Weak Friends

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There’s that famous passage where Ananda comes to the Buddha and says, “Having good friends is half of the holy life, half of the practice.” And the Buddha says, “No, don’t say that. Having good friends, having admirable friends, is the whole of the practice.” In other words, it’s because of having the Buddha as our best friend that we learn about the possibility there is an end to suffering. Without him, where would we be right now? Could you have discovered the Dhamma on your own? If you didn’t have the example of people who’d follow the path, would you think that it was still possible? That’s friends on the outside. It’s also important to have friends on the inside. In other words, all those little thoughts that come into the mind, little thoughts, big thoughts, you have to look at them and say, “This particular thought that I’m listening to right now, is this the voice of a true friend, or is it the voice of a false friend?” Basically, the distinction comes down between those two sorts that were mentioned in the chant just now. True friends are the ones who point you to worthwhile things and say, “This is the path to true happiness. It’s going to take a while. It’s going to require effort, but it’s well worth the effort.” Those kind of thoughts are your true friends, the ones who want to go in for ruinous fun, i.e., snatching whatever quick pleasures you can find. Those are your false friends, the ones who say, “I don’t care what the long-term results of this action are going to be. I feel like doing this right now, so I’m going to go ahead and do it.” Those are fools. Those are false friends. As the Buddha once said, the sign of wisdom is being able to ask yourself that question, “What, when I do it, will be to my long-term welfare and happiness?” You listen to good friends outside to see what they have to say, and then you internalize their message. Turn it into good internal friends. As for false friends, they’re too kind. You have to watch out for them. One, they’re the kind that really mean you ill. They come dressed up as friends. They entertain you. They do all the things that they know will make you like them, but basically they have ill will for you. They want to take advantage of you. They want something out of you. A major false friend in our lives is television. They want something out of you. That’s why they have that TV in your house. That’s why they come to you. That’s why they broadcast. A lot of the media is that way, or that way. It’s scary to think of how much we’ve internalized their messages. Other false friends are ones that actually mean you well, but they’re weak. They can’t carry through with their good intentions. They would like to help you, but when push comes to shove, they just don’t have the energy, don’t have the willpower, can’t carry it through. That’s why weak people are usually not welcome in any group, because you know that they’re the ones you rely on. Many times they cause trouble. They themselves get in trouble, and you have to help them, at the point where you most need their help. The same principle applies in the mind as well. There actually are thoughts in your mind that mean you’re ill. If you haven’t read it yet, read a John Lee’s talk on consciousnesses, the one where he talks about the different thoughts that come floating into the mind. He says sometimes they may not be your thoughts. They’re the worms in your blood. They’re passing through your brain. Maybe their frequency touches off a frequency in your mind. And then there are the spirits of the people you’ve wronged in previous lifetimes. Maybe they’re whispering into your mind when your guard is down. That’s one kind of thought you have to watch out for. The other one is just the weakness of the mind. Where it wants to do the right thing means well, but it just doesn’t can’t muster the strength. So it only looks for immediate satisfaction, the quick fix, what’s going to be the easy way to find a little bit of pleasure, a little bit of happiness. And we go for that, because we identify with the weaknesses in the mind. The Buddha’s cure for that one. In the first case, the Buddha reminds you don’t believe everything in your mind. Don’t identify with everything that comes into your mind. If a thought comes in that recommends a course of action that’s ultimately going to be for your suffering, put a question mark after it. Say, “This may not be me. I don’t have to identify with it in any case, even if it is something coming out of me. I don’t have to identify with it.” Because the mind does have its funny mood. Sometimes it gets self-destructive, and you’re left to learn how not to give in to those moods. And as for the weaknesses in the mind, the Buddha says we’ll counteract them by developing strength. He elicited this as one of his most important teachings, the Five Strengths—conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, discernment. These are the things that take your well-meaning but weak friends in your mind, the ones that want happiness but just can’t seem to be able to deliver it. This is what strengthens them. First, conviction in the principle of karma, that if you act on skillful intentions, you’re going to get good results. If you act on unskillful intentions, you’re going to get bad results. You’re going to suffer. You really have to believe that, hold to that firmly. Because all of our hope for happiness lies right there. If our happiness and suffering depended on some outside being, we’d be in really bad shape. You’d have to go out and please that being. Or, if everything in the world were totally predetermined, there’d be nothing you could do. If everything were totally random, there would be no way that you could… find any pattern that you could trust. So the belief in karma is more than just thinking that if you do good things, you’re going to get good results. It means you have to believe that what you do is going to make a difference in your life. There is a pattern to action and the results of actions. Sometimes the results are delayed, which is why it becomes a matter of conviction. After