Where Rubber Meets the Road: A Series on Mindful Living

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Well, I'm going to begin this speaker series on where the rubber meets the road with a talk on roles and relationships.

Although we might hear jokes that if the Buddha was teaching today, he might have taught a ninefold path with right relationship added, I would disagree. I believe it's better to deal with relationship dynamics by embracing the basics of the practice: precepts, metta, calmness, wisdom, and mindfulness. I prefer this approach to emphasizing relationship as a separate path factor. Buddhist teachers, communities, and authors may too easily project their social and ideological beliefs into what the Buddha taught, distorting the liberating potential of the teachings.

Relationships are very often the means for building up a sense of being someone, of selfing. I am me in relationship to you. I am a teacher because you're a student. I'm a daughter when I'm in relationship with my mother. I can only be an employee if an employer employs me. Working mindfully with relationships will not only reveal personal psychological patterns and help us be better people in the world, but an in-depth examination of what happens when we relate with other people will inevitably reveal and unravel the self-concepts that feed and sometimes fester in relationships.

It is essential to bring mindfulness and wisdom into our interactive lives. This is the arena that quickly triggers defilements. Unexamined relationships can feed those defilements and sustain the very patterns that promote suffering. Relationships may be the place where the rubber meets the road in our practice because it's in relationships that the quality of our attention, our mindfulness, and our virtue is often tested.

We see this all the time in the integration process at the end of retreats. We establish such lovely samadhi where the mind has no hindrances. It's a beautiful mind. There's patience, self-compassion, concentration—lovely qualities, all the good stuff that we want. We might be having a fantastic retreat and then silence breaks on the last day. In the interactions as we begin to speak with people, sometimes we might realize that we're not quite as enlightened as we had thought we were in the silence.

This is not a bad thing, and it's not a criticism of retreats. If anything, it tells us how powerful it is to have the periodic retreat experience, a kind of respite from the defilements that are fueled in unhealthy relationships. It creates a space in our lives where we can periodically step outside of the self-concepts that sustain our worlds and our worldly duties. It's incredibly important to learn how to be comfortable

alone, at ease in silence, and to work with our own minds without the constant influence of the desires, expectations, and judgments of others.

A full insight practice will include working in the deep, silent experience of retreat and also working to bring mindfulness and focus and attention into the dynamic interrelationships of our lives. This is one of the wonderful ways that we practice as lay people. We might commit time every year to go deep in silent retreats, and then we work between the retreats in a more active engagement with people, with things, with duties, with work. We integrate the purity that we experienced in the silence with the complexity of our daily lives. We use interactions to reveal our personal patterns, and we also periodically go deeper than those personal patterns to recognize the impersonal and liberating truths of the Dhamma.

I think a deep and liberating practice must include both components: some degree of solitude and some degree of community and interaction, silence and relationship. For some people, it's easy to be equanimous when we're alone, but relationships and the complexities of daily life might test our equanimity. In moments of family tragedy, are you sunk in grief and despair? Obsessed with fear? Or can you respond with sensitivity, compassion, and wisdom to the inevitable losses in life? Is your understanding of impermanence deep enough that the mind is undisturbed in the face of death?

I don't believe that there can be a right relationship or a Buddhist code of relating beyond the basic practices of virtue, mental development, and wisdom. We can maintain precepts. We can cultivate meditation. We can live wisely together as parent and child, as sister and brother, as friend and friend, colleague and colleague, as teacher and student, and as married couples.

There's a sweet little story of four old men who approach a house in a monsoon rain. The farmer invites them into the house for shelter, but they first ask the farmer to choose one of them because they will only enter the house if he chooses the one that he would follow. If the farmer chooses the wrong man, then only that man will enter and the other three will stay out in the rain. What are these four men? It's said one is named Wealth, the other is named Success, the next is named Peace, and the fourth is named Harmony.

Now the father wants to invite Wealth in—he works really hard to support the family. The mother, though, wants to invite Success in, and the parents start to fight.

After listening to the argument, the daughter simply says that she wants peace and wishes to invite Peace in. Now all three are arguing. And the son says all he ever wanted is harmony. Finally, they all agree to invite Harmony in, and all four men find shelter in their home—because wealth, success, and peace are said to follow in the footsteps of Harmony.

