Your Own Best Friend

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One of the Buddha’s main insights into the problem of suffering was that the suffering that really weighs on the heart, the stress that really gets to us, is the suffering and stress that we create for ourselves. There are the stresses of daily life, the stress of the issues involved in simply keeping the body going, making sure that it’s clothed, fed, sheltered, that it’s got the medicine it needs. But those aren’t nearly as bad as the unnecessary sufferings that we place on ourselves. We want happiness, and yet so many times the things we do for the sake of happiness turn around and bite us. It’s as if we were our own worst enemies. There’s a famous passage where the Buddha says that the things you do out of anger are precisely the sort of things that an enemy would be happy to see you do. You say stupid things, you do stupid things, you harm your own interests. Yet under the power of anger, we’re pleased to do these things. The same could be said about what we do under the power of lust, under the power of delusion. We get in our own way. We undercut our own true well-being. We’re not even really friends to ourselves. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha placed such a huge emphasis on finding what he called “admirable friends.” There’s that famous passage where Ananda comes to the Buddha and says, “Just half of living the holy life is having good friends.” And the Buddha says, “That’s not the case. It’s the whole of the holy life.” Not that the friends are going to do the work for you, but if you have admirable friends, they give you a good example. You pick up habits from them. There’s another passage where he says that if you take a piece of grass and you wrap it around some dried, rotting fish, the grass is going to pick up the bad smell of the fish. If you take that same piece of grass and you wrap it around a piece of fragrant wood, it’s going to pick up the fragrance of the wood. In the same way, you pick up characteristics of the people. You pick up characteristics of the people you associate with, the people you regard as your friends. It’s an important element in the practice of finding the right people to associate with, and particularly the people that you open your heart to. Because it’s inevitable in daily life, you’re going to have to deal with a lot of people that are not really good examples. But you have to be very clear about who are your true friends and who are not, who are the people whose habits you want to develop. The Buddha recommends people who are generous, people who are wise, people who are virtuous, people who have conviction in the principle of karma, i.e., that your actions really are important, and that the quality of the intention, the goodness of the intention that informs the actions, is going to determine the results. These are people you want to associate with, not only because the way they behave is a good example, but also the way they think, the way they look at issues. As the Buddha said, the sign of a wise person is not that the person can sit and talk and say wise things. It’s how that person approaches a question, the circumspection, the way he or she will consider an issue. So that you begin to consider the issues from the same light, asking, “What are the long-term consequences of an action? What are the long-term consequences of an answer? What are the long-term consequences of your beliefs?” Because beliefs are actions as well. So you want to pick up good habits from people like that, and the only way to pick up good habits is to associate with them, spend time with them, so you can begin to see things in the same light. You notice how they handle difficult issues. They provide good examples. We see this all over the world. People who come from families where the parents know how to work out differences, not throw things around. When they get angry, they are more likely to be able to work out differences in their own lives as well. You learn skills in how to handle issues from the people you deal with, the people you hang around with. So try to hang around with good people, people who handle issues, who handle difficult problems, with finesse, so you can get an idea of how to deal with them. A lot of my training with Ajahn Fung was not just the time spent meditating under his guidance, but it was watching him deal with very difficult people, difficult situations, conflicts that arose within the monastery, within the support group in the monastery, with the neighbors around the monastery. And seeing his example, dharma in action, was a large part of my training. So as you go through life, you want to find good people to associate with. As that chant we had just now says, attend to people like that earnestly. Pay attention to what they do and say, how they think about things. In some cases, you simply pick up their habits through osmosis, and other times you have to watch how they think about it. How would you apply their lessons in your life? A lot of the book awareness itself came from my first year after Ajahn Fung had passed away. We had a lot of difficulties in the monastery. Different people came in. They were trying to take over the monastery. They saw a power vacuum at the top. And it was in dealing with these difficulties that different things that Ajahn Fung had said and different things that he had done kept coming to mind. That’s why I started writing them down. That’s one of the ways you know that you’ve found a good friend, is that his or her comments and actions become a good example when you meet with difficulties in