

Admirable Friendship

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There's a pair of suttas in which the Buddha talks about the most helpful external factor in the practice and the most helpful internal factor.

The internal factor is appropriate attention. In Pali, this is called *yoniso manasikara*. It means focusing on the right things, focusing on the right issues, asking yourself the right questions. And particularly, seeing things in terms of the four noble truths.

That's pretty radical. We hear the term four noble truths so often that we don't stop to think about what a radical teaching they are. They're a guideline for how to look at your experience. Most of us look at experience in terms of what's us and what's not us; what we are and what we aren't; what things we have under our control, what things we don't have under our control; what things we like, what things we don't like. And then we start building our views from those dichotomies.

But the Buddha says to put those issues aside and look at the issue simply of where is there stress in your life right now? What's causing it? And what can you do to put an end to that cause? That's it. Those are the basic outlines of how you look at things from the outside on in. Essentially it's a problem-solving approach.

Years back, when I was teaching English composition in Chiang Mai, I had a lot of social science majors. I figured it would be good for them to learn how to analyze a social problem and propose a solution based on attacking the cause. So we started out with advertisements. I had them write advertisements. For the guys, we had, "Women don't find you attractive? Why is that? Maybe it's because you don't look old enough and mature enough. You'd look more mature if you smoked cigarettes." That kind of thing. Then once they got the basic principle down—that when you attack a problem, you don't attack the problem, you attack the cause—then we worked up from there until we got to social issues.

Well, the same principle applies inside. You have to look for the cause of the suffering and pare it down to the real essentials. If you focus only on the things you don't like, or if you get too distracted with extraneous issues, they get in the way.

So we're here to look, as the Buddha said, at the craving in our minds. The craving and the ignorance: Those are the main causes. We try to develop qualities of mind that can develop a sense of dispassion for the craving, that can cut through the ignorance with knowledge. That's how suffering can be brought to an

end.

All of this is a question of internal skill: how you deal with sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations; how you deal with thoughts, feelings, and perceptions; even how you deal with the act of consciousness. All these things are a matter of skill.

This is why the Buddha didn't present himself as a savior. He was a teacher. He pointed out the way. Part of his pointing out the way was basically through his own actions, his own way of dealing with people. You could see him in action and say, "So this is how a skillful person acts; this is how a skillful person speaks; this is how a skillful person presents his ideas or her ideas."

This is where the external factor that's most helpful for awakening comes in. The most helpful external factor is having admirable friendship, i.e. friendship with admirable people, people who've developed this skill and can teach it to you. They can't make you skillful but they *can* show you how to be skillful. It's a special type of friendship. On the one hand, it deals with very intimate issues in your mind: how you're dealing with issues from the past, how you're dealing with issues here in the present moment. These issues are very internal. At the same time, the solution is also internal. In other words, no teacher can come and straighten out your mind for you. You've got to do that for yourself.

Which means the teacher has to give you space. This is one of the qualities of admirable friendship: There's a lot of space in that friendship. Even though we're dealing with internal things—how your mind and your heart interact with the events that come in the course of any day—there's also space for you to work on these things. In other words, it's the kind of friendship that encourages appropriate attention. Because ultimately that internal factor is the most important one. The external factor is there to help, to show that it is possible that looking at your experience in this way really does lead to results. This kind of friendship helps open your imagination.

It's like seeing someone walk on a tightrope. If you'd never seen anybody walk on a tightrope, you might never even think it would be possible. But suppose as a child you go to the circus and you see someone walking on a tightrope and it inspires you: Maybe you'd like to walk on a tightrope as well. Simply seeing another person be skillful indicates to you that it is possible.

It's the same way with the Buddha. We read about his life, about the life of his noble disciples all the way down to the present, and they show us that it is possible to put an end to suffering. For most of us, that possibility, if we hadn't heard of it, wouldn't occur to us. We might think in a quiet moment or two that we'd like to do that, but then there's so much around us that tries to convince us that it's not

possible.

It was the same in the time of the Buddha. As a young prince, he wanted to find a deathless happiness, but all of his friends and his family said, “Oh, it’s not possible. You can’t do it. Look at all the great sages of the past— even they had to make do with our ordinary pleasures.” Most people, presented with those arguments, would think, “Okay, I guess that’s just the way it is,” and just give up.

Fortunately for us, the Buddha didn’t give up: “Even if it’s not possible, I’d rather die in the effort of trying to find if it is.” He had that kind of dedication. Which is why he’s the ultimate admirable friend. But he not only came back and said, “Hey, I did it!” He came back and said, “This is how it’s done.” And he put in all the time and effort and energy necessary to establish that path of practice in the world.

If you want to get a sense of how patient the Buddha could be, read through the Vinaya: all those monks and nuns who were misbehaving, and he very patiently had to set out rules to stop this, stop that. He went through all that so that it would keep the religion going, keep his teaching alive.

One of the stories tells of a year when the monks were invited to spend the rains at a certain place and the person who’d invited them forgot all about them. There turned out to be a famine. There was hardly any rice to eat, and the monks ended up eating barley that was usually used to feed horses.

Ven. Sariputta became concerned that maybe this was going to be the end of the teaching. So he talked to the Buddha about this, “What is it that puts an end to the teaching? What is it that guarantees that the teaching will last a long time?” And the Buddha said it’s by setting out a Patimokkha, setting out a set of rules for the behavior of the monastic Sangha: That’s what keeps it alive for a long time. So Sariputta said, “Well, then, please set out a set of rules.” The Buddha replied, “The time hasn’t come for that yet. It’s when people start misbehaving: That’s when you have to set out rules.” And sure enough, people eventually started misbehaving. So he very patiently set out those rules, so that now we still have the teaching alive. The rules are the container that’s kept everything together.

In the Buddha’s image, it’s like a thread. In the old days when they would make flower arrangements, they would stitch the flowers together with thread to make sure they stayed in place, to keep them from scattering.

So the Buddha went through all that to give us sets of standards: not only teaching us the Dhamma but also giving us the patterns and the protocols to show how a group of people living together practicing the Dhamma can live together so that they continue the principle of admirable friendship. He was giving each person space so we have the solitude and the quiet that can be conducive to the

mind. At the same time, there's space for giving encouragement. In other words, even though we live together, we try not to get in one another's way, and that way, the fact that there are quite a number of people here together is actually an encouragement in the practice. That's what our basic relationship should be.

But ultimately it all points to that issue of admirable friendship leading to appropriate attention. Because appropriate attention goes deep down inside, into those parts of the mind where no outside relationship can touch. No matter how intimate we are—and anyone who's lived with one other person for a long period of time will realize this—there are still large areas of the other person you don't know and you can't control. You see this especially when the other person is sick, when the other person is dying. There comes a point where you can't reach them. But that's where the four noble truths can still reach them, as long as they've worked on them and developed them as a skill in the mind for dealing with whatever issue of suffering and stress comes up.

This is why we give pride of place to appropriate attention, and then try to develop a friendship to create the proper container for that—so that living here together, our activities are actually a help for one another and not an obstacle to awakening.

Always try to keep this point in mind as you go through the day. The more you apply appropriate attention to your own experience, the more you become an admirable friend.