

Kate Johnson
Week One, *Admirable Friendship*
July 6, 2015
“Friendships Are Part of the Path”
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Hello. Welcome. This is the first in a four-part series, called “Friendships that Liberate.” It’s a journey that I’m really happy we’re going to be taking together, and it’s just a month to really explore this idea of spiritual friendship. The word that we use in Pali is *kalyana-mitta*, or in Sanskrit *kalyana-mitra*. It’s the idea of a friendship that is actually not separate from, but integral to the spiritual path and one that can help support us in our journey towards more wholeness and freedom and love, and maybe, eventually, liberation. Let’s hope.

This is the first part in which we’re going to be talking a little bit about, well, I thought we could lay the groundwork and talk about some of the terms and ideas that are in the field and that led me to be really interested in this concept of spiritual friendship that has really inspired my practice, as of late. I started thinking about this topic when I was on retreat at the Forest Refuge, which is a retreat center. It’s part of the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts.

I was there for two months during the summer, and it wasn’t my first long retreat. But during this particular retreat, I was just struck with this intense loneliness, and I wasn’t alone. I was with these other meditation practitioners. I saw them in the hall. I saw them in the dining hall and walking through the halls and in the trails. And I was also in these incredible natural surroundings. Which, to me, meant I wasn’t alone but I was with the trees and the animals and the birds and the mosquitoes. But I felt this tremendous sense of loneliness, and it was just heavy and I felt incredibly isolated.

One day, I was sitting and walking and holding this and trying to work with it. I used to like to walk down by the pond in the twilight hours, and I would walk down to the pond and there was this beaver family that I kind of thought, “Oh, they’re my friends.” I would sit by the water, look at the beavers, and do this round around the pond and then back up to the retreat center. So I had done that, that day and I was thinking, “Man, you know, I’m so lonely. I miss my friends. I miss my family. I miss my community.”

I felt like I was on a spiritual journey all alone and I start to walk up a hill and I see this figure at the top of the hill, and I thought, “Oh, my gosh, that looks just like Sharon Salzberg.” And that kind of sent me off on this whole other mental trip, where I was thinking, like, “Oh, Sharon. I love Sharon. I miss Sharon so much. I wonder what she’s doing right now?” And I’m continuing to walk up the hill and then I get closer and I realize, “Oh, my gosh, this is Sharon Salzberg.” She’s a close friend of the Interdependence Project and a mentor to many of us teachers here, and



so I walked up to her and completely broke the silence I was supposed to be in, and I said, “Sharon, oh my gosh, I miss you so much.” And she hugged me and I hugged her, and we separated. Then, she laughed and she said to me, “Oh, it's so wonderful that I saw you. I was just mentioning to someone that I had a bunch of friends here on retreat at the Forest Refuge.” And when she said that, my first thought was, like, “Oh, my gosh, Sharon Salzberg thinks of me as her friend. How incredible?” She's this well-renowned author and incredible teacher, and she's the person who I learned *metta* meditation from. Many of us have. *Metta* is a word that is often translated as lovingkindness. But I've heard that it more literally translates to friendliness or just love.

So this is this person who practices friendship kind of for a living, and I thought, “Wow. It's so great. She thinks I'm her friend. I must be really special.” And then, my second thought was, “Oh, wow. Sharon Salzberg thinks everyone is her friend.” And that doesn't make me less special, but that actually, for someone who invests in a practice like this, the practice of friendship, of cultivating friendliness over a long period of time, everyone is special. I thought, “Wow. What a beautiful mind and what a beautiful way to walk through the world.” It helped me so much over the course of the next several weeks that I was there, to pull that wish to the foreground of my awareness. This desire to cultivate a sense of friendliness, both with my own loneliness and with all the other people in the retreat center. So I became really interested in ways to cultivate this quality in a more intentional way.

After I got back to the city, I was reminded of one of the teachings of the Buddha, in which he's speaking with Ananda, one of the monks who is around him all the time. They seem to have this funny relationship where Ananda is always running up to the Buddha excitedly and proposing something that's not totally right, and then the Buddha sets him straight. In this particular *sutta*, it's very much the same dynamic between them. The story goes that one day, Ananda was thinking and walks up to the Buddha and says, “Hey, Buddha, I think that spiritual friendship is fully half of the Holy Life.” The Buddha kind of pauses and shakes his head and says, “No, Ananda. Spiritual friendship is not half the Holy Life. It is the whole of Holy Life.” I was thinking about this in relationship to my experience with Sharon and the Forest Refuge and the *sutta*.

It is really a bold statement that spiritual friendship is the whole of the Holy Life. What could that possibly mean, and what would that look like in practice? Especially in a church in which we have so many practices that we think encompass the Holy Life, right? For me, early in life, friendship was so important. I remember the first friendships that I cultivated outside of my



family life were just everything; right? And I poured so much energy and time and attention into them. As I've gotten older, romantic relationships and work relationships and my relationship with myself had become primary, and so one thing that that *sutta* did was refresh my respect for the role of friendship in a spiritual life.

