

## *Guardian Meditations*

*June 8, 2007*

If you've ever opened a book to look at dependent co-arising, your first impulse was probably to close the book because the topic is so complex. But actually there are some good basic lessons you can learn, even from your first impressions. The primary factor is ignorance. That's what starts suffering in motion. When you replace the ignorance with knowledge, that cuts the chain of causes and conditions leading to suffering.

So it's good to know precisely what kind of knowledge is called for here: knowledge of the four noble truths. This is why right view is always given as the first factor in the noble eightfold path. It starts with conviction in your actions: that your actions are real, that they really do have results, and that the quality of the results is determined by the quality of the mental state engendering the action. It's within this context that the four noble truths make sense. After all, suffering is a result of a particular mental action, or a series of mental actions—craving and ignorance being primary. If mental actions didn't have an impact on your life, the four noble truths would be meaningless.

This, of course, directs us to where we have to practice: We've got to train the mind. Notice that each of the four noble truths entails a particular duty, each of which is a skill to be mastered. You're trying to comprehend suffering so that you can let go of its cause. You develop the path so that you can realize the end of suffering. Those are the duties you have to master as skills. This is why in the Buddha's teaching there's no big controversy over sudden versus gradual Awakening. The kind of knowledge we're developing here, like any skill, is incremental. The more you work on it, the more sensitive you get. Ultimately you reach a point where you really understand.

The image in the texts is of the continental shelf off of India. It's a gradual slope and then there's a sudden drop-off. It's not all or nothing. The build-up is important, because the build-up is what makes you more sensitive. Only when you're really sensitive can you have those "Aha" moments that really go deep into the mind, open things up, change your perspective on everything. This is why the eightfold path is not only composed of right view, but also other factors that help to increase your ability to know, to learn, to be aware of the mind, and to help you let go of the factors that obscure the mind. That's why one of the Buddha's terms for the path is "developing and letting go." You're developing

clarity of mind; you're letting go of the things that obscure and defile the mind. So that's the big, important factor in the chain of causes and conditions: whether you're operating out of the right view of the four noble truths, or the wrong view of ignorance.

The other point that will immediately strike you if you look at dependent co-arising is how many of the factors come prior to sensory contact. Things don't just begin with sensory contact. You bring a whole load of preconditions to any experience, and working on those preconditions is what's going to make all the difference. For instance, building right off of ignorance there are what they call fabrications. The way you breathe, if it's done in ignorance, can contribute to suffering. That's physical fabrication. Verbal fabrication consists of the way you direct your thoughts to things and then comment on them. If this is done in ignorance, it's going to lead to suffering. Mental fabrication consists of perceptions and feelings: If you fabricate these things out of ignorance, they're going to lead to suffering as well.

This is why a large part of the practice is focused on the issue of perception: the way you label things, how they fit into the larger picture of your thoughts. And this is why the Buddha didn't just sit people down, and say, "Okay, just be in the present moment and don't think about anything else." He would often start his instructions by leading up to an understanding of *why* we're in the present moment, exactly what we're trying to look for in the present moment, what we're going to do about it when we see it.

This is why there are so many analogies and images in the Canon. They give you a framework for understanding what you're doing. And again, many of the images and analogies have to do with skills: Being a skillful meditator is like being a skillful cook, carpenter, or archer. There's a skillful way to perceive; there's even a skillful way to feel. Feeling comes not only from raw data, streaming in from the outside, but also from an element of fabrication and mental impulse. A physical impulse comes up your nerves, and your mind processes it before you're really conscious of it. What we're trying to do as we meditate is to learn how to bring some of these unconscious processes into the light of day. And a central element in these processes is the way you perceive things. You can consciously train yourself to perceive things in more useful, more skillful ways.

There's a series of meditations called guardian meditations, which are very helpful in using skillful perceptions to get the mind in the right mood, in the right attitude, with the right understanding, as you come into the present moment. You'll often find, as you're sitting here meditating on the breath, that the problem is not with the breath. It's with the mental baggage you're carrying with you. So you want to open up the bags and throw out all the unnecessary

weight. There's an image they have in Thailand of the old woman who carries around a huge bundle of straw on her back. She's always bent over because she's carrying so much straw. People ask her why she doesn't put it down, and she says, "Well, someday this straw's going to come in handy, so I'm carrying it for the day I'll need it." So she carries it wherever she goes. Of course there are many other things she could be carrying, but she can't because the straw is such a huge bundle, and of course it's pretty useless.

So you want to look into your baggage to see how much straw you're carrying around, so that you can lighten your load. Then you can replace it with better things, things that really will be useful. And the guardian meditations are a good way of sorting things out in your baggage.

