Admirable Friendship

March 15, 2015

The Buddha said many times that the practice begins with having an admirable friend. In fact, that’s what he meant when he said it’s the whole of the practice, it’s the foundation. The admirable friend points you to qualities of human beings that are possible. Good qualities. He said if you don’t have an admirable friend, you might think we’re impossible. The admirable friend sets a good example. And to maintain a friendship with an admirable friend, you have to start developing some of the same qualities that that friend is showing to you. The Buddha said that the most important external factor in the practice is having an admirable friend. And you want to learn how to be an admirable friend. So what are the qualities? There are four that the Buddha outlines. The first one is conviction. This means conviction in the principle of karma, basically. They say that it’s conviction in the Buddha’s awakening, the fact that he really was awakened. But when you look at what does that mean, it means that human beings can find true happiness through their efforts. And their actions really do make a difference. When the Buddha talked about his path, it was all about his actions, the things he had been doing that he realized were getting in the way of finding true happiness, and his experiments to find other ways of acting, until he finally came across the right way, starting with his discovery of right concentration or his remembrance of a time when he’d been in right concentration, realizing that this was an important factor of the path. There’s another passage where he talks about right resolve as the first factor that you discover. The two go together, as right resolve, as it develops, turns into right concentration. You want to get rid of sensual passions. You want to get rid of all your fascination with sensual thinking. Try to put that aside. Any thinking that’s imbued with ill will, any thinking that’s imbued with harmfulness, you put those things aside, and you find the mind settles into skillful thoughts, and then from skillful thoughts it begins to gather into one. It’s good to think about these as being two of the implications of having conviction in the Buddha’s awakening. You want to get these two factors down because it’s through your resolves that you act, and your actions take a specific shape. Your intentions can be all over the place—one minute intending something, another minute intending something else. When you really resolve on something, there’s more of a continuity, and it’s more explicit, it’s more articulated. So think for a bit about what it means that the Buddha gained awakening through his efforts and he showed that it’s something human beings can do. It’s what the purpose of all those autobiographical passages where he talks about his path to awakening is, showing that it’s something that we can do, too. There’s nothing in there that requires that you be superhuman or that some superhuman agent comes down and helps you. So you think about what that means for your life. Try to develop a sense of conviction in this, and the rest of the qualities are going to follow. Because when you really believe that your actions make a difference, then they’re going to come back. You want to be generous. You want to be virtuous. You want to develop discernment. Those are the other three qualities. These can be illustrated by those four principles we talked about earlier today, the Sangha Wattu. They talk about various ways in which you can be giving to other people, being generous with material things, sharing with other people what you’ve got, sharing your time, sharing your energy, sharing your knowledge when it’s helpful. Kind words or endearing words. Are these a gift? Well, you know what unendearing words are like. They can really be an acid that corrodes away a relationship. Endearing words are not just sweet words or nice words. Words to be endearing, you want them to have meaning and to be helpful. Then if you’re going to point out somebody else’s weak points or criticize some of their actions, you want to take the time—and this is where it’s a gift—you take the time and the energy to figure out what would be the best way to get to that person, or to bring these subjects up, at the same time showing respect. Because it’s the respect there that makes the words endearing. When you help someone, you want to help them in ways that really are to their advantage. In other words, you don’t go just making a show of being helpful to score points. You’re trying to think about what would really be helpful for this person, what would really be for this person’s true well-being, and give that kind of help. And then there’s consistency. Be consistent in your help at times when it’s going to be difficult. But the element of consistency is what builds trust. And trust is absolutely basic to any relationship, totally essential. So those are some of the aspects of being generous. As for virtuous, this deals with the precepts. You hold to the precepts even when it’s difficult. Because, again, there’s an element of being trustworthy. And as the Buddha said, you’re giving safety to other people. You’re setting a good example. He said one of the worst things you can do for someone else, and one of the most harmful things you can do for someone else, is to get them to break the precepts. Coming up with arguments for a while, there are times when it may not be so bad to kill, or so bad to steal, or have illicit sex, or to lie. Or to take intoxicants. So you don’t want to do anything that would get somebody else to do that. Think about that passage we chanted just now from the Metta Sutta. You’re not only wishing for other people to be happy, but you’re also wishing that they not harm one another. Because you know that if they harm one another, the person who’s doing the harming is going to get harmed back in return. Then finally, discernment. The Buddha talks about discernment of arising and passing away. And it’s more than just watching things coming and going. You want to figure out when something undesirable comes, what went with it, what comes with it, when it goes, what went away at the same time. The same thing with things that are really desirable. Remember, we’re talking about desirable in the long term. After a while, the things don’t just come and go. They come and go because of a cause. And you want to be very specific about the cause. The other day we were talking about, “Well, I realize that when the mind is doing something unskillful, there’s greed, aversion, and delusion. So it’s one of those.” That’s not knowing anything. You know the words, but the real knowledge comes when you actually see, “Okay, there was this particular desire and it led to this particular kind of stress.” And when you’re able to let go of the desire, that’s stopped. You learn how to step back from it a bit. You watch it as an event in the mind rather than as something that you’re in, or something that you’re siding with, something that you’re riding with as it flows out of the mind. There will be these various currents that come up in the mind, and you want to be able to see them. You want to be able to see, “There’s that current, but I’m not going with it. I’m not going with it.” They talk about being safe from the flood, being above the flood on an island. The river comes past and you see the currents flowing and all the stuff that’s being carried down by the currents. It’s kind of like the Yukon River up in Alaska. When the ice breaks up, there’s huge blocks of ice coming down the river, and it’s a dangerous place to be. Sometimes there are trees and other things under the ice. You want to get out of the river then. It’s the same with the mind. Your mind is like the Yukon River. It’s got some dangerous things in the way that it flows, and you want to be able to step back from that. The important thing here is that you realize that what’s really weighing the mind down is not what other people are doing. It’s the mind’s own habits of riding with these things. And you can see how this happens. This would help a relationship if you’re looking at the mind’s suffering as something the mind is doing to itself. It means you’re not blaming other people around you. And that’s an important principle. It makes it a lot easier for other people to live with you and for you to live with yourself. So we both want to look for admirable friends and be admirable friends ourselves. This way we pick up good influences and we spread some good influences around. And we actually help one another, rather than being an obstacle to one another. Because, as the Buddha said, if you can’t find a good person to be a friend with, it’s better to go alone. But if you can find someone who is admirable, he said, stay with that friend. Let that person criticize you. Let that person point out your errors and faults. Because when the person of that sort does that, it’s like pointing out treasure. And that’s the basic principle with refuge. If you take the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha as your refuge, there comes a point when you become a member of the Sangha and then you can be a refuge for others. So think about these principles of admirable friendship and realize it’s, one, something you want to look for in other people, and two, these are qualities you want to develop in yourself so that at the very least you can be your own true friend. And even better than that, that quality of true friendship will spread around. It’s something the world really needs.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2015/150315_Admirable_Friendship.mp3>