

How to Be an Admirable Friend

November 6, 2013

We start the meditation every evening with thoughts of *metta*, or goodwill. “May I be happy. May all living beings be happy, free from animosity, free from trouble, free from oppression. May each of us look after him or herself with ease.” This quality of *metta* is very close to *mitta*, the word for friend. With the words, we’re offering friendship, realizing that if our happiness depends on other people’s suffering, it’s not going to last. Either we’re not going to feel good about it, or else we’re going to go into denial about the fact that our happiness is causing suffering – neither of which is a healthy attitude. So we wish well to all beings.

And we don’t just stop with the wish. We should actually embody these qualities in our actions. And because our actions come out of the mind, this is where we start. We start with the attitude and we start with the meditation as a way of showing goodwill to ourselves and goodwill to others, of being a friend to ourselves and a friend to others. You get the mind under control. You keep your passion, aversion, and delusion – to some extent at least – within proper bounds.

If you’re not able yet to get rid of these things entirely, at least you can get some control over them. As a result, you’re going to benefit, and the people around you benefit as well.

This is why meditation is a friendly activity, not in the sense of going around smiling at people because, actually, each of us is sitting here very quiet, not looking at anybody else, looking inside our own minds. But friendly in the sense of doing something that helps – helps you, helps other people. This is one of the good aspects of the Dhamma, that in helping yourself through the Dhamma you’re helping others as well. When you’re a true friend to yourself, you can be a true friend to other people.

The Buddha listed four qualities of an admirable friend. They start inside and then they spread outside from the inner qualities. The first one is conviction that your actions really do make a difference, that you really are responsible for them, and that you have to be very careful about what you do and say and think. If you don’t have this kind of conviction, you get very sloppy in your actions. You can harm others –

you can harm yourself – very easily. So the first friendly quality is conviction that leads to heedfulness in how you act.

Then your actions, of course, to be really skillful have to go into two directions. One is to actively do things that are positively skillful, and the other is to avoid things that are not. The positive skills, of course, have to do with generosity – the way you give to others. It can be a matter of material things. It can be giving your time, giving respect, sharing your knowledge, giving your forgiveness. All of these things count as generosity. Again, other people benefit and you benefit, too.

And you look at what you *can* give. This is a good attitude to start with. A lot of us come to the meditation thinking about what we can get out of it, but you're not going to get anything until you give. Like right now, you're sitting here. You've got to give some time. You've got to give up all the other things you're thinking about or you could be thinking about right now. And you give yourself to the breath. Totally. Watch the breath coming in, watch the breath going out. Give it your full attention and see what you can learn about the mind by staying right here.

The first thing you're going to learn, of course, is that the mind doesn't want to stay. It wants to think about other things. So you have to remind yourself: You've been thinking about other things for who knows how long; and you've gotten some benefit from it, but you've also got a lot of trouble. The trouble comes from the fact that the mind's thoughts are out of control. So the mind needs a measure of control, and this is where you exercise that control by developing mindfulness and discernment around the breathing.

So you come back to the breath. Try to make the breath as interesting as possible. In other words, notice how the breath energy has an impact on how you experience your body right now. Think of the energy flowing down all the nerves, down the shoulders, down the arms, down your back, out through the legs. In front: down through the throat, the lungs, the heart, all the organs in the torso. Each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out, think of the breath sweeping in, sweeping out.

You'll begin to notice that different thoughts seem to be associated with different parts of the body. If there's a tension in your arm, you'll think one thing. If there's a tension in your leg, you'll be thinking something else. One way to get on top of that, so that you don't start

wandering off in thoughts, is to keep sweeping the breath energy through the body every time you breathe in and breathe out.

