

Guardian Meditations

September 2, 2007

There's a passage where the Buddha discusses the factors of awakening and states that some of them are especially useful when your mind is overactive, and some are useful when your mind is sluggish. But there's one, he says, that's always useful, and that's mindfulness. Still, that doesn't mean the mindfulness is ever enough on its own. It has to be combined with other qualities to form a complete path. After all, the Buddha did teach a noble eightfold path, not a noble one-fold path.

So it's important as you meditate to look at what ingredients you're bringing to the meditation, what's lacking or what's too strong, and try to bring everything into balance. It's also good to bring lots of different tools to the practice.

There's a passage where the Buddha says that when you're trying to be mindful of the breath and the mind just won't settle down—as he puts it, there's either a fever in the body or a fever in the mind, or in other words, everything is all antsy, —you've got to ask yourself: Why is this? And you've got to find antidotes for the fever.

One of the things he recommends is that you think of an inspiring theme, an inspiring topic. And you have to think in a very directed way. In other words, you want to dig out the attitudes that are making it difficult for the mind to settle down. This requires that when you think about this topic, it really is an active form of thinking, not just repeating a word in your head, like *buddho, buddho*, or whatever, or simply spreading thoughts of goodwill without thinking about what you're doing. You have to evaluate as well, to see how that particular topic is relevant to the problem in your mind—first to see if it is relevant, because there are a lot of topics you can choose from that are helpful in different situations.

One standard list has four. There's recollection of the Buddha, goodwill, contemplation of the foulness of the body, and recollection of death. Each of these is useful for different problem in the mind. So you might want to run down the list and see which one is useful for your particular problem right now.

Recollection of the Buddha: You think about the Buddha's awakening or the implications of the fact that the Buddha gained awakening through his own efforts. In other words, you think about how he went about gaining awakening, and you also think about the content of the awakening as you know it. Think about the lessons it teaches about issues in your present life, say, about how he was able to remember many previous lifetimes. If you think about the fact that you've

got many previous lifetimes, does that put the issues in your life a new perspective? He was able to see beings dying and being reborn in line with their karma, in line with the views that inspired their actions. Is that relevant to your problem right now?

In the third watch of the night, he was able to analyze the problem of suffering in the mind right here and now, looking directly at qualities of the mind and seeing that the problem inside is craving. This is good to reflect on when you find that you've got a problem with a particular person who's getting under your skin. Remember that the person hasn't really gotten under your skin, *you've* got something under your skin that comes from your craving and clinging. You may want to look into that.

In terms of *how* the Buddha gained his awakening, it's a matter developing qualities of mind that he said all human beings have in potential form—being resolute, heedful, ardent—and asking yourself what's lying in the way of your becoming more resolute, more heedful, more ardent. See if this line of thinking helps.

If it doesn't, you can go to metta, goodwill, both for yourself and for people around you. This is ordinarily regarded as an antidote to anger, but it's an antidote to other things as well, like carelessness and apathy. Remind yourself that you really do want to find true happiness. Do you have any trouble wishing yourself true happiness? You might want to look into the reasons why.

Do you feel you don't deserve it? The question of deserving never comes up in the Buddha's teachings. There's a path to happiness and it's open anybody who wants to follow it, whether they "deserve" happiness or not. If you find you can have no trouble developing goodwill for yourself, then develop goodwill for others. See if there's anybody you run across as being particularly difficult and sort out your reasons for not wanting to wish that person happiness. What would you gain from anybody's misery? What would you gain from anyone's suffering? Most of the evil in the world comes from the fact that people are suffering and miserable, and they want to spread their misery around.

So think these things through. In other words, you don't engage just in directed thought, but you also engage in evaluation: contemplating, testing, examining your attitudes around these topics. In terms of the factors for awakening, this comes under analysis of qualities: what's skillful and unskillful in the mind.

The third topic is the foulness of the body. This is a particularly good if you're attached to your body, you're attached to your health, fixated on the idea that the body has to be in a certain way, you want it to be perfect in this way or that. It's

got to eat certain kinds of food in order to stay alive and healthy. Is that attachment getting in the way of the mind's settling down?

There's also, of course, the issue of lust. The analysis of the body into its 32 parts is a very effective way of taking apart your sense of the body as something really worthy of lust, worthy of desire.

Start with your own body and then turn to think about the bodies of others. Everybody has livers; everybody has kidneys. Whoever you might lust for has all these things inside the body that you've got inside your body. So we're all equal in that way, and that's all. As Ajaan Suwat used to say, the Buddha never lies to you about these things, it's simply that there are certain aspects of the body we don't want to look at, especially when we're determined to be lustful.

This is what it really comes down to. It's not so much that the body is out there trying to make you lustful. You're lusting and you're looking for something to focus your lust on so that it'll grow. The purpose of taking the body apart this way is to keep focusing you back to what the real problem is. It's not with the body out there, it's with your own mind: in particular, the desire to lust.

You want to look into that desire. It's easier to look at the desire in and of itself once you've learned how to take apart whatever object you may be fastening on, and then direct your attention back to the desire. Look at it. Try to understand what it's coming from.