your life as well. So you can become your own best friend. The whole purpose of this training is not so that you lean on other people all the time. It’s so that you learn good lessons from them and then you internalize them. So when issues come up in your life, you know how to respond in a way that doesn’t cause any more suffering. In other words, you’re not priming yourself to suffer and your actions don’t lead to further suffering down the line. Your intention to find happiness really does lead to happiness. This applies to all aspects of the practice—your dealings with other people and your dealings with yourself, i.e., when you’re sitting here with your eyes closed, just focused on the breath, how you handle the different issues that come up in your mind, come up in the body. You can add stress or you can figure out ways of minimizing stress. That’s why the breath is a good place to start, because it’s one of the bodily functions that you do have some control over. Yet often we just let it go on its own, without taking advantage of the fact that you can breathe in ways that apply knowledge and sensitivity. And you find that you’re causing yourself less and less suffering and pain. And the breath then becomes your friend, and you become a friend of the breath. It’s a good object lesson in how we cause ourselves a lot of unnecessary suffering and pain through our ignorance, just not paying attention to what’s going on right here, right now. As the Buddha noted in Dependent Co-Arising, although he used technical terms, sometimes people really miss the fact that he makes this point. But even if you breathe in ignorance, it’s going to be a cause for suffering. The way he puts it is that from the arising of ignorance comes the arising of fabrications. There are three kinds of fabrication. One of them is bodily fabrication. In the discourse that explains Dependent Co-Arising in detail, that’s as far as it goes. But you poke around in the text a little bit more. And you realize that bodily fabrication is the breath. So if you breathe in ignorance, you’re causing yourself unnecessary stress. So this is one lesson in how you become more of a friend to yourself. Take something that’s free, right here, and by applying some attention to it, you realize you can minimize the amount of stress that you experience simply in being in the body, having a human body, experiencing the human body in the present moment. That way, when you have the breath as your friend, you can deal with the other causes of suffering, like the way you think about things. Again, the Buddha gives you practice focusing on the breath. You use what’s called verbal fabrication. You direct your thinking to the breath and then you evaluate it. It gets more and more comfortable, more and more rapturous, even. It creates a sense of refreshment simply by being here and being very attentive to the way you breathe. Then you bring in mental fabrication, the perceptions, the labels you use to think about exactly what’s happening when you breathe. Think about the breath as the energy flow in the body, rather than just the air coming out of the lungs. You’re realizing the energy flow doesn’t have to come in and out the nose. It can come in and out anywhere in the body. In fact, if you’re really sensitive, there’s an energy exchange that happens right all over your skin. You open up the pores of the skin by allowing all those little muscles to relax, and it’s going to change the way you breathe, change the way you experience the body. You begin to realize that the way you think about things is going to have a big impact on how you experience them, and you can apply that lesson to other issues in life as well. Start questioning your other habits about how you deal with other people, how you think about larger issues in life. Because sometimes we hold on to opinions that seem very, very right, but they’re actually wrong. The question is, when you’re holding on to them that way, is it causing unnecessary stress and suffering? When is the opinion appropriate? When do you put it down? Your ideas about who you are, when are they appropriate to use and when is it appropriate to put them down? You start paying attention to things in terms of cause and effect. When you look at the whole aspect of your life in that way, you find you can really minimize the amount of suffering you’re causing. Because as soon as you see a cause that leads to stress, you just drop it. You develop the things that make the mind clearer, so you can see these issues more clearly. So not everything is dropping. There’s a combination of letting go and developing the mind, but it’s learning to see very clearly which qualities of mind should be encouraged and which thoughts, which ideas, which beliefs should be put aside. It’s a very pragmatic issue. Some beliefs are skillful in certain situations and not in others. This is one of the problems with the absolutist view, that got developed in the Abhidhamma. Some things are skillful, some things are unskillful, some things are neither. The way they apply that category is all across the board. Some things are going to always be skillful, others are going to always be unskillful. They don’t notice the fact that the Buddha himself was very selective in what he would pick up to use and talk about and when to put it down. Ideas, like everything else, have their time and place. As in the principle of right speech, you say things not only because they’re true, but also because they have to be beneficial and have to be timely if you’re going to say them. The same principle applies to your thoughts. Just because something is true