

Kate Johnson
Week Four, *Admirable Friendship*
July 27, 2015
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Hello and welcome back. This is our last installment of our four-part series on friendships that liberate, and I thought that in this last section we could talk more about widening the circle of practice and really widening the circle of who it is that we consider a friend.

I was thinking back to that story that I was telling in that first part of this four-part series about Sharon Salzberg and just what it means to practice in such a way that everyone's our friend and I'm just inspired by the possibility of that. It's something that I experience from time to time, but certainly not all the time and I think that perhaps you can relate.

Sometimes I find myself in a state where I feel like I'm dividing the world into friends and enemies, or more likely friends and people I don't care about. But starting to notice that tendency and also noticing how painful that is has really helped me connect with a heartfelt wish and intention to start to widen out the circle of who I consider a friend and who I feel a heartfelt delight in seeing. That includes who I'm able to be with in their suffering and have a real understanding that the extent to which I am able to do that for others is the extent to which I am able to do that for myself and vice versa. And that continuing to expand that type of friendly, compassionate awareness is part of what can help contribute to this quality of having a holy life or a sacred life.

As I mentioned, I teach at this place in New York City called Interdependence Project (IDP). What initially drew me here was this project, exploration, that we are engaged in as a community, that many communities are engaged in, and certainly many, many, many more individuals. It is this idea of engaged Buddhism and what it means to have a Buddhist practice that informs not only our personal relationships with ourselves and with our close friends and family, but also our choices in how we build community, our interactions with strangers, perhaps even our consumer choices or political choices.

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And in this practice of discovering the terrain of what engaged Buddhism means, many of us are acting as translators between the service world and the social justice world and the dharma world in terms of language. Each of these domains tend to use slightly different language and so I find myself, as a teacher, shuttling back and forth and finding the analogous structures in these different ways of approaching the world and these different ways of moving towards freedom.

One of the words that has popped up a lot in the culture recently is this word ally. Perhaps this is something that interests you. I hope it is something that interests you. It's come up a lot in discussions in particular around some of the visibility of violence against black and brown people in the United States and in discussions about how it is that, like what the role of the Buddhist practitioner or the Buddhist community is in addressing issues of racial injustice. And so this word ally is used often in social justice practice and it's also often feared or misunderstood. There's this sense of “ally” sometimes as an identity or kind of like a static, fixed subject position that we somehow take the right courses or read the right books and figure out how to be a good ally and then that's it. Suddenly we get our ally card and we're a good ally, right? I like the idea of, and have been experimenting with, the idea of substituting the word ally for the word friend as we use it in the Buddhist context. I'd love to share that with you today and see how that resonates.

I like this idea of working with allyship as a friendship because I think that in the dharmic world we have a really great sense of friendship not being a fixed subject position but actually being a practice and a process, right? Friendship is something that we do, you know, so it's the practice of being with someone in their suffering. It's the practice of being able to listen even when someone's down and out. It's the practice of caring when someone's hurting. It's the practice of being able to see the good qualities in a person or a community. And I think that allyship can be as simple as that, and I love the way that it kind of softens the power dynamic when we talk about allyship. A good ally can be someone ... it's hard to talk about ... a good ally can be anyone who's willing to like show up for and support the spiritual growth of another person and that they can occupy any space in the power and privilege gradient. So I think it's a really

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valuable model and one that I hope we can engage as a Buddhist community as we think about how we can become friends to greater and greater numbers of people.

I’m trying to decide if I actually have time to tell this story, but I think I do.

My way into this practice . . . at IDP we’re asked to show up and support the fair wages for fast food workers campaign. When we were first approached by some organizers and activists working in labor about fair wages for fast food workers and this incredible movement that had been initiated by fast food workers to try to secure a living wage for all people and the right to unionize, I was surprised to discover that I hadn’t actually thought about fast food workers in quite a long time. I think that this is not uncommon in the meditation communities from the people that I talk to. A lot of us don’t eat at fast food restaurants and thought about fast food restaurants more in terms of the environmental devastation that they cause and the lack of nutrition that the food provides, but hadn’t actually given a lot of thought to the experiences of the people that work inside the restaurants.

