Healthy Skepticism

April 15, 2015

Metta, or goodwill, is something we feel for all people, or we try to feel for all people. Metta-tha, friendship, is something else. You have to be selective. As the Buddha said, admirable friendship is the whole of the holy life. Not that your friends are going to do the work for you, but if you have an admirable friend, he assures us that it is possible to put an end to suffering. Without friends like that, we probably wouldn’t even think of it. There are actually two kinds of friends that the Buddha recommends cultivating. Loyal friends, like the friends in the chat we had just now, those who are helpful, sympathetic, who point you to worthwhile things. Those are people you want to cultivate, because it’s hard to find people in the world who are loyal. In other descriptions, the Buddha adds other qualities as well. People who look after you when you’re heedless. In other words, people who take care of you and stick with you in your sorrows and joys, and stick with you when things get rough. I remember going over that list one time with a group of young monks in Thailand. A lot of them were there just for the rains retreat. They were getting ready to disrobe. As we went to the end of the list, I said, “These are the people you want to hang out with when you disrobe.” They said, “Where are you going to find people like that?” Really, loyal friends are hard to find. So when you do have loyal friends, treasure them. Admirable friends are the ones who pull you up to a higher level. There are four qualities that the Buddha recommends looking for in a friend like that. One is conviction and the principle of karma. In other words, you’re convinced that what you do really does make a difference. And so you have to be very careful about your actions. You want to hang around people who believe that. You want to hang around someone who’s generous, someone who’s virtuous, someone who has discernment. Partly because you benefit directly from their generosity. And their virtue and discernment. And partly because they give you a good example. These are the kind of habits you want to pick up. This is why it’s worth going far to find a good teacher. This is why it’s good to hang around people like this, so you can become like them. Now, the problem with the world, of course, is that we have all kinds of people we associate with. People in our own families sometimes. And not all of them are loyal or admirable friends. So what do you do in a case like that? Well, you are friendly to them. You have goodwill for them. But you don’t go to them for advice. And you try not to take them as an example. This requires that you have to have your guard up. And when you’re around people like that, it’s so easy to slip into their ways. You have to be a little bit skeptical around them. I’ve mentioned this many times before. John Fung had a very healthy skepticism about the people who came to the monastery. He didn’t trust people easily. And he didn’t let people get close to him easily. That may sound harsh, but this is a quality that’s needed if you’re going to learn how to take care of the people in your mind as well. We’ve talked many times about the committee of the mind. Some members are friendly, some members are not. Some seem to be friends, and some really aren’t. And if you don’t get some practice in being judicious about how you choose your friends outside, it’s going to be very hard to recognize false friends inside. Because, after all, they’re your voice. They speak with your voice, even with your own accent. And they can say all kinds of sweet things. But you have to learn how to see through them. You have to have a healthy skepticism toward the people in your committees inside. So if you have some practice in learning how to recognize loyal friends and admirable friends outside, you can apply it inside. Even with something as simple as sitting here trying to get the mind into concentration, there are those hindrances that are already waiting to come in from one direction or another. And one of the problems with the hindrances is when they actually hinder your mind is because you go along with them. They say something is really beautiful and worthy of sensual desire, and you say, “Yeah, that’s right. That’s really pretty.” Something to lust after, something to anchor for. They recommend ill will toward somebody. You can come up with lots of reasons for why that person deserves your ill will. When you’re sleepy, you say, “Ah, yes, my body needs some rest.” It’s all very quick. So you have to learn how to be skeptical about your own hindrances. Desirable objects, sights, sounds, smells, tastes, taxes. Skeptical sensations. Look for the other side. Look for the undesirable side. Everybody, everything has it. People often accuse the Buddha of badmouthing all the pleasures of life. He’s not badmouthing. He’s just pointing out that everything has two sides to it. As John Lee says, you want to be a person with two eyes and not just one. That way you can learn how to live in the world of beautiful, beautiful objects and desirable objects and not have their desire take over your mind. The same with ill will. On the one hand, you realize that if you allow yourself to feel ill will for other people, you’re giving rise to a lot of the qualities that you don’t like in other people in yourself. It’s like the person who says, “If anybody out there wants to kill people, we should kill them.” You’re taking on the other person’s problems, the other person’s bad karma, and making it your own. This is why we start with good will for ourselves and remind ourselves that engaging in that kind of thinking is not really for our own best interest. Then, as the