The first guardian meditation is recollection of the Buddha, keeping in mind his Awakening, reflecting on it as a central event in the history of the world. The fact of his Awakening shows that through human effort true happiness can be found. It's an important point to keep in mind because so much of our modern culture tries to say, "Hey. You can't have an ultimate and deathless happiness, but you can have the happiness that comes from our eggbeater with an MP3 player built right into the handle," or whatever. In other words, they keep you focused on what you can get out of buying their stuff, which is all pretty miserable. How many articles in *The Onion* are based on this: "Woman discovers that buying that new mop did not deliver the fulfillment that she hoped it would bring to her life." In other words, our culture keeps us aiming pretty low: "Go for the quick fix. Go for something that doesn't require any effort or skill on your part, just money." They dress it up, make it sound like you'll be really happy if you buy their stuff.

So it's important to keep in mind that there was someone in the past who found true happiness and it was through his own efforts. And, as he said, it wasn't because he was a special god or anything. It was simply through developing qualities of mind that we can all develop—man, woman, child, lay or ordained: ardency, resolution, heedfulness. We all have these qualities to some extent. It's simply a matter of developing them. The same with virtue, concentration, discernment: These are things we all have to some extent. It's simply a matter of learning how to make them all-around.

So when you're tempted to go for the quick but short happiness, remind yourself, "The Buddha says that true happiness is possible, and that it can be gained through human effort." Do you want to live your life without exploring that possibility? Or do you just want to write it off?

In this way, keeping the Buddha's Awakening in mind is an important perception, an important perspective, to bring to all of your experiences. And there are many other things that you can gain by thinking about the Buddha's

life: the sort of person he was, his last message to be heedful. He was the sort of person who had already found true happiness. He didn't need to gain anything from anyone else, but he went out and he taught for 45 years, walking around Northern India. Wherever there was someone who was ready to be taught, ready to benefit from his teachings, he would walk there. That's the kind of person who taught this Dhamma. Not someone who was running a retreat center and needed to bring in cash, and who was willing to say anything to attract clientele, but someone acting totally out of pure motives, pure compassion. So that's the kind of practice we're practicing as we follow his path. And it's ennobling for us to practice in that lineage.

So these are good perceptions to hold in mind. Especially when you're getting discouraged or tempted to give up on the practice, or if you think, "Well, maybe I'm not up to this": Remember that the essential qualities for Awakening are qualities that everybody can develop. But we have to develop them ourselves. We can't depend on anyone outside to come and do it for us. That's the other part of the message of the Buddha's life, the part that keeps you on your toes.

The second guardian meditation is goodwill. You want to bring an attitude of goodwill to everybody around you. When the Buddha talked about goodwill in the *brahma-viharas*, it wasn't ordinary, everyday goodwill. It was goodwill all around, without limit. That's not easy. It doesn't come naturally to us. We tend to have goodwill for certain people, and not so much for other people. As a result, our actions very easily turn unskillful. It's very easy to do harm to the people we don't care about or who aren't on our list of people who deserve to be happy. And it's also easy to drop people from the list when the mood strikes us, to treat even the people we love in unskillful ways.

So to protect yourself from that kind of unskillful action, you've got to learn how to make your goodwill all-around, 24/7. That doesn't mean creating a cloud machine that sends out billowing clouds in all directions to hide your lack of goodwill. When you start spreading thoughts of goodwill, first you spread it to people who are easy—the people you already love and like—and then to people who are harder. Even though you don't like them, you can ask yourself: "Why would I not want this person to be happy?" After all, \*\* when people aren't happy, they can do cruel and miserable things. The world would be a better place if everyone could find true happiness inside, regardless of whether you like them or not, or whether they've been good or not, or whether they're on your list of the "deserving." And besides, who made you the National Bureau of Standards? Why should your likes and dislikes rule the world? In this way, goodwill meditation is meant to be a challenge for you to really think through why you'd want to limit your goodwill, and to remind yourself of why it's good

to have goodwill for everyone. You can't act on harmful intentions if your goodwill is all around. This is why it's called a guardian meditation.

