

Outline for Class 6 Starting a Daily Practice

Once we have established our motivation through contemplation, we can move on to the next stage: establishing a daily practice.

Renouncing Negatives and Building Positives

A daily practice should combine the two elements we spoke about last week: Renouncing Negatives and Building Positives. We can practice both of these in two traditional ways: on the cushion (called the meditation session) and off the cushion (called the post-meditation session).

Under the heading of Renouncing Negatives, our on-the-cushion practice should consist of daily contemplation on the importance and necessity of Dharma practice, and our off-the-cushion practice should consist of trying to live our lives in a more karmically upright way.

Under the heading of Building Positives, we should try to establish a daily on-the-cushion practice of sitting meditation, and a daily off-the-cushion practice of being aware and mindful in our everyday lives.

Hopefully, our on-the-cushion practice will inform our off-the-cushion practice, and we will begin to become more mindful of our thoughts and actions and in so doing “clean up” our karma and create a strong connection with mindfulness and awareness.

Both of these can help us realize the goal of all Buddhist practice: to uncover our Buddha Nature and become enlightened beings ourselves.

Now, let’s look at these two types of practice more closely.

The Four Noble Truths and the Four Ordinary Foundations

Under the heading of Renouncing Negatives, we can contemplate either the Four Noble Truths or the Four Ordinary Foundations of the Tibetan Buddhist Path.

In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, many practitioners choose to complete a set of preliminaries, called Ngondro (which literally means “that which goes before”) prior to starting further practices. These preliminaries consist of Four Ordinary Foundations and Four Extraordinary Foundations.

The Four Ordinary Foundations are contemplations, which also are called The Four Thoughts that Turn the Mind toward Dharma. Like the contemplations on the Four Noble Truths, these contemplations help us understand the positive and negative parts of our lives, and help us to choose the positives over the negatives.

First, we build an appreciation for our precious opportunity in this life. Then we aim ourselves directly toward enlightenment as our lifetime goal.

Here is a brief explanation of the Four Ordinary Foundations.

The Four Ordinary Foundations

The Preciousness of Human Life

The First Ordinary Foundation is the Preciousness of Human Life. If we consider our lives from the larger perspective of the whole of cyclic existence (samsara), we can see that, despite the problems we have faced in our current life, that our lives are much better than many other beings' lives.

We could have been born in the hell realm, the hungry ghost realm, the animal realm — but we were not. We could have been born in the human realm but with many defects — like living where there is war, where there is no dharma, etc. — but we were not. We could have been born in the realm of the jealous gods or the gods, but we were not.

We were born in the human realm, where, according to the Buddha, we have the best chance for achieving enlightenment. We had good upbringing in a good country with good resources. We have now met the precious dharma. We are very fortunate, indeed!

To contemplate this foundation, we should think about the preciousness of our lives, until we come to the deeply felt sense that we have what is called “the precious human birth” and must use it wisely — by practicing the path toward Buddhahood.

The Truth of Impermanence

The Second Ordinary Foundation is the Truth of Impermanence. Even though we have obtained the precious human birth, it does not last forever. Death could come for us at any time — we don't know how long we will live, or how our lives will end. Our lives actually are as fragile as a bubble.

Thinking about this is not meant to make us depressed, but to show us how valuable our time really is, so we will use it wisely. We think about death so that we will not waste our time but live our lives fully and completely and with grace and wisdom.

We should contemplate this foundation until we come to the deeply felt sense that our time is short and precious and that we should use it to practice the dharma.

The Truth of Karma

The Third Ordinary Foundation is the Truth of Karma. The first words of the Buddha's first sermon were: “We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts, we make the world.” This, simply put, is the basic teaching on karma.

All of our words and actions start as thoughts. When we act on those thoughts, we create a momentum and a habit that will eventually determine who (and what) we will become.

According to the teaching of the Buddha, the nature and quality of our lives depends on our thoughts, words and actions. Each being is born with a set of habitual tendencies inherited from previous lives. We can either reinforce our confused states of mind, or discard them and take up new, more enlightened states of mind.

The Buddha's teaching on Karma is simple: positive actions bring positive results; negative actions bring negative results.

