



The Four Preliminaries for a Successful Meditation Practice

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A farmer does not just throw seeds on the ground and expect them to grow and flourish. He must first till and cultivate the soil, then carefully plant the seeds, and care for them in the months ahead. Similarly, we cannot begin a meditation technique without preparations that help ensure long-term success and benefit. These are four traditional preliminary reflections that enhance our motivation and turn our attention inward. If you reflect upon them regularly, they will become a part of your inner life.

Preliminary #1: This Precious Life

Have you ever given thought to how precious life is? As humans, unlike any other life form, we have the mental capacity to understand the sources of happiness and consciously create them. We have the capacity to understand the sources of suffering and consciously eliminate them. We have the capacity to create a precious life of enduring serenity, happiness, wisdom, love, and freedom. We call that human flourishing. It is a uniquely human possibility.

Here we are together, you and I. How incredibly fortunate. We have the time, resources, soundness of mind and body, teachers, and teachings—all available to us, right now right here. How often does it happen that all these factors come together at the same time? How often does it happen that we actually have the opportunity to step into a larger life of health and personal fulfillment? We have that possibility today and in the days and weeks ahead. It is not the mere fact that we exist that is precious, but rather that we have the opportunity right now to take a turn inward and become fully alive to life and all its possibilities, and that opportunity may not come again in this lifetime.

For a few minutes reflect with gratitude on the precious possibilities now available to you.

Preliminary #2: Impermanence

Nothing is permanent. Everything changes. Human life invariably has adversities and challenges. How will we face these difficulties? How will we face aging, disease, and death? How can we gain the richest of life's offerings? The wise healers and sages throughout time answer this question with one voice. They tell us that this can only be

achieved by turning inside. It is the single way we can reveal our truth, our soul, our special and precious human capacities.

But how long can we wait—tomorrow, next month, next year, when the kids are raised, when I'm financially secure, when I have more time? When will that time come, and will that time come before the final moments of our life? Like any endeavor that's important to us, we must approach meditation and the meditative pathway with urgency. When we are ill, we go right to the doctor. When our car breaks down, we fix it right away. Can we wait until our life breaks down before we gain the capacities that will take us through the difficulties of life with calm and ease? Can we wait any longer to become fully alive and vital? Please, do not waste your life. Think of the most alive moment you have had. Should that not be your life, at all times?

For a few minutes reflect on the impermanence of life and the importance and urgency of transforming your life—now.

3. Preliminary #3: Cause and Effect

If we light a match to paper the result will be fire. That will happen every time. If we exercise, we will increase our aerobic stamina. That will happen every time. If we correctly put all of the ingredients together, we will have the expected cake. That will happen every time. If we create the causes of suffering, we will suffer. If we create the causes of happiness, we will be happy. That is how it works. If we create specific causes, these causes will lead to specific predictable results. That means that if we diligently and intelligently establish the correct causes, we can intentionally orchestrate our life to achieve certain aims.

There are things that can only be found in a reliable and steadfast way within our self. Peace, happiness, love, wisdom, and freedom are amongst them. These things cannot be found fully, reliably, or permanently outside of our self, in the transient experiences of outer life. They can only be found within. We create the causes for these precious human possibilities by turning inward, calming our mind, resting in our natural state of being, gaining insight and understanding, and allowing our natural capacities to progressively reveal themselves and flourish. The causes are the practice of meditation, a meditative lifestyle, kindness, and compassion. Establish the precise and proper causes with good instruction and guidance, and the results will naturally and invariably follow. That is completely under your control.

For a few minutes reflect on how you can create the causes for optimal well being, serenity, and happiness.

Preliminary #4: What Do You Want to Do with Your Life?

As humans, unlike the rest of the animal kingdom, we have a choice. That choice is a simple one. Do you want to live an ordinary life—ordinary aging, ordinary disease and an ordinary death? Or, do you want a precious life that fulfills the promise of humanity and its special level of consciousness. I don't need to say much about an ordinary life. It is one in which yesterday, today, and tomorrow are lived much the same, guided by past history, conditioning, and habitual patterns of perception and reaction. Nothing new. The causes of an ordinary life are our past history and an unawakened heart and mind. If we do nothing, that is how we will survive until our life comes to its end.

Or do you want more to life? Do you want to come to the end of your days knowing that you have done what you could to be fully alive, living a vital and fresh life each day? If so, you have to create the correct causes. That requires the intention to fully develop your inner life and simultaneously allow it to inspire your outer life. If we want to become a good tennis player, we will seek out the best equipment and best coach. It is no different with a precious life. The equipment is meditation and the meditative pathway, and the guidance will come with the best coach you can find.

For a few minutes reflect on the kind of life you want—an ordinary life or a precious life? Are you willing to establish the cause for a larger, fulfilled life?

These four preliminary reflections establish a sound motivation and basis for a successful meditation practice. Reflect on them frequently and before each meditation session. It is important that they become installed in your mind like upgraded software.