

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
 Arlington Street Church
 1 December, 2019

Spiritual Friendship

There's a very famous conversation between the Buddha and his beloved disciple, Ananda, in which Ananda says, "This is half of the holy life: admirable friendship, admirable companionship, admirable camaraderie." The Buddha replies, "Don't say that, Ananda. Don't say that. Admirable friendship, admirable companionship, admirable camaraderie is actually the whole of the holy life."¹

In Pali, the language of the Buddha, the word for friend is *mitta*. The word *kalyāna* means lovely or beautiful. In Buddhism, your beautiful friend — your *kalyāna-mitra* — is your spiritual friend. The Buddha believed it is vital for spiritual growth to have spiritual friends.

Your *kalyāna-mitra*, he said, should be lovable, estimable, venerable, and patient. They should be able to counsel well, to deliver deep discourses, and not apply themselves to useless ends.² The Buddha encouraged his followers to spend time "in whatever town or village [you] may dwell, [with] ... young or old who are advanced in virtue;" to talk with them emulating "consummate conviction, consummate virtue, and consummate generosity." This, he said, is "admirable friendship."³

I love all these directives. And I suspect we already know that it is through friendship that we learn some of the greatest spiritual lessons: generosity, compassion, patience, and forgiveness.

Poet and Zen priest Norman Fischer recounts the story of an eager young monk called Meghiya, "who wanted to practice meditation alone in an especially [beautiful and peaceful] mango grove. But Meghiya's meditation was anything but

¹ Pali Canon, *Upaddha Sutta* (Samyutta Nikaya 45.2)

² As directed by the *Anguttara Nikaya* (7:36)

³ *Dighajanu Sutta* (AN 8:54)

[beautiful or peaceful]. To his shock, he found his mind a snarl of malicious, lustful, and confused thoughts — probably because his practice was too self-involved. When Meghiya rushed back to report his ... experience, [the] Buddha was not surprised....

“Five things induce release of heart and lasting peace,’ the Buddha told him. ‘First, a lovely intimacy with good friends. Second, virtuous conduct. Third, frequent conversation that inspires and encourages practice. Fourth, diligence, energy, and enthusiasm for the good. And fifth, insight into impermanence.’ ... In other words, friendship is the most important element in the spiritual path. Everything else ... flows from it.”

Rōshi Fisher comments, “When ... friendships with good people along the path of spiritual practice is a central feature of your life, it is almost impossible — just as the Buddha says — for spiritual qualities conducive to awakening not to ripen. For those on the ... path, loving and appreciating your friends, even when they are difficult, as [we all are] sometimes ... , is the path’s fullness and completion. Friendship ripens and deepens our capacity for compassion.”

One of the extraordinary features of spiritual community is that it throws us together with people who challenge us to dig deep and love them in spite of themselves.

G.I. Gurdjieff was a 20th century spiritual teacher. In his spiritual community in France, the students were driven to distraction by an old man who was hot-tempered, slovenly, and unwilling to help in any way. One day, after yet another blow-up, the man stormed off and drove away. The students celebrated.

Gurdjieff, however, took off for Paris in hot pursuit, hell-bent on convincing the man to return. But he had made up his mind, the man said; he was finished. After long negotiations, Gurdjieff offered to pay him a very large monthly stipend to take up residence again. How could he refuse?

When the man returned and walked in on what was essentially his bon voyage and good riddance party, the other students were appalled. When they learned he would be paid to stay, while they were in fact paying dearly to be there, they were up in arms.

Gurdjieff called together the community, listened carefully to their complaints, and laughed. “This man is like yeast for bread,” he explained.

“Without him here, you would never really learn about ... anger, patience, and compassion. That is why you pay me, and why I hire him.”

Gurdjieff was teaching spiritual friendship.

But let's return to those beloved friends — our kalyāna-mitra. On the Buddhist path, spiritual friendship grows in the context of spiritual community, built on teaching, spiritual practice, and a shared commitment to exceeding personal need and self-interest.⁴ In other words, it's not just about feeling good; it's about helping one another to grow in love and service.

