Strong Through Admirable Friendship

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We live by strength of body and strength of mind. And normally the two have to depend on each other. The problem is that strength of the body can go only so far and then it starts to deteriorate. But strength of mind, if you train it and develop it, it doesn’t have to deteriorate. It can carry you all the way through death. That’s what you want to focus on. That’s where your time is best invested. And of the different strengths of the mind, strength of persistence is one of the most important. When you have a belief that what the Buddha taught was true, and then you want to carry it through, you don’t just sit there believing. You act on that belief. But the strength of persistence is identical with right effort. And there are four kinds of right effort. If something unskillful hasn’t arisen yet, you try to make sure that it doesn’t arise. If it does arise, you abandon it. As for skillful qualities, if they’re not there yet, you try to give rise to them. And when they aren’t there, you try to develop them. Like right now, as we’re meditating. If any hindrances come up in the mind, just let them go. Thoughts of ill will, thoughts of sensuality. You don’t have to hold on to them. You don’t have to follow them. That’s really mindfulness you may have, any concentration you may have. You try to make sure that it develops. You don’t just watch it come and watch it go. But there’s more to right effort than just making an effort. You have to motivate yourself. As the Buddha says, you have to generate desire. You have to want to do this. You’re forcing yourself against your will. You have to provide yourself with reasons. Inspire yourself that things you really want in the world, if they involve any unskillful qualities of the mind, you’ve got to learn how to say no. You have to learn now not to want them. You’re focusing on the state of your mind as your major resource, as your major treasure. An important element in developing desire is to associate with people who are admirable, admirable friends. As the Buddha said, an admirable friend, you’re looking for four qualities. That they have conviction in the Buddha’s awakening. Two, they’re virtuous. Three, they’re generous. And four, they’re discerning. You don’t want to look for people like that and associate with them. You try to imitate them. You have to ask them how do they develop their conviction? What inspires them to be generous and virtuous? What kind of discernment have they developed? And then you try to follow those qualities and develop them in yourself. It’s having a living example like this that’s really important. We can read about skillful qualities in the texts, but unless we see somebody in the flesh and blood who exemplifies them, they’re just words. They may be inspiring, you may like them, but it doesn’t have the same force as meeting somebody who embodies these qualities. That’s why the Buddha said that having admirable friends or practicing admirable friendship is not just half the holy life, it’s the whole of the holy life. And he pointed himself as our primary admirable friend, because he was the one who pointed out possibilities that we might not have thought of before. I mean, how many of us would have thought that sitting and watching our breath would be a fruitful activity? For many people, it’s just a pleasant pastime. But the Buddha said there’s a lot of potential here. You get to know your breath. As you get to know your breath, the mind is right there, and you get to know your mind really well. You’re focused in the present moment. You’re doing something skillful. The mind becomes more and more transparent. That’s a potential, that’s a possibility that might not have occurred to us. That’s how admirable friendship is, the whole of the holy life, because it opens up possibilities that otherwise might have been closed. Particularly given that we’re living in a land of wrong view, and it’s becoming more and more a world of wrong view all around. A lot of people we associate with tend to have the opposite qualities. Instead of having conviction in the Buddha’s awakening, which means having conviction in the power of your actions, the power of your ability to make choices that make a big difference in your life, there are people who will tell you you have no free will. Everything is determined by physical laws, or they might say there’s nobody there to make the choices to begin with. So you just fall in with whatever urges you have, whatever emotions you have. You have no real argument to use against them. As the Buddha said, if you believe that, you’re left unprotected. Strong urges can come, and what can you do to defend yourself? But there are people who teach that. Some of them even claim to be Buddhist teachers. So you have to be very careful in choosing who your admirable friends are, and recognizing someone who may present themselves as a friend, but they’re not really. The same with virtue. There are some people who say it doesn’t matter how much you harm other people as long as you get what you want, or force them to do what you want. But that’s the attitude of someone who’s crazy about power, just does what they want without any regard to how it’s going to have an impact on other people. And that kind of person gets further and further away from the Dharma. There’s a passage in the Canon where the Buddha talks about people who want power, and when they gain power, they want to maintain power. And they get so that they don’t want to hear the Dharma at all, because the various things they have to do to get and maintain power go against the Dharma. So the more they pursue power, the further and further they get away, the more they make themselves blind and deaf to the Dharma. And there are lots of people out there, and they’re the focus of a lot of the news and the media. So you want to be very careful about what kind of things you look at in the media. There was a cartoon in the New Yorker years back, a man is standing in front of a magazine stand, and there are seven different magazines on sale on the stand, and they all have the names of the seven deadly sins. There was a sloth magazine, and a gluttony magazine, and a lust magazine. You could probably say the same with the Buddha’s definitions