

First, Train in the Preliminaries

In practicing the slogans and in your daily life, you should maintain an awareness of

[1] the preciousness of human life and the particular good fortune of life in an environment in which you can hear the teachings of Buddhadharmā;

[2] the reality of death, that it comes suddenly and without warning;

[3] the entrapment of Karma - whatever you do, whether virtuous or not, only further entraps you in the chain of cause and effect; and

[4] the intensity and inevitability of suffering for you and for all sentient beings.

This is called "taking the attitude of the four reminders"

From Training the Mind & Cultivating Loving-Kindness by Chogyam Trungpa , copyright 1993 by Diana Mukpo.

First, Train in the Preliminaries

The preliminaries are the basic meditation practice - beneficial, supportive, warm-hearted, brilliant shamatha-vipashyana practice. Shamatha-vipashyana practice is not only the earth that we stand on, it's also the air we breathe and the heart that beats inside us.

From Start Where You Are : A Guide to Compassionate Living by Pema Chodron, Copyright 1994, Shambhala Publications.</scrip

First, Train in the Preliminaries

There are two points here, the preliminary to a period of meditation and preliminary instruction.

Preliminaries to a Period of Meditation

First, at the beginning of every period of meditation, imagine your root guru sitting on a lotus-and-moon seat above your head. His body is radiant and his face happy and smiling as he regards all beings with nonreferential compassion. In him, all the root and lineage gurus are present.

With intense respect and devotion, repeat the lineage prayer if you wish and, in particular, the following prayer a hundred or a thousand times.

I pray for your blessing, my guru, great and completely worthy spiritual friend. I pray that you will cause love, compassion and bodhicitta to arise in my mind.

Then, imagine that your guru descends through the aperture of Brahma and sits in your heart in a pavilion of light, like an open shell. This exercise in intense respect and devotion is known as guru yoga. It is important to begin every period of meditation this way.

Preliminary Instruction

Second, with respect to preliminary instructions, if the four contemplations -that is, the difficulty of obtaining a free and well-favored existence, death and impermanence, consideration of the shortcomings of samsara, and action as seed and result - are new to you, they are fully explained in the graded-path texts. You need to work at these contemplations so that they definitely become part of your thinking. Here is a concise presentation of the basic points for those who would like one.

THE ACTUAL INSTRUCTIONS

In order to obtain the framework for the practice of dharma, this precious human existence, which, in being free and well favored, offers excellent opportunities, one must practice excellent virtue, since this is its karmic seed. Since the proportion of sentient beings that do practice virtue thoroughly is very small, the result, a free and well-favored existence, is difficult to obtain. When one considers the numbers of other sentient beings, such as animals, it is evident that human existence is just a remote possibility. Therefore, you should, above all else, work at dharma wholeheartedly so that the human existence now obtained is not wasted.

Furthermore, since life is uncertain, the causes of death are numerous, and one can't even be sure that death won't come today, one must exert oneself in the dharma right away. At the time of death, except for virtuous and nonvirtuous actions, nothing will follow, not wealth, food, possessions, nor land, body, or status. Since these are not even as helpful as a straw, there is not the slightest need for them.

After death, the power of karma causes one to experience birth in one of the six classes of beings. Whichever it is, there will be nothing but suffering, not even a strand of happiness.

Since happiness and suffering infallibly develop from virtuous and nonvirtuous actions, one should not do anything evil even at the risk of your life. One should practice only virtuous actions with great diligence.

You should energetically train yourself in this kind of thinking. At the end of every period of meditation, perform the seven-branch prayer as many times as you are able to. In postmeditation periods, put the points of your reflections into practice. These instructions apply to all forms of preparation and actual practice.

*From The Great Path of Awakening : An Easily Accessible Introduction for Ordinary People
by Jamgon Kongtrul, translated by Ken McLeod*

First of all train in the Preliminaries

1. THE PRECIOUSNESS OF HUMAN LIFE

In this lifetime, each of us is gifted with a human body and with circumstances, both external and internal, that are conducive to a fruitful spiritual practice of potentially great depth. To understand how precious this opportunity is, it helps to have reached a sense of conviction that we are each endowed with a continuum of consciousness that is not confined to this life alone, and, moreover, that our actions and behavior have significance from one life to another.

