Alone & Together

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Two important principles in the practice are admirable friendship and seclusion. And it’s a difficult balancing act to balance the two. And the man, as the Buddha said, without him as our admirable friend, there wouldn’t be any practice at all. We wouldn’t know that there was a path to the deathless, the end of suffering, could be found. So we’d be lost. So we need to spend time with admirable friends. This is one of the reasons why young monks, as they get started, are told to look for seclusion, but also to stay with the teacher. The seclusion is physical seclusion and mental seclusion. Physical seclusion is when you just get away on your own. Because you need that time to look at yourself. But at the same time you need guidance. In my own case, my first year as a monk, I spent a lot of time alone on a mountain. But I wasn’t totally alone. I had a Chan Fung at the base of the mountain. Issues would come up in my meditation. It was good to have him there to talk things over with, to get grounded. To get perspective. Because it’s so easy when you’re off on your own to get ingrown. To find one’s skin into an echo chamber. And it’s common knowledge in the forest tradition that some people go up into the forest alone. And they basically go crazy. They get into spiral hallucinations. And it’s recognized in the Canon too. One of my favorite images in the Canon is when a monk comes to the Buddha and says, “I want to go up into the forest.” And the Buddha sees that this particular monk is not talented in that direction. He’s not ready to go. And he says, “It’s like a cat or a rabbit seeing an elephant getting into a lake and squirting water on its back, in its ears.” And the cat or the rabbit says, “Why can’t I do that too?” So the cat goes out and tries to squirt water in its ears on its back. I like that image. Can you imagine a cat squirting water in its ears, swimming around? And it’s going to sink. Or it’s going to get carried away. A lot of people, when they just go off on their own, get really ingrown in their defilements. So they need some grounding. They need some reality check by being around good people. But that’s the trick. A lot of times we live our lives in areas where there are not that many admirable people around. So we need to depend on Dharma talks. We need to depend on Dharma readings. We have to find some seclusion. Time to get away. Because we’re constantly bombarded. We have no time to know ourselves. No time to see exactly where our problems are. Because we’re dealing so much with other people’s problems. This is why one of the tricks that you need as a meditator is to keep your conversations with others as short and as to the point as possible. So you can go off and find some time to be alone. One of the ways they have of torturing people is to submit them to a constant barrage of sensory input. Lights on all day long. Loud music on all day long. When people have no time to be by themselves, they just get worn out. Because you need to be able to look inside. Because inside you’ve got the problem of who you’re hanging around with inside. Dealing with other people’s issues you don’t know about the committee in your own mind. Voices come up. You don’t know where they’re coming from. Thoughts come into your mind. Who are they? Who do they represent? Where did you pick up those ideas? You want to be able to track it down. You can’t track it down. There’s a constant barrage of new stuff coming in all the time. So it’s important that you find some time to be alone. To get to really know your mind. After all, the heart of the path is concentration. Concentration starts with secluded from sensuality. Secluded from unskillful mental qualities. If you can’t get secluded from other people, there’s no way you’re going to get secluded from these things in your mind. So it’s an important principle. You find time to be by yourself. To get to know yourself. And have the guidance of what you’ve learned from your admirable friends. Because admirable friends represent not just having good people to be around. It means trying to figure out what their good qualities are. Noticing if you don’t have those good qualities yourself, how you develop them. Part of it is asking them. Part of it is just observing them. Then taking their lessons to heart. It’s so easy to say as we read the texts, “Well, that was okay back in those days, but we have modern problems that they didn’t have back then.” Well, they had greed. We have greed. They had aversion. We have aversion. They had delusion. We have delusion. Some of the details may be different, but the basic patterns are all the same. As John Bond once said, “People are all the same, but they’re different. But when you come right down to it, they’re all the same.” He said that to John Foong one time, and as John Foong said, he had to take it out and think about it for a while. What it comes down to is that basically we all have the same problems of greed, aversion, and delusion. The details, the tiny workings out, may be different. Which is why different people have different problems as they settle down. Or try to settle down at the concentration. And why different issues will come up as you try to develop