

Kate Johnson
Week Three, *Admirable Friendship*
July 20, 2015
“Friendship That’s Truly Unconditional”



So, welcome back and this is the third week of our month-long exploration of friendships that liberate. And I’d really love for this week to talk a little bit about the *Mitta Sutta*, which is a *sutta* in which the Buddha talks about the qualities of a friend, kind of answering the question, “What is a friend?” What qualities are we looking to cultivate in ourselves to be better friends and what qualities are we looking for in our relationships with others? And it’s a short *sutta*, so I thought I would just read the bulk of it.

So we talked about the first two lines in the first week of this retreat, that a friend is someone who gives what is beautiful and hard to give, that a friend is someone who does what is hard to do. They endure painful, ill-spoken words. They tell you their secrets. They keep your secrets. That when misfortune strikes they don’t abandon you. That when you’re down and out they don’t look down on you. And that if you find someone with these seven qualities you should make friends with them, basically. That this is a good friend. So I really love this *sutta* and I think that it speaks to one of the qualities of friendships that we talk about when we talk about spiritual friendship in the Buddhist sense, that there is a capacity to meet suffering, to be able to be with suffering, and that the friendship is not destroyed by contact with the suffering, right?

So this is a little bit of a different sensibility than the quality that we were looking at last week, which would be more aligned with the quality of *metta*, often translated as lovingkindness, friendliness, love. And so in the Buddhist commentary, the *Abhidhamma*, the proximate cause for *metta*, the reason why *metta* might spontaneously arise in the heart is said to be kind of reflecting on the good qualities of a being. And, if you remember, in the practice last week we practiced thinking of a being who is a benefactor or an advocate and reflecting on their positive qualities, the way in which they are virtuous and inspire us to have discernment and kind of enliven our desire to cultivate healthy, wholesome mind-states and practices, and not practices that are less healthy. So it’s said that reflecting on these good qualities actually awakens in us this heart of *metta*, this heart of love. We also tend to look back towards ourselves and reflect on the way in which that being sees us as, you know, kind, as generous, as diligent, as willing. And that that could help us cultivate this heart of *metta* for ourselves.

So what we’re talking about when we look at the *Mitta Sutta*, or I think what’s suggested in the *Mitta Sutta*, is not totally separate from *metta*, but it’s another kind of heart quality that I think has *metta* at its base, but that it’s sometimes said that when the heart of *metta* turns towards suffering what flowers in that moment is compassion, which is another one of these boundless qualities of heart and mind that are present in and strengthened by spiritual friendship.

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I think this is an important quality to reflect on when we’re talking about friendship with ourselves and others; because, for me at least, it’s a lot of times much easier to cultivate compassion for a friend that’s suffering than to cultivate compassion for my own suffering.

That often it’s easier for me to cultivate an unconditional positive regard for a friend, right? That even when they’re down and out, even when misfortune has stricken them or, yeah, even when they’ve acted unskillfully, there’s this way in which I can cultivate this understanding that this is a moment in time for this person and that this is a basically good being and I can kind of allow my heart to kind of resonate and soften along with theirs in that moment of difficulty. But I find that it’s been more of an intentional practice to cultivate a compassionate relationship with my own suffering, right? To be able to offer these qualities of friendship to myself in moments of difficulty. And maybe you can relate to this, that sometimes there are these subtle—I think about them as the “Ifs”, like, “I love myself unconditionally if I do everything right,” “I love myself unconditionally if I stay at my ideal weight,” “I love myself unconditionally if my partner loves me,” you know. So I think that one of the invitations of the *Mitta Sutta* is for us to contemplate the ways in which we might be able to maintain and even kind of expand our gesture of friendship in times where things are difficult.

So just to look a little more closely at some of the lines in the *Mitta Sutta*, we talked about in that first class the friend is someone who gives what is beautiful and hard to give and does what is hard to do. And we talked about one way we can think about these phrases is as indicating time. It’s beautiful and difficult to give another being or even ourselves our time and also our attention—loving attention. These are these first two qualities. The third quality says, “A friend endures painful, ill-spoken words,” right? So this is not to say we should abuse someone else or abuse ourselves with our language, but I think that the Buddha is saying here that even a word spoken out of turn isn’t capable of destroying this: a friendship in this kind of environment of spiritual friendship.

The next couple phrases that the friend tells you their secrets and keeps your secrets. I thought about this for a little while. Like, what could this possibly mean?

