

## *False Friends*

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There's a textbook they use to teach new monks in Thailand. It's designed mainly for monks who ordain only temporarily. The tradition is that young men are supposed to ordain for about three months at some time in their lives, and they go through the textbook during those three months. During the first two months, they're really thinking about being monks, but by the third month, they're thinking about when they're going to disrobe and go back to being lay people. So the textbook is designed to cover monkish issues for the first two months, and lay issues for the last.

One of the lay issues is the teaching that comes from the chant we just did about friends: what true friends are, and what false friends are. When I was teaching one group of young monks, one of them, as he was getting ready to disrobe, made a comment after reading this passage and we had discussed it: He thought about all the friends he had left behind and he was going to be returning to, and he said, none of them qualified as true friends. He thought they were his friends, but on reflection he realized they weren't.

The same principle applies to our friends inside, the thoughts that we travel around with. How many of them are your true friends? One good way to know is to get away from them a while. This is one of the reasons we practice concentration, where for the time being you decide that you're not going to deal with them, you're not going to get involved with them. Think of concentration as a temporary ordination. You get away from your family, get away from your friends, and spend some time alone, just to look at your life and to decide, when you go back to your friends, who you really want to hang out with and who you want to avoid.

This is one of the reasons why, when we practice concentration, every thought that comes up that doesn't have to do with the breath is considered not a friend, someone you don't want to hang out with, someone you want to avoid. It may seem like suppression or denial, but it's not. It's learning a skill, to put you in a position where you really can choose who you want to hang out with and who you want to just let go. Often when thoughts come along, they're really compelling. Yet sometimes the most compelling ones are the ones you have to avoid the most. You have to learn how to be really strict with yourself, skilled at sidestepping all the tricks that your thoughts may have devised to pull you in.

So as you're staying here with the breath, be prepared that thoughts are going to come and that you don't want to go with them no matter what. If there's something really important you have to think about, wait for the last five minutes or so of the session, so that during the session, each time it comes up, you say, "Not now. We'll get to you later." And then be firm with yourself. Wait until later. Remind yourself that if it's something important to think through, it's best to think it through when the mind is clear. So wait until you've had a good long hour just to be very still, to get the mind in good shape. Then, if you have to use it to think through some difficult problem, you'll be in proper shape to do it. If you hurry to rush into it when you're not ready, then whatever ideas you come up with are probably not going to be your best.

This may seem as if we're closing off the mind. You've probably heard psychologists say that people who deal a lot in denial are making themselves more and more stupid all the time. But we're not here meditating to make ourselves stupid. We're actually putting the mind in a position where it's very open and very still, so that when the time comes to think, all sorts of possibilities will appear that wouldn't have appeared otherwise. That's because the quality the concentration we're working on here is not a lockdown or clampdown concentration. The Buddha described right concentration as developing a sense of ease in some spot in the body and then, as you would knead a ball of dough to make bread, you knead that sense of ease throughout the body. That's not a lockdown, clampdown, one-pointed concentration. It's a very open concentration. It's centered. You've got to have your one spot that's your primary focus, but once you've developed a sense of ease at that spot, you think in the ease spreading throughout the different parts of the body.

You could think of it as honey spreading through all the open spaces in the body, around any spots of tension or tightness, and going all the way up to the edge of the body, out to the pores. Then let that sense of ease just stay there, filling the body. It'll start soaking into the spots of tension, softening and loosening them up. Just watch out for the mind's tendency to shrink its range of awareness. So each time you breathe in, think, "whole body breathing in, whole body breathing out." Learn to get a sense of exactly how much pressure you have to put on that sense of ease in order to maintain it and not destroy it. If there's not enough pressure, it'll begin to dissipate. If there's too much pressure, it tightens up.

This is something you have to learn through practice. Just keep at it again and again and again. And if the mind says, "This is boring," remind yourself that this skill is going to take you someplace you've never been before. As we mentioned

this morning, it takes you to something you've never reached, something you've never attained, something you've never known before. So whether it's fascinating in the present moment is not the issue. What you can do is try to make yourself fascinated with the whole issue of why, if you're putting too much pressure on the breath, are you doing that? If you're putting in too little, why are you doing that? Get interested in this, interested in this as a skill.

As for the question of whether it's intelligent or not, remind yourself: You don't have to worry about that right now. Don't identify with the voice in the mind that says, "This is boring," or, "This is not ingenious," or whatever. The people who like to think that they're clever are the ones who tend to get tripped up or ripped off. The ones who realize they've got something to learn: Those are the ones who are going to learn something new. In this way, you put yourself in a position where you're not really hungry for friends. That's when you can really choose who your true friends are. It's the people who are hungry for friends who pickup with anybody.

If there's a sense of ease or fullness that comes with being alone with the breath, then you come to the whole issue of choosing your friends from a position of strength. You're not choosing them out of desperation. You're choosing what you see there as actually friends—in other words, friends in the mind, thoughts in the mind that really are helpful, that really will share in your sorrows and joys, who point you to worthwhile things, really sympathetic to your true best interests.

At the same time, you can begin to see why you used to hang out with people who are really harmful to you. You see what their attraction was, but you also see what the drawbacks are, so that you don't get fooled by the attraction. As the Buddha said, you also see the escape from them, how to avoid getting sucked in by those friends, and how to get in to a position where ultimately they would have no attraction at all.

In the meantime, though, think of yourself as being in position of seclusion, building up the strengths, building up the skills you're going to need so that you really can deal with your friends when the time comes. Right now, the time is to be quiet. To be alone. To be one with the breath.

The Buddha describes a monk who's good at being secluded, saying that when people come and visit him, he talks with them only long enough to get them to go away. Well, have that same attitude, that same approach to thoughts that come into the mind. Get involved with them only enough to get them to go away, whether that involves simply focusing on noticing that you've slipped off and coming back to the breath or, if you have to, focusing on the drawbacks of following those trains of thought until you really decide you don't want to go

there. Or simply ignore the thought if it's going to chatter away in your mind. Think of it as a crazy person in the background, chattering away, but you don't have to get involved. Or relax around the thought. Or, if it's really insistent, clench your teeth and push it out. Whatever is necessary—but only as much as is necessary to get the thought to go away. Then you get back to the breath.

Try to develop a taste for seclusion. That way, you'll ultimately be in charge of your thoughts. You'll think the thoughts you want to think, and you won't have to think the thoughts you don't want to think. That's where you can keep yourself from getting hoodwinked by false friends.