discernment. You read about other people’s approaches to getting past their defilements, and some of them may work for you and some of them may not. But the basic battle lines are the same. We all have to deal with sensuality. We all have to deal with ill will. All the hindrances. Sloth and chopper. Restlessness and anxiety. Doubt about what we’re doing, about our ability to do this, or maybe doubt about the practice. The details may be different, but the basic outlines are all the same. So we can learn from one another, but then we have to take it out and be alone for a while to figure out does this lesson apply to me and exactly how does it apply to me? And learning how to read yourself. And also knowing some safety measures to make sure that when you get off alone you don’t get into an echo chamber of defilements. And Chan Mon gave a piece of advice to Jhammabhava. He said, “When something comes up in your meditation, and it seems strange, there may be a part of your mind that’s attracted to it, but a part of your mind that’s not quite so sure, just stay with your sense of being aware. Let it pass. Don’t think that you’re missing out on a great opportunity. Just tell yourself,”I’ve got to learn.” The best way to learn is to watch, be observant. The piece of advice that Ajahn Lee gave was when you come to some insights, ask yourself to what extent are they true and to what extent is the opposite true? Because there are only a few things that are true across the board. The Four Noble Truths, the duties of those truths, the basic principle that unskillful qualities should be abandoned and skillful ones should be developed. Everything else has its time and place. Even the perceptions of inconstancy, stress, not-self, they have their time, they have their place. And also times when they’re not appropriate. You can start thinking about not-self and decide, “Well, there’s nobody there. Nobody’s responsible. I have no free will, no choice, because there’s no me.” You can get involved in some really serious wrong views that way. There’s a case in the canon where a young monk is asked by some sectarians, “What is the result of action?” He says, “The result of action is dukkha.” You can translate it as pain, stress, suffering. The sectarian said, “We’ve never heard that from any other Buddhist monks. You better go check that with the Buddha.” So he does. And the Buddha says, “When you’re talking about karma, you don’t talk about the fact that all feelings are stressful. You’re talking about the fact that there are pleasant and painful and neutral feelings. Because when you’re thinking about action, the question is, what kind of action? Is it skillful and which ones are not? You don’t go straight to the non-action of total nibbana. That’s a case where the perception of dukkha is not useful. It’s not the right time, not the right place. So you have to be careful as you get off on your own. Because your inner conversation can go way off course. This is why the monks have their time divided. In the old days, you would wander during the cold season and the hot season, then come together during the rains to get the advantages of both being alone and being together. And so for lay people, this means finding time to be alone and finding time to be together with admirable friends. And then learning how to deal with the friends who are not so admirable. In other words, how to be with them, how not to pick up their wrong views or their wrong habits, and have the good sense to let them know that you need time to be by yourself. Our society is getting more and more connected. All you have to do is pick up your phone and you can be in conversation with anybody, anywhere. And so there’s more and more of a bombardment. And the mind gets more and more dependent on that. It feeds on that. That’s one thing you’ve got to put down. Tell yourself there’s a time and place for connection and a time and place for being disconnected. Because otherwise, how are you going to see your defilements? If you’re having to deal with other people’s defilements all the time. So realize that you have to find a balance. And what that balance will be for each person is going to be different. Ideally, as you get more advanced in the practice, you can find more time to be alone and not go crazy. But at the same time, you want to be able to be with other people and not pick up their crazy ideas. When you’re really strong in the practice, you can be alone, you can be with others, and it doesn’t make that much difference. And Jon Foong tells of the time when he went to see Jon Lee. Jon Lee had been in Bangkok for a couple years teaching. And Jon Foong visited him and he realized that one night his meditation had been knocked off course. The monastery where Jon Lee was staying was right next to the railroad tracks. And there was a constant line of visitors coming in from noon to midnight. He realized that his meditation needed to be stronger. So one day he went into the woods to strengthen it that way. But he also began to spend more time teaching, being with others, and learning how to maintain his mindfulness that way. So there’s a skill to being alone and a skill to being together. And you’ve got to find the balance.

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