As we take into account this linear progression from past life to present to future, we can appreciate the rare and precious opportunities that this fully endowed human life presents to us right now: the gifts of our teachers, the circumstances that are conducive to practice, the countless means we have for transforming our lives in a wholesome way. From this context we can also look laterally, to other sentient beings around us. Everyone desires essentially the same things as ourselves - a lasting state of contentment and freedom from suffering, pain, anxiety, and fear.

Although this common ground we share with every sentient being in the universe is utterly simple, the ways that individuals strive to fulfill this eternal longing vary with infinite diversity. And, for so many people, these methods are pathetically ineffective. We don't need to be great sages to see that many people fail tragically at finding happiness and freeing their minds from unnecessary grief. It takes no deep insight to see that the source of both our well-being and our maladies lies within our own hearts and minds. To change our experience of life we must inevitably change our hearts and minds, or rather our heart/minds.

The Buddhadharmā starts from where we are right now, with our uncertainties and our shortcomings, as well as our wholesome qualities. It starts here, not after we have become Bodhisattvas. It shows a clear path for living a meaningful, wholesome life of increasing contentment and good cheer in this very lifetime, and it shows us how to sow the seeds for our well-being in future lives.

As this sinks in, priorities change. Before, we might have said, "The teachings are good. They are all very well, but given my job and my family, my bills, the city I live in, all my responsibilities and commitments, I just don't have time. I don't have time to hear teachings, or to meditate, or to read books on dharma. I don't have time to bring my mind to Dharma." This suggests a set of priorities that leaves precious little time for dharma. What could be more important? Keep in mind that Dharma is not confined to formal practice, sitting cross-legged in meditation or reciting sadhanas. Dharma is meant here in a broad sense; but not in a sense so diluted - or deluded - that "living Dharma all the time" means very little Dharma at all.

2. DEATH AND IMPERMANENCE

An awareness of death and impermanence enhances the vivid realization of the preciousness of a fully endowed human life in a way that transforms the heart and mind. It is possible to be lethargic in a very dynamic way: lethargic in relation to dharma but

dynamic regarding samsara. We have plenty of time for entertainment, movies, vacations, sports, and partying. We have plenty of time for work. But we have precious little time for dharma, thinking, "Perhaps, when the kids are older, when I retire, when the work eases off a bit, or when winter comes, or summer. . . ." We always assume that there will be time later, but in the process we are aging and our vita

Excerpted from: The Seven-Point Mind Training (first published as A Passage from Solitude : Training the Mind in a Life Embracing the World), by B. Alan Wallace.

First Train in All the Preliminary Practices.

The following four subjects for contemplation are the basis of all Dharma instructions: (a) the precious human form, (b) death and impermanence, (c) actions and their results, and (d) the faults of cyclic existence. We should meditate thoroughly on these four points and try to realize them correctly from the very beginning of our practice. If we fail to do this, our meditation will lack a firm foundation, and it will be impossible to realize the more profound aspects, such as the relative and ultimate awakening mind. Just as a person who wishes to become a school teacher and teach others effectively must first gain the prerequisites by following the appropriate studies, so must we first engage in all the preliminary practices in order to attain higher realizations.

To ensure the success of any meditation that we practice, we should always prepare by taking sincere refuge in the Three Rare and Supreme Jewels: the fully awakened being (*buddha*), the truth (*dharma*), and those intent on virtue, or the spiritual community (*sangha*). When meditating, try to sit in the full adamant posture with legs crossed, the feet resting on the opposite thighs or calves, the hands placed in the lap, the spine straight, the eyes slightly opened and focused along the nose, and the mouth relaxed with the tongue pressed gently against the palate.

