Companions in Aging, Illness & Death

June 30, 2021

It ties up a phrase when they’re spreading thoughts of goodwill to all beings, extending their goodwill to all companions in birth, aging, illness, and death. And it’s a good thought to keep in mind, to keep things in perspective as we’re practicing the Dhamma together. We should be remembering that we are companions in aging, illness, and death, and birth again. And for good companions, we want to be helpful to one another, keeping that perspective in mind. It’s one of the reasons why the Buddha talks about how he first came to seek the Dhamma when he was a young prince. There was some point that really hit him, that he was not free from being old himself, even though he was young. He was not free from coming down with an illness, even though he was healthy. And he was not free from dying, even though he was alive. In fact, all those things were connected. And he sought the Dhamma because he wanted to find something that didn’t age, didn’t grow ill, didn’t die. And, as he said in his awakening, that’s what he found. So we have to remember that we owe the Dhamma to aging, illness, and death, and the desire not to suffer from these things. And if we’re going to be good companions to one another in the Dhamma, we should make sure that our friendship, our companionship, our time together, is guided by that perspective. This is why the Buddha said that one of the first qualities of an admirable friend is conviction, conviction in the Buddha’s awakening, which means many things. On the one hand, it means that your karma really is important, because it was through his own actions that he was able to gain awakening. And part of his awakening was seeing the role that karma plays at large in determining how well we’re going to live, what we meet with in life, what we meet with after we die, and how it is possible to develop skillful karma that goes beyond aging, illness, and death. So if you’re going to be an admirable friend, if you’re going to look for an admirable friend, this is the first thing to look for. The perspective that comes with conviction. Because that, ideally, should guide the friendship. And it does determine the remaining qualities of what the Buddha identified as an admirable friend, someone who’s virtuous, someone who realizes that if you’re careless in your actions, thoughtless in your actions, unrestrained in your actions, if you harm other beings, you’re going to be with a lot of harm yourself. And if you really care for someone else, if you see that they’re harming others or harming themselves, you want to exert whatever influence you can to get them to stop. This requires a lot of skill. You can’t just tell people, “Hey, you’re doing something wrong.” There are a few cases where they’d be willing to listen. But the first thing, of course, is that you’ve got to set the right example yourself. And then learn how to speak to them in a way where they’re willing to listen, happy to listen. The same with generosity. You influence other people to be generous by being generous yourself, with your time, with your energy, with your knowledge. Not just with material things, but with all the good things you can think of that really are conducive to getting that person to be more heedful. Because that’s what the perspective of conviction is. You think about the power of action. You’ve got to be heedful. Do what good you can. Abstain from any harm. Think about the Buddha’s statement of the heart of his teachings, never doing any evil, developing skillfulness to its ultimate, and then cleansing the mind. These are all the things you need to do if you’re really heedful. And if you’re a good friend, you try to do them yourself. Set a good example, and then find whatever way you can to encourage others to be that way, too. Now that cleansing the mind, in the characteristics of an admirable friend, falls under the category of discernment. Sometimes I wonder why the Buddha didn’t include concentration there. But the kind of discernment he’s talking about does require concentration. It’s penetrative discernment into arising and passing away. The fact that things arise and pass away, anybody can see that. The Buddha makes the insight penetrative. Part of it is that you see subtle things arising and subtle things passing away, which of course requires that the mind be still. It also requires that you see discernment of differences. When the Buddha defines penetrative as a quality of the mind, he means seeing distinctions. One, of course, is seeing that some things are causes and some things are effects. Think about John Lee’s comment, “If you see things arising but without seeing what they’re coming from, that’s not discernment.” If you see things arising and not seeing what they lead to, that’s not discernment either. You have to see cause and effect as connected. That requires mindfulness. Mindfulness, of course, when you practice it rightly, is tied up with concentration. So we’re talking about the kind of discernment that comes from developing the mind in concentration and then going further, seeing that your hindrances, whenever they come up, arise and pass away, and seeing how you can train the mind so that it doesn’t fall for them when concentration comes. Seeing how you can maintain all the factors for awakening, how you can maintain them once they’re there. Because insight into arising and passing away does not simply mean, “Whatever arises, just let it arise. Whatever’s going to pass away, let it pass away.” If something is skillful, you want to make it arise. You want to keep it from passing away as best you can. If something is unskillful, of course, if it’s going to arise, you do your best to undercut it. If it’s there, bring out some way to get it to pass away as quickly as you can. That’s what’s meant by penetrative discernment. This is a quality of an admirable friend. So remember that while you’re sitting here meditating, trying to develop this kind of insight, practical, hands-on insight into the mind, you’re being a good friend, an admirable friend to yourself. And you make yourself potentially a better admirable friend for others. Because this is how you find something generally good inside. Ideally, taking the Buddha at his word, it is possible, even in the face of aging, illness, and death, to find something that doesn’t age, doesn’t grow ill, doesn’t die. When you’ve found that, you’ve found something really valuable. And if you’re a good friend, when you get something valuable, you want to share it with your friends. You can’t take out that attainment and show it to other people. And of course, you don’t talk about it. But you should let it inform your actions. Even if you haven’t gotten that far, whatever good you have gotten from your meditation, it should come out and inform your actions in a way that other people find attractive and inspiring. Because when we think about our friendship, our companionship together, you want to make sure that you have something good to leave with someone that friendship inevitably ends. We’ve all had that experience. Someone passes away. Someone who’s been a good friend. We think, “We’ll never have that friendship ever again. Perhaps that person will come back, but it will be a different person, a different kind of relationship. The particulars of that friendship that we’ve lost, those will never come again.” We think, “That person may come back again, or at least we’ll find somebody else to be a good friend, but then that friendship will end, too. Replaced by another one, that one will end, too.” Our friendships simply are having a good time together. It’s a good time followed by sorrow, a good time followed by sorrow, over and over and over again. But when an admirable friendship ends, when we have to part, both sides have something good that they’ve gotten from their friendship, something of solid worth, habits of heedfulness, conviction, virtue, generosity, discernment. Those are real treasure. Remember the Buddhist statement that when you work for someone else’s good, it’s not simply doing good things for them. It’s getting them to do good things as well. It’s getting them to have the right perspective on the facts of aging, illness, and death, and how to live heedfully within that perspective. And that’s a gift that will show its rewards for a long, long time. And that’s what really is of value in our friendships. So whatever your friendships, whatever your companionships, try to make them admirable in this way. And both sides will gain something of solid worth.

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