



## The Four Mind Changings Spoken by Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche

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When it comes to realizing our innate nature, the four mind-changings are conducive circumstances. These four general reflections are helpful to make us more sincerely interested in actually practicing the Dharma. In particular, they are the way to turn our mind toward the essential truth, to what really matters.

The four mind-changings are not complicated to understand; small children can learn the four mind-changings. What we need is to personally take them to heart. Unless a wild horse has been tamed, you cannot ride it. It would be dangerous and harmful for the rider. In the same way, unless we have really taken to heart these four mind-changings, it is very difficult to make genuine progress in Dharma practice. The person who has not really reflected on the four mind-changings is like someone trying to ride a wild horse.

When you want to garden, isn't it true that you first need to prepare the soil? You have to remove stones and pieces of wood and soften up the hard lumps of earth. After that the soil can be receptive and ready for the seeds you will plant and water. Otherwise, you can throw seeds on the ground, but without the right conditions, they won't sprout. Even if they do, they won't produce a good plant. The four mind-changings require us to think about something that is very real. They are a very practical way of loosening up the hardness or rigidity of our different attitudes. The way to know when the four mind-changings have really taken effect is when our attachment to things as being concrete and permanent has diminished, and our selfishness, arrogance and conceit have decreased.

It is very easy to reflect on these four mind-changings; you don't have to be a great philosopher and think deeply. They are simple and direct. All of us need to remind ourselves often of these simple truths. When we really take to heart and assimilate the truths of the four mind-changings, automatically we become genuine practitioners. We have already been moved to some extent, all of us, otherwise we would not have any interest in the Dharma. To turn one's mind to the Dharma, to direct oneself toward practice, to tame and soften oneself is not as easy as simply hearing teachings on the four mind-changings which are quite uncomplicated. We need to take them to heart and assimilate them within our stream of being.

Through these four ways of changing direction, we become more soft. Our rigid attitude gets softened and loosened up. This is vital in order to practice Dharma. It is through this that we open up to understanding what kind of shortcomings we have, and we become interested in changing them, in actually practicing, and in training in the Dharma. It is easy enough to understand the details of



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these four mind-changings, but to take them to heart requires some pushing; it requires some effort. Therefore, we need to remind ourselves, again and again, to consider these four facts.

Most of you have probably heard the teachings connected to the four mind-changings quite a few times. It is entirely possible that if now you have to hear them one more time you will sit and be quite bored! Nevertheless, the point is not to merely comprehend. Comprehending is very simple; just by hearing these teachings we can understand them.

The four mind-changings are about pointing out facts that are obvious. We can easily understand that the situation we are in is somewhat fortunate compared to that of other beings. Precious human body is rare and valuable. Secondly, everyone knows that all things perish, that nothing lasts forever. There is nothing profound about it. Impermanence is an obvious fact. Thirdly, we understand that there are consequences to what we do. If we smile at someone, they smile back. If we frown and say nasty words, we get a corresponding response. If we do evil, there is an unpleasant feedback. If we do good, there is a positive return. There is a law regarding our actions, our karma. Finally, the fourth of the four mind-changings – that there are negative sides to samsara – is not that difficult to comprehend either. We create karma, we get involved in disturbing emotions and something happens that doesn't feel good. Samsaric situations are not permanently pleasant. Isn't that how life is?

### The Precious Human Body

The first of the four mind-changings is about the precious human body, which means having a human body endowed with all of the factors that are conducive to spiritual progress; they are known as the eight freedoms and ten riches. If we are born among hell beings, hungry ghosts, animals, demigods and gods, we don't have the perfect circumstance for practicing the Dharma. What we really need to understand is that our precious human life is very difficult to obtain. In terms of cause, it doesn't happen by chance, without a reason, without something that goes beforehand. In fact, to end up as a human being this time around required a tremendous amount of merit that was created in former lives. It is not just that; merit is not enough. The merit needed to be combined with pure aspirations. One must have made very sincere wishes to use that merit for something worthwhile, and after that one was reborn as a human with a precious human body.

These sincere wishes are especially evident in someone who wants to use his or her life to realize what is true, what is ultimately real. For such an individual it is not enough to merely live an ordinary life. He or she is interested in learning and experiencing what is important, ultimately. The first point is interest in the truth. The second point is to want to carry through with that interest with perseverance, pursuing where and how once can come to understand the truth. Finally there is the wish to assimilate the understanding created through study and reflection and by means of meditation practice. In other words, we need to have these three, the interest, the perseverance and the insight to realize the ultimate truth. In short, to be someone who is sincerely interested in, who



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has the perseverance to pursue and the insight to realize the ultimate truth, requires a tremendous amount of merit combined with pure aspirations. Thereby one is reborn in a precious human body, in a form which is rare and extremely valuable!

