

The Four Reflections Palpung-Richmond March 2024

Summary and suggested ways to practice for each reflection, from Lama Linda

All four: When you wake up in the morning, before you go to bed, and at the beginning of each formal practice session, recite – or just call to mind in your own words – each reflection. Or you might rotate them, focusing on each one in turn for a session, day or week at a time.

Appreciation: When you wake up every morning and at other times during the day, you could reflect on something you appreciate about your life --either in traditional terms (this rare, amazing, and time-limited opportunity to practice the dharma and travel the path of awakening) or something specific to your life. If nothing comes to mind, perhaps you could appreciate simply being alive. If being alive doesn't feel like a blessing, perhaps you could appreciate if you are not in extreme pain, or that you have enough food to sustain you, or that you can walk, whichever of these might be true for you. If none of them apply, email me and we'll try to think of something.

Impermanence: Be alert to the changing of day to night (sunrise, sunset), the changing of the seasons, changes in weather, and moment to moment change as reminders of impermanence. To notice moment to moment change, you might think how you have transformed from child to adult; how a child or parent or older person or pet you know is changing; how styles in clothing, hair, or cars have changed in your lifetime (probably imperceptibly, but over time dramatically); how people in previous generations were born, lived their lives just as we are living ours now, and passed away, and how your generation and those that follow will do the same.

Karma: When a strong negative emotion or thought of verbal or physical retaliation arises in your mind, pause and contemplate the result for the other person and for yourself; also reflect on this regarding the behavior of others, as a basis of compassion. In general, remember the Buddha's teaching that helpful actions lead to future happiness, harmful actions lead to future suffering, and dharma practice on and off the cushion leads to liberation.

Suffering of samsara: When you are in physical or emotional pain, identify it as the suffering of suffering. You could also remember that many other beings are likewise suffering, some of them in the same way as you, and do taking and sending meditation for them. Also notice how pleasure transforms into suffering: for example, the perfect job or relationship or something else you desperately wanted might turn out to have flaws or just lose its desirability over time; something delicious might make you ill or have other unwanted effects, etc. And also recall the all-pervasive suffering of conditioned existence, the background reality of moment-to-moment impermanence. Recall that the antidote to being sad or fearful about this is that through consistently practicing the dharma, we can free ourselves from all types of suffering and ultimately from samsara itself, which is nothing but a habitual mindset.¹

The overall message and action plan of the four reflections: Samsara is like a mental prison in which all our perceptions are distorted from the way things really are; all our experience is either overt or subtle suffering, and we can't help harming others in coarse and subtle ways through our very existence. To free ourselves, we need to take advantage of the rare and fortunate situation we now have in which we have the opportunity and resources to travel the path of awakening on behalf of ourself and others. We need to make use of this opportunity while we still have it by avoiding harm to others as much as possible, engaging in actions that help others as much as possible, and engaging in dharma practice to liberate ourselves as much as our situation allows.

And a reminder about ultimate versus relative reality, as we discussed at the beginning of the second workshop: We begin the path seeking a way to alleviate our suffering, which comes from reflexively (not intentionally) oversolidifying our perceptions, thoughts, emotions, opinions, and judgments, taking them as more real than they are. The antidote to that oversolidification is understanding emptiness: that all our experiences, perceptions, emotions, actions, etc., are devoid of truly being solid or permanent in the way they appear to be, that our experience is more like a dream or an illusion than the solid reality we take it for. However – it is possible and just as much of an error to overcorrect and think that emptiness nullifies or overrides relative reality and that our experience is ONLY a dream. We still have to respect and deal with all the relative phenomena that arise in our experience at any given moment, and often cause us to suffer. In a dream, if we kill, steal, lie, etc., there are no consequences, because a dream is completely an illusion that has no reality once we wake up from it. In contrast, in waking life, our experience does have a degree of solidity or shared reality (just not as much as we may perceive), and if we kill, steal, lie, etc. in waking life, it causes harm to ourself and others and accumulates negative karma that will increase our suffering in the future. Guru Rinpoche expressed it succinctly:

“My view is as vast as the sky,
And my actions as fine as barley flour.”

In short, our view is ultimate, that everything is empty of the true, solid existence it appears to have. We always keep this in mind as much as possible. But at the level of relative reality, we always act with the understanding that karma is operative and we need to do our best at all times to avoid intentional harm to other beings and to only help them, both for their sake and ours.

¹ Some other ways of understanding the all-pervasive suffering of conditioned existence:

Mingyur Rinpoche, *Turning Confusion into Clarity*, page 138: See if you can tune in to the underlying background of dissatisfaction and restlessness, like the hum of a refrigerator, which permeates all our experience, as the Buddha explained in the first noble truth.

Patrul Rinpoche, *Words of My Perfect Teacher*, page 78: Think that all the things that sustain us, such as food and clothing, “are produced through negative actions alone,” involving the suffering of other beings. Guru Vajradhara Tai Situ Rinpoche said that even to produce a cup of rice, countless insects are killed. Lama Norlha used to say that if we eat, wear clothing, or take medicine, there is no way to avoid being complicit in harming and killing other beings.