

## *Cherish Your Friends*

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Try to make the mind quiet. Try to make the body quiet. There are lots of levels to that quietness. One means sitting quietly – but, of course, the body isn't the only thing making noise and chattering away. The mind is, too. And just as when you want to hear something very subtle you have to sit very quietly, if you want to hear the subtle things going on in your mind you have to make the mind quiet, too. Focus it on the breath. Try to cut down on all the chatter. If you want to talk to yourself, talk about one thing. Talk about the breath.

Ask yourself: Is the breath coming in? Is it going out? When it comes in, how does it feel? Where do you notice it? When it goes out, how does it feel? Where do you notice it? Does it feel good? Does it not? If it doesn't feel good, you can recommend different ways of changing it. Try a little longer, try a little shorter, deeper, more shallow, faster, slower. Find the rhythm and texture of breathing that feels good for the body right now. If you're feeling tired, try to breathe in a way that gives you more energy. If you're feeling tense, try to breathe in a way that's more relaxing.

You can talk about these things to yourself. That kind of chatter is not out of place in the meditation. It's called directed thought and evaluation, which are two of the basic factors for Right Concentration. But otherwise, try to keep the mind as quiet as possible – because you want to notice what's going on. And, of course, what you're going to notice is that there are a lot of other ideas floating through the mind. Sometimes they don't just float. They yell at you. They taunt you. They whisper to you. But you have the power of choice. You can choose which voices to listen to and which ones to put aside. You don't have to believe everything you think. You don't have to obey everything you think. So listen carefully to those voices. You'll begin to realize how much they push your life around. Some of them are well-meaning voices; some of them aren't. You don't know where you've picked up a lot of these ideas that you carry around inside.

One of the functions of meditation is to give you a place to stand inside and listen very carefully so that you can figure out where these things came from. More importantly, you can see where they lead. If you listen to certain thoughts, where are they going to take you? All too often, when a thought comes up in the mind, it's like someone driving up in a car. You're standing on the side of the road, someone drives up and says: "Hop in." And so you hop in without asking, "Where are you going? Who are you?" If we lived our lives that way, we'd be dead by now. Someone would have driven us to a dark place, robbed us, shot us, and dumped our body out the back door of the car. But that's the normal way things are in the mind. Thoughts come in and you just go with them. So you've got to step back. Ask yourself, "Which thoughts really are my friends? Which

ones aren't?" In other words, which ones will lead to your true happiness? Which ones won't?

The chant we recited on friends just now applies both to friends outside and to friends inside. There are true friends; there are false friends. You've got to figure out which is which and to encourage the true friends. Notice that the Buddha said: "Attend to the true friends earnestly." In other words, when you figure out that someone really is a true friend, you want to encourage that person, cherish that person, because true friends are hard to come by.

Years back when I was in Thailand, Ajaan Fuang gave me the job of teaching new monks after I had been a monk five or six years. Every year we'd get a batch of temporary monks coming in, because that's the tradition there, for young men to ordain for about three or four months. There's a textbook for them to study during their period as monks. Toward the end of the book, as they're beginning to think about disrobing, there's a section on lay life. One of the teachings covers who's a true friend and who's a false friend, because this is a big issue in life. The book goes down the list, just as we chanted just now: People who befriend you to cheat you, those who flatter and cajole, those who are your companions in ruinous fun. Those are false friends. As for true friends, the book says, those are the ones who are willing to die in your place.

And every year the comment would come up: There are no true friends in the world. That's not really the case, of course. There are some. But you have to look really, really hard, asking, Where is friendship with this person leading me? As the Buddha said, if you find someone like that, cherish that person. We hear often that the Buddha teaches us non-attachment. Actually he teaches non-clinging, which is a different sort of thing. Clinging is when you hold onto something and create suffering. That, he said, is something you should try to understand. Look for the cause and let go. But in the meantime, you've also got the path, and that's something you try to develop. It's something you hold onto as long as you need it. You develop virtue, concentration, discernment. These are your friends inside. And the same principle applies outside. If you have helpful friends, hold onto them, cherish them. And you try to be a good friend, a true friend, to that person too.

So with regard to the question of holding on and letting go, the Buddha said you've got to be selective. There are four noble truths to life. It's not that you let go of them all. The first truth – the suffering that comes with clinging – is something you want to try to comprehend. The cause of suffering, the craving that causes you to cling, is something you want to let go. Then there's the path, which you develop. To develop it, you've got to tend to it, you've got to cherish it, you've got to hold onto it. It's like holding onto the rungs of a ladder. If you try to climb up a ladder without holding onto the rungs, you fall off. And even when you reach the roof – or as Ajaan Suwat said, even when you're finished with the path, as far as you are concerned you don't need the path anymore, but you think of the people who will come behind you, and of how easy it is for

weeds to grow on the path, how easy it is for the path to get obliterated, so you still tend to it for their sake.

The same way with true friends: If they've helped you, it's not that you leave them behind. You show them gratitude because that's one of the most important lessons you can give to other people. It reminds them that there's something good in life, something that really should be valued, because it's so rare. That's friendship on the outside.

As for friendship on the inside, you want to be friends with your wise qualities inside, the thoughts that help you, that point you in the right direction. You want to learn how to encourage them. After all, meditation is not simply a matter of driving thoughts out of the mind. You first have to learn how to think skillfully. Just listen to all the conversations going on in the mind: Should I meditate? Should I not meditate? Notice all the voices that say, No, I'm too tired, I need my rest, I want to do something else. Ask yourself: Are those your true friends? Where are they going to take you? Learn how to encourage the voices that take you where you really want to go. This is one of the most basic skills in meditation. If you can't master this one, you can't do anything else basic, like sticking with the breath.

For some of us, this is easy. We've had parents who encouraged us and we've learned how to listen to those voices of encouragement. If your parents didn't encourage you, you have to learn how to train yourself to encourage yourself. This is part of what they call emotional intelligence.

Years back there was an Olympic swimmer – Matt Biondi, I think was his name. He was expected to sweep all the medals in the swimming events but he blew the first event. All the commentators said, "That's it. He's probably all shaken up. He's going to go down into a tailspin." But his coach said, "Don't write him off. He's not that kind of person." And sure enough, he won all the remaining events – because even though he could have easily gotten discouraged after the first event, he knew how to talk to himself, to encourage himself, so that he didn't give up. He kept his spirits up and kept performing at his best.

That's what we've got to do as meditators. Learn how to talk to yourself so you can stay on the path. When things are going well, how do you talk to yourself so that you don't get careless? When things are *not* going well, how do you talk to yourself to give yourself encouragement, to get yourself over those dry patches? That's a basic skill in the meditation: learning who your true friends are inside your mind, and learning how to encourage them.

The Buddha once said that friendship with good people is the whole of the practice. On the external level that means staying with people who can teach you the practice – because without them, how would you know what to do? On your own, could you think up the path that the Buddha found? Would you have the stamina to stick with it? The example of other people who have trod the path is what keeps you going. On the internal level, friendship with good people means your ability to figure out who inside your head is your friend, and to cherish that

friend, encourage it, listen to it. That ability, more than anything else, is what keeps you on course.