True Friends Inside & Out

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The Buddha has lots of different explanations about the different stages people go through as they approach the practice and progress through the various stages of the path, partly because we’re coming from many different places. He was the kind of teacher who didn’t demand that you have to be a certain sort of person aside from the fact that you were honest and observant. But in terms of your personal background, where you came from, that wasn’t the issue. He would figure out a way to show you what would be the next step in your progress. In one of those basic lists he gives, he says the path begins by finding good friends, people outside who will give you good advice and set a good example. You look for four qualities in friends like that, because basically they show you what you can do yourself, what a human being can do, and be happy. The first quality is conviction, conviction in the Buddha’s awakening, which translates into being convinced of the power of your actions. After all, it was through his own actions that the Buddha was able to gain awakening. And as he said, the qualities of mind he brought to training himself to act skillfully in body and speech and mind were not exclusive to him. In other words, they’re qualities that we all have, at least in some form, to some extent, and the qualities that we can all develop. So that’s how the Buddha’s awakening translates to us being convinced that we can find happiness through our actions. There’s a train of thought that says wisdom lies in being very passive about things, being a quantumist, seeing things coming and going, not expecting much in terms of happiness, and not getting upset about pain. But that’s very dull. That’s not what the Buddha taught. He said, “Wisdom begins with the question, ‘What will I do to lead to long-term welfare and happiness?’” We’re convinced that there is such a thing as long-term, and we can gain it through our own actions. So everything starts with conviction. Then the next quality is virtue, the ability to abstain from harmful behavior. The Buddha sets this out in terms of the precepts. But the basic principle across the board is you see something that you can do in body, speech, or mind. And you may like to do it a lot, but you realize it’s going to give rise to bad results. You’ve got to learn how to say no. And say no in a way that you’re not just pushing the problem underground for it to turn into the thing and come up someplace else. You learn how to say no in a way that the mind is happy to say no. That means you learn how to talk yourself into wanting to be more skillful. This is where that principle of having friends outside turns into the principle of having good friends inside. Because we have false friends, just as in that chant we chanted just now, the ones who tell us what we want to hear, even though it’s not for our own good. And they’re very clever. Our greed, aversion, and delusion have long practiced in getting us to do things that are going to be for our long-term harm. And for some reason, it seems like the good side of the mind is pretty innocent, in the sense that it doesn’t think strategically, and it’s not clever enough to fend off the reasonings of our more unskillful side. So the skill of the unskillful side is learning how to talk us into doing stupid things, things that we’ll later regret. So you want to develop some ingenuity on the good side. Train the friends in your mind who are trying to get you to do something that is in your own best interest. So they’re effective. They can see right through all the tricks that greed, aversion, and delusion have played on us for so long. So train them to have some ingenuity. And the mind says, “Well, if I don’t really understand my defilement, it’s because I don’t give into it. I’m not going to really understand it, so I’ve got to give into it to see it in action.” There’s no end to that. You always keep saying, “Well, I need to understand it again. I need to understand it again.” It goes on and on and on. So just point that out. There’s no end to that ruse. Well, there can be an end when you really understand things. One of the best ways of saying “understand” your defilements is to say “no” to them, and to keep on saying “no,” and to be firm. And see what they say, how they argue, how they squirm, how they wiggle, and learn how to see through all of their ruses. As Buddha said, there’s an allure to doing unskillful things, and we’ve got to see it. Why do we go for it? It’s like building a dam across a river. You don’t know how strong the currents are and how strong the lower parts of the river are until you put a dam across the river and you see your dam get washed away. But then you build it so it’s stronger and stronger, and then you see, “This is how strong those currents are.” If you don’t say “no” to your defilements, they’re just going to keep on flowing onto the surface where you can’t see them. So you have to say “no,” and you have to be willing to be generous at the same time. Otherwise there are a lot of things we’ve got to give up. There are all kinds of things that we want in life, but we have to realize that certain things are going to get in the way of other things. It’s like wanting all kinds of plants in your garden. But you plant some eucalyptus, and the problem with eucalyptus is that it kills everything else around it. So you start out by being generous. Learn how to overcome your stinginess, because your stinginess is really going to get in the way of the practice. It’s another really basic principle. Start with generosity, because on the one hand it teaches us that we have the freedom to say “no” to our defilements, or “no” to our stinginess. And we start thinking about the welfare of others. You may have something and you see that you might benefit from it, but somebody else might benefit from it too, and you’re happy to give it to them. That creates a good state of mind, a good feeling in the mind. It opens you up. As I said, you can’t gain deep concentration, and there’s no way you’re going to awaken if you’re stingy. So that’s the third quality you look for in a good friend. And then the final one is wisdom, understanding of how suffering happens and how you can put an end to it. These are the qualities you want to look for in a friend outside, so you can develop them in yourself. Because in your mind, the good friends, the true friends, can overcome the false ones. We’ve got a whole flock of people in here, it seems, each of us. Lots of different ideas, lots of different desires. We have to learn how to take the desire to put an end to suffering. As Ajaan Mann said one time, not to be the laughingstock of our defilements, who’ve tricked us so many times. Learn to take this desire and make it central. Learn to channel all your other desires into that. In this way, we really see that gaining wisdom, understanding our own minds, is the most interesting and most valuable thing we can do. Because we want happiness, but we do things that cause suffering. Why is that? What is the mind doing inside? Take an interest in this. Sometimes we get the mind into concentration and everything is very smooth and easy. After a while, the mind gets bored. Again, that’s your defilement. It wants some excitement. But here you can find something of interest by looking more carefully at what you’re doing. If the meditation just goes through the motions, it does get boring. But if you’re sensitive to how the mind settles down and what the mind does when it gets unsettled, then see that as an interesting puzzle. That’s something you want to really understand and take apart. Because you realize that your mind is what’s making you suffer. We can point to things outside that we don’t like, and there’s lots of things outside that are bad. But those are not necessarily the things that have to weigh the mind down. The mind is doing something to weigh itself down. And we want to look into that. As I said this afternoon, it’s like putting on a big show. There’s a lot of stuff going on behind the scenes. And we look at the show, and the show’s pretty bad. And yet we keep going back to it. What do they do that fools us? What do they do that makes us want to come and spend our money again and again and again? Once you see through the tricks, the special effects, the smoke, the lights, the mirrors, then the mind can be really freed. So when the mind is quiet, the last thing you want to do is get bored. You’ve got the opportunity to see subtle things going on inside. Because they are subtle. The mind has to get really quiet to see the little movements in the mind that are ones that are really in charge. As it turns out, the false friends have somebody behind them, and they hide out. And you’ve got to get very quiet to see, “Well, who’s pushing these false friends to come and try to make you suffer? What is it in your own mind that is so ignorant that you can’t understand it?” Unfortunately, it doesn’t have to stay ignorant. We all have the potential to gain an understanding of what the mind is doing, how it lies to itself. When you can see through the lies, that’s when you’re freed. So this path to freedom starts with generosity. It starts with having good friends. Really basic things. But in our cleverness we tend to overlook the basic things and then we trip ourselves up. So get back to the basics. When you’re standing firm on the basics, then everything else falls into place.

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