I had no fear. It changed my idea about my own death. It's given me a bit more confidence in my own death, that maybe I have developed some level of fearlessness. Maybe we all have it,

whether we practise or not, some level of fearlessness in the face of death. Maybe it's not as we would expect it to be. We can't under-appreciate the effects of our practice and think all those days when I didn't meditate, and my lack of metta. We can under-estimate our practice, and we might have a lot more of a resource there when we really need it than we think we have.

Togme Zangpo says:

We will be parted from close friends or close acquaintance. Our wealth and possessions, obtained with great effort, will be left behind. The guest house of our body must be left by its guest, the mind. Casting away thoughts concerned with this life only is a practice of the bodhisattvas.

'Casting away thoughts concerned with this life only is a practice of the bodhisattvas' – I'll come back to that.

These reflections, that death is certain, that the time of death is uncertain, and that at the time of death only the Dharma is of benefit, they lead to decisions. They galvanize us. They motivate us. They lead to certain qualities. When we reflect that death is certain, that leads us to practise, which is a kind of feeling of conviction. We have a strong sense of conviction. So when push comes to shove, we realize we do believe in the Dharma. Often we're not put in that kind of position. It makes you think doubt is a bit of a luxury. We're often in a position where we can afford to doubt. When push comes to shove we realise the degree to which we do have conviction in the Dharma. The more we can take it in, that we know we will die, the more our faith will be strengthened. In knowing that we will die, we know that we need a refuge. I think we don't always know that we need a refuge. When we have the need of a refuge what happens is there is a refuge there. We have an experience of the Three Refuges in some form or other because we really experience ourselves as in need of a refuge. I think often we don't experience that strongly enough, 'in need of a refuge'.

I did feel when my dad died that I had been practising for that moment in a funny sort of way. I hadn't put two and two together before, but I had reflected on death, and it was quite interesting to reflect on what I had that other people didn't have. It wasn't very much. I didn't feel that I had very much that other people didn't have. I didn't feel like I had more courage, more love, etc. than my brother, my mum, my sister in law, or other people who were around. I felt like that was drawn out of all of us. What I did have was some sort of framework where I could make sense to some extent of what was happening. I had some way of understanding what was happening with my dad dying, so that was quite interesting just to notice what I had, which wasn't that much, but it made a difference in being able to take in his death.

If we develop this certainty that we are going to die, one of the things that it does is it liberates us from unfocussed practice. It focuses the mind. When we're quite close to death, whether it's the prospect of our own death or the death of somebody else, it brings

a certain clarity. Suddenly you are perfectly clear about what is important and what isn't important, and you just want to do what is important. It brings this focus, this clarity.

Then when we reflect that the time of death is uncertain, that makes us think we want to practise now. It gives us this sense of urgency. I must practise, and I must practise now. There's not necessarily tomorrow. We've done all our forward planning, but we're not necessarily going to be here to see out those plans. It's worth thinking about, what does this mean in terms of being in the moment. It's something we can get the wrong end of the stick about this 'being in the moment' business. You can think that being in the moment means that you don't make any plans for the future, whereas it doesn't mean that. It means that we know that all plans are provisional. We're in the moment with our forward planning, knowing that all that forward planning is provisional, yet we still plan.

This sense of urgency is going to make us ask ourselves, how do we spend our time, and how do we want to spend our time.

One of the things I've done recently is I've given up watching rubbish films. I've just suddenly got this sense that life is too short to watch films that aren't really, really good. I still watch quite a lot films, but I only watch films that are really good. That's quite interesting, because I used to be in a sort of middle ground. I don't think I've ever watched awful films, but there used to be a middle ground of quite entertaining films, a way of killing a couple of hours. Sometimes I would quite fancy a film like that. But recently I've realised, I only want to watch good films. It's the idea of killing time. Other people might not experience this with the same amount of horror. Those word puzzles that you do – not sudoku, that's different, maybe, those word puzzles where you have to find the words and then you circle them – I have this sort of thing where when I see somebody doing them, it fills me with a sort of horror. They're not even challenging. It's just an idea of losing half an hour. What are we doing with our time?

There's a poem that often comes into my mind, and I can't remember who it's by. [Editor's note: the poem is by Ezra Pound, the epigraph to *Lustra*] It says,

*The days are not full enough
And the nights are not full enough
And life slips by like a field mouse
Not shaking the grass.*

I love the image of life being like a field mouse, running through the grass so fast that the grass doesn't even move, and that life is going that fast. Just to have this feeling that the days are not long enough and the nights are not long enough. Yet it also brings up the question, what does it mean to make the most of our lives? Life is certainly too short to waste it by being busy all the time. Making the most of our lives and the days not being long enough and the nights not being long enough isn't about how much we can cram into our precious opportunity of life. We develop a sense of urgency, which is a combination of energy being freed up, that aspect to urgency, but also a disciplined focus. We know what we want to do with our time, even if we want to do nothing.

So then ‘at the time of death, only the Dharma is of benefit’. This leads us to ‘I must practise purely’. I wasn’t sure what this meant, ‘I must practise purely’. I thought about it, and maybe what it means is that I must practise with Insight in mind. I must practise with that big perspective, not just in order to be a little bit happier, in order to cope a little bit better with saṃsāra, in order to get on with people a bit better and so on. What I think it means to practise purely is to practise with Insight in mind, to practise in a way that changes us fundamentally in our deepest self. That deepest self is all that we’ve got at the time of death, so that needs to be changed. It’s not that we’re trying to fix saṃsāra. That’s a really easy mistake to make, to think that Going for Refuge and Buddhism is about being better at life or better at saṃsāra. It’s not, because saṃsāra is saṃsāra, and the only solution is to get out of it, to step outside of it, to see through it, whichever image we like to use.

One of the things we need to do is we need to rely on something other than the material plane. This has been in my mind quite a lot after my dad’s death, how much I rely on the material plane. This is quite a hard one for me, because I am quite ‘outer’. I don’t have a very strong inner life in a certain way – well I do, but I want to make things and I want things to be manifest. My practice has been to work. I like to make shrines, I like to make talks, to manifest something. The idea of actually relying on something that is non-material, where we sometimes go in our meditation, that there is another plane to existence, however we experience it, and that’s where we’ve got to put our reliance. We’ve got to start relying on that more than on the material plane – not that they’re separate.

I really don’t think I would be very good at being dead! I was having an anxiety about it yesterday. I don’t think I’d be very good at being dead, because there’s nothing to do (which I’m not very good at) and you have to go there on your own (which I’m not very good at) and I was thinking about how I’m not very good at solitary retreats. I’m better at people and doing things. Yesterday I was thinking that I must go on solitary and start practising because I don’t think I’d be very good. Given my experience of solitaries, I think it might be similar. You’ve not got any of your familiar stuff around you, you’re not at home. There are all these things about being dead that I don’t think I’d be very good at. In a way, we are practising for being dead, or for dying. Abandoning actions done solely for this life. Not that those things won’t have an effect in this life; if we develop mettā, develop fearlessness, and so on they will have an effect in this life. But it’s abandoning the actions that have an effect solely for this life that won’t have any effect on our core.