I think of the extraordinary community of caregivers that grew up together in the early years of the plague. One of the gifts of that time was a deep regard for everyone who was on the front line of the AIDS crisis. I remember this off-beat loner who brought every conversation around to the zodiac and UFOs; she was really good at scheduling and flow charts, and when someone needed 24/7 care, she created a huge wall calendar to make sure he was never alone. One woman was always lurking at the bedsides, which I experienced as distinctly unhelpful. But finally, she was enlisted to drive a very sick young man to the hospital. I was grateful. And there was this bitter, alcoholic nurse who terrorized patients with her meanness. She hated my guts! But she was one of the most effective among us, and though she made it hard for anyone to like her, I grew to respect her.

And then there were the young men with AIDS and the lessons they deployed in attention, patience, devotion, gratitude, and joy, after all. Each caregiver and each patient was invaluable to the great work before us and our collective spiritual awakening; they, every one of them, were my kalyāna-mitra.

*

Unitarian minister and leading Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote a beautiful essay in which, across centuries and thousands of miles, he and the Buddha came to the same conclusion: Spiritual friendship, they agreed, requires two elements: truth and tenderness. Norman Fischer writes, “Spiritual friends are honest with one another. They have courage, they take risks, and they speak from the standpoint of truthfulness, not expediency. When my friends go astray, at least as far as I can see, I must speak up. And I expect the same from them....”

⁴ Norman Fischer, *Making Friends on the Buddhist Path*, 5/12/17 in *Lion's Roar* magazine

“Yet tenderness is equally important. [Dōgen, Zen priest and founder of the Sōtō school of Zen in Japan,] writes of the power of kind speech: ‘Speak to sentient beings as you would to a baby’ — speak with that much tender love and sweetness.... If I find I am lacking in tenderness, speaking what I consider to be truth out of defensiveness or separateness, ... I have to work on healing the causes within myself of this breach of kindness. I need to keep my peace until I am ready to speak with love.”⁵

*

Truth and tenderness: Some days, it’s just like this.

“Today was a Difficult Day,” said Pooh.

There was a pause.

“Do you want to talk about it?” asked Piglet.

“No,” said Pooh after a bit. “No, I don't think I do.”

“That's okay,” said Piglet, and he came and sat beside his friend.

“What are you doing?” asked Pooh.

“Nothing, really,” said Piglet. “Only, I know what Difficult Days are like. I quite often don't feel like talking about it on my Difficult Days either.

“But goodness,” continued Piglet, “Difficult Days are so much easier when you know you [have] someone there for you. And I'll always be here for you, Pooh.”

And as Pooh sat there, working through in his head his Difficult Day, while the solid, reliable Piglet sat next to him quietly, swinging his little legs ... he thought that his best friend had never been more right.⁶

*

There’s an old Chinese Zen story of sixteen monks who filed into the bathhouse after a long afternoon of work, before the evening service and dinner. They scrubbed themselves clean, climbed into the great tub ... and were all

⁵ Fischer, *op cit*

⁶ A.A. Milne

enlightened together.⁷ I love to picture them chest-deep in water, these kalyānamitra, fully awake. Norman Fischer writes, “Mostly, we think of awakening as an individual affair. The teachings can make it sound like that. But ... we practice together [and] awaken together.... [Then,] together, we go forth to do what needs to be done.”

Let’s close with an extraordinary story of spiritual friendship.

Kevan Chandler, a 35-year-old with a degree in counseling, lives with two roommates and works in prison ministry in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Kevan loves to travel, but was born with a degenerative disease⁸ that affects his muscles. When a group of his friends decided they’d spend the summer of 2016 backpacking through Europe and then, a few months later, exploring China, they wanted Kevan to come along ... and Kevan wanted non-wheelchair accessible adventures. His friends decided to carry him.

