

The four foundation practices – the ‘ngondro’

The traditional starting point for young monks in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition was a sequence of four preliminary practices that form a solid foundation to all subsequent work. These practices are a reference point for all meditation, and whilst they are a place to start, they are also a place to come back to again and again. As one’s experience deepens, these simple practices take on new subtleties and can be a full path of practice in themselves.

They remain as relevant to today’s secular mindfulness practice, as they always have been. Mindfulness is not a technique, it is a way of life that can enrich and heal us, and others. With proper foundations, mindfulness will deepen, and its benefits will be more evident.

So what are these mysterious practices? In this note I’ll summarise these four, with a secular approach. With each one, I’ll suggest a simple way to practice.

The first is the **celebration of this human life**; recognising how precious it is to simply be alive, aware, and with the in-built capacity to awaken to our true nature. We have everything we need, right now; our task in our mindfulness practice is to discover what’s already there. If we take a moment to open our minds, broaden our awareness, and make a point of noticing the positives, we can see an infinite number of things for which we can be grateful.

Practice: Immediately on waking up, start listing the things you are grateful for. You might simply be thankful that you are alive and conscious.

The second is recognising **the changing nature of all things**; that all physical forms and conditions, all thoughts, all emotions, and everything around us, is changing all the time. Sometimes change is sudden and obvious, like amputating a leg, but more often there’s an imperceptible and incremental change, like the slow onset of arthritis. Many of us find change difficult, and life inevitably throws us surprises and disappointments, but the path to contentment is to accept change, be curious, adapt and become a little wiser in the process.

Practice: Next time you experience a strong emotion, such as anger, look right at it. As you look, or feel, its effect on your body, notice how it subtly changes all the time. If it dissolves, let it go.

The third foundation is to recognise **cause and effect**; that every thing that arises does so because of a complex web of causes and preconditions. Whilst some causes are simple, like turning the light on, most of what happens is infinitely unfathomable; how come we happened to be in the room in a position to turn the light on in the first place? When we start to track all the preconditions for such an everyday event, we will have to start with the Big Bang! But the key point is that we are part of this on-going process of causality; what we think, say and do sows seeds that affect us, other people, and the planet in ways that we cannot fully predict. We need to be part of an upward spiral.

Practice: Be nice to someone today. See what happens later.

The fourth step is to recognise the nature of **suffering**. If I lose an ear while using the electric hair trimmer, there will be physical pain for some time; but worse than the loss of the ear, will be my worries about how this affects my work, my attractiveness, my ability to appreciate music, and anger at my clumsiness. This is suffering. It is the resistance to

change, the desire for things to be otherwise, the need for something else, the regret, the worry and the obsessive thoughts. It can take centre stage in my mind. The path to awakening and sustainable happiness is to let go of suffering quickly, realise that with just one ear or no ears, life is amazing, and to learn to stop turning the wheel of dissatisfaction.

Practice: Next time you cut off an ear, lose your specs, or receive an unwanted email, notice the immediate reaction and then the secondary thought process.

Happiness, contentment and clarity is already present; it is our baseline state of mind. Our mind is naturally spacious and calm, yet within this mind-space we host a hundred thoughts, regrets, hopes and worries. They seem to have a life of their own and they take up all our attention. Yet they are temporary, they arise for a reason, and with practice we can step back and see their insubstantiality. When we do that, life gets better.

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