Another little quote by Lama Gunkan Konstron who says:

The Lord of Death, who dwells in the south, does not consider the state of your plan. You should speak with him. When he comes to call on you he will not ask whether you are young or old, high or low, rich or poor, ready or not. All are forced to go alone, leaving behind their unfinished works. The thread of life is suddenly broken, like a rope snapping under a heavy load. There is not time for plan-making. To die without spiritual knowledge is to die in pathetic helplessness.

Just to finish, just coming back to the koan of the dewdrop world, this world of dew, this illusory world which is at the same time very real to us and potentially very painful to us, and yet it's an illusion. Within this world, within this koan of life and death, we have another koan, which is, *How do we make the most of life without hanging on to it?* How do we neither waste time, nor resist the passing of time?

Just to finish I'm going to read a little quote from Dennis Potter, who wrote this when he was dying of cancer. It's to do with the perspective that you get when you're close to death, either your own death or somebody else's death. You get a different kind of perspective. In a way we're looking to get that different kind of perspective, which is why we're reflecting about death and impermanence.

Blossom is out in full now. It's plum tree. It looks like apple blossom but it's white. It's the whitest, frothiest, blossomest blossom that ever could be, and I can see it. Things are both more trivial than they ever were, and more important than they ever were and the difference between the trivial and the important doesn't seem to matter, but the now-ness of everything is absolutely wondrous.

Karma and the Consequences of Our Actions

by Ratnadharini

We come to the third of the mind-turning reflections. Just to re-cap: we've already heard about and reflected on the precious human birth, which has its emphasis on the opportunity we have in this lifetime to practise the Dharma and all the favourable conditions that have given rise to that possibility. And we've heard in the second reflection, the reflection on impermanence and death, which stimulates the sense of conviction and urgency and purity of practice. Those two talks, those two reflections, very much go together. Now we come to the third and fourth of the mind-turning reflections, which again go together. You could have the one on karma and rebirth first, or the one on the faults of conditioned existence first. It doesn't really matter. They go together.

I'm going to be talking about karma and rebirth, mainly in fact about karma and karma-vipāka. Probably the best-known formulation of the law of karma is the one that we all know from the *Dhammapada*. I'm just going to remind us of some of those verses from the first chapter of the *Dhammapada*. This is Bhante's translation. The *Dhammapada* must be one of the earliest Buddhist texts. It must be pretty close to what the Buddha actually taught.

The Buddha says:

Experiences are preceded by mind, led by mind and produced by mind. If one speaks or acts with an impure mind, suffering follows even as the cartwheel follows the hoof of the ox (drawing the cart).

Experiences are preceded by mind, led by mind and produced by mind. If one speaks or acts with a pure mind, happiness follows like a shadow that never departs.

Those who entertain such thoughts as 'He abused me, he beat me, he conquered me, he robbed me,' will not still their hatred.

Those who do not entertain such thoughts as 'He abused me, he beat me, he conquered me, he robbed me,' will still their hatred.

Not by hatred are hatreds ever pacified here (in the world). They are pacified by love. This is the eternal law.

Others do not realize that we are all heading for death. Those who do realize it will compose their quarrels.

The evildoer grieves in both worlds; he grieves 'here' and he grieves 'there'. He suffers and torments himself seeing his own foul deeds.

The doer of good rejoices in both (worlds); he rejoices 'here' and he rejoices 'there'. He rejoices and is glad seeing his own pure deeds.

The evildoer burns in both (worlds); he burns 'here' and he burns 'there'. He burns (with remorse) thinking he has done evil, and he burns (with suffering) having gone (after death) to an evil state.

The doer of good delights in both (worlds); he delights 'here' and he delights 'there'. He delights (in this life) thinking he has done good and he delights (after death) having gone to a state of happiness.”

I think probably those verses would be enough to reflect on in terms of the law of karma. It's all in those verses. They are well worth reflecting on.

The most essential formulation of the Buddha's Enlightenment experience, the formulation that we know of as conditioned co-arising, or dependent origination, is the most essential way of expressing the experience of the Buddha at his Enlightenment. It was the realization, the actual experience he had, that transformed his life and answered the questions that he had set out with on his noble quest. One of the simplest ways of expressing that is that all things arise dependent upon conditions, and they cease when those conditions no longer hold. It sounds very basic and it sounds quite easy, but it is so far-reaching and so hard to grasp. It's an understanding that wasn't in this world until the Buddha saw it and realized it for himself.

That most essential formulation is given shape, is given application in many different ways. It can be applied to everything. There are many ways in which we're familiar with it: the Four Noble Truths, the Twelve Nidānas, are some of the most familiar. But it's the same thing when we come to look at karma. The law of karma is usually expressed as: *'Skilful actions lead to happiness or desirable outcomes. Unskilful actions lead to suffering, or undesirable outcomes'*. It's a particular set of actions, and we're going to look at what those actions are. Some particular actions have particular outcomes, and other actions have the opposite outcome.

Karma literally means action, though it's got many, many associations. Action in this case refers to actions of body, speech and mind. It's not just overt actions and their outcomes: it's primarily our mental states. The distinction that is being made in the formulation of karma is between skilful or unskilful actions. I'm sure you all know this already, but skilful actions are those that are performed on the basis of positive mental states, that is, the opposite of unskilful mental states. Unskilful mental states are usually referred to as mental states based in greed, hatred and delusion or ignorance. Anything we do when we're in a mental state that is tinged with craving, or anger, or hatred, or ignorance is going to have a painful outcome. Anything that we do when we're in a positive mental state based on the opposite of those is going to have a 'good' outcome. That is the law of karma.

One of the first things that needs saying is that it doesn't work the other way round. It's very important to make this point quite early on. If we're having a painful experience, an

experience of suffering, it does not necessarily mean that it is as a result of an unskilful action.

The teaching that makes sense of that is the teaching of the *Five Niyamas*, which I hope you're all familiar with. The five niyamas explain different modes in which conditionality can be enacted, in which it takes place. There's the physical inorganic, the *utta-niyama*. There's the biological, which is the *bija-niyama*. Then there's what's referred to as the non-volitional mental, which could be seen as psychological, but the distinguishing feature of it is that it's non-volitional, which is *citta-niyama* or *mano-niyama*. Then there's the ethical mental events. That's volitional aspects of conditionality which is *karma-niyama*, which is what we're going to be particularly looking at. Then there's a fifth category, which is *spiritual or Dharmic niyama*. It's a bit harder to say exactly what that is, but it could be seen as other power, something coming from outside normal conditionality coming into play. It could be seen in our experience as the spiral path, so it's a sense of a different kind of conditionality, a different experience of conditionality.

