Thus Have I Heard

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 44:41

This talk was given at Insight Meditation South Bay.

This is part of a series on some of the lesser known teachings, but I thought I would start with a teaching that I've heard quite a few times—maybe some of you have heard it quite a few times too—that I didn't really understand or didn't really pay much attention to. I'd like to tie it together and flesh it out, including some things that are lesser known teachings.

Perhaps you've heard this part where Ananda, who is the Buddha's attendant, goes to the Buddha and says, "Venerable sir, I've heard that half of the holy life is good spiritual friends." And the Buddha corrects him and says, "Ananda, don't say that. The whole of the holy life is good spiritual friends."

I've heard this teaching quite a few times, and I always liked it. It made me feel good—this importance of relationships. But I'm not sure that I understood it. Why would I go on retreat? Why would I meditate? Why would I listen to dharma talks if the whole of the holy life is good spiritual friends? I felt like there's got to be more to this teaching. Or maybe it's not a real teaching. Maybe it's not really in there, just something that dharma teachers were saying.

So it's in there. When I say "in there," I mean the suttas, the Pali Canon—it's in there. This conversation is recorded. But there's more to it. There's more to that particular conversation, and there are other conversations about the role of spiritual friends and how they can support our practice.

One story is with Meghiya, who was the Buddha's attendant before Ananda. Ananda wasn't the Buddha's attendant for the Buddha's entire teaching career. Before that was Meghiya.

Meghiya, on his way to alms round one morning, saw that there was this mango grove that looked like the perfect place to meditate. So he goes on his alms round, comes back, and says to the Buddha, "I saw this mango grove. I think it would be really great. I would like to go there and meditate for the whole day." And the Buddha says, "No, don't go because there's nobody else here." Apparently the Buddha didn't want to be left alone; he needed to have an attendant with him.

Meghiya responds and says, "Venerable sir, you've done the work that needs to be done. I have not. I still have work that needs to be done. I would like to go spend the day meditating in the mango grove." For the second time, the Buddha says, "No, don't go because there's only the two of us here."

For a third time, Meghiya asks the Buddha. At this time in ancient India, it was the tradition that if somebody asked a question three times, the other had to acquiesce on the third time. We see this in the

suttas repeatedly, where people ask the Buddha three times, and he says no, no, and then yes. So when Meghiya asks this third time, the Buddha says yes.

Meghiya goes to the mango grove to meditate. While he's there, he's assaulted by all these unwholesome thoughts. He can't get settled down, and he spends the whole day with thoughts of sensual desire and lust and greed, and thoughts of harming other people. He says, "It's amazing, it's astounding. Even after all these years of practice, I still have these types of thoughts that arise in my mind when I'm going to meditate."

At the end of the day, he goes to the Buddha and says, "I can't believe what happened. I had all these terrible thoughts of lust and harming other people." And I imagine that the Buddha is kind of thinking, "Well, I told you." Instead, what he says is, "Meghiya, when the mind is not ripe for liberation, there are things to do to help make the mind ripe for liberation. There are five things to help make the mind ripe for liberation, ready for awakening, ready for deliverance, ready for liberation from thoughts of lust and harming other people."

In this list of five things to help make the mind ready, number one is good spiritual friends—to help make the mind ready. The second is to be virtuous, to behave in a particular way that supports practice.

Virtuous is kind of a strange word—it may feel a little heavy. I'll talk about it a bit more in a moment.

Three is to hear the teachings, to hear the Dharma. Either to learn about the practice, or to be inspired, or simply to have an opportunity to understand what direction to go and where not to go if you're serious about this practice.

The fourth is: after you've heard about the practice and perhaps been inspired, the fourth quality to help make the mind ready for liberation is to arouse energy for practice. It's one thing to hear about practice. It's another thing to actually do something about it. So the fourth one is to arouse energy.

And the fifth is to have a certain amount of wisdom. You don't have to know everything, you don't have to be completely knowledgeable, and you don't have to already be awakened—but there needs to be a certain amount of wisdom.

So these five things: have good spiritual friends, be virtuous, hear the Dharma, arouse energy for practice, and be wise.

Perhaps it's not surprising that elsewhere in the suttas we read that if you have good spiritual friends—and this phrase "good spiritual friend" is a translation of the Pali expression kalyāṇamitta—then everything else follows. Maybe you've heard that sometimes meditation groups will have kalyāṇamitta groups, where peers get together and talk about the Dharma and share their practice and what's happening with them.

