Admirable Friendship

August 13, 2021

One of the most important outside conditions for the practice, all the way to stream entry, first taste of awakening, is admirable friendship. A person you can rely on to teach you the Dhamma and to embody the Dhamma in his or her actions. But of course you can’t take that friend with you everywhere you go, unless you internalize what that friend embodies. And that’s a part of the friendship. It’s not simply having good people around, listening to them, trying to follow their example. That’s when their friendship becomes admirable. And what it means, of course, is that you learn how to recognize good friends in yourself and you encourage them. The voices in your mind, like right now as you’re meditating, the friendly voice, the admirable voice, is the one that says to stay with the breath, stay with the topic of your meditation. Don’t let yourself wander off. Be mindful to keep the breath in mind. Be alert to see what you’re really doing. And then be ardent in doing this well. That’s how you embody those characteristics of the loyal friend that we chanted about just now. One who’s helpful, one who’s sympathetic, basically, concerned about your well-being. Those are the voices of the mind you want to listen to. The apathetic ones the discouraged ones, those are not really your friends. Listen to the ones who give you encouragement. Because that’s the first quality of a good friend. Conviction. On the outside it means conviction in the Buddha’s awakening. And that gets carried inside, in terms of the implications of the Buddha’s awakening. And what are those implications for you? Remember the Buddha found awakening through developing his own actions and developing qualities in his mind that he said anybody has. It wasn’t that he was special. He was special only in the fact that he’d taken good qualities and developed them to the sufficient degree that he could gain awakening. But the potential is there in all of us. He was heedful, ardent, and resolute. And we can do that too. That’s the first implication. Human action is capable of doing these things. And you’re one of those human beings that can do it. So let’s keep that in mind. The Buddhist Dharma is well taught. In other words, we’re fortunate that we still have the teachings around. We can listen to them, read them, learn about them, and put them into practice to make sure they really are the genuine Dharma. Because that’s the test. When you follow these teachings, what kind of person do you become? How do your actions become? What does it do for your mind? And you realize that any teaching that teaches you how to behave in ways that really are for your own well-being deserves a lot of your attention. There are so many other voices out there in the world that sneak into the mind with their strange values, their strange priorities. And you have to regard them as non-friends, as we chatted just now. So you’ve got to sort out the voices in your mind here. Which ones are non-friends? Which ones are Dharma? Which ones are not? And read a lot of the Dharma to know. It’s good to know what the Buddha taught. And we’re fortunate that we have the the suttas instead of having simply the principles set down in abstract terms. But you can see how the Buddha would teach different kinds of people in different kinds of situations. So you get an idea of which teachings are right for which situation. You can look for the cases that are similar to where you are right now. Conviction in the Sangha. That the Buddha’s wisdom in setting up the Sangha was well placed. That it’s managed to keep his teachings alive all this time. And the last quality of conviction is that your precepts are pleasing to the noble ones. That means whoever you’re choosing as your admirable friend has to be someone whose virtue is clear and aboveboard, holds by the precepts, but doesn’t exalt him or herself over the precepts. Simply realizes that this is the way any good person should behave. And you’re holding to the precepts. Not to make yourself better than other people or to exalt yourself over others, but because it’s medicine. You need this medicine. It’s as if your eyes are blurry and you take the medicine that clears your eyes. When you behave in line with the precepts, it clears up a lot of issues in life. So this is a quality you want to look for as part of the conviction in bodhichitta. Bodhichitta is embodied by your admirable friend and a quality that you want to develop as well. That’s the first quality you look for is conviction. Virtue there is another quality that falls right into conviction, as I mentioned just now. Then there’s generosity. You want to look for someone who’s generous, not only with material things, but with time, knowledge, forgiveness. Simply because these are good people to be around. And it makes you a good person when you start emulating those qualities. I know John Fuhring had a number of students who were psychologically a little unbalanced. He never encouraged them to meditate, but he did encourage them in generosity. He got them to give of their time, give of their energy, help around the monastery. That’s a way of developing self-esteem. Because that’s what generosity is really good for. You realize that you’re here on earth helping other beings. Your presence here is something that other beings can rejoice in. And you learn how to rejoice in yourself. Finally, the fourth quality you want to emulate in your admirable friend is discernment. The Buddha calls it “penetrating discernment into arising and passing away.” We’ve heard a lot about how insight is simply seeing things come and seeing them go. Letting them come, letting them go. But that’s not penetrative. When the Buddha describes penetrative wisdom, penetrative discernment, it’s a matter of analysis. And also classifying things as they arise and pass away. Which ones are the ones that you want to have arise, that it should encourage to have arise? Which ones are the ones you should encourage to pass away? Because that’s one of the qualities of mindfulness. When the Buddha describes mindfulness, that’s what he calls a “governing principle.” It means you’re not just looking at things coming and going. If you see that something is lacking, something good is lacking in your mind, you’re mindful to give rise to it. And then when it’s there, you’re mindful to maintain it. So to be penetrative, you have to see what’s skillful and what’s not skillful. And also understand cause and effect to the extent that if something skillful arises in the mind, you learn how to maintain it. If something unskillful comes, you learn how to say “no” and say “no” effectively. Which means that you see very clearly what the allure of that unskillful thinking is, why you like going for it. You’re willing to admit it. Because that’s when you can do something about it. And then you compare it with the drawbacks. You think, “If I go for this, what happens? And is the allure worth it when compared to the drawbacks?” And you consider these things and you see that it really isn’t. That’s how you can say “no” to things effectively. So you want to be on top of things as they arise and pass away. You don’t want to be aware of something unskillful in the mind only when it’s taken over. You don’t want to see it coming down the road. The small it is when you detect it, the more easily you can get rid of it. So that’s the quality of conviction that you want to look for in your animal friend and the one you want to emulate. Virtue, generosity, discernment, all these four qualities that you want to look for. And when you see them in someone else, you say, “That person’s a human being. That person can do it. Why can’t I?” We live in what the Buddha calls an “uneven world.” The word for “uneven” is used in the Canada to describe two things. One is a road. It’s not smooth. And the other is a musical instrument that’s not well-tuned. The Bodhisattva says even though the world is uneven, we should try to live in an even, in-tune way. Not in tune with the world, but in tune with the Dharma, in tune with the principles of what really is right and wrong, what really is skillful and what’s not. And someone who can find someone else who’s in tune is living in an even way. We learn how to tune our attitudes, tune our ideas, tune our behavior with that person. And then when you’re in tune, the sound is a lot stronger. And you’re creating a better sound in the world. Think of it that way. Other people may not hear it, but you can hear it in yourself. When you can be in tune with what you know is right inside, there’s a lot of reassurance there.

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