Prior to the main meditation we shall discover many extraneous thoughts breaking like a storm into our mind. Since these must be eliminated for any successful contemplation, we should initially practice simple breath awareness. First, as we breathe out, visualize very fine smoke coming up from the heart and out through the nostrils. Then as we inhale, visualize this fine smoke re-entering gradually and evenly. While placing the concentration on the breath in this way, there are four things to avoid:

- breathing so heavily that we can hear our breath going in and out,
- giving effort to breathing,
- breathing out so far that we have to suck back in quickly, and
- breathing too rapidly.

In doing this initial meditation our mindfulness should ride on the wind of the breath like a person rides a horse. It should not be distracted to one side or the other.

Placing the mind on the breath is like looking down on a busy market place and watching the movements of just one person. The confused bustle gradually fades into the

background. It is up to the individual to determine when these extraneous thoughts have been pacified and to realize whether or not firmness of concentration has been achieved. For some people it takes only seven or twenty-one rounds of breathing to reduce internal gossip, but for others it may take much longer. When a state of mental stability has been attained, we can proceed to the more advanced objects of contemplation, because now the mind will be more able to remain on them steadily.

THE PRECIOUS HUMAN FORM

We should realize that there is nothing that we cannot accomplish if we put to good use our precious human life. We have this potential because human beings are endowed with a special intelligence not possessed by other beings, and it is through the power of this intelligence that anything becomes possible. Yet, though all human beings are born with this intelligence, many do not use it well, and some even misuse it, continually wasting their potential on unnecessary worldly diversions. If the human life is used for a mundane purpose, no matter how far-reaching it may be, that purpose always has a limit. However, by harnessing this intelligence to spiritual development, it can lead to complete freedom from confusion-the fully awakened state, which is separated from all obstacles and pain and is endowed with infinite virtuous qualities.

Initially, it is most important to realize that all people have this ability, or potential, and power of mind within them

Copyright Brian Beresford, 1977, 1996. Excerpted from Advice from a Spiritual Friend,

First, Study the Preliminaries

As a preliminary to this teaching, we must consider three things; the preciousness of being born a human being, the fact of impermanence and the problem of samsaric existence.

Human birth:

From the point of view of one who seeks enlightenment, it is far better to be a human being than to be born even in the heavens of the gods. It is as humans, and not as gods, that every one of the thousand Buddhas of this age has attained, or will attain, enlightenment. This human existence, moreover, is not to be achieved by force or mere chance; it is the result of positive actions. And because it is rare for beings to accomplish positive actions, a precious human existence is indeed difficult to obtain. Nevertheless, we have now managed to be born into such a state; we have encountered the Buddhadharma, have entered the path and are now receiving teachings. But if we are unable to practice them, simply listening to the teachings will not in itself liberate us from samsara, and will be of no help to us when we are confronted by the hardships of birth, disease, old age and death.

Impermanence

Our lives are fragile and impermanent, and because death and its causes are uncertain, we may succumb at any moment. We may think, Oh, I will practice when I am older, but now while I am young, I will live an ordinary life, making money, getting the better of my rivals,

helping my friends, and so on.□ But the fact is that we might not live to be very old. Just think for example of the people who were born at the same time as ourselves. Some might have died as children, some as adults, at their work and so on.

We are now in possession of a precious human form and have discovered the Teachings of Buddha. Therefore we should think to ourselves, I am not going to miss my chance. While I have this precious opportunity, I will practice the Dharma.

The defects of samsara

The experience of happiness and suffering comes about as a result of negative and positive actions; therefore evil should be abandoned and virtue cultivated as much as possible.

Even the tiniest insect living in the grass wishes to be happy. But it does not know how to gather the causes of happiness, namely positive actions, nor how to avoid the cause of suffering, which is evil behavior

At the moment, we are all caught in the state of delusion, and so we should acknowledge all the negative actions we have perpetrated throughout our many lives until the present time. And from now on, we should turn away from all such actions big or small, just as we would avoid getting thorns in our eyes. We should constantly be checking what we do: any negative action should be confessed immediately, and all positive actions dedicated to others. To the best of our ability, we should abandon wrongdoing and try to accumulate goodness.

From Enlightened Courage, by Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche