

Admirable Friendship

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The Buddha taught that there are two factors, one inside and one outside, that are especially useful in gaining awakening.

The inside factor is appropriate attention. The outside factor is admirable friendship. And the two go together.

Appropriate attention is seeing where you're suffering, what you're doing that's causing the suffering, and trying to figure out what you might do in order to stop that.

In other words, you look at things in terms of the four noble truths and their duties, as best you understand them. And you try to get better and better in your understanding.

That's where admirable friendship comes in. You want to be with people who are wise, but not only wise: generous, virtuous, people who have a sense of conviction in the Buddha's awakening and the principle of karma.

It's when you see that you're suffering: That's when you begin to be willing to gain influence from outside.

Because admirable friendship doesn't just mean that you find good people. It also means that you emulate them.

It's like asking yourself, "What would the Buddha do?" in a particular case. And see where in your stable of committee members there's somebody who might correspond to the closest thing you can imagine of what the Buddha might do. And you try to take on that identity.

As the Buddha said, when you find an admirable friend who has conviction, generosity, virtue, and discernment, you try to emulate those qualities. You try to develop your powers of observation, too, to see how they do it.

This means, of course, asking questions but also just noticing. The same with generosity, the same with virtue, and the same with discernment: You listen carefully, you watch carefully, and then you emulate. You imitate that person.

Part of us may resist. We think: "I am who I am, it's just the way it is." But if that's your attitude, you're not going to learn anything. And even appropriate attention is not going to do much for you.

Because appropriate attention means that there are duties to be done. Some people don't like the word "duty" there. It's *kicca* in Pali. They're duties in the sense that if you want to put an end to suffering, this is what you've got to do. No one else is imposing the duties on you, but there are tasks that have to be done if you want to stop suffering. You have to change the way you behave.

For the most part, we don't comprehend suffering. We run away from it. We don't abandon the cause. We actually embrace it.

We let the path develop itself. But it's not going to develop on its own. You've got to make a conscious effort to put the path together, to make it into something. That basically means making yourself into a person on the path.

As for the cessation of suffering, we don't really notice it at all because we're all too busy going out creating new suffering all the time.

So we have to change our ways. It's because something in us is honest enough to see that we're suffering and is willing to admit, "Yes, I'm at least part of the cause": That's when you're going to be looking for outside help.

And that's when you want to find good people to look to, so that they can actually share genuine wisdom, genuine discernment with you.

What do they teach? They teach that the cause for your suffering is inside. They're happy to share what they know, but all the work is yours to do.

So look inside your collection of committee members and see which ones correspond best to conviction, generosity, virtue, and discernment. Then bring them out.

Ajaan Lee has a nice analogy. He says our good qualities we tend to hide away and we bring out our not-so-good qualities. It's like our best clothing: We rarely wear it. Or our best china: We hardly ever use it. As a result, it just gets old. With the clothing, of course, it gets moth-eaten and deteriorates and you end up not being able to use it ever at all.

So you want to see what qualities inside you are good qualities and then bring them out, take them on, wear them as you'd wear a suit of clothing—as you're meditating and as you're not formally meditating. This way, you gain a sense that you have lots of different potential identities, so why not use the best ones?

It also helps you to realize you don't have to identify with whoever is the strongest committee member or the one who's shouting the loudest at any particular moment. You want to ask yourself, "Which committee member is the best one to use right now?" It requires effort, and part of us doesn't like that because we think, "Hey, an enlightened person just acts naturally." Well, what's natural for an enlightened person or an awakened person is natural because the person has worked at developing good qualities. We can't clone awakening.

But one thing you do notice about an awakened person is that he or she has many different identities, many sets of clothing, many sets of identities or roles.

They've developed that ability because they've consciously tried to find out which person inside them is the one who should be acting now, the one who should be making decisions now. Which identity inside is going to be the most effective in understanding where's the suffering. Which one is going to be the

most effective in abandoning the cause.

This is how appropriate attention and admirable friendship go together. The texts usually list admirable friendship first, followed by appropriate attention, but these two qualities help each other along.

They're among what the Buddha calls the factors for stream-entry. It sounds pretty exalted, but they're very basic. The list starts with admirable friendship with a person of integrity, and then moves into listening to the true Dhamma.

