

## *Weak Friends*

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There's that famous passage where Ven. Ananda comes to the Buddha and says that having good friend is half of the holy life, half of the practice. And the Buddha says, no, don't say that. Having good friends, having admirable friends, is the whole of the practice. In other words, it's because of having the Buddha as our best friend that we learn about the possibility there is an end to suffering. Without him, where would we be right now? Could you have discovered the Dhamma on your own? If you didn't have the example of people who had followed the path, would you think that it was still possible?

Those are friends on the outside. It's also important to have friends on the inside. In other words, all those little thoughts that come into the mind, little thoughts, big thoughts: You have to look at them and say, this particular thought that I'm listening to right now, is this the voice of a true friend or the voice of a false friend? Basically the distinction comes down to the two sorts that were mentioned in the chant just now: True friends are the ones who point you to worthwhile things, saying, "This is the path to true happiness. It's going to take a while, it's going to require effort, but it's well worth the effort." Those kind of thoughts are your true friends.

The ones who want you to indulge in ruinous fun, i.e. snatching whatever quick pleasures you can find without regard for the precepts: Those are your false friends. The ones who say, "I don't care what the long-term results of this action is going to be. I feel like doing this right now, so I am going to go ahead and do it": Those are fools. Those are false friends.

Now, as the Buddha once said, the sign of wisdom is being able to ask that question: What when I do it will be to my long-term welfare and happiness? You listen to good friends outside to see how they answer the question, and then you internalize their message. Turn it into a good internal friend.

As for false friends, there are two kinds you have to watch out for. The first are the kind that really mean ill. They come dressed up as friends. They entertain you. They do all the things they know will make you like them, but they basically have ill will for you. They want to take advantage of you. They want something out of you.

A major false friend in our lives has been television. The people behind the media want something out of you. That's why they have that TV in your house. That's why they come to you. That's why they broadcast. A lot of the media are

that way: radio, the Internet, social media. It's scary to think of how much we've internalized their messages.

Other false friends are the ones that actually mean you well, but they're weak. They can't carry through with their good intentions. They would like to help you, but when push comes to shove, they just don't have the energy or willpower to carry it through. That's why weak people are usually not welcome in any group, because you know you can't rely on them. All too often they cause trouble. They themselves get into trouble, and you have to help them, at the point where you most need their help.

The same principle applies inside the mind as well. There are thoughts in your mind that actually mean you ill. If you haven't read it yet, read Ajaan Lee's talk on consciousnesses, the one where he talks about the different thoughts that come floating into the mind. He says, sometimes a thought may not be your thought. It might be a thought from the worms in your blood. They're passing through your brain, and maybe their frequency touches a frequency in your mind. Then there are the spirits of the people you've wronged in previous lifetimes. Maybe they're whispering into your mind when your guard is down. That's one kind of thought you have to watch out for.

Another one is just the weakness in the mind, where it wants to do the right thing, means well, but simply can't muster the strength. It falls for immediate satisfaction, the quick fix, the easy way to find a little bit of pleasure, a little bit of happiness. And we go for that because we identify with the weaknesses in the mind.

The Buddha's cure for the first case is to remind you: Don't believe everything in your mind. Don't identify with everything that comes in to your mind. If a thought comes and recommends a course of action that's ultimately going to be for your suffering, put a question mark after it and tell yourself, "This may not be me. I don't have to identify with it in any case. Even if it is something coming out of me, I don't have to identify with it." After all, the mind does have its funny moods. Sometimes it gets self-destructive, and you have to learn how not to give in to those moods.

As for the weaknesses in the mind, the Buddha says to counteract them by developing strength. He lists five strengths as among his most important teachings. Conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment: These are the qualities that take the well-meaning but weak friends in your mind—the ones that want true happiness but just can't seem to be able to deliver it—and gives them strength.

First is conviction in the principle of karma, that if you act on skillful intentions, you're going to get good results. If you act on unskillful intentions, you're going to get bad results—you're going to suffer. You really have to believe that principle, hold to it firmly, because all our hopes for happiness lie right here in our actions. If our happiness and suffering depended on some outside being, we'd be in really bad shape. We'd have to go out and please that being. Or if everything in the world were totally predetermined, there would be nothing you could do at all. Or if everything were totally random, there would be no way you could find a pattern of behavior that you could trust.

So the belief in karma is more than just thinking that if you do good things, you're going to get good results. It also means you have to believe that what you do will make a difference in your life. There is a pattern to action and the results of actions. Sometimes the results are delayed, which is why it becomes a matter of conviction, because after all, the principle of causality is a complex one. But still, if you trust the basic principle—that if you put good energy into the system, the results will come out well—this belief is what allows you to put energy into making more of a sacrifice to sit longer than you might normally want to sit, and to sit through pain when you may not want to sit through pain, and to put more energy into meditating, walking meditation, working with the mind. Even though the results may not be immediate, having trust in the long-term, you'll benefit.

