

Guardian Meditations

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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 so that you can sense whether there's too much energy or too little energy. 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 *vihāra-dhamma*, the home for the mind—but sometimes you have trouble finding your way home, because the mind is way off in the wilderness some place: the wilderness of your doubts, 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 not worry about the breath for the time being, and use of the other techniques that the Buddha teaches for getting the mind back into shape. Four of them are called guardian meditations, in that they guard against defilement. They're good to know when you find things getting off kilter, out of balance.

The first one is *buddhanussati*, recollection of the Buddha. It's so easy living here in America to forget what the Buddha stood for, because so much of our society is aimed at making us into consumers, making us skeptical about the idea that there is such a thing as a permanent or lasting happiness. Once you can forget about lasting happiness, then you say, "What the hell, I want an immediate and quick fix right now. What can I buy? What can I purchase that'll make 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 an iPod. Even if they had had computers and iPods in those days, they still wouldn't have satisfied him, because he knew there was something lacking in all these things. No matter what happiness he got out of them, it would never last. If you spend all your time working on a happiness that doesn't last, it's a big waste. He wanted something really true and lasting. That's why he had to go away 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 true happiness. Then when he found that, he came back and he taught us for free. He didn't need anything from anyone else. He had found the ultimate happiness. If he had 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 that question: What about other people? When he realized that other people could learn from him, he went out to teach. He taught for free.

His most basic teaching was a teaching on generosity, so 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 truthful. He said, "Let someone come who's observant and no deceiver, and I'll teach that person the Dhamma." Those were his only prerequisites. And 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. And here we are, practicing the Dhamma of that person. We have the example of his life, so we can be confident that this is something human beings can do. They can raise their sights above the ordinary pleasures offered by the world. And not only raise their sights, but also achieve their aim. 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 what the Buddha stands for. Keep his example in mind. That's one way of dealing with the mind when it gets out of balance.

The next guardian meditation is goodwill, which 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 a man eating a bushel of peppers and crying. People ask him, "Why are you crying?" He says, "I'm eating these peppers." "Why are you eating them? You know they're hot." He says, "I'm looking for the sweet one." That's the way 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. Is this a sign of someone with genuine goodwill, even for yourself, much less for other people?

So when you find yourself getting apathetic or careless, reflect on goodwill. Goodwill is also useful—as are all the brahmaviharas—for dealing with anger or any unskillful state. If you really have goodwill for yourself, would you let yourself

get bound up, say, in lust or anger, greed or jealousy, or whatever the unskillful state maybe? 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 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 demanding. Just wish for them to have true happiness.

I once heard someone who was practicing thoughts of goodwill for the irritating people in her life, saying that her way of doing this was to think of them wealthy with all kinds of material pleasures. I told her, "That's not goodwill. Goodwill is thinking: 'May they find true happiness inside.'" Realize that their true happiness doesn't take anything away from your true happiness.

So if you're 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 from your mind. It's really thinking about the issue of true happiness, where it lies, what it would mean, how you go about it, what's required. Then ask yourself, what else is there to live for aside from finding true happiness? When you think in these ways, you get back into the practice, and it's a lot easier to get your mind to 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, and 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, it's got the same features. Right now. Then think of it down the line as it gets older and dies and becomes a corpse. All the stuff you find disgusting in a corpse are right here, right now, anyhow already, it's just that they're disguised by the fact that there's breath and 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. Then you start turning around to look at the mind: What is it that the mind needs or wants to use for some immediate pleasure? Can you provide it with some pleasure using the breath? When you find yourself lusting, there's going to be tension in different parts of the body. Let those areas

relax. Think of them as being thoroughly relaxed all way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-. That helps to defuse a lot of the tension that goes behind the thoughts of lust.

Finally, there's 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. There are sometimes stories about World War III. It seems as if the world's trigger finger is really itching to get things going, to blow everything up, to destroy everything we've got. How much time do you have left? We may not even live to see that. We may 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? If not, what work do you have to do?" It's work in the mind that has to be done. The same 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, then remember that the Buddha has an antidote. In addition to these guardian meditations, there are all the different recollections, and 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 to get there, motivate yourself to stay there, think in ways that bring you to your senses, so that the mind comes back to the present moment with a sense of interest, 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 to look here right now. All too many people in the world don't have that opportunity. So take advantage of the opportunity while you have it. Because this particular breath is not going to come again.