

I'm wondering how many of you are -- how many of you are here for the first time for a dharma talk? Welcome.

And for the first time coming to sit?

How many of you have been coming here for a long time? (A few hands)

And it looks like, based on my questions, most of you are somewhere in between.

So today I wanted to talk -- the topic of today's talk, as well as the topic of a workshop this afternoon, is that of friendship. In particular, some of the things that the Buddha is said to have said about friendship and I would like to explore and unpack some of these things, and explore for ourselves what we mean by friendship.

What does spiritual friendship mean? Is that more than friendship? What is that?

So I wanted to start by reading an oft-quoted section of the early discourses; there's a story, and there's different translations of it but I'll just give you one for now:

When Ananda (one of the Buddha's disciples) said to the Buddha, Lord, I think that half of the holy life is spiritual friendship. The Buddha replied, "That is not so, say it is not so, Ananda, it is not half of the holy life, it is the whole of the holy life!"

So in this quote, the Buddha is basically saying to his disciple -- who just got done saying that ahh, yeah, I got it, spiritual friendship is important! The Buddha says it's actually the whole of the holy life!

In the Pali it's kalyana mita -- sometimes translated into English as "good friendship", "good companionship", "good comradeship", and so on. So, looking at the words -- kalyana doesn't have spiritual in it at all, that's kind of implied -- it means beautiful. Or benevolent. Virtuous. That's the kalyana -- beautiful qualities or benevolent qualities. Virtuous. And mita is the same that you have in "metta" -- also the same as maitri -- every Saturday we chant the loving kindness sutra which is also called the metta sutra -- this is about universal loving kindness to all beings. As it says, like a mother to her only child.

So this idea of metta or mita or maitri, this idea of qualities of loving kindness, friendship. So kalyana mita as the whole phrase has the feeling of a beautiful, virtuous, spiritual friendship. That's where the word spiritual comes in. I'm not sure they really had a word for "spiritual" in Pali.

So I wanted to start by giving you that quote and talking a little bit about

what the difference is -- what do we think of when we think of a friend? Like, who are our friends? How do we make friends? What are their necessary ingredients? Is it just who we hang out with? Who makes us feel good? Like, not even going into the spiritual part, which I think for a lot of us is kind of, "well what does that mean" -- just what are friends? We probably all come from a lot of different backgrounds or traditions and "spiritual" can really be kind of vague sometimes. Or it seems like you could use the word and not know if it meant the same thing for the person you were talking with.

So let's for a moment consider -- what is friendship? Think of a friend you made in 5th grade; what made him or her a friend? Any thoughts?

Student: Ongoing initiative to connect.

Student: Sharing.

Student: Feeling comfortable and supported.

Student: Laughing.

Student: Have to be in the same place at the same time -- a shared space.

Student: The connection feels like a refuge to me.

Student: Like interests.

Mako: So we have sharing, ongoing initiative to connect, there's a feeling of humor or laughter, and so on. A feeling like you can really be yourself, right? Sharing. And then there's got to be something that brings you together -- and the ability to have time together. And those are some of the ingredients of what makes someone a friend.

Do you have to have the same political view or dress the same way or have the same religion? No, not really. What are the shared interests then? There has to be something shared. Like maybe a love for the arts or a sport that is played together -- something that you do together or appreciate together. And then there's something that makes you feel safe or makes you feel that you can be yourself -- a refuge.

Alright, that's pretty good. What makes those friendships spiritual friendships? What comes up around that when you throw that into the mix? How is that different?

Student: Supported in practice.

Mako: Okay, maybe there's something specific that is shared about a shared orientation towards things.

Student: Somebody who isn't able to connect in the sort of usual way but there can still be a connection -- like maybe they don't speak the same language or something. So somebody that is not able to connect in the sort of "usual" ways but there is still some connection. That's what you're saying -- this is a spiritual friendship.

Student: I think all of these are subsets of spiritual friendships.

Mako: All these friendships are subsets of spiritual friendships. What about friendships that are -- have you ever had a friend that this wasn't so friendly? It wasn't so much of a friendship? Is that a spiritual friendship?

Student: Sure.

Mako: What makes it a spiritual friendship.

Student: You're learning about yourself.

Mako: Hmm. So that's one of the necessary ingredients then -- you're learning about yourself. It might not be a very good friendship but maybe if you're learning about yourself then it's great?

Student: Less conditions on a spiritual friendship.

