

Spiritual Friendship

by Rodney Smith

Many of us think of Dharma practice as developing new skills and techniques such as meditation or metta, while others believe it to be an opportunity to develop a better and more loving character. Whatever we believe the effects of practice are, we usually want the results to be quantifiable and observable to prove our long hours of labor produced something tangible. Tangible results may show themselves from time to time but the heart of the practice is making the unconscious, conscious and that is far harder to gauge.

If becoming conscious and aware are our primary intentions we will want to notice all habituated tendencies that indicate the opposite. Awareness turns the darkness of the unconscious into the light of knowing. Once our habits are observed, we turn our attention toward areas of reactivity because our reactions indicate an unconscious relationship within our emotional patterns. The unconscious freezes us within those patterns, and we have no alternative but to play out our reactions. Awareness opens those deadened areas back to life allowing the calcified emotions to thaw and new possibilities to occur.

Moving further into the unconscious we notice areas of mistrust, denial, and prejudice safely guarded by our defense mechanisms. As awareness grows and begins to touch those areas, we notice we become open to other hidden topics like death that we have refused to acknowledge up until now. We sense we are moving beyond our perceived limits and boundaries with each incursion into darkness, and this is both thrilling and fearful. Finally the very certainties our life rests upon are scrutinized because opening means never relying on what we know. Questions like who am I, what is this, and is this true, keep moving light into the dark, inch-by-inch, until reality in all of its glory is uncovered.

Nothing spectacular occurs through much of this journey. I still feel like me, and the world still turns on its axis. What is the big deal? And then slowly over time our boundaries fade, love appears from nowhere, and there is a deep caring about the pain of others. Still nothing tangible to show others, but now it is a big deal because the heart is determining our way.

When I was a monk alone in the monastery of Thailand, my practice was effortless and spacious. I did not struggle in the Thai forests despite the unfamiliar climate and poisonous creatures. But if a Westerner visited the monastery, my heart would close down and the natural harmony of the forests would turn into a darkened internal struggle of wanting to be left alone. I was closed to any intrusion in “my space” and spiritual friendship was relegated to distant correspondences in other parts of the world.

What do we mean by spiritual friendship and how is it different than the friendships we have throughout our lives? Many friendships are based on fulfilling a need. Usually the need is a psychological hole that the friend offsets. It may come from a feeling of something missing in ourselves that we don’t feel when we are with our friend. Or the friend might offer us something tangible like empathy, advice, or a listening ear. In either case, such a relationship is often weighted toward dependency. As long as the unspoken conditions are met, the friendship endures, but if one or the other’s needs change the friendship must go through a readjustment to survive.

The hallmark of a true spiritual friend is an open and caring honesty. Not the biting honesty that says what is true regardless of the listener’s receptivity, but a caring honesty that genuinely wants the best for the other person. Such a relationship does not foster or encourage dependency. In fact if dependency becomes the basis of the relationship it would likely become a topic for inquiry and discussion between the two friends. Spiritual friends are often willing to journey into any part of their lives for the sake of truth. Inward closeted areas are opened without judgment or shame. Each supports the other in this excursion of self-discovery with interest, confidence and wise intention. Spiritual friendship support selflessness. It is not egocentric nor does it spiral down into the unskillful energies of judgment or complaining. Rather it fosters the assurance that all things are workable when they are held in intimacy and seen impersonally.

Spiritual friendship is a wonderful part of the journey of awakening. Like all spiritual practice, it requires wise effort and letting go. The effort needed is the energy to cultivate the relationship and the willingness to move the friendship into a mutual

trusting rapport. The letting go is the disposition to release the friendship from selfish demands or expectations - to have it begin and end within its own timing. Spiritual friends learn to love deeply and move on.

Reclusively huddled in the forest of Thailand I had no idea what I was missing by shutting off interpersonal contact. The free and honest exchange of spiritual friends enhances whatever practices we do. It is easy for me to be alone in nature, watch my mind, and see wisely without distortion. What is difficult is to bring the same wise observation and honest intention to my relationships and live the wisdom of the forest. Yet the heart would have no other way.