Harmony develops not through mere conformity alone. When we stop thinking primarily about ourselves and become willing to deeply consider the needs of others, we begin to find a harmonious relationship to life. This should not go to the extreme of sacrificing ourselves for the benefit of others. There's a balance

between self-sacrifice and selfishness, which might be found simply by including the community in our thoughts of what is best.

Sometimes we disrupt harmony with blaming and fault-finding tendencies. How critical are we of others? How demanding are we? How easily do you offer a helping hand, get involved, or simply assist other people in their needs? How strictly do you define what you will help with or get involved with?

There's a lovely description of a group of monks who lived very harmoniously together. One of them described their practice by saying, "Whichever of us returns from the village with alms food 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 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 with a signal of the hand, and they move it by joining hands. 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."

These monks were renowned not only for living in harmony but for profoundly supporting the development of each other's practice. They remain an excellent example of how to be a good friend, a good partner.

When we live in harmony with others, we do not need to be overly identified with job descriptions and roles and the relationships those roles define. We might fluidly contribute to the smooth functioning of any communal situation without needing to make a lot of self-statements.

I quite appreciate it at Insight Meditation South Bay when people simply help clean up this room without necessarily needing to be asked or reminded, without having to organize every single task into formal volunteer assignments. After coming for several weeks, you'll notice that when the talk ends, the tables get rolled back out, chairs get put around the tables, and the stack of chairs outside the room that the AA group stacked for us get brought inside and hung up on the rack. We go through this procedure at the end of every session, and it's lovely to see that this task is just done by everybody. Usually a bunch of people pitch in to help, and when many people participate, the task gets done quickly and easily. It feels light, not burdensome.

There's an interesting discourse in the Saṃyutta Nikāya where the Buddha's attendant, Venerable Ānanda, said to him, "This is half of the holy life, Lord—admirable friendship, admirable companionship, admirable camaraderie." And the Buddha replied, "Don't say that, Ānanda, don't say that. Admirable friendship, admirable companionship, admirable camaraderie is actually the whole of the holy life. When a monk has admirable people as friends, companions, and comrades, he can be expected to develop and pursue the Noble Eightfold Path."

So what makes someone an admirable friend, a good friend? How do your friends, family, and associates influence you? And how do you influence them? Do your friendships encourage the best in you? Do they support your development of wholesome states?

Also in the Saṃyutta Nikāya: "Bhikkhus, this is the forerunner and precursor of the rising of the sun—that is, the dawn. So too, bhikkhus, for a bhikkhu, this is the forerunner and precursor for the arising of the Noble Eightfold Path—that is, good friendship. When a bhikkhu has a good friend, it is expected that he will develop and cultivate the Noble Eightfold Path."

A wise choice of friends and associates is essential for our development and success in life. In the Itivuttaka it says, "The follower and the followed, one who contacts and one contacted, are like an arrow coated with poison that contaminates its quiver. Fearing contamination, the wise person should not have evil friends. A man who ties up putrid fish with blades of kusa grass makes the kusa grass smell putrid. So it is with those who follow fools. But a man who wraps tagara powder in the broad leaf of a tree makes the leaf smell fragrant. So it is with those who follow sages."

The destructive influences of bad associations can spread like contagion, putting ourselves and our friends in harm's way and creating conditions that lead to danger and suffering. The Buddha indicated that it would be better to walk alone like a rhinoceros with only a single horn than to associate with unskillful friends.

Sometimes we might think that friends are just the people we scarf down popcorn with at the movies, or the people we confide our personal problems to, or the people who happen to go to the same gym. But true friendships are the field for developing and expressing the beautiful qualities of virtue, concentration, and wisdom. Most of the five precepts explicitly involve our associations with other people.

To kill, to steal, to engage in sexual misconduct, to lie—these are obviously hurtful ways to relate to people. When we practice the precepts of not killing, not stealing, not engaging in sexual misconduct, refraining from lying, and also refraining from intoxication, we are integrating wisdom and compassion into our daily interactions.

And so in this practice, we consider not only what we do when we meditate with our eyes closed, but also how we choose our friends. Do we choose friends just because they share our taste in movies, or they share our hobbies, or they flatter us? Or they have pleasing personalities or they offer professional advantages?

The Buddha recommended in the Anguttara Nikaya: a friend should be followed when he possesses seven factors. What seven? He gives what is difficult to give. He does what is difficult to do. He patiently endures what is difficult to endure. He reveals his own secrets. He keeps one's secrets. He does not abandon one in misfortune. He does not despise one because of one's loss. A friend should be followed when he possesses these seven factors.

