

Spiritual Friendship Talk

GFR Retreat, Sept 2024

My talk was intended to be:

- How is Spiritual Friendship different from Ordinary Friendship?”
- But realizing that everyone’s talk was essentially that!
- We’re all talking about the same thing, through lens of our own practice

My reframe:

- Sharing my reflections and musings over the years
- as I try to understand spiritual friendship really is

Start by sharing a memorable experience about spiritual friendship in the Sangha

- Outlying Sanghas retreat held every January on MLK weekend
- Started in 2010, and has been running every year since
- Over 14 years, people started to get to know each other,
- And it developed a momentum and culture of sharing, caring, and mutual support.
 - a. This one was on the theme of Spiritual Friendship
- Even first-time attendees got swept up into the vibe

One year, we had a major snowstorm hit on Saturday.

- Several inches of snow fell in 24 hours
- We had already arrived, had all the food we needed, and each other’s company
- so we just hunkered down into retreat mode, stepped outside time/spac
- As one of the team, didn’t have time to think about digging out my car

When I went out to look on Sunday afternoon, a bunch of people had already dug all the cars out!

- And cleared walkways between Aryaloka and Akashaloka
- Nobody on the team asked for it, or organized it.
- Someone spontaneously started it, and others joined in.
- Memory has stayed with me, a magical feeling of oneness and community

Beautiful example of people stepping forward and doing what needed to get done to help each other out

- Never found out who did it, it just got done
- I thought, “what a beautiful expression of Sangha in action!”

Very much like the Culagosingha Sutta (Ashokashri mentioned)
Buddha visits three monks: Anuruddha, Nandiya, Kimbila

Buddha asks them, “I hope, Anuruddha, that you are all living in concord, with mutual appreciation, without disputing, blending like milk and water, viewing each other with kindly eyes.”

and continues: “how do you live thus?”

“Venerable sir, as to that, whichever of us returns first from the village with almsfood prepares the seats, sets out the water for drinking and for washing, and puts the refuse bucket in its place. Whichever of us returns last eats any food left over, if he wishes; otherwise he throws it away where there is no greenery or drops it into water where there is no life. He puts away the seats and the water for drinking and for washing. He puts away the refuse bucket after washing it and he sweeps out the refectory. Whoever notices that the pots of water for drinking, washing, or the latrine are low or empty takes care of them. If they are too heavy for him, he calls someone else by a signal of the hand and they move it by joining hands, but because of this we do not break out into speech. But every five days we sit together all night discussing the Dhamma. That is how we abide diligent, ardent, and resolute.”

Beautiful description of Sangha and mutually supportive, spiritual friendship.
But there something more going on than the words and description ...

But then there is another Sutta: Upaddha sutta (Amala mentioned)

Ānanda: “Sir, good friends, companions, and associates are half the spiritual life.”

Buddha: “Not so, Ānanda! Not so, Ānanda! Good friends, companions, and associates are the whole of the spiritual life.

Put the Suttas side-by-side, begs the question:

- When Buddha praised three monks for taking care of each other’s practical needs,
- He surely didn’t mean THIS was the whole of the spiritual life
 - There’s more going on here than what’s described in the story itself
- Clearly there is something much more implied in his statement.

This is the question I wanted to understand

- What exactly is spiritual friendship beyond caring for each other’s needs?
 - Culagosingha Sutta scenario could very well describe any cooperative group or family.
 - Not necessarily an explicitly SPIRITUAL friendships
 - How is spiritual friendship different from other kinds of secular friendships?
 - This question came up in Outlying Sanghas Retreat
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One is shared commitment to higher ideals.

- Commitment to self-development,
 - Working to practice precepts,
 - having friends who can provide feedback.
 - Mirror back to us our successes and stumbles.
 - Supporting each other by cheering each other on
 - Celebrating wins together.
 - Rock-tumbler effect
 - But I always knew there had to be something more
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A clue in Bhante's talk "A Case of Dysentery" (1982).

- He talks about the very close friendship between the Buddha and Ananda
- he was his personal assistant
- Always by his side
- In a relationship of unfailing mutual kindness

Bhante asks, "Why does a Buddha need a friend?"

- Doesn't need support to live up to higher ideals.
- Doesn't need feedback / rock tumbler
- It's clear he wasn't just an assistant or sidekick.
 - It was a deep, deep friendship that lasted for 20 years.
 - At Buddha's death, he wept, saying "he who was so kind."
 - Not "he who was so wise," or "he who was my teacher."

Bhante goes on to answer his own question as follows:

"The enlightenment experience is not self-contained in a one-sided sort of way. The enlightenment experience itself contains an element of what we might call communication. It contains, therefore, an element of friendship. Of spiritual friendship, that is to say, transcendental friendship, or friendship of the highest conceivable level.

"This perhaps is the significance of the Buddha having a personal attendant, having a constant companion. There was surely no question of his keeping up his dignity as a Buddha. And he was not some kind of spiritual valet, cum private secretary. The fact that he is in attendance, as the translator has it, represents the fact that there exists within the enlightenment experience, within the heart of reality, an element of communication. An element of spiritual friendship."