If you look around in this world, how many life forms do you see? Not just a myriad of insects, but in the oceans as well, there are so many different kinds of beings of untold various sizes. There is such a huge number; an almost uncountable number of beings. Consider how many billions of human beings are present in this world. Among this large number of humans, how many actually have the sincere interest, the perseverance and the insight to realize the ultimate truth? By examining in this way, we can see how extremely rare and precious the occasion to meet the Dharma is. If we think like that, it is easier to comprehend the idea behind the analogy of the blind turtle on the big ocean; otherwise it seems like a strange example. Imagine that a blind turtle lives on a planet that is covered by water. On the surface of the water there is a wooden ring floating around. The turtle comes up to the surface only once every one hundred years. The chance of the turtle putting its head through that wooden ring is the same as the chance of someone attaining rebirth in a precious human body. Whether we consider the precious human body in terms of causes, in terms of numbers, or in terms of analogy, it is an incredibly rare and precious situation. Among all types of living forms, the best support for practicing the sacred Dharma is that of the precious human body.

To reiterate, the situation of having a precious human body does not happen by chance; it has causes. These causes lie in our past lives, during which we did good actions, and formed an interest in true knowledge and compassion. Either we heard about knowledge and compassion, or we learned about them, thought about them, and wanted to know more. That formed the inclination; together with the good karma, it brought this result. Even though we were born in lots of different countries all over the world, we had an interest that brought us here, together. The power of ripening of karma is very strong. Some of the people attending the seminar have come from far away and have taken a lot of trouble to come, because of strong interest. But there are people living close by who don't have that interest and therefore don't come to listen; that is called karma. In short, because of possessing the tendency or inclination from past lives, the continuation of this tendency shows itself.

In short, to have obtained a precious human body is both rare and precious. It is a rare achievement, because it is caused by a tremendous amount of goodness done in our past. If we look around, how many people actually do great acts of goodness? Not many do so. From this angle we can see that is rare.

### **Impermanence**

The second mind-changing is reflection on impermanence. That means we should appreciate and rejoice in what we have, but clearly understand that it will not last very long. The precious human body is extremely difficult to obtain and very easy to lose. If it were as difficult to lose as to obtain, you would be somewhat safe. When something is very hard to achieve, yet extremely easy to lose,



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one needs to be careful. When we appreciate that we have obtained something that is incredibly hard to find, there is a good reason to congratulate ourselves, "I have done well!" When it happens, this is excellent; we should sincerely rejoice in our situation. There is no need to discourage ourselves when we have achieved something that is tremendously valuable.

Now is the time to pay attention. Shantideva said, in *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, that this human body is like a ship we can use to take us to the other shore. If we don't use it properly this time around, we won't necessarily obtain it again. If you really think about this, it is time to wake up. Do not be stupid and waste this opportunity. If we have a ship to reach the other side, it is better to use it now. We need to make use of this human body to reach liberation, to be free. If there were no suffering or death, it would be ok. But there is suffering and death.

Perhaps if, at the time of death, we could take with us whatever we want, it would somehow be acceptable. If we could bring along a few friends, a few possessions, we would have something to hold onto. Unfortunately, as a fact of our mortality, when we die, we die alone. We are unaccompanied by anyone. We may not want to leave our possessions and family behind; yet we cannot take even one thing. It is tough. This will happen to all of us. Our family, our siblings, other relatives, friends, lovers, children, our reputation, our wealth: all of that will be left behind without a single exception.

From the moment we took birth from our mother's womb until we die, we have kept company constantly with our body. This physical body has been our servant; perhaps we have been its slave. We have worried a lot about getting too hungry or getting too cold, or too hot. We have done so much for it. We fed it daily, cleaned it, tidied it up in all different ways. Yet, when we stop breathing our body becomes a useless corpse. People will try to get rid of it as soon as possible. Other people will regard it as a disgusting, frightful, filthy thing.

In general, all composite things are impermanent. They don't last, but especially the human body does not last. A blade of grass and a piece of paper are regarded as very fragile, aren't they? But if kept well, they can last longer than a human body. The Buddha said, "All composite things are impermanent. Just as among all footprints, the footprint of an elephant is the largest, among all concepts, the concept of impermanence is the most eminent." When we really understand that all composite things do not last, our attachment to permanence becomes much less. Moreover our clinging to the fleeting pleasures of this life is diminished. When we begin to understand the reality of how all the things of this life change from moment to moment, we become more interested in, and direct our mind toward, the sublime truth.