Mako: There's less conditions? So, give me an example.

Student: I guess, compared to a regular friendship, where one might have more conditions about shared reality, preferences. You have to like the same kind of things and so forth. Thinking about like in middle school, where everyone has to be the same, you like the same things, you dress the same, you talk the same, etc.

Mako: When I say things like age -- is common age important? Gender? Socioeconomic background? Ethnicity? We would say these are not important for friendship, but it's really helpful to look and examine: who are my friends? Who is in my spiritual group or my active having-fun-with group or whatever it is? Just as an interesting sort of thought experiment.

Student: I think when you are younger the things you have in common are SO important to who your friends become -- gender, age, interests, subculture, religion if you practice one, and socioeconomic levels, and so on. But then as you grow older this changes.

Mako: Maybe because you're kind of trapped when you're a kid -- the group is kind of given to you. These are the people you go to school with and such.

Student: Right, and your family values affect deeply who you think is important as your friend. This changes as you get older. But I was thinking about friends I've had since college where I don't hear from them for a year and I get together and it's as if no time has really passed. That's kind of like a spiritual friend -- there's some underlying thing that causes you to reconnect with them and outlasts other things that are going on.

Mako: Ah, so some kind of underlying connection. That might be the spiritual part. As I was preparing for this talk I was thinking about friendships in my life. When I was a little kid, six or younger, I was really friendly or precocious -- I would go up to people on the beach and be like hi! And I would just be non-discriminating and go up to anybody. But then as I got a little older, you go through middle school and it's harsh. My middle school was Catholic school which my rebellious time -- so all of my friends were willing to rebel with me. That was the shared activity -- you had to be willing to skip school, go to the locker rooms and smoke, whatever it is -- you had to be willing to do that. That kind of divided the people into groups of friends/no friends depending on what they were willing to do, sad to say.

But then in college I became a very serious, philosophy student very interested in truth and I was very idealistic. I really valued my friendship -- but I really kind of valued them too much and made them something more serious. So my friends became the ones who helped me FIND THE TRUTH and so on. So I lost some friends I used to just hang out with because I became so serious and was like, "No, I can't do any more because I'm going to be studying Heidegger!"

During that time in college I developed this code of friendship -- a sort of agreement what a true friend meant. You could talk to your friends about what is most important to you and how you most wanted to live in the world. And because we're all such deluded creatures and don't see each ourselves very well we would rely on each others entirely to point out each others faults. It was pretty intense. I'm going to share with you in a gentle and kind way where I think that you are not following your own value system. So if you say to me: it all started because I wanted to stop using the generic masculine -- that's how it started and it just turned into this system of ethics where we would shut each other down a lot.

This was like an ideal, I thought I was living the dream. Actually it's kind of funny, I look back on it now and I am kind of embarrassed. Took on a little bit of harshness and rigidity and I kind of lost something of friendliness. It was intended to be friendly but it got so serious.

So I wanted to share a couple of early Buddhist quotes from various sutras -- just to say that often times when you look up kalyana mitta the translation is basically a good spiritual teacher, a "teacher-friend." A friend who is advanced along the path to awakening. That's kind of the implication. Sometime who is helpful to you on your path in waking up, in waking up to an authentic

life. Which is what we all want. A good spiritual friend is someone who basically supports you on your path. So looking back on these college days of idealism, that's what it was really about; but I don't think it had all of the features that would have supported it at the time.

So for example if it's friendships that help you on your path to awakening, it's means people that can't really be a bad influence on you. Those aren't good spiritual friends. So looking back on my high school days, I was a really bad friend to people along the way because there was a lot of danger involved. But maybe not, maybe those were actually quite needed.

But in early Buddhism there's this idea of finding the right people to be friends; you avoid people who are non-virtuous. Gamblers, drunkards, prostitutes, etc., -- avoid those people -- and seek the fellowship of the virtuous. So there's that emphasis. In some places it even says it is because we live in a degenerate age and sometimes it's not so clear to know good from bad. So because of that, avoid the bad. Just avoid it.

But there is this idea that a spiritual friend is somebody that is helpful to you, to your higher purpose. So here's one quote from the early sutras:

What is a good friendship? He or she associates with others of mature virtue, generosity, faith, wisdom, and emulates those people with regard to those qualities.