We're going to look more closely at karma-niyama. This is conditionality which takes effect on the basis of volitional mental states, volitional activity. Maybe one of the first things to say is that there is karma and there is karma-vipāka. As a result of our karma, or our volitional activity, there is an effect which is pleasurable or painful, which is the consequences we reap as it were of our states of mind, which is our karma-vipāka. There's not much we can do about karma-vipāka. In fact there's not much we can do about pleasure and pain generally. Pleasure and pain can be caused by other niyamas, or it can be the effect of karmic activity of our own. But either way, once we're into the effects of something, it's non-karmic at that point. There's nothing good or bad about it. It's just pleasurable or painful. Life is pleasurable or painful. It just is. We can't do much about that and actually it can be quite a relief to know that. It can encourage us to let go of the past and not to angst too much about the past.

We can choose how we respond to pleasure and pain, and this is something that is key to our understanding of how the world works, because the alternative model would be either that everything is just random, so it's just luck and there's no reason why some people should have more pleasurable experiences in life and other people should have more suffering, it's just random. The extreme opposite of that is that somewhere it's just fate, whether it's to do with God or not. It's just written in stone and there's nothing that we can do about it. In between those two extremes is the possibility of change and the possibility of choice, or in Bhante's terms the possibility of a creative rather than a reactive response, and the possibility of transformation.

This is where the whole question of free will comes in, and this is something that we can maybe reflect on and talk about further. Our actions have consequences, but it's not fore-ordained what kind of actions we'll carry out. We experience pleasure or pain, and there is the potential to have a choice at that point. It's the famous gap on the wheel that we're used to. The fact that there is this possibility of change is obviously very, very significant. I asked Bhante once (I remember being very confused) – how can we change if our experience is rooted in greed, hatred and delusion, how can we ever think ourselves

outside that box? I remember him saying, “There’s nothing wrong with our experience: it’s the interpretation of our experience that’s the problem.”

Our experience is just is how things are, but we habitually misinterpret it. We have our experience; we have the raw material that is showing us how things are all the time. It’s not as though we have to go and find how things are. They’re staring us in the face the whole time. We just have to see them. In order to see them we need a Dharmic framework. We need some way to shift our habitual way of seeing things. We don’t need very much of a Dharmic framework. We probably all have everything we need in terms of a Dharmic framework. It’s interesting to reflect that we have our experience, and we have a Dharmic framework, and actually that’s all we need. We just have to do the work.

It’s the same message that’s in the first of the two mind-turning reflections. We have the precious human birth and opportunity, and we have come across the Dharma. And we have the faculties to make sense of it and the ability to make sense of it, and we have our raw experience of impermanence and death. It’s around us all the time. We just have to practise.

To go back to karma, and the skilful or unskilful, it’s also interesting to reflect on how do we tell whether something is skilful or unskilful. Again, it’s remarkably easy. It’s not as though we have to sit down, and look at our mental states, or look in a book to work out whether it’s based in craving or hatred. It’s so simple. There’s an instinctive sense once we’re reasonably adult. All of us have the potential for making that distinction. It’s inbuilt. We’re born with it. Maybe as very small children, where the universe is an extension of us, it’s a little bit harder to start to make that distinction, but it doesn’t take much. You can see that children have the ability to understand that once it’s spelt out, in terms of, “If you hit him he’ll probably hit you back, and you won’t like it, and it would hurt, so don’t hit him.”

We have this natural inbuilt ability to distinguish. We just know whether something is skilful or unskilful. It is something we need to work on, and we need to refine. The more we practise, the more sensitised and clear we become about the distinction. It’s interesting that it’s a law of the universe that activity based on greed, hate and delusion will eventually result in suffering. It begs the question why. Why should that be the case? You hear terms like, “We live in an ethical universe,” which seems very strange. Why should we live in an ethical universe as opposed to an unethical universe?

A little further on, I’m going to go a bit more into why that might be the case, and how it actually happens, how it works, but for the moment we’ll just take it on trust, that it is how it seems to work.

In terms of karma, the teaching of karma is obviously very bound up in the idea of re-becoming, or rebirth. The two are quite embedded in fact, but you don’t have to necessarily embrace both. The Buddha’s Enlightenment experience did arise very clearly – or how it’s come down to us – out of a reflection that he saw his past, and he saw his past lives unfolding. He could see the past lives of all other beings, and he could see them

stretching into the future. You get a very strong sense that the significance of this was that he could see how they unfolded. He could see the law that governed their progression. On the basis of that was his understanding of Enlightenment. So karma seems to be very bound up with the understanding of conditioned co-production.

The Buddha's explanation behind re-becoming: we don't have to take it on. It's foreign to our culture. It may take a bit of time to see whether it fits for us and makes sense for us. But it hasn't been contradicted by any of the schools of Buddhism down the ages, so it's worth giving it considerable weight. But we can see the workings of karma and karma-vipāka, simply as they operate in this lifetime. It's very clear from the verses in the *Dhammapada* that karma has an effect in this lifetime as well, as it's postulated, in future lifetimes.

They're not separate, but it's two ways to look at the workings of karma. There's the immediate application of karma, in the immediate aftermath of an event, and action, What happens when we do something that is either skilful or unskilful? Is there an immediate response? What the *Dhammapada* is saying would imply that there is an immediate sense of remorse, or clear conscience, rejoicing, delight. We can look at whether we experience that. It is asking whether, if we have been unskilful, we have an immediate, natural response of *hrī* or *apatrāpya*. In the opposite case, when we have been skilful, do we have a response of clarity, delight, gladness, clear conscience?

Then there is looking further into the future in terms of how our actions play themselves out. Traditionally it would be seen as a 'future becoming'. But we tend to see it more as a continual process that is happening, that is unfolding. The model we can use is as though we're a bundle of *samskāras*. Bhante said that we're a bundle of habits and a lot of them are bad habits. We can see ourselves essentially as having a momentum and it's been gathering steam for a long time, and it's got lots and lots of threads to it. It's as though we're this collection of multi-coloured threads, and some are thicker than others. If you cut through this rope, that is made of all these threads, at any one point, you'd see a particular slice of what we are at that time. Effectively that's what happens when we die. Whatever our collection of *samskāras* is at that point, is still what's driving on into the future. It's an on-going process. It's not just something that just happens at death. It's not something that just takes shape in a future birth. We're always re-creating ourselves. We're always re-becoming.

