

Friends

May, 2002

The chant just now talked about friends, and friendship—who you hang around with—is an important part of the practice. There's that famous passage where Ven. Ānanda comes up to the Buddha and says that, essentially, half of the practice is having good friends, inspiring friends, friends who are admirable. And the Buddha said, "No, it's the whole of the practice."

This doesn't mean, of course, that your admirable friends can do the practice for you. But the Buddha gave himself as an example: If it weren't for him, where would all the monks be, where would all the lay followers be, how would they *know* the path? You learn the path from other people. They help point it out. So you want to make sure you hang around people who are helpful in pointing out the path—and keeping you on the path. The word *people* here doesn't mean only the actual flesh and blood people around you. It also means the people you listen to on the radio, the people you listen to on TV, the people who write the things and who edit the things you read. You have to be very careful about who you hang around.

Because you pick up attitudes, you pick up beliefs, you pick up habits from those people. These things then get internalized, and this is where the real issue comes in: Of the things that you've internalized, which thoughts are your friends, which thoughts are your enemies?

You have to be clear on that: Meditation is not an issue of just learning how to accept everything, good and bad. You have to have a very strongly developed sense of what's right and what's wrong, what's helpful, what's not.

The places where this is detrimental is when you have lots of preconceived notions—"This has got to be that way, that's got to be this way"—because there are so many times you're deceived by people in just the same way: "This person must be right, this book must be right," and you take the book and you throw it at other people. You have to learn how to read a book, how to read a person, both inside and outside, to see: Is this really a friend, or is it just a friend in disguise? That takes time.

And we tend to make friends with the thoughts that come and say this or that and get us involved in all kinds of conversations. A lot of the meditation is learning how to be friends with your breath. It doesn't seem like much, but often the people who don't seem like much are the ones who become your most steadfast friends, the ones you end up learning that you can rely on, who really are helpful.

The breath is that kind of friend. When you first look at it, there's not much there: just in and out. It doesn't do much. It keeps you alive, but it doesn't seem to have any other interesting things to offer. Yet if you take time to get to know it, really listen to it, really pay attention to it, you find there's a lot more to it than just in and out: all kinds of qualities to the

breath. They create all kinds of feeling tones in the body, some of which are useful, some of which are not.

Learning how to sort them out, seeing cause and effect, seeing which causes lead to good effects, which causes lead to less desirable effects: You want to be really observant here. If you're not observant, then no matter how many books you read, they're not going to get you awakened. *You* have to pay attention, and really watch.

And put a lot of your preconceived notions aside. It may turn out that some of them are right, in just the ways you expected, but some of them are right in ways you didn't expect, and wrong in ways you didn't expect. There's only one way to learn that, and that's to watch, to observe.

Now, when scientists observe, how do they do it? They experiment. As you breathe, you can experiment to see exactly how much you're contributing to the present moment—how much of it is skillful, how much of it is not. And you're learning to see what this breath has to offer here. What can it teach you?

One of the things they have to do when they set up an experiment is to find a really stable place to put up their equipment. If you put it on a table, you want to make sure the table doesn't wobble around. It has to be solidly on the ground and not move. Then you put your measuring equipment on it. If the table moves, whatever measurements you get out of the equipment are going to be useless.

And the same way in the meditation: You want to make sure your mind is as still as possible so that it can watch things, so that it doesn't confuse its own movements, say, with the movements of the breath. The more still the mind can be, the more it can detect really subtle movements. And the more continuous its stillness can be, the more it can see cause and effect.

Otherwise, our awareness of things is like connect-the-dots: There's a dot here and then there's a dot over there, and you have to imagine where there's a line between those two dots—or are those two dots connected at all? For the most part, our awareness of the present moment is just like that—connect-the-dots—and we leave it up to our imagination to fill in the lines. But that's not knowledge, it's imagination.

What we're trying to do here is watch continually, so that the lines are formed not by our imagination but by the continuity of our awareness. And you actually see where there is a connection: This connects with that. When you focus on the breath in this way, this happens; when you focus on it that way, that happens. When you breathe this way, this happens; when you breathe that way, that happens.

Again, you can read about this in books, but it doesn't become a reality for you until you've been continually observant, continually aware. This is why, when they teach meditation in Thailand, they start from the outside, teaching you to be observant.

