

Gregory Kramer

Understanding the Power of Relationship and Turning It Towards the Good

September 1, 2024



Hi, my name is Gregory Kramer. I've been asked to begin by saying something about myself. But I could point out that just by hearing my voice, and seeing this image, you already know a lot about me. Or at least you think you do: age, race, gender.

In this very moment, you're assessing me. *Is this guy safe? Is he for real?*

Of course, the image touches all the constructs that you have. *Oh, it's another old person, or it's a white person, or it's another man or a Buddhist teacher.* You see me a certain way with that.

All of that is going on right now, and it sets our relational field together. This is where we are. But there's much more than that already.

I can tell you about my background and I will. I've been teaching meditation for more than 45 years now and all of my teachers were Theravada monastics.

But really in this tone of voice, the felt sense of who I am, and how much you show up, and how we relate: that's already happening.

So you know a little bit about my background now, but I'll also tell you that since the mid 90s, I've been developing Insight Dialogue, a relational form of insight meditation and dharma contemplation, which is a text-based meditative practice with the discourses. I've been exploring a relational understanding of the Buddhist teachings of the dharma.

Spiritual Friendship

The Buddha said spiritual friendship is the whole of the holy life. Why would he say that? Not just that it's important, but that it's really the whole thing. What does that mean? What is this holy life that we're talking about?

In order to understand why spiritual friendship and why relational practices are so powerful on this path, we need to touch again, this observation about how sensitive we are, first of all, to the whole world.

Light touches the eye, and wow, big response. It could be just a rock or a tree, and there's so much information, so much detail for survival. But also for pleasure or to avoid pain.

These mechanisms are very sensitive: the hearing with just the slightest air pressure changes at the ear, the touch of the body. This is how we navigate the world.

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But when what touches the body, or touches the eye, or the ear is perception, and it's a human being, then all of these other aspects of our being are recruited. And wham. It's a powerful experience. We're built that way.

That's the foundation for responsiveness by which of course, we have lots of responses: anger, fear, hatred, divorce, abuse. All kinds of things come out of that sensitivity. But also, of course, love and compassion.

As we'll see, in the feedback loop that happens when there's two or more in contact, and there's mindfulness in one and mindfulness in the other, and that reflects back and forth with the instantaneous moment, the brightness of awareness, that same relational multiplier is going to work.

That has huge implications for liberating practice.

Intrinsically Relational

We are as intrinsically relational, as we are individual. That is, I will never know your inner life. Certainly in this moment, I could look at you, we could speak together, but there's still the entire universe of your inner world.

I can get some sense of it by what you speak to me, or how I read your face or even more subtle things that I'm picking up that I may not know that I'm picking up. So that's going on, and you with me. So we have this system together.

Even so, there's a private world, or a world that is only built and experienced from within. So you're intrinsically individual. At the same time, as we just said, our bodies are built relationally.

We evolved relationally, to survive and work together and build families and build cultures. That's why the human animal dominates the planet, because we work together and flexibly so well. But also our hormone systems, the brain structure. So we are intrinsically relational even when we're alone. We feel safe or unsafe and so on.

The dharma, being about the nature of the human experience of suffering or freedom, must be as intrinsically relational as it is individual. Because the Buddha was clearly speaking about and from this human experience.

So when he spoke about suffering, do you think that didn't include the suffering of difficult families? Of people who harm us or treat us poorly? He explicitly pointed out all those aspects of suffering.

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But somehow in our culture, it doesn't get recognized or called out because we have quite an individualistic culture. And that limits and harms us, I think. You can see for yourself.

He spoke about craving—sounds like things that we do with other people, doesn't it?—wanting and fear, pleasure and pain, and ignorance. And surely that includes how we manifest these in relationship.

So we see the power of relationship, we see this relational multiplier can go towards ill: war, racism, mob politics, dysfunctional families, but it also goes towards good: caring families, professionals, health care workers and psychotherapists, aid organizations. This is all the power of working together going towards the good.

The Power of Relatedness for Cultivating Wisdom

But I'd like to introduce this other aspect, a major shift really, from just seeing that piece of it. The power of our relatedness can be put to work for cultivating wisdom. It can be put to work for strong awareness and deep inquiry.

So relationships obviously broaden our perspectives that keep us focused on an inquiry. And we learn from others. We follow their example. Think of the *Kalyana-Mittata (Sariputta Sutta)*, how to live like this. The Buddha said to make time to be with people, good people, spiritual friends, wise people, talk with them, emulate them in their conviction in their virtue, in their generosity, in their wisdom.

