Admirable Friendship, Inside & Out

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We live in a world whose ways are very fickle. They give you things and then they take them away. You gain wealth and then you can figure out some way to make your wealth not worth anything, even though you’ve worked for it. They give you status. They can take your status away. They give you praise and acceptance and then they can decide not to accept you. They give you pleasures, they give you pain. It’s pretty much the way of the world. There’s very little outside that we can take as anything solid, reliable. But then we look inside and we wonder if we’re solid or reliable too. So we’re looking for something that we can rely on, so we make sure that we’re not deluded by the world or deluded by ourselves. The Buddha recommends two things. He says the best exterior help for awakening is admirable friendship. The best interior is developing appropriate attention. The two go together. Start with admirable friendship. The Buddha says you look for someone who has four qualities. They have conviction in the principle of karma, they’re virtuous, they’re generous, and they’re discerning. Then you try to become a friend with people like that. And at the same time you try to emulate their qualities. You ask them about their conviction, their generosity, their virtue, their discernment. And then you try to follow their example. Most difficult, of course, is the discernment. And you find that it comes down to the questions they ask. Look at the Buddha teaching his son at the very beginning. He said if you’re going to do anything, look first at your intention. If you anticipate any harm, either to yourself or others, don’t do it. If you don’t anticipate any harm, go ahead and do it. While you’re doing it, if you see that any harm is coming, even though you’ve tried your best not to cause any harm, you stop. If you don’t see any harm, you continue. When you’re done, you reflect again about the long-term consequences. And if you saw that you really did cause any harm, you go and talk it over with someone else you respect. In other words, you find an admirable friend. Get some advice on how to avoid that mistake in the future. If you don’t see any harm, then take pride in the fact, take joy in the fact, that your practice is growing. And then continue training yourself this way every day. The trick there, of course, is to recognize harm. The important part of all this is to get you sensitive to what you’re doing and the results of what you’re doing. This is the area where we most tend to be deluded. We learn at a very early age you do something wrong. If you deny it strongly enough, then your parents may believe that you didn’t actually do it. But then you start denying it to yourself. That’s where it gets dangerous. That’s where the delusion begins to come in. This is where it’s important to have that admirable friend and to consult with that friend when you’re not really sure. Or you begin to pick up that maybe you’re lying to yourself and lying to other people. Because you want to do your best. If you’re going to learn anything, you have to start by doing your best. I know a lot of people who are talented who just basically send it in, phone it in, feeling that they’re good enough so they don’t have to put much effort into it. But they don’t learn anything. You have to regard your life as a skill. Because as with any skill, if you do it poorly, the results come out. And the results can actually have a long-term effect. So we’re trying to get you sensitive to what you’re doing and the results we’re getting. And keep on trying to get better and better results. This is where the admirable friend comes in. Pick up this person’s discernment. You want to see what questions does this person ask? What questions does he encourage? There’s that story about Ajahn Sao, who was Ajahn Mun’s teacher. Lumpa Put, who at the time of Ajahn Sao, was just a novice living with Ajahn Sao, later recounted what it was like to watch Ajahn Sao teaching. When he taught you meditation, if you had any theoretical questions, he wouldn’t answer them. Even something simple like repeating the word “butto.” If you asked him, “What does ‘butto’ mean?” He’d say, “Don’t ask.” “What’s going to happen when I do it?” “Don’t ask. Just do it.” And then if the person went ahead and did it, he’d come back and say, “Well, I tried what you said, and I got these results.” That’s what Lumpa Put was interested in, listening to the results, and also noticing to what extent does the person connect what he or she did with the results that he or she got. That the results were not right, he’d say, “This is not right. You have to change what you’re doing.” And might give some ideas what the person might do instead. If the results were okay, he wouldn’t say they were right. He’d just say, “Just keep on practicing that way.” Because if you were absolutely right in the training of your mind, you’d be an arahant. You’d be totally awakened. So you’re heading in the direction of right, but you’re not there yet. Ajahn Fung was similar in his instructions. He’d give instructions on meditation. And when he got so you’re a little bit more independent, he’d send you off to meditate on your own. And if you had anything arising in the meditation, and you couldn’t explain what you had done leading up to that, he didn’t want to hear it. The question always was, “What did you do before that happened?” So this is what discernment