The factor that divides positive from negative in the realm of action is selfishness. If an action bolsters selfishness and strengthens the erroneous view that the world is solid, permanent and unchanging, it is a negative action and will bear fruit as suffering, because it strengthens our grip on Samsara.

If an action bolsters selflessness and strengthens our view that self and world are basically illusory, impermanent, and continuously changing, it is a positive action and will bear fruit as happiness, because it weakens our grip on Samsara.

If we take on the teachings of dharma and practice them, we will decrease our store of bad karma and suffering and increase our store of good karma and happiness. It is that simple.

We should contemplate this foundation until we come to the deeply felt sense that our thoughts, words and actions all produce consequences, and that these determine who we will become in the future. So we should try our best to be mindful of all our thoughts and action, and vow to practice dharmic thought and action.

The Defects of Samsara

The Fourth Ordinary Foundation concerns the Defects of Samsara. No matter how hard we try, we cannot make Samsara into paradise — things will always disappoint us, and if we place all our hopes for happiness in the external world, we will always be at the mercy of the Three Types of Suffering:

- The “Suffering of Suffering Itself” is the physical and mental pain we experience as part of samsaric existence. It's what happens when we get sick, or when we suffer an injury or an attack, or when we get old and die — as well as the sadness, anger and other mental pain that accompanies our attempts to bring the external world under our control.
- The “Suffering of Change” is experienced when we first experience fleeting samsaric happiness which then ends, or when we come into contact with something we loathe or fear. First we were happy, then suddenly, our loved one leaves us; or external conditions change and we suffer disappointment and loss.

- The “Suffering of the Composite” refers to the suffering that is “built-in” to Samsara. We have bodies and minds that are, at this point in our development, limited, and can feel pain, and there are many sources of torment in our world. We experience this type of pain because the world, quite simply, is “made that way.”

We should contemplate this foundation until we come to a deeply felt sense that attempting to win lasting happiness by indulging in samsara is like trying to lick honey from the blade of a knife — we may gain a moment’s gratification, but the cost is more than we are willing to pay. We should come to a deeply felt sense that the path of enlightenment and awakening is the best use of our energy and our life.

How to Use the Four Ordinary Foundations

Now, how do we practice these contemplations? By sitting comfortably in meditation posture and reading a little bit about these topics. As we read slowly through the paragraphs, we stop from time to time to contemplate the message and see whether it is true for us. Hopefully, we will come to an important conclusion: A deeply felt sense that we must practice dharma, and that the practice of dharma is critical to our life’s highest goal: the achievement of lasting happiness and enlightenment.

Therefore, the practice of contemplation has two parts: reading and reflecting, and resolving — or coming to a conclusion. This conclusion should be deeply felt within ourselves. Then, and only then, is the contemplation considered “finished” or complete.

Once we have come to the conclusion that dharma practice is critical to our lives, we can then move on to the next phase of our daily practice — quiet sitting meditation, or *Shinay*.

Tranquility Meditation (Shinay)

Now that we have reviewed the practice of Renouncing Negatives, we come to the subject of Building Positives.

To build positives in our lives, we should try to establish a daily practice of sitting meditation, so that we can begin to unravel our negative conflicting emotions and the confusion that prevents us from realizing our innate potential.

If we preface our daily practice period with a few minutes of contemplation of one of the Four Ordinary Foundations, we will be ready, willing, and able to practice Tranquility Meditation (*Shinay* in Tibetan) and will encounter fewer obstacles to our practice.

Shinay trains us to relax our minds, to put down negative thoughts, and to get a sense of the peacefulness that is part of our basic nature. *Shinay* gives us a glimpse into our innate potential for perfect wisdom and perfect compassion, and is an oasis for those of us who lead very busy lives.

Once we establish a daily on-the-cushion practice of contemplation and shinay, we can better understand the importance of dharma in our lives and see how we can improve life for ourselves and those around us. We can also begin to see, in our off-the-cushion lives, how we create our world through our thoughts.

Homework

Try to contemplate one of the Four Ordinary Foundations each day for a few minutes a day, followed by 15 to 30 minutes of Shinay. At the beginning of the practice period, recite the Four Immeasurables, and at the conclusion, recite the Dedication of Merit.

Handout

“A Teaching on Refuge,” by Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche