

Four Thoughts that Turn the Mind

(from In Search of the Stainless Ambrosia, Jewel Ornament of Liberation, Jewel Treasury of Advice and Transformation of Suffering)

by Khenchen Konchog Gyaltzen Rinpoche

1. Precious Human Life

To attain Enlightenment one must take birth in human form, and to attain this form, one must have the eighteen qualities which include the Eight Freedoms and Ten Endowments. The Eight Freedoms are one must not be born

1. in the Hell realms
2. as a hungry ghost
3. as an animal
4. in a place where teachings are unavailable
5. as a long-life god (always content and therefore has no motivation for progress)
6. with wrong view (no understanding of karma, and no understanding of past and future lives)
7. where no Buddha has appeared
8. deaf, dumb, blind or mentally deficient

If one is born in any of the above realms, there is no chance of studying and practicing the teachings. What is therefore necessary are the Ten Endowments which consists of Five Inherent Endowments and Five Karma Provisions. The Five Inherent Endowments are one is born

1. as a human being
2. where there are teachings
3. possessing five senses
4. not having committed heavy negative karmas
5. having confidence in and devotion to the Triple Gem

The Five Karma Provisions are one is born

1. where a Buddha has appeared
2. where a Buddha has taught
3. where the Dharma teachings flourish
4. where there are followers who enter the pure path of Dharma
5. where there is support from the kindness of others, including the spiritual master.

In addition, we need The Three Confidences and they are:

1. Faith in the clear mind arises when we see the supreme qualities of the Three Jewels. We develop devotion for and interest in the Buddha as the teacher who shows the path, the Dharma which becomes the path, and the Sangha which guides one in order to accomplish the path.
2. Faith of desire, the wish to be enlightened, to study and practice the Dharma. Seeing what samsara is, we sincerely wish to escape, to reach enlightenment. Recognizing the assets of virtue, we

wish to make them our own. Seeing the defects of non-virtue, we wish to avoid them. These wishes inspire the faith of desire.

3. Faith in the truth of karma (causes and effects), trusting that happiness is the fruit of virtuous causes and suffering is the fruit of non-virtuous causes.

One must have all the above qualities together to be freed from samsara.

There are many obstacles to Enlightenment. Our human body is called "precious" because with this vehicle one can avoid all non-virtue and achieve virtue, cross the ocean of samsara, and complete the path of Enlightenment ending in full Buddhahood. Therefore, the human form is superior to any others, including those of gods and nagas. As this advantage is difficult to obtain, we must have ethics and morality and practice the ten virtuous actions. We must not waste the wonderful opportunity we have to practice, as it is extremely rare. In fact, the Buddha gave the following analogy to demonstrate the rarity of this opportunity: a blind tortoise was swimming in an ocean in which there was a yoke with a hole in it. This yoke was tossed about in every direction by the waves, while the tortoise only came to the surface of the water once every hundred years. There is as much chance of being born in a human body as there is that the blind turtle's neck will meet up with the hole of the yoke! if one has this opportunity, one is very fortunate. Therefore, one should rejoice and use this opportunity to the full, both for oneself and others. In fact, one should use human life to cross the ocean of samsara as one uses a ship to cross the sea.

To achieve Enlightenment, we need devotion and confidence in Buddhahood. Without these, it is difficult to attain to a spiritual quality in the mind. Just as a rotten seed cannot produce a healthy plant, so faltering devotion cannot produce virtue. Devotion and confidence mean an understanding of cause and effect. A positive cause creates peace and happiness, and a negative cause leads to suffering. Afflicting emotions cause different levels of suffering to arise, whereas Enlightenment is sacred and precious, free from confusion and pain. To achieve this state, one must have devotion and confidence in the Buddha as the teacher who shows the path, the Dharma as the path itself, and in the Sangha as the community which cultivates the Enlightenment mind and acts as a guide to Buddhahood. Devotion and confidence are like water to a seedling; if one is endowed with these qualities, one can meet many great masters and receive the precious teachings. So when the precious human body containing the Eight Freedoms and Ten Endowments and in addition possesses devotion and confidence, the being has the basis for achieving Enlightenment.