all, the principle of causality is a complex one. But still, if you trust the basic principle that if you put good energy into the system, the results are going to come out well. Believing this is what allows you to put energy into, make more of a sacrifice, to sit longer than you might normally want to sit, to sit through pain when you may not want to sit through pain. Give up more energy into meditating, walking meditation, working with the mind, even though the results may not be immediate. Having trust that in the long term, you’ll benefit. If you hold to that belief, that becomes a strength. It allows you to put more energy in, which is the second strength, the quality of persistence, where you just really stick with this. It’s not something you do when you feel like doing it or only when it’s convenient. It becomes part of your daily duty, something you just have to do because it has to be done. And you stick with it. This means learning to figure out what your level of energy is right now so you can keep putting in a consistent level of energy. There’s that famous sutta where the Buddha is talking to Sona, a person who is very delicate and brought up so delicately that he even had hair on the bottom of his feet. He goes out and does walking meditation. Of course, his feet get all bloody because the skin there is very tender. He thinks about giving up, and the Buddha comes to see him. He reminds him about when he was younger and used to play the lute. If the lute string was too tight, it was going to snap. If it was too loose, it wouldn’t get a good sound. You had to tune it just right. It’s the same way when you tune a guitar. You tune one string and then you tune the other strings to that one. When you’re tuning your strengths, or what they also call the faculties, you tune your level of energy first. How much energy are you able to put into the practice right now? You take that as your basis. But do your best to make it consistent. It’s not a case of throwing yourself at it and then just sleeping for the next four or five days. You want to put in a level of energy that you can maintain over time. That becomes a strength that develops a momentum. Because your level of energy is consistent, it helps your mindfulness as well. You learn to keep the practice in mind. You remind yourself, “You’ve got to stick with this, stick with this.” Like when we’re meditating right now, stay with the breath, stay with the breath. As soon as you wander off, remind yourself, “Hey, you’ve got to come back. This is not what we’re here for.” And you find that with exercise, the mindfulness does grow. If it does, with our lapses in mindfulness, they get shorter and shorter. And you get more and more sensitive to when the mind is about ready to wander off and you can pull it back. Because mindfulness has to be paired with alertness, watching what’s actually happening. You combine this with persistence. This is something you do all the time, not just when you’re meditating. You can think of it as people going down to the gym. Some people go down to the gym and exercise hard not because they want to use that strength for any good purpose. When they leave the gym, simply they want to look good in the mirror. That kind of meditation doesn’t go anywhere. You do it and you meditate and you feel good about your meditation, and then you drop it when you leave. What you want is a kind of mindfulness that once you’ve practiced it, once you’ve strengthened it, you use it in day-to-day life. No matter what you’re doing, always watch out over the mind. Watch out for those false friends. Make sure you don’t follow them. That’s the kind of person who goes down to the gym because they’ve got work that needs strength and they use their exercise to get stronger. They come out and they actually use that strength and put it to good use. As your mindfulness and alertness get stronger, then your concentration becomes a strength. Your mind really does get firmly established in your object. Stay with the breath and it becomes more and more consistent. There’s a sense of absorption. You’re not just with the breath, you seem to become one with the breath. The breath feels really good coming in, feels really good going out, because you’ve watched it carefully, adjusted it carefully. There’s a sense of ease, a sense of rapture, and you can spread that rapture. Spread that sense of ease so it fills the body. This is what really provides food and nourishment for the mind, this sense of well-being that doesn’t have to depend on food or sights or sounds, tactile sensations. It’s a nourishment that comes from within. This is when you really begin to see the balance of power shifting in the mind, in the sense of your good intentions. Intentions really do become stronger. You can rely on them more because you’ve nourished them with a sense of well-being that comes from concentration. As your concentration develops, you begin to see the ways the mind fools itself, the way the mind falls for its false friends. This is the beginning of insight. This is the beginning of discernment. You can choose which kinds of thoughts to follow, which kinds of thoughts you want to avoid, which impulses to follow, which impulses to avoid, because you’re not so hungry all the time. As you side more and more consistently with your wise thoughts, that strengthens the mind as well, because you’re weighing it down with less and less and less. It’s a useless activity. So this is how you make your mind a true friend, both by working on your intentions to make sure that they’re skillful and that they have an element of wisdom in them, and then learning to strengthen that wisdom through these five strengths—conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. Those are the kinds of people you look for, for true friends outside, and it only makes sense that you look for them inside as well. Fortunately, you can train your inner friends. Friends outside are hard to train. But as your friends inside, it’s entirely within your power to make them reliable. And that’s what we’re working on right now.

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