

Guardian Meditations

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One of Ajaan Fuang's students commented that as she began to meditate, it seemed like her mind was getting more and more defiled all the time. His reply was that it was like cleaning the floor of your house. If you don't clean the floor, dust settles and, in the course of a day, you have no idea how much dust is settling because it's just being added to the dust already there. It doesn't seem to be anything new, anything out of the ordinary. But if you wipe down your floor every day, then the least little bit of dust that falls is going to appear, and you won't be able to bear it.

So take it as a good sign that you're beginning to see your defilements as defilements, and not just accepting them as part of the ordinary way the mind has to run. This is one of the advantages of having the mind clear and calm and still. You can hear the voices of the defilements—because they have their reasons. It's not the case that you have just pure passion as opposed to reason, because your passion has its reasons, aversion has its reasons, delusion has its reasons.

The thing is, their reasons don't stand up to much scrutiny. When the mind is really clear and you're really on top of these things and you can actually see them as the Buddha says, "as something separate," then you can see how weak their reasoning is. So, of course, what do they do? They make it hard for you to get the mind to settle down. They get in the way even before you can get the mind calm. They have lots of tricks.

The big trick, of course, is making you identify with them, because after all that's why they're there. We talk about the committee of the mind with all its different voices, and you've been every one of those voices at some time in your life. That's why the voice is there. You've adopted that view either from something someone else said, or just the tone of voice that someone else said something to you, or sometimes you're not even clearly aware of how these ideas get into you. They just seep in through the culture. But you've identified with them in the past, and so it's very easy for them to get you to think you should identify with them again.

This is one of the reasons we have the practices for calming the mind. They don't allow us to see the defilements only after we've gotten the mind to calm down. We're also challenging them *while* we try to get the mind to calm down. That makes them stir out of their lair a little bit.

To get the mind calmed down you need lots of different strategies. We talk a lot here about the breath. As Ajaan Lee says, that's home base among the various meditation topics. But then there are other topics that he calls your "foraging areas"—in other words, places where the mind can go, and where it sometimes *has* to go in order to get it to settle down when it won't settle down with the breath. There's one standard list of these places, called the

guardian meditations.

The first guardian meditation is recollection of the Buddha. This is for times when you're feeling discouraged, when you're feeling not quite up to this path, or when you start having doubts about the path itself. You reflect on the Buddha: What kind of person was he? Someone who was totally honest and totally harmless. He wanted a happiness that was blameless, which meant a happiness that didn't cause any harm to anybody. He realized that he had to be very strict with himself to carry through with that aspiration. And he was strict with himself—to the point where he developed the three attributes that we think about when we think of the Buddha: his purity, his wisdom, and his compassion. That was the kind of person who found this path.

Now, the problem with thinking about how amazing a person the Buddha was, is that it's hard for you to relate to him. In that case, you can think about the Sangha instead, the noble Sangha. You read about them in the Therigatha and Theragatha, various monks and nuns, and the problems that they encountered in their practice and how they overcame them. Some of them were even suicidal. They had problems with lust, problems with disease, problems with discouragement, and yet they were able to find resources within themselves that enabled them to overcome those problems.

These are good reflections for the times when you're feeling discouraged in the practice or feeling doubtful—in other words, when your defilements are trying to make you doubt that you're up to this. So you use this guardian meditation to protect yourself from the big danger, which of course is the danger inside.

Another guardian meditation is goodwill. This is for times when you're feeling angry at other people. You have to remind yourself: If you want safety in this world, you have to give safety to others. This is one of the reasons why we observe the precepts. No harming, period. As the Buddha said, when you're resolved to be harmless to all, in line with the precepts, with no exceptions—when the safety you're giving is universal, then you have a share in that universal safety. If the safety you give to others is partial, then your safety is only partial.

So learn to see your anger and your aversion as dangers within you. Then you develop goodwill for yourself. You don't want to inflict those dangers on yourself and you don't want to inflict them on others. Then you develop lots of universal goodwill, spread it around to everybody without exception.

The Buddha said that you should care for this universal goodwill in the same way that a mother would care for her only child. In other words, you maintain it despite anything that anybody might do. So goodwill for yourself means not harming others. Then you start thinking about them. They want happiness, too, just like you. It's simply that we live in this world where people have lots of different levels of understanding and levels of behavior, so you have to be forgiving. In this way, when anger comes up, you've got a tool to deal with it.

Sometimes people say, "Will everybody truly be happy? When you say 'May all beings be

happy, may all beings be happy, will they be happy?” Even the Buddha didn’t answer that question. Someone asked him one time, “Will the whole world, or half the world, or a third of the world reach awakening?” He didn’t answer. And as Ven. Ananda later explained to the person who asked the question, the Buddha’s main concern was that if people want to find happiness—and it’s their choice—if they want to put an end to suffering, this is how it has to be done. But because people have free will, there’s no telling what the choices made in the future will be.

