

Always in Training

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When I was on the plane recently, the person sitting next to me was watching a documentary on two boxers. They'd had a match between a challenger and a champion. The challenger was able to beat the champion, but it was a close match. Now the challenger was the new champion, and he spent all of his time celebrating: partying, having a good time, getting totally out of shape. At first, the former champ thought he would just retire from boxing. But then he saw that the new champ was out of shape, so he challenged him to a rematch. Because the new champ was so much out of shape, he lost the second match. The lesson, of course, is if you're a boxer, you always have to be in training, in shape to be prepared whenever a challenge comes up.

Well, the same principle applies to being a meditator. When you're here at the monastery, you're on a retreat, you're in training. When you go home, you have to remind yourself that you're still in training, just as an athlete has to be careful about diet, exercise—and also has to have the right values in mind.

As meditators, when we're around daily life, we need to have both the right technique for reminding ourselves that we are in training, and also the right values. The technique, of course, is the technique you learn with the breath meditation: When unpleasant feelings arise in the body, or strange energies arise in the body based on greed, aversion, or delusion, you can breathe through them, just as you breathe through a painful or blocked sensation in the body as you're here meditating.

It may be too much to be aware of the whole body as you're going through the day, but it is useful to do it when you can. Otherwise, try and have one spot in the body that's particularly sensitive, that reacts very quickly to changes in your mood, and focus your attention there. Always breathe in a way that keeps it open, relaxed, spacious so that when something comes up and it constricts, you'll know immediately, and you'll have a technique for stopping it in its tracks. Just breathe right into it, breathe right through it. Otherwise, these emotions are going to hijack your breath, and then they'll have your mind hijacked as well. Your breath is held hostage. Your body is held hostage. And the mind ends up paying the ransom: in other words, saying something really unskillful, or doing something really unskillful and then regretting it later.

So working with the breath here as you're meditating is a skill you should take with you as you go out into daily life. Whatever the chores may be, whatever your

work may be, wherever you are, you need to have a sense that you're always in training, like that story they tell of the sword master teaching a new student. The new student came, wanted to become a sword master, too. So the sword master put the new student to work: carrying water, chopping wood, doing chores around the center, never once mentioning the word "sword" or "master" or "fighting." The student was beginning to wonder if he was ever going to get to become a master or even to pick up a sword. But as the student was going through the day doing his chores, every now and then the master would attack him with a big stick, and the student had to get very wary.

Finally, one day, as the student was carrying water, the master came up behind him and attacked him with a stick, but the student parried him right away. That's when the master said, "Okay, now you're ready to pick up a sword. You've got the right attitude": a sense of wariness, a sense of heedfulness, as we would say, something you've got to carry through the day.

And that's a matter not just of technique, but of values.

We'd like to believe that we live in a nice, interconnected world where the welfare of one member of the interconnected system depends on the welfare of everybody else. But interconnections don't work like that. The Buddha's image for interconnection is feeding. Those who are fed feed on other ones who are sacrificed for those who feed. So we're in a dangerous situation. We can't rest blissfully ignorant and confident there's somebody in charge, or somehow it'll all work out, or that we're all basically good deep down inside. The Buddha said that the human mind is very unreliable, very quick to change. That applies to minds outside and to your mind as well.

So you have to have a couple of ways of reminding yourself of the need for heedfulness. And heedfulness is what? The realization that there are dangers but that they can be avoided by the way you act. If they couldn't be avoided, there'd be no need for heedfulness. You'd just simply have to accept the dangers. If there were no dangers at all, you wouldn't have to be heedful.

But there are dangers. It's obvious. But they can be avoided. This places a lot of importance on how you act, the choices you make as you go through the day. And there are four reflections that help with this. They're called the guardian meditations. They're often recommended as ways of getting the mind into shape so it's ready to sit down and meditate, but they're also good things simply to contemplate, to think about, to make sure that your values are right as you go through the day.

The first one is recollection of the Buddha. The Buddha reminds us of what is possible. Human beings can do this: They can gain awakening. They can find a

true happiness, a blameless happiness through their own actions. We live in a world where that's been shown to be possible—at least there's news that it is possible. And you don't want other news to get in the way of your willingness to test that possibility.

Human beings have it within their power to get beyond greed, aversion, and delusion. They have it within their power to train their minds to act, to speak, to think in ways that are noble. How many noble examples do we have in the news today? Very, very few. Most of the examples seem to be going in the other direction. So you don't want to have that kind of news become the example for your life. This is why it's good to read about the Buddha: about his life, about the way he taught, about how he gained awakening. And ask yourself where you can emulate him, what it would be like to take his example seriously, to take refuge in his example, confident that it is a good example, worthy of emulation. Just as he had to give up a lot of things for the sake of awakening, you may have to give up a lot of things too, but it's worth it.

We tend to think of renunciation as deprivation, but actually it's a trade, and it's a trade up. We're trading for something better. We're trading candy for gold. So that's one contemplation that helps keep your values straight, focuses on the importance of your actions and gives you a sense of how far human action can go, how noble it can be, so that you can inspire yourself and try to push yourself a little bit farther than you might normally want to, and that you can make choices that make you noble. And they're worth it. That's the first guardian meditation: recollection of the Buddha.

The second is goodwill. Goodwill is a wish for happiness, a happiness that's true, a happiness that's blameless. And this wish is meant to be spread around. Again, it's sometimes explained by saying that we're all interconnected. We're all part of one another, so we owe it to one another to have goodwill. But the Buddha never talks about who you "owe" goodwill to. He said it's something you *give* to everybody regardless, because if you have ill will for people, you're going to act unskillfully around them, and that's going to become your kamma. So to protect yourself from yourself, you need to develop goodwill to be universal.

