

Spiritual Friendship

*A Dharma talk by Reverend Master Phoebe
Pine Mountain Buddhist Temple - February 2002*

Today we will talk a bit about friendship and friends, and just to make sure that you understand I am not making this up, Rev. Seikai is going to read something from *The Dhammapada*, which is old.

Rev. Seikai said, "This is verse 78 from *The Dhammapada*, and it's under a little chapter that's regarding the wise man, and what a wise man does and doesn't do."

"Do not have evildoers for friends. Do not have low people for friends. Have virtuous people for friends. Have for friends the best of the men." (*The Dhammapada*, verse 78)

In the time of the Buddha the people who were studying with the Buddha - lay people as well as monks - the Buddha often addressed them as friend or so it comes over in the translation. Of course over time... when people ask him a question the answer often starts with friend as a way of address. And I've always really liked that, and in many ways that's how I see all of you and I hope you see me, and that's how I see the monk as well, as friends. Then we are talking about spiritual friendship rather than all the various different ways of friendship that exist in the world. And there is a difference. There are several differences.

The first thing that is important, I think, to get here is that to be friends involves respect, mutual respect. Not in the way of the strict hierarchical idea, you know, of "I am the prior and you are all trainees, so you have to be polite." That's not the kind of respect that I mean, but the respect that people have who are convinced of each other's good intention and of each other's sincerity in practice, and that is what is important - the sincerity of practice. So I respect that in all of you, and I'm assuming you're respecting that in me and in Rev. Seikai and in each other, because otherwise you wouldn't be here.

Sincerity of practice does not have terribly much to do with achievement in practice because we all have to start where we are, and you don't measure each other to where you are or what you have achieved but more with the good intention and the sincerity. And not only do you regard each other's sincerity of practice, but you also regard your own, and you have respect for that, and you trust that, and you encourage that in yourself. And by encouraging it in yourself you encourage it in other people as well. So we all come together and we do this thing together.

Last week apparently Asha and her friends in the car - they had a flat tire - and Asha wrote a lovely little article on that which is going to go in the newsletter. You're all named by name. (Laughter) There is some real lovely insight in there, and the last sentence or so - it's like this was not a very nice thing to happen but I'm glad it happened with these people. So she really did appreciate the way everybody was showing their friendship. So that's one sort of aspect of this.

Another aspect of it is that in training and in spiritual friendship there is not encouragement for mutual dependency, which there you start to be different from what's happening in the world. In the world very often you choose your friends, kind of knowingly or unknowingly, because they're giving you something that you don't think you have yourself or you think you need a little more of. For instance, they make you feel needed. They make you feel looked after. Both those two opposites can be the case. Or they can protect you. There are many relationships in the world where people have a relationship and they sort of have this mutual agreement, that maybe never even got put into words, that if you put up with this weakness of mine, then I'll put up with that weakness of yours, and we'll not talk about it, and we'll just make it sort of okay for one another.

And in spiritual friendship we don't do that. And the reason why we don't do it is because it slows you down in your being complete. We trust that we are complete. We don't need somebody else to boost us up permanently. Every now and then everybody needs a bit of boosting a little bit. And that's okay. But it has to be understood that it isn't permanent. And it's very good to at least every now and then remind yourself that is what is going on. And that's where a spiritual friendship with a monk and even amongst yourselves becomes

different from a worldly one. And that's where I on occasion get accused of indifference - loving indifference, somebody said once. And I actually thought that was quite a good description. Because although there is a sense of friendship and a sense of love, there is no dependency, because once there is that then you are just preparing the way for getting stuck.

So I'll not necessarily call you all up a lot. I'll call you up every now and then, and I think it's a good thing, but at other times I might not. I'll leave it up to people to come if and when they want to. And sometimes from a human point of view I'm an ordinary person and I think, "Well, where is everybody now?" (Laughter) But then I sit still for a moment and I think, "Well, that's really not my business." I decided to come and live here. I decided to come and do this thing, so people are helping or they're not helping, but that's not really the point. This is what I'm doing.

In the world there is a price that you pay for that, for the kind of coziness, the reassuring, the being needed kind of thing. And the price that you pay for that is you slightly allow yourself to do a little bit less than you could or can, or a little bit more than is good.