And elsewhere, we see him saying that one with good friends can be expected to develop the noble eightfold path. So this is the power of spiritual friendship, and why it's the foundation of the holy life.

Interpersonal Meditation

Insight Dialogue is an interpersonal meditation practice that puts this very power to work. It's completely aligned and working with traditional silent meditation. Indeed, that's where it came from. That was its roots, the developing meditative qualities, the factors of awakening, diminishing things like the hindrances, greed, hatred, and delusion. But it's an actual formal practice, and it's supported by forms and by teachers.

We can picture two or more people in meditation practice: if I sit down with this intention to cultivate mindfulness, and you do the same.

You and I, right now, could be doing this. Here we are. And this awareness, just sitting in front of you. When you pause, it's like, *oh, wow, here's this moment*. You just reminded me. You didn't just cultivate and bring up and brighten your mind. You helped do that for me.

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And I pause. *Oh, right, right.* I had gotten distracted. I had gotten reactive or something, where I was just in conceptual thinking and you, you pause, and it brings me into the moment.

But also, now, not only am I cultivating the mindfulness, but there's a kind of a mutual downregulation, a calming that can happen.

We know that two or more people together can get all excited together. We don't always recognize how two or more together can calm each other down. Something in the compassion, in the safety, in the love, even just the shared intention to be together in a way that is wholesome and awakening calms us.

Insight Dialogue: The Six Guidelines

So we have the Inside Dialogue guideline one: Pause, which is a meditation instruction related to mindfulness, *sati*.

Relax invites the factor of awakening of *passaddhi* or tranquility, and *samadhi*, concentration, calm serenity, stillness.

We have (1) Pause, (2) Relax, (3) Open, and just straight out of the Satipatthana Sutta, mindfulness is established internally, externally, and both internally and externally.

This is straight out of the discourses as it describes a relational or less dualistic view of me being aware of you. It's internal and external in that moment.

So that's the guideline Open. And then the next guideline: (4) Attune to Emergence. Again, back to the Satipatthana Sutta. One is mindful of the rising and the vanishing.

Attuning to emergence is to be aware, on the edge of the present moment. So here we are. Even as you hear these words, they're vanishing.

Or you can look at their rising. So as we attune to the rising and vanishing, to the *anicca*, to the impermanence, it brightens the mind. It gives us something to work with when things get difficult, when things get active. We don't have to dive in and try to hold on. Oh, I can just be aware of this piece or this piece—you'd go crazy.

But if you draw back, open and attune to emergence, you're riding with the flow, the rising and vanishing of it. A very flexible quality of mind. And then the last two guidelines are, (5) Listen Deeply, and (6) Speak the Truth.

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This sounds like what it is and it's much deeper. The quality of listening, the way that you bring the *sati* and the *samadhi*, the mindfulness and the concentration, right into receiving the words, the body, the face, the presence of the other, listen deeply.

The Truth of Experience

And speak the truth is kind of a secret sauce, because it's what allows bringing in the conceiving mind, to speak, to use words. But to speak the truth, you have to know what the truth is. So that means mindfulness in this moment. It's not just about the truth of the world out there.

Truth in meditation is the truth of experience. So to speak the truth, even if you're bringing in a dharma teaching, it's what's true now when that teaching touches me. So all of a sudden, with these meditative qualities that we're cultivating together, we can drop into the seed of this awareness between us and this alertness, a teaching on let's say, the inevitability of death or of the hunger to exist or to be seen, or conceit.

And these things the Buddha spoke about, all these human qualities, as well as these really penetrating teachings on dependent origination, and the aggregates, all of this can be brought into present moment experience. The language is dropped, and there you are, here we are together. What's this?

Then, of course, we can expand this practice, we see that the individual practices is the foundation, the specific relationship is a ground for practice. And this expands and extends to communities, groups of friends, and so on.

The Results of Interpersonal Meditation Practice

There's a lot of ways to think about the results of interpersonal meditation practice of Insight Dialogue. Since there's such a thirst in our lives for depth of practice, for deep understanding, for stillness, for insight really, sometimes in deep practice, the mind can get very quiet. And two together, being quiet and alert, can experience awareness meets awareness, not self meets self.

