

Spiritual Friendship, Part 2

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on
07-28-2013.

In my early years on this path I had one very important friend who was also on the path, someone who at the time was a little ahead of me. This friendship was a great support and encouragement to me. Over time a sangha formed around us and I developed other friendships. But this one person remained my key spiritual friend.

And then irresolvable differences arose between us and I felt the only thing I could do was to leave that sangha. So for a while I felt I was largely without spiritual friends.

But over the last few years I've been fortunate to develop some new friendships and to renew some old ones. This has been a great source of joy for me.

So the topic of spiritual friendship feels especially rich and important to me. And I'd like to spend more time with it today.

To provide a context for this continuing discussion, I want to start with something I've shared a few times in the last months. The Buddha said:

"... in regard to external factors, I do not perceive another single factor so helpful as good friendship for a learner" [i.e., one who is not fully awakened]...

— Itivuttaka 1.17, John Ireland trans.

So today let's see what the Buddha has to say about how we know when someone is a candidate to be a good friend on the path, and how we can practice being good friends with others.

In the sutta "Advice to Sigālaka," (DN 31) the Buddha offered guidance to a young man about friends. First he spoke about people who may act as friends but aren't.

" Young man, be aware of these four enemies disguised as friends: the taker, the talker, the flatterer, and the reckless companion.

"The taker can be identified by four things: by only taking, asking for a lot while giving little, performing duty out of fear, and offering service in order to

gain something.

"The talker can be identified by four things: by reminding of past generosity, promising future generosity, mouthing empty words of kindness, and protesting personal misfortune when called on to help.

"The flatterer can be identified by four things: by supporting both bad and good behavior indiscriminately, praising you to your face, and putting you down behind your back.

"The reckless companion can be identified by four things: by accompanying you in drinking, roaming around at night, partying, and gambling."

(DN 31.15-19, John Kelly et al. trans.)

One of the things that strikes me about this list is that someone who relates to us in these ways might be a lot of fun to hang out with initially. But they aren't going to help us have stable and ethical lives, which is a pre-requisite for further spiritual development. And when we're truly in need, it is doubtful that they would be there to rely on.

The Buddha also offers advice on the characteristics of good friends.

"Young man, be aware of these four good-hearted friends: the helper, the friend who endures in good times and bad, the mentor, and the compassionate friend.

"The helper can be identified by four things: by protecting you when you are vulnerable, and likewise your wealth, being a refuge when you are afraid, and in various tasks providing double what is requested."

(DN 31.21-22, John Kelly et al. trans.)

So a good spiritual friend can be relied upon to protect us, reassure and encourage us and to be generous with us.

"The enduring friend can be identified by four things: by telling you secrets, guarding your own secrets closely, not abandoning you in misfortune, and even dying for you."

(DN 31.23, John Kelly et al. trans.)

Several things stand out to me about these qualities. The first is the quality of intimacy. The enduring friend tells you some of his or her secrets. They make themselves vulnerable to you and invest their trust in you. So good friendship isn't just a one-way street. There's also that quality of protection once again. A good friend keeps your secrets. He or she doesn't use your secrets for his or her own advantage, either in the world or for any form

of self-puffery. There's the quality of reliability. A good friend isn't a fair weather friend. He or she is someone you can count on when life gets stormy. And there is this last quality of "even dying for you." This one raises the bar quite a bit and I'm not sure how many of us would literally die for a friend. But if we take it metaphorically, we can understand it in other ways. Such as being willing to let our own self, our self-concept, our self-image, our social standing and other things we hold dear, die in order to stand by our friend. To be willing to let go of these things for the sake of the friend's well being.

"The mentor can be identified by four things: by restraining you from wrong-doing, guiding you towards good actions, telling you what you ought to know, and showing you the path to heaven."

(DN 31.24, John Kelly et al. trans.)

This description of a good friend who is a mentor reminds me of that story Ajahn Chah, the 20th century Thai master, told about teaching. Someone once complained about him being inconsistent because at one time he would tell people to do one thing and at another he'd tell them to do something else. He commented that it was like standing in the middle of a road and trying to guide someone walking down the road. If they veered too far to the left he would yell out "Go right." And if they veered too far to the right he would yell out "Go left." Until they got to their destination.

And a good friend who is a mentor is someone who is willing and able to talk with you about the Dhamma, both the teachings and what they have come to directly know about the way things are.

"The compassionate friend can be identified by four things: by not rejoicing in your misfortune, delighting in your good fortune, preventing others from speaking ill of you, and encouraging others who praise your good qualities."

(DN 31.25, John Kelly et al. trans.)

To use a more contemporary phrase, then, a good friend is someone who "has your back," someone who "keeps you covered."

(DN 31 16-19, 21-25, Sigalovada Sutta: The Buddha's Advice to Sigalaka, translated from the Pali by John Kelly, Sue Sawyer, and Victoria Yareham, © 2005-2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.31.0.ksw0.html>, retrieved 07/15/2013)

So these are some of the qualities we can look for in our spiritual friends and qualities we can try to offer to our friends.

The Buddha offers us additional advice in the Numerical Discourses. He speaks of the way our spiritual friends, especially those who are further along in their development, can serve as role models and supports for us.

"And what is good friendship? Here, in whatever village or town a clansman lives, he associates with householders or their sons—whether young but of mature virtue, or old and of mature virtue—who are accomplished in faith, virtuous behavior, generosity, and wisdom; he converses with them and engages in discussions with them. Insofar as they are accomplished in faith, he emulates them with respect to their accomplishment in faith; insofar as they are accomplished in virtuous behavior, he emulates them with respect to their accomplishment in virtuous behavior; insofar as they are accomplished in generosity, he emulates them with respect to their accomplishment in generosity; insofar as they are accomplished in wisdom, he emulates them with respect to their accomplishment in wisdom. This is called good friendship."

(AN 8.54, trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi)

So the age of the person isn't important. It is how virtuous their actions are, whether those actions are thoughts, words or deeds. And the Buddha encourages us to emulate these people in terms of any of these particular skillful actions.

I think it is equally important that we reflect on the impact that our own skillful behavior may have on others. If they have the opportunity to witness us handling a situation with a degree of impeccability, with generosity and open-heartedness, that may affect how they respond in the future. And because we normally tend to focus on our imperfections, we should also take some time periodically to reflect on and appreciate when we've acted in skillful ways and the impact that has on our own mind-states as well as on others.

As I indicated with my own story at the beginning of the talk, spiritual friendships can at times be problematic, at least until we and our friends are fully awakened. What seems crucial in these situations is for each of the persons in the friendship to be fully committed to seeing their own shadow side, the parts of their lives where greed, hatred and delusion still dominate. We all have this deeply in-grained tendency to stay where we feel comfortable. So there has to be a deep commitment to knowing and integrating what is true. This requires a great deal of honesty with oneself, but also a willingness to hear others' perspectives about oneself and to challenge one's own deeply held beliefs. If

there's an openness to this and a willingness to meet each other with goodwill, then there is reason to hope that differences can be worked out.

So I'd like to close today with these verses from the Dhammapada. I'm offering them in reverse order:

~~But~~ if for company you cannot find a wise and prudent friend,
 one who leads a good life,
 then, like a king who leaves behind a conquered kingdom
 or a lone elephant in the elephant forest,
 you should go your own way alone.

[but] If for company you find a wise and prudent friend,
 one who leads a good life,
 you should overcome all impediments
 and keep his company, joyously and mindfully.

(Achārya Buddhārakkhita, *The Dhammapada: The Buddha's Path of Wisdom*, Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1996, vs. 329-328.)