The third guardian meditation is of the foulness of the body. A lot of people don't like this one. If we took a poll of meditators here in the West, we'd probably find this at the bottom of the list of popular meditation topics, yet it's very useful. Some people say, "Hey, I've already got a negative body image. Why do you want me to make it even more negative?" Well, there's healthy negative body image, as well as an unhealthy one. Unhealthy is when you see that your body is ugly, but other people have beautiful bodies. Healthy is when you see that we all have the same garbage inside ourselves: Nobody's liver would win the Miss Universe contest. This contemplation is helpful because it's a guardian. It protects you from inappropriate lust. There are so many people out there you could feel lust for, but if you acted on it you'd create a lot of trouble. Even if you're not practicing celibacy, you need a way to guard yourself against that kind of vagrant lust. So the next time you see an attractive person, instead of weaving all sorts of narratives from the ideas and associations you've developed around beauty, it's good to teach yourself other narratives, other associations. Right under the skin, what have you got? You've got all these blood vessels and nerves and *uck!* And as you go deeper, it's gets more *uck!* And what do you gain out of lusting for that? Why would you want it?

This sort of contemplation really goes against the grain, which is one of the reasons why it's useful to reflect on over and over and over again. Ajaan Maha Boowa keeps making the point: Don't count the number of times you've reflected on the foulness of the body. Just keep doing it until it's done its job. After all, our lusting after the human body is what led us to be born. This is what keeps us wanting to come back, and it makes us do really stupid things. So this contemplation is a useful tool to have in your arsenal. It's a useful new set of perceptions to develop. Our perceptions of beauty are dangerous, so it's good to learn how to see that beautiful bodies are not really beautiful. All you have to do is look inside a little bit and you see all kinds of stuff that can kill the lust if you really allow yourself to look at the body as a whole, and not just at the few parts you tend to focus on as being attractive.

The fourth guardian meditation is recollection of death. For most people this is pretty disturbing and depressing, but it's meant to be used in a way that's inspiring, that helps us to follow the path beyond death to the deathless. Remind yourself that we've got this practice that allows us to prepare for death and transcend it. Have you fully developed it? Are you really prepared? And the answer is almost always No. Okay, then, you've got work to do.

This is a good antidote for laziness. There's a great sutta where the Buddha talks about eight reasons for laziness and eight reasons for being diligent, and for

both lists the external conditions are the same. You can be lazy because you're feeling sick; you can be lazy because you are about to go on a trip; you can be lazy because you've just gotten back from a trip; you can be lazy because you just recovered from an illness; you can be lazy because you haven't eaten enough; you can be lazy because you've eaten too much. But you can also use those circumstances to remind yourself: "I don't have much time." When you just recover from an illness, instead of saying, "I'm still weak, I'm not quite well yet, let me rest," you remind yourself: "I could get sick again. I could have a relapse, but at least now I've some strength, let me give this strength to the practice." If you haven't eaten enough, remind yourself, "The body is light; I'm not spending all that time and energy digesting my food, so I've got more energy now for the practice." You've got the right conditions for sitting very quietly, very still.

So your attitude is what's going to make the difference between whether the circumstances you've got right now are reasons for laziness or reasons for diligence. When you remind yourself that you don't know how much time you've got, it should stir you to action—so that when the time comes, when you really do have to go, you're ready, prepared. You've got the concentration, you've got the power of discernment, you've got the strength of mind to deal with whatever comes your way.

If you sit around saying, "Please may I not die, please may I not die," someday you'll still have to die no matter how much you plead. A wiser attitude would be: "Please may I be ready when the time comes. May I have the strength to deal with any difficulty that might come my way." Then you realize that this is something you have in your power: to work on those strengths. After all, we've got the example of how the Buddha died. This is why these two recollections—recollection of the Buddha and recollection of death—go well together. The Buddha shows you how you can prepare. You look at the way he died: one last trip through all the jhanas. He died with no suffering at all and gained total release. It's possible for a human being to do this. If you think that comparing yourself to the Buddha is too much of a stretch, think about the members of the Sangha. You can read the verses of the elder monks and the elder nuns. Some of them were pretty miserable, total losers in meditation at first, and yet they were able to pull themselves together. They could do it; you can do it.

So these four contemplations are guardian meditations to bring wisdom into your perception of things, the labels and ideas you bring to your experience. The more you develop them, then the better the set of associations, the better the set of narratives you bring to, say, just the fact you're breathing, or the fact you're seeing, hearing, tasting, or touching things in the present moment. In other words, what you bring into the present moment is going to make all the difference.

This is why we train the mind. This is why we practice—so that when the time comes to perform, you can perform well, in a way that doesn't lead to suffering. You bring knowledge into the equation so that no matter which factor of dependent co-arising you're looking at—whether it's feelings, contact, craving, clinging, or whatever—you can untangle the conditions for suffering and replace them with conditions that lead to the end of suffering.

So learn how to develop these topics along with the breath. They help put the whole practice into the right narrative, into the right perspective, and they protect you so that you aren't constantly causing suffering for yourself and the people around you. That's the best protection there is.