Is this our experience? Is this what actually happens, if we look at our experience, that these two aspects of karma and karma-vipāka actually unfold like this? How do we feel if something painful has happened, and we've responded with anger? Or how do we feel if something has happened and we've responded with empathy? How do we feel if we've responded with generosity, or how do we feel if we've responded with a tighter, more self-oriented response? How do we feel when we've been mindful and sensitive, and when we've not? These are like the immediate experience of skilfulness or unskilfulness.

In terms of looking a bit longer into the future, we can look back and think how we have changed over the years, and whether we get a sense of our practice having influenced that

change. Sometimes it's easier to look at other people and think how they have changed, and how are they changing. It can be quite hard to see our own process of change. Five or six years ago we had a couple of retreats for women who had been ordained ten years or more. One of the first things we did was ask ourselves whether we thought we were any nearer to stream entry than we had been when we were ordained, and everybody said yes. It was very marked. It was as though ten years' practice was a long enough time to have that kind of perspective, and see the effect of our practice. It felt very affirming, because you can doubt it in the short term and sometimes despair that you've made any progress, but actually if you look back and have that kind of perspective, hopefully you can see that your practice has had some kind of effect and that we have changed..

We're going to see whether our experience bears out the law of karma. Sometimes it can be hard to understand how karma works because sometimes it can seem as though people get away with it, or they're lucky. One of the explanations of how the law of karma works is that your vipāka will always take effect, but you don't know when. But it's there, as though a seed has been sown. Every time we act it's as if another seed has been added on one side or the other. The theory is that different vipākas will kick in to effect at different times. There's a whole theory behind the relative priority of karma taking effect. Apparently, what's most likely to happen is that weighty karma, something of big karmic consequence, is likely to have priority. And then if we've just died, or the most recent karma, what's very fresh, will be having an effect. And then there's habitual karma, which is worth bearing in mind which is that all those little things that we do, that seem so insignificant, but which add up over time, habitual karma has an effect. Finally there's the catch-all of residual karma. So we don't know exactly when things are going to have an effect.

And then, how do we actually put our understanding of karma and karma-vipāka into practice? Because hopefully you know already everything that I've just said. But despite the theory, the Dharmic framework, and hopefully our practice which is reflecting us back all the time, we seem to not act as though we believe it. In fact we often seem to act as though we believe the opposite. We tend to go about life as though a favourable outcome is most likely to happen if we have rather than if we give and if we win rather than if we understand. That's worth reflecting on, in terms of what we seem to go about trying to create. It's as though we think a favourable outcome will be if we can have more and more things, rather than give, and if we can win, for example rather than understand. I'm sure we all know this. There's a desire to get things and hold on to them, and a desire to prove ourselves right, although if we think about the feeling associated with those different actions, we can probably get a sense of it being a more pleasant experience when we give. It's actually completely topsy-turvy, completely upside down. It's very strange.

It's as though the spiritual life is a whole re-learning and a turning upside down of some of our most basic assumptions. So for example sometimes we've had an impulse to give, but have second thoughts because it means parting with something. Our worry is that we're going to have less, so we'll be smaller somehow. But if we can manage to do it and we give, we tend to feel bigger and more expansive and connected. We just have to reflect on this and let it sink in more and more deeply; we'll be happier if we can give.

We tend to just dig a hole. On the basis of past assumptions we tend to just reinforce them rather than learn the lessons and start to create something new which is more pleasant for us and others. So we need to reflect on karma, because even though it's a very simple teaching and we believe it in theory, we don't always practise it. We need to reflect on it in order to bring it alive in our lives. The good thing about it is that, as well as reflecting on it, it's a very practical teaching that needs putting into action. It's something that needs to be not just thought about and reflected on, but also translated into action. Karma is action.

It gives us somewhere to start. Sometimes we feel that we just don't know where to start with our spiritual lives. That's something that Bhante made very clear: that we can always choose to act skilfully rather than unskilfully. We always have that option, regardless of circumstances. So it gives us somewhere to start.

But we have to put it into practice. That may well mean that we need to translate it into bite-sized chunks. For example, we have karma and the law of conditionality in the ethical sense, and we have the five and ten precepts, so we have these guidelines as to how we can practise. But even then we probably need to translate the precepts into something personally particularly applicable. It's worth bearing in mind from time to time we probably will need to make personal precepts for ourselves. We need to not only dwell in the theoretical realm, but also make things tangible and concrete.

We also need to understand that there's no such thing as inaction in terms of karma. We like to think that if we're just rather vague and we don't do anything very much, then nothing very much will happen. It's extraordinary how vague we can be around it. But Bhante has said that there's no standing still in the spiritual life. If you're not moving forward, you're slipping backwards – that's one of his aphorisms. So we not only need to be not doing unskilful things: we need to be doing skilful things. Not doing is actually perpetuating a state of craving and ignorance as much as doing unskilful things is.

Again in terms of personal precepts, this is something that Vajradarshini has drawn out and maybe something that we can draw out in our groups. She said that it's quite useful to have a sense of the theory and the concrete, and what we're moving away from and what we're moving towards. We can use those axes to help us formulate personal precepts.

The practice of karma gives us somewhere to start, a way of practising that we can always use. Sometimes we can feel a bit stuck. Either we don't know what to do next, or we can have these leaps of enthusiasm where we think we'll try to be enlightened, we'll try and have insight, we'll try to transform ourselves in that kind of way. Actually, somewhere in the middle, although we'd like change to be fast, sometimes we feel (speaking personally) that we'd do almost anything if we could make it happen fast. It's actually a gradual process, but with profound implications. Spiritual change is something we need to be prepared to work on for lifetimes.

Going back to the nature of the mind-turning reflections, this particular reflection on karma and karma-vipāka is traditionally seen as two things. The first is reminding

ourselves of the danger of rebirth in lower realms, waking us up to the fact that if we commit unskillful actions we're building up painful experience in the lower realms. We can also understand this as building up painful existence for ourselves: confusion, doubt, painful experience, suffering.

The other side of the wake-up call is that there is massive potential benefit to us acting skillfully. Traditionally we often reflect on the benefits of a practice, of skillful actions. It is the way we change ourselves: by acting skillfully. We change others' experience of us, and we change our experience of the world. There are these three connected ways in which we bring about transformation by choosing to act skillfully. I'm going to go into each of these headings a little bit.

First of all, in terms of changing our self. You've probably got a sense that changing our self prompts the question, What are we? We're trying to change our being, we're trying to change our consciousness, we're trying to change our essence, our nature. There's a danger of misunderstanding the nature of change, and thinking that we'll still be who we are, but we'll just understand things differently. There's a danger in the spiritual life of thinking we'll be able to hold on to who we essentially are, but just have understood something. We'll have read enough books, have enough grasp of Dharmic formulations and somehow that will mean that everything's different. But, as I was saying earlier, the nature of change has to be very gradual. We have to lay the foundations. We have to prepare the foundations. The whole thing about the path of gradual steps is that we do the work, we do the gradual steps, and then radical transformation, real transformation will arise, but we can't force it. We can't make it happen. We can't choose to make it happen. We have to keep preparing the ground.

