Your Own Best Friend

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Respect for concentration is one of the forms of respect that we chanted just now. It’s a principle we have to remind ourselves of over and over again, because many times concentration doesn’t seem all that exciting. All that interesting intelligence is just keeping the mind on one object. And even when there’s a sense of well-being and even rapture that can come with that, this part of the mind says, “Well, what’s next?” But the part of the mind wants to have it explained. It’s like, “What state am I in?” As I’ve mentioned before, Jon Foon would never encourage that kind of thinking or those kind of questions by answering them. If you want to learn where you are, stay there long enough and then learn to observe what’s going on. Because it’s a mental phenomenon, you have to watch it for long periods of time to see what it does, see how it reacts. Learn not to get too caught up in the labels and learn how to look more and more at where you are, what stress there is, what you’ve done to settle the mind there, what you do to keep the mind there. Gradually, you begin to recognize where you are. Jon Foon once said there are two types of people in the world, those who think too much and those who don’t think enough. Most of us here in the West fall in the first category—we think too much. We want to have things figured out all in advance before we commit ourselves. An important lesson in the meditation is that you have to commit many times before you really know what you’re committed to. What you’re committed to is your quest to understand. Some things require a long period of observation before you really understand what’s going on. This requires having a sense of the right time for focusing and being settled and the right time for asking questions. Because if you ask questions at the wrong time, it destroys your focus. And if you respect your questions too much at the wrong time, it destroys your focus. Then your respect for concentration disappears. So once you’ve got an interesting state going in the mind and it seems refreshing, learn how to stick with it no matter what, no matter what questions come up, no matter what your activities are. When you get out of the meditation, try to maintain at least some contact with that state. As you’re moving around, getting involved in other activities around the monastery, try to maintain that state as much as you can. It may not be as refined or as precise an awareness as you can get when you’re sitting in meditation, but it’s part of respect for concentration. You try to maintain that look after it. The word that John Foon would use is “prakong,” a Thai word that means “holding something gently to protect it.” The word they use when you’re hovering around a child who’s just learning how to walk. You have to allow the child some freedom to walk, but you can’t at the same time let it go totally on its own for fear that it’s going to fall down. So your hands are just a little bit out around the child, ready to catch it in case it falls. But you don’t grab the child. You’ve got to let the child walk on its own. That’s “prakong.” Or holding a baby chick in your hand. Not so tightly that you squeeze it and harm it, not so loosely that it flies away. That’s also “prakong.” You’ve got to have that same protective attitude towards your concentration no matter what happens, whether it’s outside stimuli that come in to disturb it or those inside doubts. “What is this? What’s going on here? Why don’t I understand this?” You’ve got to protect your concentration from those doubts as well. There does come a time when you do want to ask questions, but you’ve got to make sure that you’re asking at the right time, when the mind is really solid and stable, and the asking of questions doesn’t disturb the basic stability of the mind. And there are some times when you get into some states of concentration, especially in the more refined, formless states, that you can’t ask any questions while you’re in the concentration. That destroys it. You have to step out a little bit after the concentration and reflect on where you were. This is all part of a principle called kalañjuta, having a sense of the right time and the right place for things. There are so many teachings in the canon. Sometimes you look at them and they seem contradictory. It’s because some of the teachings are for certain circumstances and others’ teachings are for others. The Buddha didn’t teach an abstract philosophy. He taught a course of mental training. Even the ideas he has you reflect on are for the effect they have on the mind. Their usefulness as tools for either getting the mind into concentration or learning how to understand the concentration, learning how to look at things in the most appropriate way. Because they’re part of a course of training, you have to learn how to use them at the appropriate time, when the mind needs that particular line of thought and when it doesn’t need that line of thought. This is one of the skills you have to develop in meditation. It’s all part of a larger set of skills, as the Buddha said. Characterize a person of integrity, a person of wisdom. There are seven in all. The first two are knowing the Dhamma, knowing its meaning. That’s verbal knowledge. The remaining forms of knowledge are not things that you can really put into words. They have to come from experience. Experience takes time. Having a sense of yourself. When you’re working on the meditation, how much effort can you put in? That’s right effort. You’re not pushing yourself so hard that you begin to break down and you’re not being so lazy that nothing really develops. How do you know this? You have to learn by experimenting. You have