

Guardian Meditations, Right & Wrong

September 4, 2016

Breath meditation is our home base, the theme to which we return again and again and again. One of the reasons is that it's the safest of all the meditation topics. As long as you're with your breath and the breath is at ease and comfortable and you don't go running off after other things that may come up, you're in safe territory. The problem is that, as with any animal, you can't stay only in safe territory all the time. There are times when you have to go out foraging for food.

For that, there are other meditation themes for dealing with particular problems as they come up. An important point is that you don't wait for the problem to come up in order to start practicing with that particular theme. You learn to do them regularly in preparation. Some of them we engage in every night as we chant.

The first is recollection of the Buddha. And there are right ways and wrong ways of recollecting the Buddha. The right way is to think about what a wonderful person he was and how wisely he taught. And that the Dhamma he taught is totally doable, feasible. As he said, he taught only things that people can do. If there were things that people couldn't do, he wouldn't teach them.

It's also inspiring to think about his example. He was wealthy, had the potential for power, but he gave it all up. He saw that even though, with political power, there was a lot he could do for people, but if he gained awakening he could do much more. So he sacrificed his wealth, sacrificed all his comforts, went out and practiced. It took him years to find the right path.

And then he taught, and he taught the Dhamma for free. That, too, is amazing. Nowadays people get a little bit of Dhamma and they can't wait to sell it, to figure out how to make money off of it. Just last night I saw in a catalog: mindfulness coloring books. There's mindfulness mayonnaise. People with a little bit of Dhamma knowledge are all too happy to turn it into money.

If anyone would have had the right to charge for the Dhamma, it would have been the Buddha, but he didn't. He saw that generosity was the beginning of our practice. And one of the best ways to teach generosity is to *be* generous yourself.

And the atmosphere he created by giving the Dhamma makes it something that's given in the family. When you charge for something, it's a sign that there's a barrier. You're not in the family anymore. You're a stranger to one another and you make an exchange over that barrier of having to pay the price. But the

Buddha gave the Dhamma as if he was giving it to his relatives. He'd give it to everybody as if he was giving it to his relatives. And it's been passed down that way. It's like a long extended family that we belong to.

All the Buddha asked is that we practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. So that's the right way to think about the Buddha, to pay homage to him, to show our gratitude to him: Just go ahead and do the practice as he set it out. And that's entirely feasible.

Sometimes his life story seems a little bit in another realm entirely, as if he were superhuman. He *was* a superior human being, but the qualities he developed and that made him superior are all things that we have the potential to develop, too. So that's the right way to think about the Buddha, a way that encourages you to practice.

Another theme that we chant every day is the theme of goodwill, "May I be happy. May all beings be happy." Again, there's a right way and a wrong way to think that. The wrong way is to think about how much you want to stay around and help everybody forever and ever and never want to leave. But that's not the ultimate gift. The Buddha himself gave the ultimate gift by gaining awakening and pulling out of samsara, giving up on this addiction to keep on going again, wandering on, wandering on. He showed us getting out this is something we can do, too, and that we benefit by doing so—and that our search for true happiness is nothing to be ashamed of.

And remember that we develop goodwill not so much for other people—although of course they will benefit—but primarily for ourselves. We want to make sure that our motivation in dealing with other people is always right in line with what's skillful. If you have ill will for anyone, it's going to be hard to act skillfully toward that person.

So we spread thoughts of goodwill, not so that we'll stay around forever with everybody, but so that we'll be motivated to act in the right way to get out of here with skill, and leave behind a good example for others.

Recollection of the foulness of the body is another guardian meditation. And this, too, can be done in a right way and a wrong way. You could start contemplating the body and thinking about how wonderful it is, this wonderful mechanism we have that allows us to move about and to talk and to think and to do all kinds of things. And there is that aspect to it, but the more you think in those terms, the more attached you'll get to it—and the more you're going to want to find another body when you leave this one.

The right way to think is that all of these intricate parts of the body that work together so well are not going to work well all the time. They can so easily go awry.

So while we have the opportunity, let's make the best use of the body, i.e., to practice.