of unskillful mind states. Some magazines should be called greed, others should be called anger, some should be called delusion. Sloth and torpor, doubt, all the hindrances, all the unskillful mind states. There’s a magazine for them, and there are websites for them, and apps. And when we spend so much time with our cell phones, screens, those become the people we associate with, so you have to be very careful about who you associate with out there. The same goes for the third quality, generosity. People who are not generous tend to believe that the important things in life are material things, and their main concern is getting as much as they can. But then, as the Buddha pointed out, those kinds of treasures are subject to fire, subject to floods, they can be taken away by kings and thieves and hateful heirs. And the more you have that kind of wealth, the more you excite the jealousy of others, and the people who want to take it from you. So if you find that you’re associating with people who are not generous, you’ve got to watch out. Because generosity is basically realizing that much more important than material things are the states of mind that you develop. When you give something away, you gain a really good state of mind in return. It’s much more valuable. And finally, discernment. As the Buddha said, discernment sees things arising and passing away, and not only that, it sees them in a penetrating way. You understand which kinds of things, when they arise, deserve to be developed, which should be abandoned, what the range of their results can be. Where they come from. In other words, you try to understand them in terms of cause and effect, and how skillful and unskillful they are. That’s when you’re discerning. And based on that, you realize that you have many different desires. And so you have to ask yourself, which desires are worth following? Because you don’t have infinite time, or infinite resources. You want to focus on things that will give the most benefit over the long term. It requires looking at the various desires you have, seeing what their allure is. What is it that makes them attractive? And also seeing the drawbacks of following through with them. Then you do what’s basically a cost-benefit analysis, and decide which ones are worth following, which ones are not. And we do this all the time. It’s just the Buddha’s asking us to be systematic about it, and clear-headed about it. A lot of people find this kind of analysis too cerebral, too much up in the head. That doesn’t speak to their real desires. But then desires have their reasons too. They don’t just force their way on you. There’s a part of the mind that will explain why you would want to give in to something that’s blatantly unskillful. And you realize if you looked at that argument really carefully, it wouldn’t hold any water. And so that’s why those kinds of arguments like to go behind the scenes, go underground. And then they claim that they’re not doing anything at all. They claim that your desires are just innate to you. You can’t say no to them, that they’re your true feelings about things. They make you not want to change. So your desires have their reasons. Sometimes they’re pretty devious, which is why they want to pretend that they’re not doing anything. It’s like the people who claim there is no global warming, but then go up and try to take control of the Northwest Passage, knowing that someday it’s going to be a big trade route. They deny what they’re doing, and they don’t want anyone to look at what they’re doing. Well, the mind is like that. And so when you realize that it’s in your best interest, as long as the mind does this kind of cost-benefit analysis, to do it out in the open, do it clearly, and see precisely where the allure of a desire is, and when you can see the allure for what it generally is, and you can see that it has a lot of drawbacks, then you can let it go. There are other cases where the desire is actually skillful, like the desire to develop this strength of persistence. That’s a good desire. That’s something you want to develop as much as you can. Now someday, as the Buddha said, you’ll want to get past that as well. But you want to develop that strength, see how far it can go. And when it’s taking you to as far as it can go, that’s when you let it go. Think of the image of the raft. You’re tying together a raft made out of the twigs and branches on this side of the river, where there’s danger, but you want to get to the safety of the other side. You need a raft. You can’t go over to the other side to get things from that side to make a raft, so you make things out of this side. Then when you get over to that side, then you can let the raft go. In the meantime, you hold on. That’s the attitude that you learn from a person of integrity, an admirable friend. And seeing the example of the admirable friend. But admirable friends do and say and think. And you do your best to do and say and think the same sorts of things. Then you really develop from that friendship, and it gives you more and more motivation to want to be skillful, as skillful as you can. And be really concerned about your own actions. Because a lot of people think about, “Well, as long as I want something that’s really good, I can do whatever I want to get it.” i.e. the ends justify the means. But the Buddha said, “No, the means have to be good too.” Because that’s all there is in samsara, means. The things we do. The only thing that gives you permanent, unchanging well-being is nibbana, and that’s beyond ends and means. You take that as your goal. And then when you’ve arrived, you no longer have any need for goals. But to get there, the means have to be good as well. So take that as a lesson from your admirable friend, and use that as you develop the desires that lead to the strength of persistence, where you keep wanting, wanting, wanting to be as strong as you can. That kind of desire is a good thing, as the Chan Fung used to say. You have to be crazy about the meditation in order to do it well. It has to engage your mind fully. So it’s a good focus for your desires. When you see that other people have benefited from this kind of attitude, it gives you even more energy to stick with those desires and see them all the way through.

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