So mature virtue, generosity, faith, and wisdom. So it doesn't mention some of the things that we already agreed are really not all that essential. Like coming from the same background and so on, it's more about qualities of generosity, qualities of virtue, qualities of faith and wisdom.

Other factors of friendship -- the Buddha says these are seven things that a friend does: a friend gives what is difficult to give, does what is difficult to do, patiently endures what is difficult to endure, reveals their own secrets but keeps your secrets, does not abandon you in misfortune, and does not despise you because of your loss or something that happens to you. There's a bar here for good friends, not just fair weather friends. Patiently endures what is difficult to endure. So there's this sense of being a confidant and not disclosing things that are supposedly confidential. Does not abandon one in misfortune and does not despise one because loss -- a good friend as opposed to just a pal is someone that sticks with you through difficulty. It's kind of a test. Of course, you know, some of us make friends easily and others take a lot longer to make friends. But it balances out right, in terms of -- time is needed to figure out who will be there for you or not, and sometimes situations have to arise that show things these. But these are qualities of keeping confidence and being there for you when things get rough are good qualities of friendship.

And then there are four types of people that are seen as loyal friends:

The helper, who is loyal in four ways: he looks after you when you are inattentive. She looks after your possessions. He is a refuge when you are afraid. She allows you to have twice what you ask for. So there's a spirit of generosity.

Then there's another type of person: the person who is the same in happy or unhappy times: they tell their secrets, guard yours, does not let you down in misfortune, and would even sacrifice their life for you. That's a BIG one, that's a GOOD spiritual friend. Would even sacrifice their life for you.

The third type of person is the one who points out what is good for you. My college student part would like this one: keeps you from wrongdoing, supports you in doing good. Informs you of what you do not know. And points out the path for you. So in this way, this is what I was kind of looking for in college; I wanted people to look out for me and say hey, you're getting off track from where I know you want to be because you told me. So here's the path.

And then the fourth type of person that is a loyal friend is sympathetic; this person does not rejoice in your misfortune, rejoices in your fortune, stops others who speak against you. Commands others to speak in praise of you. That last one is kind of funny. ;P

It's not flattery, though. There's lots in the sutras on flattery -- the near enemy of friendliness -- someone makes you feel like a friend when actually they are not. Oscar Wilde said, "A good friend is one who stabs you in the front!"

So going back to the original quote on kalyana mita, the half of the holy life and the whole of the holy life, there's another way of looking at this translation. It's talking about friendship but there's another way of translating that emphasizes "friendship with beautiful qualities." Virtuous qualities, and also just this notion of friendliness. I wanted to point out that especially for people who -- I guess in Western culture, the friendliness part is really not so easy to do for ourselves. When we do these kind of loving kindness meditations, you always start with yourself and a lot of us have a really hard time doing. We feel selfish or no we shouldn't. Do you find this to be the case?

There's a story about a conference where Sharon Salzberg was talking to the Dalai Lama and she was saying as a part of this presentation about how in the West there are a lot of people who suffer from debilitating self-contempt/blame/shame/etc., in the bad way (not the wholesome Abhidharma way), and he didn't know what she was talking about, and so he asked a couple of other Western teachers and every single one said "Yeah, we know about that." And he was kind of dumbfounded to hear that. And the idea is that oh, they don't have maitri. They don't have friendliness to themselves. Which is

so sad, because actually there is actually this idea that in order to truly be friends with others, with all beings, it's got to start with being able to be friendly with oneself. As an indicator, it's like, how do I talk to myself? Am I friends with myself? What does that mean? How could I possibly be a good spiritual friend for this one? Starting here. How many of you feel like -- no no that's not for me or I don't need to do that.

You don't have to raise your hands. I mean, I feel it. When I was starting my forays into different Buddhist meditations, I found that the practice of taking care of this one first before going to someone I valued and loved and cherished was like oh, no, that's way too hard. I couldn't start with me. Giving myself compassion -- that was difficult. I had to work on that a lot in the beginning, and still do actually. So this idea of cultivating friendliness -- do we do that for ourselves? Do we cultivate a spirit of generosity and giving to ourselves?

How many of you feel sometimes you can't give too much too yourself? That you'd run roughshod over yourself or you'd never get anything done and end up in a ditch somewhere. Anyone feel that way? You gotta reign in the self!

Student: There's this great word narcissism.

Mako: Ah, that's a great word, narcissism. Say more. How did that word come to you?

Student: Heh, well, I mean...I'd rather not (laughter).