When the Buddha has us contemplate the body, he has us look at the negative side, but not in an unhealthy way. It's to remind us that all bodies are like this. As I was saying this afternoon, think about when you eat food: Exactly which part of the body does the most absorption of the food that you eat? And what is the state of that food when you absorb it? It's pretty bad.

When you think of all the different parts of the body, the different liquids in the body and the different solid parts: If you had them out on the floor here, we'd have to clean them up immediately. And not everybody in the room would be able to clean them up—a lot of people would outside and get sick. And yet here we are, sitting in this room, with all these parts all nicely sewed up and stashed away in the skin.

So we think about the unattractive side of the body whenever we feel tempted to get attached to the body, either our own body or to the bodies of other people. There's not much there. Remembering that this negative side to the body is universal: That's what it means to have a healthy negative image. The unhealthy negative image is one that says, "My body is bad and ugly and other people have beautiful bodies." That gets you down on your own body, and yet doesn't undo your attachment to it.

There are lots of instructions to develop a positive image to overcome the unhealthy mental states that can develop that way. You start by reminding yourself that everybody has the same stuff inside. Even people who have healthier livers than others—you wouldn't want to put them out here on the floor. So we're all equal this way. That's a healthy negative body image.

The healthy positive image is that, given the intricacies of the body and how prone they are to misfiring, we'd better do what we can *right now*. Because we don't know how much longer the body's going to last, or even which part is going to go first.

Last year I had some surprise news that. First they told me I'd already had a heart attack, but it turned out not to be true. Still, it made me realize that this heart I'd been depending on for so long could so easily just stop. All it takes is a little clot to move in someplace and get stuck and whoops! that's it.

We all seem to have this sense that we have a pact with the body that it's going to treat us right if we treat it right. But no matter how well you treat the body, there comes a point where it's just going to go to pieces. So if nothing else, think about the precariousness of this very intricate mechanism you have here, and how you want to make the most of it while you've got it, while it's in good shape.

That connects with the last guardian meditation, which is contemplation of death. Again, there's a right way and a wrong way to do this. The wrong way is to get depressed about the fact that death is going to come. The right way is to think, "Well, given that death could come at any time, I've got to work *now*." We don't know when it's going to come, how it's going to come, but we do know that it's something that can be done skillfully or with lack of skill. So we want to do it skillfully. If we have to be reborn, we want to do it skillfully. If we can get beyond rebirth, so much the better. But this thought should put an accelerator on our practice, realizing that as you get older, things don't get easier, and you don't even know if you'll get the chance to get old. Things can happen, things can stop very quickly.

As the Buddha said, think every morning, "This might be my last sunrise. Am I ready to go?" Think every evening, "This might be my last sunset. Am I ready to go?" The answer usually is No. So the next question is, "Okay, what's keeping you from being willing and able to just drop things and go? What are you still holding on to? What unskillful qualities do you have that you're still nurturing on the side? What can you do to stop that?" Then make it your top priority to work on that. That's the right way to think about death.

In fact, the Buddha actually said at one point, "Thinking about it twice a day is still not enough." Remind yourself each time you breathe in, "I know I have this breath now. What's the best use to make of it? Because I don't know if I'll have another one right after this."

That keeps you on your toes, which is where you have to be when you're practicing. We practice concentration to get a sense of well-being, but we need a sense of heedfulness at the same time, to protect the concentration and put it to as best use as we can.

It's in these ways that all these meditations guard us. They guard us against heedlessness. In every case, that's what they're about. We remind ourselves that it *is* possible, with the Buddha's example, to find an awakening that takes us beyond suffering. So what are we doing, mucking around and not following the path? We practice thoughts of goodwill to remind ourselves that we've got to keep our motivation in line with that path if we really care about our happiness. We practice contemplation of the body to make sure that we don't get waylaid by our attachment to the body. We practice recollection of death to make sure that we are on our toes, even as we practice concentration and develop a sense of inner well-being.

So these meditations are all to protect us against our heedlessness. And when they provide you with motivation to practice, that's when you're thinking these

topics rightly and getting the protection that they offer.