Understanding impermanence loosens up our rigid clinging to a solid reality; it is weakened and reduced. Composite things are like the flickering of a star, like foam on water, like a mirage, like a reflection, like an echo, like a dream.



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When someone is born, it is unavoidable that his body will eventually die; he can't help it. Whatever is gathered together will be spent, used up. Whatever is built falls apart, crumbles. You cannot prevent a gathering from dispersing. Everything is like that; it is the nature of things. The whole universe was first formed, then remains and finally disintegrates. In short, whatever is formed necessarily also vanishes.

A human life is formed through causes and circumstances. It changes from moment to moment until in the end one dies. Milarepa said, "If you cannot take the fact of impermanence personally, you will not be a good practitioner." There are many causes for death and very few causes to sustain life. Therefore, don't postpone training in what is really true and meaningful; practice immediately.

All of us can understand that everything composite is impermanent; we can understand it very clearly, if we put our minds to it. We can understand that there is really no point in being too attached to the things of this life. Everything is like soap bubbles, or foam on water: what is the point of being so attached to a bubble? It is going to burst at any moment anyway.

When we look at ourselves, we can count how many years of our lives have passed. Honestly speaking, a lot of use here are not that young any longer. Since you cannot count on having a long life, it would be much better to a little bit realistic about how to spend the rest of your time. Don't go around being scared about this. Simply be realistic and practical about how to use your life in a meaningful way. The thought of impermanence spurs us on toward Dharma practice.

When you find something that is very valuable, but fragile, it is better to make use of it as soon as possible. Take full advantage of the precious human body by learning, reflection and meditation practice. Death is certain, but how and when are not. If we could settle on the number of years we have to live, we could sit down and make a program, right? Unfortunately, death comes unannounced. While eating, people die; while talking, they die. While suffering from sickness, they die. While lying down and sleeping, people die. Some become so sad that they die. Some, being too depressed, end their lives. Some are so happy, too happy, then they die! Sometimes people die from eating beneficial medicine, sometimes from eating useless drugs. It is never sure. Because all of this is not sure, it is better not to make plans such as, "Next year I will practice." Or, "After a long while I will have more time; then I will really practice." It is better to practice as soon as possible, right away.

The clinging to something as being real, lasting and concrete is the exact opposite of the understanding of impermanence. Moreover, the attitude that everything is permanent, real and truly existing is in exact contradiction to how things actually are. There is nothing that lasts. There is no real thing. All the formed things only seem to exist as long as we don't look closely. Things are only real for the deluded mind. It's like while being asleep and dreaming. For the dreamer, whatever is dreamt seems to exist, seems to be real, concrete, and permanent. In fact, it is merely a dream. The dreamer is lying there snoring, dreaming the whole thing. It isn't real. But if we have to settle whether it is real or not, we must say that for the dreamer it is real while dreaming.



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What happens when that person wakes up? One discovers that it was only a dream; there wasn't anything to it. You can understand at that point that there wasn't any reality to it. However, at the same, some people still prefer to cling to their dreams as having real value. If it was a pleasant dream, one holds onto that pleasantness for maybe a few hours or a few days! If it was a really nasty, ugly dream, one can make oneself unhappy about it for a few days.

Even though we know that dreams are unreal, they can still affect our mood and change it to either happiness or sadness. That is the power of habit. By waking up from a dream, the whole dream spectacle falls apart. In the same way, it is possible to wake up from the big dream of the three realms of samsara. The whole drama of deluded experience falls apart. When awakening from the sleep of ignorance the knowledge that perceives the nature as it is and all possibly existing things unfolds. That is called buddhahood.

Everyone who meets together will again part. Whoever takes birth will die. Whatever is built will crumble, no matter how solidly it is built. Whatever is collected will be dispersed. A person who truly takes to heart the fact of impermanence becomes the foremost practitioner, like the great master Milarepa. He left everything, all mundane concerns, behind and practiced alone in caves, in forests, with incredible perseverance. He practiced the path of means, the six doctrines of Naropa, as well as the path of liberation, Mahamudra itself, day and night. Even when sleeping he would continue his training in luminosity of deep sleep. He threw away all selfish aims such as fame, praise, reputation and so forth. He did not hold onto any self-oriented concerns. Within that very lifetime, he attained supreme accomplishment. Many other great masters had earlier given up all worldly concerns and went to the mountains and caves one-pointedly on practice. Some of them would even, in a few years or within that same lifetime, attain accomplishment. Not just a few; there have been many like that.

