Spiritual Friendships

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:01:02

So tonight I want to talk some about wise friendship, spiritual friendship—having wise friends and also being a wise friend. I'll mostly use things that the Buddha said and some stories from the time of the Buddha to show how important this is in our path of awakening.

"This was said by the Blessed One, so I have heard. With regard to external factors, I don't envision any other single factor like friendship with admirable people as doing so much for a bhikkhu in training who has not attained the goal but remains intent on the unsurpassed safety from bondage. A bhikkhu who is a friend with admirable people abandons what is unskillful and develops what is skillful."

That's quite a statement. I don't see any other external factor so important as friendship with the wise, friendship with the lovely. This is a theme that runs through the suttas quite a bit, and I want to expand on it.

Partly, I bring this up tonight because as we move from the world of intensive retreat and the depth and subtlety of our intensive practice, it's all about to change. We all know intensive practice isn't the whole ball of wax, but still, it can be quite delightful, quite subtle, and we can get caught trying to think of our life in the world in terms of intensive practice. I think that all of our path really is intensive practice.

I fell into this mistake for some years in my early years of practice—thinking that the life in between retreats was just coasting on the intensive retreat until the high ultimately crashed. And I hate to tell you, it will. Then I began suffering enough to go back to a retreat to get it again. It took a while—I'm a little slow—to figure out: oh, I have to pay attention in my life. My life is also practice.

But that doesn't mean noting your way through every moment of your life. Sometimes we think that's what we mean when we say, "My life is my practice." People seriously ask, "Do you note all day, every day?" No. There are many factors that we need to bring in to widen our myopic sense of what the path of awakening is about. Kamala talked about the perfections of heart and mind the other night. Tonight I want to focus on this area of spiritual friendship.

I think it really highlights the Buddha pointing to the fact that we are not separate. We can't live, we can't practice in isolation, really. We are so affected by everyone around us, the people we spend time with, the choices we make. And what's really important is that we also affect everyone around us.

In reading different things the Buddha said about the importance of this essential quality—seeking out and paying attention to who we choose to spend time with—it doesn't mean that we get rid of everybody who isn't perfect or something like that. It's more about the choices we make. If we have a choice to go

hang out with people who aren't wise or to hang out with wise people, we pick the wise choice.

But even more, I want to emphasize what I feel so deeply myself: how desperately this world is in need of lovely friends, wise people, spiritual friends—kalyāṇamittas. I think it's part of our job to really become that for our friends, for the world. Not just waiting for the good friends to come and save us, but being part of that for others. That's really what we are becoming, what you are becoming. And so I also want to point out that you should appreciate this about yourselves.

No, we're not perfect. We still need to pay attention to what we're doing, to what arises in our minds and hearts, to how we act. But we shouldn't fall into a distorted perception of ourselves. Having spent all this time looking at greed, hatred, and delusion arising, looking at conceit arising, we're really quite tuned in to how much of that keeps arising. It's so easy to think, "Oh my God, three months, and I'm more deluded. I'm more filled with greed, more filled with craving than ever before. I see sakkāya-diṭṭhi all over the place." And wait until you start talking tomorrow—you'll really see it all over the place, personality view, that is. Yours.

And then we think, "How could I possibly be a wise friend to anybody? It's hopeless." That's an inverted, distorted perception. Appreciate the qualities that have naturally been cultivated in your wisdom and purification.

With that context in mind, I want to read you a sutta from the Buddha—really a story about the importance of wise friends in our life and in our spiritual practice.

This is a sutta where a young monk named Meghiya was coming back from alms round one day, and he saw a beautiful mango grove by the river. He thought, "What a charming spot. This would be a perfect place to go and meditate"—or the way he put it, "to exert myself in meditation." So he decided to go ask the Blessed One if he might do that.

He went to the Buddha, described how he saw this beautiful spot, and said, "It occurred to me how charming it is, the perfect place. So please, if the Blessed One gives me permission, I would like to go and exert myself in meditation in the mango grove."

The Buddha said, "It would be better to stay here until there's another monk to go with you. Better not to go alone."

Meghiya asked him a second time and received the same answer. A third time he said, "Lord, you, the Blessed One, have nothing further to do, nothing further to add to what has been done. But I have something further to do, so please give me permission to go and exert myself in meditation in the mango grove."

Finally the Buddha said, "Well, if you talk about exertion, and if you talk about things to do, what can I say? Go."

