

On Spiritual Friendship 2016

From *When You Greet Me I Bow: Notes and Reflections from a Life in Zen* by Norman Fischer

ONCE THE BUDDHA'S disciple Ananda asked him about friendship. Ananda knew that having good and encouraging friends was very important for the path. He even wondered whether having good friends is half the path. "No, Ananda," the Buddha told him, "having good friends isn't half of the Holy Life. Having good friends is the whole of the Holy Life."

The Meghiya Sutta is my favorite Pali text about friendship. It tells the story of the eager young monk Meghiya, who wanted to practice meditation alone in an especially peaceful and beautiful mango grove. But Meghiya's meditation was anything but peaceful and beautiful. To his shock, he found his mind a snarl of malicious, lustful, and confused thoughts—probably because his practice was too self-involved. When Meghiya rushed back to report his confusing experience, Buddha was not surprised. He took the opportunity to give Meghiya what he must have hoped was a relevant teaching.

"Five things induce release of heart and lasting peace," the Buddha told him. "First, a lovely intimacy with good friends. Second, virtuous conduct. Third, frequent conversation that inspires and encourages practice. Fourth, diligence, energy, and enthusiasm for the good. And fifth, insight into impermanence."

Then, for Meghiya's further benefit, and to cement the point, the Buddha goes through the list again, this time preceding each of the other items with the first: "When there is a lovely intimacy between friends, then there is virtuous conduct," and so on. In other words, friendship is the most important element in the spiritual path. Everything else naturally flows from it.

I appreciate the truth and beauty of this teaching more and more as the years go by. To be able to practice with good friends for five, ten, twenty, thirty, or forty years is a special joy. So much comes of it. As you ripen and age, you appreciate the nobility and uniqueness of each friend, the twists and turns of each life, and the gift each has given you. After a while you begin attending the funerals of your dearest friends, and each loss seems to increase the gravity and preciousness of your own life and makes the remaining friendships even more important.

When long friendships with good people along the path of spiritual practice are a central feature of your life, it is almost impossible—just as the Buddha says—for

spiritual qualities conducive to awakening not to ripen. For those on the bodhisattva path, loving and appreciating your friends, even when they are difficult, as they sometimes are, is the path's fullness and completion. Friendship ripens and deepens our capacity for compassion.

These days we talk a lot about "relationships." The word usually suggests romantic relationship, but we might also mean our connections with parents, children, siblings, and colleagues. But we don't hear so much about friendship.

Yet friendship may be the most wonderful form of human relationship. Emerson called it "the masterpiece of Nature." That we and our friends can communicate intimately with one another and support each other unselfishly come what may—this truly is a masterpiece of nature, and one of our brightest human achievements. It is also, I believe, our best hope in troubled times. When things are tough, having a trusted friend to help shoulder the burden makes survival not only infinitely more possible, but also much lovelier.

In his essay on friendship, Emerson writes, "The laws of friendship are great, austere, and eternal, of one web with the laws of nature and of morals... but we seek our friends not sacredly but with an adulterated passion." 1

In other words, most friendship falls short of the spiritual friendship the Buddha is referring to in the Meghiya Sutta and Emerson takes as his ideal. We are looking for something from the other person—entertainment, sympathy, some kind of support. Unable to stand the fullness of the other, we don't want to discover and offer our own.

"Almost all people descend to meet," Emerson says. "What a disappointment is actual society!" Real friendship, he says, includes the depth of solitude of each of us. Real friendship is profound. Real friendship is always spiritual.

Perhaps Emerson is a bit too idealistic. I feel that ordinary friendship is good, as far as it goes. We come together out of mutual interest, attraction, or social necessity. We need people to talk to and to play with. This is normal and healthy. There's joy in it. And we do care about one another.

Yet spiritual friendship—the friendship the Buddha called the whole of the Holy Life and that Emerson considered true friendship—is different. "

In the Buddhist path, spiritual friendship takes place in the context of community. Life in a sangha is built on teaching, dedicated meditation practice, and a shared commitment to going beyond self-interest and personal need.