It is asked why, if we are born as humans many times before, and have met spiritual masters, we did not previously achieve Enlightenment. The reason is that we fell into conditions of error such as attachment to this life, attachment to samsaric pleasures and laziness, attachment to our own liberation, and not understanding the method for achieving Buddhahood. To dispel such errors, there are four antidotes: the contemplation of impermanence, understanding the suffering in samsara and the truth of karma and result, the practice of loving kindness and compassion, and the cultivation of the Enlightenment mind.

Obtaining a life of leisure and endowments is like arriving at a continent of jewels.

Whether we attain liberation or not is up to us.

Be sure, therefore, not to leave empty-handed.

This is my heart's advice.

(from Jewel Treasury of Advice)

2. Contemplation of Impermanence as an antidote to attachment to this life

The Buddha has said, "The whole world is as impermanent as clouds in an autumn sky. Birth and death are like the movements of a dancer." One should meditate on death, on the decreasing time that remains, and on the inevitability of separation. To meditate on death, think that it is the stopping of breath, the transformation of the body into a corpse, and the scattering of consciousness. To meditate on the shortness of life, think that your life since last year has become shorter, that since last month it has become shorter still, that since yesterday it has become yet shorter, and that even since this morning it has become shorter. In the Bodhicharya Avatvara it is said that life is each day becoming shorter, and that as there is no way to add to it, we surely experience death. To meditate on separation, consider that no matter what dear friends and close relatives we have, we must separate from them when death comes. No matter what wealth we have accumulated or how beautiful our body has been, we must leave them behind.

Another way of meditation on impermanence is to consider that we will definitely die one day, that we do not know when this will happen, and that when we die nothing will help except the realization of the teachings. It is certain that everyone who has ever been born has died. Even great masters who achieve many qualities, or famous people, or wealthy persons all experience death. There is no way of escaping. One reason that death is certain is that the body is composed of many elements and all things which are composite will decompose. This is the nature of change. Life is decreasing from moment to moment. For this reason, also, death is definite. Each moment that passes brings us closer to death. It is like the archer who shoots the arrow through space until it reaches the target. The arrow does not remain in space even a moment. In the same way, from the day we are born until we die, life does not stay still for even a moment. Life is also like a flowing river. As the river does not cease its flow even for a moment, so does life, gallops on. It is ever changing, yet ever the same in its change. Our life moves daily closer to death like the prisoner moving towards his place of execution. Our life has no predictable span, especially in this world system. Some beings die in the mother's womb, some at the moment of birth, some as infants, some in youth and some in old age.

The body has no value in itself. It is but a composite brought about by many causes and condition. If we analyze it, we cannot find anything permanent in it. Generally, everything one can name acts as a catalyst for death. If even food or drink or medicines in some circumstances can cause death, all other things can, too. Life is as fragile as a bubble in the water. At the time of death, our wealth will not help us. No matter how much we have accumulated in our lives, we must leave with empty hands. Moreover, wealth is actually harmful because it creates attachment and anger. If one has negative karma through accumulation of wealth, one must experience its fruits. Friends and relatives will also not help at the moment of death. No matter how powerful, skilled, or wealthy they may be, they cannot protect us from death. Nor will one's body help. No matter how strong it has been or wealth they may be, they cannot protect us from death. Nor will one's body help. No matter how strong it has been and how agile, no matter how expressive and attractive, it cannot protect us from death. It is like the sun which cannot stay from setting. Not only can it not protect us, but it is the cause of much suffering. How often it produces pain, discomfort, hunger, thirst, and the fear of attack! And by protecting ourselves from danger, we can create further karma which brings yet more suffering.

