Admirable Friendship

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Practicing the Dhamma is primarily an issue of looking at yourself, looking at your own thoughts, your own words, your own deeds, seeing what's skillful, seeing what's not. It's not so much an issue of self-improvement as one of action-improvement, word-improvement, and thought-improvement. This is an important distinction, because people in the modern world — *especially* in the modern world — seem to be obsessed with self-image. We've spent our lives bombarded with images, and you can't help but compare your image of yourself to the images of people you see outside you. And for the most part there's no comparison: You're not as strong, as beautiful, as wealthy, as stylish, and so forth. I noticed in Thailand that, as soon as television became rampant, teenagers became very sullen. I think it's largely this issue of people's looking at themselves in comparison to the images broadcast at them. And the whole question of self-image becomes very sensitive, very painful. So when we say that you're looking at yourself, remember you're not looking at your "self." You're looking at your thoughts, words, and deeds. Try to look at them as objectively as possible, get the whole issue of "self" out of the way, and then it becomes a lot easier to make improvements.

The same applies to your dealings with other people. The Buddha said there are two factors that help most in the arising of discernment, that help you most along the path. The foremost internal factor is appropriate attention. The foremost external factor is admirable friendship. And it's important that you reflect on what admirable friendship means, because even though you're supposed to be looking at your own thoughts, words, and deeds, you're also looking at the thoughts, words, and deeds of the people around you. After all, your eyes are fixed in your body so that they point outside. You can't help but see what other people are doing. So the question is how you can make this knowledge most useful to yourself as you practice. And this is where the principle of admirable friendship comes in.

To begin with, it means associating with admirable people, people who have admirable habits, people who have qualities that are worthy of admiration. One list puts these qualities at four: Admirable people have conviction in the principle of kamma, they're virtuous, they're generous, and

they're discerning. There's a well-known line from Dogen where he says, "When you walk through the mist, your robe gets wet without your even thinking about it." That's his description of living with a teacher. You pick up the teacher's habits without thinking about it, but that can be a double-edged sword because your teacher can have both good and bad habits, and you need to be careful about which ones you pick up.

So in addition to associating with admirable people, the Buddha says there are two further factors in admirable friendship. One is that you ask these people about issues of conviction, virtue, generosity, discernment. And this doesn't necessarily mean just asking the teacher. You can ask other people in the community who have admirable qualities as well. See what special insights they have on how to develop those qualities. After all, they've obviously got experience, and you'd be wise to pick their brains.

The second factor is that if you see anything in other people worth emulating, you emulate it, you follow it, you bring that quality into your own behavior. So this makes you responsible for your end of admirable friendship, too. You can't sit around simply hoping to soak up the mist, waiting for it to blow your way. *You* have to be active. Remember that passage in the Dhammapada about the spoon not knowing the taste of the soup, while the tongue does know the taste.

But again, when looking at people around you, it's important that you get away from your sense of competitiveness, of this person versus that person. You look, not at them, but at their activities. Otherwise you start comparing yourself to the other person: "This person's better than I am. That person's worse than I am." And that brings in questions of conceit, resentment, and competition, which are not really helpful because we're not here to compete with each other. We're here to work on ourselves. So again, look at other people simply in terms of their thoughts, their words, their actions. And see what's an admirable action, what are admirable words, what are admirable ideas, ones you can emulate, ones you can pick up. In this way the fact that we're living together becomes a help to the practice rather than a hindrance.

The same is true when you notice people around you doing things that are not so admirable. Instead of judging the other person, simply judge the actions by their results: that that particular action, that particular way of thinking or speaking is not very skillful, for it obviously leads to this or that undesirable result. And then turn around and look at yourself, at the things you do and say: Are those unskillful words and actions to be found in you? Look at the behavior of other people as a mirror for your own behavior. When you do this, even the

difficulties of living in a community become an aid to the practice.

The Buddha designed the monkhood so that monks would have time alone but also have time together. If you spent all of your time alone, you'd probably go crazy. If you spent all of your time together, life would start getting more and more like dorm life all the time. So you have to learn how to balance the two. Learn how to develop your own good qualities on your own and at the same time use the actions and words of other people as mirrors for yourself, to check yourself, to see what out there is worth emulating, to see what out there is clearly unskillful. And then reflect on yourself, "Do I have those admirable qualities? Do I have those unskillful qualities in my thoughts, words and deeds?" If you've got those unskillful qualities, you've got work to do. If you don't have the admirable ones, you've got work to do there as well.

What's interesting is that in both of these internal and external factors — both in appropriate attention and in admirable friendship — one of the crucial factors is questioning. In other words, in appropriate attention you learn how to ask yourself questions about your own actions. In admirable friendship you ask the other people you admire about the qualities they embody. If you find someone whose conviction is admirable, you ask that person about conviction. If you find someone whose effort and persistence are admirable, you ask him about persistence. In other words, you take an interest in these things. The things that we ask questions about, those are the things we're interested in, those are the things that direct our practice. And it's the combination of the two, the internal questioning and the external questioning, that gets us pointed in the right direction.

So this is something to think about as you go through the day and you see someone else doing something that gets you upset or something that offends you. Don't focus on the other person; focus on the action in and of itself, as part of a causal process, and then turn around and look at yourself. If, in your mind, you create other people out there, you create a lot of problems. But if you simply see life in the community as an opportunity to watch the principle of cause and effect as it plays itself out, the problems vanish.

The same with admirable people: You don't get jealous of their good qualities; you don't get depressed about the fact that you don't have their good qualities. Where do good qualities come from? They come from persistence, from effort, from training, which is something we can all do. So again, if you see something admirable in other people, *ask them about it*, and then try to apply those lessons in your own life. If we go through life without asking questions, we learn nothing. If we ask the wrong questions, we go off the path. If, with

practice, we learn how to ask the right questions, that's the factor that helps us get our practice right on target.

I once read a man's reminiscences about his childhood in which he said that every day, when he'd come home from school, his mother's first question would be, "What questions did you ask in school today?" She didn't ask, "What did you learn? What did the teacher teach?" She asked, "What questions did you ask?" She was teaching him to think. So at the end of the day when you stop to reflect on the day's activities, that's a good question to ask yourself: "What questions did I ask today? What answers did I get?" That way you get to see which direction your practice is going.