Spiritual friendship is less about personal connection than it is about helping one another grow in faith and goodness—to realize, as we say in Zen, our true nature. Sangha friendships are forged and grounded in silence. This is especially true in the Soto Zen tradition I practice, which emphasizes meditation as a shared activity over a long period of time.

In ordinary friendships we might connect right away, with lots to share and learn from one another. In sangha life, friendship develops much more slowly. It may take years to share backgrounds and personal stories. Maybe we never do.

But in the meantime, we slowly get to know one another intimately in the silent space of the meditation hall. We know each other's hands and feet and facial expressions, how we walk and stand and sit. We see the suffering and the triumph expressed in body language and facial expression. We share the sound of our voices joined in chanting. We hear our groans, our fatigue, the ways we cope when we don't have our usual social strategies available.

Often the most unlikely people show up in Buddhist communities, people who under ordinary circumstances would never meet and spend weeks, maybe years, together. Yet this disparate group of people manages to find harmony, commonality, and deep mutual appreciation despite their differences. They come to share something more fundamental than their interests and affinities.

It's not unusual to be in a community with someone who pushes all your buttons. Exactly the sort of person you'd avoid at all costs in ordinary life will appear in your sangha. There he or she is—your father or sister, childhood nemesis, or ancient school or workplace enemy—sitting right across from you in the meditation hall. You will have to deal with this person in ways you never would have if left to your own devices. And eventually, they become a valued friend.

Emerson and the Buddha both believe that spiritual friendship requires two elements: truth and tenderness. Spiritual friends are honest with one another. They have courage, they take risks, and they speak from the standpoint of truthfulness, not expediency. When my friends go astray, at least as far as I can see, I must speak up. And I expect the same from them as well.

Yet tenderness is equally important. Dogen writes of the power of kind speech: “Speak to sentient beings as you would to a baby” —speak with that much tender love and sweetness. I can receive a true friend’s criticism with loving-kindness because it comes from a loving heart seeking only my benefit and well-being. And if I find I am lacking in tenderness, speaking what I consider to be truth out of defensiveness or separateness, I have to discern this. I have to work on healing the causes within myself of this breach of kindness. I need to keep my peace until I am ready to speak with love.

We often think of spiritual teachers as parents or authority figures. Maybe we think of them as coaches or trainers. But in the Mahayana sutras, teachers are referred to as kalyanamitras—spiritual friends. They are people who see us as we are, love us anyway, and care absolutely for our ultimate welfare.

A teacher’s job is to model spiritual friendship. While at first we may be intimidated by the teacher, imagining them to be far more spiritually developed than we are, as time goes on the teacher transforms from a scary boss to a trusted friend. And over time in community life we come to have such inspiring friendships with others who support and love us in the same way. No matter what their background or personal style, anyone with enough proximity in sincere practice becomes a sangha friend. You will treat them with full respect and affectionate regard, and they will treat you the same way.

The Buddha thought of the sangha as a harmonious group of spiritual friends looking out for one another’s welfare, living together in full equality for the spiritual development of each one. The early Buddhist sangha was radical in its insistence that anyone, prince or pauper, could join and be fully accepted and equally loved. Rank was established solely on the basis of seniority, without regard to wealth, social position, or even skill in practice.

To this day, Buddhism retains this emphasis on equality and inclusion. To be sure, this ideal isn’t always practiced very well. As is well known, women were and still are not included as equals with men in nearly all forms of Asian Buddhism. Convert Buddhist communities in the West are far from free of sexism and are overwhelmingly made up of white middle-class people. We notice this, hope that it will change, and work to make it happen. But it will take time, and many more women teachers and teachers of color.

Still, even as things stand now, we can rejoice in the wholesomeness and inclusivity of our sangha friendships. We can depend on them to support us in

hard times. Sometimes we might expect or ask for more emotional or material support from our community than we seem to be getting. But the more we are “established in our practice, the more we understand that the support our spiritual friends provide is the most fundamental and the most healing kind: gentle encouragement to awaken.

