People of Integrity

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We all encounter pain in life. Even when we’re first born, coming out into the world is a painful experience. And there are more pains from day to day. And we had nobody to explain them to us. As the Buddha said, our first raw reaction to pain is bewilderment. Why is this happening? And then there’s a desire to find a way out. You search for someone. It’s just somebody who knows a way to put an end to this pain, this suffering. This is why we reach out to other people. If we had no pain, we could be perfectly content to be by ourselves. It’s because of pain that we seek other people out. So we look for somebody who knows. The problem is because we’re searching with bewilderment, we don’t really know who we can rely on, who we can’t. So we go through life picking up ideas as we develop language, as we listen to other people, observe other people, and pick up ideas on how to deal with pain. Physical pain, mental pain. Some of them work, some of them don’t work. When they don’t work, we keep on searching. So instinctively we’re looking for, one, someone who knows how to put an end to pain. Two, they’re truthful, they’re willing to tell us the truth about what they know. And three, they’re compassionate. They’d be willing to share their knowledge. When the Buddha talks about one of the requisites for gaining awakening, it starts with people like that. People who know people who tell the truth, and people who are compassionate. His tests for what he calls people of integrity include the test that you observe this person very carefully, and you see if this person would try to get somebody to do something that was not in that person’s best interests, then you wouldn’t want to take this first person as a teacher, because it shows that the first person doesn’t have compassion. But if everything that person tells you is for your own best interest, then you can trust that person’s compassion. The next question is, would this person claim to know things that he or she didn’t know? And again, if you see that happening, you realize you can’t trust that person. You want somebody who’s truthful. Then you want to see how deep that person’s teachings are. And they give you new insights into your own mind. It shows that that person knows something you don’t know. So that’s what you look for as you go through life. And the Buddha says he’s providing that kind of person for you. He himself trained himself to be knowledgeable, truthful, compassionate. And he trained others to be knowledgeable, truthful, and compassionate as well. This is why we have the Sangha, all the monastics that he trained, and they’ve trained one another since then, to keep these traditions alive. But as the Buddha pointed out, to recognize a person of integrity, you have to have some integrity too. You may not have the knowledge that you’re looking for, but you do want to develop the quality of being truthful, and the quality of being compassionate. You’re truthful both to yourself and with other people. This is why when the Buddha was teaching his son, the very first thing he talked about was being truthful, how important it was to be truthful. If you want to benefit from the practice, you have to start out as someone who’s always going to tell the truth. And he said you don’t even tell a lie, even in jest. In other words, you don’t tell a joke. That’s basically a lie. You have to make sure that whatever you say, is in line with the truth, as you know it. Now you may be deceived, but as long as you speak in line with the truth, as you know it, you’re developing the right quality. Then of course, to gain knowledge, you want to figure out where do you really not know yet. As for the quality of compassion, you realize if you harm other people, whatever happiness you have, it’s not going to last, because they’re going to not want to stand being harmed. If your happiness depends on their harm, they’re going to try to destroy your happiness. So you have to take their happiness into consideration as well. They really want other beings to be happy. So you have to develop the qualities of integrity inside. You see this especially as you meditate. You tell them, you know, often I ask people who are meditating, “What do you see when you meditate?” I don’t know about lottery numbers, or maybe visions of Davis or something, but as John Foon pointed out, the best thing to say is, “I see my defilements.” In other words, I admit to myself what’s going wrong in my mind. Because when you admit your faults to yourself, then there’s hope for you. You realize that there’s something wrong, something that needs to be corrected, and you’re willing to correct it. That’s the quality of truthfulness you want. The same with compassion. You work on what you know will be for your long-term welfare and happiness. If you’re compassionate in this way, the Buddha says, “It’s also the beginning of wisdom.” So these qualities of truthfulness and compassion come together to make you wise. So as we meditate, you have to remember, we’re not here just for the techniques. We’re talking about staying with the breath, what happens when the mind wanders off from the breath, you bring it right back. The “how to” part is a necessary part of the meditation. But it’s also the “why.” What are your values? And how honest are you in maintaining those values? I’ve known a lot of cases where people meditate, and they start getting visions. Visions of what other people are doing, visions of devas. In the beginning, maybe their visions are correct, but if they go around bragging about them, trying to use their knowledge to impress other people, their knowledge tends to turn on them. They start getting false things mixed up. Because their intentions are not really all that good, they can’t tell the difference. So your best guide to keeping yourself safe, both as you’re looking for someone to take as an admirable friend, and as you’re working with your own practice, try to be as truthful as possible. And think about compassion in terms of the long term. You’re here not to impress other people, but you’re here because you’ve got a problem inside. The mind is causing self-suffering and it doesn’t know why. Everything we do, say, and think is for the purpose of happiness, and yet we turn around and do things that make us very unhappy. Why is that? That’s the problem we’re here to solve. It’s good that we have the time to do that. So many people go through life and they don’t have the time to sit down and look at their own minds. This is the big problem that’s driving us, that’s making us suffer. The Buddha is offering us an opportunity to learn how to understand the problem, and in understanding it, you can put an end to it. You look for people of integrity, and you also try to develop qualities of integrity in yourself. That way you keep yourself on the right track.

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