

## *Admirable Friendship*

*July 25, 2017*

As the Buddha said, the most important external factor for gaining awakening is admirable friendship. The most important internal factor is appropriate attention. The question is, which comes first? In the texts, they talk about having admirable friends first, because it's through having admirable friends that you learn about appropriate attention to begin with. But then, of course, admirable friendship is something you seek when you start to develop appropriate attention. So the two help each other along.

But the outside influence is primary. Just think: If we hadn't learned of the Buddha's awakening, would we be sitting here watching our breaths? Probably not. We'd be off someplace else, doing who knows what. We've learned through his teachings, and through the long line of teachers that passed it down, that it's a good thing to be sitting here watching our breaths as a way of training the mind. That's how we can develop appropriate attention, which means looking for where our actions are skillful, looking for where they're not, encouraging the skillful ones, and trying to abandon the unskillful ones.

Then we take that principle deeper into the four noble truths. Try to comprehend suffering. Abandon its cause. Realize cessation by developing the path. To look at our experience in these terms—in terms of skillful and unskillful actions as they relate to the four noble truths: That's what appropriate attention is.

And the main point of appropriate attention is: If you're suffering, it's coming from within. Always keep that in mind as we're living together here.

We have a community. We want to have that fact help our practice, so we have to be good admirable friends for one another. What does that mean? One, you try to set a good example. Two, you look for the good examples in other people. It's all too easy living together to see the faults and failings, the weak points of other people. But we should learn how to look past that. We want to learn from their good points. As for their failings, you can put them aside. You're not being asked to imitate everything you see around you. You're the one who has to make the choice: what's worth imitating and what's not. Whatever's not worth imitating, just put it aside.

Staying with Ajaan Fuang, I'd hear his opinions on politics. And I must admit, I didn't agree with his opinions on politics. But I figured I wasn't there to learn politics from him. I was there to learn the Dhamma, and he had an awful lot to

teach in that area. If Ajaan Fuang had been a political leader, he probably would have been a dictator. He thought dictatorship was the best kind of government for Thailand. But that was beside the point as far as I was concerned. The point was: What were the good Dhamma lessons he had to give? What were the good things in his way of speaking, acting; the way he looked at things that I could learn from? I picked that up as best I could.

As we're living with another, as the Buddha said, admirable friendship is finding people who have good qualities and learning how to emulate their good qualities, so that's what you look for. Years back, we had a person here who was very set on practicing restraint of the senses. She'd get upset when people down at the house were talking. She said, "Don't they know I'm practicing restraint of the senses?" So I had to say to her, "Look. Restraint of the senses means you're not going to get upset by what they say. You've got to learn how to restrain your anger, your aversion, to the fact that they're talking."

We can't expect to have a totally perfectly quiet environment around here. After all, we've got people, and not just people, we have the crickets outside; the bugs in the trees. I remember talking to someone coming here whose experience in meditation had been in hermetically sealed environments. After his first day meditating here, he came to complain that the orchard was awfully noisy and interfering with his concentration. The sound of the bugs walking over the leaves and the sounds of the lizards running around on the leaves: Those were real irritants to him. This shows that you can find something to complain about anywhere. And the same with any people. You can always find something to complain about. But is that the best use of your time with those people?

We're here in a place where everybody's trying their best, or at least trying, to live in line with the Dhamma. Just that fact should give you thoughts of gratitude toward them, that we have a community like this. There are going to be imperfections. As Ajaan Lee says, you can't expect everybody to be equal. Even the fingers of your hand, he says, are not equal. If the fingers of your hand were all equal, you'd have a monster's hands. So you can't expect everybody else to be equal in their determination or in their circumspection. But the fact that we have a supportive environment, where the bottom line is not money; the bottom line is the training of the mind: That's something you should be thankful for.

So look for the good in the people around you. That's how you can turn any friendship into an admirable friendship. It becomes a support on the path so that you can develop appropriate attention. When things are not going well, you don't say that it's because of this thing out there or that person out there. "It's because

of something happening in the mind. There's something I'm not doing quite right." This is how the Buddha himself gained awakening.

He looked at the state of his mind and said, "Something's not right. What am I doing?" That was always the focus: "What am I doing?" And it went from grosser to more and more refined levels of being not right. From the blatant problems of aging, illness, and death, he focused in more and more and more on his mind to the point where he didn't even talk about suffering. It was just disturbance. "What's the disturbance in the mind? What am I doing that's causing that disturbance?" If you can pay attention in here and ask those questions and look for those disturbances, that's what's going to solve all the problems. Because once the mind is not creating unnecessary suffering or disturbances for itself, it's not going to suffer at all.

The Buddha discovered that all suffering is unnecessary. Pain is part of having a human body, physical pain, but mental suffering is not necessary. We're creating it. Our old habitual ways of feeding—feeding off our thoughts, feeding off our opinions, feeding off our moods: Those are the things creating the suffering inside. As long as your focus is there, you're focused on the right spot for solving the problem.

As Ajaan Chah says, if you're looking for something, always look for it where you dropped it. Well, you dropped it inside. You didn't drop it outside. There's that story they tell in the Philippines about a man who dropped something off the side of the boat one time after they had left port. So he waited to get into the next port, and then he looked for the item he dropped off the side of the boat when they were in port. People asked him, "Why didn't you look for it back there where you dropped it?" And he said, "Well, the light is better here." So in the light outside it may be easier to see the faults of other people, but don't look there for your problem. Look inside for your problem, because that's where the cause is and that's where it can be solved.