

Spiritual Friendship

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on
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While I was practicing at the Forest Refuge last month there were 28 other people in residence doing their own retreats. We didn't speak to each other, at least not until the last day when those of us who were leaving did. And I didn't know any of them. Yet each of them became a friend and support for me.

When my inspiration and effort began to lag, I might walk down a hall or around a corner or look out a window, and I would see someone diligently doing their practice. And so I would be encouraged by their example to continue with my own. At other times it was simply inspiring to look around the meditation hall or the dining hall and reflect that all of these people were dedicated to living in a skillful way, to making the Buddha's teachings real in their lives and to finding their way to greater equanimity and compassion.

And I find I feel the same way sitting here with you. I feel grateful for your presence here and for your practice.

These experiences bring to mind the Buddha's words that "**... in regard to external factors, I do not perceive another single factor so helpful as good friendship...**"

[Itivuttaka 1.17, trans. John Ireland]

So I thought I'd explore this topic of spiritual friendship a bit today. And mostly I just want to share some quotes that I think point to what is important about spiritual friendship.

There's no better place to start than the well-known quote from the *Samyutta Nikāya*, the Connected Discourses, that says:

**"...the Venerable Ānanda approached the Blessed One ... and said to him:
"Venerable sir, this is half of the holy life, that is, good friendship, good companionship, good comradeship."**

[The Buddha responded:] **"Not so, Ānanda! Not so, Ānanda! This is the entire holy life, Ānanda, that is, good friendship, good companionship, good comradeship. When a bhikkhu has a good friend, a good companion, a good comrade, it is to be expected that he will develop and cultivate the Noble Eightfold Path."** [SN 45.2, trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi, {bracketed text inserted by PLJ for easier comprehension}]

Ajahn Sundara, a nun in the Thai Forest Tradition of Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Sumedho, gives us some sense of how this works, how good friendship helps us to develop and cultivate the attitudes, intentions and actions that lead to spiritual growth, that lead to the development of the Noble Eightfold Path. She said:

"The refuge in sangha...is the refuge in noble friendship — *kalyānamitta*. It symbolizes the community of men and women, ordained or living in the world, who have taken refuge in living wisely and compassionately, in accord with the Dhamma. They take refuge in harmlessness, loving-kindness and respect for all living beings. These are people who have a moral conscience. They are aware when they are acting foolishly or harmfully. This refuge symbolizes the purity of the human heart. ... it's a refuge in that in us which is good, wholesome, compassionate and wise."

[Ajahn Sundara, "Taking Refuge," *Friends on the Path*, Amaravati Publications (epub), 2011, p. 116]

And this long quote from Stephen Batchelor's *Buddhism Without Beliefs* fills out our sense of the way spiritual friendship operates.

"Dharma practice is not just a question of cultivating resolve and integrity in the privacy of our hearts. It is embodied in friendships. Our practice is nourished, sustained, and challenged through ongoing contact with friends and mentors who seek to realize the dharma in their own lives." [Stephen Batchelor, *Buddhism without Beliefs*, New York: Riverhead Books (Penguin), 1977, p. 49]

"In terms of dharma practice, a true friend is more than just someone with whom we share common values and who accepts us for what we are. Such a friend is someone whom we can trust to refine our understanding of what it means to live, who can guide us when we're lost and help us find the way along a path, who can assuage our anguish through the reassurance of his or her presence." [Stephen Batchelor, *Buddhism without Beliefs*, New York: Riverhead Books (Penguin), 1977, p. 50]

"While such friendships occur naturally between peers with similar aspirations and interests, certain crucial friendships are also formed with those we respect for having achieved a maturity and understanding greater than our own. Such people offer guidance and reassurance through each aspect of their being. The

way they move their body and hold our gaze with their eyes, the cadences of their speech, their response to sudden provocation, the way they rest a ease and attend to daily chores: all these things tell us as much as they tell us in words. And we too are called upon to respond in such ways. In this kind of relationship we are no mere recipients of knowledge. We are invited to interact, to challenge and be challenged.

"These friends are teachers in the sense that they are skilled in the art of learning from every situation. We do not seek perfection in these friends but rather heartfelt acceptance of human imperfection. Nor omniscience but an ironic admission of ignorance. We should be wary of being seduced by charismatic purveyors of Enlightenment. For true friends seek not to coerce us, even gently and reasonably, into believing what we are unsure of. These friends are like midwives, who draw forth what is waiting to be born. Their task is not to make themselves indispensable but redundant.

"These friends are our vital link to past and future. For they too were nurtured through friendships, in many cases with those who are dead. Dharma practice has survived through a series of friendships that stretches back through history—ultimately to Gautama himself. Through friendship we are entrusted with a delicate thread that joins past with future generations. These fragile, intimate moments are ones of indebtedness and responsibility. Dharma practice flourishes only when such friendships flourish. It has no other means of transmission.

"And these friends are our vital links to a community that lives and struggles today. Through them we belong to a culture of awakening, a matrix of friendships, that expands in ever wider circles to embrace not only 'Buddhists' but all who are actually or potentially committed to the values of dharma practice." [Stephen Batchelor, *Buddhism without Beliefs*, New York: Riverhead Books (Penguin), 1977, pp. 50-51]

And, giving the Buddha the last word, speaking of spiritual friendship he said:

"Bhikkhus, this is the forerunner and precursor of the rising of the sun, that is, the dawn. So too, bhikkhus, for a bhikkhu this [that is, spiritual friendship] is the forerunner and precursor for the arising of the Noble Eightfold Path." [SN 45.49, trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi. {Bracketed text inserted by PLJ for easier comprehension}]

So friends, this is offered for your reflection. And I look forward to any comments or questions you may have.