Sustaining Relationships

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 44:31

This talk was given at Insight Meditation South Bay.

This is part of a series exploring 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 teaching 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 it's all about 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.

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 a mango grove that looked like the perfect place to meditate. So he goes to 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."

The Buddha says, "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, "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 makes his request. At this time in ancient India, it was the tradition that if

somebody asked a question three times, the other person 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. He spends the whole day with thoughts of sensual desire and lust and greed, and thoughts of harming other people. He reflects, "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."

I imagine 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 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. The second is to be virtuous—to behave in a way that supports practice.

The word "virtuous" is perhaps a bit of heavy or awkward language. I'll talk about it a little more in a moment.

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

Fourth, after you've heard about the practice and perhaps are 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 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 term "good spiritual friend" is a translation of the expression *kalyāṇamitta*. Maybe you've heard that sometimes meditation groups will have Kalyāṇamitta groups, where peers get together to talk about the Dharma, share their practice and what's happening with them.

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

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

Let me flesh some of these out.

This idea of being virtuous—it's not only about how we behave. It's also about 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 right conduct, and sometimes in English we use the somewhat awkward term "resort"—the right behavior for the right setting. 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. Virtue also means having the right conduct for the right setting, behaving in a particular way that supports your practice and supports 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 have this experience. Early in my practice I wanted to share a story with some Dharma friends, and as I started, I realized this story was actually about somebody else. It wasn't 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, "Diana, 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. 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—they support you to be the best version of yourself and remind you of what you often already know but sometimes forget, or when you get lost in the moment and disconnected from yourself. In this way, having good spiritual friends can help us come to our best behavior.

The second way good spiritual friends help is by helping us hear the Dharma. In very simple ways—"Okay, I'll see you at IMC next Tuesday." Having friends I knew I would see here, or even saying to somebody, "I'll see you then"—it helps support going even when you don't feel like you want to go to the meditation center.

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

And then in the Pali Canon, when they talk about good spiritual friends supporting others to hear the

Dharma, they speak of Dharma that includes talk on solitude. There's 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 to 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 with ourselves, to kind of check in about what's going on.

And some of the 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. Maybe 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.

Then the other thing is that good spiritual friends help arouse energy for practice—specifically, 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 and 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 one 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, I hear anyway. But also this really deep insight into impermanence is 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 too, if we can appreciate that things change. 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.

So with all of this idea of—okay, so maybe it is a good idea to have good spiritual friends—what does it mean? What is a good spiritual friend? How is that? In addition to these types of things—help you see the Dharma, arouse energy, be virtuous, and have 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, right? All of

these lists. I actually love these lists. I'm one of those people that it helps 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, 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 a little, in a way that feels right, in a way that I think is a nicer way to just 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, you know, sometimes maybe you get angry at people.

Or get fed up. Or maybe you're friends for historical reasons—you've been together for a long time, but you've started to really dislike the person. I don't know. 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 as a good quality of a friend.

And maybe related to that is to patiently endure what is difficult to endure. There's no details about this, but maybe your friend is going through a really difficult time, 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, to not share them with others. I think this is interesting—this is on a Buddhist list, to preserve people's secrets. It kind of encourages some confidentiality, encourages some intimacy. To share things. So you can share things with others when you know that they're not going to be sharing them with other people.

And then the next little cluster of 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" means—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. Or something. 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 kind of what your life is like, part of your inner life. But it could also be, you know, the best way to get to IMC at 7:30 when there's traffic is don't take 101, go down this road—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 that 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 are teachings about how to sustain relationships once you have them.

When Shaila invited me to talk and to say something about teachings that aren't so often discussed, this is one that I had in mind. This is something that we don't hear about 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, to help end suffering.

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

In the suttas, it says that among all gifts, the best gift is the gift of the Dharma, the gift of the teachings. This is very consistent with this idea—if you want to relieve suffering, you would give them the Dharma.

But we can expand that understanding of generosity. It includes giving people the benefit of the doubt. It includes letting them speak at length if there's really something happening, generously allowing them space to express themselves instead of feeling that we have to speak. It also means supporting them in other ways, whether with material goods or with our 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 interesting. Perhaps not surprisingly, it says that among the types of endearing speech, the best is teaching the Dharma—but specifically 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, teach the Dharma to them, share what you know. I rather like that idea as a type of endearing speech—it's something that they want to hear, not something that they don't.

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 teachings that aren't frequently taught, I noticed that next week is Tony Bernhard. When I saw what he's going to be talking about—these verbal acts of loving-kindness—I realized he'll explore this more deeply.

There's 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, of setting up an us-versus-them dichotomy. Instead, speech should be a promoter of friendships, speech that reunites those who are divided. We use our speech to bring people together, to support 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 bit formal—"rejoice in concord" may not be part of our active vocabulary. But this idea of appreciating the friends we have and speaking in a way that lets them know, that supports the communities and relationships we have, is valuable.

