Guardian Meditations

September 2, 2007

There’s a passage where the Buddha discusses the factors of awakening and states that some of them are especially useful when your mind is overactive, and some are useful when your mind is sluggish. But there’s one he says that’s always useful, and that’s mindfulness. But that doesn’t mean that mindfulness is ever enough on its own. It has to be combined with other qualities to form a complete path. After all, the Buddha did teach an eightfold noble path, not a one-fold noble path. So it’s important as you meditate to look at what ingredients you’re bringing to the table, what’s too strong, and try to bring everything into balance. It’s also good to bring lots of different tools to the practice. There’s a passage where the Buddha says that when you’re trying to be mindful of the breath, the mind just won’t settle down. He says there’s either a fever in the body or a fever in the mind. In other words, everything is all antsy inside, and you’ve got to ask yourself, “Why is this?” Then you’ve got to find antidotes for the fever. One of the things he recommends is that you think of an inspiring theme, an inspiring topic, and you have to think about it. Think of it in a very directed way. In other words, you want to dig out the attitudes that are making it difficult for the mind to settle down. When you think about these topics, this really is an active form of thinking. It’s not just repeating a word in your head, like butto, butto, or whatever, or simply spreading thoughts of goodwill without thinking about what you’re doing. You have to evaluate as well. You have to see how that particular topic is relevant to the problem in your mind. First, you have to see if it is relevant, because there are lots of topics you can choose from that are helpful in different situations. One standard list has four. There’s recollection of the Buddha, goodwill, contemplation of the foulness of the body, and recollection of death. Each of these is useful for a different problem in the mind. You might want to run down the list and see which one is useful for your particular problem right now. In recollection of the Buddha, you think about the Buddha’s awakening. What are the implications of the fact that the Buddha was awakened, that he gained awakening through his own efforts? Think about how he went about gaining awakening, and also think about the content of the awakening as you know it, the lessons it has about issues in your present life. Say, after all, he was able to remember many previous lifetimes. If you think about the fact that you’ve got many previous lifetimes, does that put the issues in your life in a new perspective? He was able to see beings die and be reborn in line with their karma, in line with their views. The views that inspired their actions. Is that relevant to your problem right now? The third watch of the night, he was able to analyze the problem of suffering in the mind right here and now, simply looking at qualities of the mind and seeing that the problem inside is craving. This is good to reflect on when you find that you’ve got a problem with a particular person who’s getting under your skin. Remember that the person hasn’t really gotten under your skin. You’ve got something under your skin that comes from your craving and clinging. You may want to look into that. In terms of how the Buddha gained his awakening, it’s a matter of developing your awareness and developing qualities of mind that he said all human beings have in potential form, being resolute, heedful, ardent. You can ask yourself, “What’s lying in the way of your becoming more resolute, more heedful, more ardent?” See if this line of thinking helps. If it doesn’t, you can go on to metta. Goodwill, both for yourself and for people around you. This is ordinarily taught as an antidote to anger, but it’s an antidote to other things as well—carelessness, apathy. Remind yourself that you really do want to find true happiness. Do you have any trouble wishing yourself true happiness? You might want to look into the reasons why. If you don’t deserve it, the question of deserving never comes up in the Buddhist teachings. There is a path to happiness, and it’s open to anybody who wants to follow it, whether they “deserve” happiness or not. If you find you can have no trouble wishing goodwill for yourself, then wish goodwill for others. See if there’s anybody you run across as being particularly difficult. Sort out your reasons for not wanting to wish that person happiness. What would you gain from anybody’s misery? What would you gain from anyone’s suffering? Most of the evil in the world comes from the fact that people are suffering and miserable, and they want to spread their misery around. Just think these things through. In other words, you don’t engage just in directed thought, but you also engage in evaluation, contemplating, testing, and examining your attitudes around these topics. In terms of the factors for awakening, this comes under analysis of qualities—what’s skillful and unskillful in the mind. The third topic is the foulness of the body. This is particularly good if you’re attached to your body, you’re attached to your health. The body has to be a certain way. You want it to be perfect in this way or that. It’s got to eat certain kinds of food in order to stay alive and healthy. Is that attachment getting in the way of the mind settling down? There’s also, of course, the issue of lust. Analysis of the body into its thirty-two parts is a very effective way of taking apart your sense that the body is something that really is worthy of lust, worthy of desire. Start with your own body and then move around to the bodies of others. Everybody has livers. Everybody has kidneys. Whoever you might lust for has all these things inside the body that you’ve got inside your body. We’re all equal in that way. As Ajahn Suwat used to say, “The Buddha never lies to you about these things.” These are certain aspects of the body we don’t want to look at, especially when we’re determined to be lustful. This is what it really comes down to. It’s not so much that the body is out there trying to make you lustful. You’re lusting, and you’re looking for something to focus on. The purpose for taking the body apart this way is to keep focus on what the real problem is. It’s not with the body out there. It’s with your own mind, in particular, the desire to lust. You want to look into that desire. It’s easier to look at the desire in and of itself when you’ve learned how to take apart whatever object it may be fastening on. Direct the attention back to the desire. Look