And I also think that there's this way in which the Buddha is indicating that friendships are not something that's separate from our spiritual path. Certainly when I first came to practice, all of my friendships were outside of my spiritual practice. I was kind of a secret Buddhist. I didn't really talk about my spiritual practice with my friends. And certainly, many of the people in the *sangha*, in the spiritual community, I thought, "I don't know if I want to be friends with them. They're kind of uppity and maybe a little annoying." This isn't uncommon. I hear a lot from students who are really interested in the Buddha, kind of in love with the *dharmā*, and kind of so-so about the *sangha*; right? I think what the Buddha was indicating is that it's not *aside* from these relationships or *despite* these relationships, but *through* these relationships that we actually start to develop profound insight into the way things are so that our insights around impermanence and selflessness and suffering and the possibilities for liberation actually happen by way of our person-to-person, moment-to-moment interactions in a spirit of friendship. And that seeing our friendships in this way can create this holy life, this life in which all of our interactions and all of our relationships can be seen as part of our sacred practice.

I've talked about friendship, in terms of different kinds of relationships. I think friendship can also be accessed as a quality of attention, and that's really what I'd like us to work with today. In the *mitta sutta*, which is another *sutta*, the Buddha talks about seven qualities of a spiritual friend. We'll come back to the *sutta* later in the month. But two of the lines from the *sutta* that I'd love to refer to is he talks about a friend being one who gives what is hard to give and does what is hard to do. It sounds a little mysterious. But I think, in this instance, we could think of just attention and time as things that are often, for us, especially in the modern world, difficult to give and difficult to do. And that in offering ourselves our own time and attention, to a moment-to-moment experience, that we're actually cultivating a friendship with our own minds and hearts that is going to be the template for all of our other relationships.

So I'll just invite you to take a comfortable seat. The seat that you're in is probably just fine, or if you'd like to sit on the floor or a chair, and arrange your body in a way that's comfortable where you can sit for a few minutes, and you can close your eyes. Or if you feel too sleepy or if that doesn't feel comfortable, you can keep them open, but slightly downcast and half mast. So that we're starting to draw the attention away from getting our information visually, and starting to

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pay attention to our felt experience. And then just notice that you're sitting and starting to pay attention to what it feels like to be just a body sitting at this moment... noticing where the feet or legs are touching the floor or the cushion or the chair.

Noticing where the hands are touching the thighs or each other.

And allowing those connections to deepen slightly so that there's a sense of relaxing into the floor, kind of relaxing into the earth.

Allowing the spine to rise towards the sky. So that there's both in the seat a quality of relaxation and also a brightness or an energy.

And then allowing your awareness to draw to the foreground of your experience the feeling of breathing. Just noticing where you feel your breath naturally in your body. Maybe you can feel the whole rising and falling of the body with each breath or maybe there's a particular place in the body where you can access a feeling of breathing.

And allowing your awareness to kind of rest in the space when you feel the breath most deeply, and to follow that feeling of breathing as you breathe in, kind of moment-to-moment-to-moment and as you breathe out moment-to-moment-to-moment, and letting your awareness gather and unify around the sensation of breathing.

As you do this, you're staying in touch with the feeling of breathing in the foreground, just lightly dropping in the contemplation of this breath as a friend. This breath that's been with you since the day you were born that stays with you, whether you're paying attention to it or not.

It allows you to live and move through this world and grow and love and experience all that life has to offer.

And that also connects you with all of life. So that every living thing has some kind of inhalation and exhalation, some give and take with its environment. And appreciating the fact that through this breath, you are intimately connected with all of life, with all of the other beings that may be in your geographic area, even with the beings that might be farthest from you across the earth.

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And that the earth itself is in some way also breathing.

And allowing your attention to this breath to be an act of appreciation, an act of love.

And in the next few moments, starting to expand your awareness or widen the field of your attention beyond the feeling of breathing back into feeling the whole body, sitting, its location in space. And if you'd like, you can join me in a bow to close the practice, honoring the time that we've spent cultivating a friendly relationship with our own breath.

Thank you so much for allowing me to share these thoughts on friendship with you and for practicing together today. I hope that you will join us again next week and I encourage you to experiment with this idea of working with the breath as a friend. Informal practice and then, maybe even as you go about the world, have this friend that's always with you. And if you'd like, even taking on as a contemplation, how are your friendships going? It's something that you can contemplate in your own life. I find it's a really interesting question to ask my friends and loved ones. Rather than, like, "How was work?" or "How's your boyfriend or girlfriend?" Like, "How are your friendships?" I hope that's an interesting exploration for you and see you again soon.