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# *Back to Basics.*

## *The Four Basic Reflections and Refuge*

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## Stillness and movement

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Recognising the nature of our mind is often presented as something very special and fantastic. However, our mind is always operating and if we look, we can already see how it is operating but, as we have all probably experienced in meditation, it can be difficult to see what's going on, due to the nature of distraction. We go off into thoughts and daydreams and the process of trying to find ourselves, we lose ourselves.

In some buddhist views such movements of the mind are seen as unhelpful distractions and there are techniques to avoid this. However from the dzogchen point of view what is important is to not stand apart from thoughts, but to be very, very close to them so that even when the mind is moving, *you* are never lost, since you remain at the centre of the movement.

Nevertheless all the buddhist paths are designed to bring the integration of stillness and movement so that no matter what kind of movement occurs, we won't be troubled by it. We won't be afraid of stillness and we won't be afraid of movement. We won't be in love with stillness and we won't be in love with movement – they'll simply be functioning together.

And when we take refuge, we bring our ordinary everyday life into reality so then every experience we have becomes part of our refuge. We're not taking refuge *from* experience but we are finding refuge *in* experience, as it occurs. This is the approach of dzogchen. But we can only find the refuge *in* the experience, if *we* can be in our experience. If we are standing back from our experience we won't see a thing and if we are intoxicated in the experience we won't see anything either.

## The Four Basic Reflections: back to basics

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Holding all this in mind, we will explore the four basic reflections in buddhism, which Tibetans call “lo-dog nam-zhi”. These four basic reflections are very important. We can take these ideas and run the whole of the dharma teachings through them. We should never be forgetful of them.

They are: the difficulty of finding a good situation, impermanence and death, karma and samsara's unsatisfactory nature.

### Precious human birth

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The first reflection is on our precious human birth; on the fact that we have the opportunity to think about our reality and that we live in a culture that supports us in such reflection. Many cultures are very poor, many people are born into families of extreme need and obligation so that they have to work all the time and have no space for reflection. They might be born into a family where there is feuding, like in

Pakistan, where one family can be opposed to another family and when you come into language, you learn who your enemies are and what you have to do.

We have healthy bodies, and even if we have some sicknesses and difficulties, we are still able to sit and think and reflect. This is a very wonderful opportunity, and given all the interesting and fascinating things in the world, we find ourselves being here in this buddhist environment. From a buddhist point of view that's wonderful, but from the point of view of 'normal' people it's very strange.

This opportunity will not last for long and we can reflect that in the future these opportunities will be more and more difficult to gain. A hundred years ago there were many buddhist countries in the world but now there are almost none. Buddhist traditions used to be very stable and well established but now they are very, very fragile. Whether buddhism will continue in a big way in the world is very uncertain and so the opportunities to study and practise are very thin.

## Impermanence and death

The exploration of impermanence is traditionally considered one of the best ways to see that there is no substance, no internal reality to subject or object. Neither outside nor inside do we find anything which is stable and enduring.

Things change. We see impermanence all around us: some of us here have not met before, but for those who know each other we see that faces change a little, that we look a bit older. Life is moving and turning; our own minds and thoughts are turning. Nothing stays the same. There is nothing to hang onto which is stable or guaranteed. If we rely on objects to keep us safe we are sure to be disappointed.

This is the heart of buddhism and again and again we need to take up this reflection, to see that there is nothing substantial for us to rest on. Everything is changing, including ourselves, even when we may experience ourselves as solid, fixed and enduring. We can get a bit heavy with our lives, with our work and with our family and so on. When we are heavy we want outside things to be strong so that they will support us. But that desperate need for something to rely on is the cement of samsara, the glue which keeps us involved in situations of attachment. We feel, "I am something and therefore I need something to rely on."

Life is a process; there are no fixed entities anywhere at any time. We live in the process of our sensory perception – that is what we have. We can have concepts *about* things *as if* they were real. We may choose 'our' place to sit in this room, then go out for a break and when we come back we say, "Oh, that's my place. I am sitting there. Look, that's my cushion keeping it for me." We have already attached ourselves to our cushion but what is continuing is a concept: 'That is my cushion'. When we come back into the room after the break, what we have is a new experience; each time we see this place it is a new perception.