We may also meditate on impermanence by thinking of those who have died, recognizing that this will one day be our state. For example, if we know a dying person, we can meditate on how he used to be strong, clear of complexion, capable of body, joyful of mind. Yet disease has suddenly caused him to lose all physical power, to grow dark of complexion, to suffer in the mind, to writhe in pain, and to derive no benefit from medication. Aware that there is no escape, he surrounds himself with friends and relatives, eats his last meal, pronounces his last wishes, and stops breathing. No matter how important he was to his family or his nation, his body must be carried away. Some of his relatives may cry and try to hold onto him, some may faint from grief, but he cannot return. His body is then either buried, or cremated, or thrown into the river. One should therefore meditate that one day the same will happen to oneself. One is not beyond this.

If we hear that someone is dead, whether he be known or unknown to us, we should think: One day I, too, will be like that person. We should also remember those who have died, young or old, in our family or city, thinking: Soon I will be as they, a mere memory. The Buddha said: Birth leads to death; meetings lead to partings; gain leads to loss; and construction leads to destruction. The beneficial effects of meditating on impermanence are that by understanding the nature of composition and decomposition, one learns to detach from this life. The teachings, far from being pessimistic as some people think, lead to ultimate peace of mind because they cause us to drop attachment to that which, being impermanent, bring no lasting happiness. They support the motivation to achieve Enlightenment, and help free one of hatred. With them, one has the chance to realize the equanimity of Dharma-as-such.

Impermanence and death are like the spreading shadow of sunset at the mouth of a pass.

It approaches without stopping for even an instant.

Apart from Dharma, nothing will help.

This is my heart's advice.

(from the Jewel Treasury of Advice)

3. Understanding Karma as an antidote to attachment to samsara

All sufferings of all the realms of samsara are caused by negative karma. All positive results are caused by virtuous karma. In illustration of this, the Buddha recounted the following two stories:

Story 1

When Lord Buddha was residing in Shrawasti, there lived a poor Brahmin woman who gave birth to a hunch-backed child named Gurchung. As her milk dried up very quickly, Gurchung was precariously sustained with milk from buffaloes and other animals. When he reached adolescence, his father told him, "Son, our lives are sustained by begging, so now you must search for your own sustenance." Gurchung received a bare minimum on which to survive. Meeting the Lord Buddha, he asked to be ordained as a monk. In the days that followed his ordination, the other monks fed him, but soon they too, told him that he must be responsible for his own food. Again, Gurchung barely managed to survive.

Even when he begged for food in the company of other monks, he always suffer a mishap. Either there would be no food left when it was his turn to present his bowl, or, if he was served first, the food that remained would spoil, leaving the other monks hungry. To resolve this, the Buddha order

that Gurchung should henceforth stand at the end of the line of monks receiving food. One day, the buddha told Gurchung to clean the temple, where Gurchung found a large quantity of food. 'thus able to rebuild his strength, he increased his practice and attained the state of arhat. However, when he returned to the temple thereafter, he found that someone else had already cleaned it, so he once again had to beg for alms. The first day, a wealthy family invited the Buddha and his retinue for a meal, but by the time Gurchung had arrived, the food was gone. Once again, he had to go hungry. The following day Ananda, one of buddha's chief disciples, brought two begging bowls, one for himself and one for Gurchung. After eating his own portion, he set out to bring Gurchung the food he had collected for him, but he was attacked by dogs who consumed the food. The following day, ananda announced that all the offerings of food received by the monks that day would be given to Gurchung. However, the people who normally provided the food were unable to do so, leaving Gurchung to pass another day hungry. The next day, another disciple, Maulgalyayana, brought an extra begging bowl for Gurchung, but on his way, he tripped on a rock, so spilling the food which was eaten by crows. The following day Sariputra filled two begging bowls, but on his way he encountered ghosts who by their miracle powers made the food disappear. The next day Sariputra again brought Gurchung food, but every spoonful of food disappeared just as Gurchung placed it in his mouth. When Sariputra then tried feeding Gurchung by hand, Gurchung's mouth locked. Despite his miracle powers, Sariputra could not succeed in feeding Gurchung, whose mouth unlocked only after mealtime was past. Sariputra then asked Gurchung, "Of all your physical sufferings, which is most intolerable?" Gurchung replied, "I am so thirsty; please give me water." When Gurchung raised the bowl to his lips, a karmic spirit placed ashes in it. drinking this, Gurchung attained miracle powers and levitated in the air. But following this display he passed away. When the Buddha was asked why Gurchung, who had attained the state of arhat, should have died in such a manner, the Buddha replied, "Many kalpas ago, there live a wealthy family who gave alms to Brahmins and the poor. When the father died, the mother continued this generosity, but her son objected, feeling that if the mother continued the practice, their wealth would be destroyed. The son pleaded with the mother to stop such giving, but the mother refused to listen. Finally, when the son married, he locked his mother in a room without food. The mother begged for her release, saying she would leave the house, but the son decided that if she left, she would probably take with her what remained of the of the family's fortune. For seven days he kept his mother locked in the room without food until relatives, hearing the rumors, came to investigate. They found the woman nearly dead. When she asked her son for water, he gave her a glass sprinkled with ashes. Drinking the spoiled water, the mother died."