Buddha recommends, you try to look at the other person’s good side. There must be something, someplace. This doesn’t mean that you try to love the person. Simply, you don’t let ill will take over. When you see the other person’s good side, that gives you something to work with. If you can’t find any good side to that person at all, then you have to feel sorry for the person. The person’s creating a lot of bad karma. The Buddha says you have to treat that person as someone who’s really sick, out in the middle of the desert with nobody to help him. If you can be of help, you’re happy to help. If you can’t, you have to leave it, leave the person right there. But you do your best first to see if there’s anything you can do. As for sleepiness, the Buddha has you test it. A lot of times the mind gets really sleepy, not because of any lack of energy, simply because it’s bored. So you test it. If you’re working with the breath, try to work with the breath in new ways. Move the spot of your focus around. Three breaths in the middle of the chest, three breaths at the base of the throat, three breaths in the middle of the head. Keep moving, moving, moving around. See if that stirs something up. Think about different ways you can conceive the breath, you can hold a perception of the breath in mind that may change the way you experience the breath, or just be very conscious of trying to be aware of the whole body all at once, all the time, continually, without lapse. If that doesn’t work, give yourself a meditation object that stirs things up a little bit more. You can think about the Buddha, you can think about the Dhamma, the Sangha, you can think about the bones in your body, the different parts in your body. Something that grabs your attention, gives the mind something to work with so it’s not bored. Other times, sleepiness comes from a lack of energy. That’s when you learn how to breathe in ways that are more energizing for the body. You’ve got to test the sleepiness, not just give in every time it comes. So you can figure out which sleepy voice in the mind is actually friendly and which one is just trying to get in the way of your meditation. You’ve got to be skeptical of these things. Same with restlessness and anxiety. You’ve got to think about this right now. This is really important. It’s something you’ve really got to worry about. It’s important to tell yourself, “Meditate for a while first, and then at the end of the meditation, once you’ve got more alertness and more stability in the mind, then you can think about it.” And if the voice insists, you’ve got to think about it now and remind yourself. There’s so little you really know about the future. One thing you do know about the future is that whatever comes up, you’ve got to be alert, you’ve got to be mindful. You have to use your power shift to sermon well. You develop those things by meditating. It’s like going to school. If you go to school basically to memorize information, when you graduate it won’t be too long before the information you’ve memorized is out of date. If you go to school to learn skills about how to think, how to read, how to write, those skills stick with you. You can use them in any situation. If information dies away, you can plug in new information. It’s the same with facing the future. You need good qualities of mind in order to deal with whatever comes up. And so how do you do that? Well, you meditate. This way you can argue with the voices that pull you away. As for uncertainty, there are lots of things in the world you can be uncertain about. But again, you know that if you develop good qualities of mind, it’s going to have a good effect someplace down the line. It’s about how to sort through the mind, which things are skillful in the mind and which things are not skillful. If that seems too complex, just ask yourself, “Do you know if you’re breathing in?” “Yes, I’m breathing in.” “Okay, stick with the in-breath.” “Do you know if you’re breathing out?” “Yes, I’m breathing out.” “Okay, stick with that.” That gives you something solid to work with. It’s something right here. Right now. And as for your doubts about other things, as the Buddha said, you’re not going to overcome your doubts by giving in to them. You test things. You experiment. Give the practice a chance. Learn how to doubt your doubts. In this way you can take that attitude that is very careful about choosing friends outside, and you can apply it inside as well. You learn how to recognize the little weaselly voices inside that tell you to do something that ultimately you know is going to cause harm down the line. But they can plead and they can wheedle and they can make themselves sound really attractive. You’ve got to learn how to see through that. So again, you have good will for everybody, but you’re careful about who you choose as your friends. I was talking to a therapist one time who was saying that most people really have only about twelve true friends, and beyond that are good friends, and then there’s their acquaintances. You can’t have that large a group of really true friends. If it gets too large, then they’re not all that true. So within that circle of true friends—the people you trust, the people to whom you open your heart when you look for advice—choose those people very carefully. If you find that you have loyal friends, treat them well. As for other people, you treat them nicely, too. But you learn how to maintain a skeptical attitude. This principle applies both inside and out. That’s how you learn how to be hateful. And as the Buddha said, hatefulness is the basis of everything that’s skillful. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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