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, words that go to the heart and are courteous and agreeable. There's no need for us to use language that is harmful or hurtful. That's perhaps obvious, but sometimes what constitutes harshness requires sensitivity. There's a right time to say things and a skillful way to say them. Of course, speech should be timely, beneficial, kind, and true—these are the guidelines for what to say. Here we're adding speaking about the Dharma if the person wants to hear about it, and speaking in a way that promotes community and relationships.

The third way to sustain relationships is to do beneficial actions. In the suttas, this is described as doing actions that encourage, settle, and establish a person without confidence in the accomplishment of confidence. Actions that encourage, settle, and establish an immoral person in the accomplishment of virtuous behavior. Actions that encourage, settle, and establish a miserly person in the accomplishment of generosity. Actions that encourage, settle, and establish an unwise person in the accomplishment of wisdom.

I'm interpreting this as a way to help people find their way. I don't think we're going to convert people—if they're a certain way, it's not our job to transform them into something else. We all have our own path and our own way of getting there.

But to encourage, settle, and establish—I feel like that's something somebody has to do for themselves. Yet 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.

And then, of course, I talked earlier about why a good spiritual friend also helps people be virtuous. You help other people be virtuous by being virtuous yourself. Maybe I shouldn't use that word—it sounds a bit

funny to me. Ethical. Having integrity. Those sound a little 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 translate this as being without bias, without prejudice, being impartial—to view others, to see others as the same as myself. This idea of common humanity. We all share certain experiences. We all have difficulties. We all have aspirations—they may not be the same ones, but the idea is that there are certain things we share. And 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 Ānanda, "Ānanda, 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, then you'll be virtuous, hear the Dhamma, 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 and support them, give what is difficult to give and do what is difficult to do, and reveal secrets. And then this idea that 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 as ourselves—seeing others as ourselves.

There's more I could say, but I feel I'd like to open it up for questions now, or comments. But maybe before I do that, I'll 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. And maybe there are people sitting around listening. For me, if I were to visualize that time, that's what I would see. 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; he wasn't always present for the monastics. And this is true today in monasteries as well—very often the monks or the nuns are teaching each other rather than the abbot or the abbess.

So 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 as it is now.

This is a way to tie in this idea of good spiritual friends: for us as individuals to have good spiritual friends, for us to be good spiritual friends, and for us to be part of a community. And how this community is also part of something bigger—this is part of Buddhism itself.

So now I'll open it up to see if people have questions or comments.

So Sharon was talking about the importance of trust in friendships, including specifically not revealing secrets, and right speech. I was happy to find some of these teachings in the early Buddhist literature. I don't think anything I said here is new—nothing we don't already know. But sometimes, just like so many things in the Dharma, it's helpful to be reminded of their importance.

She also spoke briefly about restoring trust when it's been broken. I was thinking about the guiding principle for all these lists—seven ways to be a good friend, four ways to maintain a relationship, and so on. The guiding principle is what the Buddha was teaching: to help relieve suffering. So if we want to restore trust, 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 big picture—for the benefit of others and ourselves, to not harm either others or ourselves—that becomes our guide.

Elizabeth was saying that our friends are aging. All of us are aging, right? And some of our friends are perhaps getting difficult to hear, maybe aren't the best drivers, and have a lot going on in their lives. So perhaps in order to be a good friend, these teachings serve as reminders of how to be one: be generous, do what is difficult to do, patiently endure what needs to be endured, keep secrets.

The question arose: is this teaching us to treat friends differently than random strangers? What do you think? One person said no, but wasn't sure why. Sharon reminded us of a helpful teaching—how we are dependent on others for growing food, making clothes, sometimes making food too. We are so dependent on other people. This recognition can influence us.

But to return to the question: how many of you have had this experience, that the more you practice, the less interesting it becomes to set up or maintain rivals and enemies and people we don't like? It just feels like we don't need to spend so much energy on that type of thing anymore. So maybe not everybody becomes our best friend, but this idea of not behaving in a generous manner toward someone becomes less interesting. There's just not as much energy for whatever was preventing us from being friendly toward them. I'm not saying we're all going to be best friends soon, but something shifts.

Someone observed that friendship requires interacting, requires doing something. I agree. This list of things to do—not all of them are really active. Patiently enduring sometimes doesn't look so active. But at the same time, we do have friends we've had for a long time, friends we maybe haven't heard from for decades. Then we hear from them and feel a connection again. So there's both: the relationships we actively cultivate as a big part of our lives, and friends from another era, when we lived in another place or were in a different chapter of life.

Someone noted that with strangers, if you act toward them with anger, you'll likely get anger back. If you treat them with respect, you'll get respect back. This can be a big part of our practice—just acknowledging the person who checks us out at the grocery store, treating them with respect, looking them in the eye: "Hi, how are you?" These simple things can make a big difference. The janitors, the people we often aren't

paying attention to—they matter too.

Thank you.

Yes, where do we go to find these virtuous friends? Do you have some ideas?

I would say, for me, I found a lot of people at meditation centers. We 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 is and how to practice. Through that shared exploration, becoming friends happened naturally. In my own experience at meditation centers, I've made a lot of really wonderful friends.

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

It's a pleasure being here and teaching with you tonight. I'll stay up here if anyone has more comments or questions they'd like to share.

Thank you.

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