Guardian Meditations

June 12, 2025

The Buddha talks of times when you meditate, you try to focus on the breath or any of the other topics in the body, but there’s a fever. A fever in the body, a fever in the mind. It doesn’t allow you to settle down. In cases like that, he says, try to find another theme that’s inspiring. Focus on that. Find something that the mind likes to think about. If it’s not going to watch the present moment, at least it can think about things that are related to the Dharma, and gradually get itself in the mood to settle down. So maybe your mind is like that. It’s what Ajahn Mahāprabhu calls discernment fostering concentration. You have to think your way to stillness. Think your way to a place in the mind where the mind is willing to stop its thinking. Settle down. So there are lots of different lists of topics in the commentaries. They talk of 40 different meditation topics. And there’s a standard list that’s very popular in Thailand. It’s called the Guardian Meditations. There are four of them. You can try them on for size. The first one is recollection of the Buddha. Think about the person who found this Dhamma. He was wealthy. He had power. Everything that you could wish for back in those days. And he saw that it wasn’t enough. That no matter how powerful you were, no matter how much wealth you had, no matter how well your life went, it was going to end. Whatever it should be. All the effort you put into pursuing things that would age, grow ill, and die, would mean that your life when you died wouldn’t have anything to show for all the effort that went into it. He wanted to find something that was deathless. That’s how he framed his search. He called it the Noble Search for something that doesn’t age, doesn’t grow ill, doesn’t die. He left his house. They say it’s a palace. Went out into the wilderness. Lived off alms. Tried whatever method he could think of to purify the mind. And after many years of trial and error, he finally gained awakening. Gained awakening because he was so determined that whatever skill there might be, he was going to master it. That the mind wasn’t skillful enough. He’d keep on trying, trying, trying. When he found that Dhamma, he taught it for free. He walked all over India. Northern India. Teaching wherever might be available. Might be ready to hear the teaching. A wide range of people, everything from kings down to lepers, and very poor people. He sounds so good that it sounds almost unreal. But it’s because of someone like that that we have this Dhamma. So think about that. You can think about events in his life. You can read up on his life. And focus on events that you find inspiring. One of the stories I find inspiring was when Devadatta, his cousin, was trying to take over the Sangha. He tried various methods. Nothing worked. So he finally decided to arrange to have the Buddha killed. He had the king hire some archers. The first archer was told to go in, shoot the Buddha with a bow and arrow. Then go by a certain route to get away. Then two other archers were placed at that route to kill him. They were told after they’d done their dirty duty, they should go down a certain route. Four archers were placed there to kill them. Then eight. Sixteen. Lots and lots of archers. The first one comes in. As soon as he gets in the presence of the Buddha, he’s struck with fear. The Buddha says, “You can put down your bow and arrow and come in. I’ll teach you.” So he comes in. The Buddha teaches him. Something called the graduated discourse. He taught him about generosity and virtue. The rewards of generosity and virtue in heaven. The drawbacks of those rewards. And seeing renunciation, in other words, the pleasure of concentration, as rest for the mind. You can imagine, as someone who was a hired killer, listening to this drama, the focus of that teaching. I always thought it was a shame that we didn’t have the text of what he taught. Just the general outline. At any rate, the archer was able to gain the Dhamma Aya and became a noble disciple. The Buddha saw that this person had buried someplace in him the potential. And even though he’d been willing to accept a little bit of money to kill the Buddha, the Buddha didn’t hold that against him. He taught him. And then told him, “Don’t go the way you were told to go. Go another way.” So the man was saved. Then he did this with all the other archers, as they were curious. What happened to the archers that were supposed to kill? They came in, group by group by group. And the Buddha was able to teach all of them to become stream-enterers. That’s pretty amazing. But then you can find other incidents in the Buddha’s life that you find inspiring, and you think about them. If your mind is inclined to like to tell stories, well, tell yourself these stories. Convince yourself that you would like to practice the Dhamma found by this person. The second guardian meditation is goodwill. Goodwill is for happiness, true happiness, which means it’s the happiness that comes from within. As we know from the Buddhist teachings on karma, people are going to be happy, not because you simply wish them to be happy, but because they create the causes of happiness in the skills of their thoughts, their words, their deeds. Which means that when you’re extending goodwill to yourself, extending goodwill to others, whether you deserve goodwill, whether you deserve happiness. When the Buddha was teaching the end of suffering to people, he didn’t ask them first, “Do you deserve to suffer?” Everybody he knew had karma that would induce them to suffer, but they didn’t have to suffer from it. That’s what the teaching was all about. And again, he didn’t hold people’s past against them. This is the way out. That should be the attitude you have to others as well. There are a lot of people out there who are behaving in really bad ways, and your wish for them should be, “May they understand the causes for true happiness and be willing and able to act on them.” Which in many cases means, “May they stop doing what they’re doing voluntarily and get