Admirable Friendship

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The Buddha said that the most important internal factor for gaining awakening is appropriate attention. Looking at your actions, seeing what’s skillful, what’s unskillful, and trying to figure out how to abandon what’s unskillful and develop what’s skillful. And as you pursue that further, you get into the four noble truths. Seeing what Attitudes in mind are causes of suffering and which ones are part of the path. You abandon the cause and develop the path. Comprehend suffering so you can realize the cessation of suffering. Through looking at things in that framework, you’re asking yourself questions that fall into that framework. Any questions that fall outside of that, you just let go. That’s the most important internal factor. The second factor is admirable friendship, which means two things. One, finding admirable friends. And then two, associating with those people and trying to pick up their habits. Because the Dhamma is not just a matter of words. You can read the Dhamma and you can talk about what it means to you. But there’s so much of the Dhamma that’s a quality of the heart that is shown in action. And you can pick that up only by being around people who embody the Dhamma. So you look for good people. As the Buddha said, you look for people. And it takes a while to figure out who you can trust and who you can’t. We live in a world where the media encourages us to go by our first impressions. If you look at People magazine, you begin to realize that the people you like on screen are not anywhere near the people you thought they were. It’s very easy for people to simulate wisdom, friendliness, whatever. But if you live with people for a while, you begin to figure out who you can trust and who you can’t. As the Buddha said, you look for someone who doesn’t have the kind of greed where he or she would claim to know things that he or she didn’t know, or would get somebody to do things that were not in that person’s best interest. You look for someone who doesn’t have the kind of aversion that would lead to that kind of behavior, or the kind of delusion that would lead to that kind of behavior. Then once you’ve found someone that you think fits the bill, you stay with that person. You observe that person in action. You listen to what that person has to say. Then you reflect on your own life to see what you could do to pick up, in terms of the good habits of that person, what you need to do in order to be more and more like that person. Finally, work on four qualities, or look for four qualities, which are generosity, conviction, virtue, and discernment. Again, these are things that we can read about, and we can have our own ideas about what they mean. But I found in my own training that there’s a lot in the canon that you don’t really understand unless you’ve seen somebody in action. It is possible. In fact, I was just reading today a scholar talking about how holding to the precepts, holding to the rules for the monks, gets in the way of awakening. After all, one of the fetters that’s let go of stream-entry is the fetter of grasping at practices, precepts, and habits. If you read the books, that might sound reasonable. Then you begin to wonder, “What does that mean in practice? Why would the Buddha have precepts to begin with?” Then it interests me that in terms of the precepts, Chan Phuong was extremely strict in observing them. You look around in the canon, and you do find there’s a passage where they explain that the person who’s gone beyond the fetter of skillful practices is someone who is virtuous but is not defined by virtue. In other words, you don’t exalt yourself. You exalt yourself over the fact that you’ve got good precepts, that you’re strict, and you don’t disparage others. You try to encourage other people that it really is good to try to be strict in your observance of the precepts. That was my experience of a Chan Phuong. A Chan Suat once said that when you’re following the path, you do everything you can to clear away the weeds that might get in your way. When you’ve gotten to the end of the path, then as far as you’re concerned, the path can grow up. The weeds can grow up again. The path can get overgrown. It wouldn’t make any difference. But then you look back and you see other people struggling along the path, and other people putting obstacles in their way. So you do your best to go back and clear up the obstacles. So holding the precepts is not a fetter. The fetter is when you define yourself or you define others in the sense that they make you a better person. They’re there like medicine. They’re there to cure an illness and to make you very sensitive to what you’re doing. So this is the kind of thing you pick up from being around somebody who’s an edible friend. You begin to understand what virtue is, where the pitfalls are, but also where the benefits are. The same with generosity. You gain a sense of how to hold on to these things, how to be passionate in the practice, but also passionate in a way that’s not just excitable. As with any skill, you focus your passion on being very precise, because the defilements, when they arise in the mind, are very precise things. They’re small things, like little tiny plants. And