So he goes, and as he's sitting there, he says that for the most part he was assailed by three kinds of unskillful thoughts: sensual thoughts, thoughts of ill will, and thoughts of doing harm. The thought occurred to him, "How amazing, how awesome—even though I came here through faith, still I'm overpowered by these three kinds of unskillful thoughts."

It's really very human, isn't it? That's what I like about many of these stories—they quite humanize things.

So he got up, emerged from his seclusion, went back to the Buddha and said, "How amazing. I went with all this sincere intention and I was overwhelmed by thoughts of lust, thoughts of ill will, thoughts of cruelty."

The Buddha says, "Meghiya, in one whose mind still lacks maturity for liberation, five qualities can bring it to maturity. Which five? This is the case where a bhikkhu has admirable people as friends, as companions, as colleagues."

So in one whose mind is still lacking maturity for liberation, the first quality that brings it to maturity is having admirable or wholesome friends as colleagues, as companions. And then he says that when one has admirable people as friends, companions, and colleagues, it is to be expected that the other four qualities will be developed.

I'll mention them briefly. The salient point here is that having and spending time with other wholesome friends would naturally—one would expect it—bring out these skillful qualities in us.

The first of these qualities is to be virtuous, to dwell with wholesome virtue. The second is that it's expected we'll get to hear at will, easily and without difficulty, talk that is truly conducive to the opening of awareness. That is, talk on having few wants, on contentment, on seclusion, on non-entanglement, on arousing persistence, on virtue, on concentration, on discernment, on freedom. There's quite a few things one can talk about other than trivialities. It's not like there's nothing else to discuss but who's going to star in the movie. There's a lot, but we just have to find other people who are interested in these same things. And sometimes we can be that person who starts the conversation.

Also, when a bhikkhu has admirable people as friends, companions, and colleagues, the other quality that is expected to be developed is that persistence will be aroused for abandoning unskillful qualities and for taking on skillful qualities. It's really this sense that we're contagious. When we're with someone who really has a lot of skillful qualities, who manifests compassion, who manifests caring, who manifests non-greed, it inspires those qualities in us. It reminds us of them.

The last he mentions is that when a monk has admirable people as friends, it is to be expected that he will become discerning—endowed with a discernment of impermanence, of arising and passing away.

In all the different suttas I've read, where the Buddha is talking about wise friendship in one who's on the path of awakening, it's not only that it's nice or good for us. It always takes us all the way to freedom. It

always starts with friendship and ends up in one form or another with discerning wisdom, with freedom. So it's really a powerful thing. It's not just about how to have a nice life. It's really about what's onward leading in our life to the path of awakening.

Then he briefly talks about ways that a person who's established with friends and with these five qualities cultivates different forms of meditation and contemplation: contemplation of the unattractive to abandon lust, goodwill to abandon ill will—that's basically metta—mindfulness of in and out breathing to cut off distractive thought, and the perception of impermanence, which uproots the conceit, the māna of "I am."

So just in this short sutta, he moves from "don't think you can just go off and do it alone, but find some wise friends to support you" all the way to liberation.

What really inspired me to talk about this—I first talked about it a few weeks ago at the Forest Refuge—was more the sense of urgency for this world. For us to really go out and share with the world who we are, who you are: the discerning wisdom, the skillful virtue, the hearts of metta and generosity, the deep faith and confidence that these are ways of being in life. Not perfectly, not one hundred percent, but really having seen the power of metta, of generosity, of wisdom, so that we don't have to automatically fall back into the train of the common day-to-day way of thinking.

What motivated me to talk about this was that I often listen to NPR in the morning, and in the space of a week I heard interviews with the authors of two different books. It really made me reflect on what makes people so different from one another.

The first was the authors of a book called *The Smartest Guys in the Room*, which is about the main people involved in Enron—the executive directors and the high-up people. This book charted how they did the whole scam. "The smartest guys in the room" refers to these people so drunk on their own success, so ambitious, so certain of their own brilliance, that they basically felt they could get away with anything. And for many years, apparently, they did—by changing the books, cooking the books, getting banks to support them. This sense of real creativity, real energy, real brilliance, completely in the service of greed and self-interest and conceit. "Everyone else is too stupid to catch on to what we're doing."

How often in the world that kind of brilliance is seen as intelligence that leads to power worth having.

