

## *Friends Inside & Out*

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There are two principles that the Buddha said are most conducive to awakening: One is admirable friendship and the other is appropriate attention.

Admirable friendship, the Buddha said, is the most important external condition. Appropriate attention is the most important internal condition.

The Buddha has a lot to say about friendship. Often the issue of who you hang around with lies at the very beginning of many of his descriptions of the path. You try to find someone reliable, someone you can trust, because we pick up our knowledge and our habits from the people we hang out with. So you want to look for someone who would not make false claims to knowledge out of greed, aversion, or delusion, or would recommend to other people that they do things that are in those people's not best interests.

Now, to know that sort of thing about someone, you have to watch that person carefully. You have to be careful about who you make friends with. Because sometimes it's only over time that you can see the qualities of the people you're hanging out with.

This is why in the Buddha's teachings you don't make a life-long commitment to any teacher. You watch the person and you let the person watch you.

When you find someone you trust, the Buddha says try to be open to their criticism because that's the only way that they'll be willing to really teach you frankly. If you show a resistance to criticism, they'll just close up.

The fact that someone says nice things to you doesn't mean that that person's a good friend. The fact that someone says harsh things doesn't mean that person's a bad friend. Sometimes the truth is harsh. You have to look at the underlying motivation and also what happens when you follow the other person's advice.

But again, it's not just what the person says. You want to look for a person whose habits are good. The Buddha said you pick up lots of habits from the people you associate with.

He has a list at one point of seven qualities to look for in a person before deciding whether that's a person you want to respect. The implication here is that you also want to learn those qualities from the person you respect.

Two of them have to do with the Dhamma: knowing what the Dhamma is and what the meaning of the Dhamma is. That kind of thing can be passed along in words.

But the five other qualities are things you can talk about in general terms but

you can't really pass the knowledge along in words. You have to watch your friend in action over time and get a more intuitive sense of how to embody those qualities.

One is having a sense of yourself: what your strengths are, what your weaknesses are, what kinds of tasks are appropriate for you to do, what other kind of tasks are appropriate for you to leave to other people.

Having a sense of enough: This is really important, because a large part of our lives is driven by a sense that we don't have enough. If we have friends who have an exaggerated standard of how wealthy you have to be in order to have enough—in other words, lots and lots and lots of stuff—then you're going to be spending most of your life running after stuff.

You want to find someone who has a healthy attitude toward material things: how much you really need, how much you really need to work in order to get those things, so that you can have time left over to practice and not all of your life is given to your job. You want to have time to look after your own mind, time to find some solitude.

That relates to another quality you want to pick up, which is a sense of the right time and place for things. What's the right time to speak, what's the right time to be quiet? Once something has to be said, what's the right time to say it? This is something you really have to be sensitive to as you deal with other people.

Occasionally there will be something you want to talk about that you know the other person is going to resist. How do you find a way to talk about it in such a way that they lower their resistance? How rested are they? Do they feel well-fed? Do they feel secure in their trust of you? Who else is going to be around when you're talking? You really have to look at these things so that your words will be more effective.

You also want to have a sense of how you behave in different kinds of groups of people: how you behave at work, how you behave at home, how you behave with your close friends, how you behave in different levels of society, how you speak in different levels of society. This is something you have to observe.

Finally, there's having a sense of how to judge people: what kind of people should you hang out with and what kind of people you should avoid because they set a bad example.

This is one of the reasons why, when the Buddha set up the monastic Sangha, he set it up as an apprenticeship. You spend time with your teacher and pick up these things. That way, when you're trained, you're not trained just in the words or not just in the texts, but in an all-around way.

After all, these external friends tend to become internal voices in your mind.

And for most of us, who's our internal voice? Who's our internal friend?

The Buddha said, most of us go around with craving as our companion. So where is our companion leading us? Hopefully at the present moment our craving is focused on doing something skillful: training the mind, getting a handle on what we're doing right now that's causing suffering and how we may put an end to it.

Not all craving is bad. But you have to remember craving is not one person in your mind. You have lots of cravings in the mind—lots of different voices, lots of different attitudes. And that ability to sort out who you want to associate with outside and who you don't want to associate with outside, has to be turned inside as well. Which cravings do you want to listen to? Which cravings should you put out in the doghouse? You pick up some of this from other people.

As the Buddha said, that second quality—the quality of appropriate attention—is something you pick up from people who are wise. You have to learn how to apply it inside and make it your own.

Appropriate attention basically means seeing things in terms of the four noble truths: where there's stress, what's causing the stress, seeing the possibility of having dispassion for that cause, and then following a strategy for how to develop that dispassion. That strategy is the path.

This means looking at yourself in a new way. If you have a very strong sense of, "I am this. I have a unitary self that wants this and wants that," that's going to determine the imperatives in your life.