That way, practicing meditation like this, you're giving yourself to the meditation. This is one very positive way of being a friend to yourself and, of course, to other people. At the moment, you're not harming anybody and you're setting a good example. Because when we think thoughts of goodwill, it's not that our metta or goodwill is going to make other people happy. We're basically hoping that they will act on the causes of happiness. And how are you going to get them to do that unless you set a good example? I mean, you can tell them all kinds of good things about what would be good for them and what would make them happy. But if you don't set that same example, if you don't walk the talk, your words are not going to have any weight. So here you're setting a good example for the world. If everybody could meditate, this would be a very different world from what it is. These are some of the ways in which meditation is a gift and a way of being an admirable friend to other people.

In addition to generosity, there's virtue. Virtue means abstaining from things that are harmful: no killing, no stealing – that right there is very friendly – no illicit sex, no creating any problems around sex, no lying, no divisive speech, no harsh speech, no idle chatter. This doesn't mean you don't say anything critical at all, simply that you're very careful in your criticisms. Again, the criticism has to come from goodwill. Divisive speech, harsh speech, and using coarse language – those forms of speech show no goodwill at all. You show goodwill by the way you time your words, who's around when you're talking – take that into consideration. What kind of mood is the person in right now? Are they in a mood to receive your words or not? If they're not yet, what can you do to put them in that mood?

In other words, if you want to give constructive criticism, you have to treat your criticism carefully. If it really is valuable criticism, show that it has some value. In that way, other people will give value to your words as well. If you just scatter your criticism around like sand, no one's going to take it seriously. They're just going to avoid it. When they see the sandblaster's coming, they all run away. You're trying to show care in your actions, so that they're not harmful, so that even when you do have to say critical things, you do it with an attitude of goodwill. You do it as a friend.

And finally, the fourth quality of an admirable friend is discernment. You really do understand how the mind creates suffering. You can see it in action, so that you can avoid it. This is the attitude that makes you a genuine friend to yourself, because the mind wants happiness. Everything we do is for the sake of happiness. And yet we always turn around and find that, while some of the things we've done have actually created happiness, a lot of the things we've done have not. They created just the opposite. Why was that? Because we had no discernment. We were ignorant of what we were doing, ignorant of the effects, ignorant of the motivation going on inside our minds. Things we should be very clear about—right here in our own minds—we tend to be muddled about because we're paying attention to things far away. This is where we're not really a friend to ourselves.

To be truly a friend to yourself, you have to look carefully at your actions. Before you do something, ask yourself, "What are the consequences going to be?" You don't do something just because you feel like doing it. You do it because you think it's going to have a good impact. If you see that it's going to have a bad impact, then no matter how much you want to do it, you learn how to say No. That's an aspect of discernment right there: learning how to say No to yourself when you have to, and making it stick.

While you're doing something, watch the results that are actually arising. If you notice that even though you meant well, your actions are not having a good impact, stop. If you don't see anything harmful happening, you can continue with the action. When you're done, reflect on the long-term consequences. If the action actually did cause trouble, talk it over with somebody. Don't be too embarrassed. Point out to them: "I did this, and these were the consequences." That way, you learn from other people's wisdom. The fool is someone who thinks he can figure out everything on his own. We've had who knows how many generations of people practicing the Dhamma now. There are bound to be people who've learned how to avoid mistakes and how to avoid things that may seem okay but are actually going to cause trouble down the line.

In this way, you take your happiness seriously. That's what discernment is all about: realizing that as long as you have the power to act, you might as well use it well for genuine happiness, and doing what

you can to learn. In this way, you cause less trouble for other people, and you set a good example. You're a friend to them and a friend to yourself.

So when we chant, "May all beings be happy, may they be free from animosity, free from trouble," it's not just an idle wish. We actually try to make that part of our motivation in our actions, and we try to embody it in developing these qualities of conviction, generosity, virtue and discernment. This way, we're a friend to all, ourselves and others – an admirable friend – both through not harming anyone, through actively helping them, and also through setting a good example.

If you keep these principles in mind, you'll find that the world is a friendlier place because you've learned how to be a good friend to everyone you meet, starting with yourself.