to learn by being willing to push yourself a little bit too hard sometimes, so you can begin to read the results. This is how you get to know yourself, by watching yourself in action. Mattañjuta, having a sense of enough. Traditionally, this means having a sense of how much food is enough, how much sleep is enough, but there’s more than that. How much of anything is enough? How much concentration is enough? How much effort is enough? Again, this comes from watching, being observant. Someone asked the other day what are the most essential qualities needed for a good meditator, and that’s number one right up there, is learning to be observant. If you’re not observant, you can never learn any of these other qualities. You can read the books and understand what’s in the books, but if you don’t get these other qualities of a person of wisdom, a person of integrity, you’re missing huge aspects, huge parts of the practice. The fifth quality is the one we started out with, having a sense of the right time for things. When’s the time to listen to the questioning side of the mind? When’s the time to say, “Enough. Right now is the time just to stick with what I’ve got here so I can watch it and observe it.” Get settled in. Learning how to read your mind. When does the mind need gladdening? When does it need stilling? In other words, when does its energy level have to be picked up? When does its energy level have to be pulled back down? The last two qualities have to do with people. One is when you’re a particular group of people, what’s the way to speak? When you’re talking with your friends, you speak one way. When you’re talking with people older than you are, more senior to you, you speak in another way. The way you speak, the things you speak about. Getting a sense of the different societies that you’re in and what’s appropriate in each of them. This is where you learn to avoid a lot of trouble. That can disturb your meditation. Finally, there’s the question of who’s most worthy of associating with. Which people, when you stay with them, lead you further along the path to freedom from suffering? Which people, when you stay with them, pull you back down? You’ve got to learn how to observe these things for yourself because they create the context for your practice. So wisdom isn’t just a matter of reading books or of doing insight meditation techniques. It requires a sensitivity all around. Our minds are not simply machines. They’re not just mathematical problems. They operate on many, many levels, and the training of the mind has to take place on many levels as well. So learn to think about it in this all-around way. Your knowledge of the Dhamma and its meaning, your knowledge of yourself, your knowledge of when you’ve had enough, of material things, and other aspects of the practice. When is the right time and place for different aspects of the practice? And then the last two, being with the proper way to associate with the people around you and having a sense of who you really want to hang around with. As the Buddha once said, and this is the whole of the holy life, is admirable friendship. So you’ve got to look for admirable friends. Learn how to cultivate admirable friendship. In this particular case, it’s something very hard in our modern society, because the values seem to be all pulling in the other direction, to what is not admirable. In a direction where everything has a price, and whole lives are lived under the shadow of the bottom line. So when you think about the context, the social context in which you’re practicing, it’s not just the people around you, but also the books you read, the values you pick up, you need a strong sense of how important this is to keep the practice going, and to keep open that possibility that you can find an end to suffering, an end to the craving and ignorance that keep pushing people around, keep enslaving people. It’s not that the craving enslaves people. People allow themselves to be enslaved by the craving. And as long as they hang around with other people who are enslaved by craving, it’s very difficult to get out. Particularly if everybody seems to believe that that’s the ideal way to live, that what the world needs is a lot more greed to keep the economy well greased. Those are the attitudes of the world out there. We’re here in a place where those attitudes don’t hold. Have a sense of how important that is. And work on the practice so that you fully internalize them, so you can become an admirable friend for yourself. This is a lot of what the practice is, is teaching yourself to be your own best friend. So many times we’re our own worst enemies. But as you develop these qualities, they’re called the qualities of a person of integrity, you find that you become more and more reliable. You’ve taken the time to watch, to observe, to see what really works and what doesn’t work. Bring the mind to peace. Bring the mind to understanding. Bring the mind to release. That’s a project that’s worth a lot of time and a lot of energy. It goes someplace. Unlike the world, which goes around and around and around. As Chanda just now said, the world is always insufficient. There’s never enough. It never reaches a point of completion. It’s only the practice of the Dhamma when you come to a point of completion, because you make your mind complete by developing these forms of understanding, these forms of wisdom—knowledge of the Dhamma and its meaning, knowledge of yourself, knowledge of having a sense of enough, knowledge of the right time, knowledge of the societies in which you function from day to day, and also knowledge of the best people to associate with. The time spent learning these things is time well spent.

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