

Protective Meditations

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In times of uncertainty, when there's disease and social unrest, it's only natural that we think about issues of protection. And the Buddha's teachings offer a kind of protection through meditation. There's a set of four topics that traditionally have been put together called the "guardian meditations" or the "protective meditations."

They may not necessarily protect you from disease or from being a victim of social unrest. After all, karma is complex, and who knows what we have in our past karma? But, when you follow these meditations, they prevent you from creating any bad new karma. And that's important, because that's where you actually can make a big difference. As we know, if we develop the right attitude toward the present moment, sometimes it can help us to not suffer from past karma. So you want to focus on what you can do right now, here with your mind, to protect yourself from *the* biggest danger, which is that you might act on unskillful intentions.

The list of guardian meditations is four: recollection of the Buddha, goodwill, contemplation of the unattractiveness of the body, and mindfulness of death. It sounds like a rather random collection and, in the sense that they focus on different defilements, they *are* diverse. Metta is usually used as the antidote to anger; contemplation of the body as an antidote to lust; recollection of the Buddha as an antidote to discouragement and nihilism; and recollection of death as an antidote to laziness and heedlessness.

But they all come together on one topic, which is that they focus on the power of your intentions and the importance of being skillful in your intentions, simply that they remind you in different ways.

With recollection of the Buddha, we think about his awakening, the qualities he developed—wisdom, compassion, purity—but the important point is that, in awakening, he learned a lot about the power of intention. After all, it was through the power of his concentrated intentions, his consistent intentions, that he gained awakening.

And in the course of the three knowledges of the night of his awakening, he learned a lot about how karma functions in the universe, particularly about how your intentional actions play a huge role in whether you're going to suffer or not. So insight into intention was the content of the awakening, and focused intention was the means that got him there.

So it's a lesson in the power of intention: You've got this power here in your hands, right here in your mind right now. And thinking about the Buddha's life, thinking about his teaching career, thinking about his teachings, reminds you that you want to use this power well.

Now, one very easy way to abandon skillful intentions is if you have ill will for someone, which is where the contemplation of goodwill comes in. You don't just contemplate the idea of goodwill. You try to develop it for all. This is where the practice of meditation on goodwill

takes it from being a simple human characteristic, that we have goodwill for some people and not for others, and tries to make it a Brahma-attitude: goodwill for everybody without exception. Because if there are exceptions to your goodwill, then those are the people you'll be unskillful with.

And those unskillful actions, those unskillful intentions will then become *your* karma. You leave a big opening. The Buddha's image is of your hand. If your hand doesn't have a wound, you can pick up poison and it won't seep into the hand. You're safe. If there's a wound, though, the poison will go right in. So think of your unskillful actions as wounds. Any case of ill will for *anybody*, no matter how badly they treat you, is a wound that leaves you exposed to infection.

So, as the Buddha said, even if people have pinned you down and are sawing off your limbs with a two-handed saw, if you want to follow his teachings you should have goodwill for them. Now, this doesn't mean lovingkindness or tenderness. It means basically wishing them well. In this case, it would be seeing that they're doing something *really* unskillful and that it would be good for them if they stopped. Of course, there are cases where you're not pinned down and you can defend yourself, but with goodwill. You fend them off only enough to keep them at bay, and don't let ill will get in the way.

There have been many cases where people talk about how their attitude of goodwill, when going into a difficult situation with lots of danger, has protected them, changed the energy of the situation. Again, it's not trying to be tender or gentle toward other beings, it's simply wishing them well. People can sense that: whether you wish them well or not. So, even in difficult situations you want to have goodwill for everyone.

That's something you have to practice beforehand, because it doesn't come naturally on the spot. So when you extend thoughts of goodwill, ask yourself, "Is there anybody out there who I find it hard to have goodwill for?" If there is, then ask yourself, "Why? What purpose is served by seeing them suffer? Or wishing them ill? How does this help you?"

And remember, we're setting the intention that we ourselves can understand the causes for true happiness and be willing and able to act on them. Then we wish the same for others. So in cases where people are really misbehaving, that's the wish you have: "May they learn how to stop this unskillful behavior, for their own good." And when you come into that situation with the "for their own good" in your mind, it changes the equation. Even if it doesn't change their behavior, it changes yours, it changes your attitude. And if you really are in physical danger in a situation like that, and you have to leave the body, you leave with a healthy mind. A protected mind.

That connects with the next guardian or protective meditation, which is contemplation of the body. You have to realize there's not much there. The body is a very useful tool, but it has its limitations. If we think about it in terms that go beyond its real utility in terms of practicing

the Dhamma, we're going off-course. This is where we get greedy, selfish, holding on to things for the sake of the body.

But then, what is it? It's going to fall apart. There's a disease for every part of the body—many diseases for many parts of the body. If all you can think about are the needs of the body and protecting the body, then you're going to do a lot of unskillful things. And of course, you'll end up losing the body at some point, and then all you'll have is the bad karma. So contemplate it in any way that can help you pry away your attachments to your body, until you can see it simply as a useful tool, one that gets worn down, worn down, and finally you'll have to let go. Then, before you have to let it go, try to squeeze whatever goodness you can out of it.

If the needs of the body lead you to feel greed, remind yourself of what the Buddha had to say about sharing: Even if it were your last meal, if there was somebody there to share something with, he'd say go ahead and share. The power of generosity is that strong.

Then finally, recollection of death: This also counteracts greed, with the thought that the things you might amass and protect in an unskillful way, you can't take with you. Death could come at any time, and it may have nothing to do with disease or social unrest, or the diseases you might think are dangerous. Something else may come up and do you in.

I had a friend who was afraid to ride in a car when someone else was driving. He never trusted anybody else's driving. But then he ended up dying from an accident while *he* was driving. So death can be very ironic. It's almost like it's playing games with you.

So, given that it could come at any time, you have to ask yourself, "What can I do with the moment I have *now*? What good things can I do *right now*?" To begin with, focus on training the mind, looking after your intentions. As you're sitting here meditating, try to make the most of the fact that you've got time to meditate and clean up your intentions. As you go through the day, make the most of the fact that you have time to focus on your breath and develop good qualities of heart and mind in that way—so that when the time *does* come to go, there's a minimum of regret because you've used your time well, and there'll be no self-recrimination.

So all these meditations focus on your intentions. Recollection of the Buddha teaches you about the power of intention. Goodwill reminds you that you don't want any ill will to color your intentions. And contemplation of the body and contemplation of death remind you of what's important, that is the training of your mind and its intentions should take priority over everything else. Because that's what you've got to take with you. That's the essence here in the body. That's what you can take with you when you go.

So, seeing as we're going to have to go someday, get yourself ready now for however it has to be. And for whatever external dangers there may be in the meantime, you'll have the strength of mind to deal with them well. You will have protected yourself from any unskillful intentions. Because those are the dangers that hurt the most, hurt both in the sense that, one, they do a lot of damage, and two, they make you feel really bad. The things that you did and

you knew better, you knew you shouldn't have done them but you went ahead and did them anyhow: The memory of those things is going to hurt for a long time.

So to protect yourself from that regret, keep on top of each moment as you breathe in, as you breathe out. Keep on top of the intentions of the mind. That's how you keep yourself protected.