

Kate Johnson
Week Two, *Admirable Friendship*
July 13, 2015
“What’s Different About Spiritual Friendship?”



Hi. Welcome back. So, in continuing our exploration of this topic of friendship in the Dharma and what it means for us as Buddhist practitioners. I wanted to talk a little bit today about some of the benefits of friendship, and kind of restoring respect the role of friendship in our lives. I know, for me, it's sometimes something that I have taken for granted from time to time.

I tell you oftentimes when I think of a friend in our, kind of, conventional mundane use of the word, it's like someone who I mean, think about the way we use it. It's like someone to hang out with, or a friend can be someone who we have shared interests with, like the same music or have similar style of dress, have dinner with them from time to time, and these are all totally lovely. I'm not knocking any of these. But just to point out that what we're talking about when we talk about spiritual friendship, or *kalyanamittata*, is this idea of a friendship that is, both, a path to and a support for greater freedom and liberation.

So one of the phrases that pops in the Buddhist teachings, with relationship to this idea of spiritual friendship, is association with the wise, is a phrase. It's a little clunky. But, basically, it's referring to a recommendation or a suggestion that we start to cultivate relationships with people who are spiritual practitioners. Sometimes it's used in the sense of a teacher, like a big "T," teacher, you know, someone who is very advanced in their practice and in their understanding and who can offer us some wisdom in that way, and oftentimes, it's referred to as something that is a little closer to a colleague or a fellow practitioner on the path—a community member or maybe someone who's just a few steps further along the spiritual path. Someone who has a similar practice and kind of remind us of our aspirations as meditation practitioners and followers of the dharma.

When I talk about association with the wise, I don't mean just Buddhist. In my opinion, Buddhists don't have a monopoly on enlightenment or anything, and certainly, there are many people who are really developed, real awake beings, who wouldn't call themselves Buddhists. So I'm hoping that we can take this term, *association with the wise*, kind of broadly and hold in consideration that the wise could be found outside of any spiritual discipline or kind of within different spiritual frameworks or traditions. So in the teachings of the Buddha, there are several stories in which the Buddha talks about the different benefits of being in association with the wise or in a community in which spiritual friendship exists, and one of them in particular I'm thinking about in the *Udana* talks about four different benefits of spiritual friendship.

So the first is that someone who is in association with the wise or has cultivated spiritual friendships finds themselves to be easily virtuous. So that they are, kind of, tending towards right action, action that doesn't harm but helps, that they tend to express themselves in an ethical way.

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The second quality is that if someone is associating with spiritual practitioners or associating with the wise, that they are more likely to hear talk that is dharmic. So, reflecting reality and also to hear language that leads itself towards awakening. All right. So language that is inspired language that is reflective of the truth of the way things are. It's not diluted or hyperbolic but that is kind of reflecting the real and helping us to stay grounded in reality, as well, right? The third quality is that someone who cultivates an association with the wise, they find inspired in themselves a sense of persistence, with respect to cultivating what's wholesome and healthy, and letting go of what's unhealthy, and I can think about this in terms of, you know, different circles that I've run with over the years.

That there are some friends with whom I feel real encouraged to be my best self and to pursue activities and thoughts and speech that are really in alignment with the values that I've kind of set up for myself as a human being, and then some friends I find that when I'm hanging out with them, I'm more likely to gossip or engage in behavior that's not so much in alignment with my values. So this is, kind of, what the Buddhist's talking about here with this third quality. And then, the fourth quality that he talks about as a benefit of associating with the wise is that there's a quality of discernment that starts to appear. We are more easily able to discern some of these—where we're more able to discern kind of the, like, deep insights into our experience. So, like, we're more likely to discern the arising and passing away phenomena. We're more likely to discern the, kind of, like impersonal nature of existence.

So some of these, kind of, more classical like deep insights into reality are said to be more easily seen when we cultivate association with the wise. So these are great benefits. These are certainly persuasive for me, and I was thinking, with all these great benefits to cultivating association with the wise, like why is it that we don't always do it? Or why did I specifically have some resistance to seeking out friendship with other meditators, other spiritual practitioners? It took me a while of showing up to Buddhist meditation centers and, kind of, like, public sats before I started to actually get phone numbers and hang out with people. You know, I think part of it is that it just takes time. But I was also reflecting and think that maybe one of the obstacles that arose for me, at least in the beginning, was feelings of unworthiness can arise, I think, when we're [horns honk] you know, listening to horns honk.

