

A Refuge from Modern Values

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There is a passage in the Canon where Ven. Ananda comes to the Buddha and says: "You know, half of this holy life, half of the life of the practice, is to have admirable friends." And the Buddha says, "Don't say that, Ananda. Having admirable friends is the whole of the holy life." Everything in the practice depends on having admirable friends. And the Buddha gives us an example: If it hadn't been for him as our admirable friend, where would we be? How would we know anything about the noble eightfold path? How would we know anything about the path to the end of suffering?

And the practice unfolds in the context of our friendships, which means that you have to choose your friends well: the people you hang around with, the people whose values you agree with. The problem is that we often pick up the values of the people around us through a process of osmosis, hardly even aware of what we're doing. We live in a society where everything is measured in terms of monetary worth. It seems normal. We forget how abnormal it can be. How can money be the worth of a person? The worth of a person lies in qualities of mind, the goodness of the heart, the goodness of that person's actions. There are lots of worthwhile things in the world that really shouldn't have a price on them.

I remember when we were in India. Sometimes we'd find ourselves out in an Indian village and we wanted some water to wash with or to drink. If we saw a well or a pipe in front of a house, we'd ask the people in the house if we could use their water. They looked at us very strangely. Later we discovered that it was expected that you could just take water. Water was something without a price; you didn't have to ask permission for it. It was common property. Of course that's not the way it is now. They want to privatize all our water supplies; people keep finding more ways to make money off of water. And that becomes the norm, because "everybody's doing it." So you have to be very careful to choose your "everybody," because a lot of activities that everybody is doing can cause a great deal of harm.

So the practice of meditation is not just mastering a technique. It's also learning to pick up the right values. This is why the Buddha created the monastic Sangha. Not only is this a community where the monks and the nuns help one another maintain the right set of values; it's also a place where laypeople can learn values from the monks and nuns. The fact that the monastics depend on laypeople means that the laypeople need to have close contact with the monastics. That hopefully causes the values of the monastic life to rub off on the laypeople. The mere example of someone who can live happily on very simple things without a salary, without owning any money at all teaches good lessons to the society at large. It challenges you to look at your values, to look at your life. Which attitudes, which values and ideas that you've picked up from other people really work against your own best interests? It's good to examine those attitudes, because a lot of defilements usually hide behind them.

"Defilement" is one of those traditional Buddhist words that have had trouble finding their way into Western Buddhism. It's a very common word over in Asia.

People freely admit that they have defilements, and can talk openly about their defilements all the time. But over here, people don't like to hear about it. This is because we tend to regard our greed, anger, and delusion as our friends. We live in a society where everybody takes it for granted that people are going to be greedy, angry, and deluded, and the society actually is arranged to take advantage of that. It becomes not only the norm but it's also encouraged—as when they tell you that greed is good. I don't know how many times people have complained to me, saying that if you live content with very little, the economy is going to collapse. Well, if the economy is built on greed, anger, and delusion maybe it should collapse. It's causing people to do unskillful things, to think and act in unskillful ways. It's not good for us. You might say, "How can we live otherwise?" Well, have one foot outside of the "real world" so you can step back and look at these things from a more detached perspective—detached in the sense of looking at them in terms of the larger picture.

There's a chant we often chant here: "We are subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death, subject to separation. And I'm the owner of my actions: whatever I've done, for good or for evil, to that will I fall heir." The Buddha says that these are things we should all reflect on whether we're lay or ordained. We should reflect on them every day, remembering that our actions have consequences, and the consequences are determined by the quality of the intention that goes into the action. Once you take this perspective, you can look at the things you "have to do" to get ahead: If they're done out of greed, anger and delusion, you'd be better off not doing them because they have long term consequences down the line.

Of course that calls into question the idea of "getting ahead." It's easy for us to look at people in other cultures—the things they do to get ahead, the things they value as signs of social status—and to see them as kind of strange. The insignia, for example, that go with wealth and power: If you're from outside the culture, and look at how people clamor after those ribbons and fans and medals, it's all pretty bizarre, and not a little sad. Well, remember that our signs of status seem bizarre and sad to them. So learn to have that kind of attitude toward the culture in which you live. Step outside of your culture and realize how bizarre it is.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha encourages people to go off into the wilderness, because it's a very natural way to pull out of the frenzy and rat race of daily life. Ask yourself: "Do you want to be in a race with a lot of rats?" You see this reflection filling the literature on wilderness, yet it often happens that people who go into the wilderness and think about this for a while, don't have the skills required to maintain that wilderness attitude when they return into society. So this is one of the things we try to cultivate through the meditation: the ability to carry a sense of an inner patch of wilderness, a sense of separate center. You stay with your center regardless of what's happening outside. That gives you your separate perspective where you can step back and look at things. This is why it's so important to develop this as a skill.

We were talking today about the concept of refuge as a home for the mind. It's also your own internal wilderness. It's good to have a wilderness home in the midst of the city, in the midst of all the frenzy of modern life—to have that place where you can step back even while you're in the midst of people whose values

aren't really helpful in training the mind.

So the values and the techniques of meditation go together. This is why it's so important to work on this skill until you really have it mastered—so that no matter what, you can stay with the meditation. This is why your values, the reasons you come to the meditation or your motivation for meditation, have to be more than just relaxation or stress reduction. You have to do it for your sanity, for your safety, knowing that there are dangers out there. This is why the Buddha stressed heedfulness as the basic mind state underlying all skillful qualities. "Heedfulness" means a very alive sense of the dangers that await you out there, all the stupid things you can do if you fall in line with general run-of-the-mill values. It also means having a sense how crucial it is to develop the ability to step back so you don't run with the herd mentality, don't get caught up in the stampede.

It's dangerous out there because it's dangerous in here. The mind so quickly picks up through its greed, anger, and delusion the ideas out there that foster greed, anger, and delusion. If our minds were truly pure, if you really did have that wonderful Buddha nature, that deep down inside is so true and good, this wouldn't happen. It would be incorruptible. But the mind is corrupted, it is defiled, so what kind of Buddha nature is that? How can you depend on it? We like to think that we're basically pure yet corrupted by society, but if we were basically pure we wouldn't be corruptible.

So you do have to take a jaundiced eye not only to values out there but also to these false friends inside who are here only to cheat you. They're good only in word; they flatter and cajole; and they lead you to ruinous fun, like we repeated in the chant about false external friends just now. You've got to protect yourself from those dangers as well. They're a fifth column: Mara's armies inside you.

So realize that you have to be very careful about who you choose as your friends both inside and out. Sit down with yourself and ask, "What do you really value in life? What really is important in life?" Then develop the qualities of mindfulness, alertness, and ardency needed to give yourself the refuge where you can stay true to your values and develop a sense of genuine security, genuine well-being. That way your values help the techniques of meditation, and the techniques help your values. So look for admirable friends. When you find them outside, follow them. If you can't find them outside, the Buddha says, go alone, but try to maintain your internal friends wherever you go.