

The Four Reminders

Precious Human Life: Resources & Opportunities

From the *Shangpa Practice Reminders* by Jamgön Kongtrul:

*To have the eight freedoms
And the ten favorable conditions in this human form
Is so much better than being a god;
It is just like a pauper's finding a jewel.*

*For so many reasons —
Cause, number, example and others —
It is difficult to find it but for this moment.*

*It is impermanent too, like a bubble of froth, certain to perish soon.
At that time, nothing but Dharma is even a hair tip's help.
Hence, I practice the profound path, the pith of the supreme dharma.*

Commentary

Of all the planets in the universe, I am on this one — warm, green, hospitable. Of the billions of creatures on this planet, I am a human being. Of all the times and places I could have been born, I am in this time and place.

Many people live in poverty, lacking adequate food, shelter, and health care. My life is free from war, from oppression, from grinding poverty, from debilitating addiction or crippling mental illness. I enjoy basic health, with my senses and intelligence intact.

I have all the freedoms and conditions necessary for spiritual practice. I am endowed with natural awareness and the ability to respond to imbalance and suffering. I have access to authentic spiritual teachings by qualified and compassionate teachers. I can rely on the support of experienced companions on the path.

This life has great potential for good or harm. The coming together of all these freedoms and conditions is fragile, and may end at any time. I want to understand my life and make the most of it. I don't want to waste these resources and opportunities.

*All human beings should try to learn before they
die what they are running from, and to, and why.
~ James Thurber*

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Impermanence: Everything Changes

*The universe, this external world,
Will be destroyed by fire and water.
The four seasons, mere moments, come and go.
Everything is impermanent, bound in the four ends.*

*There has never been a person born who doesn't die.
Life and breath are like lightning and dew.
It is not even certain which will come first,
Tomorrow or the next world.*

*If I only think about dharma but don't practice it,
The demons of distraction and laziness carry me away.
Since I must go empty-handed and naked
I should practice the supreme dharma without delay.*

Commentary

Every event and circumstance in this world is dependent on complex causes and conditions that are constantly arising and disappearing.

The pleasures, conditions, beliefs, and relationships that I rely on — which of them is genuinely reliable and lasting? What am I taking for granted? As I observe the world about me, I can see that everything changes — nothing stays the same.

The inhabitants of the world come and go. Every one of them will die. Though I see change, impermanence, and death all around me, I act as though I were going to live forever — but I too will die.

*the end of accumulation is dispersion
the end of building is ruin
the end of meeting is parting
the end of birth is death*

My death will definitely come, and I have no idea when. I may live a long time, or I may die today. What I do know is that each day brings me one day closer to my inevitable death. Nothing — not wealth, intelligence, strength, power, friends or family — will prevent me from dying.

Where in my life do I ignore change? What am I trying to cling to?

What is really important to me? Am I living the life that I want?

*Today you live, and tomorrow you are
dust. One fever will quench your pride.
~ Romanus*

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Karma: Actions Evolve Into Experienced Results

*At death, everyone, even a universal monarch, leaves power and influence behind.
I wander alone in limbo.
The effects of my actions follow me
Like my shadow follows my body.*

*I will experience the effects of every one of my actions.
I will not experience the effects of actions I haven't done.
My actions keep evolving into experienced results.
The virtue and evil that I do inevitably ripen as happiness and suffering for me.*

*I am only here in this world for a moment, but samsara is long without end.
To avoid bringing about my own downfall, I must accept the principle of
action and result.
In particular, I must abide by my commitments
And let no failing stain my experience.*

When you really know yourself, you will realize how important it is to practice zazen. Before you know what you are doing, you don't know why we practice. You think you are quite free, that whatever you do is your choice, but actually you are creating karma for yourself and others. You don't know what you're doing, so you don't think there is any need to practice... But we have to pay our own debts; no one else can pay our debts. That is why we practice. To fulfill our responsibility we practice. We have to.

~ Suzuki Roshi

Commentary

Though I may not be able to see all the impacts of my actions, I know that acts do have consequences. Everything I think, say, and do has consequences, large or small, immediate or distant.

Karma is the evolution of action and result. Each action's intended and unintended consequences become new seeds, setting up conditions that influence my future actions.

Every action I do becomes easier to repeat. Repeated actions become habits, and habits become character. My actions inevitably ripen into my experience of happiness and suffering. Ignoring the effects of my actions does not relieve me of the consequences. I alone am responsible for my actions and my experience of life.

Everyone has the potential to wake up, to see how things are, to stop creating suffering, to help others. But not everyone does. This brief, precious life can be used for good or ill. Is my life my own, or is it being directed and consumed by habitual patterns I do not choose?

*We have about as much room to move as a violin in a violin case.
And that's enough.*

~ Michael Conklin

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Samsara: The Reactive Life Is Unsatisfactory

*From the pinnacle of existence down to the depths of torment,
From top to bottom, the regions of samsara
Are like a fiery trench or a thicket of razors.
No chance for happiness ever appears.*

*Until now, I have wandered in samsara.
Ignorance, confusion, and samsara haven't come to an end.
Now that I understand this intolerable unhappiness
A fierce determination rises in me.*

*I enter the path to freedom and true happiness
And follow the freedom of the lineage teachers
To awaken fully in this one life.*

Commentary

The aches and pains of the physical body, the grief of losing what one holds dear, old age, sickness and death — some things are unavoidable. But I create extra suffering for myself and others with craving, aversion, and delusion.

When I define my life by wealth, pleasure, praise, and reputation, then my happiness depends on circumstances and conditions.

Reactive emotions do not bring me happiness; they produce exactly what I am trying to avoid. Samsara, the life of reactivity, is a never-ending cycle through realms I am creating: Caught up in anger and aggression, I find myself in a realm of conflict. Consumed by grasping and neediness, I never seem to get what I want. Seeking security and comfort, I get stuck in the same old ways of doing things. Jumping from desire to desire, chasing possessions and pleasures, my desires are never satisfied for long, and my busyness is endless. Feeling inadequate, jealous and competitive, I'm compelled to accomplish more and more. Self-satisfied, trying to maintain my position, I'm blind to the inevitability of change.

The cycles of reactivity and suffering can be brought to an end. Our fundamental nature is goodness and awareness. A path of awakening and freedom has been developed and refined over many centuries of experience. I can place confidence in the teachers and practitioners of that path, and in my ability to travel it.

*All experience is preceded
by mind, led by mind,
made by mind. Speak or
act with a corrupted mind,
and struggle follows, like
the wheel of the cart
follows the beast that
draws the cart.*

~ Dhammapada 1

*On this path, effort never goes
to waste, and there is no
failure. Even a little effort
toward spiritual awareness
will protect you from the
greatest fear.*

~ Bhagavad Gita 2:40