So sometimes, when we see people who seem to be practicing so diligently or have been practicing for a long time, sometimes feelings of unworthiness can arise. Where we kind of look at them and think, "Oh, they're so much better than me. I've only been sitting for like a month or two. They know all these incredible Sanskrit words. I don't know any." You know, there can be this tendency to compare, and so just to know that if that arises, when it arises, they're hindrances. They're what's called hindrances. So they're these classic kind of obstacles that arise that kind of keep us, like, separate from our practice, and I think the ones that you know, the

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ones that say, "Oh, this person's better than me," or "They wouldn't want to be friends with me," or "I'm not good enough at meditating, yet, to really cultivate relationships here." It's kind of like a mixture of aversion and doubt that can arise, and so the gesture that I think about when doubt arises or the quality that I think about when doubt arises, to help kind of counteract that and bring us back into a sense of, "No. I deserve to be here and I actually deserve to have friends that support my path and my highest, kind of, aspirations for myself." I think about the story of the Buddha's awakening and that, after a long time of sitting and kind of being tormented by doubt that he was said to have, he started to, kind of, have many similar thoughts. Like, "Oh, maybe, I'm not good enough for this practice," or "Who am I to think that I, kind of, deserve to wake up and to have all the support that would allow me to wake up." And it was said that in that moment, he actually took his hand and touched the earth and that the earth shook, and that was this gesture that to me says, you know, "I deserve to be here," and in this case, "I deserve to cultivate relationships with people who are on the same path."

So I'd like to lead you in a practice. If you wouldn't mind finding your meditation seat, whatever that might be. I think for this practice, it is actually slightly preferable to close your eyes, if that's comfortable. If not, certainly, keeping them a crack open is fine, and just taking a few moments to feel the body sitting, and check in with the sense of the body breathing, and maybe even touching in with the quality that we worked on in the last week of turning to the breath as if we're turning towards a dear friend that has been with us our whole life—kind of greeting that friend with our awareness.

And I'd just like to invite you to bring to mind someone who embodies this quality for you of a spiritual friend. So this is a variation on love and kindness practice, and it's the category that we sometimes call the benefactor. I like to think of this person as an advocate. So someone who has supported you, who cares for you, maybe someone who stood up for you or protected you in some way, someone who is wise and who offers you support for your own wisdom to arise. Perhaps, there's someone in your life that you know personally like this or maybe it's this idea of a person like this or someone, even a public figure, who reminds you of these qualities. So just bringing to mind this person or this being, could even be a deity, and seeing if, with your awareness, you can kind of bring this person close to you as if they're in the room with you, maybe hovering slightly above you, and just noticing the way that they look at you. That they love you and respect you and want you to be your best self. So seeing the incredible, like, warmth and care in their eyes and in their hearts for you, noticing any feelings that come up, you know, being regarded in this way by this loving, caring, friendly being, and then continuing, to the best of your ability, to receive that friendship, receive that care.

You can stay here in this relationship with them, or if you'd like, you can ask them if you can temporarily switch places with them. So that you can see yourself through their eyes. So if it's

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comfortable, kind of, stepping inside and peering back at yourself from the viewpoint of this incredibly loving, kind and caring being, regarding yourself through those loving, friendly eyes. How do you look from the perspective of this being?

Noticing any feelings or thoughts that arise and kind of continuing to gather and unify your attention and steady it towards seeing yourself through the eyes of this spiritual friend. And then, I'll just ask you to thank this being and return back to your own viewpoint. Let them return back to theirs. Thank them for being with you for this period of practice, and then allow them to kind of dissolve back into space, as you bring your attention back to the feeling of your breathing, back to the feeling of your body sitting for a few moments.

And then, if you'd like to close the practice, you can join me in a bow, just to honor the efforts that you put forth in cultivating a friendly relationship with your own mind and heart today.

So thank you so much for coming to practice today, and yeah, I invite you to continue to work with contemplation like this over the course of the week. I particularly love it when it's paired with breath meditation like we did last week. So to structure a practice at home, you can make it any length of time that works for you. But maybe the first half or two-thirds of the practice maybe working with breathing and then the last half or third, working with this benefactor advocate in the way that we just did, can be a great daily practice to try, as we're cultivating and contemplating spiritual friendship this month. In addition, if you'd like, you can take on, as contemplation, the question: "What are the friendships that I would like to cultivate in my life?" I think that this is a really useful way of kind of working with our relationships with others. So we have our personal practice where we're working on our relationship with ourselves and then, you know, in our relationships with others kind of noticing what are the relationships that support my practice, and kind of bring your energy and attention to those relationships. I would say, the way this works is kind of like permaculture so we don't have to worry about, like, getting rid of the friendships that we don't like and deciding who's not worthy of our time. But that if we just kind of bring our attention to cultivating friendships with the people that we find loving and supportive and wise that those become primary and that whatever is kind of not supportive or less healthy kind of naturally falls away. So anyway, I wish you great happiness and a really engaged week of practice, and I look forward to seeing you next week. Take care.