

Benefitting from Admirable Friendship

July 13, 2014

Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths.

Notice how the breathing feels. Stay with each breath. And you can adjust the breath so that it feels right: not too long, not too short.

As for any other thoughts that are coming in right now, you don't want to hang out with them. You want to hang out with the thoughts that say you're here to train the mind.

Because the mind needs to be trained. It's *the* main factor in life that's going to determine whether we have happiness or suffering. You can have plenty of things outside, plenty of friends, lots of power, lots of status, and still be miserable.

By the same token, you could have a lot of things lacking outside but still be happy inside. It's the mind that makes the difference. So the mind needs to be trained, because it can take a lot of good things and turn them into bad, or it can take bad things and turn them into good.

You have to think that you've got lots of different voices in here. It's as if you've got a whole committee and you have to determine which members you're going to side with. This is a very basic principle the Buddha said in finding protection in life: learning which people to take as your friends and which ones not to take as your friends. People who are just your acquaintances and you're friendly to them, that's one thing. But as for the ones who are really your friends—the ones you hang around with, the ones you look to for advice, you look to for examples—you have to be very selective.

That's both an external principle and an internal principle, because your mind has picked up all kinds of voices from outside and it's carrying them around. You have to decide which voices inside are really your friends and which ones are people you want to put aside for the time being and learn how to work around.

So the two principles help each other along. If you hang out with good people, you begin to think in good ways. You hang out with people who are admirable, you think in admirable ways. If you hang around people who have a lot of weird ideas, very strange values, you begin to pick up their values even without thinking about it.

What it comes down to is: Who do you respect inside? Who do you respect outside? You have to be very careful to choose people who are worthy of respect both inside and out.

So right now while you're meditating, respect the voice that says, "The mind

needs training.” You need to get the mind to stay here with the breath. Learn to take that principle as you go through life. You’ll be hearing lots of different voices going through your head as you go through the day, and you can ask yourself, “Who are the ones in here that I can really identify with, the ones I can hang out with? And who are the ones I just have to let go, let go, as background noise?”

In this way, the mind begins to straighten itself out because you’re taking wise people as your friends and staying away from the fools inside and out. We have to deal with all kinds of people in this world and we have to be on good terms with many kinds of people. But remember: It really does matter who you take as your guide. Who do you take as your examples? You’ve got to look around you: Whose behavior is behavior that you really want to admire, that you can admire and you want to admire in yourself?

That’s how we benefit from what the Buddha called “admirable friendship”: seeing good people, seeing where they’re good and what you can learn from them as an example. You don’t take their things, you take their examples, because in that way you pick up their good karma, too.

The same principle goes inside: If you’ve got a thought coming in, ask yourself, “Where is this thought going? Where is it coming from? Do I want to ride along with it?”

Most of us are like a person who stands by the side of the road and someone comes driving up in a car and says, “Hop in!” and we just hop right in without asking any questions, “Who’s driving? Where are they going? What kind of car is this? Is it going to last or is it going to break down?” You have to look at things carefully before you jump in like that. If we lived our lives like that, we’d be dead. Yet that’s the way we run our minds: Anything comes in you just go riding with it.

So learn to be a little more selective about which thoughts you ride with and which thoughts you let go past. Which thoughts you take as your friends and which thoughts you decide to just leave behind.

It’s who you take as your friends that’s going to determine what kind of person you become. You pick up the habits of your friends. So be very selective in how you choose your true friends: the ones you look to for examples, the ones that you open your heart to when you want advice.

Be very selective in that. That way, you save yourself a lot of trouble—and that’s one of the ways that we find protection in life.