Mako: Perfect. Yeah, okay, so narcissism. So there's a flip side -- with self-berating. Or there's a self-aggrandizing.

Student: But narcissism is having to live out false constructions. This is all playing out but it is really really painful for some people. So narcissism and depression together is like -- how do you weather the storm?

Mako: How do you weather the storm? You find good spiritual friends as one part. And in fact the Buddha talks about the five conditions for developing along the path -- the first condition is finding friends.

#1 is good spiritual friendship; connection to others on the path.

Another is being virtuous.

Another is the ability to have dharma conversations with others.

So two out of the five are just are about just who you are around and about being with other people.

The 4th is ability to self-monitor your own states of mind. Awareness.

And number five is having a deep awareness and appreciation of impermanence.

That's a good insight in terms of this -- when we are mean to ourselves, it also can rear its head as being narcissistic or being heavily depressed, oftentimes waffling back and forth.

So awareness -- being really aware of our relationships and starting with the relationship that we have with ourself -- being really aware, how do we talk to ourselves? Do we admonish ourselves? Do we try to shame ourselves into doing things? You should, you should, you should! I have this voice.

So how we treat ourselves -- to be able to study this carefully requires awareness and the interest and curiosity to look as non-judgmentally as possible. Another big ingredient of good friends. It's not that good friends aren't discerning, it's this non-judgmental part. They accept you. To be able to accept ourselves as we are and stay with it. Non-judgmental. Being aware. Being curious. This inner voice -- is our inner voice friendly with us?

And then, when we take a look at that maybe we can then look at our relationships with others. You know, we here at the Zen Center have a really precious jewel. It's this. This is sangha. There's the three jewels -- Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha -- how do a group of people who, no matter where you came from or how you got here; even if this is the first time you've come here, right? -- there's something that made you wonder about waking up. That's true of everybody. And to have interest -- I truly believe everyone in the universe is interested in this -- but the fact that we're able to sit in the same space together and that we have a place devoted to people to come and just sit. This is a jewel! Like-minded people, all of us. Doesn't matter whether or not we like french fries or scalloped potatoes or whatever. I got to the Jack in the Box or no, no, I'd never do that. That really doesn't matter.

That's not to say that all of the conditioning that we have doesn't come into play; some of have had VERY different conditioning, and this might bite us at some point. There's this underlying connection though and so we weather these storms. There's an underlying value in living an authentic life -- and taking the time to pause and be curious and look inside. That's the thing that really brought all of us here; the interest, the curiosity, the pause, the look inside to develop awareness.

So we have this community of practitioners called Sangha, the third of the three jewels. And one of the beauties of Sangha is that we keep coming back, and for a place like Austin Zen Center which is an urban temple, its doors are open to anybody. Anyone who wants to sit can come -- doesn't matter who they are, where they come from, what they look like, they can come. Everyone is welcome.

Living in a monastery is like living in a pressure cooker; people think it's serene, but it's NOT. It's a bunch of people that really really need spiritual help together and then you make them work CONSTANTLY around each other, they work together, bathe together, sleep in the same buildings, make them have the same schedule, and they are all in various states of distress. And you give them large knives to work in the kitchen together. It's not calm! The benefit is that you do a lot of sitting meditation and so even there is flare-up after flare-up -- and I can tell you of some doozies, I mean really bad ones -- people picking up rocks and I'm gonna hit you with this rock! People flip!

But then they go sit. And it's like OK. Ugh.

So they keep coming back to the practice together and I've seen the most amazing and amazing breakups and makeups when I was living there. It's true enough that we do spend a lot of our time in silence so there's not always necessarily -- I don't know if you feel this way -- but sometimes people come for zazen and then just leave, and you never even get their name. And you might say this is not spiritual friendship, but really it is. All people are welcome here.

You can come and sit in the back and never talk to anyone; people that get super excited, it's all good. Open arms, right? It's open to everybody.

Which is one of the things about the universality of metta -- it goes everywhere. It pervades everyone, everywhere, everything in all the directions. So we have this jewel that reflects that. It's not all jasmine and roses, flowers and wafty incense. We get that, but we also get -- well people rub up against each other and that's part of what makes it love.

Being in community can be a mirror for all of us who come; sometimes the first time that people come to a spiritual center they get a little freaked out. People in black robes chanting in Japanese, they're not understanding what's going on, etc., and we find that we can meet that all as a community. In zazen we can meet this. Just come back to the breath, to the body, to the present, and we can take that anywhere.