But that's taking every craving as your friend and totally trusting it. Whereas the Buddha says if you look at most of your cravings, they're not really true friends. They cause a lot of stress. He has you look at that point very carefully.

Why does he have us look there? Because seeing the stress that we cause ourselves is one way of getting past a lot of the dishonesty in the mind. Many of our cravings are the false friends who flatter and cajole. We like people who flatter us. We like people who go along with our ideas. As a result, we can end up causing a lot of trouble for ourselves and for other people. Yet it's very easy to ignore that.

In fact, there's a common saying in Thailand: People have to really sense a certain amount of suffering in their lives before they'll be willing to practice. If they don't sense that, they're never really going to come to the practice.

And you have to begin to see that it's not all caused by things outside. There's a lot you're doing inside right now to cause it, which is why you have to train the mind.

Without that training, the mind can just go blissfully on, thinking that it's good and yet complaining about all the suffering—and not being willing to see

where there's the connection between what the mind is doing itself and the suffering that it's undergoing.

It's when you finally realize that the problem isn't outside, the problem is inside: That's when you're ready to practice. Those outside friends may be leading you astray, but they're not the real problem. The real problem is your willingness to go along with them. And why are you willing? Because they happen to fall in line with a lot of your inner cravings.

So you have to look carefully at these cravings that you've taken as your friends, because some of them actually are true friends and some of them are not.

Ajaan Suwat used to say this is our problem. We see craving as our friend, and stress and suffering as our enemy. Of course, if you look carefully at stress and suffering, you discover that it gives good lessons.

Now, to look at it, the mind has to be still. And to be still, it has to learn at least a few tricks about looking at its cravings with suspicion, learning how to put them aside at least for the time being. Say, let the mind just settle down right now, see where in the mind there's a craving for peace, a craving for stillness. Learn how to train that so that, as with all desire on the path, it actually is conducive to the states that you want and doesn't get in the way.

The Buddha talks about having too little desire and too much desire as both being a problem. If there's too little desire, you just don't want to put in the effort to practice. If there's too much, all you can think about is how much you want the results. You're not really focused on "What am I doing right now? What can I change? What's the actual path that will lead to the results."

It's like seeing a city on the horizon that you want to go to and focusing all your attention on that as you're driving there. Of course, you're going to run into people or run off the road. You've got to focus your desire on staying safely on the road.

That's how you harness your desires and harness your cravings. As for the cravings that would pull you aside: Learn how to put *them* aside for the time being. They're like people coming along and saying, "Hey, let's go out and have a little fun here." You can remind yourself you've had that kind of fun many, many, many times before. There's nothing really new about it.

It's here in the meditation that there's the potential for something new. In the beginning it doesn't seem like much new at all. It's just breath coming in, breath going out, something you really know, you think. But there's a lot more going on here than you see at the beginning.

That's why you want to look more deeply into the breath, look more deeply into what it's like for the mind to settle down and really feel secure here.

As the Buddha says, as we're practicing we're trying to see something we've never seen before. That means we have to do things we've never done before.

A lot of our cravings are like old movies you've seen many, many times. Here's a chance to look for something new—and to strengthen some of the skillful cravings that have been pushed off into the background. Focus your craving on “How can I get the mind down? How can I get the mind to feel at ease in the present moment? How can I get it to stay here with a sense of interest and well-being.”

Those are things we want. Well, how do you act skillfully on that desire? We're not trying to deny desire. We're just trying to augment it with the other factors that will be needed to achieve it.

The desire there is part of right effort. But you have to be mindful, you have to be alert. You have to contemplate things, evaluate things. “How's the breath going right now? How can I improve it? When it feels good, how do I maintain that sense of comfort, not get too excited about it? Or when things are going well, how do I get not too blasé?”

A lot of this is a matter of finding the right balance, of having that sense of enough in an all-around way.

This is one of the reasons we come out to a place like this where it's still: so that the friends we've been associating with for so long who may not be so helpful in the practice can at least be further away. Of course, you look inside and you find you've internalized a lot of their ideas and values.

But think of the image that Ajaan Chah had, that you've got a house and the house has one seat. You're the one sitting in the seat, and everybody else who comes into the house has to stand. Because you're the owner of the house, you can tell the ones who are standing, “Okay, you're not wanted here right now, you can go.” They don't have any place to sit down. If they're sitting down in the seat and you're standing around, you're in a bad position. But now you've got the seat here in your meditation.

As for other voices that come up, the other members of the committee, friends, true friends and false friends: You want to sort through them. This practice of recognizing who's a true friend and who's not, both internally and externally, covers a lot of the practice right there.

We use the principle of appropriate attention to sort these things out. Which friends are helping you understand the cause of stress, help you understand the problem of suffering? And which ones are trying to pull you in another way?

Take that as your standard, and you'll find that the results will be good, both inside and out.