

Admirable Friendship

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Meditation is the center of the practice. We practice generosity to train the mind; we practice virtue to train the mind. But sometimes when we do, the focus on the mind is indirect. But when you're meditating, you're directly focusing on the mind in and of itself.

You start first by focusing on something right next to the mind: the breath in the body, how you sense it right here in and of itself, right here in the present moment. This is something each of us has to take responsibility for. Nobody else can focus on our breath for us or do the work for us. When you're watching the breath, it's up to you to make sure that you're watching the breath. When you're evaluating the breath, it's up to you to be skillful in your evaluation.

In other words, figure out what kind of breathing really is comfortable right now. Then figure out how to maintain it or to change it if it's not so comfortable anymore. When it stays comfortable, figure out how to let that sense of comfort spread throughout the body. All of this is work that each of us has to do for him or herself.

But we take energy from a principle that the Buddha called admirable friendship: associating with good people, and trying to pick up on their good qualities. If you're meditating all alone, practicing all alone, it can get very lonely, and you begin to have doubts about whether it's worthwhile to practice. But if you're with people who are obviously good examples, they remind you that, yes, there is goodness in the world, and it really is worth working on. It really is worth developing.

The Buddha talks about two types of friends that are really worth treasuring: loyal friends and admirable friends. Loyal friends are people who go out of their way to help you; people who are happy when you're happy and sad when you're sad; people who will protect you when you're heedless. The proper response to those kinds of friends is to feel gratitude and to help them in return.

Admirable friends are people who have qualities that are better than yours. In particular, the Buddha pointed out four qualities: conviction, virtue, generosity, and discernment. If you're wise, you look for people who have these qualities and you try to emulate them.

Conviction means conviction in the principle that your actions do matter and that you're the one making the choices. You can't blame other people for the

choices you make. And your actions have results. They have consequences, so you have to be careful about what you do. This is a good principle to emulate. If you don't believe in it, you tend to be careless, and you can end up doing all kinds of unskillful things.

There are so many people out there in the world who say, "Your actions don't matter; just do what you want. Someday, the Sun will become a nova. The earth will burn away. So it doesn't matter what you do." But if you listen to those people, you get careless. That's how the world falls apart, and you end up having to suffer the consequences of your carelessness. But when you believe in the principle that your choices do matter, you're more likely to choose actions that matter in a good way, benefitting yourself and benefitting others. This is *the* most basic principle in admirable friendship, because the other three build on it.

Virtue means trying to be harmless, holding to the intention that you don't want to cause any harm. You follow the precepts in all circumstances. You don't kill, steal, have illicit sex, lie, or take intoxicants. Ever. As a result, you find that you create a better life for yourself, and you have a better influence on others.

Generosity means being generous with your things, generous with your time, generous with your knowledge, generous with your strength, generous with your forgiveness, realizing that if you're going to receive happiness in this lifetime, you first have to be willing to give. And you become happy to give, realizing that something good does come from generosity: You develop good qualities in the mind. The mind becomes more spacious. The world around you becomes a much more humane place, because when you're generous, you break down barriers. If you put a price tag on things all the time, you're putting up barriers. Generosity tears them down.

The fourth quality is discernment, noticing where you're causing unnecessary suffering and seeing how it's related to your actions. You learn how to stop doing the things that cause unnecessary suffering and to develop the qualities that lead to the end of suffering instead.

So when you find people outside who have these qualities, you should associate with them and emulate them. In that way, these qualities become part of you. If you think of the mind as a committee, you're strengthening your good committee members. You've got good friends inside. When your outside admirable friends have been internalized, then even though they may be far away, you feel like you're close.

When we first were setting up Wat Metta, a lot of Americans came and said, "Well, now that you're in America, you have to change things. You can't hold to the rules you held to in Thailand. You can't do things the way you did them in

Thailand because now you're in America. Things are different here." My response was always the same. "At the moment, I'm physically far from my teacher—far from the members of the Sangha that gave me support and encouragement. If I change my behavior from the way they taught me to behave, I would be far from them not only physically but also emotionally and mentally. But if I stick to the good principles they taught, the good examples they set, then it's as if they're still around and right nearby."

This is the way admirable friendship works. You internalize the good qualities of your admirable friends, and then they're with you all the time, giving you support, giving you encouragement, giving you energy, because they're in no way separate from you.

When the Buddha talks about the different principles in the practice—starting with the most basic and building up to the more subtle—he often starts with admirable friendship, because the people you associate with will color the way you look at the world. They'll color the person you are and the energy you put into the practice.

So make sure you hold to this principle all the time. Be loyal to this principle, and it'll be loyal to you.