With the help of REI and Deuter backpacks, they got to work designing a carrier. And “in June of 2016, they boarded a flight to Paris, leaving Kevan’s wheelchair behind....”⁹ “We had ... four guys taking turns to carry me and caring for my personal needs,” Kevan says. “But with that, each one was naturally a sort of specialist in some aspect of the responsibilities. Ben handled a lot of the personal care (showers, turning [me] at night); Robbie did the driving, medical care, and auxiliary carrying; Philip did a lot of the out-of-pack carrying; and Tom took the lead on ‘extreme carrying,’ boasting good cardio. Mind you, everyone did everything, and everyone worked together, but it is helpful to know your strengths and utilize those.”

“They spent three weeks exploring the cities and countryside of France, England, and Ireland, ‘completely unhindered by the question of accessibility.’ They danced [in] the streets of Paris; visited ...the former French home of Kevan’s idol, Django Reinhardt (the iconic guitarist who invented a new way to play to accommodate a disability in his hand); and visited places in England associated with some of their favorite writers such as J.M. Barrie [the man behind Peter Pan]

⁷ *Blue Cliff Record*, #78

⁸ Kevan Chandler was born with spinal muscular atrophy (SMA), a genetic disease affecting the part of the nervous system that controls voluntary muscle movement.

⁹ Sasha Brady, “The author who travels the world as a ‘human backpack,’” at *Lonely Planet*. Please see lonelyplanet.com/articles/we-carry-kevan

... and C.S. Lewis. [They] even took on the mighty Skellig Michael in Ireland, a ... monastery (and Star Wars filming location), perched on a craggy pinnacle on the Skellig Islands.... ‘All [these] places bore such a rich heritage for me of the things that shape who I am today,’ says Kevan, ‘and it was a joy to have my friends with me at the discovery of them.’”¹⁰

“The most empowering part of everything with the guys was literally being able to go places I wouldn’t be able to go. It’s been enriching in two ways: They have never done it in the mindset of, ‘this is a service to Kevan.’ More so, we are just a group of guys on an adventure.... You come out with the mindset that anything is possible. The world is accessible if we are willing to get creative with it. That just sets you free. It allows the [community of people with disabilities] to feel a sense of freedom, strength, and empowerment to do anything.”¹¹

Out of this extraordinary experience was born a nonprofit called We Carry Kevan, whose mission is to “redefine accessibility as a cooperative effort.” Kevan says, “This is the message we share by telling our story and coming alongside families and individuals (able-bodied and disabled alike) who want to see this happen as well. Some folks want help brainstorming how to travel themselves or help others, some are interested in backpacks like mine (which are for sale on our website), and some folks just want to talk about life and process their own experiences. Whatever we can do to encourage folks, traveling or not, to care for one another and live richly in [this] kind of community, we’re happy to be involved.... Our perspective,” he concludes, “is that true accessibility comes from people helping people.”¹²

*

Beloved spiritual companions, my spiritual friends,

Friendship is not half of the holy life, but all of it —
the most important element on the spiritual path.

Through friendship, we learn some of the greatest spiritual lessons:
generosity, compassion, patience, and forgiveness.

¹⁰ Sasha Brady, *op cit*

¹¹ Shari Puterman, “Kevan can’t walk — so his friends carried him through Europe,” 6/1/18 at [usatoday.com/story/news/humankind/2018/06/01/we-carry-kevan-inspires-worldwide-movement-people-disabilities/662755002/](https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/humankind/2018/06/01/we-carry-kevan-inspires-worldwide-movement-people-disabilities/662755002/)

¹² Please see Shari Puterman, *op cit*, and Michele Herman, “Meet the Man Who Traveled with is Friends as a Human Backpack,” *Forbes* magazine, 5/9/19. Please see [forbes.com/sites/micheleherrmann/2019/05/09/we-carry-kevan/#396ffe846554](https://www.forbes.com/sites/micheleherrmann/2019/05/09/we-carry-kevan/#396ffe846554)

May our spiritual friendships continue to deepen
in this beloved community.
May we help one another to grow in love and service.

May we all carry each other.
May we all wake up together.