It says in the verse that Rev. Seikai was just reading, "Do not be friends with low people or..." what was the other one, unwise people? Evildoers - now evildoers - you have to remember what I've said before. Evil in Buddhism is everything that is not in harmony with meditation, so evildoers is not just the murderers and the burglars (laughter). It is the people who will encourage you in your weakness, or who will encourage themselves in their weakness and use you to help with that. Those are evildoers, and it sounds much worse than we would like to think of it. And that's where it gets tricky, because you are out in the world and you know these things are going on.

Now in the old days this is why lay-trainees were not encouraged to talk with one another. They were not encouraged to just have friendships. They'd come to a Temple, and you sit and you do a ceremony, and then you all go your own way, because there was a fear - and sometimes it happens, and I have no doubt it still happens - that people would actually encourage each other's negative thinking, sense of doubt, sense of unhappiness. And they would just

sort of get into grouching about it, and agree with one another, and before you know it it sort of would roll down hill.

But that's actually quite a long time ago that that was seen that way, and meanwhile on the whole people are maturing and there is a whole lot of other stuff that you lot share with one another, which is wisdom and kindness and compassion and insight, and understanding with training, and helping cleaning up the muddy car tracks. ***So personally I think it's well worth having friendships because of all that good stuff, and every now and then it doesn't hurt to remind yourself that there is a possibility of just getting stuck in that.*** And if you catch yourself - or if you're in the car driving down hill and the whole group kind of goes, "Well gee, it was really cold in that ceremony hall. I don't know what Rev. Phoebe was thinking!" (Laughter) and it becomes more than just that, it gets into, you know, serious doubt about the practice, or real negative attitude stuff - listen to the little alarm bell that goes off inside you, and say, "Hmm, I don't know," and find a way to break through it, or just shut up and think "I'm just going to not join in with this." So that's the whole evildoers business.

The other side of that is that you know in yourself something isn't completely right, but the other person is doing it also and they're not saying anything. So maybe it's not quite that bad, so you kind of keep each other afloat just a little bit. And that's something to watch out for as well in a friendship, in a spiritual friendship.

Now one of the things that I've read somewhere and I don't know where - I think it's also in *The Dhammapada* - that says a good friend will tell you what is difficult to hear. Do you remember that bit? ***A good friend will encourage you to do what is good, even if it's difficult.*** And so there again it's good to have friends, and you talk with your friends. And you develop a sense of trust with your friends, because to encourage somebody to do what is good, or to tell somebody what is difficult to hear, cannot be done until there is sufficient trust. And people every now and then run into that. They see other trainees who are doing things that they think, if they did them, something would be said. And this person just seems to be getting away with it. This used to happen at the Abbey and I'm sure

it's still happening. That may have to do with the level of trust that is going on. And you all know how that works.

I have to feel my way. Rev. Master (Jiyu-Kennett) used to have to feel her way. Somebody comes and asks me something and sometimes I give it them straight, and at other times I don't, because I'm not having the feeling that that would be helpful. And every now and then, I make a mistake in that, and I'll come out with something thinking there was sufficient trust, and there wasn't. So the person gets upset. It happens.

If you find that that has happened to you, that I've said something that really hurt you, or I did something that really hurt you, or that you just couldn't understand, please try and come back and ask about it, because that's your part of building on the friendship. And instead of going off in a huff and being totally hurt and staying away for a long time, stay away for a little bit, and then kind of scrabble back together and say "Well, I'm going to give her one more chance (laughter) - I'm going to just ask her what this was about." And that is your offering when you do that.

And mostly then what happens is, you know, it'll get talked over and sorted out and, fine, and I learn something and you learn something. And that then becomes a positive thing. Whereas, if you just stay away, and say well my feelings are hurt, then you close a door and that's that, and that is not practicing true friendship. So you see how the friendship has to work both ways. It's not ever a one-sided thing. And everybody who's in there learns from it. You give but you receive much more than you give always.

Would you mind repeating the last line?

Does anybody got any comments at this point, or questions?

"Have virtuous people for friends. Have for friends the best of men." Rev. Seikai said, "I think men can be people, men and women." Rev. Phoebe then continued, "people or dogs." (Laughter) The best of beings. And this is not a dualistic statement that sort of looks at people with a judgmental eye. But you do look with the eye of discerning wisdom. And this is what happens with everybody who

starts to seriously work on having a spiritual practice - is that there is a whole bunch of people that you have to deal with in your work or in your bars that you frequent on the weekend or wherever you go, whatever you do. (Laughter) There are, you know, people who just go out on the weekend, and then they start to practice, and then they begin to realize that actually going out on a Friday night and a Saturday night begins to lose a little bit of its appeal. And there is just no way around of that. It does. It changes your outlook and it changes your interests. And it begins to make you feel uncomfortable, because what's going on in those places is actually breaking the precepts, or just a total waste of time, or boring. And there is a period of time where that is really difficult because you thought those people were your friends. Now you are beginning to see it's a rather shallow business. It actually is drawing you into saying things or behaving in ways that afterwards you feel you're not completely happy with. But if you let that go, you haven't got any friends left. And that's no good either. So that is difficult.