And we may experience the dissolving of a fixed and isolated self really. We may experience deep tranquility as the body-mind settles and the hungers abate. This is a kind of relational insight, a relational gateway to *annata*, to not-self.

We may well encounter the living experience of metta, of loving kindness and compassion. Not metta as a formal practice where you recite phrases which is a good, helpful practice. But the living direct experience of the hindrances out of the way, and the natural response to another human being, rich with kindness and rich with care, because that's how we're built.

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So in that sense, we become less deranged, by comparing mind, by interpersonal desire, interpersonal fear.

Think of the *Sedaka Sutta*, the discourse on the Acrobat where the Buddha says: looking after oneself, one looks after others. So that's your mindfulness practice, you look after yourself, and others are safe and cared for, because you're looking after yourself.

Looking after others, one looks after oneself. That's the metta practice, which is to say, when I'm cultivating metta, naturally, or with formal practices, I'm looking after you, but by doing so, I'm looking after myself.

It's a powerful teaching, and we see that working pretty much dynamically and all the time in Insight Dialogue. And we're nurturing our relational capacity.

This possibility of greater intimacy of a different sort, both the constructed intimacy that's more emotional and has roots in history, and the unfabricated intimacy of awareness with awareness, which is not dependent on personality and history.

A deeper sense of how to listen, how to speak truthfully, to have patience and equanimity. In the places we need it most. Human contact is complex.

The Power of Human Contact

Jesus said, "Wherever two or more are gathered, there am I, in my name, there am I among them."

It's true. When you have the intention, in the name of Jesus, and you get two people together, something holy is there. But two or more gathered, not in Jesus's name, it's just complex.

Two or more gathered, guided by the dharma, that's strong stuff, and that dharma comes alive as embodied experience.

It's not theoretical dharma. Buddha talks about clinging, you pause, you look at it, it's an immediate internally felt living experience of clinging and non-clinging, freedom. And Insight Dialogue can teach us the feeling, the potential of good friendship.

And in communities I've seen it, where a lot of people practice Inside Dialogue together, like the Global Insight Dialogue Community, in this sub-community, in different countries and so on. The base level of relatedness grows, increases, because people have experienced these other forms of being together, rooted in the dharma, rooted in awareness, but it's awareness infused with wisdom.

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Learning to Live the Dharma

We see then that with Insight Dialogue, we're learning to live the dharma beyond conceiving. The Buddha's teachings are experienced, they're embodied. They're real, they're meaningful in my life, as I actually live it, alone and with others.

But be ready, because mindfulness practice with others may help you see the division and injustice in your own heart too.

Where do my words, my actions come from care and foster harmony? It's a good question, but also where not? Where am I bound? Where am I biased?

We all are. That's just how it is. That's part of being human, part of having a heart, a mind.

Is there loneliness or lack of meaning driving me to consume? Or am I living in a sustainable way?

When the mindfulness that's developed in relationship enters your life, we see in a dynamic form, these aspects of our own being.

Do my friendships nourish ignorance, or clear seeing?

Does this particular conversation contribute to wise view, wise understanding?

How do my spiritual friendships contribute to my continuity of living the Eightfold Path?

We can take examples like the metta sutta: *am I acting as a good friend to others?* The Buddha shares certain ways to do that, and mindfulness. And these kinds of practices will help us see that.

Liberation Individually, Relationally and Collectively

So meditating while speaking and listening brings us to wonder: how does all this fit with these deeper sides of the practice as well with wordless insight?

How can words and talking guide us to the wordless? And meditating both silently and in relationship, we naturally wonder, what does liberation mean individually? What does it mean in relationship? And collectively? And how do we manifest all three of those all the time?

And that is a question our world needs to answer.

A Practice to Take Home

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I'd like to leave you with a practice you can take home, a really simple one. We've talked about it already. It's the pause.

It's simple. But because there's so much pressure, not only in our habits of speech, but in all of our habits of mind, of bodily action.

So maybe bring some intentionality, do some experiments, set aside a specific time or a specific person that you might practice with. They don't even have to know you're practicing. It's can be when you first go into work, first thing you're going to do, first conversation: pause. *What am I aware of now?*

Or sitting down at the dinner table: pause. Maybe while you're eating, a physical pause, but also try bringing it into your speaking.

That forward momentum for all of us is very strong. So you pause. *What am I aware of now?* The body, the mind states, the other person, spaciousness, small or big.

Anytime. Anywhere. You can pause.

I hope this serves you in some way. Thanks for your time.