If you hold to that belief, that becomes a strength. It allows you to put more energy in—which is the second strength: the quality of persistence, where you really stick with this. The practice is not something you do only when you feel like doing it or only when it's convenient. It becomes part of your daily duties, something you have to do because it has to be done. And you stick with it. This means learning to figure out what your level of energy is right now, so that you can to keep putting in a consistent level of energy.

There's that famous sutta where the Buddha was talking to Ven. Sona, the monk who was very delicately brought up, so delicately brought up that he even had hair on the bottom of his feet. He ordains and does walking meditation, and of course his feet get all bloody because the skin there is very tender. He thinks about giving up. The Buddha comes to see him, reminds him about when he was a layman and used to play the lute. If a lute string was too tight, it'd snap. If it was too loose, it wouldn't give a good sound. So you have to tune it just right.

When you tune a guitar, first you tune one string, and then you tune the other strings to that one. In this case, the Buddha says, when you meditate, it's as if you're tuning your strings, which he equates with the five faculties, which are the same as the five strengths. The first string you tune is your persistence, in line with

how much energy you're able to put into the practice right now. You take that as your basis. But do your best to make it consistent. It's not a case of throwing yourself at it and then sleeping for the next four or five days. You want to put in a level of energy that you can maintain over time. That then becomes a strength, it develops a momentum.

And because your level of energy is consistent, it helps your mindfulness as well. You learn to keep the practice in mind. Keep reminding yourself that you're going to stick with this, stick with this, as when we're meditating right now: Stay with the breath, stay with the breath.

As soon as you wander off, you tell yourself, "Hey, you've got to come back. This is not what we're here for." You find that, with exercise, mindfulness does grow. Your lapses in mindfulness get shorter and shorter. And you get more and more sensitive to when the mind is about ready to wander off and you can pull it back in time. That's why mindfulness has to be paired with alertness, watching what's actually happening. You combine these two qualities with persistence.

This is something you do all the time, not just when you're meditating. You can think of it as like people going down to the gym. Some people go down to the gym and exercise hard, not because they want to use that strength for any good purpose. When they leave the gym, they simply want to look good in the mirror. That kind of meditation doesn't go anywhere. You meditate, you feel good about your meditation, and then you drop it when you leave.

What you want is the kind of mindfulness that once you've practiced it, once you've strengthened it, you use it in day-to-day life. No matter what you're doing, always watch over the mind. Watch out for those false friends. Make sure you don't follow them. That's the kind of person who's go down the gym because he's got work that needs strength, and he uses the exercise to get stronger. He comes out and actually puts that strength to good use.

As your mindfulness and alertness get stronger, then your concentration becomes a strength as well. Your mind really does get firmly established in your object. You become more and more consistent in staying with the breath. There's a sense of absorption. You're not just *with* the breath, you seem to become *one* with the breath. The breath feels really good coming in, feels really good going out because you've watched it carefully and adjusted it carefully. A sense of ease, a sense of rapture, come, and you can spread that rapture, spread that sense of ease, so that they fill the body.

This is what really provides food and nourishment for the mind, a sense of well-being that doesn't have to depend on the food of sights, sounds, smells, flavors, or tactile sensations. It's a nourishment that comes from within.

This is when you really begin to see the balance of power shifting in the mind, in the sense that your good intentions really do become stronger. You can rely on them more, because you've nourished them with a sense of well-being that comes from concentration.

And as your concentration develops, you begin to see the ways the mind fools itself, the way it falls for its false friends. This is the beginning of insight. This is the beginning of discernment. You can choose which kinds of thoughts to follow, which kinds of thoughts you want to avoid; which impulses to follow, which impulses to avoid—because you're not so hungry all the time.

As you side more and more consistently with your wise thoughts, that strengthens the mind as well, because you're weighing it down with less and less useless activity.

This is how you make your mind a true friend, both by working on your intentions to make sure they're skillful, with an element of wisdom in them, and by learning to strengthen that wisdom through these five strengths: conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. After all, that's the mark of a true friend: one, wishing you well, and two, having the strength to follow through with those good wishes.

Those are the kind of people you look for as your true friends outside, and it only makes sense that you look for them inside as well. Fortunately, you can train your inner friends. Friends outside are hard to train. But as for your friends inside, it's entirely within your power to make them reliable.

That's what we're working on right now.