Your Own Best Friend

June 17, 2023

We’re social animals. We depend on other people to learn how to walk, how to talk, how to think. If we’re fortunate, we’re surrounded by good people who teach us to think in good ways. But when you look at society now, it seems like everybody’s going crazy. So how do you make sure that you don’t go crazy? You’ve got to learn how to be your own best friend. So think about the qualities of a good friend. First off, of course, is the quality of goodwill. To learn how to wish yourself well, wish other people well. It’s amazing how so many people have trouble wishing themselves well. They feel they don’t deserve it. But, as the Buddha said, it’s not a question of deserving. It’s more thinking in terms of possibilities. After all, when he taught the path to the end of suffering, he didn’t ask his listeners first, “Do you deserve to suffer? If not, I won’t teach you.” He didn’t say that. Anybody who came to him with suffering in the past, even though the Buddha knew that these people had done some karma in the past that would lead to suffering in the present, or might be doing karma right now that would lead to suffering in the present, he didn’t say, “Well, take care of your deserved suffering first, and then we can talk.” He taught them there’s a way to live in this world, even with past bad karma, where you don’t have to suffer. When you learn how to not make yourself suffer, then you are less likely to make other people suffer. So it’s not a selfish thing, looking after yourself like this. And, of course, you extend goodwill to everybody else because you realize that if you have ill will for anybody, you’re going to be likely to behave in unskillful ways toward that person. So for your own protection, to protect yourself from yourself, spread goodwill to everybody else. Then think of the qualities that the Buddha said would typify an admirable friend. Conviction, virtue, generosity, and discernment. Those are the things you have to work on. Conviction formally is conviction in the truth of the Buddha’s awakening, that he really awakened to the end of suffering. And he did it through his own efforts, and he did it through developing qualities in his heart and mind that anybody can develop in their hearts and minds. So even though conviction is focused on an event in the past, it has important implications for you right here, right now. You have within you the potential to learn how to stop suffering. And to stop, in particular, to stop inflicting suffering on yourself. So always keep that possibility alive. And be really convinced that this is something you can do. But it also means, of course, that you have to be heedful because there are dangers. Your actions have an impact. It’s not riding in the water. What you do will have an influence now and on into the future. So you want to be careful because, as you’ve seen already in your life, it is possible for you to make mistakes whose effects last for a long time. It’s also possible to do good things. Because the mind is so quick to change, you have to be very careful to train it. So that if it’s heading in the wrong direction, it will be quick to change back to the right direction. If it’s heading in the right direction, it learns how to maintain itself. Keep going in that direction, regardless of what might come along to deflect it. So conviction in the Buddha’s awakening means conviction in the power that you have through your actions to find happiness. So always keep that potential in mind. The second quality of a good friend is virtue. Because one very easy way to destroy your self-confidence is to act in harmful ways. And then you start looking at the harm you’ve done. And it really hurts. And either you hide it from yourself, in which case you have a house inside with lots of hidden rooms, locked rooms, and who knows what kind of spirits are lurking in the rooms. Or you get defiant and say, “It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter who I hurt. Both of those attitudes are really going to be bad and make it hard for you to live with yourself.” As long as you stick with the precepts and you look back on your actions, there’s no conflict inside. So it makes it easy to live with yourself and also to have a sense of confidence that when you make up your mind to be harmless, you can do it. That gives you confidence. And that confidence sense will carry over into your meditation. As for generosity, the word the Buddha uses, “jaga,” can refer to generosity on all kinds of levels. John Lee finds at least three. One is just giving up material things, being willing to share. Because when you share with other people, it’s basically an act of making them your relatives. It’s when we charge prices for things. That’s when we cut off relationships. But giving things freely makes other people friends, brothers, sisters. This is why in Thailand the monks refer to their supporters as “yad-yom,” which means “the relatives.” So when you’re generous with the world, you’re making the world your home, a place where you belong. You’re not a trespasser. You’re giving something good to the world. I find that when I was in Thailand, the fact that I was the monk in the monastery who was responsible for keeping it clean when all the other monks were working on construction projects made me feel that I wasn’t home there. I belonged. Because I gave of my time, I gave of my energy, to keep the place looking good. And I really did feel that I belonged there. I wasn’t a foreigner. So wherever you are, try to be generous. If you don’t have material things to give, be generous with them. Then the next level, as John Lee pointed out, be generous with your time, be generous with your knowledge, be generous with your forgiveness. Don’t hold grudges. Don’t seek revenge for the things that people have done to harm you. We do admit that harm has been done. Some people say you shouldn’t judge other people, but the Buddha never said that. The only time he said that was in the context of judging who was awakened and who wasn’t. You never really know. There are some cases where you see someone behaving in immoral ways and you know that this person is not awakened. But you never know their potential. Maybe later in life they’ll change their potential. So you withhold judgment in those areas. But you are careful to judge other people as to who is healthy for you to associate with and who is not. The Buddha taught us to learn how to judge people in terms of, are they interested in the Dhamma? If they’re interested, do they actually listen to the Dhamma? If they listen to the Dhamma, do they contemplate it? Do they put it into