

Spiritual Friendship

There is quite a contrast in direction between spiritual friendship and the more worldly kind. Just as a worldly mind is based on desire and a spiritual mind on wisdom and compassion, a worldly friendship is based on liking and disliking and a spiritual friendship on mindfulness. This means that our spiritual relationships can be of great value to us on the path. Sometimes, for instance, we can see more clearly what is happening in an outer dynamic than we can in an inner one, and by those means – by using the outer as a mirror for the inner – we can ascertain whether we are headed in the right direction or not.

Worldly friendship then is based on doing nice things together, on common tastes and preferences. And satisfying our worldly needs through each others company in turn leads to an attachment and dependence; which gives rise to more emotional needs – we look for expressions of reassurance that these desires will continue to be met in some way. Such a relationship can also begin to become more complex as our desires take the form of views regarding ourselves or the other person, which make us try to recast the friend into what we want him or her to be.

Spiritual friendship has nothing to do with any of these things; in fact it goes in the opposite direction. A common view comes first, not last. A common vision of the spiritual path or goal is the beginning, the basis. This guides all the rest. The Buddha describes spiritual friendship as 'association with the beautiful'. We can picture this as two practitioners bowing together at the same shrine, or as each party respecting the spiritual aspirations of the other.

So keeping a spiritual friendship together requires regularly checking where we both are on the path in relation to the common vision. Making this vision take shape is then the sole purpose of the relationship. So the ultimate in terms of a spiritual friendship will be both to support each other in the striving for enlightenment, and also supporting a monastery, or retreat centre in order to ensure that the material and practical support for the spiritual life is there too.

In this way worldly priorities are not omitted – doing so would just amount to spiritual idealism – but they are put at the end, they come after the spiritual affairs. We define what is needed in concrete terms to support the vision while we can also make practical compromises without compromising that vision. We could perhaps combine spiritual discussions with baby-sitting, or something like that.

I offer this for your reflection.

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