As the Buddha said, it's a determination. It's not something that comes innately to us to have goodwill for everybody. We're very easily inspired to ill will by people's actions when they harm us or harm somebody we love, or harm somebody we think is undeserving of harm. So you have to be determined to have goodwill even for people who've been evil, cruel, and thoughtless.

And you have to be mindful. It's something you have to keep in mind. Otherwise, you can spend a whole retreat thinking, "May all beings be happy. May

all beings be happy.” Then you leave, get in the car. Somebody cuts in front of you, and “Well, may this being go to hell!”

You have to keep in mind: “all beings.” You want to act in a way that’s conducive to their well-being, conducive to their true happiness. It doesn’t mean you go around pleasing people. There were a lot of people the Buddha displeased, but he never had ill will for anybody. He said there were times when you have to do displeasing things in the same way that if a child has taken something sharp into his mouth, you’ve got to do what you can to get the sharp object out, even if it means drawing blood, because otherwise the child will swallow the object and then he’ll be in even worse shape. So goodwill means acting in ways that are not detrimental to anybody’s genuine happiness. That, too, is a reflection that focuses on the importance of your actions, and on what’s needed to make sure that your actions are skillful.

The third reflection is on the unattractiveness of the body. There are a lot of people who don’t like this reflection. They say they have a negative body image already; this makes it even more so. But you have to distinguish between an unhealthy negative and a healthy negative, just as you have to distinguish between an unhealthy positive body image and a healthy positive body image.

An unhealthy negative body image is that you think your body is miserable and other people have beautiful bodies. The healthy attitude is that all of us, regardless, have a lot of really unattractive things inside, so there’s no reason to feel that you’re either a better person or a worse person based on your outside appearance. This way, the various defilements that would come about are being nurtured by too strong an attachment to the body, have less and less to hold onto.

That’s because this kind of reflection is not just an antidote to lust. It’s also an antidote to pride around the body, an antidote to states of mind where you’ve made the mind a slave to the needs of the body. So many of the things we have to do as we go through the day are based on having to provide for the body. And so much of the goodness that the mind could do gets sacrificed for that. We have to realize that our values are backwards. It’s the mind that’s more important, and the body has to be there in service of the mind.

This is where we get into the issue of the healthy positive and unhealthy positive body image. An unhealthy positive image is that you’re better looking than others and you can use your good looks to get away with things, to have advantages that other people might not have. That builds up a lot of pride, the kind of pride that goes before a fall, because, after all, the nature of the body is that as it gets older, it gets less attractive. And if your identity is built around your positive body image, you’re going to have a lot of trouble. In the meantime, you’re

going to be subject to all kinds of people who are attracted to your body, who have designs on your body that are not really good for you. That's an unhealthy positive body image.

A healthy positive body image is that there's a lot you can do with the body, in terms of being generous, of being virtuous, of taking it as an object of your meditation. Your body has its good side, its useful side, so that you can develop skillful qualities in the mind. So here again, contemplation of the unattractiveness of the body comes down to reminding you of what is important to do and say and think, to give you some proper sense of priorities.

The final guardian meditation is mindfulness of death, which is not meant to be morbid. It's meant to be a spur to action because we don't know when death is going to come, and when death comes, we don't know where we're going. What we *do* know is what we have right now: an opportunity to practice. So with each breath, we should make the most of that opportunity.

The Buddha once said to some monks that they should reflect often on death. And different monks were saying, "Well, I already do that." And the Buddha said, "Well, how many times do you do it in a day?" One monk said, "I do it once a day." Other monks said, "I do it twice a day." They described shorter and shorter periods of time between the reflections, until it got to one monk who said, "Every time I breathe in," he said, "I think that if I can live for one more breath, I'll be able to accomplish a great deal in the practice." The Buddha said, "Okay, this is the monk who's heedful. Everybody else is heedless."

It's worth noting that when the Buddha talks about focusing your attention on the present moment, it's never the present moment as an end in itself, or as a wonderful place to be. He said it's the place where work can be done, your duties can be done: your duties with regard to the four noble truths—to comprehend suffering, abandon its cause, realize its cessation by developing the path.

So this is what reflection of death is for. When the Buddha talks about being in the present moment, it's always focused in the context of recollection of death. We're here because there's work to be done and right here is where we can do it.

So these four contemplations are useful for giving you a good set of values for being heedful as you go through the day, reminding yourself of what is possible: That's what recollection of the Buddha is for. Reminding yourself that you have to be careful about your motivation in dealing with other people: That's what goodwill is for. Reminding yourself to get your priorities right: That's what contemplation of the body is for. And then reminding yourself of the urgency of doing the practice right now: That's what recollection of death is for. When you have the basic techniques down for reminding yourself that you've got to be

heedful, reminding yourself that you've got to watch out for what the mind is doing right now, and you can use the body, use the breath as an anchor, then you augment it with these reflections that make sure that your values are straight. That way, you can live in the world and not be overcome by the world—and not forget the fact that you can be in training at all times and you should be, because you never know what challenges are going to come up, either from outside or from inside. You've always got to be ready to parry them.

You've always got to be ready to meet the challenges. After all, the Buddha's images for people who practice are never images of people relaxing their way to nibbana. They're always images of people who are fighting, people who develop skills, people who are searching for something. So there is a fight, but it's a good fight, and the Buddha provides you with all the tools you need. It's simply up to you to make sure that you always stay in training for whatever the next moment may bring.