

## *Self Power, Other Power*

*August 4, 2014*

There's a famous passage where the Buddha says that admirable friendship is the whole of the holy life. Ananda had come to him and commented that, "Gee, it's really amazing how much we have to depend on our friends and fellows in the practice. It's half of the holy life." And the Buddha said, "No. It's the whole of the holy life."

But at the same time, there's a passage where the Buddha says, *Attahi attano natho*, "The self is its own mainstay."

So how do we put those two statements together?

Well, first it's because of good friends like the Buddha – and he calls himself an admirable friend – that we know that there is a such a thing as the practice, that there is a noble eightfold path.

Think of all that he went through in order to find the path, that we don't have to go through. He didn't have a tradition that told him that there's a path to the end of suffering, a way to the Deathless. All he had was his conviction that life wouldn't be worth living unless he could find a happiness that wasn't affected by aging, illness, and death. And he couldn't live with himself unless he actually gave it the best try possible.

We, however have the advantage. There's the Buddha, there are the noble disciples who've passed the teaching on to us.

So that's how admirable friendship is the whole of the path. We have the example of good friends, we have the support of good friends.

One time, one of the Buddha's cousins who had ordained as a monk was getting discouraged in his practice and the Buddha said, "I'm here to help." So we have his teachings. And there's that voice behind the teachings: "These are here to help you."

What they do, of course, is that they point you inside. That's where the self has to take over. We hear a lot of teaching about not-self, but the Buddha has a place for self as well, in the sense that you have to learn how to depend on yourself and look within yourself for the strengths you need.

The world has a lot of slings and arrows to throw at you. But each of us has the qualities inside that, if we work on them, if we develop them, will give us a true mainstay, something that can't be touched by those slings and arrows.

And that mainstay is to be touched right here in the mind. As the Buddha said, "It's to be seen with the body." An interesting turn of phrase: to see with the body. What it means is that right here where you sense your body right now, that's where you'll see the Deathless. And it'll be a total experience. It won't just be an idea. That's to be found in here. And the qualities that lead to that can be found within the mind.

This is why Ananda taught at one point that even though we're practicing to overcome conceit, we have to make use of conceit—conceit here being the sense that, "If other people can do this, so can I. They're human beings, I'm a human being. Why can't I do this?" That gives you the confidence that you can handle this path.

Then there's a self—the Buddha calls it the self as a governing principle—that's to help keep you on the path. When you're tempted to just give up, when things are hard, you remind yourself, "I started on this path because I wanted to find a deathless happiness, and if I give up and go back to whatever I was contenting myself with before, do I really love myself? Is it really fitting?"

So there are these ways in which you think about yourself and learn how to depend on yourself that are an important part of the path. So don't go throwing away your self too quickly. Find which parts of yourself, which sense of self within you, which skills you can develop within you, you can depend on.

In the beginning, they may not seem all that dependable. We were talking yesterday about walking along a path and seeing little plants that look like grass. You look down and if you don't look carefully at them, they're just grass and you step on them, and that's that. But if you look carefully, you see all kinds of plants in there. Some are weeds and others are really useful plants. Some are the seedlings of trees: If you look after them, take care of them properly, even these little tiny things here will grow, will provide you with fruit, provide you with shade.

So keep that in mind as you're working with your concentration and there are times when it seems difficult. These are little shoots and seedlings that you have to look after. But if you care for them, they'll care for you.

It's like that old story of the mouse and the lion. There was one day when a lion caught a mouse, and the mouse said, "Please, please let me go. Maybe someday I'll have the opportunity to help you too." The whole idea was so amusing to the lion that the lion let him go. Then later on the lion was caught in a big net. The mouse came along, saw the lion, and bit all the different cords in the net and so the lion was free.

So don't go overlooking little tiny things just because they're small.

There are lots of examples in the Canon. The Buddha said, "Don't be careless around small fires or small snakes, because a small fire can turn into a big one, a small snake can have a lot of poison. Don't be careless around little princes. A little prince can grow up and become a king. If you mistreat him when he's small, he's going to remember that."

That principle applies to little tiny defilements in the mind.

But it also applies to the good things in the mind as well. Whatever amount of concentration, whatever amount of mindfulness you're able to muster: If you look after them, they'll grow. And just because they're not as strong as you'd like right now doesn't mean you throw them away. You've got to nurture them, you've got to care for them.

It's like having a weak child. You have to spend extra time looking after the child. But then

the child can repay you.

So have the confidence that whatever good things you can find in yourself that don't yet seem all that dependable—you don't see how you're going to make a mainstay out of yourself based on them—may not show their potential all at once. If you nurture them, look after them, they'll grow.

How do we know this? Partly because we have the example of admirable friends, people who have practiced, to show that it is possible.

And it's something that doesn't depend on gender or race or what historical period you're in. The Dhamma's always there to practice.

Here we are, right now. There's no better time to practice than right now.

So have the confidence that this will provide you with the refuge you need. Because as the Buddha said, "There is no other refuge."