

A Reflection on Spiritual Friendship

Offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 07-22-13.

As some of you know, I've been exploring the theme of spiritual friendship recently. Today I'd like to share a further reflection on it.

In the famous exchange with his attendant, Ānanda, the Buddha said

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

What is it about good spiritual friendship that it could be called the entire holy life?

Witnessing our friends' commitment to making the values of generosity, goodwill, compassion, joy for others' good fortune and equanimity real in their own lives can inspire our faith in the practice, encouraging us when our inspiration or effort is lagging. Seeing and hearing how training the mind and heart through meditation and working with the Five Precepts has transformed our friends lives can encourage us to make the effort ourselves. So good friends can, through their simple being, serve as models for us.

Equally important, our good friends (*kalyāna mitta*) are the people who will tell us when we're heading in the wrong direction as well as praise us when we are being skillful. Our good friends are the people who have the courage and tact to help us see our blind spots, the shadow side of our characters.

Pema Chödrön, the Tibetan Buddhist nun, has been a good friend for many of us. In book after book she has pointed us towards seeing and opening to what is difficult, to our actions and attitudes that are embarrassing, inconvenient, uncomfortable and unpleasant to know. As she notes so often and so eloquently, it is the practice of

opening to these "places that scare you" that actually leads us to greater freedom.

Gil Fronsdal has pointed out that when we practitioners get together creating communities we create cultures that reflect not only our ideals, but also our shadow sides. Gil notes that

A function of Buddhist practice is to clarify and draw out the shadow, bringing it into balance with the light. Without honest practice, a culture's shadow can remain hidden.

—"The Jewel of the Sangha" (The Issue at Hand, 2001)

Our good friends are those inconvenient people who make us uncomfortable by pointing out when something unskillful has occurred in our communities. Just as our individual lives depend on our good friends for a fulfilling spiritual life, our communities depend on them as well.

So a big part of our practice is actually to find good companions on the path who inspire and support our own work and whom we feel we can trust to point out the places we don't want to look. Sometimes good spiritual friends can be a joy; sometimes they can be a pain. But without them our spiritual lives would be incomplete.

I'm grateful for each of you being a spiritual friend.