The Buddha gives you standards for understanding what is true Dhamma and what's not, as when he taught Gotami:

Does this particular Dhamma lead to being unfettered?

Does it lead to dispassion?

Those are the goals.

Does it encourage you to put out more effort?

Does it encourage you to be less entangled with people?

Does it encourage you to be more content with your material surroundings?

Does it encourage you to be less burdensome?

These qualities deal with the way to the goal and they focus on two things: one, how you practice on your own; and two, how you engage with other people.

So you look at these qualities and then you look at yourself: "The teachings that I'm following, the qualities I'm developing in my mind: Do they lead in the right direction or are they leaning in another direction?" If they're leaning in another direction, you want to put them aside. No matter how much you may hold to them or how much you may like them, you have to realize, "These things are making me act in ways that are unskillful."

So if it's a Dhamma that teaches you, "Well, just be natural," look at what it's doing to your life. It's obviously not the Dhamma.

You've got lots of different roles in here. And just because one role seems easiest at the moment doesn't mean that it's the best one, and it doesn't necessarily mean that it's you. After all, it is a role. All these things are fabricated. Your feelings are fabricated. The voices in your mind are fabricated.

It's just that some are more habitual than others, and it's very easy to fall into the groove and the ruts of old habits. Then if you're not careful, they can be like the ruts that develop in snow in the winter. If the car that went before you went over the side of the cliff, you're going to go over the side of the cliff, too, if you don't get out of the ruts.

So even though it may not seem natural to begin with, find which identity in yourself most corresponds to what you admire in an admirable friend and that you would like to imitate in an admirable friend.

And that's not just how you have an admirable friend but also how you have an admirable friendship. In other words, the friendship doesn't come just from the good person. You have to respond in the proper way for it to be a genuine admirable friendship.

It's motivated by that ability to look at things in terms of appropriate attention. Then you get good examples from the admirable friend and you carry through. That's actually the third of the four qualities for stream-entry.

The first one, as I said, is finding an admirable friend and having admirable friendship with that person.

The second one is listening to the true Dhamma.

The third one is applying appropriate attention—in other words, seeing how the Dhamma applies to what you're doing right here, right now, to solve the problem of suffering.

As with the four noble truths: They're not just four things to think about. They're a framework to apply when you look at your life, telling you what to do.

If you're suffering, figure out where the suffering is, try to comprehend it. When the Buddha talks about suffering, he starts out with things we're all familiar with and then he goes into the five clinging-aggregates, which are not so familiar. He says that they're the actual problem there.

So we have to look, "Okay, what is the clinging? What are these aggregates?" It's not something that would immediately occur to us, that this would be the key to comprehending suffering, but we look into it, we try to comprehend these things. And then, when we comprehend, the next step is practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma.

That was Ajaan Mun's motto, that whatever the Dhamma is, you try to fit yourself into the Dhamma. This is very much like admirable friendship. You fit yourself into the mold supplied by the admirable friend. Here you fit yourself into the mold of the Dhamma. Again, it requires that you change yourself.

This is very different from the way most people approach the Dhamma. They want to change the Dhamma to fit themselves. Or they want to study it from outside and not get committed. But the Dhamma's there for you to be committed, because in committing yourself to it, you put an end to your suffering.

It's not like a free-form art where you can just express yourself. It's more like a skill. The Buddha was a master craftsperson. He discovered this is how you put an end to suffering. This is how it works.

And we want to give his teachings a fair try. Which means trying to maintain them as they are and follow them as they are. Because that's the only way you can give them a fair trial.

What all this means is that you have to change yourself, change your

actions. If you think of yourself as a *thing*, it's difficult, but you begin to realize that your senses of selves are different kinds of actions. It's as if you've got a whole wardrobe, with different sets of clothing you can put on. Well, don't just stay in the rags that you've been ordinarily wearing. You've got better clothes in there. And if they're not developed, okay, sew yourself a better set.

In other words, take what you've got in terms of your good qualities and nourish them. Take them on more and more often as the role you play.

Again, you're not play-acting to show off to other people. You're taking on these roles because you want to find the roles that are really effective in dealing skillfully with whatever problems come up, both inside and out.

So change what you do. And look for good people to show you what it means to change what you do in a good direction. Take their lessons to heart.

That's how both of these qualities—both admirable friendship and appropriate attention—work together to take you to the goal.