Elsewhere in the discourses we find that if a person has kalyāṇamittas, good spiritual friends, it turns out

that they will be virtuous—the second thing on this list. They will hear the Dharma, they will arouse energy, and they will be wise. So having good spiritual friends helps you do all these other things on the path.

Let me spend a little time fleshing some of these out.

This idea of being virtuous—it's not only about how we behave. It's also the attitudes we have. Are we compassionate? Are we caring? For both ourselves and for others. Are we doing the things that need to be done and not doing the things that shouldn't be done?

Implied in this is also the idea of right conduct, appropriate behavior for the context. I can imagine that if you're going to give a presentation to the Supreme Court of the United States, you behave in a particular manner, which is probably different than if you're picking your kids up from daycare. There's this sense that virtue includes having the right conduct for the right setting, behaving in a particular way. It helps support your practice and helps support other people's practice too.

A big part of virtue—ethics, morality, maybe those are better words—is about supporting other people. We don't harm them, we don't steal from them, we don't lie to them. Having good spiritual friends can help us with that.

I know I've had this experience. Early in my practice, I wanted to share a story with some of my Dharma friends. I started to tell this story and I realized, oh, this is actually about somebody else. It's not my story to tell. It was going to be: did you hear what happened to so-and-so? And I thought, that's actually not really supportive. But one of my friends said, "Diane, are you sure you want to go down this path with what you're about to say?" I was so appreciative, because it was just helpful. Yeah, I don't have to be gossiping. I don't have to be telling stories about other people. That's not particularly helpful. It may have entertainment value, but it's not a kind thing to do. That's part of having friends in the Dharma who support you to be the best version of yourself, and who remind you of what you often already know—but sometimes we forget, or we get lost in the moment, disconnected from ourselves. In this way, having good spiritual friends can help us come to the best behavior.

The second area: good spiritual friends can help us hear the Dharma. In very simple ways—"Okay, I'll see you at IMC next Tuesday." Just that type of thing. Certainly this has been helpful for me, having friends that I knew I was going to see here, or saying to somebody, "I'll see you then." It helps support showing up even when you don't feel like going to the meditation center.

And maybe you've had this too, where somebody says, "I read this great book. Have you read this? Here's an interesting podcast. Have you heard of this person? It's really great. There's this article..." Things that get forwarded or shared—an opportunity to hear the Dharma.

And then in the Pali Canon, when they talk about good spiritual friends supporting other people to hear the Dharma, they speak of Dharma that includes talk on solitude. This recognition that even though you

have friends and you practice with friends and they encourage you to practice together, it still includes an appreciation of solitude.

Sometimes if we want to meditate, we can meditate with others. Sometimes we meditate by ourselves. But we recognize that it's not all about being with other people. Sometimes we have to really be with ourselves and be with what's happening within ourselves, checking in about what's arising.

And some of this Dharma talk, when you're hearing the Dharma, is also about liberation—hearing things that are inspiring or meaningful or that make us want to engage, whatever that may be for each of us. Perhaps at different times in our lives and different times in our practice, it's different things. But it's not only how to practice, what to do, but things that are inspiring and that encourage us.

The other quality is that good spiritual friends help arouse energy for practice. Specifically, this means the energy to abandon what is unwholesome and to cultivate what is wholesome. That's such a big part of the practice—learning what is wholesome and what isn't wholesome.

Most of us have a general idea, but the more we practice, the more we discover. Just like for me, being about to tell a story about somebody else, realizing there was a time in my life where that seemed perfectly harmless and a normal thing to do. But as I started to practice and become more sensitive to other people's needs and how they were in the world, what made me feel like I had some real integrity was to not start talking about other people. So part of the Dharma is to learn that for ourselves through practice, as well as to have some pointers, some people to point out: here's a direction to go, here's a direction not to go.

And then the last quality is to be wise. What's pointed out specifically is this idea of certain wisdom about seeing the arising and passing of phenomena—pointing towards impermanence.

There are so many different levels of this. We know impermanence, right? We know that the weather today is not exactly the same as it was yesterday and it will be a little bit different tomorrow. But this really deep insight into impermanence is also one of the key insights in this tradition that leads to liberation. A very thorough understanding or knowing of impermanence is one of the gateways into awakening.

It's also a way to just have a better life, if we can appreciate that things change, that they're not always the same. Then we're less likely to hold on to those things that are going to be slipping away, or to imagine things into the future that perhaps won't be that way because things change.

