



## Friends in the Good Life

Extracts from a talk given by Srivati at the Hornchurch Buddhist Group April 8<sup>th</sup> 2013

Srivati first came into contact with the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (as the Triratna Buddhist Community was then known) in 1984 at a beginners' retreat in Battle, Sussex. She became a Buddhist and was ordained into the Western Buddhist Order in 1993. Srivati began the talk by saying that she has more friends than she almost knows what to do with and that she couldn't be who or how she is without them.

**The Triratna Buddhist Community** really values and encourages the practice of Spiritual Friendship, indeed according to Sangharakshita the movement's founder it is one of the six distinctive emphasis of the Triratna movement...

<http://hornchurchbuddhistgroup.org.uk/resources/introduction-to-triratna/>

'Spiritual Friendship' (from Kalyana Mitrata in the Pali language) is the heart of the Sangha or spiritual community. Kalyana can be translated as beautiful, auspicious, helpful, morally good; Mitrata as friendship or companionship, hence friends in the good life, beautiful companionship.

### The Whole of the Spiritual Life

There is a famous account in the Pali Canon (the early literature of Buddhism) where the Buddha's companion Ananda, thinking that he is acknowledging how important Spiritual Friendship is says that it amounts to half of the spiritual life, but the Buddha corrects him saying, "say not so Ananda, it is the *whole* of the spiritual life". You can find this episode at the link below, please note that translations of certain terms vary:

<http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn45/sn45.002.than.html>

Why should this be? It is not just that we need **guidance of the wise** (spiritual friends are especially those more experienced than us), we **need our friends to be mirrors**, allowing us to see ourselves more clearly, gain self-knowledge through the challenge of true communication.

Also Spiritual Friendship is where we can **practise giving**, because one of the main benefits of spiritual practice is to go beyond our limitations, **to liberate our minds and hearts we need to know what our limitations are**, understand our habitual ways of being - become more spontaneously generous and creative, more like a Buddha

What makes Spiritual Friendship different from ordinary friendship is that it is friendship between those with **shared aspirations**; in the case of Buddhism this is a commitment to Three Jewels of

Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, practising the Buddha's teachings, the Dharma, pointing ourselves in direction of Enlightenment, these are not theory but to be practised and *lived*.

Spiritual Friendship can be **actively cultivated**, can **lead to growth, transformation even transcendence**, it offers support, encouragement and inspiration as well as challenge and a spur. Whether over a cup of tea or more intensive situations, for example in a working situation, study group, or on retreat, Spiritual Friendship helps us to see our tendencies, habits, blind spots.

Sangharakshita, the founder of the Triratna movement and Order, and fondly known as Bhante (teacher) has said - 'No-one else can practice the Dharma for us; we have to practice it ourselves. But **we do not have to practice it *by ourselves***.'

## The Buddha's How-To Guide for Spiritual Friends

Sigolavada Sutta (Dig Nik iii 190)

### 5 duties of friends

1. **Be generous** - share whatever we have, ideally our friends shouldn't have to ask. This is not always easy and we notice ourselves holding back but **if in doubt give**, even if we are aware that our motives may be mixed (we do need to look after ourselves too though).
2. **Speak kindly** - not just truthfully but not harshly, bitterly, sarcastically or gossiping. Non Violent Communication (NVC) is popular amongst Triratna: listening for the need that is being expressed, i.e. seek first to understand, then to be understood (Stephen Covey)
3. **Look after their welfare** – especially their spiritual welfare, e.g. help work out how to break an old unhelpful habit or understand old limiting conditioning or to make decisions to support their spiritual goals and path.

Also we can just be considerate in ordinary ways, helping with the everyday needs of life where needed. Srivati also talked about the example of the passing of Vidyajyoti which was an amazing demonstration of Sangha at its best, a group of close friends providing practical care in hospital and hospice. All about love – supporting her as she approached death, helping with physical needs and in facing the inevitable

4. **Treat our friends as ourselves** - 'Do as you would be done by' supports harmony and reduces conflict and also allows for the weakening of the polarised way we usually express everything, Spiritual Friendship is training in unselfishness, by cherishing their happiness and well-being as if our own, this boils down to not always prioritising our own preferences, we can start with the little things... put ourselves out a little...

5. **Keep our word to friends** - Why not? Is straightforward really – how else can we rely on each other? Includes doing what we say when we say and not making promises can't keep.

Several translations of this sutta can be found at the link below, scroll down to verse 30.

<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.31.0.ksw0.html>

Friendship not based on power, but love and love is a verb – it's what we do...

In **Triratna** are many different ways to experience/cultivate Spiritual Friendship and Sangha: Living together, working together either in an on-going job or a class, event or retreat team etc. retreats, small groups e.g. for study or Order chapter, large gatherings e.g. festivals

### **It is not just about self-transformation**

Going beyond ourselves, caring for others, putting ourselves in their 'moccasins' can lead to the **transformation of society** starting with the creation of a **spiritual community** within in it:

- Help one another develop spiritually
- Help others, outside the community to develop their individuality
- This needs individuals, not just those following the crowd, custom or convention
- **A true individual** (Bhante) is continually aware and emotionally positive, continually responsible, sensitive and creative (of one's own self)

If you have a strong enough community of such 'true individuals', then you have the beginnings of a new society, one that is created, guided and sustained by the values of compassion, generosity, contentment, honesty and awareness. Where communication, whether personal, social or economic, is based on seeking understanding and harmony as well as the expression of needs and differences

That is the sort of world I wish to live in, to contribute to and benefit from, and that is why I feel so fortunate to have come across the Dharma and to be a member of the Triratna community.

*I would like to thank Srivati for generously travelling to Hornchurch for the evening and for providing her notes as this basis for this document. David Weston*