That is why it is good to develop friendships with people who are meditating as well, because nobody wants to have no friends. And so I do encourage you all, guys, to talk with one another, go out and have a meal every now and then, go for a walk on the beach - whatever it is you want to do. Sit together, go weight lifting or whatever, or even go out - go out and have a meal. ***Because it is important to have friends, and it is also important to have friends that actually have something of value to bring to you, so you don't waste your time.***

And this whole process is usually a natural one. You don't have to sort of say, that is it, get my little address book out and I'm going to scrap these these these. It quite naturally happens. And just as you get bored with your bar going friends, they'll get bored with you also quite naturally (laughter). And so usually it just sort of happens. And you can allow that to happen.

And every now and then there'll be somebody who is not getting bored with you, and who wants something that you are not happy to give, like a serious romantic relationship. Or somebody just keeps wanting you to come out and hunt with them, or what have you. And every now and then you might just have to say, "No, I'm just not

interested in this. This is not a good idea.” ***And there you have to be your own best friend, and know what it is that you truly want, and then make that clear to yourself. And if it’s completely clear to yourself, it’ll be clear to others as well.*** And then you won’t end up making promises that you cannot keep, or compromising yourself in ways that you feel bad about, or doing things just in order to be considered to be a nice person - which everybody wouldn’t mind being a nice person - but that’s not really the purpose of practice.

(At this point in the tape, someone asked a question about family members having different interests and expectations than you might have.)

...Yeah, it might, and then it’s actually in some ways probably a sign of a larger area of people going different ways, and expectations have to be let go of. And of course if your family’s members are still little and you’re bringing up your kids - everybody remembers that I think. We were being brought up and we had to go to church because our parents wanted us to. Pretty soon my parents ceased to want me to and I kept wanting to go, so that was an equal problem. When there is that sort of growing up age, there has to be compliance. But when everybody’s grown up people have to stand up for what their conviction is. And find ways of either allowing each other to do that whilst living in the same house or, when that isn’t possible, looking for other ways. Because the same thing is happening that you can only compromise yourself so much. ***And it would be a shame if you came to the end of your life and suddenly thought I’ve never actually done what I truly wanted to do.***

But you see, what you truly want to do is one half of it. The other half of it is, are you truly willing to pay the price of what that is? We’ve talked about that before. It’s one thing to say I really want this, but do you really want it that deeply that you are willing to do whatever it’s going to take. And those two things have to come together, and you can bring them together.

I think the difficulty with that for people is that they think - and it looks like that - that there is the difficulty of wanting something that’s far away or hard to get, and you have to pay the price, and it’s going to

take a long time, and maybe that price is going to be so bad that you'll just find you're just really feeling terrible for a long time before you get this thing. ***Now that actually is a mistake, because what you'll find is that once you actually start working on doing what it is your heart truly wants, that brings contentment - not the reaching of it, but the knowing that you are putting yourself in that direction. That brings contentment. And the contentment is actually what you really want.*** So it's right there.

Does that make some kind of sense? I'm finding this a little difficult to put into words. Does it make sense? It's a little bit like when I was painting the Dharma house. For a year and a half I kept thinking the inside of the Dharma house really needs painting. And it was this kind of nagging thing inside me. I was thinking it's too big, and nobody's helping, and I don't know when to start, and I have no time. And I felt unhappy about it all the time. And one day I thought, well, I'll just do this one little section of wall. And the moment I started, I felt contentment. I wasn't even thinking of when I was going to finish it. It took me about almost two months. I did a little section of wall every morning and that was enough. ***And it's the same with doing your practice wholeheartedly. Don't look at when it's going to be finished. And don't look at what it's going to do the rest of your life. Just start. And do a little bit everyday. And that brings the contentment and the peace of mind. It really does.*** If there isn't peace of mind, if there's still niggling, then that means that there is something else that you can do in this day about it. Which is a horribly scary thought, isn't it? (Laughter)