Four Guardian Meditations, The

November, 2002

Sometimes when it’s difficult to settle down with the breath, you might want to turn around, look at your mind, see if there’s an underlying habit that’s getting in the way. A tendency in the mind that pulls you out of the present moment and sends you off thinking in a particular direction. If you can identify it, then there are ways to treat it. They’re called the cardian meditations. The standard list is four, but it stands for a lot of other types of meditation where you actually use your thinking processes to work through a particular problem. You set up other topics for your meditation. It’s part of what one teacher called “Using Your Discernment to Develop Concentration.” In other words, you notice there’s a particular tendency in the mind that either leans toward lust, or it leans toward anger, or laziness, or lack of confidence, doubt. There are ways you can think about it and also exercises for the mind that help pull it in the other direction. It’s kind of like a balancing act for the mind. If your mind tends to lean too far to the left, you practice very diligently leaning to the right. After a while, you get yourself sitting up straight. That’s the point where you can let go of the exercise and return to the present moment, return to the breath. The first of the cardian meditations is recollection of the Buddha. This includes recollection of the Dharma and the Sangha as well. It depends on what your particular problem is, what your particular doubt or lack of confidence is, whether you want to focus on the Buddha or the Dharma or the Sangha. If you have doubts about the Dharma, you might reflect on the kind of person the Buddha was. He had everything—money, fame, power, all the sensual pleasures you might want to imagine. And yet, it wasn’t enough. So he was willing to give it all up. Can you imagine someone, say, in the White House today, or someone in Hollywood, who just drops it all and says, “This is total futility”? He went off into the forest for six years and had nothing to do with anybody. That’s the kind of person the Buddha was. When he came back and he’d found the truth, he didn’t sell it. He didn’t even give a Dharma talk saying that Don is a 2,500-year-old fund-raising tradition of Buddhism. He gave it free. He didn’t ask anything from anyone, aside from the fact that they would practice the teaching. So you can think about that for a while. We have these phrases that we chant, “Araham samma sambuddho,” “Buddha is a worthy one,” “Rightly self-awakened.” You can think about that for a while, what it means. Think about the kind of person who found the Dharma that we’re practicing, and how rare it is to find a teaching like this that’s not for sale. It wasn’t for sale from the very beginning. It was offered out of pure compassion, because it had worked. If your doubts are more about yourself, you might want to think about the Sangha. And if you don’t know much about the Sangha, think about, go back and read some of the verses of the elders, or the elder monks, or the elder nuns. Many of them were quite ordinary people. Men, women, children. Educated, uneducated. Healthy, sick. People who gained it, like an easy people who gained it only after a long struggle. You read about them, and it gives you encouragement. That is something you can do as well. Years back, when I was in Thailand, after John Fung passed away, I was placed in charge of writing his biography to be handed out at his funeral. So I put down just about everything I could remember that he told me about his life, except there was one issue that he didn’t want put down. Those were images and visions he had in his meditation. He tended to be pretty tight-lipped about those things. But there were a few times he mentioned them. But I made sure not to mention them in his biography, which was pretty rare in Thailand, because that is usually the stuff of many of the biographies they write about the teachers. But one thing I did put down, which turned out to be quite controversial, was his talking about the difficulties he’d had in his practice, and the difficulties some of his fellow monks, who later on became famous at times, had as well. A lot of people said that that was inappropriate, but I personally felt that it was encouraging to realize that people who’d started out and had a hard time were still able to work through that hard time, were able to overcome the obstacles that they had, and turn into the famous Ajahns that we know today. This is an important thing for us to think about, too. Many times when we start out a new project, we like to focus only on doing the things that we have a knack for. Sometimes our education system encourages us, “The kids who are good at one particular topic get focused on that topic, or one activity, they’re focused on that activity.” There’s not that much training in learning how to get good at something that you’re not naturally good at, the kinds of what they call “emotional intelligence” that’s needed in order to encourage yourself, to keep yourself going, to pick yourself up and dust yourself off and look back and see what your problems are, and learn how to work around them. Those are important skills for us to develop. It’s many times encouraging to remember that people who later became arahants had trouble in the beginning. There are a couple of passages in the verses of the Elder Monks and Nuns about people who were totally distraught, had pretty much given up hope or were planning to commit suicide. They’d tried for years and years and years and their minds knew not even a moment’s worth of stillness, they said. Then something suddenly clicked and it came to their senses. So there’s always that possibility. If you have doubts about your own abilities in the practice, remember that it’s not always easy for the people who eventually came out on top. They had trouble, too. So fighting and