



# Friendship, the Whole of Life Well-lived

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As he was wont to do, on one occasion the Buddha posed a rhetorical question to his disciples: “Friends, how many things contribute to seeing things rightly (sammāditṭhi)?” Answering his own question, the Buddha said that there are two key factors: the “voice of another” (paratoghosa) and “focused attention” (yonisomanasikara, sometimes translated as “wise attention”). He also said that these two factors are the two legs on which the life of spiritual practice and transformation stand. On another occasion, Ananda, the Buddha’s beloved disciple, speaking to the Buddha about what he had learned from the Buddha’s instructions over the years of living with him, said that “half of the good life” is friendship with good people (kalyanamitta), companionship with good people, closeness with good people, only to be corrected by the Buddha that these are not half but actually the whole of the good life (SN. 45v.2).

That last statement of the Buddha’s should stop us in our tracks. What could the Buddha possibly mean by this? Is it that all of the Dhamma can actually emerge, unfold, and find completion in lives lived with friends? Is it that we have a foresight of all that Dhamma is and can be when we are in the company of friends? Is it that we have prescient glimpses

of transformative experiences, even of liberation itself, in our experiences of our friends being there with and for us--and we for them--through thick and thin, whether together or apart.

We ourselves are friends. It is as friends that we write here because we want to share some of what we have learned from taking up such questions together in friendship.

We have been reminded repeatedly of a basic truth that, as persons, we are always in relation with other persons. Key to what we have learned, however, is the significance of being aware and acknowledging that whenever we are on the Path, so are others. Indeed, as we are always in relation, we are always on the Path together with others and for others. Our relations, then, are not something separate and especially not something to be overcome or transcended. Quite the contrary, our relations are both the foundations for practice as well as the fruits of practice.

This may come as a surprise. A prominent feature of some common portrayals of Buddhist life is individualism. In these portrayals, the Buddha's going forth into homelessness, apparently leaving behind his family, and then his awakening alone under the Bodhi tree are highlighted. Through selective readings of his story, the Buddha's teaching can come across as celebrating individual practice, particularly meditation, as best done in solitude and silence. "Wander lonely like a rhinoceros" becomes a clarion call, as do "be an island to yourself" and "work out your own salvation with diligence."

It is not that anyone denies that Sangha is one of the Triple Gems, but it can often seem to be treated like a relative always invited but mostly ignored at family gatherings, in plain sight but not really acknowledged. Community is appreciated more for how it can support individual practice than as a necessary condition for and the highest fulfillment of a life well-lived. Moreover, we often fail to remember that

the Buddha's Sangha is itself a community of friends, as Rohini speaks of it in the Therigatha:

Those who have gone forth  
are from various families and from various regions  
and still they are friendly with each other--

That is why ascetics are so dear to me. (Thi  
285)

In the context of our conversations together as friends, the breadth and depth of the reflections on friendship found across Buddhist literature have become freshly instructive for us. Equally instructive is what we have seen whenever we have allowed these reflections on friendship to interface and interact with other teachings and practices, even ones that we thought we already knew well. One example of this is in the two passages which we quoted above. If friendship is indeed the whole of the good life, how does our understanding of the “voice of another” and “wise attention” change when we see them as instances of friendship, and as such interfacing and interacting with each other? How do we get better at both of these two “legs of the good life,” and all that each entails, by engaging and practicing them with others, realizing that they are grounded and constituted by friendship? Another example is what we see when we remember that friendship is the foundation of metta, loving kindness. This is literally so, insofar as the Pali word metta is etymologically derived from the Pali word for friend (mitta). The arising of metta is organic in friendships and thus the practice of metta is to enable us to become ourselves by becoming more of what we already are. With this in mind, shouldn't we see the cultivation of metta as something actually done with particular others, both in meditation and in

life, rather than as the practice of an individual practitioner imagining ideal relations with generic others?

We have found that the implications of the possibilities that present themselves in questions like this are vast and always inviting. Like the Dhamma itself, they beckon us onwards (opanayika), and like the Buddha himself, they call out to us to “come and see” (ehi passi) freshly and simply. The implications go far beyond a rethinking of this or that idea and this or that practice. They are about the whole of what the Buddha teaches us and about the whole of our lives well-lived together.

Our thoughts frequently returned to the naturalness of friendship. We humans don't need to be taught the value of friendship. Rather, we are simply in need of friends, as even very young children naturally reach out and connect with others. An innate relationality is obvious in infants, in the unobstructed eye contact they seek, and it is not an exaggeration to say that the world of infants is defined by relationality. At the same time, defilements (greed, hatred, and delusion) and structural evils (like sexism, racism, and speciesism) limit and disfigure our relational lives. Even with these firmly in view, we can still glimpse that the life to which the Buddha calls us is not other than what we already are. Rather, the Buddha calls us to become more of what we are when we are at our best. And this reminds us that, while the need for friendship may be natural, the maturation of friendship is something that has to be cultivated, whether in removing hindrances (nivarana) to friendship or in growing in the capacity to be a friend.