The Buddha then revealed that in a previous life, Gurchung had been this shameful son. The son then took rebirth in hell for thousands of years. When he finally took rebirth in higher realms, he continually suffered from hunger, and died shortly after drinking the water spoiled with ashes. Even having achieved the arhat state, he had to accept the negative result of his previous actions.

Story 2

To show that the fruits of positive actions are just as inevitable, the Buddha then told this story: In the Buddha's life-time, a daughter was born to a humble family. She was exceptional, both for her beauty and because she was born wearing a white cotton cloth. As she grew, the cloth grew with her. When she reached marrying age, she expressed the desire to renounce samsaric life. Her parents offered to make her nun's robes, but instead she told them that she would be grateful if they would help her in her quest to meet the Buddha Shakyamuni. When she finally beheld him, she requested that he initiate her into the nunnary. The Lord Buddha welcomed her, and instantly her hair shed

and her white cloth was transformed into the five traditional garments of a nun. Through her diligence in practice, she shortly afterward attained the state of arhat. Ananda, the Buddha's personal attendant, asked what kind of previous virtue allowed the woman to attain that state in this life. The Lord Buddha replied, "In a past life, Buddha Soekyab appeared in this samsaric world. Every human being showed him great respect. At this time, a monk wandered from city to city encouraging people to make offerings to the Buddha. A very poor lady named Danaka, living with her husband in a shack, possessed only a piece of cotton cloth which she shared with him. Whichever one went outside would wear the cloth while the other remained naked inside the shack. One day Danaka met the wandering monk who advised her of the great merit received from making an offering. Danaka asked the monk to wait a few minutes. Returning to the shack, she said to her husband, 'Because of our previous lack of generosity, we were born into this life in poor circumstances. If we do not demonstrate generosity in this life, we will suffer the same fate in the next. Please give me permission to make an offering.' The husband gladly agreed, and Danaka beckoned to the monk to come to the door of her shack. He said, 'Give what you have to give and I will say prayers for the gift'. Danaka replied, 'I have only this cloth which I am wearing.' She then went inside disrobed and passed the cloth out to the monk, knowing that she would thus have no choice but to remain in the shack and wait for death. The monk took the offering to the Buddha, who was addressing a gathering of royalty. Upon the monk's arrival, the Buddha immediately asked, 'Where is the offering of cloth?' and took the cloth in his hand. The kings misinterpreted the exchange, believing that the Buddha had grown so materialistic that he would accept even a ragged cloth. Reading their minds, the Buddha replied, 'The offering of this cloth is more perfect than any of the offering you have made.' He then revealed the details of the offering. A royal couple present took off their fine clothes and ornaments and had them sent to the poor couple so they could attend the gathering. The Buddha then gave numerous teachings which liberated many from samsara." The Buddha Sakyamuni then concluded the story by saying, "The poor woman Danaka was the previous incarnation of this white-clad bhikshuni. By offering the cloth with pure motivation, Danaka was reborn wearing the white cotton cloth for ninety-one kalpas. She never again suffered from poverty. By the merits received from listening to my teachings and from the aspiration to be free from samsaric life, the young bhikshuni has now attained the state of arhat."