And really I thought, "God, these guys had no clue of generosity or virtue, of sila, of morality, of kindness, of metta, of karma." I mean, really clueless. And if they hadn't gotten caught, they would still be thinking they were the smartest guys in the room, and everyone around agreeing with them.

And then a couple of days later, I heard the interview with the surgeon I mentioned—I think it was last week—Hassan Bayev, the Chechen surgeon who went from Moscow to work in the hospital in Chechnya for six years for nothing, the only surgeon in the city. As I said, he treated everybody—Russians, Chechens, civilians, military—even at very great risk to his own life. He was attacked and everything.

The interview was actually with him, and he just had that simplicity of a really pure heart. He tended to say, "Well, what else could one do? I took an oath as a surgeon. Of course I had to treat everybody." People would challenge him—"Yeah, people kill, but..." And he would say, "It's really important. I'm a doctor. No, you can't refuse."

And you know how it is when you're in the company of, or just hearing, somebody speaking from that level of compassion, that level of sila really in their life, that level of commitment and courage. It's incredibly inspiring. Why is it inspiring? Because it touches those qualities in ourselves. Otherwise, it wouldn't be inspiring. I don't know how these Enron guys would really think, but maybe they'd hear about him and say, "God, what a jerk. He could have kept making a lot of money in his plastic surgery practice in Moscow, and instead he goes there."

But when the qualities of compassion, of wisdom, of courageous effort, of sila, of generosity—when they're awake in us, when they're there to be touched, then it doesn't take much to touch them, to open them up, to bring them out in us. That's what's beautiful about being around, or even just reading about, or hearing about such people. We may live somewhere where we don't know anybody that is really inspiring, but we have so much available to us. We don't have to know people personally. I get tons of inspiration from books, from reading articles, from hearing on the radio—all kinds of people, so-called ordinary people. It doesn't have to be some famous person. Just the essential goodness of people brings that out in us.

That's really why I thought of talking about this. I want to share now a few different ways the Buddha talks about what a good friend is, so we can pay attention to that in others but also cultivate it in ourselves. Because surely, these qualities are here and deep in all of you, in all of us. And like everything, we have to keep paying attention. We have to keep making choices. We still have to feel drawn to virtue rather than greed. We have to feel drawn to appreciate the discernment that comes with really knowing impermanence, rather than saying, "Ah, it's just too painful to stay open to this dharma. I wish I could just go back to delusion." Some days it's like that.

But to make the choice—anyway, you can't forget about it. It's too late; there's no point even trying. But to consciously make the choice not to is much more empowering.

Another way the Buddha describes what friendship with the lovely does is this: "I know of no one single thing of such power to cause the arising of good states not arisen, or the waning of evil states already arisen, as friendship with the lovely." That's in his very practical way of speaking about things. And of course, much of who he's talking to is monks, and often when he's talking about sila or morality, he's talking about the whole set of monks' and nuns' rules. But it's not only in that relatively rarefied realm that he's speaking.

Here's a lovely list I came across, of seven qualities of a friend: "A friend should be followed when she possesses seven factors. What seven? She gives what is difficult to give. She does what is difficult to do. She patiently endures what is difficult to endure. She reveals her own secrets—is open-hearted. She keeps

one's secrets—so is trustworthy. She does not abandon one when one is in misfortune, and does not despise one because of one's loss. A friend should be followed when she possesses these seven qualities."

And those are qualities of a really good friend, aren't they? Nothing esoteric, nothing that you have to be in robes to appreciate—just very much based on kindness, friendliness, morality, and simple caring, heart-to-heart caring. That's really what the Buddha's talking about.

One other place where he's talking specifically to householders: Sometimes he would give specific discourses to householders who would come and say, "We have no interest in ordaining. We want to live a happy and wholesome household life"—basically asking him to tone it down.

And he often did. So in this particular one, he's talking about four things that lead to the welfare and happiness of a family person. And the first one, guess what? Good friendship. And then he says what entails good friendship is finding a friend who has accomplishments in faith, virtue, morality, generosity, and wisdom. So it's these basic qualities he talks about over and over.

Faith—he really means faith in Buddhadharma, but we could expand it to faith in the wholesome, faith in awakening, faith in the potential for purification of our hearts and minds from greed and hatred and delusion. Virtue, obvious. Generosity, we've talked about a lot. And wisdom, again. When he talks about wisdom, even in household ways, the level of wisdom he talks about always reaches up to the point of seeing into and understanding the arising and passing away of things. So basically, if we come to really understand in our own experience the truth of anicca, the truth of impermanence—and sure, that can go deeper and deeper and deeper, don't start thinking, "I've got to have some state of seeing into anicca and that's it"—but just more and more seeing and understanding that truth, it will naturally continue to lead us into deeper and deeper wisdom.