We have also found that whenever we think of spiritual life in the light of friendship, concrete and particular examples from our own lives presented themselves as confirming the truth and reality of what we saw generically. This moved us forward and encouraged us. Our recognition of the importance of thinking about friends and friendship

both abstractly and concretely moved us to want to learn more. It generated fruitful questions about how we could learn more about and from our own experiences.

We know that there is much ahead for us to explore about such large and important possibilities but some of these are already in view, making us want to share something of them, even at the risk of speaking prematurely. What we share here is thus only an initial report of what we are learning and also of how we are learning. To this end there are three areas that we will highlight. The first is how reading stories about friends in Buddhist texts illuminate not only the value of friendship but illustrates how persons actually live as friends. In many ways, these stories come to us like the voice of another, especially when they give us new vantage points from which to see our own lives. The second area is how sustained reflection together on our own experiences of friendship gives us different ways of seeing new possibilities and realities in our relations with particular others. Investigating and reflecting on our experiences with others in turn give a freshness to what we end up seeing in familiar texts. That is, learning from our lives with our friends changes how we engage the Buddha's Dhamma in texts. Such relational reflection is, of course, another instance of "focused attention" (*yonisomanasikara*), but it is attention that when cultivated with others and in dialogue opens new and expansive possibilities. As the Buddha noted, these two practices of wise speaking, (the voice of another speaking directly to a particular friend) and attentive listening become the basis for ongoing dialogue. Of course, they should be taken together and understood as two legs of lives well-lived in friendship. When we trace how this is so, we find that the two legs actually cannot be taken separately: they are more like two sides of one coin or how the in-breath and the out-breath constitute "a breath." This is the third area we would like to highlight and we will illustrate it here with the example of the relational practice of Insight Dialogue, a

practice in which meditative states are intentionally cultivated in the company of friends in direct, face to face speaking and listening. We hope that the few examples that we turn to now will suggestively mark the expanding significance of the Buddha's answer to Ananda that *kalyāṇamittatā*, or "beautiful friendship," is the best image of a life well-lived.

## Learning how to be a friend: from texts to the personal

Buddhists have been magnificent story-tellers and there is no shortage of great Buddhist stories. It is often the case, however, that a detail in a story told to make a point needed at a particular time turns our attention to something other than the ostensive 'moral of the story.' This is the case with a small, homey story about the Buddha's two chief disciples, Sariputta and Moggallana, told by Buddhaghosa in his *Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)*. It seems that at one time Sariputta was quite sick and when Moggallana visited him, he asked, "Friend, what used to make you feel better?" Sariputta remembers the comfort food that his mother prepared for him as a child and replies, "My mother used to make me milk-rice." Moggallana immediately wants to get that for his friend. As Aristotle said, "the friend is another self," and Moggallana spontaneously wants what would comfort his friend. The narrative continues in a complex and nuanced way and we recommend reading the whole story in the *Path of Purification*,<sup>[2]</sup> but suffice to say here that a tree-god who overheard the conversation between Sariputta and Moggallana coerces some laypeople to give milk-rice to Moggallana as alms so that he, in turn, can give it to Sariputta. When Sariputta sees the milk rice that Moggallana offers him, he immediately discerns the coercion involved in Moggallana's receiving the milk-rice as alms. In turn, seeing what Sariputta sees, Moggallana immediately knows Sariputta's resolve not to accept anything which is not

freely offered. Moggallana throws the milk-rice on the ground without a second thought, even after he had to have been pleased when he originally obtained it. When Sariputta sees Moggallana's empathetic action, he is immediately and spontaneously cured of his illness forever. That milk-rice discarded is comfort food and true medicine for the sick, indeed.

Sariputta's cure highlights the significance of seeing with immediacy throughout the story: to see is to be transformed, to be changed permanently, and the seeing that is afforded in friendship seemingly happens outside any effort on our part, arising, rather, somehow simultaneously within and between us. As this story is told in the Path of Purification, its point is explicitly about Sariputta's strict observance of monastic rules, but when we engage it as a story about friendship, we also learn something important about the 'entwining' of want and action and the deep mutual understanding that can happen effortlessly between friends: Moggallana simply wants whatever it is that Sariputta wants or needs, putting aside his own needs for recognition or reward. Sariputta is immediately aware, touched and perhaps even healed by Moggallana's care and "selfless" actions. The story makes it clear that friends (*mitta*) 'naturally' and intuitively have care and loving kindness (*metta*) for each other and that *metta* co-arises within and between them in mutuality. The *Mitta sutta* (AN 7.35)[3] speaks generally of the seven qualities that friends have, but we are reminded in this story that the concrete forms of action that loving kindness assumes are as infinitely variable, fluid, and changeable as the needs and wishes of our friends can be.