The Ten Non-virtues

Karma is caused by all the varieties of samsara, it is said in the Abidharma kosha. Specially, it is set in motion by the ten virtuous and ten non-virtuous actions. The ten non-virtuous actions can be divided into three physical, four verbal and three mental non-virtuous. Physical non-virtues include taking life, stealing and sexual misconduct. Verbal non-virtues include lying, abrasive words, harsh words and senseless talk. Mental non-virtues include covetousness, harmful motivation and wrong view.

Taking life

- Taking life as a means of gratification, or to obtain wealth or to feed oneself.
- Taking life as an act of hatred by resentment or by killing an enemy.
- Taking life through ignorance, killing as a sacrifice.

Stealing

- Through force
- Stealthily
- By presenting as pure a product that has been mixed with impurities

Sexual misconduct

- Having sexual relations with one's mother, father, sister or brother
- With another person's marriage partner
- With a monk or nun

Lying

- Falsely claiming to have had visions
- Making promises one will not keep
- Lying for no particular reason

Abrasive words

- Forcefully trying to divide others
- Politely trying to divide others
- Dividing Sanghas

Harsh words

- Forcefully condemning another's faults
- Politely condemning others

Senseless talks

- Repeating non-virtuous mantras
- Telling useless stories (gossip)
- Giving teachings to those who are improper vessels

Covetousness

- Attachment to one's own body, qualities and wealth
- Jealousy regarding others' wealth and possessions
- Attachment to that which is not owned by others or oneself (country, locale, etc.)

Harmful motivation (desire to destroy)

- Born of hatred
- Born of jealousy and competitiveness
- Born of resentment

Wrong view

- Thinking that positive karma will not lead to happiness and negative karma will not bring suffering.
- Not believing the truth of the path, and thereby not achieving the truth of the result.
- Thinking that the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha do not exist

If all of the ten above are done repeatedly, one is reborn in a hell realm. If they are done occasionally, one is reborn as a hungry ghost. If they are done infrequently, one is reborn as an animal. Another way of expressing the above is to say that if one acts in anger, one is reborn in a hell realm; if one acts with desire, one is reborn as a hungry ghost; if one acts in ignorance, one is reborn as an animal. One could also say that if one commits negative acts against Enlightened beings, one is reborn in hell; if one commits negative acts against one's parents or some other crucial person, one is reborn as a hungry ghost; and if one commits negative acts against ordinary sentient beings, one is reborn as an animal. The root causes of non-virtuous actions are ignorance, desire and hatred. It is therefore important to eliminate these afflicting emotions.

Characteristics of Karma

The self ascription of Karma means that the results of an action are always reaped by the sower of the action and no one else. If this were not the case, it would mean that our actions bore no fruit, or that we were the victims of negative actions we had not committed. Neither of these is true.

The Strict result of Karma means that positive and negative actions will inevitably bring about positive and negative results, respectively. For example, the poisonous seed will produce poison, and the medicinal seed will produce medicine.

Minor Karma produces great result means that as a small seed can yield a large tree and many fruits, so can a minor action (positive or negative) produce strong results.

The inevitability of Karma means that unless karma is eliminated by an antidote, or purified, it may remain intact for thousands of kalpas until conditions finally cause it to produce its inevitable result. In the Sutras the Buddha said, "Fire may grow cold, the wind may be caught by a lasso, and the sun and moon may fall to the earth, but the result of karma is inevitable."

