Guardians at Death

October 6, 2024

When we meditate, we take our breath as home base. In other words, that’s the main topic we focus on, because it gives us a place of well-being. You can breathe in short ways, long ways, fast, slow, heavy light, and you can adjust the breath so that it feels just right for you right now, energizing when you’re feeling tired, relaxing when you’re feeling tense. This is the home base for the meditation. But the mind needs a lot more than just breath. Lots of issues come up in the mind. There are five in particular that can be obstacles to your concentration. And the Buddha also points out that there are obstacles when you die. He recommends that you get the mind in a good state of concentration. Because where your mind is focused at the moment of death will have a big impact on where you’re going to go. You want to maintain a focus that’s solid, clear, aimed either at total release or at least a rebirth where you can continue practicing. That requires real focus. It’s your learned focus here as you’re sitting here in relative comfort, relative ease. And you’re also going to learn how to keep your mind focused when the body is not in ease. Sometimes pains will come up in the course of the meditation. You have to learn how to sit with them. Don’t let your concentration get knocked over by them. Say, if there’s a pain in the knee, you don’t have to focus on the knee. You can focus anywhere else in the body that you can make comfortable. And when you have good energy in other parts of the body, then you can think of that energy flowing down. Through the nerves, through the knee. Flowing down through the blood vessels, through the knee. See what that does to the pain. Because when death comes, there’s going to be a lot more pain and a lot more turmoil in the mind. You need either the turmoil or the pain to get in the way of the focus or your concentration. This is why the Buddha talks about five obstacles to concentration. And he also talks about those same obstacles as death approaches. So if you learn how to deal with these obstacles now, you’ll have the skills you’ll need when they come and present themselves as obstacles then. There are five all together. They’re called niwanana in Pali, niwan in Thai, hindrances in English, sensual desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and anxiety, and then doubt. And these obstacles will require more than just breathing through them if you want to get past them. You have to think your way past them. This is why the Buddha gives different meditations for dealing with them. There’s one set, they’re called the guardian meditations. There are four of them all together. And they cover all five of the hindrances. Now you do the math, that means one of the guardian meditations will have to cover two of the hindrances. But it works out pretty neatly. The first of the guardian meditations is recollection of the Buddha. This is for helping you deal with doubt. When you have doubts about the Buddha, you have doubts about your ability to follow the teachings. You try to think about what was it about the Buddha that you found inspiring. The fact that he had wealth, power, and saw that wealth and power were not the answer to his desire for happiness. He was able to abandon them. Think of the famous people nowadays, famous politicians, famous movie stars. They suddenly said, “This is stupid, trying to find happiness in power, finding happiness in wealth. I’m going to give it all up and go into the forest and be anonymous.” That’s awfully rare. And then when the Buddha came out and found awakening, he came out of the forest and taught for 45 years. Taught for free. Didn’t charge anything for his teachings. He taught all kinds of people, everything from kings down to lepers, poor workers. Gave them his full attention. He was able to lead many of them to awakening. Sometimes it’s good to read the story of the Buddha. You notice the things you find fascinating, the things you find inspiring about him. So you have a greater sense of inspiration within Dhamma. And remember also that he was a human being. What made him special was his truthfulness, his determination not to settle for anything lower than the very best. He’s basically saying that the qualities that made him Buddha are things that everybody has in potential form. It’s simply a question of developing them. So you have them within you someplace. So it’s not just a matter of being inspired by the Buddha. You have to be inspired by the fact that you want true happiness and Buddhahood is possible. And that you have the potential qualities to do that. That’s a good line of thinking to keep in mind. Helps overcome doubt. The second guardian meditation is called goodwill. As I was saying this morning, realize that you want a happiness that doesn’t harm anybody. Because if your happiness harms other people, it’s not going to last. There’s a story in the Canon. King Vasanadhi is in his palace with his queen, Mallika, one-on-one. In a tender