So these qualities of friendship are both quite natural, and they also can be cultivated and developed to great depth. And that's, I really feel, a great part of the practice that we're called to in our daily life. Of course we continue with our formal meditation practice, and we'll talk a lot about that. But this sense of really honoring our potential as a source of light in the world, as a spiritual friend in the world, and consciously seeking out others because that supports us in the same way—it takes commitment. It takes dedication. It takes resolve. Because as the Buddha said, his way of teaching, the way of his path, runs upstream to the stream of common society. That was true then, and it's true now. It's not a judgment. It's just a statement of how things are.

Someone expressed this to me at the Forest Refuge last month, a friend who had been just coming to the end of five months of retreat at that time. She was, you know, as you all are two months in, in a very refined and pure state. And she came in one day saying how she saw so deeply how important our effect on one another is, how important who we spend time with is. She said, "I really see that there really is some purity in my mind stream, in my heart. And I can feel so deeply how much it's affected by the people I choose to be around." She said, "If I hang out with wise people, with good companions—we don't have to

be arahants, just basically good people—I really see that they call out the skillful qualities in me that maybe are dormant or near the surface, but they call them out by inspiration, and I call it out in them."

But she also noticed that if she tends to, just out of inertia really, choose to go hang out with unwise companions, then not only does it not encourage the wholesome, the skillful qualities in her, but she finds that she starts to kind of fall into their train and starts—not talking about really bad stuff, but we just get more careless. We get more lazy. We start following with inertia and do things that just aren't really so helpful.

And again, remembering in this context, this isn't about judging. It's not to say if you go to work and the people you work with aren't so wise or aren't so good, you should say, "I'm quitting." It's not that. That's the place where we have to really call on our commitment to awakening, our commitment to metta, our commitment to generosity and openheartedness to be the lovely friend at that point, rather than just abandon it and say, "Well, it's easier to go with the flow."

I remember when, after my first retreat years ago, a long time ago, I didn't really understand much about Buddhadharma. I was only nineteen. But it really changed my life. And I felt just spontaneously when I came home—I just lost all interest. I was nineteen, remember. I lost all interest in hanging out and going to bars and things like that. And it wasn't a judgment trip. It wasn't that I thought, "Oh, these are the precepts and I have to follow them to be a good Buddhist." It was nothing like that. It was just that that sense of enjoyment from that kind of activity had fallen away, and I was awake enough to be aware of that. It also meant at times I didn't hang out with my friends because that's what they wanted to do. So there were plenty of times of choice. I'd just want to sit home alone. And sometimes, yeah.

And that was actually quite peaceful and fine. It was actually a very happy year, as I remember it back in that haze of memory.

And sometimes not. Sometimes I'd think, "Oh, but I'm being stuck up or I'm being too standoffish—I'll just go out tonight." And if I paid attention—and this is the key, the reference point the Buddha gives us over and over and over—there are actions to be performed and actions to be avoided, speech to be performed and speech to be avoided, thoughts to think and thoughts to be avoided.

And what's the reference? That which increases skillful states already arisen or brings about skillful states not yet arisen—that's to be followed. Actions and speech that bring about an increase in unwholesome states or bring up unwholesome states that weren't there before—well, that's to be avoided.

It's not rocket science. It's not about adhering to some set of rules or pleasing someone else. It's very specifically and experientially tuned into what creates more peace and happiness and harmony in my heart and in my surroundings, and what creates more suffering. Here and now.

And it doesn't mean the activity is intrinsically bad. If it brings up more confusion, more greed, more anger, then it's something we have a choice about. Don't do it. That's all.

And so I would find I'd go out with my friends and go to some bar, and halfway through I'd be like, "What am I doing here?" Have you ever been in that situation? What am I doing here? And it's not their fault. They're having fun. Fine. Let them have fun.

That took a while to learn. I remember, actually, I was on staff here—I forget which time, I think it was in '78—and sometimes we as staff used to get together and go out to movies. It's like an hour drive to any movie from here. And we'd always go six in the car, the pack mentality, because we didn't have many cars then, and it was a big deal.