dragging the mind back to the breath and dragging it back to the breath and all the other troubles we have as we meditate, it’s not futility. It’s well worth the effort. Because if you don’t put the effort in now, when are you going to put it in? It doesn’t get easier as life goes on. And if you don’t do it, who’s going to do it for you? We’d like to think that we’re the type that has the quick and easy mode of practice. But if that’s not the case, what are you going to do? Well, you deal with the hand that you’ve been dealt, play the hand that you’ve been dealt. So those are some of the things you can think about as you reflect on the Sangha. The Buddha or the Dhamma or the Sangha is a way of overcoming doubt, lack of confidence. Goodwill is for overcoming anger. That’s the second of the Guardian Meditations. And there are many ways of expressing goodwill. Sometimes it’s simply just the feeling. You don’t have to articulate it. “May so-and-so be happy.” Just a feeling of wishing people well. There’s an emotional tone that goes along with it. And you have to start out with yourself. Be with yourself. Be willing to tell yourself, “May I be happy. May I be truly happy.” Remind yourself that everybody deserves to be happy if they apply themselves to that goal. Most people apply themselves in only a half-hearted way. They want very much to be happy, but they don’t like to look too carefully at what’s required. If they run into difficulties, they tend to give up. But if you’re really serious about being happy, if you can make that determination in your mind that you really do want true happiness, you’re not just fooling around, learn how to respect that desire. Don’t be cynical about it, the way the world at large tends to be cynical about the desire for true happiness. I heard someone say, today, writing a letter in response to that romanticism article on Tri-Cycle, saying that the desire for the unconditioned is the feeble dream of the body. In other words, it’s not something to be respected. They say, “Make yourself at home with the wholeness and interconnectedness of things as they already are.” That’s where true happiness stays. That’s lowering your sights considerably. The whole point of the Buddhist teachings was to raise your sights. True happiness doesn’t change, doesn’t disappoint, is not dependent on the vagaries of interdependence. It is possible. It’s attainable. People of all kinds can do it. Learn how to have respect for that. That’s having goodwill for yourself. Once you can truly have goodwill for yourself, it’s a lot easier to have goodwill for the people around you. In other words, the wish for your own happiness is a wish that’s healing to yourself. That’s a basic friendliness with yourself. Once you can be at friends with yourself, then you can be friends with the people around you, even the people who’ve wronged you. You might look at whatever anger you’re carrying around with you and ask yourself, “What good does it do?” When, after all, you’re the one who’s suffering from the anger. Even though there may be a certain amount of sense of justification in holding on to the sense of being wronged, again, who’s carrying it around? Who’s weighted down by it? It’s a pretty miserable kind of happiness, miserable kind of sense of self-righteousness. If you learn how to let it go, learn how to be forgiving, you’ll take a huge weight off your mind. Being forgiving doesn’t mean that you’re going to love and forget what the other person did to you. It’s simply that you’re not going to pose any danger to the other person. That’s what abhaya means in Pali, “no danger.” The word for forgiveness means “no danger,” literally. It’s just that you’re not going to carry around a grudge. Contemplation on the body is the third one, like the chant we had just now. For many people, that’s a difficult chant or a difficult concept. Come to the practice already with an unhealthy negative body image, and here we’re getting more of it thrown at us. There’s such a thing as a healthy and unhealthy negative body image. The unhealthy one is when you feel that your body is ugly and everybody else has good-looking bodies. The healthy one is when you remember that everybody has the same stuff inside. No matter how good-looking a person may be outside, you start taking the body apart piece by piece by piece. We’re all equal. It’s a great leveler. It’s something very liberating about being able to think about these things, the parts of the body. After all, it’s not a very polite dinner-table conversation to talk about these things. That’s one of the reasons why we have so much trouble thinking about it many times, is that we’ve been socially conditioned not to think about these things. One of the ways you’re going to break out of your social conditioning is to allow yourself to remind yourself, “That’s what we’ve got in our bodies. That’s what I’m carrying around. That’s what you’re carrying around. That’s what we’re all carrying around inside. What is there to get so worked up about?” The reason we’re able to feel lust is because we cover these things up, pretend that they’re not there. When lust hits, you remind yourself, “Well, the object of my lust has this, this, this as well.” It tends to diffuse the lust. You begin to wonder, “Why? Why bother?” That turns around and focuses the attention. The problem isn’t really with the object of the lust. It’s the lust itself. If you can pry your attention away from the object, you begin to look at lust as an event in the mind. What is it like to feel lust? What does it do to the mind? What does it do to your life? Think of all the things that come about as a result of lust. John Swat always used to like to say, “If lust was such a good thing, why is it that most of the murders in the world are committed by people who’ve had sex together?” The strongest rage often comes when we’re talking about people who’ve had sex and the other person wrongs