It is said that someone who really understands impermanence is like a coward who discovers a viper in his lap. He is not going to wait until it leaves by itself; he will immediately jump up. Another example is a vain girl who discovers her hair is on fire. She will act immediately, not waiting until some other sweet, good time.

Reflecting on impermanence helps us to understand emptiness; the emptiness of all things. Reflecting on impermanence helps us to understand that everything is futile to pursue. Being more detached and having less craving come automatically through understanding impermanence. Furthermore, understanding impermanence will diminish our selfish emotions. Understanding impermanence will pull us closer to realizing the ultimate attainment. In this way, there are an incredible number of benefits from reflecting on the fact that nothing lasts. Do not simply reflect on this; take it to heart as something real. Do not only endeavor to understand impermanence intellectually and talk about it; really take it to heart!



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### **Karma, The Law of Cause and Effect**

The third of the four mind-changings has to do with the consequence of actions, the law of karma. This simply means that in our thoughts, in our words, and in our deeds, if we do evil it has a negative consequence; it brings suffering and pain. If in our thoughts, words and deeds we do what is good and helpful, it brings happiness and well-being. It is as simple as that. That is the main principle of the karmic experiences of one's actions. What we do has a consequence that is unfailing; there is no mistake. Evil brings a result that is unpleasant. When doing good, it brings a pleasant result. There is no mistake in that. Therefore, it is very important that one doesn't confuse what needs to be rejected and what need to be accepted in one's behaviour. That is the very basis for all Dharma practice.

### **Defects of samsara**

The last of the four mind-changings is about the negative sides of samsara. In the three lower realms, among hell beings and hungry ghosts, there is nothing but suffering. Among animals there are some pleasant moments, but not many. Mostly, animals eat one another and are in constant fear of being hunted down and killed by other animals. Human beings, demigods and gods have more pleasure; but it is still a mixture with a painful quality to it.

Human beings suffer when they are born, when they age, when they fall sick and when they die. But there are many other kinds of worries, especially of being unfulfilled, of having this sense of not yet obtaining what one needs. That itself is painful. We want so much. We want this, we want that, and we want to avoid what is unpleasant, and yet it happens. That is painful. We have enemies, those people we don't get along with. There is disease; there is failure. We have intimates, our friends and relatives; we have the money we love and the things in our lives that are really dear to us. We don't want to part from all of that, and yet we do. That is painful. We have to part from those things, temporarily as well as finally.

In each moment of conceptual thought there is hope and fear. This hope and fear is painful; it is a very subtle pain. Based on that there can be intense pain. In the United States, sometimes whole mountain ranges catch fire, although the first cause might not have been more than someone throwing a match or a cigarette. It just takes a little bit to have a huge effect. In each moment of thought, if the subtle hope and fear that are present are allowed to take hold and be amplified in our minds, the misery can be horrible.

There are also the traditional ways of describing suffering: the suffering of change, the suffering upon suffering, and the all-pervasive suffering of being conditioned, along with many other details. Seen from the perspective of a completely enlightened Buddha, coming into being, being born, is





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painful. Living is painful, existing is painful. Falling sick is painful and dying is painful. Birth, old age, sickness and death.

Samsaric states always have a certain negative quality. No matter where one is now, or where one ends up, in any situation within the three realms of samsara, there is no place that is of perfect happiness, joy and pleasure. Why? Because all samsaric states are created through karma and disturbing emotions; all are conditioned. In any conditioned state there is no permanent happiness. Even though the higher realms are somewhat pleasant compared to the lower realms, none of that pleasure or happiness is ever perfect or lasting. There is no place that is truly beyond the three types of suffering.

When we really understand this, acutely some disenchantment arises within us. We have developed some distaste for pursuing further conditioned states within samsara. That is all we need, and that is the job of the four mind-changings. When we are no longer so interested in pursuing further samsara, what will we pursue? What really matters is realizing the essential meaning. The importance of the four mind-changings is that they can turn our interest away from samsaric states toward Dharma practice. They can also help us to be more compassionate toward others, and to turn and direct our mind toward realizing the essential truth, the natural state of our mind. Even if we have recognized this state, the four mind-changings will help us to realize it more deeply. In this way, the four mind-changings are very valuable. We need to know what this value is, what the purpose is.

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