Guardian Meditations

December 25, 2006

One of the important skills in meditating is learning how to read your mind, to see what it needs, to see where it’s going off balance and how you can bring it back into balance. That takes time and it takes experience. You can sense whether there’s too much energy or too little energy, and then the question is what to do with it when you find that it’s out of balance. This is why the Buddha has lots of meditation techniques, lots of meditation topics, for dealing with the mind when it’s out of balance. We take the breath here as our home. It’s called viharadhamma, the home for the mind. But sometimes you have trouble finding it. The mind is way off in the wilderness someplace, in the wilderness of your doubts or the wilderness of your laziness or the wilderness of your lust or your anger. So sometimes just to get back to the breath and stay with the breath requires that you put the breath aside for a minute or don’t worry about the breath for the time being. You use some of the other techniques that the Buddha teaches for getting the mind back into shape. Four of them are called the guardian meditations, and they’re good to know when you find things getting off kilter, out of balance. The first one is bhuttanussati, recollection of the Buddha. It’s so easy living here in America to forget what the Buddha stood for, because so much of society is aimed at making us into consumers. It makes you skeptical about the idea that there is such a thing as lasting happiness. Once you can forget about lasting happiness, then you say, “Well, what the hell? I want an immediate, quick fix right now. What can I buy? What can I purchase that’ll make me feel good right now?” They teach you to be skeptical about the idea that there is something that lies beyond space and time that you can touch, you can taste, for yourself, through your own efforts. So to get yourself out of that mindset, it’s good to reflect on what the Buddha stands for, what kind of person he was, someone who had all the good things that life had to offer back in those days. And it wasn’t that he left his palace because he didn’t have a computer. Or he didn’t have an iPod. Even if they’d had computers and iPods in those days, they still would have not satisfied him, because he knew there was something lacking in all these things. And no matter what happiness you got out of these things, it would never last. And you spend all your time working on a happiness that doesn’t last. It’s a big waste. He wanted something that was really true and lasting. That’s why he had to go off to a place where he could really look into his own mind. So that’s what he did. He sacrificed everything else for the sake of a true happiness. Then when he found that, he came back and he taught it for free. He didn’t need anything from anyone else. He’d found the ultimate happiness. If he’d wanted to, he could have just sat there, experiencing the bliss of release until he died. No one would have ever known. No one else would have ever benefited. As far as he was concerned, his job was done. But there was the question, “What about other people?” When he realized that other people could learn from him, he went out to teach. He taught for free. The first teaching was a teaching on generosity. What better way to teach generosity than to be generous with your teachings? This is why he taught freely. Anybody who needed the Dhamma, he was happy to teach. All he asked was that people be true. He said, “Bring me someone who is truthful and no deceiver, and I’ll teach that person the Dhamma.” That was his only prerequisite. He taught without holding anything back, anything that was really necessary for the sake of awakening. So that’s the kind of person he was. We are practicing the Dhamma of that person. We have the example of his life, showing that this is something human beings can do. They can raise their sights above the ordinary pleasures offered by the world. They not only raise their sights but also achieve their aim. So that’s the example. That’s the challenge of his life story. So when you find yourself getting discouraged in the practice or distracted from the practice, remind yourself of what the Buddha stands for. That’s one way of dealing with the mind when it gets out of balance. The next guarded meditation is goodwill. It starts with goodwill for yourself. Do you really want happiness? Are you serious about being happy? Almost everyone would answer in a sort of knee-jerk reaction, “Yes, what else would you want in life?” But then you look at the way most people live their lives, and it’s as if they didn’t take their happiness seriously at all. There’s that story about the man sitting eating a bushel of peppers and crying, and people say, “Why are you crying?” He says, “Well, I’m eating these peppers.” “Well, why are you eating them? You know they’re hot.” He says, “Well, I’m waiting for the sweet one.” That’s what it is with most of us in our search for happiness—things that haven’t really given us true happiness in the past. We keep going back to them over and over and over again. This is a sign of someone with genuine goodwill, even for yourself, much less for other people. So when you