

Wholesome Friends

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation
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[[Master's Teachings](#)] As mundane beings, we really need to make friends with and cherish friends of good character, for they can have a positive influence on us, by encouraging us to do good, pointing out the errors we make, and preventing us from going astray when we are in the deep suffering of anguish and afflictions.

When we become afflicted and get confused about what to do with our life, we are like a traveler who loses his orientation and doesn't know which way to go. The way for him to get back on track is to quickly seek help from someone who can point out the right road. When he is given directions, he should really mindfully listen; otherwise he will soon get lost again and not be able to reach his destination.

In life, we need wholesome friends beside us. Not only can they provide guidance, support and encouragement; they also set a good example for us. The following story will help us better understand this.

One day, when the Buddha and his disciples were out on a journey, they saw a string on the path. The Buddha asked one of his disciples to pick it up, and the disciple tentatively did so with his thumb and forefinger. Seeing this, the Buddha asked why he did not hold the string more firmly. He replied honestly, "Buddha, it really stinks." "Why does the string stink?" the Buddha asked. "Perhaps it was once used to tie fish," the disciple guessed, "and the bad smell came from the fish."

"The fish is long gone," the Buddha noted, "so why does this string still smell so bad?" "It must have been used to tie the fish for long enough to absorb the smell," the disciple offered. The Buddha agreed, "The fish and the string were once together, but are now apart, yet the string still has the smell of the fish on it. You can think about this more."

Continuing on their journey, they soon saw a piece of wrapping on the path. The Buddha asked the same disciple to pick it up. The disciple did so with a smile on his face. "You seem very happy to find this wrapping," the Buddha observed. "Yes, Buddha. It smells pleasant, like sandalwood." The Buddha smiled back and said, "It's a piece of wrapping. Why do you speak of sandalwood?" "Well," replied the disciple, "it must have been used to wrap sandalwood for it to smell like sandalwood. And although it isn't used to wrap the wood any more, its scent lingers."

The Buddha seized the moment to offer a teaching, "Yes. We human beings are exactly like the string and the wrapping; if we often mix with wayward friends, it will be hard not to be influenced by them. If we are surrounded by wholesome friends, we will have them as good examples to follow."

I remember a case that illustrated this when I visited Dalin Tzu Chi Hospital sometime ago. Entering the busy lobby, I saw a young man sitting in a wheelchair, accompanied by a Tzu Chi

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volunteer who seemed very kind and gentle. Walking toward them I found that the young man's body was covered with tattoos, and the pattern extended to his hands and palms.

I was very curious about why he had been admitted to the hospital, so I bent down to meet his eyes and speak to him. It turned out he had been injured in a fight after getting drunk with some friends. I patted his hand in encouragement, and seeing the openness and sincerity in his eyes, I told him, "You are still young and have your whole life ahead of you. Do you really want to spend your precious time that way, getting drunk with friends and getting into fights?" I encouraged him to think on it and told him, "It would be wonderful if the next time we meet, it turned out that you were there as a volunteer helping others." He nodded and gave me a timid smile. I smiled back and said, "Best wishes to you."

One day, sometime later, I saw him on a Da Ai TV program, being introduced as a dedicated Tzu Chi recycling volunteer. He told the interviewer about the episode in the Dalin Tzu Chi Hospital. He had taken in my words wholeheartedly and after receiving great encouragement by the Tzu Chi volunteers in the hospital, he was inspired to lead a more meaningful life.

When he was discharged from the hospital, it wasn't easy to begin anew. Knowing this, he kept in close contact with Tzu Chi volunteers and started volunteering at a Tzu Chi recycling station. He spent whatever time he could there, turning down his old friends' invitations to join them in their activities. With the great support and encouragement from fellow volunteers at the recycling station his conviction to change was firm, and he gave up smoking, drinking, and drugs. He even established a daily habit of copying out Jing Si Aphorisms and would give the aphorisms to his old friends. He ended up influencing some of them for the better.

This young man was greatly touched and positively influenced by the unconditional love and care of many Tzu Chi volunteers. His experience encouraged him to take the initiative in helping others get back on track, as he had learned how important it is to have wholesome friends.

Drawing close to friends of good character, we enwrap ourselves in wholesome influences. We will be inspired to reflect on our thoughts and behaviors and to cultivate ourselves to become better people. Indeed, wholesome friends are like wise mentors to students, a guide at the crossroads, fragrant sandalwood to a wrapping sheet, and Dharma to our afflicted mind.

From Dharma Master Cheng Yen's Talks
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