

Admirable Friends & Amiable Company

July 16, 2011

Tonight we begin the rains retreat, which here in Southern California is a misnomer. There's probably going to be very little rain. But still it's a good time to get together and to practice the Dhamma, and to encourage one another in practicing the Dhamma.

As the Buddha said, admirable friendship is essential to the path. It's the whole of the practice. So as we encourage one another, both through our words and through our example, we want to make sure that we're admirable friends for one another, we set good examples.

There are four qualities that the Buddha mentioned that were good for admirable friends, the people you want to emulate: that they're people of conviction, in other words, they believe firmly in the Buddha's awakening; they're virtuous; they're generous; and they're discerning.

You should look at your behavior to see in what ways you can develop those qualities more. Of course, it's good for you, but it's good for the people around you, too, so that our presence here doesn't become an obstacle to one another. We're here to be quiet, we're here to develop qualities of seclusion, but we're not absolutely alone. We're here with one another. So you want to make sure that your presence is not harming someone else's efforts in the practice.

The process is made even easier by developing what the Buddha called the qualities of amiability. These apply to any group. If the group wants to hold together you want to develop these six qualities.

The first three have to do with goodwill. You show goodwill in what you do, you show goodwill in what you say to one another, and you show goodwill in your thoughts toward one another. In other words, regardless of how the other person's behaving, you always want to keep that person's true happiness in mind as you interact with that person. As the phrase says in the Pali, "both to that person's face and behind the person's back." All your actions that are going to have an impact on that person should be done with goodwill.

The fourth quality is generosity. When you gain something good, you want to share it with the other people around you. You don't hold it just for yourself. And you can see in society at large right now the problems caused by people who don't understand this principle. Some people just want to get, get, get, get, get, and they don't care about anybody else, and so the fabric of society breaks down. So as a place where we're practicing the Dhamma, we want to make sure that we do set a good example, so that whatever gains we get are shared.

The fifth quality is being equal in our virtue. For the monks this means that everybody adheres to all the precepts that the monks are supposed to adhere to. For the laypeople, it means the five and the eight precepts. We all hold that these are important qualities, and they form the basis of our interactions. In particular, this has to do with our speech: no lying, no

divisive speech, no harsh speech, no idle chatter. If we make sure that what we say is true, leads to harmony, is gentle, and is worth hearing, the community is going to live together a lot more peacefully, and it's going to be a lot more conducive for our practice.

Finally, there's commonality of our views. This is defined in terms of both levels of right view. On the one hand, we believe that our actions really do have consequences, and that the most important thing we can focus on is the skillfulness of our actions. We also hold in common the idea that the Buddha's teachings on suffering are really important, and that the fact that the Buddha focused on the issue of suffering and how to put an end to suffering is *the* most important issue in life.

Think about all the things he could have taught after his awakening. He had totally free rein to say anything he wanted to. But he chose this as *the* most important issue. So we want to try to understand *why* it was important, and then also understand what we can do to benefit from those teachings. If these are our views, and we hold them in common, then it's a lot easier for the community to live together.

As the Buddha said, you don't just pretend to hold things in common or pretend to be harmonious. Back in his days he said there are two types of community: a community that's based on bombast and a community that's based on counter-questioning. Bombast is just listening to beautiful words that the teacher has to say without really having to dig into what the words mean or how they might apply to you. Each person is free to interpret them as he or she likes. But it all gets very vague and very unfocused. If it's a community based basically on the agreement to disagree, that's going to develop cracks and divisions very quickly. No matter how much you may paper over the cracks, the community's not going to last.

This is why the Buddha encouraged that the monks question one another. Any place where you don't understand, you ask, "What is this? Why is this? What does this mean?" That way, the teachings are clear and *you're* clear enough so that you can practice them and gain results. Basically we're all on the same page.

Those are the qualities we want to develop as we live together, as we work together, as we encourage one another in the practice: the qualities of an admirable friend, the qualities of an amiable society.

That way, the fact that we've chosen to stay here for the three months actually will become conducive to our finding an end to suffering—so that our interactions with one another are helpful for one another for that purpose.

So try to keep these points in mind.