on the right path.” You don’t want to teach anybody without hypocrisy. There may be part of your mind that would like to see people suffer a bit for their past deeds. But then again, you think back on the Buddha. He taught many people, probably people who had killed him in previous lifetimes, people who had mistreated him, but he never held it against them. You want to teach everybody who had the potential. You want to teach the nature of his goodwill, and you want to learn how to develop that kind of goodwill as well. Send your thoughts out in all directions. As the Buddha said, “Make this immeasurable, as far as you can imagine.” One of the standard practices that was developed centuries immediately after the Buddha passed away was to think of specific directions, one by one. West, north, south, south-east, north-west, north-east, south-west, below, above. So send your mind out in those directions. With you right in the middle. With a sense that there’s no direction in any direction, whether it’s anyone that you have ill-will for, that can settle the mind down. As long as you want to maintain that perception, hold that perception in mind. The Buddha compares that to a person who plays a trumpet. You play the trumpet and the sound goes in all directions. You don’t say this sound is going to go to that person, that sound is not going to go to this person. Everybody gets to hear the sound. The third guardian meditation is called contemplation of the unattractiveness of the body. This is usually taught as an antidote to lust, but it also can just be an inducement to sanghvega. If you think of how much of your life is devoted to looking after this body, but what is there in there? If you took the skin off and took all the different pieces, all the different parts, and put them on the floor here, you’d run away. Now you sew them up, put them back in the body, and it’s perfectly fine, perfectly attractive. Why is that? How can the mind see these things, know these things, and still turn a blind eye to them? The purpose of this is to see whatever thoughts of lust or pride or attachment you have, for the body, are really misplaced. The problem, of course, is not with the body. It’s not making any claims on you. You’re the one making claims on it. But you want to see that it’s not worth the attitudes you developed for it, so that you can then turn on the attitudes themselves. What is this desire for sensuality? What is this desire for pride? When you look at the mind straight on like that, then you can put aside the thought of the body, and you might be willing, at that point, to settle down with the breath. Finally, the fourth guardian meditation is recollection of death. The fact that no matter what you gain in this lifetime, you have to leave it behind. And you don’t know when death is going to come. So what will you be able to take with you? You’ve got your actions. You’ve got your state of your mind. That’s what you’re going to focus on. Recollection of death is not just thinking death, death, death all the time. It’s reminding yourself there’s work that needs to be done. You don’t know how much time you have to do it. But you do have right now. But it is good to think of all the death all around you. They say, what, 200,000 people die every day? And yet the world keeps going on, going on, going on. And beings keep on going on. And being reborn. What do you take with you? Your state of mind. What kind of state of mind would you have if you had to die? Are you ready to go? The answer usually is no. So the next question is, what are you holding on to? What’s keeping you from being ready? And John Lee compares it to suddenly being told that you have to immigrate. You can no longer stay in this country, you’ve got to get out. You just take whatever you have near at hand. But what do you have near at hand? What are the qualities of your mind? Because that’s what you can take for sure. The things of the world, you have to leave them behind. So that gets you more and more inclined to want to develop the mind. To see the importance of the mind. Getting it trained, getting it under your control. At that point, you might be willing to meditate on the breath. To say, how can I get the mind to say you’re in the present moment? Not just to be with the breath. But once you have the breath as an anchor, you can start seeing the processes of the mind. Because that’s what the meditation is all about. We spend our lives looking at the products that the mind keeps creating. We very rarely turn around and say, well, what is the process? Why is the mind so avid to create stories that it tells itself and then lets go? They hold your interest for a little bit and then they get boring. Then you have to find something else. Something else. Something else. What is the process? And why do we get so addicted to it? That’s what you want to see as you get settled down here with the breath. Use the breath as an anchor. As the forester John would say, we look at the breath not to get the breath, but to get the mind. And to understand these processes by which it keeps creating things. Then it finds lacking, empty, and it moves on, creates some more, moves on, creates some more. Maybe there’s an alternative way to find happiness. By learning to see the processes and learn how to get beyond them. That’s what the Buddha promises. That’s what he found. That’s why he had the compassion and the goodwill to teach everybody. So these guardian meditations come together. In the sense that they make you want to meditate. They protect you from yourself. That’s why they’re called guardian meditations. But they also turn you in the right direction. So if you find that sitting down and focusing on the breath just does not capture your imagination, does not capture your mind, try some of these themes. Until you get the mind into the state where it really is willing to settle down and learn about itself in the present moment. That’s how these themes offer protection.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2025/250612_Guardian_Meditations.mp3>