moment he turns to her and says, “Is there anyone you love more than yourself?” Of course he’s expecting her to say, “Yes, your majesty, I love you more than myself.” Because we’re Hollywood movie, that’s what she’s saying. But this is the Pali Canon. There’s no room for nonsense in the Pali Canon. She says, “No, there’s nobody I love more than myself. And what about you? Is there anybody you love more than yourself?” The king has to admit that no, he doesn’t love anyone more than himself. So that’s the end of that scene. He goes down to see the Buddha, tells the Buddha what happened, and the Buddha said, “She’s right. You could search the whole world over and not find anyone you love more than yourself.” In the same way, other people just fiercely love themselves in the same way. The conclusion he draws is an interesting one. It’s not that this is a dog-eat-dog world. It’s that you should never cause harm to anyone or cause them to do harm. In other words, you have to have goodwill for all beings. Take that into consideration as you’re looking for happiness. This is the antidote to ill will. And I was just saying earlier this morning, when you have goodwill for beings, it doesn’t mean, “May you be happy doing whatever you’re doing.” Killing, stealing, whatever. That’s not goodwill. Goodwill is, if you’re behaving in an unskillful way, may you stop that unskillful behavior. If you’re behaving in skillful ways, I’d like to encourage you. Because people are going to meet with happiness or misery based on their actions. So you want to inspire in them the desire to act in skillful ways. And your wish for all beings is that, “May all beings be happy,” means, “May all beings not kill, steal, engage in illicit sex, lie, or take intoxicants.” That’s a vision of the world that may be very unlike the world we actually see around us. But think about the Buddha. He met with all kinds of people in the course of his life. He had goodwill for all of them. And he found with some cases he could really help people. Other cases they were beyond his help. But in all cases he had goodwill. You want to be able to generate goodwill no matter what. Don’t let your goodwill be dependent on other people’s behavior. Because if your goodness depends on their goodness, what are you looking around us? What do you see? A lot of untrustworthy behavior. You have to make yourself trustworthy inside if you want to be truly happy. This is the antidote for illwill, the desire to see people suffer. And sometimes that desire can justify itself, saying, “Well, that person really was really bad.” People like that shouldn’t be allowed to go unpunished. But if they have the potential within them to see the error of their ways, that’s the best course for the future. Because that means they’ll voluntarily change their ways. Oftentimes punishment simply confirms people in their wrong views. They say the punishment was unfair, and they get more and more entrenched in their wrong views, their wrong attitudes. So the ideal attitude is, “May they see the error of their ways and be willing and able to act on the causes for true happiness.” When you have that attitude, you can go through the world and not have illwill for anyone. Your goodwill is solid. Because think about it at the moment of death, that there’s someone who’s wronged you in the course of this life and suddenly comes to mind. You don’t want the desire for revenge or the desire for justice to suddenly take over. Because that’s not going to take you to a good place. You want to go to a place where you can practice. That’s the second guardian meditation. It’s also good for restlessness and anxiety. Restlessness and anxiety cover two sorts of things. Your fears about the future and your concerns about the past. You look back at your past actions and you realize you behaved in unskillful ways. And that can lead to bad consequences in the future. And it’s easy to get anxious about that. But is this the best way to deal with that? Is to recognize that you’ve made mistakes. Recognize the mistake as a mistake. Resolve not to repeat it. Then have lots of goodwill for yourself, lots of goodwill for the other people involved. Then goodwill for everybody. The goodwill for yourself is so you don’t beat yourself up. The goodwill for others is to remind yourself why you don’t want to repeat that mistake. You approach the future with the right attitude, that whatever you do, you don’t want to harm anybody. As for the results of past bad actions, the Buddha says that the way they show their results depends not only on the action itself, but also on the state of your mind when the actions bear fruit. And if your mind is expansive, then whatever pain comes from that is going to seem a lot more minor than if your mind is narrow and confined. The image the Buddha gives is of a river. The river is broad and wide. You put a little hunk of salt in the river and you can still drink the water, because there’s so much more water than there is salt. But if your mind is narrow