## Sharing as a practice among friends: from the personal to texts

Our second question explores how shared reflections on our own experiences of friendship can open us to seeing new dimensions and arriving at fresh understandings of the teachings and stories we find in texts. This is how it happened for us at one time. Jan once began a conversation with Charlie by speaking about her own sense of how close attention to the experience of another can be deeply inspiring, and how we are changed by this. She spoke in general terms, but her reflections were grounded in particular memories that infused her reflections with confidence. Jan spoke of how sometimes a friend, in sharing their own struggles, inspires us so vividly and tangibly that we come to feel so moved by their meeting of life-challenges that somehow their resilience becomes a part of us, directly available and accessible to us in future moments of our own difficulty; in other words, their life-experience becomes our resource. Sensing the emerging benefit for both, that sharing friend is, in turn, moved and strengthened by this deep and enlarged receptivity. When we return to the story of Sariputta and Moggallana, we can see that this is what happens between them. Moggallana comes to share not only Sariputta's memory of his mother's care but also his concern for strict discipline. Sariputta's inner life guides and shapes Moggallana's care for his friend as it unfolds in mutuality. We are equally sure that Sariputta, in turn, was touched by all that Moggallana was willing to do for him, and he was uplifted by the goodness of his friend. Moggallana's quality of goodness had its trajectory in Sariputta's being healed. This is part of what we mean when we say that friendship not only turns us to the good, the mutuality intrinsic to friendship enlarges and frees us from our own limitations and self-centeredness.

The Buddha often speaks of the power of good friends, of *kalyāṇamitta*, to “lead” us to wise and moral

action and also toward awakening, just as beautiful things attract us and draw us towards them. Having such words in mind encourages us to slow down and wonder about just what happened in Ananda's heart when, anguished as he was after the Buddha's death at his own failure to have attained awakening, he remembered the Buddha's encouraging words to him: "Ananda, I know you can do it." We have no doubt that those remembered words were key to Ananda's awakening that night. Reflecting on this led us to share personal memories which gave us a chance to talk and reflect together on how listening to the voice of another can inspire and motivate, and about the power of our friends to influence and care for us in the whole of our lives beyond the moment, even after their deaths. This surely is part of what makes friendship ever beautiful, to take up the literal meaning of the term *kalyāṇa* in *kalyāṇamitta*.

## **Dhamma talk: what happens when friends talk together**

Sharing such personal memories together led us to ask whether and how could we intentionally initiate future moments of sharing experiences (as in the voice of another) and reflecting productively together (as in focused attention)? The structured practice of Insight Dialogue is one way that we have found helpful. When we reflect on reasons for its benefit, we see that it can help wise attention and listening to the voice of another to interface and intersect with each other in unexpected and illuminating ways. Insight Dialogue is a relational meditation practice that intentionally brings silent meditation, the power of Dharma contemplation, and the relational practice of speaking truth and deep listening.[4] Guidelines for Insight Dialogue were created by Gregory Kramer about 25 years ago, in the broad context of the

modern movement of Insight meditation. Kramer based the practice on foundational relational dharma, and extended the unexplored power of engaged relationship—of direct, “unconstructed intimacy”—into meditation and dharma contemplation.[5] In some ways, this practice does appear to reactivate and give new form to the practice long noted in the Theravada Buddhist traditions under the name of dhammakathā, or “dhamma talk.” In the Meghiya sutta, the Buddha names “easy access” to dhamma talk as one of the most powerful elements of kalyāṇamitta, of beautiful, liberative friendship.[6]

We have found an especially helpful account of ‘dhamma talk’ in the Mahāgosinga sutta in which a number of monks present their different practices as “illuminating the Gosinga forest.”[7] The way that these early disciples share their own practices with each other, all speaking and listening, is clearly an occasion of friendship. Moggallana, however, celebrates a particular practice of those who “engage in a talk on the higher Dhamma and they question each other, and each being questioned by the other answers without foundering, and their talk rolls on in accordance with the Dhamma. That kind of bhikkhu could illuminate this Gosinga Sāla-tree Wood.” We want to highlight here two elements in Moggallana’s celebration of dhamma talk: the mutual responsiveness suggested by the fact that “they question each other, and each being questioned by the other answers without foundering,” and the effortless and forward-movement that is evident when “their talk rolls on in accordance with the Dhamma.” Friendship is probably best understood not only as a noun. To speak of friendship requires verbs, as English exemplifies with the verb “to befriend.”

