

Four Reminders

Commentary by Michael Levin

Joyful to have such a human birth, free and well favored.

Of all possible births, to be born with a human body is exceedingly rare. To be born free is rarer still. This means that one is not born into slavery or some other form of bondage, and that one has the leisure to have at least some free time to use as one wishes. To be born well favored is rarer still. This means that one has been born in a land where the dharma is taught, that one has the good fortune to have encountered a teacher of dharma, and the further good fortune to have chosen to listen to the dharma, and to seek to practice it. Most of those born with a human body never have the opportunity to make use of it and it is wasted.

But death is real and comes without warning, this body will be a corpse.

Life is extremely impermanent and is like a bubble. Habitual mind ignores this and assumes that because one appears to be in good health, and appears not to be presently in danger, that this situation will continue. This is a delusion, and there is no guarantee that the present breath will not be the last one of this life. One never actually knows which breath will be the last. Not fully understanding this and not taking it to heart leads to distraction and habitual behavior, that is, to carelessness and loss of awareness.

Unalterable are the laws of karma, cause and effect cannot be escaped.

Karma means a collection of many causes and conditions, most of which are beyond our present awareness. Regular practice, which includes diligent and courageous contemplation of the previous two reminders may increase our awareness of karmic causes and conditions, however most of it remains beyond one's awareness until one has attained perfect enlightenment. Nothing one does should be considered accidental and of no consequence.

Samsara is an ocean of suffering, unendurable, unbearably intense.

Because one has not fully appreciated impermanence and the certainty of death, one may take some comfort in being alive which generates the illusion that samsara is not really all that intense or painful. But this delusion cannot last, and eventually one must enter death without any illusory protection.

What I have typed above are the exact words of the Four Reminders as I first heard them from my teacher, Trungpa Rinpoche together with my commentary. This a very pithy, condensed version, which he soon replaced with a more fully developed version which is the one that Emily first heard. It is similar to the one I have provided in that the third reminder is karma and the fourth is samsara.

However, Khandro, Rinpoche in *This Precious Human Life* uses a tradition in which samsara is third and karma is fourth. Her book is an excellent teaching, and one will not go wrong making full use of it.

Although the Four Reminders might seem to be a depressing topic when we first hear them, this is actually not true. If we understand that living our life fully and courageously is the best way to live, then we need have no fear that preparing to die is something different from this.