at it. Try to understand where it’s coming from. Think about also where it leads. If you were to give in to that desire, or even just sit here thinking about it for twenty-four hours, where would it take you? Not very far. You’d get the mind all worked up over nothing. As the Buddha said, our desire for sensual things comes from our inability to see that there’s an alternative to pain and the other alternative to pain. When we think about things in this way, that should incline your mind more towards being willing to settle down to find what that other alternative is. Finally, there’s contemplation of death. As the Buddha said, the contemplation of death leads to the deathless. It’s not meant to make you discouraged or despondent. Actually, it’s meant to make you more hateful. When you start getting lazy in the meditation, say, “Well, this is enough for tonight.” You have to ask yourself, “Well, is it really enough for tonight? Can you sit longer? Can you walk longer? Can you meditate longer? What if you were to die tonight? What if that little earthquake we had earlier this morning was a precursor for something really big? Would you be ready to go? If part of you says,”No, no, this has to be done first. That has to be done first. I don’t want to go. It’s okay. What can I do right now that will get me ready to go?” Then you realize that it’s working with the mind that will get you ready to go, because at least that gives you the skills you need, the tools you need to handle the fact of death, the process of dying. There may be a lot of unfinished business out there, but the world is filled with unfinished business. When people stop working, it’s not because their jobs are done. It’s simply that they just can’t manage their jobs anymore. You get too old, you get too sick, you get too tired. So if you find that you’re laboring under a strong sense that you’ve got to get x done, you’ve got to get y done, if there are things outside, remind yourself that the work of the world is never finished. However, the work of the mind can be finished if you really focus on it. That’s the one area where you really can get yourself ready, right here and now. So when you’re using any of these four topics, remember, it’s not just repeating a word over and over in your mind, like bhutto, bhutto, or death, death. You’re trying to analyze. When you bring up these topics, what reaction is there in the mind? Which part of the mind fights against that particular topic? You want to look into that because that may be part of the problem, why the mind can’t settle down. When you can convince yourself that, yes, you really do agree with the Buddha on these topics, that gives a sense of ease and inspiration in the mind. That can allow the mind to settle down. You take that sense of ease and inspiration and you bring that into the breath. As the Buddha said, when you find that you can come to a sense of inspiration from this inspiring or potentially inspiring topic, then you bring the mind back to your frame of reference, the body or feelings or the mind. Or as John Lee would say, you return to your home base. Breath is the home base. These other topics are places where you go foraging for food. When you’ve got the food, then you come back home, get back to the breath. As you’re dealing with the breath and things don’t seem to be settling down, remind yourself that sometimes the problem is with the way you’re thinking or approaching the breath. But other times there are other issues still gnawing away at the mind that don’t allow you to settle down, that create the sense of a fever in the body or the fever in the mind. So stop and try to develop right view around any of these topics. There are other topics as well. You can think about your path to past generosity, especially when you’re feeling discouraged in your practice and you feel like, “I don’t have it in me.” Tell yourself, “What do I have in me? What do I have in the past?” That’s good. Think of the times you’ve been generous. Think of the times you’ve held to the precepts, even when you attempted not to. Remind yourself that you do have some good to you. That can be another inspiring thought. Or, if comparing yourself to the Buddha seems like reaching a little too high, you can compare yourself to the different members of the Noble Sangha that you read about in, say, the Theragatha, the Therigatha, or any of the biographies of the Ajahns. It’s a lot easier to relate to the people in those places as human beings who are similar to you, because many times they talk about their weaknesses. Some of them are a lot worse off than you are now. So when you see that they were able to pull themselves together and make something out of their practice, remind yourself that you can do that too. It’s not just a matter of finding the right way to breathe or the right way to be mindful. It’s more looking at the whole. It’s trying to bring the body and the mind together. Sometimes the body is the problem, sometimes the mind. You’ve got some misunderstandings in there that may be getting in the way of your meditation. So sometimes it’s good to stop and try to sort those out in a way that encourages you to get back to the breath. After all, how did the Buddha gain awakening? He was focusing on his breath. How can you show real goodwill to yourself? You focus on the breath, making it comfortable, making it easeful. How do you try to find an alternative to lust? You focus on the breath. Where should you go when you realize that death could come at any time? You come back to the breath. In other words, when you think about these topics in the right way, it eventually pulls you back to the breath, hopefully with the right attitude, the right sense of encouragement. The right sense of heedfulness, whatever it is that you need right now. So you want to learn how to use your thinking as an aid in the meditation. Don’t treat it as an enemy. If you think skillfully, it’s a part of the meditation. Tamo vijayat, analysis of qualities, analysis of what’s skillful and unskillful. It’s a factor for awakening. So try to make use of all the tools that are at your disposal. Figure out which one is appropriate for you right now and learn how to master that tool. The meditation as a whole will become more and more of a skill, not simply a matter of shooting birds at night up in the dark where you can’t see anything, where everything is hit or miss. It becomes more and more of a skill where you have a definite sense of your own mind and what it needs and how you can provide for its needs so that it settles down.

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