

## *Admirable Friendship*

*July 30, 2009*

The Buddha once said that the most important external factor in gaining awakening is having admirable friends—or, more precisely, engaging in admirable friendship, which is a little bit different from simply having admirable friends. In the ideal admirable friendship, you're taking on good qualities from the other friend. The admirable friend is supposed to be a good example in terms of conviction, virtue, generosity, and discernment. He helps clear up your misunderstandings on those topics, but the friendship becomes admirable when you find yourself growing in those qualities yourself. After all, the purpose of an admirable friend is to help you recognize who your admirable friends are inside. One of our main problems is that we suffer from delusion. Thoughts come into the mind and it's hard for us to tell, "Is this a good thought or is this a bad thought?" Even if part of the mind recognizes that it may be a bad thought, another part says, well, No, maybe it's got it's good side after all.

After all, there are so many different opinions out there, and our minds have been filled with all the wrong views that come from the media, wrong views we've picked up from other people. Sometimes, even when the other people are giving us right views, we come away with wrong views.

I was talking to someone tonight, someone with whom I've been talking for years. I suddenly discovered he had some pretty bad misunderstandings, which I thought I'd cleared up a long time ago. Which just goes to show sometimes you can hear right view many, many times, and it doesn't sink in. So you can't blame society for giving you wrong views. It's what you've picked up. It was your karma that made you pick up those things. I've noticed in my own family: My two brothers and I came away from our childhood being raised by the same parents but with very different impressions about what they taught. So it's important as you're engaging in an admirable friendships that you try to pick up what's really skillful.

Once you learn to recognize it, you try to develop it within yourself. The first quality is conviction. Conviction means being convinced that the Buddha really was awakened. What does that mean in practice? It isn't just a matter of being convinced of a historical fact. It's thinking about the implications of that fact as they apply to you, one of which is that the Buddha was able to find true happiness through his own efforts, through developing qualities in his mind that we have, in a potential form, in our minds as well. In other words, we have the potential for

finding true happiness if we develop the right qualities, too. So the implication here is that you've got to look at your mind and develop the qualities that he worked on: heedfulness, ardency, resolution.

Heedfulness, he said, is the most important, in that it underlies all the rest. In some places it's defined as diligence, but it's more than simply just doing the practice diligently. It's having a strong sense that your choices make a difference. This is why conviction in the Buddha's awakening comes down to conviction in karma: that your actions are important, that they do make a difference, and that you have to be very careful because it's so easy to choose to do the wrong thing, to choose to do the unskillful thing. So when you see the danger of unskillful actions, heedfulness gives you a strong desire for the security that can come in acting in a skillful way.

That leads to the next quality, which is ardency, when you really try to act on this principle. Ardency is another name for right effort. You see unskillful qualities coming up in the mind, and you do what you can to undercut them. Sometimes this means simply watching them; sometimes it means that you really have to exert an effort.

In both cases, this requires the third quality, which is resolution. Usually there's a tendency, when a certain unskillful quality comes up, that you want to act on it. Anger arises in the mind and you want to say something or do something to express it. Lust comes up and you want to act on the lust. So the first part of resolution is holding firm, not giving into the sway of that particular defilement. And the other part is that if it requires work to undo it, okay, you're willing to do the work all the way to the end.

I don't know how many times we hear that all you have to do is be mindful of your defilements and not be overcome by them, and that's enough right there. Well, it's not enough, because they can sneak up on you when you're not being vigilant, and you suddenly find yourself doing the things you knew you shouldn't be doing. Then you wonder why. It's because the roots are still in the ground. It's like one of those vines in the orchard. It's not enough simply to cut the vine at the ground level. You've got to dig down into the ground to find the root to be done with it. Otherwise, it just keeps coming back, coming back, coming back, and you have to spend all of your time cutting it back, cutting it back. You're never done with it.

So you've got to dig down and see: Where is this particular defilement coming from? Often that means going against your inclinations, going against your old habits. But you've got to be resolute. You've got to be strong.

So when we talk about conviction in the Buddha's awakening, these are some of the implications. You've got to develop those same qualities that he said he worked on—heedfulness, ardency, and resolution—in your own mind.

The next quality you want to develop from admirable friendship is virtue. If you see that an action is harmful, you just don't do it. If you keep on doing harmful things, they become a rut in the mind, and you find yourself falling into the rut again and again and again. At the same time, if you're indulging in a particular activity, it's hard to focus in on the cause of that activity. You may tell yourself, "I'll just watch it as I indulge, and that'll be my mindfulness." Well, no. I mean, the fact that something in the mind said Yes to the activity: You've got to figure out why. And the best way to figure that out is to just keep saying No, No, No, and see what arguments the mind comes up with to counter each No, and taking them apart one by one by one. It's in this way that restraint is an excellent source of knowledge.