This is the seventy-eighth case of the Blue Cliff Record, a classical compendium of Zen stories:

In olden times there were sixteen bodhisattvas. When it was time for monks to wash, the bodhisattvas filed in to bathe. Suddenly they awakened to the basis of water. All you Chan worthies, how will you understand their saying, “Subtle feeling reveals illumination, and we have achieved the station of sons of Buddha”? 2

In big Chan monasteries of China, there were no private bathrooms. The monastics went to a common bathhouse to bathe and use the toilet. The schedule provided for bath time, when everyone filed into the bathhouse to take a bath together in the big tub. We still practice like this at Tassajara Zen Mountain Center. Bath time is late afternoon, after work and before evening service and dinner. Entering the bathhouse, we bow at the shrine and recite the bathing verse. Enshrined on the bathhouse altar is a picture of the sixteen bodhisattvas in the bath. We bathe silently and then put on our robes for service.

This is the only Buddhist story I am aware of in which a fairly large group of people realized awakening together, as good spiritual friends. Sitting chest-deep in the tub, they must have looked around at one another with beautiful smiles of acknowledgment, saying, no doubt, nothing at all.

Mostly we think of awakening as an individual affair. The teachings can make it sound like that. But in Buddhism we practice together, awaken together, and understand together. Together we go forth to do what needs to be done.

In the Mahayana Buddhist teachings, the bodhisattva clearly sees that no one can be happy or content while others are suffering. There is no individual awakening. No one can be happy, no one can be enlightened, unless everyone is happy and enlightened. Self and other are not two truly different existing entities. They are mutually conditioned positions or concepts.

What we call a person is in reality a series of interactions and relationships. There is no atomized, freestanding person. This is completely obvious to the bodhisattvas. That is why love, compassion, and friendship are at the center of the bodhisattva path. That is why the buddha of the coming era is called Maitreya, the buddha of the practice of friendship.

In his essay on friendship, sixteenth-century French writer Michel de Montaigne compares friendship to all other human relationship and finds it superior. Siblings usually fight with one another. Spouses are too emotionally entangled to support each other disinterestedly. Parents and children are too blinded by the psychological weight of their connection to see one another with fully open appreciation. But friends, he writes, share one mind, one heart, and one will. They are for one another even more than a person can be for themselves. You can trust your friends to look after your interests more than you can trust yourself, he writes. Nothing is more intimate, nothing more lovely, than friendship.

Montaigne's essay is all the more poignant because in it he tells us that he is not merely theorizing. He is writing in testimony and memorial to the most cherished friendship of his own life—his relationship with the writer Estienne de la Boétie, whose death has left him “feeling like half a person.”

In this essay about friendship, I too am giving testimony and memorial to my own great friend of more than forty years, the late Rabbi Alan Lew. We met on the first day of classes at the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop in 1968, before either of us had begun our spiritual practice. After Iowa we moved, independently, to California, where we practiced Zen together for a decade under our teacher, Sojun Mel Weitsman.

When Alan went on to become a rabbi we continued our spiritual friendship, founding a Jewish meditation center (that I still direct, in his name and memory) in San Francisco. For all those years, Alan supported, loved, and respected me more than I supported, loved, and respected myself. His practice and loving heart was, and remains, my inspiration.

In his essay, Montaigne argues that deep friendship is necessarily exclusive—it is only possible, he says, to have one such dear friend—and that exclusivity is its essence. But that isn't the case with spiritual friendship. We can have many dear spiritual friends. Probably the more such friends we have, the more we are capable of having—and the more enriched our lives will become.

Still, with luck, we may have, as I have had, a spiritual relationship that is uniquely precious to us. In an uncanny way, my friendship with Rabbi Lew was not exclusive. Our intimacy was one in which others were always welcome. Because we were such good friends, others were encouraged and inspired to be good friends too.

This is the nature of spiritual friendship. It never depends on division or discrimination between people. Love can't be exclusive. It is boundless, empty, open, and free. Spiritual friendship is too. No doubt this is an ideal we can never completely realize. But I believe it was what the Buddha had in mind when he taught that there is no element of the path more precious or more important than spiritual friendship."

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