

1. This Precious Opportunity

Here, now, I have a chance to make something of my life.

I have relative health.

I have energy.

I have the ability to think and feel freely.

I have enough food and enough money to meet my needs.

I live in a country that free of war, and many of the other difficulties people can face.

I'm not trapped in a negative state of mind like madness, craving, hatred or depression.

All of these things can change, but while I have these advantages I have a great opportunity.

I have had the great good fortune to meet the Dharma.
The Buddha taught it.

It has been practiced down the generations.

Thanks to my teachers it has come to my country and into my life in a form I can understand and accept.

I've had the good fortune to meet an effective sangha, whose members offer me guidance and friendship.

All these conditions have made the Dharma a presence in my life, and made its practice possible for me.

Am I making use of the opportunity this offers? How much time I waste!

How much of my life passes in unawareness! How strongly my habits constrain me!

I would be foolish to waste this chance.

So let me commit myself to practicing as fully as I can.

2. Reflection on Death and Impermanence

One day I will die.
I cannot avoid it.
It comes to everyone, and it will come to me.

Everyone who has lived in the past has aged and died,
And those living now are aging and will die too.

Think of the millions of people who have lived in the past. Where are they now?

I see myself aging. Day by day, year by year my body grow older, as I can clearly see.

The causes of life are unstable and impermanent, and when they run out my death will come.

I will have to face death and meet it, the end of my life.
I am like a fish caught in a net.
I am like a prisoner condemned to execution.
I am like an animal in a slaughterhouse.

In my fantasies I am exempted from the general truth of death.
But that is a delusion, and death will come to me, even me, as well.

The time of my death is uncertain.

Even if I live a full span, that is just a few decades.
But death could come at any moment – in a few years, or a few weeks, or even today.

There are many causes of death in addition to old age: illness, accident, disaster and violence. Every day people die in these ways, all of them having expected to live longer.

Therefore death is a presence that should be borne in mind.

My plans should always be provisional;
I should not put things off,
And live free from regrets and obligations.

Everyone I know will die as well.
One by one we will be taken by death.

All my friends, all my family, everyone I know, everyone I love, everyone who loves me. In a hundred years we will all be gone.

To face death I will need courage, forbearance, contentment and a clear conscience.

I need to be free of regrets, and that means using my time wisely.

All that will matter at the time of death is spiritual practice.

What will matter is what I have become in myself, the qualities of my mind, and the sense of having lived a worthwhile life through helping others.

So I should live with awareness of the inevitability of death and of its imminence. And I must make good use of my time through practicing the Dharma.

3. Karma - Cause and Conditions

Everywhere I look in the universe I see things arising and passing away in dependence upon conditions.

From galaxies and stars to micro-organisms, this pattern holds true.

Things aren't random – they have causes and effects.

This is also true of my life.

What I am today is the product of many influences: my family, culture, education and relationships.

It's also the product of choices I've made, of how I've acted, of my mental states and habits. There are many things I cannot alter, and these I must accept.

But I can change those conditions that spring from my mind.

I can change how I think, I can affect how I feel.

Meditation and Dharma practice give me ways to do so.

I know that skillful actions have brought me happiness and fulfillment and have benefited others. When I've been kind or generous I've seen others benefit, and it has given me happiness.

I know that my unskillful actions have harmed others, and harmed me too.

When I have been unkind I have seen the pain I have caused.

Those actions have reinforced negative states of mind that make me unhappy, and I've felt remorse and regret.

Therefore I should cultivate positive states, practice skillful actions and avoid unskillful ones. This means practicing the Dharma, which offers a sure path to establishing positive conditions.

To this path I commit myself.

4. The Defects of Samsara

Suffering is part of my life.

Everything I experience is tinged with incompleteness. I cannot escape unsatisfactoriness.

My life involves stress, striving and struggle.

The same is true of others.

Almost everyone I know is searching for something their lives do not give them. Everywhere I see this.

People's lives include many other kinds of suffering.

There is illness and physical pain: that goes with having a body.
There is the mental anguish of depression, fear, madness and many other afflictions.
The possibility of such experience goes with having a mind.

All this is within the spectrum of experience I occupy.
This is human life, and these things can happen to me.

When I consider my experience I see that it's in continual flux.
My body changes continually, a mass of processes that never settle. My mind is an endless stream of thoughts, one after another. Similarly, people change, situations alter, nothing endures.
The whole world is like this.

Nothing is solid, or final; nothing can be fully relied upon.

Consider this present moment, and you see this is true.
Look around and you see it is true everywhere.

I want the world to be substantial and knowable, but it isn't.
This causes me to suffer.

These are the defects of samsara.

It's futile to expect the world to make me happy: that expectation is the very source of my suffering.

I must change the way I see the world, and live on the basis of reality, not illusion.

The Dharma offers a way to do this.

It gives a path away from being trapped in samsara.

Therefore let me commit myself to practicing the Dharma.