So the whole purpose of goodwill is not so that we think that someday all the world will all be happy. It’s because we’re responsible for our actions, we’re taking responsibility for our actions, we’re not going to blame our actions on anybody else’s unskillful behavior, so we want to make sure that our motivation is right, that it’s harmless, both for ourselves and for other people. That’s the second guardian meditation.

The third is contemplation of the unattractiveness of the body. This is for, one, lust, and two, pride, that we might have around the body—and particularly about its appearance. The Buddha’s not saying the body is bad. After all, what do you use to sit and meditate? Your body. What do you use to do walking meditation? Your body. When you’re being generous, you’ve got to use your body. If you didn’t have this body, you’d be stuck, like those devas or those spirits who want to make merit but they can’t. So you’ve got this opportunity, through the body. Simply make sure that you don’t get sidetracked by getting carried away with the body’s appearance.

Look at what’s inside. What have you got in there? You’ve got a stomach, intestines, feces, new food, old food, lungs, liver, a stomach, a spleen, blood, puss, sweat—none of which are attractive. Even the skin that covers it all up, if you just had the skin on its own, would be pretty disgusting. So it’s good to take the body apart like this when you’re feeling lust, when you’re feeling pride in the body’s appearance.

There’s a place where the Buddha said that when you can see yourself as attractive, that’s when you’re able to see other people as attractive as well. Some people say, “Well, I don’t see myself as attractive at all.” But still, there’s something in there that’s really attached to the body. We’ve got to learn to ferret that out because a lot of our defilements come from our attachment to the body, which then spills over to attachment to other people’s bodies.

So the Buddha has you do this analysis first on yourself, then on others. If you have a really bad unhealthy body image, sometimes it’s useful to start doing it with other people whose bodies you’re jealous of and you see, well, there’s really nothing much there to be jealous of. Then you can apply it to yourself. But the purpose here is to ferret out the various defilements that can lurk around your attitude toward your body.

The fourth guardian meditation is mindfulness of death; realizing that it could come at any time. And the question is, are you ready? The Buddha recommends every evening at sunset, when you see the sun slipping behind the hill over there, telling yourself: This could be the last

time you see it. All kinds of things can happen at night. Are you ready to go?

Every morning at sunrise, same thought: “This could be the last time I see the sunrise. All kinds of things can happen in the course of the day, am I ready to go? If not, what do I need to do to prepare my mind so that it is ready to go?”

Another way of thinking about death is if something really unskillful is going through the mind—you find yourself feeding on unskillful thoughts—you ask yourself: “Suppose I had a sudden heart attack right now or sudden stroke and these were the thoughts going through my head. How would I feel?” This is a contemplation that’s really good for clearing out a lot of complicated reasoning and rationalizing that your defilements can make. This cuts right through.

So these are some of the basic themes that are used in what are called the guardian meditations for dealing with different kinds of defilements. Part of your skill as a meditator is learning how to know when to use them, and how to work variations on them. After all, when the defilements come, they don’t come with just one disguise, with one set of reasons. They have lots of different reasons, lots of different disguises. You have to learn how to vary these techniques so that they’re appropriate for the particular defilement you’ve got right now.

As the ajaans in Thailand like to say, the defilements are clever, but the discernment you can develop out of your desire to put an end to your suffering, that can be more clever. They can be tricky? Well, you can be tricky too. You have lots of different things up your sleeve: different techniques, different ways of applying the techniques. This is all part of your skill as a meditator, developing your repertoire.

So when one defilement comes and you feel you’ve dealt with it successfully and then it comes back again another day, don’t get discouraged. Just remind yourself: It can come in lots of different forms, so you have to use your ingenuity to deal with the new form. Keep this up and have this attitude that whatever comes at you, you’re going to figure out a way around it. That’s half the battle right there.

The part of the mind that’s all too ready to give in: That’s the one you’ve got to watch out for—the one that makes excuses, that’s already siding with the greed, aversion, and delusion. As Ajaan Mun said, “You have to have the attitude that you don’t want to come back and be the laughingstock of the defilements ever again.” You’ve got to have that kind of determination. You’ve had enough. Now, part of the mind will say, “No, not quite yet, not quite yet.” So you’ve got to question that. What exactly in the defilements are you holding on to? What do you still hope to squeeze out of them? Examine that voice.

In doing this, you learn an awful lot about the mind, and in learning about the mind in this way you develop your discernment. The discernment doesn’t come just from memorizing what’s in the books or taking ready-made ideas and adopting them. The ideas we pick up from the Dhamma talks we hear, the ideas we pick up from the books: These are the beginnings of what you can do, but you’re going to have to learn to work your own variations on them. And

in doing so, your discernment becomes just that: It becomes *your* discernment. It's not borrowed goods any more. It's something you've learned how to produce yourself. And when that discernment becomes yours in this way, that's when it's really effective.