Think also about where it leads. If you were to give in to that desire, or even just sit here thinking about it for 24 hours, where would it take you? Not very far. It'd get the mind all worked up over nothing. As the Buddha said, our desire for sensual things comes from our inability to see that there's another alternative to pain. When we think about things in this way, that should incline your mind more toward being willing to settle down to find what that other alternative is: the pleasure of concentration.

Finally, there's contemplation of death. As the Buddha said, the contemplation of death leads to the deathless, so it's not meant to make you discouraged or despondent. Actually, it's meant to make you more heedful. When you start getting lazy in the meditation, saying, "Well, this is enough for tonight," you have to ask yourself, "What really is enough for tonight? Can you sit longer? Can you walk longer? Can you meditate longer? What if you were to die tonight? What if that little earthquake we had earlier this morning was a precursor for something really big? Would you be ready to go?"

Now, if part of you says, "No, no, this has to be done first, that has to be done first, I don't want to go," then what can you do right now that will get you ready to go? You realize that working with the mind is what will get you ready to go,

because at least that gives you the skills you need, the tools you need to handle the fact of dying, the process of dying. There may be a lot of unfinished business out there, but the world is filled with unfinished business. When people stop working, it's not because their jobs are done. It's simply because they can't manage the work anymore. You get too old, you get too sick, you get too tired.

So if you find that you're laboring under a strong sense that you've got x done, you've got to get y done, if they're things outside, remind yourself the work of the world is never finished. However, the work of the mind *can* be finished if you really focus on it. That's the one area where you really can get yourself ready right here and now.

So when you're using any of these four topics, remember, it's not just repeating a word over and over your mind, like *buddho, buddho*, or death, death. You're trying to analyze: When you bring up these topics, what reaction is there in the mind? Which part of the mind fights against that particular topic? You want to look into that, because that may be part of the problem why the mind can't settle down.

When you can convince yourself that, Yes, you really do agree with the Buddha on these topics, that gives you a sense of ease and inspiration in the mind. That can allow the mind to settle down. Then you take that sense of ease and inspiration, and bring that into the breath. As the Buddha said, when you come to a sense of inspiration from this inspiring or potentially inspiring topic, then you bring the mind back to your frame of reference: the body, the feeling, the mind, in and of themselves. As Ajaan Lee would say, you return to your home base. The breath is the home base. These topics are places where you go foraging for food. When you've got the food, then you come back home. Get back to the breath.

So as you're dealing with the breath and things don't seem to be settling down, remind yourself: Sometimes the problem is with the way you're approaching the breath. But other times there are other issues still gnawing away at the mind that don't allow you to settle down. They create a sense of a fever in the body or a fever in the mind. So stop and try to develop right view around any of these topics.

There are other topics as well. You can think about your past generosity, especially when you're feeling discouraged in your practice, when you feel that "I don't have any good in me," tell yourself, "What *do* I have in me? What do I have in the past that's good?" Think of the times you've been generous when you didn't have to be. Think of the times you held to the precepts even when you were tempted not to. Remind yourself that you do have some good to you. That can be another inspiring thought. Or if comparing yourself to the Buddhist seems reaching a little too high, you can compare yourself to the different members of

the noble Sangha that you read about, say, in the Theragatha, or the Therigatha, or any of the biographies of the ajaans. It's a lot easier to relate to people in those pieces as human beings who are similar to you, because often they talk about their weaknesses. Some of them were a lot worse off than you are now. So when you see that they were able to pull themselves together and make something out of their practice, remind yourself: You can do that, too.

So it's not just a matter of finding the right way to breathe or the right way to be mindful. It's more looking at the whole process of trying to bring the body and mind together. Sometimes the body is the problem, sometimes the mind. You've got some misunderstandings in there that may be getting in the way of the meditation, so sometimes it's good to stop and try to sort them out in a way that encourages you to get back to the breath.

After all, how did the Buddha gain awakening? He was focusing on his breath. How can you show a real goodwill to yourself? You focus on the breath, making it comfortable, making it easeful. How do you try to find an alternative to lust? You focus on the breath. Where should you go when you realize that death could come at any time? You come back to the breath. In other words, when you think about these topics in the right way, it eventually pulls you back to breath, but hopefully with the right attitude, the right sense of encouragement, the right sense of heedfulness, whatever is that you need right now.

So you want to learn how to use your thinking as an aid in the meditation. Don't treat it as an enemy. If you think skillfully, it's a part of the meditation. *Dhamma-vicaya*—analysis of qualities, analysis of what's skillful and unskillful—is a factor for awakening.

So try to make use of all the tools that are at your disposal. Figure out which one is appropriate for you right now and learn how to master that tool. That way, the meditation as a whole will become more and more of a skill, not simply a matter of going out and shooting birds at night up in the dark when you can't see anything, where everything is hit or miss. It becomes more and more of a skill where you have a definite sense of your own mind: what it needs and how you can provide for its needs so that it settles down.