For example, in meditation we understand that the importance of dhyānic mental states, for example, is not that they are an end in themselves, but that if we have some experience of dhyāna, it has an effect on our consciousness. When we're in dhyāna, we're in a very different state of consciousness, and with a bit of familiarity with that and a bit of that having a longer lasting effect, apparently our consciousness becomes more pliable and more amenable to being able to actually absorb and make use of an experience of insight. We'll all have had moments of insight, and they will have had an effect on us, but for them to really have a long-lasting transformative effect on us, we need to have loosened up our consciousness, we need to have prepared it, it needs to be habitually more positive and more receptive, and less identified and less fixed.

And the practice of ethics too. Speaking as somebody who doesn't experience a lot of dhyāna I find it very reassuring that the practice of ethics is working on the same ground. The practice of ethics, of karma in terms of skillful actions, is not just about becoming more skillful and the consequences will be that we're happier. This is something that we meet again and again in our spiritual lives. It is so easy to end up with the view that we're practising in order to just make saṃsāra more acceptable. I'm sure this is something Maitreyi will be going into.

Ultimately the motivation for practising spiritually and for practising ethically is that we're trying to transcend karma altogether. It's quite hard to get our heads around, but the Buddha had gone beyond being skilful or being unskilful. There comes a point where although karma-vipāka may still be playing itself out, we no longer need to act to be making that choice to act skilfully or unskilfully, because our whole consciousness is so different that we just naturally are responding from a basis of understanding reality. That is of a different order to being skilful or unskilful. Being skilful is by definition a duality. It's the opposite of being unskilful. While we've got that choice, we're still having to make the effort, the choice to be skilful. There comes a time when it just would be our nature to be compassionate and wise, because that's how we would be. We have to begin by transforming ourselves and one way in which we do that is ethically. We're changing from a narrow, tight, self-interested view of the world to something that is broader, more flexible, more empathic. We can get a sense of that shift in quality.

This is what we need to do. One way of looking at ethics is that it is how an enlightened being would naturally be. Although we're practising on a different level and in a rather different way, the fact that we're making the effort to practise skilfully gradually changes our being. It's as though we have two scales. Scales are very useful in explaining how change comes about. It's as though we're just dropping seeds of skilfulness on one side of the scales, or unskilfulness on the other side of the scales, and at some point out of all those little drops something shifts. This happens at different points in our spiritual lives, this shift. It happens at stream entry. It happens at Enlightenment, where qualitatively there's a whole shift in the process. We need to be adding these little drops in order for that shift to come about.

There's a very deep-seated change we're trying to bring about. We're trying to root out ignorance, craving and hatred, but we can't really get at it head on, immediately. We have to work at it from the point of skilfulness until such time as we are in a different kind of relationship with the world, and then something happens. The Yogācāra has a model for this, which I'm going to manage not to go into in too much detail. It says that at the heart of our delusion and the root of our craving is the fact that we have four delusions about self. These are the four *ātma-kleśas*. These are self-view, or *ātma-dṛṣṭi*; self delusion or *ātma-moha*; self conceit or *ātma-mana*; and attachment to self, which is *ātma-sneha*.

Self view is the collection of views that we have about our self. We think that we are substantial; we think that we're something we can rely on and get hold of, and the other side of that is that it is a delusion; actually there is no fixed self.

Another side of this is self conceit: we *are*, we are the centre of the universe. Our experience is very deeply that we are where everything is.

Attachment to self, which goes with that, is that we are wonderful. We're very deeply attached to ourselves. This can take a perverted form of the opposite of that, but essentially we're very, very important to ourselves.

The usefulness of the Yogācāra model is that we're hard wired. This is just how we are. The way our consciousness is, we can only make sense of things in time and space, but actually they're not absolute things, they are part of our relative reality. However, we can't experience outside of them. It's the nature of human beings to have experience in a particular way. The nature of our experience is to have this deluded understanding of ourselves. That is the problem. That is what we are trying to root out. That is what we are trying to transform. But we can't get at it head on, so although it's really important we do get down to these views, we shouldn't give ourselves a hard time for having these wrong views. They are not an ethical matter as such. We can't immediately do anything about them. They're just how we are. In fact we need to approach them quite differently.

We approach them sideways; we approach them gradually. We approach them by practising ethically and practising skilfully until such time as our experience is a much more positive one. Our relationship between self and other becomes much more positive. What happens as a basis of a much more skilful and 'in line with reality' experience is that one of these shifts then take place. We can't make it take place, but we prepare the ground, and at some point some fundamental shift happens. It's called the 'turning about in the deepest seat of consciousness' and that's when wisdom really arises. It's when ignorance is really transformed.

So the practice of ethics does actually go a very long way. Karma and the practice of ethics is about self and other, and fundamentally that is the root of all our delusion and our craving. So our practice of ethics is a gradual process, with enormous potential and implications which, if you follow its logical conclusion, is a path which takes us all the way to Enlightenment. It's not separate from the practice of meditation and the arising of wisdom. It's a continual process. We start with the practice of ethics, and that is where we need to start.

It's not just about transforming ourselves. It is about transforming ourselves into enlightened beings, but there's a danger maybe of getting a little self-absorbed, in which case we won't get anywhere. So we also need to be aware that the practice of ethics and of being aware of karma and karma-vipāka are an understanding of the fact that we have an effect on other beings. It's about the relationship between ourselves and others. If we act unskilfully, we don't just harm ourselves; we cause pain to others. We need to be awake to that and take in the reality of other beings. It can be very painful, very salutary to understand the effect we've had on someone else. Sometimes we need that. We need to hear how our actions have landed to really be motivated to change them in the future. We have a responsibility. We can't just fall back on inaction and think we're not doing anything terribly bad, so we'll just get by and not cause too much of a ripple in the world. There's a huge responsibility which goes with the understanding of karma and karma-vipāka. We have an effect, and we have an effect by our inaction as well. There's a huge potential, and with potential comes responsibility. We can just reflect on the responsibility we have in terms of our effect on other beings.