So this insight into impermanence is really key both in the big Buddhist endeavor of awakening as well as just having a better life. We're going to age, we're going to get sick. Things change. People we love are going to age and get sick and die.

With all of this idea of perhaps it is a good idea to have good spiritual friends, what does it mean? What is

a good spiritual friend? In addition to these qualities—helping you hear the Dharma, arousing energy, being virtuous, and having a certain amount of wisdom—would you be surprised if I said there's yet another Buddhist list about how to be a good spiritual friend?

It's amazing, all of these lists. I actually love these lists. I'm one of those people for whom they help me remember. Like, oh yeah, there's seven, and I can only remember four—what are the other three? So I actually like having all these lists.

There are seven qualities of a good spiritual friend. Most of these lists, for those of you who are familiar with them, are given in a particular order. Usually when we know the five faculties or the seven factors of awakening, for example, there's a usual order: number one is usually this, number two is usually that. But for these seven qualities of a good spiritual friend, I'm going to mix up the list in a way that feels right, in a way that I think is a nicer way to talk about it.

Number one, in Diana's version: How to be a good spiritual friend? Don't despise your friend.

It seems obvious. I'm a little bit curious why it's in there. But then I started to think about how sometimes maybe you get angry at people.

Or get fed up. Or maybe you're friends from historical reasons—you've been friends for a long time, but you've started to really dislike the person. I don't know. But this is, for me, number one: don't despise your friends.

The rest form a little cluster that I'm interpreting as standing by your friend. Stand by them. So number two is to not forsake them when they're having difficulties, to still stand by them. I think all of us would recognize that's a good quality of a friend. And maybe related to that is to patiently endure what is difficult to endure. There are no details about this, but maybe your friend is going through a really difficult thing, and that is all your friend can talk about—a big event that's happening in his or her life, or a big decision he or she has to make, and that's maybe all that they talk about. But to be a good friend is to patiently endure what needs to be endured.

And the third one is to preserve their secrets. If they share things with you, don't share them with others. I think this is interesting—that this is on a Buddhist list, to preserve people's secrets. It encourages some confidentiality, encourages some intimacy. You can share things with others when you know that they're not going to be sharing them with other people.

Then the next little cluster of qualities for how to be a good spiritual friend is to support your friend. So don't despise them, stand by them in these three different ways, and this third grouping is to support them. What's listed here is to give what is difficult to give and to do what is difficult to do. I think that's right—that's what kind of distinguishes a friend from maybe just an acquaintance. I don't know exactly what "give" might mean, but you can imagine maybe to give some feedback, but in a kind, gentle way that's appropriate. Or to do what is difficult to do—maybe to help support your friend, help them move on

a Saturday when you really don't want to. I don't know exactly, but I think all of us understand this is a friend that stands by.

And then here's number seven: a good friend reveals secrets. I'm understanding this two ways. One, maybe about themselves—if you're a good friend, you are sharing what your life is like, part of your inner life. But it could also be practical things, like the best way to get to IMC at 7:30 when there's traffic is don't take 101, go down this other route—some little secret, something that you've learned, some little trick, to freely share those.

So these are the seven ways to be a good friend: don't despise others, don't forsake them, patiently endure what is difficult to endure, and preserve their secrets. Give what is difficult to give, do what is difficult to do, and reveal secrets. I think all of these are something we would recognize. There's nothing here that is surprising or perhaps new.

So we've talked about how having good spiritual friends is really helpful. We've talked about how to be a good spiritual friend. And then also in the Buddhist literature, this earliest literature, the Pali Canon, there's teaching on how to sustain relationships once you have them.

When Shaila invited me to talk and to say something about teachings that aren't spoken of so often, this is one that I had in mind. We don't hear about this so much—how to sustain relationships. Obviously you continue being a good friend, but when the Buddha was teaching, he was teaching from his perspective of ending suffering. If you're a good friend, you help people end their suffering. In his view, it's all about that. All the teachings, everything—the purpose for him was to help other people end their suffering. His idea was that if you're going to be a good friend, you're going to help them end their suffering. So these teachings are pointed in that direction.

The first thing to do to sustain relationships is to be generous.

In the suttas, it is said that among all gifts, the best gift is the gift of the Dharma, the gift of the teachings. This is very consistent with the idea of relieving suffering—if you want to relieve suffering, you give the Dharma. But we can expand this understanding of generosity. It includes giving people the benefit of the doubt. It includes letting them speak fully if something important is happening, generously letting them speak instead of holding to the idea that we must speak. It includes supporting them in other ways, whether with material goods or with time. So the first way to maintain relationships is to be generous, and there are so many different ways to be generous.