is all about, connecting your actions with the results. And being honest with yourself. This is why the Buddha said that he looked for, in a student, two qualities. The person be honest and observant. By observant, he meant noticing what you do, the results you’re getting, and being able to judge whether they’re good or not. The ability to judge is something you’re going to develop. But the honesty is just saying, “Yes, I really did this, and these are the results I really got, and they really were connected.” That was an important part of the training. So an idea is just to have wonderful experiences, and to figure out, “What are we doing?” So we have something solid inside, that chan we had just now, with subject to aging, illness, death, separation. The first three happen to do with our bodies. The fourth contemplation has to do with just things in the world, the people. You love the things you love, things you depend on, the people you depend on. You’re going to be separated from them. So the world doesn’t offer you much to rely on. The fifth contemplation we have, we’re the owners of our actions. This is what we have to rely on, what we’re doing. So you want to be very careful that you’re not deluded about what you’re doing. You don’t deny what you’re doing. You have to learn how to see the connections between what you’re doing and the results you’re getting. In some cases, the results come right away. In other cases, it takes time, which is why you have to develop mindfulness to be a reliable judge, so you can remember what you’ve done. Mindfulness is not just being aware of what’s happening. It’s keeping things in mind. Most particularly, keeping in mind that when you do X, you’re going to look for the results. And when you begin to see the results, you want to check them again and again, to make sure they really are connected. Because the practice that leads to awakening is going to require that you be really, really clear about what you’re doing, even in the refined states of concentration. We’re not there just to bliss out, say, on emptiness. Or space. Or the quality of the breath. We want to see very clearly, when you do this, when you hold this perception in mind, when you focus in this way, what are the results you’re getting? If you change the focus, change the perception, what results do you get? You want to be clear about that. So in this way, you become your own admirable friend. You establish an admirable friendship inside. Which is where you really need to rely on it, because admirable friends are not everywhere. And even when you find one, you can’t guarantee that that person’s going to live long enough or be with you long enough to learn anything you have to need, everything you need to learn from this person. So you try to learn your best as you can. And you practice admirable friendship. By trying things out. Being really observant of what you’re doing. This is where alertness is an important part of training and mindfulness. Being alert to what you’re doing, the results you’re getting, and then checking them against what you’ve learned in the past to figure out what’s up to standard and what’s not. And you try your best. This way you begin to rely on yourself. So we live in this body of aging, illness, and death, in this world of separation, this world of material gain and loss, status and loss of status, acceptance and non-acceptance, pleasure and pain. We can find something solid and reliable. We’re going to find it inside. We find examples outside. They give us some ideas. But to find what’s generally reliable, you have to look inside. This is what I think is meant by that Zen koan about the Buddha nature and a dog. The Master says no. It’s supposed to be paradoxical, because their teachings, everybody has Buddha nature. Why would the Master say no? If you want to see the potential for awakening, you don’t look in other people. You certainly don’t look in dogs. You’re going to have to find it in yourself. You can get good examples from other people. And there are dogs who actually give good examples in some things. They know gratitude. But if you want to find the real thing, you’re going to have to find it inside, using your own powers of being observant and being honest, and learning how to ask the right questions about what you’re doing, the results you’re getting, and how you can improve. That’s why we have that fifth reflection. It teaches us to look in the right place and look in our actions, and think about the results. It mentions that something solid can be found. When the Buddha talks about the knowledge that leads to awakening, it’s right here. The Dhamma says that whatever is subject to origination is all subject to cessation. It doesn’t mean that whatever arises passes away. Origination usually refers to causes that come from within the mind. Cessation comes with dispassion. You learn how to train yourself to look at things in such a way that gives rise to dispassion. And from the dispassion comes the ability to open up to something that is really reliable inside. Something that doesn’t change. It’s not a world at all. And that’s when you know you’ve found something solid. In the meantime, you’re heading in that direction. As long as you keep looking at your actions and doing your best to learn how to judge the results. For the sake of trying again and trying again. We work with trial and error until we finally get to trial and success.

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