So starting to go to these hearings and listen to the testimony of these workers helped me really understand in a very visceral way, *Oh, these are people that were outside of the scope of my awareness just because I don’t go into those particular restaurants. But these are people in many ways like just like me, working hard, supporting families, wanting to live a comfortable life.* I could feel my heart open up, you know. Once I noticed that struggle it was impossible for me to not notice again, and that caring, rather than being a burden, was like a pleasure. It was so refreshing to have a sense of *I can actually pay attention to someone who has a slightly different life experience than me and find that we have so many commonalities and really see their struggle for well-being as intimately tied in with my own.* And that whereas I had worried about that being an overwhelming feeling it was actually an incredibly healing feeling. So I would like to offer our practice today. It’s intended to help us expand our hearts to people that we might not

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ordinarily notice or people who we might see as different from ourselves through our Buddhist meditation practice.

I'd like to invite you to take your meditation seat, please. And settling in, closing your eyes or letting them soften to the space in front of you. Maybe taking a couple of deep breaths in and out and allowing the body and the mind and the heart to settle. Letting the awareness touch the feeling of breathing and to follow that feeling of breathing as the breath enters in and out of the body and staying with that sensation and allowing the staying-with quality to be an adjustor of friendship towards that moment-to-moment experience.

I'd like you to imagine that you are in a room filled with people who are just like you. This can be in any way that you interpret “just like you,” perhaps all the same race or all the same gender or all the same religion or all of the above. The people who you think, “Oh, this person is similar, these people are similar to me.” Similar education, similar background. And then, from your heart beaming out to this whole group of people including yourself, resonating the wish, may we all have happiness and the causes of happiness. Letting it be like a gentle rain that falls equally on all of the beings in this room, the beings who you feel are like you and yourself included. May we all have happiness and the causes of happiness. Really cultivating the sense of being a part of this group. So, thoughts or feelings may come but renewing those phrases as the primary action of your practice. May we all have happiness and the causes of happiness.

And then allowing that visualization to start to dissolve and fade, feeling into your body and your breathing once again as a way to collect the mind, gather the attention. I'd like you to imagine yourself in a room with people who are completely different from you. It can just be many people that are in the same group that's different than you, a group of people who are a different age or a different race or a different gender, different orientation, different class. Just noticing what it feels like to be with difference. Sensations in the body, thoughts in the mind. And then offering that same wish from your heart, seeing yourself as a part of this group even with the

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difference. Saying to everyone in this room including yourself, “May we all have happiness and the causes of happiness.” And allowing that to be like a rain that falls equally on all the people in the room including yourself. May we all have happiness and the causes of happiness and saying this silently a few times, radiating this wish to yourself and this group of people who are different from you.

And then starting to add in the people that are the same as you into this group, creating a mixed group now. And starting to invite in other groups, other types of beings, other walks of life, other interests, other categories, other identities, and expanding your awareness as far as it can reach and, again, offering a few of these phrases to this expanded group, this inclusive, diverse group, may we all have happiness and the causes of happiness and wishing that equally to all of these beings, including yourself.

And then starting to allow that contemplation to soften and dissolve, coming back to the feeling in the body, body breathing. And if you’d like we can close the practice with a bow to honor the sincerity and diligence of your practice.

That brings us to the end of our session today and also of our series on friendships that liberate. It’s been such a pleasure to work with this topic and such a joy to think of a bunch of people out there working with this topic, too. I invite you to continue to work with any of these meditation practices that have been helpful or interesting and even as you go into this next week contemplating or noticing *who is it that I don’t notice* or *who is it that I slightly back away from* and as you go about your day or your week and your regular life and when you notice that kind of checked out feeling or that pull back feeling you can give a little secret *metta* shot, may you be happy. It’s a lovely practice. So, thank you very much for practicing this month and I wish you great friendship. May we all experience hearts that are filled with love and kindness. May we awaken to the truth of interdependence and may it liberate our hearts and minds. Thank you so much for joining, and thank you, *Tricycle*, for making this possible. Take care, everybody.