The second is to have endearing speech. This phrase, "endearing speech," only occurs in the Pali canon in this particular list of four things for sustaining relationships, which I think is quite interesting. Perhaps not surprisingly, it says that among the types of endearing speech, the best is teaching the Dharma. But what I find particularly interesting here is the emphasis on teaching the Dharma to one who is interested in it and listens with eager ears. It's not about trying to convert people who don't want to hear about this.

Instead, for those who have some sincerity and really want to hear about it, we teach the Dharma to them, share what we know. I appreciate this idea as a type of endearing speech—it is something they want to hear, not something they don't want to hear.

Along these lines, we can also understand endearing speech as verbal acts of loving-kindness, this expression of doing metta by saying kind things to other people. When I was looking at the list of speakers for this series on not-frequently-taught teachings, I saw that next week Tony Bernhard will talk more about this, about verbal acts of loving-kindness.

There is also this teaching that part of right speech is to not be divisive—that is, to not repeat elsewhere what you heard here with the purpose of dividing people, setting up an us-versus-them dichotomy. That's part of the ways of speech, like right speech, to not be divisive. Instead, we become promoters of friendships, using speech as a promoter of friendships that reunites those who are divided, that brings people together and supports relationships and community. We speak in a way that supports concord and helps people rejoice in concord and have delight in concord. The English is perhaps a little unusual—it's not part of our active vocabulary to "rejoice in concord." But there is this idea of appreciating the friends we have and speaking in a way that lets them know, supporting the communities and relationships we have.

Another part of endearing speech as a way to maintain relationships is to not speak harshly. Instead, we speak words that are gentle, pleasing to the ear and lovable, that go to the heart and are courteous and agreeable. There is no need for us to use language that is harmful or hurtful. That's perhaps obvious, but what constitutes harsh speech requires sensitivity—there is a right time to say things and a way to say things. The guidelines for speech are, of course, that it be timely, beneficial, kind, and true. Here we add speaking about the Dharma if the person wants to hear about it, and speaking in a way that promotes community and promotes relationships.

The third way to sustain relationships is to do beneficial actions. In the suttas, this is described as performing actions that encourage, settle, and establish a person without confidence in the accomplishment of confidence; encourage, settle, and establish an immoral person in the accomplishment of virtuous behavior; encourage, settle, and establish a miserly person in the accomplishment of generosity; and encourage, settle, and establish an unwise person in the accomplishment of wisdom. I interpret this as a way to help people find their way. I don't think we're going to convert people if they are a certain way—that's not our job. We all have our own path and our own way of getting there.

But to encourage, settle, and establish—I feel like establishing is something a person has to do for themselves. But part of being a good spiritual friend is about creating the conditions in which others can be the best version of themselves, so that they can hear the teachings if that's what they're interested in, if that's what they want to do. And then helping them to practice. These are part of the beneficial actions.

As I mentioned earlier, a good spiritual friend also helps people be virtuous. And you help other people be

virtuous by being virtuous yourself. Maybe I shouldn't use that word—it sounds funny to me. Ethical, having integrity. Those sound a little bit better to my ear.

The fourth means of sustaining relationships is this very interesting word in Pali. If we were to translate it directly into English, it would be "the same as myself." Some would translate that as being without bias, without prejudice, impartial—to view others, to see others the same as myself. This idea of common humanity. We all share certain things. We all have difficulties. We all have aspirations, though they may not be the same ones. But the idea that there are certain things we share. It's the opposite of being divisive. It's the opposite of having prejudice. The same as myself. *Samānattā*.

So I started by talking about the Buddha saying to Ananda, "Ananda, don't say that it's just half of the holy life. Good spiritual friends are the whole of the holy life." Then in other suttas we find this gets expanded—that if you have good spiritual friends, you'll be virtuous, hear the Dharma, have energy to practice, and have wisdom. And you can be a good spiritual friend through these seven qualities: don't despise your friend, stand by them, don't forsake them, patiently endure what needs to be endured, preserve their secrets, support them, give what is difficult to give, do what is difficult to do, and reveal secrets. Once you have relationships and good spiritual friends, it's important to sustain them. We do that with generosity, endearing speech, beneficial actions, and treating others the same as ourselves—seeing others the same as ourselves.

There's more I could say, but I'd like to open it up for questions or comments. But maybe before I do that, let me say one more thing.