Bhante is saying if we can get a taste of what spiritual friendship is,

- it will give us a taste of enlightenment
- True spiritual friendship is an expression of enlightenment

So how do we do that? What is “transcendental friendship”?’

This is the heart of what I’ve been trying to understand.

- Transcendental means something that goes beyond our normal, ordinary, understanding of our physical human experience
- something that takes us outside of our usual way of perceiving, thinking about, and interacting with our world.
- Said to be something that can’t be described in words and concepts.
- So how do we even begin to understand something like that?

Let me trace my reflections on this.

Common misperception of enlightenment, awakening, transcendental

- I’ve certainly fallen into that trap many times!
- Thinking of it as “higher“, “better“, more spacious, pleasurable, desirable

Here’s the misperception:

- We equate enlightenment with perfection
 - (In the human sense of the term),
 - not as an ideal to inspire us forward, but a goal we measure ourselves against
 - And we always fall WAY WAY short

We imagine an enlightened being as someone who

- Is always calm, never needs to speak up for themselves
- Never gets into conflicts or difficult relationships
- Doesn’t experience painful emotions, whether physical or emotional
 - Like shame, fear
- Has completely gotten past all things difficult and unpleasant
- Floats in blissful state of metta, total mindfulness, and permanent spaciousness!
- And when we don’t, we are being “bad Buddhists”!

But I think that is a misperception.

- Leads to us setting us up with impossible goals,
- Makes awakening seem like an impossibly distant thing that I can’t relate to

But let’s not forget:

- The Buddha had many enemies who were out to get him!
- He experienced extreme pain as he was dying.
- And after his death, many of his disciples (many who were enlightened) wept
- Being enlightened doesn’t mean we’re free from these things!

I think awakening is not as impossibly far away as we might think

- I think it’s when we step away from our likes, dislikes, wants, don’t wants

- Our ideas of how things should be
- Personal agendas, grasping, and so forth
- And meet the moment as the pure being that we are by nature

This is Equanimity

- Near enemy is neutrality
- I misunderstood it as “balance”

It's not something that comes easily!

The point of practicing

- is not to become something more, to acquire new abilities/ knowledge
- But to let go of our tendency to put up a front against the world
- be there as our naked selves
- I know it sounds terrifying!

But I am quite sure that it has already happened to you many times during this retreat

- When you felt deeply connected and in sync with someone else
- Not that this itself is enlightenment
- But a taste of it, touching into it.

I'm sure we've all had the experience of practicing something over and over

- until it becomes more a part of your being, more a spontaneous action.
- I believe this is how we find ultimate awakening over time

Quote by Adyashanti, American teacher

We don't come to nirvana by avoiding samara. We don't come to heaven by avoiding hell or trying to sidestep it. We don't come to clarity by avoiding confusion. We don't come to freedom by avoiding that which is less than freedom. The truth is quite the opposite.

Our illusions – the beliefs we hold onto – are the very doorways to our freedom. We simply have to enter through them, without grasping or pushing away. We must not believe them, but we must not run away from them either.

Each moment is the moment that needs to be happening. It may be a beautifully engraved invitation, or it may be a very fierce invitation, but each moment is the invitation. I couldn't possibly emphasize this more: the texture and flow of our lives from moment to moment is itself what reveals freedom.

To come back to spiritual friendship

- When we move into this state with another person, we are encountering a living, moving reality that we can get into a dance with
- We are touching directly into that wonderful thing that gets described as Indra's Net
- A living, breathing reality of which we are a part, and with which we interplay in every moment

I believe this is what Bhante means by Transcendental Friendship

- And is the ultimate point of Spiritual Friendship
- We practice by letting the daily, everyday aspects of life be the pointers to where our doorways to freedom lie
- We find ways to peek into little tastes of freedom bit by bit

Gregory Kramer describes this OPEN dimension of relationship:

What we're beginning to touch into is a spatial experience of non-clinging. And our awareness has no self at the center. This quality of OPEN invites the mind to relax out of a sense of agency or control. As our awareness becomes more fluid between internal and external, you might find less and less a sense of me vs another. What the other person is saying and what I think in response are all just arising in the moment. As you move closer into this fluidity, you may begin to notice something else emerging that's neither me or other, but something that's arising in the joining of me and the other. It's the dancing experience of the in-between that's described by the Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber:

"Our relationship lives in the space between us – it doesn't live in me or in you or even in the dialogue between the two us – it lives in the space we live together and that space is sacred space."

(Martin Buber, Jewish philosopher, in his work I and Thou.

So this is my understanding of the significance of spiritual friendship.

- And the transcendental dimension of it.
- It's a way to touch into awakening, if only for a split second, and get a taste of freedom.
- It's not as impossibly far away as you think
- I think we've all touched into it at times on this retreat.
- So let's keep practicing, and getting a taste of awakening together

