The Guardian Meditations

July, 2001

There’s an old saying that we’re often our own worst enemy. And, in fact, a lot of the practice is built around that basic principle. Your real suffering comes from within. It doesn’t come from without. I mean, there are bad things that happen from the outside, but it’s how your mind reacts, what your mind does with those things. That’s where the real suffering lies. And so the purpose of training the mind is to turn yourself from your own worst enemy into your own best friend. The big troublemaker is the process of thought fabrication in the mind. All the thoughts you create that bring danger and bring suffering to the mind—greed, anger, delusion—this is where the real problems lie. Our problem is that we focus outside and put the blame on this person, that person, this situation, that situation. And it’s often true that those things really are messed up, unfair. But then, hey, the world has been unfair for a long time, and it’s going to be unfair for a long time to come. And if we wait until the world is straightened out before we’re really going to straighten ourselves out, there’s no end to it. So we focus inside. And the way of dealing with these thought processes is not just to throw them out or to deny them. We have to learn to think in more skillful ways before we can put them aside. There’s that famous passage where the Buddha is talking about how he observed the processes of his mind. In fact, he said this is where he really got on the right path. It was when he started just looking at his thoughts to see, well, where do they go? What do they lead to? When you think in a certain way, what are the results? He found that thoughts based on sensuality, ill-will, and harmfulness led to suffering, led to harm. Worse thoughts that were devoid of those things didn’t lead to harm, aside from the fact that if you keep thinking for a long time, it wears your mind out, it wears the body out. But it’s not that he went straight from harmful thinking to not thinking. He had to go through skillful thinking first. This is why right view is such an important part of the path. In other words, the Buddha doesn’t say, “Okay, just stop everything and just note, note, note, and everything is going to be okay.” Or, “Withdraw your mind from your senses and everything will be okay.” It doesn’t work that way. You have to learn how to think properly, think skillfully. There’s a series of meditations called the Guardian Meditations. That’s the basic principle that they’re based on. You find the real problems coming from within, and you’ve got to protect yourself from them. So you learn how to think in ways that counteract the thoughts that are dangerous to yourself. Like recollection of the Buddha, this is for times when you’re getting discouraged. We sometimes think that either something’s wrong with the path, or there’s something wrong with you. We stop and think about the Buddha, the person who founded the path to begin with. He was a sort of person who didn’t really need anything from anybody else. He had put his life on the line. Think about it. He had all that wealth, all that potential for power, and then he dropped it and went off into the forest and found his own strength within when he came back. He didn’t need anything from anybody, but he had a lot to share. It’s very rare to find a teacher like that. Somebody doesn’t say things just because they’re popular or because people will like them, but because simply they’re true and they’re helpful. That’s the kind of person he was. He attested to these things. I mean, he passed out a couple of times in the course of trying to find the true way. So you can take inspiration in him. As for when you get discouraged about yourself, sometimes it’s hard to think about the Buddha to solve that, because the Buddha almost seems superhuman. The Sangha, all the people over the centuries who follow the Buddhist teachings, sometimes it’s good to read through the Theragatthana, the Therigatthana. These are poems that are attributed to the Buddhist monk and nun students about the problems they went through, the troubles they had before they finally were able to gain awakening. You realize that they all came from the same place where we are. They had the same strengths, the same weaknesses we had. They were able to use those strengths to overcome those weaknesses. They were human beings. You are a human being. You start thinking in this way, and you feel more encouraged on the path. That’s the basic outline. When you run into discouragement, you have to work with the details yourself. But it gives you the basic principles that you don’t just run away from discouraging thoughts or simply watch them arise and pass away. You’ve got to learn how to counteract them. They have their reasons. You have to come back with your reasons that are better. They have their trick statements. Well, you can have your trick statements, too. Whatever works to just get yourself out of that rut, so you can bring the mind back to its home base here, which is the breath. The same principle works with anger. The antidote here is thoughts of goodwill. It starts with goodwill for yourself. Remind yourself, you just let yourself sit here and stew with anger. What do you get out of it? What benefits does it have? Well, there are no benefits at all. Then you start getting angry with people. You’re pulling yourself down to their level. You want to rise up above it. Right? Right. Then you can start thinking about thoughts of goodwill to them, thinking how stupid they are, how inappropriate their actions are, and how they’re going to have to suffer from those actions. And it’s just really too bad. You can think about the things they’ve done to you in the past that have been harmful. Well, there must have been some things that were helpful. Focus on those. On the one hand, it helps you get above the anger, but it also helps you just take a more realistic view of relationships in general. Whoever it was that said we could find true happiness on our relationships, they’ve done more damage. Because once you start placing that hope on a relationship, you’re placing more weight on it than it can hold. And no wonder people’s relationships crash, because of all these burdens they’re carrying around. So you’re realizing relationships aren’t perfect. The people who talk about perfect relationships are the ones who’ve gone through three or four husbands, three or four wives. And there’s a lot of delusion in there. So when you start thinking this way, you begin to realize, “Okay, where are you going to look for true happiness?” When you look back within, you can bring the mind back to the breath. As for lust, that’s what contemplation in the body is all about. In the chant we have every morning, day after day after day, ayanko