I remember I'd go just to be with everybody, and I liked movies. But I found that if I went out more than one night a week, I was just exhausted. I couldn't do it. And then I stopped even enjoying all that. It was just so much effort to go to some stupid movie.

And I remember when I really got it—that I could tune into what was true for me more than going with the pack. We were starting out in the car, got to the end of the driveway, and I said, "Wait a minute, stop, let me out!" I finally realized it before I got all the way to Northampton and asked, "What am I doing here?" Oh, yeah—I don't need to do this.

And it was so freeing, because nobody cared. It didn't hurt anybody's feelings. And it was a really positive commitment to what's really true—what's liberating, what's bringing about more skillfulness in my own experience, more wholesomeness. So it can just be little things.

And in little ways, we're all models for each other. But we have to commit ourselves. Really. And it's over and over and over.

I know sometimes it's a hard teaching, saying that who we choose to spend time with has such an effect on us, just as we have such an effect on others. We can so easily fall into this better-or-worse judgment, good and bad kind of thing about people. And it isn't that.

We all know in ourselves there are times when we're the deluded, aversive person and we really need a lovely friend to remind us there's another way. There are times when we might be the lovely friend and someone else is deluded and aversive. But to notice the fact that we are completely not separate, and we do have a huge effect on one another—

This is a little poem from the Buddha:

Even if you do no harm, but seek out one who does, you're suspected of harm. Your bad reputation grows. The sort of person you make a friend, the sort you seek out, that's the sort you yourself become. Where you're living together is like that.

The one associated with, the one who associates, the one who's touched, the one who touches another—like an arrow smeared with poison contaminates the quiver.

A man who wraps rotting fish in a blade of kusa grass makes the grass smelly. So it is if you seek out fools. But a person who wraps powdered incense in the leaf of a tree makes the leaf fragrant. So it is if you seek out the wise.

The Buddha goes on to say simply: seek out wise people, seek out lovely people. That sense of conditioning is so strong—we need a healthy respect for it. I think more than anything in these thirty years, every year my respect for the power of our habits of mind and heart grows. That's not meant to be discouraging. It's simply to have a healthy respect and to pay attention to all the different ways of training the Buddha offers, and to use them all in our life.

There are a couple of incidents where the Buddha gave other examples of qualities to cultivate in being a wise friend. There's one story I particularly like—another one that makes it all very human—called "The Quarrel at Kosambi."

At Kosambi, there was a large group of monks living together. What started as a very minor disagreement between two of them grew into a huge quarrel that caused a schism in the sangha, and then the whole lay community began to get involved and take sides.

I find it amusing, just because human nature often amuses me, and also because it's so recognizable. You can just hear any of us getting this petty—well, maybe I'm projecting. It was two bhikkhus, one of whom was an expert in the discipline, in the Vinaya, and the other was a teacher of the discourses. These weren't slacker bhikkhus. These were serious practicing monks.

What started the quarrel was this: the teacher of the discourses committed some very minor offense—of all the rules, some minor infraction. The scholar of discipline pointed it out, saying, "That's an offense you committed." And the second one said, "Oh, I didn't know it. Okay, I'll go and say the confession, ask forgiveness right away." No problem. But then the scholar of discipline said to him, "Well, if you didn't know it was an offense, then it's okay—it's not an offense." So the second monk went away thinking he hadn't committed an offense after all.

Very complicated, right? Basically, it's this very nitpicky thing. But then the discipline scholar went around saying, "He committed an offense and he doesn't even know when he commits offenses. He's a no-good monk." And the second monk said, "No, he told me it wasn't an offense, and now he's saying it is. He's a liar."

You see how it started from such a little thing, and it grew and grew until it was this huge argument, this fight going on, and the laypeople were getting involved, saying, "We can't respect these bhikkhus if they fight and squabble like this."

Finally the Buddha came to try to talk to these monks. At some point—I'm just picking the pithy parts—he says:

"Bhikkhus, when you take to quarreling and brawling and are deep in disputes, stabbing each other with verbal daggers, on that occasion you do not maintain acts of loving-kindness by body, speech, and mind. Misguided men, what can you possibly know? What can you see that you take to quarreling and brawling, stabbing each other with verbal daggers? You can neither convince each other nor be convinced by others. You can neither persuade each other nor be persuaded by others. Misguided men, this will lead to your harm and suffering for a long time."