Perception is always dynamic and always fresh. When I speak, if I stop speaking then there's no sound—speech is a process. Eating is a process. Pissing is a process. Shitting is a process. We are processes, processing in the world, and the world is

processing into us. Our heart is beating, the blood is going round the body, the brain chemistry is moving, the breath is going in and out. In the midst of that you don't find *any* stable, enduring thing, just patterns of manifestation. That is to say, patterns which arise in the processes have a regularity which allows prediction. There's no problem with that, rather our difficulty arises when we imagine that behind this regularity there is some substance – that the regularity, the familiarity, is kept in place because inside the phenomena there is something enduring.

Most of us who have been involved with buddhism for some time will have reflected a lot on impermanence, but it is never something to treat lightly. It's a big, royal road to an understanding of stillness and movement. When I came in today, the man of the house was telling the history of this building and how there have been buildings on this site for two thousand years. That was very interesting. This building had almost fallen down but now they have remade it. In that way it can look as if it has a continuity. You might even say, "There have been buildings on this site for two thousand years." but this is the language of the tourist office. This building has certainly not been here for two thousand years even if other buildings came and fell down and came and fell down before this one.

So this kind of examination is very important for us.

## Death

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Death comes in all sorts of ways. Who would have thought that a plane would come out of the sky and fly into a skyscraper? You can read in the papers everyday of deaths in car crashes, in fires in houses, stabbings, shooting... People die of cancers, brain haemorrhages, strokes and so on. There are many, many ways in which we die but one thing is for sure, we *will* die. From the buddhist point of view there is a continuity from one life to the next as the death of the body is not the death of our existence. Our mind continues across lives as a point or a movement of experience.

What will help us when we die? Will our money help us? Will our possessions help us? Will having lots of friends help us? Will having a huge extended family help us? Will being wrapped in a national flag help us? The Buddha would say it doesn't matter what you wrap someone in because when you burn the body the wrapping burns, the body burns, but something continues. What is that thing that continues and what does it take along?

From the traditional point of view what continues is awareness, our noetic capacity, the capacity to experience, to be alive, to know. Awareness is inseparable from emptiness. Awareness and emptiness are integrated like the wind and the sky. Just as you can't take the wind out of the sky, you can't take this awareness out of anything else. Awareness becomes the basis for manifestation, and carries with it certain charges or impulses – what we call karma – which lead to it manifesting in particular contexts and with particular impulses and interests.

What is important when we die is the kind of impulses that we carry, for these will determine whether our next life is in a healthy body or a sick body, what dimension

of reincarnation we are born into and so on. More importantly, from the point of view of dzogchen, what is our relationship between the awareness and the set of potential impulses, our karmic traits?

## Karma

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The third concern or reflection is karma. Karma means that our actions have consequences that we didn't understand at the time we did the act. You do something – you didn't realise at the time that what you were doing was a bit stupid – then you get the consequence and are very surprised. When we act in ways that disturb ourselves and disturb the environment, consequence comes back to us. When the consequence comes back they can be difficult to cope with. Buddhist teachings say that if you cannot be aware at the time of committing the action, if you cannot tolerate the reality of your action, then you will find it very difficult to manage the consequence.

Everybody wants to be loved and admired but behind that façade we are all doing some funny business, wanting to take things for ourselves and mess up other people. We want to do all these things and also be great. When the consequences of our shadow, of the bits we don't like to own, come back to us we are very surprised – we don't like to get caught out!

Karma arises because we feel 'I am real' and 'the world is real'. Hence, I want the nice things in the world and I don't want the bad things. As soon as subject and object become strongly real, judgement comes into existence, the evaluation of good and bad. When you have these evaluations of good and bad, it all becomes very difficult.

This is the nature of ignorance: we don't stay present with all our activities but we split ourselves and we split the world. We are hypocritical; we say one thing to one person and another thing to another person. We want to please everyone, get all the benefits, and so we become involved in lies and corruption. The things happening now between the West and the Middle East are happening in ourselves as well; we also have our totalitarian aspects; we also can be fascist and self-indulgent. These things happen in the outer world because they happen to be in ourselves. The mind creates these phenomena, it's a process of our own minds and their concern with power, control and politics.

From the perspective of karma we need to see how we get pulled into acting with one eye covered, one ear filled up – not fully present in the world, not seeing the full picture. From a psychological point of view we say that our inner sense of self is fragmented. We have self-states, bits of ourselves which are provocative and angry, other bits of ourselves which are frightened, afraid and shy, other bits that are very hungry and greedy, and other bits that are very authoritarian.... These different parts of ourselves are not related. They are like the fingers on the hand. Of course they are related but we don't see the relation, we just see the independent fingers. One time we do *this* finger and another time we do *that* finger; one time we are in

one position and the next time we are in different position. Then when we act from these different positions it's very difficult to see the consequence.