The other problem, of course, is that if you indulge in certain activities, you tend to give yourself excuses. There are all kinds of good rationalizations for why you do it. And you're not going to see those rationalizations until you say No to them. So the restraint of virtue is an important part of learning to know the mind, to figure out where its unskillful qualities are, and why they have control over you. This is why virtue flows from conviction. Some texts actually say that virtue that's pleasing to the noble ones is actually an aspect of conviction.

Another quality in admirable friendship that goes with conviction is generosity. You see the things you have to give up in order to develop skillful qualities in the mind, and you're willing to give them up. The word *caga* here means more than just generosity, giving things to other people. It also means giving things up. *Relinquishment* might be a better translation. If you see that indulging in certain foods has a bad affect on the mind, well, you stop eating them. Indulging in certain kinds of conversations has a bad affect on the mind, well, you stop engaging in them. Indulging in certain thoughts has a bad effect on the mind, you stop thinking them. You give them up, you give them back. You say, "These are pleasures I used to hold onto as mind, but I'm going to give them back. I don't need them because they come with strings attached; they come with poison for the mind."

And then finally there's discernment—which, in this context, is defined as discernment of arising and passing away. What this means is that you learn to look into the mind to see exactly how it's creating suffering out of things where it doesn't have to. You can be sitting in a particular situation and suddenly find yourself suffering, and then you find yourself not. The situation didn't change. It

was something that happened in your mind. This is the arising and passing away that the Buddha is talking about: the arising and passing away of mental states.

Now, to see this, the mind has to get very, very still. This is why we sit here practicing concentration, to get everything as still as possible, so that you can see the slightest fluctuations in the mind—when there's stress present and when there's not. The practice of concentration not only gets you still so that you can see movements, but also gets you more and more sensitive to more and more subtle movements. When you get better and better at this, when you know your mind a lot better, you can start rooting out deeper and deeper roots of suffering. Because as you see things arising and passing away, and you see the suffering that comes and the suffering that goes, the next question, of course, is well, what's causing that?

This is where you have your magic bullet. The Buddha says to regard everything in terms of the four noble truths. This means that wherever there's suffering, you look for the cause. You don't attack the suffering, you attack the cause and you abandon the cause. You simply try to comprehend the suffering. And that can apply to any mental event. You try to bring right view—all the factors of the path, from right view all the way to right concentration—to bear on that particular issue. It could be clinging, it could be craving, it could be feeling, intention, attention, verbal fabrication, mental fabrication, or bodily fabrication like the breath.

When you think about dependent co-arising and all the various ways that suffering and stress can arise in the mind, it's useful to know that whatever the factor that's coming or contributing to that, all you have to do is look at it in terms of the four noble truths. That will bring knowledge to bear where there used to be ignorance. And it's through the abandoning of ignorance that the causes of suffering no longer cause suffering. The suffering goes away. In other words, you learn to breathe with knowledge, you learn to think with knowledge, you learn to label things with knowledge, and see what's happening.

It's interesting that there were questions the Buddha refused to answer. In each case, the next question always was, "Well, why are you not answering this? Is it because you don't know?" And his answer was always, "No, I know, I see, and that's why I don't answer." He knew and saw where those questions came from and where they would lead if you tried to answer them. He looked at those mental events in terms of the four noble truths, and saw that this particular question is bound to bring suffering, no matter how you answer it. That's the kind of knowledge he was looking for. That's the kind of knowledge he recommends.

So whatever comes up in the mind, you try to look at it in those terms so that regardless of how complex dependent co-arising might be, it's just this series of questions and the series of duties that goes along with these questions: Where is the suffering? How do you comprehend it? Where is the cause? How do you abandon it? How do you develop the factors of the path so that you can realize awakening? This is why the Buddha said that it was through having him as an admirable friend that the monks developed the noble eightfold path. In other words, they developed the qualities in mind—conviction, virtue, relinquishment, discernment—that allowed them to bring suffering to an end.

So that's what it means to engage in admirable friendship. It's not simply a matter of hanging around good people. It also involves picking up these particular qualities and developing them in your own mind.

So sitting in meditation is actually an expression of admirable friendship. Any aspect of the path is an aspect of admirable friendship. You're not attributing all the good to the admirable friend. You're taking responsibility to detect what's admirable in that friend, what's worth taking as an example, and then actually developing it within yourself. This, of course, requires that you use your own discernment, because you can't expect the admirable friend to be a good example in everything. You can't throw all the responsibility on the friend. The whole point of admirable friendship is that you learn to take responsibility for yourself. That's the way in which this factor helps to lead to awakening.