the person they’ve had sex with. If lust was such a good thing, why would it lead to such strong, destructive behavior? Is it something you really want to encourage in yourself? Once you see that it’s not a desirable thing, then it’s easier to let it go. It’s easier to think in ways that help cut it off. It’s by allowing yourself to think outside the box a little bit this way that helps get you around the defilements. After all, the defilements know that if you stay inside your box, they’ve got you surrounded. So you’ve got to get outside the box, learn to think in ways that you don’t normally think, to outflank them. Contemplation of death. That’s something else we don’t like to think about. That’s the fourth guardian meditation. Someone once said that one of the most amazing things about the human race is that everybody’s going to die. Everybody knows that they’re going to die, but they act as if they didn’t know. All the things that we know that we really should do deep down is how we find ways of putting it off. And then when death hits, either someone else’s death or our own death, it’s too late. So it’s healthy to remind yourself of this. Again, just as with contemplation of the body, sometimes there are ways you can go a little bit overboard with it. In terms of contemplation of the body, if you find that you can just get so disgusted with your body that you can’t eat or sleep because you’ve done it too much, as the Buddha said, at that point, drop it and go back to sleep. And the same with contemplation of death. If you just think about how short life is, you can get a sense of futility. That’s an unhealthy contemplation. The Buddha said healthy contemplation of death leads through to the deathless. In other words, the question should be, “Since I only have a limited amount of time here, only have a limited amount of energy, how should I best invest that time and energy?” And then the question is, “Well, what do you mean ‘best invest’? What’s left after death?” Well, the Buddha said death isn’t the end. What are you going to take with you when you go? Or even better, how can you get out of this process of dying and taking birth again, dying and taking birth again, over and over? Because there is a path of practice, he said, in four types of karma. There’s a path of practice that leads beyond death. Of the four types, there’s the path of action that leads to comfortable states within the process of birth and death, or relatively comfortable, the other one that leads to uncomfortable states, and the third leads to a mixture of the two. And finally, there’s a fourth type of karma that leads you beyond the cycle to the ending of karma. When you weigh all the alternatives, you realize that that’s the most desirable. That’s the one that you really want to focus on, because that’s the one that gives you direction to your life. Otherwise, this process of death and rebirth, as the Buddha said, is like throwing a stick up in the air. Your karma is so complex that you don’t know for sure whether you leave this life you’re going to go to a better place or a worse place or an equal place. You throw the stick up in the air, sometimes it lands on this end, sometimes it lands on that end, sometimes it lands flat. And the way most people lead their lives is pretty random. If you decide you’re going to head for the deathless, that gives direction to the whole process. John Munn once said that this is the most valuable thing you have as a meditator, the desire not to come back and suffer all over again. If you can hold on to that, that’ll see you through. But on days when you feel lazy, you remind yourself, “How much time do you have?” You watch the sun don’t go down in the evening. It’s a pretty sunset. But that might be your last sunset. Are you ready to go? No. If you’re not ready to go, what’s still standing in the way? Well, there’s work to be done in the mind. Okay, you do the work. It’s the same when the sun rises in the morning. You may not live to see the sunset. Are you ready to go? Well, no. I’ll get back to work again. That’s a healthy contemplation of death. All these meditations are called “guardian meditations” because they protect you from your own damaging mind states. As the Buddha once said, the biggest dangers are not outside, they’re inside, what the mind does to itself, how it deludes itself, how it destroys its own chances for true happiness. This is what these meditations are for, to protect yourself against those mind states. We have a tendency to identify with them, the lazy mind states, the lustful ones, the angry ones. The discouraged ones. That’s siding with your enemies. So you try to side with these other exercises instead. Even though they may seem artificial, you find that they really do strengthen the mind in the right direction. It’s like any kind of exercise. Of course it’s going to be artificial, but it has a good effect. That’s what you’re looking for. Everything comes down to cause and effect. This is why we have the teaching on not-self. If you identify with a particular mind state, you’re going to just get stuck there. But if you realize that whatever the mind state is, you can look at it in terms of its causes, where it comes from, you can look at it where it’s going to go, and you’re free to manipulate the causes so you get better effects. That’s why it’s important when you practice meditation to keep the principle of karma in mind. We’re here to see how that principle works in our minds, and we’re here to see how we can learn how to master it so we can bend it to our own advantage. That’s what the Guardian Meditations are for. Once you find that they’ve brought the mind to a state of balance, then you find it a lot easier to stay with the breath. Because you’ve brought the mind into balance. Where it used to be leaning to the left or the right, now it’s standing straight up.

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