We have an effect not only immediately on the beings we actually impact on immediately, but we have an effect on the world. Bhante's talked about a cloud of skilfulness or unskilfulness. The Buddha's teaching on conditionality is massive. When

you look at it more deeply, you start to see how deeply conditioned we and all beings are. The causes of any experience are so myriad that you can start to see the all-embracing web of conditionality and how each of us condition and affect it. The drop of skilful or unskilful actions onto the scales that I referred to earlier doesn't just affect ourselves. It has a cumulative effect in the world and we affect it one way or the other. However, it's not a weight that lands just on our shoulders. As a fixed self we're not going to be able to transform the world by ourselves. But if we take responsibility for our part in the world, we are sharing in the Bodhisattva Ideal. We are sharing in that responsibility that we and others have an effect in the world. The knock-on effect of our actions is so much bigger than we sometimes realise. One act of mettā, for example, affects the next person. They are then feeling more positive, so their actions are more likely to be positive. The ripple effect is enormous. It's the model of a butterfly flapping its wings on one side of the world and you have a hurricane on the other.

We don't just transform ourselves and affect others, both immediately and more broadly. We do affect the world but, depending on how we choose to act, whether skilfully or unskilfully, strangely and miraculously our experience of the world will be affected. However the world is, we can completely transform our experience of it. For example, sometimes you can come out of a meeting, and someone draws up minutes, but you read them and think, That isn't how I remember the meeting. Or worse still, no-one draws up minutes and everyone has a different memory of what happened at the meeting. Our experience of events is very different. If we experience something as painful, we can't just rest in blaming the outside agent, and think it's all happening out there and they should have been more skilful because then that would have been nicer for us. That may be true, but we can't affect that. What we can affect is our response.

Going back to the very beginning of my talk, we have a huge repertoire of responses that we can make. The fact that this is so gives us huge freedom. Whatever our circumstances, we have enormous freedom. It may not be something we can do over night, but over time we can create a different world for ourselves. We have some very dramatic accounts of this. We have accounts all the way through the Buddhist scriptures, but we have some very striking modern accounts. For example, I always remember Nelson Mandela's autobiography, and his account of freedom at the end.

I'll just end with another quote [from a poem by Ryokan]:

*The rain has stopped.
The clouds have drifted away and the weather is clear again.
If your heart is pure, then all things are pure.
Abandon this fleeting world,
Abandon yourself.
Then the moon and flowers will guide you along the way.*

The Defects and Dangers of Saṃsāra

by Maitreyi

My talk today is on the defects of saṃsāra. It's the last of the mind-turning reflections, and the second of the last pair of mind-turning reflections. The law of karma and the defects of saṃsāra work together to help us overcome clinging to future pleasures and encourage us towards the greater happiness of freedom. I thought we could just check in with ourselves and ask how much of what has gone through our mind today is about looking forward to future pleasures, and how much about the planting of the seeds of skilful action. I know for myself I've been feeling quite tired, because I've been up late writing this talk, and I've been thinking a lot about a nice bath, and bed, and a good book to read!

A defect is a lack or a deficiency, and I think it's important that we clarify this. We're not saying that saṃsāra is evil or horrible, but we're saying that it doesn't give us what we most deeply need, and that it is permeated by all kinds of suffering, as well as giving us pleasure. When we talk about something being defective, then it needs correcting.

Saṃsāra is not a place that we go. It's easy to fall into this way of speaking, as if it's a place we find ourselves in, that we loosely equate with 'the world', and there's another place called nirvana that we might get to if we're very good or we work very hard at our practice. At the same time we're not sure that we want to go there, because it does seem a bit much or it's a bit lonely or somehow featureless. Saṃsāra and nirvana are not somewhere that we go. It's something that we do. We 'samsarise'. Literally, it means to go round, or to spin.

There are various images associated with it which have this circular or cyclical nature or character. It is like an ill-fitting chariot wheel. It's the wheel of life with the six realms, and the outer circle of becoming or re-becoming. It is like water in a water wheel in which we circle helplessly. It's like bees buzzing round and round a pot. It's like the turning of a potter's wheel. A circle is endless, or it ends in itself. A cycle is recurrent, repetitive. It returns to the beginning. Nothing new comes out of it.

We create this saṃsāra in which we go round and round. We create it initially by what we come with. We're hard-wired, as Ratnadharini put it in her talk, with the four *ātma-kleśas*, that sense of ourselves as centre of the universe, and the subject of every experience. There's no blame in this; it's just how things are from the perspective of how we are. It's part of the human condition to experience the world as subject and object, and it's part of our precious human birth that we have a self-reflexive consciousness and an ability to discriminate which allows us to explore and question that experience.

So far so good, it would seem. But already there is an underlying tension. Saṃsāra is a condition in which our minds are not functioning in accordance with reality. We believe in a separate self. We believe in the importance of that self. We are determined to protect and defend that self. At the same time, on some deeper level we know this not to be the

case. Our experiences confirm it and yet contradict it. For instance, other people also think they are the centre of the world. They are wrong, of course. We can't all be the most important person, but that is their experience. Within it all there's a sense of incompleteness, a lack of wholeness.

An unease and an insecurity accompany our experience. That unease causes us to want to become more secure, more substantial, so we feel the need to acquire things, to bolster up that sense of self. Then we think we own these things, which might be material objects, other people, skills, opinions, experiences.

First, conceiving an 'I', we cling to an ego.

Then, conceiving a 'mine', we cling to a material world.

Like water in a water wheel helplessly we circle.

I bow down to the compassion that arises for all beings.

Candrakīrti

But the unease and the insecurity persist. Having feared we might lose ourselves in some way or other, the situation has been compounded. We now fear we might lose our possessions, our standing in the world, our points of view, as well as fearing the loss of self. Again there is no blame. Our craving for security and substantiality arise out of ignorance. It's a very human response. And it causes suffering.

Sāmsāra is cyclical because through our actions based on ignorance we feed that ignorance. Seeing objects in the world as 'mine', we compound that view of a separate sense of self, increasing that sense of alienation and insecurity which then reaches out to draw more towards it. It's not only a cycle, but it's a vicious circle. Helplessly we circle, digging ourselves deeper into that ignorant view.

Another way of describing the defects of sāmsāra is that it is characterised by the three marks or lakṣaṇas of conditioned existence: the unsatisfactory or painful (*duḥkha*), the impermanent (*anitya*) and the emptiness of self or essential being (*anātman*). The connection of *duḥkha* and *anitya* is obvious: that things are impermanent is often a cause of suffering. *Anātman* is less obviously connected, but emptiness of self means that we are not in control. We are a process, not an entity. We too arise day by day, moment by moment, in dependence on conditions. There is no self that is in control of those conditions. We can only have some influence as a part of those conditions.

There is suffering and there is no blame. I think it is very important to see that we tend to equate these two states, suffering and blame, and very important that we can distinguish them. I think equating blame and guilt with suffering is probably the result of Christian conditioning in our culture. While I was brought up an atheist, I was still horrified as a child by the idea that Christ died for our sins. While we are in a culture of guilt or blame, whether self or other blame, it will cloud our ability to understand suffering and its causes.