I see this in my psychotherapy work in the hospital. For example, for some of the time a person may be very lovely, charming, sweet and kind, enjoying doing things for others, but then they might get so angry that they smash up a room and hit people. One moment they are so sweet, so very, very nice and then suddenly they are something else. When they turn into this other mode all the sweetness has gone and is not available to them. This is very much what happens in respect to karma, that in the moment of committing the action that we shouldn't commit, the other bits of ourselves which would disagree with that action are not available. It is as if they've gone to sleep. We have the acceleration going one way and none of the brakes.

People who are trying to give up cigarettes or drinking or eating too much often have that experience. They decide 'I will not do this' and are very clear about that – but then they do it. "How did you come to do that when you didn't think you would do it, and you didn't want to do it?" "I don't know... I just felt like it." The person who suddenly felt like having a cigarette and the person who said 'No, I'm not going to smoke any more', are living in the same body but they are not in communication. This is fragmentation.

It is one of the reasons why buddhists practise mindfulness meditation, since it enables us to have an overview on what we are doing. This then helps us to manage these different impulses, these different parts of ourselves, so that in the moment of entering into the wrong action some alarm bell starts to ring and we are more likely to be able to pull back.

However if we don't want to know how bad we are and we want to pretend that we are better than we are, wanting to hide our bad aspects behind our false 'friendly' mask, this makes it very difficult to integrate ourselves. Karma means 'activity' and it's difficult enough to stop doing something we are very conscious of doing, let alone stop doing things that we can't see we are doing. If we cover up our bad actions even from ourselves, then how can we know when to stop doing them? Due to ignorance we cheat ourselves, then we cheat other people and then we don't even want to know that the cheating is going on. This is what Freud calls repression, where an activity is going on and it is repressed, covered over and put out of consciousness.

That is why one of the purposes of meditation is to bring up our unconscious material so that we see ourselves more as we are. Usually that is not a pretty sight. When we sit to meditate and have all these funny thoughts and feelings going on, it's often very surprising to us: "How can my mind be so crazy?" It makes a big difference whether or not we recognise that we are confused. We all have the five poisons of stupidity, anger, desire, pride, jealousy and all the rest. These operate in us and are not theoretical concepts. They are an accurate description of who we are. In recognising this, our dharma work begins, but if we don't recognise how full

of shit we are, how confused and complex we are, then we can employ buddhism just as a kind of game. We can use buddhism just to make ourselves feel better but the real work always involves a kind of despair, since it is so awful to see how messy we are, to see that we are not as nice as we would like to be.

Buddhism offers many paths for us to choose from. One path involves trying to be better, to be more aware of what we do, trying to do good actions and not bad actions, trying to practise compassion rather selfishness. Then there is the path of the bodhisattva, trying to help other people. There is the transformation path of tantra. The dzogchen path is to see this complexity of our being in terms of energy, the energy that is moving through the body all the time. This is a manifestation of our mind as it gets fragmented through the channels of the body, and the practice is to bring it back into the central channel. There are many methods for doing this but while you are divided against yourself, while each of these fingers seems to be very separate, you will not be able to understand what is going on. Only when these separate fingers get integrated as something that function together do the methods become useful.

When our energy gets separated through our channels and runs against itself, we are not able to breathe properly and we get whirring thoughts. So we have to integrate and recognise that, “Yes, it is all functioning together.” This is the real essence of dzogchen – to have the whole of ourselves functioning together in relation to the environment, so that it becomes dynamic and moving rather than held and locked in particular positions.

## Ice or water, depending on the conditions

Karma is a conditioning of awareness. It conditions it or prepares it in a particular way. For example, if we condition water by freezing it we will get ice. Ice is then brittle. You can hammer ice to get a sharp piece that you can use to attack someone with or you can rub ice on your nipples to make them hard. You can do all sorts of things with a piece of ice but the ice is fragile. It has a limited duration because the ice will only remain as ice under certain circumstances. In the more normal temperature for this human dimension ice becomes water. Water is flowing and when you hit it, it just splashes; it doesn't break. It has different qualities of manifestation from ice. In the same way our awareness can become hard and brittle like ice. A quality of samsara is for there to be a fragility to the ways that we manifest and a consequent fear we are going to get destroyed. Awareness can also be like liquid and flowing like water, responding to different situations without anxiety, for water pours and then comes together again; it separates and rejoins. Traditionally the image of mercury is used as an example for this. You can take a piece of mercury, shake it and it goes down into little balls and then you just shake it again and it all comes together.