He's basically saying: What are you thinking? What do you see that takes you to that?

Then he gave them a list of six memorable qualities, which I'll go into in a minute. But I just want to say how this ended. It says in some of the discourses that at first these bhikkhus heard him out, and then they said, "You know, Blessed One, don't bother yourself with this. You go off and we'll deal with it."

They didn't want to hear him. Can you imagine? We're so into our views and opinions that the Buddha comes and says, "This is the way to live in concord," and they say, "Blessed One, don't bother yourself." It's said that he went off and remarked, "It's impossible to make them see. These misguided men seem obsessed." And he went away and came back another time.

So just so you know, it wasn't always easy then, and they even had a Buddha to talk to. It's no wonder we get obsessed and caught up. We do.

So: six memorable qualities that create love and respect and conduce to helpfulness, to non-dispute, to concord, and to unity. They're nothing we haven't heard a million times, but these are the six the Buddha picked, so I want to emphasize them again.

One maintains bodily acts of loving kindness, both in public and in private, towards one's companions in the holy life. One maintains verbal acts of loving kindness, both in public and in private, towards one's companions. And one maintains mental acts of loving kindness, both in public and in private. Already that's huge, right? It's not that we're going to be perfect in that, but to really take it as a practice—this is truly a way one can aspire to live.

The next quality is basically generosity: that one uses things in common with one's companions in the holy life, with friends, without reserving things for me. One shares any kind of gain that comes to one that's in accord with the Dhamma. Just sharing freely with our friends, with our companions, with our family, with whoever in the holy life.

The next one is basically sila. The Buddha says—and this is speaking to bhikkhus, but it also applies to us—one dwells both in public and in private, possessing in common with companions in the life virtues that are unbroken, unblemished, commended by the wise, not misunderstood. In other words, a commitment to sila, to non-harming.

And the sixth is dwelling both in public and in private, possessing in common with one's companions in

the holy life a view that is emancipating, that leads one to practice in accordance with that view, that one will continue to practice to the destruction of suffering. This is a memorable quality.

Of course, the Buddha goes on to say that of these six qualities, the most comprehensive, the most conclusive is this quality of wise view, right view. Even here, where he's talking about the qualities that allow us to live together in unity, in concord, in helpfulness, in non-dispute—it comes to right view. Again, the view of understanding arising and passing away, of understanding that things are impermanent.

And this is the thing I love most about this sutta: he goes on to say, how does this view that is noble and emancipating lead the one who practices in accordance with it to the complete destruction of suffering?

Imagine he's talking to some people that are totally locked in recrimination and anger with each other about their conflicting views. They are sure they're right. They can't hear each other. They don't want to hear each other. And this is how the Buddha says we use wise view in this case—and this is so applicable to any of us in our lives.

One uses this view: one goes to the forest or to the root of a tree or to an empty hut—or to the little corner of your room, or if you're at work and really busy, go to the toilet. Just go somewhere for a few minutes and be quiet and consider thus: Is there some obsession unabandoned in myself that might so obsess my mind that I cannot know or see things as they actually are?

Is this what we tend to do when we're really locked in anger and sure the other person's wrong and we're right? Do we go off and sit and say, "Is there an obsession unabandoned in my mind that's preventing me from seeing things as they actually are?" This is powerful stuff, and this is possible for us. Not so much telling the other person to go look and see what obsession is keeping their mind from seeing things as they actually are—that's more what we'd like to do. But really go and look and see for ourselves.

The Buddha gives a list of some of the things that obsess our mind. If one is obsessed by sensual lust, just wanting, the mind is obsessed. If one is obsessed by sloth and torpor, the mind is obsessed. By restlessness and remorse, by doubt. If one is absorbed in speculation about this world, the mind is obsessed. If one is absorbed in speculation about the other world, the mind is obsessed. And this encompasses quite a bit. If one takes to quarreling and brawling and is deep in disputes, stabbing others with verbal daggers, then the mind is obsessed. He didn't really give the option that maybe you're right and the other person's obsessed—not if we're that locked in.

Simply having a commitment to this wise view, we take ourselves off and go look. This is so inspiring to me. It's not about expecting to be perfect. It's about that commitment to practice, to honesty, to sincerity of intention—to really looking at what's present and what's absent in the mind stream, in the heart, right now. Is it possible that there's some obsession present that's really preventing my seeing and understanding clearly in this situation?

