

## *Prerequisites for the Practice*

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There are two factors that the Buddha said are most helpful in putting an end to suffering: one external; one internal. The external factor is admirable friendship. The internal one is appropriate attention. And even though one is outside and the other is inside, they're very closely connected.

Admirable friendship means not only finding good people to be friends with, but also emulating their good qualities. The Buddha listed four qualities for an admirable friend. The first is conviction: conviction in the Buddha's awakening; being convinced that the Buddha really did put an end to suffering and that he really did it through his own efforts. And he did it through qualities that were not peculiar to him. They're qualities that we all have, at least in potential form, simply that he developed them to a very heightened form. But we can do that, too. What that means is that you're convinced in the power of your actions, in the power of your mind to change itself. That's a quality you look for in your admirable friends. And you also try to emulate it.

The second quality is virtue. You want to look for someone who sticks to the precepts and encourages other people to stick to the precepts. That means following the precepts in all situations, without exceptions. As the Buddha once said, when you hold to the precepts in all situations, you're giving universal safety to all beings and you have a share in that universal safety yourself. If you make exceptions, the safety you give to the world is only partial, and your safety is only partial.

This, too, is a quality you want to look for in your admirable friend. And if you find that it's lacking, you realize you don't have an admirable friend. It's not someone you want to hang around with. Because after all, if the admirable friend really does have conviction in the power of the action, he or she would not want to do anything harmful—especially because conviction in the power of action is also conviction in the principle of rebirth: that our actions have consequences that don't end with death, but that can go on to the next life or the next or the next. A person who really believes in that is very much more likely to be harmless in his or her behavior.

And also generous: That's the third quality. We look for someone who's generous with not only material things, but also with time, energy, knowledge, forgiveness. And we try to emulate those qualities as well.

And finally, discernment, which comes down to seeing where there's suffering, what it comes from, and how to put an end to it. Here, specifically, the Buddha's focusing on the causes of suffering inside. There may be external causes for pain and misery in the world, but, as he said, you don't solve those problems without solving the problem of why the mind is

making itself suffer inside. You want to see when suffering comes, how it comes; when it goes, how it goes.

This ties into appropriate attention, because that's precisely one of the issues that appropriate attention looks at.

The word "attention" in the Buddha's teachings means basically which questions you pay attention to, the ones you try to answer. He never taught bare attention, because there are no bare questions. There are appropriate questions and inappropriate questions, based on whether they help or don't help put an end to suffering. Inappropriate ones are the questions like: Is the world eternal? Was it created? Was it not created? Or how about you: Do you exist? Do you not exist? What are you? Who are you? If you get ensnared in questions like these, the Buddha said, it's a tangle of views, a jungle of views, and you never get free. Whereas with appropriate attention, the questions come down to: What is skillful and what's not skillful? What, when I do it, will lead to long term welfare and happiness? What, when I do it, will lead to long term harm and suffering?

Then there's a realization that you don't simply want to know those facts, but you actually want to act on them. From there, you move into the four noble truths. In looking inside, what kind of actions in the mind are unskillful, i.e., the ones that create suffering? Which ones are skillful, the ones that don't, the ones that actually lead to the end of suffering? That's how the question on skillfulness and unskillfulness translates into the four noble truths.

You've got craving, which is a cause of suffering. That's an unskillful action, a mental action. Then there's the suffering that results. Then you've got the path to the end of suffering. That's a skillful action. It leads to the end of craving and, through the end of craving, to the end of suffering.

So that's appropriate attention. Notice that it focuses a lot on your actions, on what you're doing. You learn from your admirable friend what actions are skillful and not. And you see them in action and learn how to emulate them.

But to see them really clearly requires two more qualities the Buddha said he looked for in any student. One was that the student be observant; and the other was that the student be honest—"not deceitful," as he said. In other words, when you make a mistake, you admit it. You don't try to cover it up because, after all, you're trying to change your actions from unskillful to skillful. And if you refuse to recognize your own mistakes, there's no way you're going to learn.

So you apply these two qualities both to the teacher and to your own actions. In other words, when you're looking for a teacher as an admirable friend, it's your responsibility to be observant: Does this person really embody the qualities of an admirable friend? As the Buddha said, this takes time and powers of observation. To know if the person is virtuous takes time. You have to be with the person a long time, and you have to be observant. If you want to know if the person is honest, you have to have dealings with that person, which can either mean

trade, making exchanges, or just getting into an argument. If the other person treats you well, treats you properly in an argument, then you know that this is somebody who's trustworthy. Honest. That's what's meant by "dealings."

And how do you develop those qualities of being honest and observant? This connects with the Buddha's teachings to his son, Rahula. Before you act, he said, ask yourself, "What do you expect to be the results of your actions?" If you foresee that an action is going to cause suffering or harm, you don't do it. If you don't foresee any harm, you go ahead and do it. Look at it also while you're doing it to see if any harmful results are coming up in spite of your original intention. If you see any harm happening, just stop. If you don't see any, you can continue. When you're done, you're not really done. You have to look at the long term results.

And again, if you realize that you did cause harm even though you didn't expect to, you go and talk it over with someone else. Not just anybody: You try to find an admirable friend, both as an exercise in honesty and also to learn from what that friend has to offer in terms of advice.

It's here that all these qualities come together. You're looking at your actions: trying to be honest; observant. And you're depending on the help of a reliable person to force you to be more observant; to force you to be more honest, so that when you get to the point where you look at your actions and you don't see any harm at all, that's when the Buddha says you can take joy in the practice.

That joy is nothing to be afraid of. It's not an unhealthy form of pride. We're learning a skill here. And developing a skill requires a certain amount of pride: not the pride that you're better than other people, but pride that you're learning something—because all of the practice should be based on the desire to learn. You want to learn. You're willing to learn. You're not too proud to learn. It's a different kind of pride. It's the pride that comes from willingness to submit yourself to the training, to look for people who you think have better qualities than you do and to try to adjust your own behavior so that you can embody those qualities as well.

It's when you've got all these factors working together that it is possible to put an end to suffering. There's a passage where the Buddha said that admirable friendship is the whole of the practice, or the whole of what he calls the holy life. And by that he means that without him as our admirable friend, we'd be nowhere. We'd have no idea what was right view, right resolve, any of the right factors of the path. We'd be groping around.

But there's another passage where he says that if you can't find an admirable friend, it's better to go alone. Of course, here you don't totally lack an admirable friend. You do have the example of the Buddha that you can read about. It's not quite the same as having a real person, because there's nobody that you can talk things over with. But if all you can find around you are people who are lacking in conviction, lacking in virtue, lacking in generosity, lacking in discernment, it's best not to associate with them. You certainly can't take them as a guide in the path, which means that you have to be especially stringent with yourself in terms of those other qualities: developing appropriate attention, being honest with yourself, and being observant.

If you're lacking an admirable friend, it's like a big hole in your path that maybe you can get over if you try hard enough. But if you're lacking the other three qualities, it's like a bottomless pit cutting across your path. There's no way you can get anywhere.

So look to yourself, because that's where the test ultimately is. Even the ability to recognize an admirable friend requires that you have some good qualities in yourself and that you recognize them. As the Buddha once said, you can't really know if someone else has integrity if you yourself don't have integrity. But if you try your best to be honest and be observant, and learn where to look, learn the right questions to ask, then you can make progress along the path.