He also told the following story in proof that one cannot escape the fruit of one's actions: There was a king called Pawajin who had 84,000 queens, 1,000 princes and 500 princesses. At that time the Bodhisattva Metok Dadze was staying in a dense forest practicing meditation and giving teachings. One day, he announced with profound understanding and great awareness that the time was ripe for him to travel from city to city giving teachings for the benefit of all sentient beings. The other Bodhisattvas warned him, "Lama Metok Dadze, your physical and spiritual beauty will incur the jealousy of kings. You will be in grave danger." He replied, "If I think only of my own safety, I cannot protect the teachings of the Buddhas of the Three Times. All Buddhas achieved Enlightenment through great actions in which they sacrificed the protection of self. One can only protect the teachings when one renounces attachment to form, sound, taste, smell and touch. The merit received from keeping one precept diligently for twenty-four hours, at a time when the Dharma is in decline, greatly exceeds the merit received by the devoted being who offer food, drink, the precious umbrella and light to the millions of Buddhas for kalpas as unlimited as the sands of the river Ganges." Lama Metok Dadze then traveled to many towns, giving teachings which established 90 million sentient beings in unsurpassable Enlightenment. Then he journeyed to the palace of King Pawajin, where he gave teachings for seven days during which he also fasted. On the seventh day

1,086 queens instantly attained the state of non-returning Enlightenment after merely glancing at the monk. Young girls also gathered to make offerings and receive teachings. Blinded by his jealousy of the beautiful form of the Bhikshu, King Pawajin believed the Lama was preaching a misguided path for his subjects. He therefore ordered his one thousand princes to take Lama Metok Dadze's life, but they refused. Finally Gache, the kingdom's butcher, consented to do the deed. The King ordered Gache to sever the lama's hands, legs, ears and nose with a sharp sword, as well as to cut out the monk's eyes so that he might never again look on the King's consorts with desire. When the order had been completed, hundreds of thousands of light rays radiated from the monk's body in the ten directions, and then returned to his body. Instead of blood, milk gushed from his veins. From the severed limbs the eight auspicious symbols and thirty-two special marks appeared. At this display, the King and his retinue were filled with misgiving. After seven days they returned to find that the monk's body had not discolored in death. They concluded that Lama Metok Dadze had been a very special Bodhisattva who had attained the non-returning state of Enlightenment. King Pawajin cried out. "I have committed every negative karma; I will be reborn in hell." Instantly, eight thousand gods appeared in the sky and affirmed the king's fears. Filled with remorse, King Pawajin said, "bodhisattva Metok Radze, listen to me. Please wake up like a full moon. Teacher, free from all aggression and anger, please wake up like a shining sun. You have practiced patience for a long time. Where is your great compassion and perseverances. Wake up and say something, Great Loving and Kind One." Having said this, King Pawajin placed the Lama's body in a coffin and anointed it with medicine, sandalwood, juniper and incense. The body was cremated and a stupa was built with the remains. For ninety-five million years King Pawajin made daily offerings and practiced purification by the four powers-the power to effect atonement, the power to practice good as an antidote to evil, the power to desist from evil, the power of reliance. 'when the King died, he was reborn in hell, experiencing infinite suffering. After one million kalpas, his eyes were gouged and his hands and legs were severed. King Pawajin's fate demonstrated the inevitability of karma. The buddha Sakyamuni concluded the story by explaining to his attendant anada that he was King Pawajin in a former life and that Lama metok Dadze was later reborn as Buddha padme lame, the previous incarnation of the unparalleled Gampopa.

Thus it is important to understand and watch over the causes of karma, trying to eliminate them rather than fighting the result.

The Ten Virtues

When we renounce the ten non-virtuous actions, they are transformed into the ten virtuous actions. Entering into the path, the ten virtuous actions are

- Protecting life (physical)
- Widespread giving (physical)
- Maintaining ethics (physical)
- Speaking truth (verbal)
- Speaking harmoniously by mediating among divided groups (verbal)
- Speaking lovingly and peacefully and speaking meaningfully (verbal)
- Cultivating admiration, satisfaction and contentment (mental)
- Becoming helpful, loving and compassionate (mental)
- Cultivating correct views (mental)

The root causes of the above are a lack of ignorance, desire or hatred. Therefore, it is important to strengthen these qualities of mind in order to achieve happiness for oneself and others. One who practices the ten virtuous actions is reborn as a human or in a god realm; one who practices all of the above and in addition renounces samsara achieves the arhat state; one who practices all of the above and cultivated Bodhicitta achieve Buddhahood.

