

Hand Untying Knots, Part 18: Untying Knots in Friendship

Good morning, everyone! This is today's Dharma Espresso on Untying Knots in Friendship.

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There are people we call friends because we know them, have their phone numbers, work, play, or exercise together, but we don't necessarily cultivate that friendship. We don't know how to nurture that friendship like family relationships with spouses, children, grandchildren, grandparents, or sometimes teacher-student relationships. We consider most of them our friends, but we don't really treat them like friends; rather, we treat them according to our life priority. When a friend calls to ask if we can come to help with something, we'd say, "No, sorry, I'm busy right now." We have our own priority.

Let me tell you a funny story. I invited a friend to come for lunch, but he said, "No, thanks. I'm very busy." I then asked him to let me know what day and time he would be free to come. He asked, "What do you need? Is there something you want me to come and do for you?" I said, "No, can't I just ask you to come for lunch and chat?" You know what, he didn't come, and he still hasn't come. He would come only if I truly need his help; he wouldn't come just to chat.

I'm amused at the definition of friendship. It turns out that pressure, priority, power, position, and fame gradually make our hearts unable to connect with those we call friends. Hence, a best friend is getting to be a rarity.

Sometimes we should be careful with relationships between teacher and students, parents and children because they can deteriorate if we have too many egocentric priorities. What is egocentric? It's when you consider your own life priority, job, or position to come first; your standard is right, others' are wrong, so you don't hang out with them; you're rich, your friends are poor, so it'd be tough for them to talk to you. Once you've found your friends' mistakes, no way you'd let them come or talk to you. And if they ever offend you in any way, it'd be hard to enjoy their company again.

In other words, we cannot let our hearts touch the hearts of those we call friends. We have many filters and blocking curtains that prevent us from seeing, feeling, and understanding others' hearts. We're concerned about our own necessities. When we suffer, we want friends to come, but when they suffer, we don't necessarily want to come.

That's why our CSS has a caring team whose members I call "practicing bodhisattvas". They go around visiting the sick, the old, the advanced seniors. They have no particular agenda other than visiting, showing their loving-kindness and asking for the same from those they visit. Don't think that we visit the sick because we're healthy; instead, go and ask for their loving-kindness. They really need an opportunity to express their love through us.

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I mention this not to hope that they will give us money or other things in the future. No. The caring team only practices the Tao of friendship. Therefore, we should gradually understand friendship again in its original meaning, which is how our hearts can touch other people's hearts.

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A few decades ago, in 1992, my master once said a sentence which troubled my heart a great deal. He said, "If you know who your true friends are, go ahead and screw up." Screw up here means to mess up, damage, mismanage, or ruin something to see who will still be standing by you. That saying really sank into my heart in 1992 when I screwed up, did something wrong, was punished and confined in a solitary retreat to recite and memorize the Avatamsaka Sutra for repentance. Only then could I tell who still stood by me and who swept me out of their circle of friendship. It turns out that a true friend always understands our past and our future (whether good or bad), and always accepts us, who and how we are, in the present time, which is not easy. There are many friends who just want to come and say hello, not to ask us a favor or bring a gift for us to help them with something.

When I was young in Vietnam, I remember it was easy to visit people. Now in the U.S., we often have to call first before we come. When we come, we usually have to make it a short visit because our friends don't have time. Specifically, friendship needs to be cultivated and nurtured. A friend can always help lift our spirit, understand our pain or fear, and make us feel we have someone by our side.

A friend of mine once told me a quote from the French philosopher Albert Camus: "*Don't walk behind me; I may not lead. Don't walk in front of me; I may not follow. Just walk beside me, hold my hand, and be my friend.*" Isn't it great? Sometimes we can't see what's in front or behind us, only what's side by side with us. Friends always want to support us and find ways to listen to our heart, not caring whether our appearance is good, beautiful, or ugly. They don't want to go behind us to gossip or to find faults and criticize. They may not praise us but they won't badmouth us. Hence, when we say negative things about someone, we are no longer a friend for that person.

Thank you for listening. I hope that you will always remember to harmonize your heart with someone else's heart. Let's cultivate friendships together.

Dharma Master Heng Chang

(Translated and transcribed by Compassionate Service Society)