In the same way our energy can be dispersed and it can be integrated. But due to karmic conditioning we enter into these states which are brittle and in these states we don't recognise who we are. This is why we do meditation, in order to recognise

that the water and ice have the same nature. The open, flowing quality that we develop in meditation, and the brittle, defended quality have the same nature. Water and ice are the same in their real nature but they manifest differently. So in this life we use the meditation practice to try to get into the state of water and even if we are not successful, at least to recognise that water and ice have the same nature. In that way when our conditioning manifests, when we become limited into particular forms with our likes and dislikes, our hopes and fears, we still carry some sense that this can be integrated with water, and then we continue that.

However, if you enter into death in the state of ice then it's very difficult because it's like being broken up – everything is being taken away. You can't flow with it because you are looking at all these things you like and want to hang on to and you feel frightened and you don't know what's coming. To go from ice into water, if you've been used to the shape of ice, is very terrifying. When the traditional texts describe the bardo, the intermediary states between one life and another, they always say that in the first part of the bardo, just after you've died, you have an illusory body like a body in a dream. This has the form of this present life, but after a while it dissolves and you don't have anything to rely on. What is external is different and what is internal is moving very quickly, so there is no stability there, and that is quite difficult.

For example, some people here have met and practiced together before. If we meet in a new environment—it may look a bit strange, a bit uncertain, maybe it's not so nice, or maybe it's nicer, more exciting. There can be all sorts of emotions present but at least you can look at each other and you know them and you can reassure yourself that there are some things in the environment that are familiar. If you are a new person coming into a group and you don't know anyone it's a bit more scary because it's difficult to relax with people you don't know. Next, you imagine you go into an environment where nothing external is the same. Your own body has gone and your mind is whirring so fast – that is very, very frightening. Traditionally, they say that people blank out at that point, they go unconscious, or one might say that they dissociate. It is a trauma and they get overwhelmed, and that suffering causes a lack of clarity in terms of the possibilities of rebirth. In that way people don't do their best to find the best rebirth and so find themselves born just somewhere. According to Buddhist traditions, the baby is not having a good time inside the mother's body. It's been through this completely hellish confusing situation and then its body is developing which traditional descriptions say is also very painful. Nowadays we like to imagine the baby is swishing about in an amniotic paradise but in the tradition describes it as very unpleasant.

Next you come out of the mother into a situation and it takes a long time to work out what's going on. Moreover, if that environment is not a healthy environment it is going to be very, very hard. Small babies are at the enormous mercy of what is around them so death is, from this point of view, a real limit. If you haven't got it together before death arrives it's going to be very hard. It's like in school, when an exam is coming up and you haven't done your homework. When you go into the

exam you can't just pull the answers out of the air. If the answer isn't inside you it won't get out on the paper. If, through meditation practice, you don't have some relationship to your 'deeper self', if you don't have some understanding of stillness and movement and how they are connected, then you have a real problem at that time. And nobody can give it to you or do it for you. When you go for your school exam, your anxious mother can't come into the examination with you and write the answer. She would probably love to do that but she is not allowed to.

## Going it alone

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In our life there are many places where we have to go alone but death is the main one. We go alone into death and so we have to understand that the currency that operates now will not operate then. All the things we had in this life we can't take with us. We may have spent a lot of money to buy nice thangkas and beautiful statues, but where are we going to put the statue? Even if we had a very precious gold statue of Tara and you clasped it to our chest, when we died it wouldn't go with us. It's not possible. All the knowledge that we have – how to cook, to drive a car, knowing lots of languages, geography, history, and all other things, is just wiped out, invalid, not useful. The surface level of memory is cut off.

The purpose of meditation then is to get our system 'proper' before it's too late. If we have illegal cash, which we've never paid any tax on, then we have to find way of getting it into the Central Buddha Bank before we die. This is why we do Dorje Sempa. Dorje Sempa is the great money-launderer because when Dorje Sempa is on top of your head and you recite the hundred-syllable mantra, all your bad cash is transformed. It goes out and you get new, shiny banknotes coming in. Then you become a person of radiant money, which you can spend in any lifetime and buy yourself a good rebirth. But most people don't do that because most people think 'My money may be bad but it is still useful'. They like to gossip or they have envy or like to hurt other people. It's a sort of secret money that they enjoy. You spend it but you don't want anyone to know you're spending it. Because of that you never bring it together to purify. The real work that we have to do is to bring all of ourselves and purify.

