

## *Guarded*

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There's a passage where the Buddha recommends a way of thinking to help overcome your hatred of another person. It starts out, "This person has wronged me, but what should I expect? This person has wronged people I love, but what should I expect? This person has done good things for people I hate, but what should I expect?" And he has you go through similar thoughts not just the past tense, but also the present tense and the future tense. It all sounds pretty cynical. The trick is learning how to think in these ways and not be cynical. And that comes down to the tenth contemplation, which is that you train yourself not to get worked up over impossibilities.

We would like for the world to be full of wonderful people, where everybody's fundamentally good, everybody's trustworthy. That's how we usually come into life—assuming that we can trust people. And then we find that there are people we can't. You only have to look in your own mind: You have all kinds of attitudes in your own mind—good, bad, indifferent. Everybody else is the same way. We try to feed off the goodness of other people, and when they don't have goodness to offer, we find ourselves feeding off their bad qualities—which, of course, make us sick. This means we have to be guarded.

This is one of the qualities I noticed in Ajaan Fuang. He was very guarded in his words, guarded in whom he would trust, but he managed to do it in a way that wasn't cynical. He was just very realistic. And to not be cynical, you have to be in a position where you're not trying to feed off of other people. You have to train yourself, if you can, to feed off the good qualities of your own mind. That way, you can live with the ups and downs and the goods and the bads in the world, and not have any ill will over the bad parts. Ill will comes from wanting something out of other people and then not getting it. But if you can put yourself in a position where you don't feel threatened by other people's bad actions, bad words, bad thoughts, and you're not trying to find anything to feed off of them, then you can live in the world with goodwill for everybody—realizing we all have our good and bad sides.

You try to look for the good in other people so that you can help develop goodwill, but realizing at the same time that you can't always trust that it's going to be there or it's going to be ready to be developed. So how do you do all this? Start out by working on the technique of getting familiar with your breath, noticing when you breathe in, breathe out, where does it feel good, where does it not feel so good? How can you tell when a breath is too long or too short? How can you read what the body's needs in terms of breath energy? These are all skills that you can work with over time, over time.

Find a spot where you feel at home inside, let your attention settle there and learn how to protect it. One of the ways in which we feel invaded or threatened by other people is when we

feel their energy moving into our energy field. And one way to prevent that is, once you've got some good energy going in your selected spot, that you allow it to spread. Think of your own awareness filling the whole body, at the same time allowing that sense of well-being to seep out and spread throughout the whole body as well. This then becomes your place. Other people's energy can be directed at you but you've got this force field inside that repels it, so it slips past. The first time you notice this actually happening, you begin to gain a sense that you do have a sense of strength and a sense of not being threatened that you didn't have before. You want to nurture this, look after it.

But it's not just the technique that helps you. The right attitude helps as well. And part of it is that attitude of being guarded—the Buddha calls it being heedful. It's the basis, he says, of all good qualities in the mind. But it's also the basis for your protection, realizing that you can't just barge into a situation and immediately figure it all out. You've got to watch things for a while. And as the Buddha said, remind yourself that you're like a person who's sick. You've got a wound; you have to care for your wound. Don't eat the wrong kinds of food. Don't let it get dirty. Keep it clean. Keep yourself well nourished. Don't do any activities that are going to open up the wound again.

We'd like to go through the world in a way where we don't have to be guarded but it doesn't work that way. And again, you don't have to look very far, just look into your own mind and you see there are all kinds of things that can threaten to take over if you're not careful. Well, other people have those too, and they may not be working on keeping those things under control. So you keep up your guard. Now, this isn't tense or bitter because you've got this sense of well-being inside that helps to nourish you.

The second thing that helps with getting the right attitude is finding good people. Once you've found someone you've learned over time you can trust, try to spend time with that person so that you can pick up that person's good qualities. What are the skills that that person has mastered? What are that person's ways of looking at things? And as you pick those up, you find your attitude changing as well. This way, you learn how to think in ways that undercut any bitterness or irritation or sense of being threatened by people or situations outside. Because a lot of times it's your own thinking that leads these germs into your system.

Try to have that combination of the physical sense of well-being that comes with the breath—the technique—and the right attitudes in the mind: that this is a world filled with all kinds of things, all kinds of people. Your own mind is filled with all kinds of thoughts; you have to be guarded around your own thoughts.

So learn how to be guarded but, at the same time, don't take that sense of being guarded as a weight. Do what you can to lighten the load. Nourish yourself with a sense of well-being inside. Look after your breath, look after your mind together with the breath. Because this is what gives you strength. And it's from the strength that you can keep up your guard as you need to, to be well nourished, to nourish that sense of the center that's going to be your safe

place.

And to learn how to develop as much goodness within yourself as you can, so that even though you have to be guarded in this world, you can treat people with goodwill. The basic attitude of goodwill is that you wish them well—realizing that, in some cases, the best thing for you and that other person may be to stay away from each other. This realization comes, not from ill will, but from noticing that this relationship is not working out—it's not going in the right direction. And fortunately, we don't all have to join in some enlightened society in order to be enlightened. It's an individual quest. And you have to face the fact that, with some people, you're never going to find reconciliation. But you don't get worked up over impossibilities. You focus on doing good where you can—both inside and out—and that becomes your strength.

The ajaans talk often talk about the need for a fence. As Ajaan Maha Boowa says, virtue is a fence for your thoughts, words, and deeds. Concentration, in particular, is a fence for your mind. It's through discernment that you learn how not to need those fences anymore. As long as your discernment is not yet all around, you need to keep those other fences up.

Ajaan Chah mentions that the lesson he took away after being with Ajaan Mun for three days was that he had to practice in a shape of a circle. He thought about that for a long time before he realized what it meant: It was like putting a fence around your home. You do the practice all the time because your mind needs protection all the time. Don't let there be any gaps in the fence, because a beautiful fence that surrounds only three sides of your house doesn't protect you. It leaves a whole other side open where thieves and wild animals can come in.

So we do have to be guarded as we deal with ourselves and with other people. But we've got this source of nourishment inside that gives us this strength so that it's not a burden and it's not bitter. It's simply facing things as they are and being strong enough that it's not a problem.