There are three types of beings:

- Beings with small capacity - these work only for the pleasures of samsara
- Beings with medium capacity - these work for individual growth and renounce samsara
- Beings with great capacity - these renounce samsara and practice Bodhicitta for all sentient beings

The results of virtue and non-virtue are like the shadows of flying birds.

We may not see them now, but they will appear at the time of death.

Make effort to abandon non-virtue and to accomplish wholesome deeds.

This is my heart's advice.

(from the Jewel Treasury of Advice)

4. Contemplation of Suffering as an antidote to attachment samsara's pleasure

If you think that it is acceptable to die because you can be reborn in the human or god realm and enjoy the luxuries of those states, that is merely attachment to samsara. For this, the antidote is understanding samsara by meditating on its negative features. In general, there are three types of suffering: pervasive suffering (root cause of all suffering-impermanence of the unenlightened body); suffering of change (impermanence of peace and happiness); and suffering of suffering. Pervasive suffering is the nature of samsara. No matter what kind of conditions we enjoy, sooner or later suffering will pervade our worldly state, where our afflicted ordinary bodies are a source of pain. Suffering of change is like eating food mixed with poison. Suffering of suffering is physical and mental pain (sickness, depression, etc.). Pervasive suffering brings about a feeling of apathy; the suffering of change brings about a false sense of euphoria; the suffering of physical and mental pain brings about anguish.

The five ordinary skandhas are the cause of pervasive suffering, but ordinary people do not recognize them as suffering, just as when stuck by plague, they do not notice minor illness. However, those noble beings entering the path recognize this as suffering, just as, when the plague abates, one notices the pain of a lesser injury. pervasive suffering is like a hair, ordinary people are like the hands, and noble beings are like the eyes. When a hair touches the hand, there is no feeling of discomfort, but when it is in the eyes, it is intolerable. The joys of samsara are ultimately the cause of the suffering of change. It is written in the Karma sutra, "The kingdom of the gods and the kingdom of humans are the cause of suffering." No matter how high the rank you achieve in samsara, you will eventually fall, for you are fundamentally attached to temporary enjoyments which cause the suffering of hope and fear. The body composed of the five skandhas causes the suffering of physical and mental pain, for the moment we enter into it we experience suffering which brings about the feeling of pain.

There are six realms of suffering: the hell realm, the hungry ghost realm, the animal realm, the human realm, the demi-god realm, and the god realm.

Hell realm

There are eight hot and eight cold realms. The eight hot realms in ascending order are: the reviving hell, the black thread hell, the crushing hell, the howling hell, the loud howling hell, the heating hell, the Avici hell. The eight cold realms are: the realm of infected bubbles, the realm of frozen bubbles, the realm of chattering, the realm of cold sounds (Achu), the realm of other cold sounds (Kyhü), the realm of crackling like an utpala flower, the realm of crackling like a lotus flower, the realm of crackling like a larger lotus flower. Two further hell realms are: Nyitshe (the suffering close to the hot realms) and Nyekhor (the place close to the hot realms).

The hungry ghost realm

There are two types of hungry ghosts: The first are those who see food guarded by someone who will not allow them to touch it, or see food transformed into waste as soon as they behold it, or see food and water as a mirage, or are unable to eat or drink because though their stomachs are as large as a valley, their throats are as narrow as a horse's hair. The second are those who experience food as fire or filth as soon as it reaches their stomach. In the hungry ghost realm, even the sun grows cold in winter and even the moon grows hot in summer. Thus, the inhabitants become living skeletons. So intense is their suffering that a story is told of one of the Buddha's disciples who, on passing through the hungry ghost realm, was asked by a woman there to look for her husband who had long before gone out in search of food for her and their five hundred children. When the disciple finally found the man, he said that he had not been able to find food in all his search, but that he had managed to grab some saliva that a compassionate monk had spat upon the ground. So eager was the man to keep hold of his treasure amidst the hundreds of ghosts who had set upon it avidly that he had clenched his fist until his fingernails had been driven through the top of his hand.