practice? These are your standards for judging the people you want to hang around with. So you do judge other people. But when you see that someone is not the sort of person you want to associate with, you forgive them for whatever wrong they’ve done. That way you can live in the world with a greater sense of not having a lot of issues. And then finally there’s discernment. This is defined as penetrative knowledge or penetrative awareness of arising and passing away. Now, this doesn’t mean you simply watch things coming and going. For your knowledge to be penetrative, it means seeing which things, when they arise, do you want to maintain, and which things, when they arise, do you want to get rid of. Again, you bring the principle of heedfulness to apply. Because heedfulness, even though it’s one principle, implies a duality. There are skillful actions that avoid danger, and there are unskillful actions that create danger. And you want to do the skillful ones. You have it within you to do them. Then that principle expands into the four noble truths and the duties that go with those truths. You look at those duties, and they’re not the sort of things that some harsh bureaucrat is applying to other people. It’s something of the Buddha’s observation. If you want to put an end to suffering, these are the things you’ve got to do. You have to comprehend suffering. You have to abandon its cause, realize its cessation, and develop the path to its cessation. To comprehend suffering means realizing that of all the different ways you suffer, the common denominator is the fact that you’re clinging to the aggregates. These aggregates are different activities that the mind does, and the clinging here doesn’t mean that the mind has a hand that it grasps things with. It simply means that it gets addicted to certain patterns of behavior, certain ways of relating to the body, certain ways of feelings that you focus on and other feelings that you destroy, perceptions you have, the way the thought processes in the mind fabricate things within your consciousness. These are all activities. The Buddha defines them using verbs. You have to ask yourself, “The way I perceive things, the way I talk to myself about things, what am I clinging to? How am I clinging?” That’s called comprehending suffering. Because you want to see that the way you cling to these things, even though you may like to cling to them, or even though you may not like to cling to them, but you feel you have to cling to them, is totally optional. It’s not worth it. And you have an alternative. You don’t have to cling. In other words, you end your passion for these things. That’s comprehending. Now, the cause of suffering? There are three kinds of craving. Craving for sensuality, craving for becoming or not becoming. Sensuality is your fascination with thinking sensual thoughts. Becoming is your sense of you in a world of experience, which can happen either. On the inside level, where you think of an object you like, and all of a sudden you can see the world in which that object would exist. And then you take on a role within that world. Or on the outside level, the fact that you are a human being in this world right now. Craving for non-becoming is craving for whatever becomings you have to be destroyed. All these things, these types of craving, create suffering. Because they lead you to cling. So you have to see, again, that you don’t have to cling. You don’t have to crave. And when you can gain dispassion for the craving, that’s when you realize the third noble truth. And you do that by developing the path. So think about that this path we’re on is meant to help you abandon craving. You develop right view all the way through to right concentration. Right concentration is really important because it means that the path is not just a matter of thinking your way around things. You change your relationship to your body. You change your relationship to the way you breathe, even, to make it an ally. So these are all things you do out of friendship to yourself, which is why these duties are good duties to take on. In Freud’s analysis of the mind, we have this superego that’s telling us what we have to do, and it’s pretty harsh. It basically makes impossible demands. But the “shoulds” that the Buddha mentions are all in your favor. They’re based on his goodwill for you, and he wants you to develop goodwill for yourself by taking them on. Because they’re all aimed at putting an end to suffering, the suffering that you’re imposing on yourself right now. Whether you’re aware of the fact that you’re imposing it or not, the Buddha shows you that this is what’s happening. And you can learn how not to follow through with these old patterns of behavior. So this is how you become your own best friend, by having conviction in the Buddha’s awakening. You have conviction in what it means for your life, being virtuous, being generous, and developing discernment as to what’s skillful and what’s not, and how to develop what is skillful to the ultimate degree, and how to abandon what is unskillful. These are all things we can do. We have that chant, “May I look after myself with ease.” This is how you do it. It may not be easy in the beginning as you’re learning new habits, but as you develop a familiarity with these habits, you find that they become more and more comfortable, and you’re more and more comfortable with yourself. It’s important as part of the path that you develop a strong sense of yourself as a competent person that you can rely on yourself. There will come a point where you don’t even need a sense of self anymore, because your sense of self is basically a strategy for happiness. Your ideas of non-self are strategies for happiness. What the Buddha’s teaching here is how to take those strategies and train them so they really do lead to genuine happiness. And then when you’ve found that genuine happiness, you don’t need those strategies anymore. Both self and non-self get put aside. But you do want to have a sense that you are a good friend to yourself. That you’re following the path, that you’re competent to do it, and that this is a good path to be on. Now, the world may encourage you or the world may not encourage you. For the most part, it doesn’t. But as I said, society seems to be getting crazier and crazier all the time. But what was true now was true back in the time of the Buddha. You have to learn how to be your own refuge, your own mainstay. So these are the qualities you need to develop. Always keep them in mind. Conviction, virtue, generosity, discernment. They’re your inner friends.

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