Often when we think about the Buddhist teachings or the Buddha, we imagine this very powerful, amazing figure—the Buddha giving a talk, with people sitting around listening. For me, that's how I would visualize that time. And often, as practitioners or scholars, we give importance to that figure in the center, the Buddha. But it's the community that preserves the teachings. It's the community that teaches each other. The Buddha was not always there. He traveled around and wasn't always present for the monastics. This is true today in monasteries as well—very often the monks or nuns are teaching each other rather than the abbot or abbess.

I want to emphasize the importance of community, not only for our own spiritual practice, not only for our own lives—it's part of psychological well-being too, this sense of belonging to community. But also this recognition: without a community, there would be no Buddhism. We would have the Buddha, but there wouldn't be anything passed down through the generations, actively practiced, dispersed throughout the world.

So as a way to tie together this idea of good spiritual friends: there's having good spiritual friends for ourselves as individuals, being good spiritual friends to others, and being part of a community. And then how this community is part of something bigger—that's Buddhism too.

For the benefit of anyone who might not have heard, Sharon was speaking about the importance of trust in friendships, including specifically the importance of not revealing secrets, and also about right speech.

I was happy to find some of these teachings in the early Buddhist literature. I don't think anything I've shared here is new or something we don't already know. But sometimes, just like with so many things in the Dharma, it's helpful to be reminded of their importance.

Sharon also spoke briefly about restoring trust when it's been broken. I was thinking about the guiding principle underlying all these lists—seven ways to be a good friend, four ways to maintain a relationship, and so on. The guiding principle behind what the Buddha was teaching is to help relieve suffering. So if we want to restore trust, the question becomes: How can we support that other person? How can we relieve their suffering? At the same time, we acknowledge and honor what's happening for ourselves too. But if we can hold that bigger picture—for the benefit of others and ourselves, and to not harm either others or ourselves—that becomes our compass.

Elizabeth shared that our friends are aging. All of us are aging, of course. Some of her friends are perhaps becoming harder of hearing, maybe aren't the best drivers anymore, and have many issues arising in their lives. Perhaps they're sharing about these difficulties. In order to be a good friend during such times, these teachings serve as reminders: be generous, do what is difficult to do, patiently endure what needs to be endured, keep secrets.

Then the question arose: Is this teaching us to treat friends differently than random strangers? What do you think? Someone said the answer was no, but he wasn't sure why.

Sharon reminded us of a helpful teaching about how we are dependent on others—for growing our food, making our clothes, sometimes preparing our food as well. We are so profoundly dependent on other people, and recognizing this can influence how we relate to everyone.

But to return to the question about friends versus strangers: How many of you have had the experience that the more you practice, the less interesting it becomes to set up or maintain rivals and enemies and categories of people we don't like? It just starts to feel unnecessary—like we don't need to spend so much energy doing that anymore. So maybe not everybody becomes our best friend, but this idea of withholding generosity toward certain people becomes less compelling. There's simply not as much energy for whatever was preventing us from being friendly toward them. I'm not saying we're all going to become best friends with everyone soon.

Someone observed that friendship requires interacting, requires doing something. And I agree—this list of qualities does involve action. But at the same time, not all of them appear overtly active. Patiently enduring, for instance, sometimes doesn't look very active at all. And yet we also have friends we've known for a long time whom we haven't heard from in decades. Then we reconnect and feel that sense of connection again. So both are true: we have relationships that we actively cultivate as a big part of our

current lives, and we have friends from another era, perhaps from when we lived in another place.

Someone else noted how the way we interact with strangers creates its own dynamic. If we act toward them with anger, we're likely to receive anger in return. If we treat them with respect, we'll likely receive respect back. This can be a significant part of our practice—simply acknowledging the person who checks us out at the grocery store, treating them with respect, looking them in the eye, saying hello and asking how they are. These simple gestures can make a real difference. The janitors, the people we often don't notice or pay attention to—extending our awareness and care to them matters.

Thank you.

Where do we go to find these virtuous friends? Do you have some ideas?

For me, I found a lot of people at meditation centers—people who came from different walks of life and had very different lives, but we shared something in common: this appreciation for the Dharma, this trying to find our way with it, to understand it, to discover what practice really is. Through becoming friends at meditation centers, I've made many truly wonderful connections.

So perhaps here, at the end of the sitting when you meet to say hello to somebody, that could be just the introduction of something. It could be the start of something.

Thank you. It's a pleasure being here and teaching with you.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.