The animal realm

There are different types of animals: many-legged animals, four-legged animals, and apods. Most animals live in the ocean, on the plains and in the forest. They suffer from being beaten by humans; from having no freedom; from being killed or dismembered for fur, bones, meat, skin, and pearls; and from preying on each other.

Human realm

The suffering of the human state includes birth, aging, sickness, death, separation from loved ones, meetings with enemies, desire for that which one cannot obtain, and the loss of that which one possesses.

Birth: After wandering in the Bardo (intermediate state), we take birth in a mother's womb and remain there for about thirty-eight weeks. There are many stages of inconceivable suffering in this process, as well as at the moment of birth, which most people do not remember.

Aging: In youth the body is straight and strong; later, it becomes bent and feeble, the limbs shake, it becomes difficult to sit or stand, the hair changes color or falls out, the skin, once soft as silk, becomes thick and wrinkled, and the complexion, once like a newly-blossomed lotus flower, becomes faded. In youth one has the strength to undertake anything, and one is optimistic. Later, one loses strength, cannot work, and becomes depressed. The once-sharp senses decline so that it is hard to see, hear, or

taste foods vividly. In youth one gains respect, but in older age, having lost dignity, one is scorned even by children. Materially, it becomes difficult to increase one's wealth or to solicit support from others. One craves food and drink which one cannot afford. Aging is the worst disease because it cannot be cured. All other sicknesses are brought on by aging. Mentally, one becomes forgetful and confused. Milarepa said: If one does not realize the nature of non-aging, the suffering of aging is inconceivable.

Sickness: In old age, there are operations, pain, bitter medicines, the desire to eat unhealthy things, a dependence on physicians, the exhausting of one's resources on physicians and medicine, and the fear of death. Milarepa said: If one does not realize the nature of non-sickness, the suffering of sickness is inconceivable.

Death: If one is caught by the Lord of Death, one is separated from one's protectors and objects of refuge. One endures pain, shaking limbs, shallow breath, the abandonment of physicians, and the inability to sit upright. Making the great transition to the next life, one enters the dark unknown, leaving everything familiar behind, including one's body. Only the realization of the precious teachings can help. Everything else is but illusion that creates further suffering. After breath stops, one goes on to a new life which depends on one's karma.

Separation from loved ones: When one is separated from parents, relatives and friends, there is great pain.

Meetings with enemies: When one meets with enemies, one experiences the suffering of quarrelling, anger and unease.

Difficulty in obtaining one's desires: One desires that which one does not have, and no matter what one does have, one still craves more. Thus, there is no satisfaction in the mind and this, in turn, causes further suffering.

Loss of what one possesses: One constantly worries that thieves may steal one's possessions, or that they may be destroyed. This leads to further unrest in the mind.

These are the basic sufferings of all humans, whether high or low-born, rich or poor, educated or uneducated.

The demi-god realm

The suffering of the demi-gods includes pride, jealousy, fighting (with the gods), and death in battle.

The god realm

The suffering of the gods includes fighting (with demi-gods), dissatisfaction no matter how many pleasures are granted, and rebirth in lower realms as a result of using up all previous good karma.

Samsara pervades the six realms. Therefore birth in any of these realms brings suffering. We all exist in an ocean of suffering. By recognizing the reality of samsara and becoming detached from the six realms, one is able to cultivate a mind free from suffering, thereby achieving Enlightenment.

*Renunciation and the mind that abandons negativity are like a captain piloting a ship.
Freedom from samsara depends upon them.
Therefore, always think on this without distraction.
This is my heart's advice.
(from the Jewel Treasury of Advice)*