There are lots of things I had to pick up from Ajaan Fuang that he never explained to me at all. It began with little things: about how to clean up around his hut, how to do this, how to do that. And it was up to me to observe: When he did things, how did he do them?

Sometimes he would point out that I was doing something wrong, but he wouldn't explain what the right way would be to do it. In a situation like that, what do you do? You have to watch who else you can see around there who's doing that same thing, and learn from them. When you develop that habit of being willing to be observant—and also willing to conform, willing to submit to the way things are—then when the time comes to meditate, you'll have the right habits for meditation:

One: You're watchful.

Two: You find that there are certain things you'd like to be a certain way but they just won't be that way, because that's not in their nature, and you learn not to fight their nature. You're willing to figure out: "There is this principle of cause and effect here. How can I use it to my advantage?" You don't just go storming in with your preconceived notions. You have to watch, you have to lie back a little bit to observe, and see what the truth has to teach you. It's always displaying itself. It's not that the truth is hidden.

Someone asked a while back what the secret of the universe was; and the answer is, is there really a secret? The universe shows its nature all the time.

When the Buddha was talking about inconstancy, stress, not-self, he was pointing out things that are so obvious that we normally don't even look at them. And yet they become secrets because of that, because we want to see something else there. What was really remarkable about the Buddha was his willingness to watch: What are things telling you on their own? This is how you make friends: You listen to what they have to say. You *really* listen and don't just immediately turn off and interpret it in some other way. You watch what they have to offer, you watch how they behave—they *teach* you.

And it's this willingness to submit to the way things are, and to work within the system so you can get out of the system... For most of us, we want to change the system to suit our desires, and it just doesn't work. It's going to be—the way it is.

But if we're observant and we really watch, we begin to see: This cause leads to that cause; this is the principle of causality that works here. So, how do you use it to get beyond suffering and stress? In other words, you make friends with what you've got here in the present moment. You make friends with the breath, you make friends with your basic state of awareness. And then you learn to *use* them. You're not *abusing* them. You're just nudging them in the right direction. You can use feelings of pleasure, feelings of pain, use the breath, use your awareness, so as to gain release.

Ofentimes we experience things in the present and we just grab onto them. We don't learn how to use them as a path. It's in the grabbing on that, one, we don't see them, and two, we abuse them. But when you learn to use them as a path, then if there's a pleasant feeling,

what's the best use for that pleasant feeling? If there's a painful feeling, what's the best use for that painful feeling. It's a way most of us don't tend to think.

All we can think of is: "If there's a pleasant feeling, let's just jump into it. If it's a painful feeling, let's get rid of it as fast as we can." But if you're observant, you learn that these things have their uses. If you're really skillful, you can use their nature to gain release from the suffering that you cause yourself, but it's a principle that we tend to overlook day, after day, after day, because we have better ideas. At least that's what we think.

What's needed is this willingness to look: How are things behaving on their own? How does the principle of causality really act? Watch it, learn, experiment.

Someone once pointed out that it's only because we can act that we can learn about things. If we were just totally passive observers, what would we know? We wouldn't know anything at all. There would just be the passing show. But because we interact with things, we know that when we do this, that's going to happen. When we do that, this is going to happen. That's how we learn. So you have to watch, again, and again, and be really, really, observant.

Learn how to be a friend to the principle of causality, learn how to be a friend to the present moment. That's when they begin to open up, and what used to be a secret you see has been secret only because we keep covering these things up. We're not willing to listen to them, we're not willing to be really friendly with them. We've got our own ideas: that this has to be this way, that has to be that way, and we don't get anywhere.

So we stop and look and we're willing to pick up lessons. After all, they talk about the Buddha being able to pick up lessons on the way to awakening, as in the story of the woman who passed by, singing a song of the image of the lute. A lot of people would ignore lessons like those, but the Buddha stopped and said, "There's a message here. This is something really worth taking to heart." And that way he opened up.

When you're open to learn in this way and you develop the qualities of steadiness, you also have to be reliable if you want to get reliable truths out of the present moment. These are the same qualities that are required in gaining true friends and being a true friend: Be observant, be watchful, be steady.

Test your friends a little bit, but with an attitude of friendliness. And you'll find there's a lot you pick up. There's a lot you can learn.