There are many forms of suffering in saṃsāra. Traditionally there are three lists. To begin with and, probably most encompassingly, there are three kinds of duḥkha. There's the suffering of pain, of unpleasant experiences, the unsatisfactory (*duḥkha duḥkha*); there's the suffering of change and impermanence, and there's the existential suffering: that insecurity, lack of wholeness and lack of fulfilment. These three sum it up really, but they have been expanded out considerably, which brings it home more to us.

There are the eight kinds of suffering. There's the suffering of birth, which is traumatic for the child and painful for the mother. There's the suffering of sickness, which we all know about to some degree. There's the suffering of ageing, especially old age, loss of mobility and faculties, loss of memory and independence. There's the suffering of death, our own death and that of others. There's being separated from those who we love, which sometimes happens quite outside our control. There's being with what and whom we dislike. There's not to have what we desire, and having what we don't desire. Then there are also the six kinds of suffering: an uncertain lifespan, indefinite rebirth, repeated conception, fluctuations of loss and gain, the fact that we are alone at birth and alone at death. But this isn't all.

There's also the suffering underlying some kinds of pleasure, which Conze has enumerated. There's the fact that our pleasure may involve suffering for others. We may buy new clothes that are produced in sweat shops, in dire conditions. We're afraid of losing that which gives us pleasure. Conze says that's particularly so for wealthy people who struggle with guilt about the amount of money that they own and their fear of losing it. There's the fact that that which brings pleasure through the senses, the body, also equally brings pain. And that pleasures which derive from conditioned things cannot satisfy the longings of the human heart, which is the existential suffering of the three kinds of duḥkha.

Sometimes lists don't quite do it for us, so it's also brought to mind more imaginatively in the images of the wheel of life, the suffering of the six realms: the realm of the animals which is brutish, focussed on food, sex and sleep; the hungry ghosts always longing, never able to satisfy themselves; the gods blissfully oblivious and complacent, until their lotuses begin to rot; the hell beings subject to intense physical and mental pains, anger and hatred; the asuras, obsessed with jealousy and competitiveness; the human realm where there's pleasure and pain, but happiness is temporary, and there's also pride and conceit.

We don't need either models or lists to know about suffering - we just need the experience of our own lives: the illness and physical pain which goes with having a body; the mental pain of depression and fear which goes with having a mind; the sense of incompleteness; things change; people change; people leave us and people die; nothing is solid and substantial and nothing can be fully relied upon. We want the world to be substantial and secure and it isn't, and this causes us suffering. This is our experience from a relatively fortunate existence in a relatively stable society. If we think of the sufferings of other people, in wars, famine, captivity, poverty, the reflections seem endless.

What is the effect of such reflections? We can easily feel overwhelmed. I can see that, looking at you. If we remember ‘no blame, no guilt’, then what arises with our reflections? Maybe sadness, empathy, compassion.

When you realise suffering for what it is, as the Buddha did, then you will be drawn into discovering its causes.

The Dalai Lama

One thing only do I teach: suffering and the cessation of suffering.

The Buddha

The Buddha realized that suffering is a fact of the human condition, caused by craving, which in turn is caused by ignorance; an ignorance which sets up the way we experience the world. He saw how difficult it is for us to penetrate that ignorance because of the desire and attachment it gives rise to. Not long after his Enlightenment experience, he’s considering whether to teach the Dharma. It’s a passage that I’ve always found very moving. He says:

The Law that I have attained to is profound and hard to see, hard to discover. It is the most peaceful and superior goal of all, not attainable by mere reasoning, subtle, for the wise to experience. But this generation relies on attachment, relishes attachment, delights in attachment. It is hard for such a generation to see this truth, that is to say, conditionality, dependent arising. If I taught the Law, others would not understand me, and that would be wearying and troubling for me.

I always like the way he seems to take himself into account at the end of that passage! I want to look a bit closer at where we might be at in all of this. Certainly we are in a state of ignorance, conditioned by the ātma-kleśas.

At the same time we have some sense of what might be going on. We know to some extent that happiness doesn’t come through possessing things. We are not consumed by acquiring wealth and fame. We have some understanding of how suffering arises, and we don’t expect to avoid it altogether. If nothing else, we have to die. So rather than craving and grasping material objects, or pursuing the perfect relationship, we have a more sophisticated approach. We try to fix saṃsāra. We try to organise and plan our lives so we have the right balance of pleasure over pain, to fix our own experience of saṃsāra so it is palatable and has the right ingredients, some of which will be opportunities to practise the Dharma.

This can take subtler and subtler forms so that we can find ourselves using the Dharma as another way of fixing saṃsāra. I’m just going to give you an example from my own experience. Some time ago, I realised I was feeling somewhat intolerant of people, who happened to be other Order members, who were acting in ways that didn’t accord with the precepts, that is, those precepts that I would not find it difficult to keep. At some point in

all of this, I recognised that intolerance was not itself in fact a skilful mental state and is in fact a breach of the first precept. So I was struck by this and thought I needed to explore it more fully. What was this all about for me? In one way it made sense. If we all acted in accord with the precepts, the world would be a better place, at least that Triratna corner of the world that I spend a lot of my time in, so that would be better for me! I would certainly have a more pleasant experience. Behind this is my own conditioning, my socialist conditioning. I've grown up with a strong message that the meaning of life is to make the world a better place. Again, this is subtle because on the face of it, it resonates with the Dharma: there is a desire to alleviate suffering. But at the same time it's limited. I'm still trying to fix saṃsāra and to fix my own experience of saṃsāra, and in so doing I was going for refuge to ethics, albeit in a subtle way, rather than going for refuge to compassion, a true refuge, and having a compassionate response to unskilfulness.

It's not surprising that I did this, because the longer I practise, the more aware I am of the degree to which my own conditioning affects not only the way I practise the Dharma, but affects how I hear the Dharma, what filters it comes through. I was talking about this to Bhante recently, and he said towards the end of our discussion, "*The important thing is that you see how your conditioning affects you. That's already the beginning of change.*"

I was fortunate in this case to see through my fix before too long. When we don't, then there's frustration, disappointment and maybe anger. We feel that we've failed, we feel inadequate and we undermine ourselves, or we become even more determined to try another lifestyle, another job. We become frenetic in our efforts to keep all the balls in the air, to cover our backs, to be one jump ahead. Or we blame the situation, the people we've been involved with. If those situations, those people have been the repository for our ideals, especially our spiritual ideals, then we can feel let down to the point of betrayal. I think sometimes this happens for people in relation to the Order and the Movement.

There's a very good article by James Hillman on the subject of betrayal, and I've read it on a number of occasions in my life and each time I've found more depth, psychological and spiritual truth in it. He writes about the situation of primal trust evoked in the myth of the Garden of Eden and existing in relationship between infant and parent. He describes it as a fundamental belief that the ground underfoot is really there, and one will be contained in perfection by another who will never let one down.