## Samsara: banging into things

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Purify doesn't mean purify *away*, since the essence of all the poisons, of all our negative characteristics are modes of energy. If we understand how that functions energetically then we can use it to benefit other beings and ourselves, but if we don't understand it clearly, and if the negative impulse is very hard, then it will just bang into things, creating bruising and pain. That's what samsara is – it's where people are banging into each other because we don't collaborate.

## Taking refuge

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Refuge is the idea that we are lost, that where we are now is not safe. We don't know what will happen with our lives. The things that we take refuge in are not reliable and even if we have more security cameras, more electronic ID cards, DNA

databases... sooner or later somebody will find a way to undermine them and we will again feel unsafe. In the middle ages rich people had suits of iron and steel and sat on big horses but they also died, for when they lifted their arm, someone could stick a sword or a lance in their armpit.

If you seal yourself up completely you don't live. If you want to live you're vulnerable. That is the reality. To be alive is to be vulnerable. Therefore we need to find a refuge that helps us to be alive, rather than putting up a wall between us and the other, which is not even any kind of security.

In buddhism we do that when we take refuge. When we take refuge in the Buddha we take refuge in our own buddha nature, in the possibility of an awareness which is open to every event, which tries to deal with reality, to be present in reality as it is. Not telling lies to ourselves or to others, not being lazy and relying on past truths and assumptions but trying to stay fresh in the moment.

We take refuge in the dharma, in the teaching about reality which helps us to stay present in reality. It means that at each moment we use buddhist practice to return to presence, to return to being here and not being lost.

We also take refuge in the sangha as a reminder that we can't do it by ourselves. The practice is not about sealing ourselves up in a bubble of awareness which then keeps other people out, since the fact is, that we disturb others and others disturb us. So how can we use meditation to make such disturbance *meaningful* rather than *meaningless*? The sangha is a place to do that. The sangha means interconnectedness. The sangha means you can't just make a safe world for yourself. It means *'I must be connected with other people and when they disturb me, that is an awakening for me that I need to be even more awake.'* Any time anyone hurts me that is a reminder that I wasn't very aware.

Because who is the one who got hurt? If it's solid, stupid 'me', then I am going to get hurt but if the one who is hurt is not trapped in the hurt but experiences the hurt as something which arises and passes, then I have the possibility of self-liberating the experience in awareness. In Tibetan they say *phang-lang me-pa*, without abandoning or rejecting. Without pushing things away and without pulling things in, we just try to accept whatever comes.

But we can't accept what comes unless we can also accept that people are full of shit, that people will help us and they will harm us; people will please us and they will disappoint us. It's silly to get surprised when other people irritate us. Since we were tiny children fighting with our brothers and sisters and arguing about football in the playground, people have irritated us. When people wanted to play with our toys or wouldn't let us ride their bicycle, people have been irritating us. When people could swim better than us or climb a tree quicker, people were irritating us. All our life people have irritated us.

What does that mean? It means that the energetic movement of the world gets blocked because we want things to be a particular way. We want to tell other people, not to do this or that because they are upsetting us. Taking refuge in the

sangha means that by being present in awareness we practise tolerance, we practise liberating experience rather than controlling it; we practice non-attachment rather than manipulation. This is very hard to do but is the *real* refuge, for in that refuge we become awakened to the *process* rather than trying to maintain fixed positions, which in any case, can never be maintained.

The two main positions people get into are, 'I am not getting enough! I need more!' and 'It's all too much, stay away, give me space!' This is the basic structure of attachment-desire and aversion-anger – pulling in, pushing away. Taking refuge in the sangha means using all our social experience to examine how we get tied in knots and to see the point where we push and the point where we pull? When we can examine and be aware of this sense of the 'me' which wants to do that then we're much more in a dance. When you're dancing sometimes you go out and sometimes you come in; that feels playful, but if you're defending a territory, that doesn't feel playful.

With this kind of refuge we bring our ordinary everyday life into reality and then every experience we have becomes part of our refuge. We're not taking refuge *from* experience but we are finding refuge *in* experience, as it occurs. This is the approach of dzogchen but we can only find the refuge *in* the experience, if *we* can be in our experience. If we are standing back from our experience we won't see a thing and if we are intoxicated in the experience we won't see anything either.

So we have to be present in the experience, which is there – in the ordinariness, but with the lights on, present. And that is surprisingly difficult to do. But only you can decide if you want to try and do this, and do it as much as you can, whenever you can.