Is this your criteria? You can consider what sort of friends you follow today. What kind of blogs do you read? What kind of groups do you seek to join? Perhaps it would be worth seeking friendships and associations that strengthen our virtue, our meditative development, and our understanding of reality. It matters less, perhaps, if they share our clothing style, our taste in music, or our political views.

As important as friendship is for spiritual growth, though, it's not easy to actually know the inner qualities of others—at least not for sure. In the Anguttara Nikaya, the Buddha said: by living with the person, his virtue can be known. And this too, only after a long time. Not casually, but by close attention. Not without attention. By one who is wise, not by one who is stupid. It is by having dealings with the person that his integrity can be known. And this too, only after a long time. In misfortune, a person's fortitude can be known. And this too, only after a long time. By conversation a person's wisdom can be known, and this too only after a long time. Not casually, but by close attention. Not without attention. By one who is wise, not by one who is stupid.

Now, what about intimate relationships, sexual relationships? Perhaps few topics elicit as much suffering and confusion, anxiety, fear, and obsession as the topic of love, of sex, and intimate relations. People suffer when they are in relationships. They suffer when they are not in relationships. They suffer when they want to be in relationships. They suffer when they want to get out of relationships.

Buddhist teachings are not as prescriptive regarding intimate relationships as many other religions seem to be. The Buddha did not idealize the institution of marriage. He did not link women's value to their role as child bearers. He did not stigmatize divorce. He did not condemn homosexuality, prostitution, polygamy, or monogamy.

But in his time, gender oppression was pervasive. He lived in a culture that had slavery, where women's rights and freedoms were extremely limited, and their very identities were defined in large part by their relationship to male members of the family. Customarily, women's status at that time depended upon being a daughter, a mother, a daughter-in-law, or a wife. Sexual misconduct was usually described as men having sex with women who were under the protection of other men—that is, as their wife, their daughter, or their slave. And that's why the precept of sexual misconduct today is usually interpreted as prohibiting adultery.

But today, with greater freedoms, more diverse economic opportunities, less gender inequality, and a broader acceptance of a variety of love relationships, we must contemplate what sexual misconduct implies for us. Perhaps it might mean a forced relationship. Perhaps it might mean coercion. Or perhaps simply love and respect become the most critical factors for developing harmonious, intimate relationships.

These qualities, though, are difficult to define. Love can easily be distorted and confused with lust, power, or personal desire. When teaching love as a spiritual quality, one of my Dhamma teachers made the point when he said: love needs to be liberated from all that is wrapped around it. When love is liberated from

the constraints of personal desire and the deluding view that separates self from other, it might be possible to experience an all-embracing love in which we are truly intimate with all of life.

Poonjaji said, "If I love some people and not others, then my love is divided. And love that is divided is not love."

Perhaps because the Buddha primarily taught a monastic community. Perhaps because in ancient times marriages served primarily to establish economic agreements between families—not really expressions of intimate love. Or perhaps because sensual desire and self-interest, which are involved in most relationships, are considered great obstructions to awakening. Whatever the reason, we find very few teachings on relational love beyond the basics of virtuous conduct and the cultivation of loving-kindness and compassion.

In fact, I think it's in some way stretching the Buddha's teaching even to give a talk on relationships beyond the basics of abandoning unwholesome states—lust, hatred, and self-delusion—and cultivating wholesome states of compassion, friendliness, and equanimity. But when we look at monastic communities, we find that relationships certainly characterize these communities. It's harmony that is emphasized more than close, personal, individual relationships.

Now, none of us here are monastics. But still, spiritual community is important. And so we might ask: What is our relationship to spiritual community? What is our relationship to Sangha? Do you consider yourself a member of Insight Meditation South Bay? If yes, why? If no, why not? Is this a relationship that you're actively cultivating? Is it a relationship that you value? Or are you just attending Insight Meditation South Bay as you would any evening class, perhaps the way you might come to learn a professional skill?

For insight meditation communities to thrive, we must consider how we relate to the community, what we give to support it, and what we put into its development. Clearly, we have not formed IMSB as an educational group. We're not here simply offering lectures on spiritual topics. If we were, there would be a ticket price at the door—you'd all pay forty dollars to enter, and when you came to a daylong, you would register online and pay your one hundred fifty dollars.