and confined, it’s like a little cup of water. You take that same lump of salt and put it in the cup. You can’t drink the water. It’s too salty. So you’re trying to make your mind expansive. With regard to past bad actions and also to future dangers, approaching the future with the right attitude, approaching whatever comes up with the right attitude, you find that you have a lot less need for worry or anxiety. The third garden meditation is contemplation of the unattractiveness of the body. You heard that chant we had this morning about the 32 parts of the body. It’s for dealing with lust and sensual desire. Because all too often we think about the body as being attractive in one way or another. And in doing so, we have to turn a blind eye to all kinds of things in the body. The skin is such a narrow film. If you peel off the skin of the body, what would you have? Things you couldn’t look at. You wouldn’t even want to go near because of the smell. And yet with the skin around it, we can be attracted to it and find it exciting, enticing. What is this about the mind? The mind likes to lie to itself. It wants to get excited about things. It wants to lust. So it’ll take any excuse it can. But then you think about what you get when you get a human body. Hair of the body, hair of the head, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, bones down the line. Nothing you’d want to stay around. If we took the different parts of the body out and scattered them on the floor, even if we put them in neat piles, we’d still run away. So when you find yourself getting distracted by sensual desire, think in these ways. Think of the drawbacks of what it is that has you attracted. At the same time, try to figure out, well, what was the allure? Was the allure actually something there in the body itself or was it something that the mind made up? All too often it’s made up in the mind. Yet here the mind is deceiving itself, placing obstacles in its way. Do you want that? You want to think in these terms until you decide that it’s not worth it. Then you’re willing to go back to the breath. And finally for dealing with sloth and torpor, the Buddha has you contemplate death. Death could come at any time. When you’re sleeping, there are two reasons you’re sleeping. One is you’re bored and the other is you’re really tired. Actually there are three. Sometimes something is coming up in the mind and you want to avoid it. So you just get very drowsy. And if the body really needs to rest, you let it rest. But you have to test it first. Because sometimes the mind likes to put up sleepiness as an excuse not to do something. Especially when you’re meditating. You find that you get sleepy, you’re drowsy, you’re yawning. You leave the meditation. You turn on the movie. You’re going to stay up past midnight. That’s a sign that the mind was lying to you. It was creating the symptoms of sleepiness to pull you away. So you have to test these things first. And one good test of it is to remind yourself you could die at any time. Do you want to spend the last night of your life, the last day of your life just napping, going to bed early? That’s an opportunity to develop good qualities in the mind. Because you have to ask yourself, “I could die at any time. Am I ready to go? What would pull me back? What attachments would pull me back? What defilements would pull me back?” And if you think of anything that would pull you back, we’ll work on that. In other words, contemplation of death isn’t something you sit for an hour and just think, “Death, death, death.” You ask yourself, “What work needs to be done in whatever time I have left?” Then you focus on whichever defilement seems to be the most prominent at that time. It’s in this way the Buddha says that contemplation of death leads you to the deathless. In other words, it gets you to work on the hindrances in the mind that prevent you from seeing that deep in the mind there is this element that doesn’t die. When you’ve experienced that, then you can approach death with much less fear. Because you know that that’s not touched by death. But to get there, you have to work with these hindrances, develop concentration based on the breath, and then whenever hindrance comes up, use one of these techniques. Recollection of the Buddha, goodwill, contemplation of the unattractiveness of the body, mindfulness of death. These are your guardians. They protect your mind as you’re trying to get it into concentration. And they protect you as death approaches. Because the mind will get scattered in all directions. Like that story they tell of the man who jumped on a horse and rode off in all four directions at once. The mind will be scattered everywhere. You’ll have that tendency to get scattered. So you want to gather things together. And don’t let any of these hindrances get in the way. You’ve got the tools you need. So learn how to master them. Because that will be for your long-term welfare and happiness.

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