What's amazing is how hard it can be to notice. You all know that. And then we notice it, and it's like, "Oh

my God, the elephant in the room. Oh yeah—total self-righteousness." It's possible that might slightly skew my perception in the present moment experience. It's a really powerful practice. Our mind does get obsessed so easily.

I want to read a couple of lines from Bankei, who was a Zen master in Japan in the 1600s—about how easily our mind gets obsessed in thought, in emotions. He cuts right through.

He says, "Your self-partiality is at the root of all your illusions. There aren't any illusions when you don't have this preference for yourself."

"If the men sitting next to you start quarreling, it may be quite easy for you to tell which of the disputants is in the right and which is in the wrong, because you're not involved yourself. You're a bystander, so you can keep a cool head. But what if you do have a part in it? Then you take your own side and oppose the other fellow. As you fight with each other, you transform your Buddha minds into fighting spirits."

This is when our mind and heart gets obsessed.

And then here's another, more specific example. He's talking to a monk who comes to Bankei and says, "I was born with a short temper. It's always flaring up. My master at home has told me time and again to get rid of it, but it hasn't done any good. I'm born with a bad temper. No matter how hard I try, I can't get rid of it. So I've come to you hoping that you'll cure me with your teaching, and then I can go back."

Bankei is very straightforward. He says, "That's an interesting inheritance you have. Is your temper here now? Bring it out and I'll cure it for you."

The monk says, "Well, I'm not angry now. My temper comes out unexpectedly when something provokes me."

Bankei says, "Well, then you weren't born with it, were you? You create it yourself when some pretext or other appears to happen. You work yourself into a temper because of your partiality for yourself, opposing others in order to have your own way." And he says, "Each person receives Buddha mind from his parents when he's born. His illusion is something he produces all alone by being partial to himself."

Now, this is moment to moment. It's foolish to think that it's inherent—and that's what's freeing. Not to think that our delusion, our illusion is inherent and we're stuck with it. The fact that it's being produced every moment, or many moments, means there are also moments when it's not being produced.

He says, "When you don't produce your temper, where is it? All illusions are the same. As long as you don't produce them, they don't exist. That's what everyone fails to realize."

"You create your outbursts of temper," he's now talking to this monk again, "when the organs of your six senses—vision, hearing, smell, taste, touch, and faculty of mind—are stimulated by some external condition and incite you to oppose other people because you desire to assert your own preciously held

ideas. When you have no attachment to self, there are no illusions."

Not that we're living in the perfection of this—and not to grasp that as another idea of how it should be—but as a pointer, a direction of practice. Just to hold the possibility: when we're in conflict internally, externally, or both, to check in, to look really honestly, to trust our sincerity of attention and see—is the heart obsessed? Is the mind obsessed? Is there a partiality to myself creating illusion right now? Not something we can think through, of course, but something we can tune into.

Another statement from Bankei: "Don't set yourself into confrontation with things." So it's not even argument with another person, but that sense of—can I just be so present with things as they are in this moment, without moving to-ing or fro-ing? Then, without that illusion, that partiality of self, perhaps one can see more clearly, perceive more clearly, be more present to what's really going on.

Someone shared with me this saying from Shantideva that she was using as a kind of daily practice on retreat: "Since all fear, stress, and harm are consequences of the commitment to the me fantasy, can I afford to entertain this fantasy even for a moment?"

It's not a should. It's a sense of really seeing. Since all fear, stress, and harm are consequences of the commitment to the me fantasy in any moment, can I really afford to entertain this fantasy even for a moment?

Just explore that in these days here—not as a judgment, but noticing: when I'm really entertaining the me fantasy, is that conducive to wholesome states arising, or is it conducive to suffering states arising? And if you find it's conducive to wholesome states arising, then go for it by all means. If you find it's conducive to suffering states arising, don't get into judging it. But when we see that clearly, that's when the heart and mind begins to naturally let go.

Because we're really not stupid. We don't really want to suffer. We just need to commit, to have that sincerity of intention, that resolution to explore, to use that guideline of the Buddha: whatever thought, speech, or action leads to more suffering, to unwholesome states arising, these are to be avoided. Whatever thought, speech, or action leads to more wholesome states—

Non-greed, metta, compassion, generosity, sila, discerning wisdom—then by all means, that's to be followed. Simply a guideline. Not to judge ourselves about perfection, not to try and get upset every time we fall short.

