Making the Mind Your Friend

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One of the purposes of meditation is to make the mind its own best friend. As you sit down with the breath, you begin to notice there are lots of different voices in the mind—some of them that will encourage you to stay with the breath, others that won’t. You have to decide which ones are your true friends. Let’s say the ones that have your long-term happiness in mind. Those are your friends. Then you want to learn how to strengthen those friends. Part of it is by finding a good meditation topic, like the breath. If you find the breath easy to stay with, try to make it comfortable. Try to make it a good place to stay. The body needs a sense of comfort in the present moment. The mind needs that sense of comfort in order to be able to stay here at all. The mind can stay here and it’s not pushed out. It can see things as they arise inside. It can see things, where they’re coming from, where they’re going. And you’re in a much better position to see what thoughts you want to go with and which ones you don’t. Because after all, no matter how hard or good a friend may be or a member of the family, they can’t be with you 24/7. They can’t be with you all the time. But the mind is with you all the time. So you want to learn how to make sure that it’s always saying helpful things, giving you helpful ideas, that will be for your own true happiness. So you can get the most out of the fact that you’ve got this human life. This is a rare opportunity, because as human beings we have a lot of opportunities to do good. That good then becomes part of our own inner treasure, our own inner wealth, as it also forms some kind of wealth that we leave behind. But to keep that up requires strength. So you want the voices in the mind that are strengthening to be strong, to be encouraging. And having a good place to stay in the present moment is very helpful. If the breath is hard to focus on, you might try thoughts of goodwill itself. It’s one of what they call the sublime attitudes. You try to have goodwill for everybody without exception. And by extension, if you see someone suffering, you want to have compassion. In other words, you want to have them, if you can, help them get out of that suffering. Or if you see someone who’s doing the kinds of things that will lead to suffering down the line, you want to help them if you can. As for people who are already happy or already doing things that are going to lead to happiness, you’re happy for them. You’re not jealous. You’re not envious. You’re not resentful of their happiness. And then to back all that up, you have to have an attitude of equanimity. In other words, realizing there are some cases where you really cannot make a difference. No matter how much you want someone to be happy, it’s not going to happen. So instead of wasting your energy on areas where you can’t help, you learn to focus energy on areas where you can. This kind of equanimity is like that of a doctor. The doctor gets a patient. And the doctor may see that the patient has some prospect of getting well, but there may be cases where the patient is not going to get well. In which case, the doctor has to figure out ways to make sure the patient doesn’t suffer too much, doesn’t spread diseases around. In other words, the doctor focuses on what can be done. As for what can’t be done, there’s no need to waste your energy. These are good attitudes to develop. It’s actually a meditation topic. You go through all the people in the world for whom you might have ill will. In other words, you’d like to see them suffer. And you ask yourself, “What would be gained by that?” When you wish for people to be happy, what are you wishing for? Well, happiness just doesn’t come floating by. It comes from people’s actions. So you’re wishing that they understand the causes for their happiness and be willing and able to act on them. Then ask yourself, “Is there anybody out there for whom you cannot feel that?” There may be people who’ve wronged you in the past, or wronged someone that you love, or done harm to lots of people. But wishing them ill is not going to solve the problem. If they could somehow change their ways, you should be happy for them. That’s the kind of attitude that’s asked. So just go through the list of people you have. There may be quite a few people for whom you have trouble feeling goodwill. But you try to work your way through that inner conversation as to why you might want to have ill will, to realize that nothing’s gained by it. You don’t gain anything from it. Nobody else gains anything from it. So you learn how to talk your way into an attitude. When you have goodwill for everybody, then you can start trusting yourself more. Because if you have ill will for some people, it’s hard to act skillfully around them. And then that unskillful action becomes your own bad karma. So for your sake, even more than for their sake, you want to learn how to develop goodwill in all situations. Compassion where it’s appropriate. Empathetic joy where it’s appropriate. But you have to be ready to fall back on these attitudes whenever they’re needed. So it requires practice. In developing these attitudes, you become not only a friend to the world, but also a friend to yourself. That makes it easier to settle down in the present moment. You may often find that when you have developed these attitudes of goodwill, you look at the breath and the breath is calm. The breath is smooth, at ease. You can switch over to the breath again and feel at home. Make the breath your friend. This requires getting to know the breath, just like with any friendship. You can’t just walk up to someone, shake hands, and instantly be friends. You can be friendly. But to be true friends, you have to know the other person, what that other person likes, doesn’t like, areas where you can trust the other person, areas where you can’t, seeing the areas where you can be of help to that friend. It’s the same with the breath. You want to get to know what the body needs right now, and all its various needs as they change. That takes time. And you have to be observant. With any friendship, it requires time and you have to be observant. So be willing to take some time with the breath. When you’ve got the breath as your friend inside, that means you’ve got an important part of the body on your side. And that helps to get a good part of your mind on your side as well. That part of the mind that works for your happiness and doesn’t destroy it. This is one of the saddest things to see, people who destroy themselves through their own thinking. Their own minds destroy them. Sometimes when you can help, and sometimes when you can’t. Sometimes when you see people who are really ill, they get so they’re just not listening to anybody anymore. They’re suffering, but they can’t hear anybody. And it just tears your heart. You can ask yourself, “Do you want to be that kind of person, tearing the hearts of other people around you?” You want to learn how to set things straight inside so that even in difficult situations your mind is a friend you can depend on and have the right attitude to the possibilities of what you can do. There’s a story I’ve told before, but it bears telling again. There was a woman one time who found that she had cancer. So she went in to meditate, to make sure that her mind was on her side as she faced the last stages of the disease. She asked Ajahn Mahaprabhu if she could come to his monastery and practice. He said he’d be happy to help her look after her mind, but as for her body, she needed a doctor to come along, just to make sure that that side of her illness was taken care of. So there was an old retired doctor friend, an older woman in her eighties, who came along and helped look after her. They stayed there for three months. Ajahn Mahaprabhu gave them a Dhamma talk almost every night, all of which got recorded. Then at the end of the three months, she went home. About six months later, she passed away. Well, the old doctor friend was still alive, and she had this big pile of tapes of the Dhamma talks. She wanted to try to transcribe them. She took her inspiration from a statement that Ajahn Mahaprabhu had made, which was that as you get older and things begin to fall apart in the body, try to squeeze as much goodness as you can out of the body before it goes. It’s almost like having a piece of fruit and trying to squeeze all the juice out before you have to throw it away. So the old woman set about recording the tapes. She got into a typewriter, she got into a tape machine, and she worked at it, worked at it, and was able to transcribe it. It was almost ninety talks. Two big books when they’re finally printed. The whole purpose, as I said, was to squeeze as much goodness out of her body before she had to throw it away. Because the goodness is what you take with you. You want to make sure that that is what you take with you, because your actions, the results of your actions, are what you take with you when you go. They can be good or bad. So you want to take as much goodness as possible. And, of course, in taking the goodness, you don’t take all of it. You leave a lot of it behind as well. It’s your gift. So in this way, you’re a friend to yourself, you’re a friend to the people around you, as you get the mind trained. When you bring the right attitude to the meditation, bring the right attitude to your practice, you find that when you have this good friend inside, on one level it’s the breath as your friend, but the most important level is having your own mind as your friend, then you’re never really alone.

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