Although many people share in giving the dana reminder, we're pretty careful to never say that our programs are free. We offer them instead on a dana basis, a donation basis. The teachings may be offered freely, but every event includes a structured opportunity to practice generosity. I'd hate to think that people come here because it's just a cheap activity for a Tuesday night. Once you connect with the dana system and respect the practices that we teach here, I really hope that everyone, without exception, will embrace the practice of generosity and participate in building a relationship with the sangha by supporting it. Dana practice is part of our relationship here. Dana practice is every bit as important to what we do and teach here as mindfulness, attention skills, and insight practices.

In the Samyutta Nikaya it says, "By giving, one unites friends." Sangha relationships develop by supporting

each other. Primarily we are supporting each other's spiritual growth, and that growth happens in the context of complex life relationships.

Community is not a static thing. It's not an object. It's us. We are creating the community by the ways that we interact with each other. Through our communities, we determine how the Dhamma will take root in the West. How do we discuss the Dhamma? How do we challenge each other? How do we disagree with each other? What qualities do we nurture in each other? How do we help each other when we're sick, when we're getting old, when we're confused? How do we work together to plan events, to sustain our activities? How do we communicate with each other? How do we resolve conflicts when they arise? How do we treat newcomers who walk through our doors?

Have we established any internal cliques or social hierarchies that we really should question? Do we swoon over wealthy members or those with social influence? Do we value the intelligence of both the young and the old? Are there any prejudices that blind us to each other's needs? What do we expect from each other—from our leaders, from our teachers, from our volunteers, from our members? What roles do we take?

The roles that we step into are important. But they don't need to be fixed. They don't need to become a source of self-grasping. Social roles can be fluid.

They can be ever-changing. Like in ballroom dance, leaders and followers are equally important, and both must be skillful in their execution of the role. Partner dance is a continuous act of communication. If we don't respect the dialogue of the lead and the follow, we are going to trip each other.

All teamwork requires a dynamic engagement in respectful communication and a responsible performance of our roles. This inevitably will require letting go of attachments—attachments to position, opinions, and self-interests. Roles are embedded in most human communications, so we can perform our roles, but with mindfulness, with integrity, with wisdom. We can use our social interactions to examine the mind, to uproot conceit and self-centered perspectives, cultivating the beautiful qualities of compassion, of love, of equanimity.

The Buddha taught liberation through not clinging. And there are endless opportunities to discover the moments of contraction, clinging, and selfing when we are engaged in relationships. There are endless opportunities to purify the mind in the dynamic of human interactions.

Just notice when and why you suffer. Perhaps you were expecting something from someone and didn't get it. Perhaps we're expecting somebody to satisfy our needs, our wants, our hopes. Perhaps we're expecting someone to make us happy. Of course, when we think about it, we'll remember—ah, yes, craving. That's the cause of suffering. Self-interest—ah, that's the primary delusion. We'll have enough wisdom to fall back on what we know to be true. Craving causes suffering. We know that. Everything is impermanent, and yet we still try to hold on.

Sometimes, though, when we interact with other people, we forget all the great Dhamma lessons that are so clear when we're meditating. And we might just find ourselves again and again trying to assert our interests and satisfy our personal desires. So relationships then become great vehicles for our practice.

People change. They will disappoint us—maybe not one hundred percent of the time, but often enough. Often enough to learn. People don't comply with our fantasies of them. There's often a dissonance between what we hoped for and what's actually happening in a relationship. When this happens, we have a chance to see what's going on—not just in the relationship, but in the subtle dynamics of how we are relating to life.

Even our most faithful and satisfying relationships are going to change, simply because all conditioned things change. All conditioned things are impermanent. Everyone that is born will age, get sick, and die. We all will be separated from those we love. And yet we still love, and we grow, and we learn to let go right in the midst of that dynamic relationship.

There is much we can do to open to human relationships. And more broadly, the Dhamma teachings invite us to consider: what is our relationship to every encounter in life? Being mindful, we are observing not only the meditation object, not only what is impacting our senses—we're examining the quality of the mind that is perceiving our experience. We're essentially mindful of our relationship to life.

And as we're increasingly aware of our relationships, we may find that they don't need to be defined by the divisions of self and other. Penetrating this illusion of self and other, we dissolve all boundaries, revealing an immeasurable freedom that we might call love—the immeasurable deliverance of mind, of loving-kindness, of mettā.

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