There's something about sitting with others as well that nurtures that friendship, that shared purpose. That's what makes it a refuge, a safety, a safe space to come. I talked a little bit about some of the early Buddhist ideas about friendship -- in later Buddhism and in particular the Mahayana, there's this quality that -- Mahayana means big boat -- it means large, great vehicle -- this quality of we're all in this together.

For those of you in the workshop later we'll be talking about this more -- this notion of identity-action as one of the four methods of a Bodhisatva in the context of spiritual friendship; it has this sense of "we're all in it together." If I'm less along the path than you or you less along the path than me, it doesn't matter, we're on the same path, we're walking together as human

beings. So oftentimes when you are looking for something specifically about friendships you don't see much in Zen -- you have story after story of the family dramas -- of the family friendships -- dharma sisters and brothers, stories of pure relationships, friendships, between monastics and laypeople. There's countless stories. That's one of the main things that Zen is about is collecting stories about our families and our friendships. So lots of stories, our koan collections are mostly stories about relating. A couple of months ago I gave a talk on a notion called "Men Mitsu No Kafu" -- it means "careful attention to detail is the family way". It's not just careful attention as scrutinizing, penetrating attention, it's like careful attention like loving attention. How do you pick up your zafu after you sit on it and fluff it? Ever think about that? How do you cut your veggies or make your coffee? This careful attention to detail is loving.

The founder of this school wrote a fascicle called Instructions to the Cook; great, great fascicle talking about working in the kitchen. Really ordinary, but so not -- you know, a single stalk of celery becomes a golden Buddha and such. In that fascicle he talks about the three minds -- joyful mind; grandparental mind -- or sometimes grand motherly mind like taking care of your grandchild -- that's the feeling of care and attentiveness and generosity that is extended not just to people that you hang out with, or the people that you're neutral to, or even people at all but to everything. The stalk of celery.

How many of you have gardens? So you have to water your plants right? How often do water them and you talk to them? You should try it! When you dust them, you can dust them lovingly. Yeah, so it doesn't matter if they are plastic or not!

There's another expression in Zen -- a Dogen quote -- to study a single mote of dust is to study the whole universe. So how we take care of what is directly in front of us is taking care of the entire universe. The emphasis has shifted from what's a good friend and what's the ingredients and such to -- instead -- what is friendliness? It's non-dualistic -- it's not for some and not for others; it is universal and can be applied everywhere, especially starting with oneself. Even the parts we think are rotten! How do to develop friendliness towards everything? These are my bad qualities, my bad habits, how can I be friendly with those? Being friendly as you know does not mean letting them run all over us and run our lives. If we have a friend that has bad habits and wants to come live with us, yeah okay but we must set some ground rules. Good relationships have boundaries.

This idea of extending friendliness to all things universally, I wanted to end with a poem. I don't really know anything about the poet, like whether this person is a Buddhist, or, but I've heard this poem before and I'm sure many of you have as well. It's called Aimless Love by Billy Collins.

This morning as I walked along the lakeshore,

I fell in love with a wren
and later in the day with a mouse
the cat had dropped under the dining room table.

In the shadows of an autumn evening,
I fell for a seamstress
still at her machine in the tailor's window,
and later for a bowl of broth,
steam rising like smoke from a naval battle.

This is the best kind of love, I thought,
without recompense, without gifts,
or unkind words, without suspicion,
or silence on the telephone.

The love of the chestnut,
the jazz cap and one hand on the wheel.

No lust, no slam of the door –
the love of the miniature orange tree,
the clean white shirt, the hot evening shower,
the highway that cuts across Florida.

No waiting, no huffiness, or rancor –
just a twinge every now and then

for the wren who had built her nest
on a low branch overhanging the water
and for the dead mouse,
still dressed in its light brown suit.

But my heart is always propped up
in a field on its tripod,
ready for the next arrow.

After I carried the mouse by the tail
to a pile of leaves in the woods,
I found myself standing at the bathroom sink
gazing down affectionately at the soap,

so patient and soluble,
so at home in its pale green soap dish.
I could feel myself falling again
as I felt its turning in my wet hands
and caught the scent of lavender and stone.

So I apologize that we don't have time for questions, but I encourage you in

whatever way you can to strengthen those bonds of friendship that you have and especially with yourself. Enjoy universally.