

In the Land of Wrong View

June 11, 2007

You probably know the passage in the canon where Ananda comes to see the Buddha and says, “You know, half of this holy life we’re leading, half of this practice is having friendship with admirable people.” And the Buddha says, “Don’t say that, Ananda. The whole of the practice is having friendship with admirable people.” This doesn’t mean that other people can do the practice for you. It simply means that having the right people around you, associating with the right people, enables you to get on the path to begin with and to stay there.

There’s another passage where the Buddha says he doesn’t see any external factor that’s more helpful for awakening than friendship with admirable people. Of course the primary example of the admirable friend is the Buddha himself; he’s the example. Which sets up the challenge: He claims that he was able to find true happiness—a happiness that wasn’t dependent on conditions—through his own efforts, and that we can attain it through our efforts, too. Simply keeping that claim in mind and looking at the example of his teaching, the example of his behavior as it’s recorded, and the examples of people who’ve followed his teachings down through the centuries: Keeping that claim in mind puts your life into perspective.

You can ask yourself: “Do you want to accept that challenge to see if it’s true or do you just want to turn your back on it? Or are you going to be very selective in thinking about it sometimes and hiding it away at others?” It’s a choice you’ve got to make. It’s best to keep it there in the background all the time because it enables you to live your life to its highest capacity. We talk about getting the most out of life; well, finding true happiness is certainly getting the most out of life.

This is where we begin to see the importance of having genuinely admirable people as friends because there are a lot of other theories out there about what it means to get the most out of life and they’re especially strong in our society. We have little boxes in our houses that teach us all kinds of weird things about where happiness lies, what kind of happiness is possible, and what kind of happiness is desirable. You have to ask yourself: “Are those boxes—TVs, radios, computers—your friends or not?” When you hang around with them, what kind of friends are you hanging around with? What kinds of ideas, what kinds of values are you picking up from them? Because it’s not just the flesh and blood people you associate with who create your mental environment. You also associate with the people who wrote the books you read, who produced all the shows you see, who made the video games you play. The question you always have to ask is: “Why is there somebody out there who wants me to believe this? And exactly what are they asking me to believe? What assumptions am I accepting when I accept their ideas or even start thinking in-line with them?”

Yesterday I was talking with some businessmen who were saying that when you’re in business, you’ve got to be aware of people who are unscrupulous—but even when you’re associating with people who are scrupulous in their business dealings, what assumptions are you picking up from them about the best way to

spend your time, the best kind of values to have? You've got to question those values. Are they really in-line with your own true interests? Do they clash with the Buddha's basic teaching that happiness comes from training the mind?

There are a lot of different areas out there in the world where we could be competing with one another. Some people try to compete in being smarter. Some people compete in trying to be wealthier, better looking, stronger, more powerful—in the sense of being able to influence a lot of people. And you've always got to ask, "Is that really good for you? When you hang around with a group of people, what are the basic assumptions that underlie your friendship, underlie your interactions?" If you're serious about your practice, you've really got to cordon off an area of your heart through the meditation so that when you've been dealing with people, you come back home and sit quietly and say: "Okay, what did I pick up? What germs of ideas did I pick up from these people?"

Even something as innocent as listening to the news: There's not only the bias of the particular newscaster but also a deeper bias that underlies all the news that you get through the media—which is that the most important things happening in the world right now are things that other people are doing someplace else. And that right there flies in the face of the Dhamma. The Buddha's teaching is that the most important thing in life is what you're doing right now. And you want to be skillful about it.

You don't want your attention to be distracted by other people's behavior. At most you look at them as examples: Is this person's behavior a good example? A bad example? But your primary focus has to be on what you're doing right now. That's one of the questions the Buddha has the monks ask themselves everyday: "Days and night fly past, fly past. What am I doing right now?" And it's a good question not only for monks but for all people who are trying to train the mind, trying to find true happiness.

So it's important that you ask yourself: "Who are your true friends and who are not?" The Buddha gives some examples in the Canon of the people you want to hang around with. One, people who have conviction, i.e. conviction in the power of human action, the power of training the mind, that it really is important, that your actions are not just throw away, that you can't be apathetic about what you're doing. That's the first prerequisite.

The second one is that you want to find people who are generous—not only because they'll be generous to you, but also because they'll teach you generosity by example so you can pick up some of that habit. If you're going to be competing with one another, learn how to compete in being generous rather than in accumulating.

The third prerequisite is that you want your friends to be people of virtue, people who have strong principles about certain types of behavior that they won't engage in because they know that those things are harmful. Again, you benefit not only because they're not going to harm you, but also because they'll teach you how to be harmless. And they'll remind you that this is important.

And finally, you want friends who are wise and discerning in terms of seeing what really does cause suffering and what doesn't, what leads to true happiness and what doesn't.

So those are the four qualities: conviction, generosity, virtue, and discernment. These are the people you want in your inner circle of friends, the ones you go to for advice, the ones whose values you really feel at home with.

Of course there's the question of how many of those people can you find. If you have trouble finding them outside, you've got to develop this set of friends inside. This is one of the reasons that Ajaan Lee, for example, talks about having the breath as your friend—because being able to stay in touch with your breath helps you watch the motions of your mind. It helps to alert you to when you've picked up germs from other people.

And in terms of your reading and the things you listen to: Read Dhamma books, listen to Dhamma talks. Be selective in your reading of the Dhamma because there are all kinds of dhamma out there, true and false. The Buddha gives some examples to help you sort out which is which. True Dhamma teaches you to be unburdensome. It teaches you to develop dispassion rather than passion, thinking and acting in ways that will loosen your fetters rather than tie them tight, acting in ways that don't lead to entanglement, don't lead to self-aggrandizement. This last is a big problem in America.

These are some basic principles to watch for in your behavior, to watch for when you're trying to decide what's Dhamma and what's not. Just because a book says it's a Dhamma book doesn't mean that it *is* a Dhamma book. And conversely, there are a lot of books out there that may not be "Dhamma books" in an overt way but they do teach good lessons. So learn to be alert to that.

But ultimately the best test is for you to develop as much integrity and as many admirable qualities within yourself as you can, and to be very clear about what your values are. If you're going to be competing with other people, compete in being virtuous, compete in being generous, in having conviction, in being wise. Ajaan Lee tells a story about when he was a young monk competing with his other young monk friends to see who could sit longer in meditation, who could walk longer in meditation, who could do with less food. It may seem kind of childish but it did develop good qualities. He eventually got over the need to be competitive, to measure himself against other people, but when you live in society it's hard not to measure yourself against other people. So learn to measure yourself in terms of the right standards.

There's another passage where Ananda is talking to a nun and says: "We're practicing this practice to overcome conceit, but conceit has its uses." You see that other people are practicing and you say: "They are human beings. I'm a human being. They can do it. I can do it." So as long as there's going to be conceit in your mind—i.e., the idea that you define yourself in a certain way and you define yourself against other people in a certain way—try to use standards that are wise. Look in terms generosity, virtue, conviction, discernment. At the very least be your own best friend in terms of your values and try to keep those values clear and articulate so that you notice when you're deviating from them. So that even though we're living here in a land of wrong views, you try to create an island of right views around yourself.

Sometimes I feel like we're living on a moon colony here. We have to be very careful to make sure we stay within our support system and carry our own oxygen around with us. Make the Dhamma your oxygen as best as you can in

terms of what you listen to, what you read, and how you sort out the germs and other things you pick up from outside. In other words, look for admirable friends and learn to internalize them so you can carry them around with you. That's one of the most important things you can do in the practice.