me kayo. And sometimes it seems automatic and like it becomes mechanical as we chant it. But it’s a good thing to have buried there in your mind as a habit. Start recalling, “Well, what do you have in this body?” And you go down the list. Think about if you had those parts arranged out on the floor in here. You suddenly walked in the room and found them here. What would you do? You’d run away. What you have in your body, the other person has in his or her body. When you really think about it, what is there to get all worked up about? At the same time, this is a useful antidote to pride. This is what you’re carrying around inside you. It’s a useful meditation to counteract a lot of unskillful mental states. For people, a lot of pride and lust, all these mental states deal with a lot of denial. This is making yourself just look at what’s really there. Matter of fact, you can’t debate it. This body of mine, what’s in their head, hair of the head, is that true or false? Well, there’s hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin. Is there anything that’s a lie in that chant? It’s all true. And people complain and complain, “Why do we chant this so often? They come up with so many reasons why they’re beyond the need for this chant.” Well, the fact that they’re complaining suggests that there’s still some defilement in there that still needs to be worked with. So you look around and see, if you’ve got that inside yourself, that particular defilement, use this contemplation for whatever is helpful. And again, it’s just a beginning. You can start thinking in your own details, your own mental pictures, whatever you find. What way of thinking helps counteract that tendency to want to feel lust? Because that’s what it is. Without the desire to feel lust, who would want to feel lust if you really looked at it? It’s a really uncomfortable state of mind. Then you turn around and start thinking, “What does the mind have to do to itself in order to crank up the lust? In what ways does it lie to itself? What make-believe games does it play?” When you start looking at that, you begin to realize that there’s nothing really there that you want. And so you keep chipping and chipping away at the lust like this until the mind is ready to let it go and you can get back to the breath. The fourth guardian meditation is contemplation of death, mindfulness of death. It could happen at any time, even while we’re sitting right here. There’s that passage when the Buddha says, “When the sun goes down at night, just look at it.” Instead of marveling at how beautiful the sunset is, you might think to yourself, “I may not live to see the sunrise.” You might die tonight. Are you ready to go? Well, no, not yet. Well, what’s your unfinished business? This is a good antidote to complacency and laziness. The attitude that says, “Oh, I can do this tomorrow.” Well, maybe you might not have it tomorrow. And again, when tomorrow does come, the sunrise, if you’re still around for it and you see the sunrise, you think, “Well, I might not live to see the sunset. How many people woke up this morning who ended up dead this evening and had no idea that this was going to be their last day?” There are a lot of them out there. And someday that’s going to happen to you. Death will come in the present moment at some point. Are you ready to go? When you start thinking in this way, you can cut through a lot of garbage in life. You read about people who are told by the doctor they only have X number of days, X number of weeks, X number of months to live, and all of a sudden they drop all the inessential things in their lives and focus on what’s really important. Which is good that they’re doing that, but you wonder, “Well, where were they in the meantime? Did they think they weren’t going to die?” All that extraneous stuff they carry around. It’s good to look at your life in the light of death frequently to see where you’re creating useless entanglements, where you’re getting involved in things that really aren’t all that important. And particularly when the most important work you have facing yourself is this fact that you are your own worst enemy. And you’ve got to train the mind more in the direction of becoming your own best friend. That’s got to be top priority, because if that work doesn’t take top priority, everything else is kind of useless. You get fame involved. You can use that fame to harm yourself. You get money. You use the money to harm yourself. You get all the things that they call the good things in life. And if the mind isn’t skillful, they turn into instruments with which you harm yourself. So before you focus on thinking about those, you’ve got to think about this problem right here, the way in which the mind hasn’t really straightened itself out yet. It doesn’t have its own powers under control. It’s like somebody who’s given atomic energy. All kinds of things you can do with it, most of it very harmful. You’ve got to train yourself to use it in ways that are only good, only helpful. So a lot of times you find you’re trying to sit here to get the mind to calm down. It just won’t calm down. It’s a time to look at exactly what mental states are getting in the way, what kind of unskillful thoughts, unskillful attitudes, are getting in the way, and then how to counteract them, how to use their techniques against them. Once you kind of break through to exactly where the issue was, then the mind can settle down. And you find your practice goes back and forth like this, periods of stillness, periods of quiet, and then periods where you’ve really got to work through things. You can’t just turn off the thoughts, turn off your senses, and run away into a little corner where you’re oblivious to things. That kind of meditation is full of denial and leaves a lot of work unfinished. When you come out, there’s the unfinished work staring you right in the face. So you have to work on a combination of learning how to develop stillness, and the mind, so that you can turn around and use it to really look at things, counteract things, become more skillful in your thinking. Then use your skillful thinking to make yourself more still, back and forth like this, even when you’re just focused on the breath itself. Many times you find that there are times when you have to learn how to rethink the breath before you can get to a more still level. Sometimes you have to sit there and just be very quiet and watch before you can begin to understand some of the subtleties of the breath. The two processes go together, the questions and the stillness. The stillness and the rethinking help each other along. It’s like washing your hands. Your left hand washes your right hand, your right hand washes your left hand, and together they get clean.

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