I remember the Dalai Lama saying that when we look at whether to have faith in our practice, we can trust the sincerity of our intentions. And that sincerity of intention—we can renew that, commit to that in each new moment. "Okay, so last time I made the choice that increased my suffering." Seeing that with the mind and heart not obsessed, not partial to myself, it's like, "Oh yeah, that really didn't work, did it?" It allows for something new to emerge, for a movement towards wholesomeness, towards happiness, towards compassion, towards metta in the next moment. And that's always a possibility. We're not locked

in. The habits are strong, yes, but mindfulness, generosity, sila, wisdom—it's much stronger. Much stronger.

A teacher of mine used to say, "One spark of truth burns up a mountain of lies." And you'll see that. You struggle and struggle and struggle, and then you have that one good sitting, or just one moment—a flash of insight. Have you noticed how that keeps you going for days, for weeks? It's a good thing that a spark of truth burns up a mountain of lies. It's so much stronger than conditioning that it doesn't take as many moments—thank the good Lord—but it takes recommitting over and over to free our hearts and minds from obsessive sufferings.

There's just time for one other story. On a more positive note, it's said in some of the commentaries for the Vinaya that actually, when the Buddha left those recalcitrant monks in Kosambi—saying, "These poor guys are obsessed, I'm out of here"—he wandered off and came to the park of the Gosinga Sala tree wood, where three very well-known monks were living together. I think these monks were Arahats at this time: Anuruddha, Nandiya, and Kimbilla. And they were living together in great harmony, in great peace. So it's like the other side, the photographic negative of the story before.

The Buddha comes and says to them, "Oh, you're living together, living in concord with mutual appreciation, blending like milk and water, viewing each other with kindly eyes. How do you do it, Anuruddha?"

I'll just share a few things they say. Anuruddha responds, "I think it's a gain for me, it's a great gain for me, that I am living with such companions in the holy life." So he maintains bodily, verbal, and mental acts of loving-kindness towards them, openly and privately. He says, "I consider, why should I not set aside what I wish to do and do what these venerable ones wish to do? And so then I set aside what I wish to do and I do what these ones wish to do." And then the other two say the same thing.

There's this lovely little paragraph where they're describing their daily rounds together, their life in community. I was reading this at the refuge, and a friend who was a monk—he just disrobed, had been there for some time, but had also been in Asia as a monk—he loved it because it just brought back the flavor of what life in a monastery in Asia is actually like.

So the Buddha says, "How do you abide?" And Anuruddha says, "We abide diligent, ardent, and resolute." The Buddha asks, "But Anuruddha, how do you abide thus?" And he explains: "Venerable sir, as to that, whichever of us returns first 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 he sweeps out the refectory. Whoever notices that the pots of water for drinking, washing, or the latrine are low or empty takes care of them. If they're too heavy for him, he calls someone else by a signal of the hand and they move it by joining hands. But because of this, we do

not break out into speech. But every five days, we sit together all night discussing the Dhamma. That is how we abide, diligent, ardent, and resolute."

It's lovely, isn't it?

And then there are many other things, but right at the end—and this is the point I want to close with—the Buddha goes on to draw from their example how this is a great benefit to all in the world. I want to emphasize this: really take it in that our practice and our commitment to live an awakened life, our commitment to really keep on trucking on this path, is so important. Whatever particular way we end up interacting and living in the world—whether we go off to be hermits, whether we're very socially active, whether we're having a family life—it's not so much the outer form. It's the inner qualities of wholesomeness, of goodness, of commitment to awakening that you bring. And it's of great benefit for all you come in contact with in the world.

The Buddha's words are quite long, so I'll just read the end of it. He starts by saying, "If the clan from which those three clansmen went forth from home into homelessness should remember them with confident heart, that would lead to the welfare and happiness of that clan for a long time." And he goes through, getting bigger and bigger and bigger, until he ends with: "If the world with its gods, its Maras, and its Brahmas, this generation with its recluses and Brahmins, its princes and its people, should remember those three clansmen with confident heart, that would lead to the welfare and happiness of the world for a long time. See how those three clansmen are practicing for the welfare and happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the good, welfare, and happiness of gods and humans."

And really, that's what we're practicing for: for the welfare and happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the good, welfare, and happiness of gods and humans.

So may it be so in all of your lives.

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And really, that's what we're practicing for—for the welfare and happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the good, welfare, and happiness of gods and humans.

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