I think that those two phrases are less—in my interpretation—less about the secrets and more about the quality of relationship that this type of confidentiality engenders so that what we’re talking about here is an honest relationship and a trusting relationship in which if there was something spoken in confidence there’s a trust there on both sides and there’s a capacity to be honest about what’s really going on. Sometimes this is just honesty about the fact that we’re not doing so hot today. We’re not feeling so well, and so to be able to say to ourselves or to a friend when they ask how we are to say, “Like, you know, not so good. I could use a hug,” or “do you have time to talk?”

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And these last couple I think are particularly beautiful and particularly important: when misfortune strikes they don’t abandon you, and when you’re down and out they don’t look down on you. There’s an understanding here that this happens to all of us from time to time. There’s a teaching where the Buddha talks about the eight worldly winds, sometimes called the vicissitudes. These states kind of blow through our lives and they are pleasure and pain, and gain and loss, and praise and blame, and fame and disrepute. You know. And the point of the teaching is that we all kind of get some of one pole and some of the other pole, you know. Nobody gets all of the fame and none of the disrepute. No one gets all the blame and none of the praise. You know. And so in the moments where we are experiencing misfortune or being down and out, the friend—either the friend outside or the our own friendly relationship with ourselves—we’re not going to abandon ourselves or the other in this moment. Okay? Okay.

So yeah, I’d love to offer our practice to help us kind of connect with this quality of a friend, the friendship that is capable of meeting suffering and remaining strong. So if you’d like, please, find your meditation seat and you can close your eyes. Once, again, dropping into the feeling of the body sitting, exploring with your awareness what that feels like. We’re starting to draw into the foreground of the awareness the feeling of breathing.

Letting your awareness contact the feeling of breathing on a moment-to-moment basis as it comes in, as the breath comes in and the breath goes out, as a way to kind of gather and unify the attention and calm the body and mind and as a gesture of friendship and loyalty to our own moment-to-moment experience. And I’d like to invite you to bring to mind a friend, someone you know and care about who might be having a difficult time, maybe not the person who’s befallen the worst tragedy, you know, but someone who’s knowing some difficulty in their life at this moment and imagine them maybe sitting in front of you. Or, I like to imagine them sitting beside me.

And then kind of saying to them with your heart, or from your heart, you can imagine saying the words or just letting it be like a beam of light from your heart to their heart, but offering them the phrases: “I care about you. I’m here for you. I won’t abandon you.” Just notice how that feels and then repeating these phrases silently to yourself, or to them really, from time to time: I care about your suffering, I’m not going to abandon you, I’m here for you.

And just offering those phrases to that friend a few times in your own voice, in your own timing, in your own imagination. And then just allowing that friend to kind of dissolve into space and bring to mind a time when you, yourself, were experiencing difficulty, not the worst tragedy in your life, but a bit of difficulty. Or maybe there’s even some difficulty you’re experiencing now, a challenge, a place where you feel unsure or uncertain or unsteady. Just turning your awareness and your own heart towards that part of yourself or yourself in that time and offering those same

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phrases to yourself: “I care about this suffering, I’m not going to abandon you, I’m here for you.”

So offering these phrases, or a variation of these phrases, to yourself a few times silently: “I care about this suffering, I’m not going to abandon you, I’m here for you.”

Noticing any thoughts or sensations or feelings that arise and that all those are fine. Anything that arises is fine to be here, just continuing to foreground that experience, that experience of offering yourself those phrases as gestures of friendship. And then starting to allow that contemplation to kind of soften and dissolve and taking a few moments to come back to the feeling of the body sitting and breathing, taking perhaps a few deep cleansing breaths.

And when you’re ready, if you’d like, you can join me in a bow to honor the steadfastness and bravery of that practice. So thank you very much for choosing to practice today. I hope that this was useful for you. If it was you can feel free to work with this over the course of the next week perhaps in conjunction with the breath awareness practice that we used in the first week. So setting aside the first portion the time to work with the breath awareness as with a friend, and then the second portion to work with the visualization that we just experimented with if it’s helpful to you.

I’d also like to suggest, you know, as a contemplation to start to notice those places—the “Ifs”—like, what the “Ifs” are for you: “I am capable of loving myself, if..” And when you notice them, like, just take note and see if it’s possible to approach it with a sense of humor, like, “Oh, there it goes again, that one exception,” and seeing if maybe it’s possible to just start to expand your sense of friendship so that it includes even when we mess up, even when we’re not perfect, even when conditions are not ideal, the friendship starts to become less and less conditional.

So thank you very much for continuing to work with your heart and mind and relationships and I look forward to seeing you again next week for our final session together. Take care.