He starts the essay by telling a Jewish story of a father teaching his son to have more courage by jumping down the stairs. As he jumps the father catches him and each time he jumps from a higher stair. But at one point the father steps back and the boy falls on the floor. As he picks himself up crying, the father says to him, "*Never trust a Jew. Even if it is your own father*"

The story is shocking on one level, and it's ironic on another. Hillman questions it more deeply. Why does the father betray the son who trusts him? In the Garden of Eden, something other was needed for man than God himself. Eve had to be created out of man,

which then led to a betrayal of primal trust by God. It's important not to get into gender issues here, or we miss the point. Eden was over and life began.

It's a many-layered essay, but the thrust of it is that betrayal of this primal trust is necessary for maturation. The story – and please remember it's a story told for a purpose – is the boy's initiation into adult tragedy. Hillman says, *"If one can give oneself, assured that one will come out intact, what has been given? Dad, or God, will catch you at the bottom of the stairs."* Broken trust can also be a breakthrough into a new level of consciousness.

Hillman also spells out the reactions to betrayal, what he calls the sterile choices, which prevent or delay this maturation. The first is revenge, which is an obvious and simple one. When I read this I always remember an experience of a friend of mine a long time ago whose husband went off with another woman. In the night she got on her bike and cycled over to the house where he was with this other woman, and threw a whole lot of eggs at the window. In a way, that's quite a clean act of revenge, but at the same time it's not quite as clean as it sounds. They certainly ended up with a dirty window!

After revenge comes denial. We deny the value of other people, the person, the group, the teaching. If we don't stop there, then we come to cynicism as a reaction to betrayal. *"Love is a cheat. Causes are for saps. Organisations are traps. Hierarchies are evil."* And personally, we say to ourselves, *"Keep sharp. Go it alone. I'm all right, Jack."*

Broken idealism results in a tough philosophy of cynicism. Hillman says that most damaging of all in these reactions to betrayal is self-betrayal, in which one's own ideals are rendered into dust. We stop honouring our true sense of ourselves. We rubbish our own sensitivities, values and aspirations. What is needed, he says, for maturation, is to take on one's own suffering, experience that, and be how and what one is.

I can't do his thesis justice in this talk, but it has many resonances for me with the spiritual life. Life betrays us, lets us down, pulls the rug from under our feet, disappoints our expectations. We can choose to respond in different ways. We can try to make a better job of it, work harder, improve ourselves, that is, we can try to fix saṃsāra, which actually is impossible in the long term. We can fall into despair and despondency and just think, "What's the point?" which is nihilism. We can look for rewards in some future heaven realm, which is eternalism. We can experience and recognise the suffering inherent in saṃsāra. We can practise to understand its causes and so stop creating it. We can follow the Dharma.

For this last to happen we need to allow ourselves to experience our own suffering and that of others, without horrified anxiety, without trying to fix it or put it right in an unhelpful way, and at the same time without identifying with it, either because we're experiencing it or through guilt at what others are experiencing, and without blame towards ourselves or others. No one person can be the cause of our suffering.

It's a tall order. But it's what our practice needs to be about quite a lot of the time. It's staying in the gap with all those emotions of insecurity, embarrassment, shame,

frustration, grief, all through the spectrum of extreme distress and pain. Pema Chodron writes a lot about this whole area of practice. She calls the ability to be with one's suffering to 'be in the gap', the 'place of the spiritual warrior'. It's not a new idea, or new terminology, but I find it a very helpful one: that in the experience where one might be feeling inadequate, confused, uncomfortable and out of control, by responding with attentive awareness without identifying, one is at the same time a warrior in the work of the spiritual life.

In her book, '*When Things Fall Apart*', she writes about a state which in Tibetan is described as Ye Tang Che. Apparently it's difficult to translate, but the nearest to come to it are descriptions like, 'totally exhausted', 'completely hopeless', 'totally fed up'.

Believing in a solid, separate self, continuing to seek pleasure and avoid pain, thinking that someone out there is to blame for our pain, one has to get totally fed up with these ways of thinking.

Pema Chodron

It's an emotion that comes with attention to that suffering, that sense that there is no ground under our feet. It's a realization that to seek for lasting security is futile. To think that we can finally get it together is just not realistic.

At this point our energy can really turn in the direction of the true refuges. At this point we have the real possibility to get off the wheel, to get out of saṃsāra, by stopping creating it for ourselves, by stopping *samsarizing*. We have the momentum to begin to see things as they really are and, from this vantage point on the spiral path, it will be possible to see the wheel, saṃsāra, as duḥkha, anitya, anātman: unsatisfactory, impermanent and empty of self. Then we can become altogether dis-illusioned, which leads naturally to dis-entanglement and dis-passion. We are no longer caught up in craving, grasping and becoming.

It's important to emphasize that what comes with this renunciation is the freedom of disentanglement and the calm and tranquillity of dispassion which flows out into love and compassion for all beings.

*Like water in a water wheel, helplessly we circle,
I bow down to the compassion that arises for all beings.*

Candrakīrti is identifying with the helpless circling, as well as the perspective that can see clearly the sufferings of saṃsāra, out of which arises compassion. I feel a strong response to this last line: *I bow down to the compassion that arises for all beings*. Being still caught up in the wheel I can be aware of a need for compassion for myself and for others, but I haven't yet seen clearly enough for that compassion to well up spontaneously. But I can bow down to it, pay homage to it, wherever it manifests: in reality, in symbolic form, or in mythic imagination. I can honour and hold trust with it, without fear of disappointment.

The second two mind turning reflections work together, in that the recognition that the sufferings of saṃsāra lead to a renunciation of cyclic existence: the *nissaraṇa*, the not going for refuge to saṃsāra. Instead we want to create the karmic conditions that give rise to insight, and reflecting on the suffering of sentient beings engenders compassion, the desire, not only to free ourselves, but to free all beings, the arising of the Bodhicitta.

*

Feedback on the Dharma Training Course

Once you've finished the module, please consider leaving feedback on the DTC on-line forum – a dedicated place for Mitra group leaders to make comments, suggestions, and corrections to the new course. This will have two big benefits:

1. It collects ideas and information needed to improve the course over time
2. It will also be a place where group leaders can find out how others have led or approached a particular module, share good ideas, and so on.

Each group leader needs to get their own username and password to access the forum. If you are a Mitra group leader and would like to participate, please e-mail Vajrashura (who has kindly set up the forum) and he'll set up an account for you, usually within a day or two. His e-mail is: vajrashura@gmail.com, and the URL of the forum is: www.dublinbuddhistcentre.org/DTCforum.