if you don’t see them, you can step on them. Or not step on them. You don’t understand where they’re there. And they can grow. And when they’ve grown, then they’re really in the way. So you want to be able to see these things clearly as they begin, because that’s when you gain a sense of why you go for them. This connects to the Buddhist teachings on seeing the origination. If something unskillful, what is it that sparks it? How does it start? Why wait until it’s already full-blown and it’s laid claim to a good part of your mind? You want to see it as it’s just getting started. And then you want to see it as it passes away, realizing that these states of mind that come in, although they may seem monolithic and of a huge piece, actually come in small little bits, repeatedly. And sometimes they arise and they just pass away. You want to see, when they pass away, why did you lose interest? Then you look for the allure. Why do you go for them again? Why do you dig them up and keep them going? Which is often something that just flashes in the mind very quickly. And if you’re not precise in looking at your own behavior, you’re not going to be precise in looking at the behavior of your mind. This is where virtue translates into concentration and discernment. If you’re not particular about what you do, or if you feel, “Well, I can break the rules when I feel that it would be compassionate or feel that it would be nice for somebody if I broke a rule,” then you’re going to get sloppy. And as you get sloppy in your external behavior, you get sloppy in your internal behavior, your powers of observation. So these are some of the things you can pick up through admirable friendship. Because you look at the world outside, and all rules are up for being broken now outside, it seems. Everybody’s attitude is, “I want to be free. I want to express myself. I don’t want narrow rules to get in the way.” Well, sometimes you need the rules to get in the way to remind you that you’re overstepping bounds. And there are going to be consequences that you might not be thinking about. They’re there to warn you. And the discernment comes not in learning which circumstances make it okay to break the rule, but the discernment comes in how you stick with the precepts and yet not cause harm. Because there will be times when you can’t lie, but there’s some information you really should hide from somebody who might abuse it. And the discernment there lies in how not to divulge information but at the same time not lie. And you find that holding the precept in this way really does exercise your discernment. It makes you more ingenious. It makes you more perceptive. It helps you to develop better judgment, all of which are aspects of discernment. And how do you figure out how to do this? Well, you try to find people who are good examples. Living with the Chan Furu, I noticed that there are ways that he would handle difficult situations I never would have thought of on my own. But having seen him do it, it gave me some ideas. So the things you pick up, in Dogon’s words, it’s like walking through fog. Even without thinking about it, your ropes get wet, he says. In the same way, when you are around a good person, you sort of bit by bit by bit pick up that person’s attitudes. You want to be careful, of course, that not everything that the Ajaan does is always perfect. But there are good things there. You want to pick those up. Because if you want to embody the Dhamma, you have to pick those up. You have to see examples of how it’s embodied. If you want to learn how to approach a particular problem in the Dhamma, you have to see how other people who are more experienced approach those problems. These are things you can’t pick up from reading. There’s that definition of discernment, the various facets of discernment. Knowing the Dhamma, knowing its meaning, having a sense of yourself, having a sense of moderation, having a sense of the people to associate with and people not to associate with, and how to associate with different groups of people. Only the first one, knowing the Dhamma, is something you can learn from books. Everything else you have to learn from examples. That’s why admirable friendship is not something you say, “Well, I’m going to have books as my admirable friend, or my boon image up there to inspire me as my admirable friend, or a picture of the Ajaan in your room as your admirable friend.” You want living people. We had a case years back where someone wanted to give a ghatin to Moda Sokharam, and Moda Sokharam already had a sponsor. This person insisted, though, that they wanted to give the ghatin to Ajaan Lee. He said, “Ajaan Lee wouldn’t want me to do this.” Well, Ajaan Lee wasn’t there to say no. So as one of the monks said, “Okay, take it over to his coffin there, and if he sticks out his hand, it’s a sign that he wants it.” The person left. It’s very easy to read things into a picture or read things into a book that are not there, that the living person would not have authorized. So when you look for admirable friends, look for living people. If you can’t find anyone, that’s when you go alone. But there are still admirable people around. So don’t dismiss them. Pay careful attention to them.

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