The significance of dhamma talking as “[rolling] on in accordance with the Dhamma” is further illuminated in the Meghiya sutta where the Buddha draws our attention to friendship as “the light before the dawn.” Friendship is the

tangible sign of what is to come, the arising of the bright sunshine of the day. Friendship belongs to the future. This is a rich metaphor for how we should see friendship and liberation, the goal ahead. In the Meghiya sutta, the Buddha speaks variously of friendship as a condition for, a means to, and the fruit of the Path.

How friendship is a means to future liberation becomes apparent when the Buddha describes the importance of dhamma talking between friends: it is not only what we talk about but how we talk together. Our unspoken truths are encountered and shared as we get better at speaking our truth to each other and listening with hearts of kindness and compassion. It is certainly true that, paraphrasing Janet Gyatso, ‘to exist is to see oneself in the eyes of another.’[8] It is in the interstices between friends, explored by speaking and listening together, that a shared “seeing” and understanding is encountered, and the Dhamma comes to life in our lives. This is far more than acknowledging the power of friends to energize and inspire us, to help us through the difficult times when we start to lose heart. It is to see friendship as an instance of Wisdom and Compassion, just as the light before the dawn is sunlight.

It is also to see friendship as a context for practice. Thinking about the place of a path of practice in our lives invites us to return to the two statements of the Buddha with which we began, the one about wise attention and the voice of another as support for right view and the other about friendship as constituting and sustaining the whole of the good life. When we do so, we see that these two statements can be taken as echoes of each other: they do not say the same thing, but they do not say anything different from each other either. To adapt a familiar idiom, they are “neither the same nor different.”

Both of the Buddha’s statements lead to an acknowledgement of the potential of friendship in a life

dedicated to awakening, indeed, to such a degree that friendship can be considered a path of practice in itself. And with such an acknowledgement comes the challenge of naming the components of such a path. These include how we intend friendship, that is, how we orient ourselves to friendship intentionally and to the power of shared intention; how we attend to mutuality or shared attention, to that larger field of mindfulness which emerges and becomes available between persons; how we tend friendship, cultivating an openness to mutuality, as in “tending a garden;” how we mend in the fabric of friendship the tears that inevitably occur; and how we extend friendship, as is done in formal metta meditation when the care exchanged between friends is extended to all beings.

Such thoughts are just beginnings for tracing the potential and possibilities of friendship in lives well-lived, obviously, but already we can see just why it is that the dhamma talking between monks as friends in the Gosinga forest rolled on the way it did. All of us are invited to join in that conversation too and when we do so, what began in the Gosinga forest—realizing that friendship is Dhamma—will continue to roll on and will light up the worlds in which we find ourselves.

[1] Jan Surrey would like to acknowledge the enormous contribution of founding teacher Gregory Kramer and the Insight Dialogue Community for opening the dimension of friendship for Dhamma contemplation and for establishing the relational meditation practice of Insight Dialogue that illuminates and cultivates the liberative power of spiritual friendship.

[2] A translation of the story can be found in *The Path of Purification*, translated by Bhikkhu Ñanamoli, available online at <https://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/authors/nanamoli/PathofPurification2011.pdf>, pages 39-40.

[3] For a translation of the Mitta sutta, see: [https://www.dhammadtalks.org/suttas/AN/AN7\\_35.html](https://www.dhammadtalks.org/suttas/AN/AN7_35.html). The seven qualities of a friend are: a friend “gives what is hard to give; does what is hard to do, endures what is hard to endure; reveals their own secrets to you; keeps your secrets; when misfortune strikes, a friend doesn’t abandon you; when you are down and out, a friend doesn’t look down on you” (translation slightly modified).

[4] For more on Insight Dialogue as a practice and as a community, see: <https://insightdialogue.org/>

[5] Gregory Kramer, *Insight Dialogue: The Interpersonal Path to Freedom*. Boston: Shambhala, 2007, 136.

[6] For a translation of the Meghiya sutta, see: [https://www.dhammadtalks.org/suttas/KN/Ud/ud4\\_1.html](https://www.dhammadtalks.org/suttas/KN/Ud/ud4_1.html).

[7] For a translation of the Mahagosinga sutta, see: <https://suttacentral.net/mn32/en/bodhi>

[8] “To be perceived and recognized by others is an assurance that one exists; by being an other to someone else, one is a self to oneself, whatever the precise nature of that self” (Janet Gyatso, *Apparitions of the Self*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998, 220)