

How to Contemplate the Four Reminders (also called “Four Thoughts that Turn the Mind toward Dharma”)

By Kathy Wesley, based on oral teachings from His Eminence Tai Situ Rinpoche.

As for the contemplations* on the Four Reminders (precious human birth, impermanence, karma, and the unsatisfactoriness of samsara) there is actually a method for contemplating them. The method I like the best is to take one of the four topics as your object of contemplation for an entire week, spending anywhere from a few minutes to a half-hour (or more, if you have lots of free time!) doing analytical contemplation on it.

To do this, you first recite your refuge prayers or whatever prayers you say before starting your practice session, and then perform a little quiet shinay (sitting meditation) if you have time. Then, you begin the contemplation by reading a paragraph or two about the topic from one of the many books written on the given topic (such as the Chapter on the Ordinary Foundations in Jamgon Kongtrul’s book “The Torch of Certainty” or Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche’s transcript on the Foundation Practices), then put down your book and think, “Is this true? Is this thing meaningful to me?” analyzing its truth and its applicability to you in your life.

When you reach a point in the contemplation in which you reach a sense of “yes, this is true,” you follow that by consciously making the resolution, “since this is true, I must do my best to practice dharma so that my precious human life will not be wasted, “ thereby forming an altruistic, dharma-influenced aspiration born from the understanding you have reached.

Then you read a little more and perform the analysis again, until you reach the point of being moved in your being, form the resolution in your mind, and then read some more. In this way—reading, analyzing, resolving and so forth—you pass the period of your contemplation. When you reach the point of being moved and go on to make the resolution, you have truly performed the contemplation. Without this [understanding and subsequent resolution], you have merely reviewed information in a dry and intellectual way.

At the conclusion of the contemplation session, dedicate your merit to the benefit of all sentient beings. In this way your practice is embraced by bodhicitta.

**Contemplation is different than meditation in that meditation is usually considered the process of resting one’s mind on an object of virtue—such as a mantra, visualization, a visual object, or the breath. Contemplation is the process of using our intellect to examine and analyze a topic until we reach a deeply felt sense of understanding of that topic—that is, until we are moved by the truth of the subject we are contemplating.*

■