

Good Friends Inside

June 9, 2005

Ven. Ananda once went to the Buddha and commented on how important it was to have friends in the practice. He said, “It’s half of the holy life.”

And the Buddha said, “Don’t say that. It’s the whole of the holy life.”

He gave himself as an example. If we didn’t have the Buddha as our friend in the holy life, where would we be? We wouldn’t know anything about the possibility of putting an end to suffering. Our sense of our potential as human beings would be a lot more limited than it is.

It’s only when you open up your mind to the idea that it is possible to put an end to suffering that you can actually do it, that you can actually put forth the effort. Because it takes a lot. If you felt that it was futile, you wouldn’t bother. You’d devote your energies to things that promised more likely results.

So having the right friends outside is a very important part of the practice—especially taking the Buddha as our number one friend.

It’s also important to have good friends inside. This refers to all the voices we carry around in our minds. It’s amazing how much power they have over us. But it turns out it’s a power we give them. And we can take the power away.

So it’s important that you learn how to listen to which kind of voices are running your life—and particularly the voices that place limitations on you, the ones that get you discouraged, the ones that tell you that you can’t do this or that this is just much too hard for anybody to do. Those are not your friends.

After all, they’re verbal fabrication. And what does fabrication come from? It comes from ignorance. You have to learn how to look at that process so that you can do it with knowledge. That way, it won’t cause suffering. And the best way to look at it is to step out of it. But before you can step out of it, you have to use verbal fabrication to get yourself out.

Learn how to think in ways that are more encouraging. Learn how to talk to yourself about the breath a lot. Be tuned-in to the breath as much as possible. Make this your meditative dwelling or your abiding place.

The breath is always here, as are all the other topics for meditation. Infinite space can be experienced here. Infinite consciousness. Nothingness. Emptiness. They’re all right here. It’s a question of what you’re tuned-in to.

They say that alcoholics, as soon as they walk into a house, very quickly pick up on where the alcohol is kept. The same with chocoholics: They walk into a house and soon know where the chocolate is kept.

Well, you want to be a breathaholic. Where's your breath right now? How is your breath right now? Tune-in to it. Stay there. Every voice in the mind that helps you stay there: That's a friend.

Any voice that pulls you away regard for the time being as not a friend: one of those friends that makes friends only to cheat them, or one who is good only in word. These voices say, "Think about this. This will be a lot more interesting." But if you think about it, where does it take you? It doesn't take you anyplace especially good, anything new, anything you didn't really know before.

A lot of our inner voices are companions in ruinous fun as well. They don't want to bother with this practice we're doing: "Let's go think about food or sex or..." whatever else we find entertaining. We've got to learn how to be discerning in who we associate with inside your mind.

So for the time being, your friends are the ones that point you to the breath, who encourage you to stay with the breath, who remind you of all the good things that come from staying with the breath.

And when you're actually able to stay with the breath for a little while, they give you encouragement. Say you're able to stay with the breath for five minutes. You could say, "Oh my gosh, only five minutes! This is pretty pitiful." That doesn't help. What helps is to say, "Hey! Five minutes! Let's try ten minutes now." Learn to talk to yourself in a way that's encouraging.

This is a lot of what's required for persistence, for discipline. It's not just gritting your teeth and bearing with it. It's learning how to make it entertaining, how to make it enjoyable, how to get your spirits up as you stick with the work.

You find that once you can do this, you've learned some very important skills. These are just as important in the meditation as your ability to stay focused for long periods of time: things like your ability to pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and just keep on going, finding ways to energize yourself.

This is how tasks get done. This is how progress gets made. This is how people really make a change in themselves: by believing it's possible to do it.

And they're making it as enjoyable as possible all along the way.

Once you've been able to stay with the breath for a while, then you can look back at your old conversations, the voices that used to have such power over your mind. Taking the breath, taking the present moment as your foundation, you now begin to see more clearly what kind of motivation lies between what kind of voice. You get better and better at distinguishing your inner friends from your inner non-friends, and better at associating with your true friends inside.

So these friends can be seen as the whole of the holy life as well: having good friends, having noble friends inside, the voices that encourage you in the practice.

Because without them you couldn't get off first base.