

Friends Inside

August 29, 2010

Tell yourself while you're meditating here that you're going to make friends with the breath—because that way, wherever you go you'll have a friend going with you. Whenever you need a sense of ease, a sense of nourishment, you can just turn to the breath. If you're on really good terms, the breath will provide that energy and nourishment for you.

To be good friends with another person, you have to take time to really know that person. And the same holds true with the breath: You have to listen to the breath and see what the body wants. Ask yourself, "What kind of breathing would feel really good right now?" Take a couple of good, long deep in-and-out breaths, and see how the body responds. Does it feel good? If it does, keep it up.

But that doesn't mean it's going to feel good all the time. After a while, the body will have had enough of that kind of breathing and it'll need something else. So you want to keep on top of it: keep watching, keep observant.

This is how you develop good friends. On the one hand, you spend a lot of time with them. On the other, you have to be very observant so that you really get to know them: What are their strengths? What are their weaknesses? Where are the areas you can trust them? Where are the areas where you can't trust them?

Because not everybody who's friendly and nice on the surface is going to be friendly and nice deep down. Not everybody who's fun to talk to is going to be someone you can really depend on.

In Thai they talk about having two kinds of friends: the friends that you eat with and the friends that would be willing to die for you. The friends you eat with may not necessarily be loyal all the way. So there are times when you have to test your friends to see if they're trustworthy. Ask questions. Notice what they do, what they think. Notice how they treat other people. Gradually, over time, you get a sense of who you can trust and who you can't.

It's the same with the breath. It takes time to really get to know the breath. Because as the mind gets more and more quiet, it begins to see things in the breath that it didn't see before.

You begin to realize that the breath is not just the sensation of air going in and out of the nose. Sometimes the breath can be the breath sensations in the chest. As you breathe in, the chest feels one way; as you breathe out, your chest feels another way.

You begin to realize that there's a sense of energy that flows through the whole

body each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out. Sometimes it flows nicely; sometimes it's blocked because you're tensing up someplace. You may be tensing your arm, you may be tensing your leg, or there may be some tension in your back. So make a survey to see what you can relax so that the breath can flow in and out every part of the body.

Get so that there's a sense of openness all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out. Even when the breath stops between the in-breath and the out-breath or between the out-breath and the in-breath, there's still a sense of openness and ease.

As you listen to the body's needs, as you notice what the body needs, then you get a sense of what kind of breathing is going to help meet those needs. That way, you and the breath become better and better friends, so that as soon as you want that sense of ease, all you have to do is just think about the breath, and there it is. It opens things up, gives you energy when you want energy, helps you relax when you want to relax.

And you can pose little questions. What's the breath like in the arm? What's the breath like in the legs? What kind of breathing does the body need right now? Sometimes you have to read your own body as to whether it's too tired or too energetic, and then you learn how to make adjustments.

This way, you become friends inside. And as the Buddha said, one of the most important things in life is who your friends are. If your friends are greedy and angry and deluded, you begin to pick up some of their habits. If all they see as important in the world is money and position and power and wealth, and those are the only people you know, then you're going to start thinking in those ways, too. It's going to be dangerous for you.

This is why the Buddha said he's a good friend to all meditators because he teaches them the path. Without his teaching us the path, would you have ever thought to sit down and close your eyes and focus on your breath that it would accomplish anything?

Very few people in the world realize that true happiness doesn't come from getting things or having nice friends. It comes from training the mind. Nice things and good friends are good, but your real happiness comes from within. That's why we work on the breath: so that we can have a real friend inside. The mind can be its own friend.

Because sometimes the mind can be your enemy. It thinks up things that are actually going to be bad for you. Yet you think, "This is my thought, so it must be what I want." But what you want is not necessarily always good for you.

This is why you have to watch your mind too, to see when it's a true friend and

when it's not.

Like that chant we had just now about friends who cheat you. Sometimes your mind cheats you. It says, "I'd like to do that," but then you do that and it gives you bad results. You end up unhappy as a result. Even though you thought it would be good, it's a case of the mind cheating you.

The mind that's good only in word: It promises you'll do something and then you don't do it.

The mind that flatters and cajoles: Flattery means just talking about how nice you are all the time. Even when you've made a mistake, the mind can say, "Ah, that was right, that was okay." You can't trust that kind of mind. It doesn't want to admit its mistakes, and if you don't admit your mistakes you're never going to learn.

And it's a companion in ruinous fun, the kind of fun that harms you, harms other people. Sometimes the mind says, "I'd like to say this," or "I'd like to do that." Then when you actually do it, it seems like fun at the time, but afterwards you realize, okay, you really did hurt somebody.

When the mind is thinking in those ways, it's being your enemy. So you've got to learn how to watch not only your breath, but also your mind.

The Buddha once taught his son that whenever you're planning to think about something, ask yourself, "What's really going to happen as a result?" If you think it's going to harm yourself or harm other people, you just don't do it. If it seems okay, go ahead and try. But while you're doing it, begin to notice, "Okay, what are the results that are actually coming out right now?" If it turns out that even though you didn't think there'd be any harm, you actually are causing harm either to yourself or to other people, you stop. If you don't see any harm, keep on with the action.

Then when the action is done, you reflect on the long-term results. Did it end up harming anybody? If so, you make up your mind not to do that anymore. If it was an action in word or deed, you go and talk it over with somebody you trust. Tell them what you did. Don't be afraid to tell people your mistakes. But you've got to choose somebody you really trust, someone who's wise. Talk it over with that person and you get his or her advice.

This is why being a good parent means that you're willing to listen to your child's mistakes and not jump all over the kid. But point out, okay, this is where it was a mistake, this is where it harmed somebody, and this is how you can avoid that mistake the next time around.

Once your trustworthy friend has given you that kind of advice, then you make up your mind that you're not going to make that mistake ever again.

It's in this way that the mind becomes its own best friend. It points you to worthwhile things. It's helpful. So as you train the mind, you're getting a good friend inside. As you work with the breath you're getting a good friend inside. And these are the friends that really mean the most, because they'll stay with you until you die. So it's good to spend time with them.

As I said, it takes time to really be friends with someone. You can't just walk up and say something nice or shake hands and be friends automatically. There are some people who are friendly in that way, but to be a true friend takes time. You have to be really observant; you really have to watch. This applies outside; it applies inside.

Right now we have a whole hour, so take this opportunity to learn to be really good friends with your breath and your mind. The more you're a friend with them, the more they'll have to offer you as well.