

Teachings on the second of The Four Thoughts:

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Because of ignorance and misperception, we become attached to permanence and solidity. We habitually deny the fact of our mortality, acting as if we will live forever. This misperception of reality only brings more confusion, stress, dissatisfaction, and suffering.

When thinking about impermanence, the mind goes straight to negative experiences of impermanence, and you immediately want to make your life better in the time you have. Many of you say that you need to reduce fear of death so you can enjoy life more. You say, "I understand impermanence and death. They are some of the elements of life I'm not so happy about. But I don't want to think about them, really. They're scary, so I'm going to accept them without investigating them. That way I won't be scared and can enjoy this life more before it ends." But for authentic Dharma that is not the point, really.

You say that you feel the meaninglessness of this life and so you practice Dharma and compassion to bring meaning to this life. That is still not good enough. It's 50% OK, but not 100%. You are still trying to make this life perfect...this life, this life, this life. So far in the West, 90% of Dharma is devoted to this life, to making this life happier.

Becoming a healthy human being is a very good place to start, but it could become a trap. If it were your main purpose for practice, you would be called a "California Dharma Practitioner" because there is so much interest in self-improvement in California. Such a practitioner uses Dharma to make life more pleasant and emotionally comfortable. But there is no reduction of attachment, no reduction of anger, no reduction of jealousy, no reduction of pride, no reduction of ignorance. No reduction of ego, really. In fact, you are simply making ego feel more "spiritual." But in this contemplation, we're talking about going beyond ego, not making it stronger. Dharma is about transcending samsara, not making it a nicer place to be. That is the tough part. Very, very tough.

The actual wording in Tibetan for the Four Thoughts that Turn the Mind is "Turning the Mind from Samsara." With practice you're reversing the mind's interest in perfecting this life by turning it away from samsara. Sometimes in the West, practicing with this contemplation on impermanence and death leads only to improving the quality of this life, but not to motivating you to attain liberation.

So what we are talking about is change. Changing the mind, turning it away from its strong attachment to [the activities of] this life. *(excerpted and edited from <http://www.pundarika.org/news/?p=863> by Lama Tsoknyi Rinpoche)*

*(The "activities of this life" refer to what is known as "The 8 Worldly Activities") which are:

Gain or Loss	Pleasure or Pain
Praise or Blame	Fame or Ostracism

So if we truly start to understand impermanence, we see not only that all the freedoms and opportunities that allow us to practice (1st Thought) will be gone soon, but we also begin to understand that all our focus on "The 8 Worldly Activities" can only lead to suffering, because EVERYTHING changes. Think of a relationship you craved that turned sour, or a new car (boat, house, etc.) that you craved but which later was just a burden. So for the second thought you could recite something like:

"I am aware of the inevitability of change and of death. Because of impermanence I am aware that all my positive circumstances will end soon, and I am also aware that all my worldly attachments will increase my suffering. I have no time to waste in practicing, so as to purify my obscurations (a.k.a. Kleshas, or Poisons...which all boil down to self-clinging) and to refine my perceptions."