find yourself getting apathetic, remind yourself of what the Buddha stands for, or, again, getting careless. Reflect on goodwill. Goodwill is also useful, as are all the brahmavaharas, in dealing with anger or any unskillful state. If you really had goodwill for yourself, would you let yourself get bound up, say, in lust or anger or greed or jealousy, whatever the unskillful state may be? Then when you find yourself able to kindle some thoughts of goodwill for yourself, some genuine goodwill for yourself, then it’s a lot easier to feel goodwill for the people around you—the ones who are disturbing you, the ones who are irritating you. Realizing that if they could find true happiness, the world would be a much better place. There’s no need for you to exact revenge or to get back at other people or to teach them a lesson or whatever the chatter in your mind may be. Just wish for them to have true happiness. I once heard of someone who was practicing thoughts of goodwill for the irritating people in her life, and her way of doing this was to think of them wealthy with all kinds of material pleasures. She said, “Well, that’s not goodwill. Goodwill is saying, ‘May they find true happiness inside.’” Then you realize their true happiness doesn’t take anything away from your true happiness. So if you find yourself irritated by the people around you, have some goodwill for yourself. Have some goodwill for them. It helps to clear up a lot of those issues if you really think it through. Goodwill is not just a cloud of pink cotton candy that you spread out in your mind. It’s really thinking about the issue of true happiness, where it lies, what it would mean, how you’d go about it, what’s required. Then ask yourself, “What else is there to live for, aside from finding true happiness?” Let your mind settle down. Contemplation of the foulness of the body. This is for lust. If you look at your lustful thoughts, you realize that you usually tend to focus on this detail or that detail. So broaden the frame. Look at the body as a whole. First, start with your own body. Find which aspects of the body you find particularly unpleasant, disgusting. You might think of the different liquids that ooze from the body. What have you got here? The body you lust after, that’s got the same features right now. Then think of it down the line as it gets older, and when it dies, it becomes a corpse. All the stuff we find disgusting in a corpse is right here, right now, anyhow, already. It’s just that they’re disguised by the fact that there’s breath and there’s warmth in the body. Once the breath and the warmth are gone, what we’ve got here is basically a corpse. So when you broaden your view here, and don’t insist on focusing just on the things that are exciting or lust-provoking, you begin to realize that this is not anything really worthy of lust. What is it in the mind that needs some immediate pleasure? Can you provide that with a breath? When you find yourself lusting, there’s going to be tension in different parts of the body. Let those relax. Think of them being thoroughly relaxed all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. It helps to diffuse a lot of the tension that goes behind the thoughts. Then let’s find the recollection of death. This is for when you’re really lazy. You have to remember, you don’t know how much more time you’ve got. We sometimes worry about World War Three. It seems like the world is about to end. Trigger finger is really itching to get things going, to blow everything up, to destroy everything we’ve got. How much time do we have left? We may not even live to see that. We may even die before then. Are you ready to go? You know the sutta where the Buddha says, “When you see the sun rise in the morning, ask yourself, ‘This could be the last time you see it rise.’ Are you ready to go?” Well, if you’re not, what work do you have to do? Well, it’s work in the mind. It has to be done at the same time as when the sun sets. This might be your last sunset. Are you ready to go tonight? If not, what work do you have to do? It’s right there in the mind. So when you find yourself unable to settle down with the breath, look and see exactly what the problem is. And then remember, the Buddha has an answer. There are lots of ways of thinking that can bring you to a point where you’re ready to stop thinking. This is an important principle in the meditation. We think of meditation simply as not thinking, being with the present moment. But a lot of times you have to think yourself to that point. Motivate yourself. Motivate yourself to get there. Motivate yourself to stay there. Think in ways that bring you to your senses. So the mind comes back to the present moment with a sense of interest, with a sense of eagerness. Not simply because you’re supposed to be here, but because you realize that everything you want in life, in terms of true happiness, you’re going to find here. So you’ve got to look here. And be happy that you’ve got the opportunity, because there are so many people in the world who don’t. So take advantage of the opportunity while you have it, because this particular breath is not going to come again.

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