doesn’t mean that it’s going to be beneficial in every situation, or timely in every situation. So you learn to look at your thoughts and your words and your deeds from this perspective. When is it appropriate to hold on to them? When is it appropriate to put them aside? In this way, your opinions don’t turn into your enemies. Your habits don’t turn into your enemies. They actually become part of the path because you develop a kind of concentration that comes when you’ve got the breath and the way you think about the breath and the perceptions you have of the breath all informed by knowledge. It puts the mind in a really good position to dig deeper inside. You’ll notice, for example, that some pains in the body can be mitigated by the fact that the way you breathe, to a certain extent. Sometimes they’re just going to sit there as physical pain. Then you realize, okay, the problem there is not so much how you breathe around the pain, but how you think about the pain, what perceptions you have of the pain. That puts you in a position where you can dig deeper, because you see more and more precisely exactly what the problem is. If the way you breathe is painful, that’s going to get in the way. But if you’re sensitive to the breath energy in the body and you’ve got it going as well as it can but there’s still pain, and the pain is still bothering you, then you’ve got to look into how you perceive the pain. We have this tendency to glom everything together. There’s the experience of the body, which the Buddha divides into the four elements. It’s best to think of the four elements as four properties of the body. There’s the warmth, and there’s the coolness. There’s the energy, and there’s the solidity of the body. Those are body sensations. And then you’ve got the pain sensations. We tend to glom these together, especially when you glom the pain to the solidity. The pain seems solid. You glom the pain to the breath energy, and all of a sudden the pain flows all over the body like the breath. So you should ask yourself, when you feel that you’ve got a pain that’s just solidly there, say, in your hips, first off, is the way you’re breathing going to exacerbate the pain, or is it not a question of breathing at all? Is it a different kind of question? First, you experiment with the breath. If you find any pain left over when you’ve done your breath work, then you realize it’s an issue of the way you direct your breath. Your thoughts to the pain, the way you perceive the pain. Try to notice which sensations in that spot are body sensations, which sensations are pain sensations. They’re different kinds of sensations. As soon as you can separate them out, you begin to see that the pain is not nearly as solid as you thought it was. It flits around. If you ask yourself, where is the pain strongest? You begin to realize that you can catch the mind in action, because the mind has been perceiving the pain. It’s been placing a label on it that makes the issue worse. So if you can catch the particular perception that heightens the pain and then drop that perception, you learn some really important things about the mind, how the mind does create suffering for itself. Simply through the way it fabricates the mind, through its perceptions and feelings, or its directive thoughts, the way it evaluates things. In this way, you learn to be your own best friend. You learn to make the breath into your friend. You learn to make all the other processes of the mind into your friend, because they can put you in a position where you can see the subtle levels of your own lack of skill. So if you come to the meditation with that attitude, “I’m just going to learn to sit here and deal with pain through endurance,” well, endurance is not the solution to the problem. It helps if you can watch things more carefully. But one of the important lessons of endurance is that you try to minimize the amount of stress you’re causing to yourself in a difficult situation, so you can bear with the situation more easily and also see it more clearly. Think about the Buddha, all those years of self-torment, thinking that if he could only get his mind totally impervious to pleasure and pain, then he’d gain awakening. Well, it didn’t work. He had to use concentration, he had to use all the elements of the path as his friends, so he could dig deeper into the issue of why is suffering such a problem. Where does it come from? It’s helpful to build up endurance, but it’s even more helpful to be very precise about exactly what you’re doing that’s causing suffering that you don’t have to do. You see that more clearly as you sort out the various ways you fabricate your experience of the present moment. So in dealing with the breath, we’re learning precisely that, how the different sorts of fabrication create your experience of what’s happening right here, right now. And as you bring more and more knowledge, more and more awareness to what you’re doing, you can cut through this problem of the unnecessary suffering you’re causing yourself. When that problem is dealt with, then there’s no more suffering in the mind, even though there may be pains in the body, difficult people to deal with, as there were before. The mind’s relationship to these things has changed, and when you’re not piling unnecessary suffering on yourself, there’s no suffering in the mind. There’ll be the stress of conditions, or as John Lee calls it, the stress of the elements. But there’s not the stress of defilement. There’s not the stress of ignorance. When the stress of ignorance is gone, then the problem is solved.

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