

F.R.I.E.N.D.S. – A Buddhist Perspective (a lightly edited transcript)
by Ven. Thubten Chodron© at Tai Pei Buddhist Centre, Singapore. 24 Nov 2003
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Contents (click on heading to view text)

- What qualities do we look for in friends?
- Maintaining your individuality & not buying into the 'group think'
- Fear of not belonging
- Be happy and true to ourselves
- Questions and answers

I always like to start things off with a few minutes of sitting quietly together. I'll give a talk and then we'll have some questions and answers. But first let's just sit quietly together and calm our mind. So sit up straight, put your hands in your lap and lower your eyes. Feel yourself breathing; just breathe normally and naturally but be aware of your breath. And be aware of all the sensations as you inhale and exhale. And while you are watching your breath, be content to sit here and watch your breath. Let's just do this for a minute or so and let our mind get quiet.

Before we actually begin.... For a moment, let's set our motivation and think that we are going to share this evening together so that we can learn and improve ourselves. And we want to do that not only for our own happiness but because we live in a world where we are interdependent and interrelated with everybody else.

Let's listen and learn and discuss this evening so that we can contribute to the welfare of all beings and make a positive contribution to society, and be able to lead all beings on the path to full enlightenment. Let's begin our evening together with this thought of loving kindness for others. Then slowly open your eyes and come out of your meditation.

They asked me to talk about friends and friendship this evening. I think we all know that friends are very important to us. We like having friends. And also, we live in a world, where we are totally interdependent and interrelated with everybody else. So friends are part of this interrelationship, this depending on other people. We can't stay alive alone, can we? We need other people very much. Just for example for food, clothing, shelter, and medicine. For the basic necessities of life, we are dependent on other people. So we want to be able to get along well with them because we depend upon them and they depend upon us. This is also because we all feel much happier when we get along well with others.

What qualities do we look for in friends?

So among all the infinite number of living beings, there are some that we are closer to than others; some people that we are attracted to, we share common interests and we like to do things together. And those people we often call 'friends'. It's interesting to think a little to ourselves: what qualities do we look for in friends? Have you ever wondered about that? When you are meeting new people, what qualities are you looking for in the people that you select as friends?

I remember many years ago, I was at the Singapore Polytechnic Buddhist Society and they asked me to lead a discussion about friends. I put that same question to them: "What qualities do you look for in friends?" And they began to say things like "People I can trust; people who don't tell my secrets; people who care about me even when I'm not in such a good mood; people who will help me when I'm not in a good mood; or people who will tell me when I'm making mistakes, but they will tell me with kindness; people who I can trust with my things, who won't steal my things or who won't hurt me."

And as we began to discuss the kind of qualities that we look for in friends, it became very evident to me that it related very much with what Buddha talked about-- about avoiding ten negative actions and doing ten positive actions. And even though we're having a discussion and just giving our own ideas, it actually came out to be very much what the Buddha had recommended.

For example, qualities to look for in friends are also qualities for us to develop so that we can be good friends to others. If we want to have friends, we also have to learn how to be a good friend.

So qualities that are really good are: First of all, not harming others physically and respecting life. And second, respecting other people's property, their stuff and not taking what hasn't been given to us. It's a good quality for a friend isn't it? Using our sexuality wisely and kindly and not manipulating people. And also 'telling the truth'—I think that's important for friendship, don't you? That you are able to speak truthfully to your friend and they can also speak truthfully to you.

And also, learning to speak so that we create harmony, and not talking behind other people's back. I mean, that's a great way to have enemies isn't it—to talk behind other's back. It's a proven way to not have friends, because all you do is talk behind people's back. Also learning to speak kindly—not yelling and screaming and blaming people and blowing up but trying to express what we need to say in clear way without blaming others.

Sometimes when we are unhappy we need to tell our friend we are unhappy about something that they did but rather than going "YOU did this and how dare you do that? I can't believe it, you're such a rotten friend..."—you know the rest of the story don't you?

So instead of being like that, I think it's very good if you're disturbed by what a friend did, to say, "Well, you did this. This is how it impacted me. When you said you'd meet me at 5 o' clock to go out together, you didn't show up and you also didn't call me. It was really inconvenient because I was concerned about you and I didn't know whether I should wait or go do something else."

When we express ourselves in that way—telling the person exactly what they did and then telling them how it impacted you is a very good way to communicate when we are unhappy with a friend, rather than just blaming them and screaming. Because they can understand us when we are saying that.

Then also speaking at appropriate times is a good quality for a friend. If we are blabbermouths and we gossip, then it's difficult to be with friends because we really have to give up our friend's time to speak and build on their ideas. It's like somebody's talking and then we interrupt them because we want to talk about ourselves.

It's also important to have a peaceful contented mind instead of a very greedy mind. When we are very greedy and self-centered, it's difficult for people to be friends with us. We are always looking out for what we can get out of the friendship, "Oh where did you get that? How can I get one?" If we're always looking out for our self and if we are kind of jealous, it's difficult for people to be friends with us. If we have a more contented mind and a more satisfied attitude, then we're much easier to get along with and if we're looking for friends, we'll have much better friends because those people will have those qualities.

Similarly, if we figure out a way to work with our anger instead of just thinking malicious thoughts, being able to forgive people and to let go of grudges, then we are going to be a much better friend to others. And similarly, when we are looking for friends, it's best to look for people who don't hold onto grudges because otherwise friends can be really difficult to be with. Can't they?

If you are always with somebody and all they do is always complaining about other people—"This is wrong with this person; this is wrong with that person; this is wrong with the other person; this person hurt me, I want to retaliate; that person hurt me, I want to ruin their reputation; this person is so conceited I can't stand their guts" That doesn't make for a real pleasant friendship, does it? Who wants to listen to that all day? I don't know about you but I certainly don't!

And also I'm always a little bit skeptical if all somebody does is to criticize somebody else. Then I know it's only a matter of time before they also criticize me. It's true isn't it? If there's somebody whose pet project is criticizing other people and putting them down, then I know pretty soon they're going to start talking about me behind my back and criticizing me. So I'm always a little bit wary when I meet those people. From my side, I have to watch my speech and make sure I don't talk about other people that way because then, people won't trust me because they feel that maybe I might turn on them too.

So there are lots of things that we need to be aware of in creating friendships—you know, the kind of qualities we want to develop in ourselves, and the kinds of qualities we want to seek out in friends.

Maintaining your individuality & not buying into the 'group think'

While we depend on friends, I also think it's important that we maintain our individuality because sometimes when we get together with a group of friends, we get what is called "group think". Is that true in Singapore or is that just an American term?

Have you ever heard of the term "group think"?

It means that everybody in the same group thinks alike. So maybe you're with a group of people and they all think "Oh, let's go out and have a beer. We all want to go drinking" and everybody thinks that and because your friends were those people, you think you'd better think like them, in order to be accepted. And then you wind up in big difficulties because sometimes we wind up doing things that aren't so healthy for us just because we are trying to think like the rest of the group.

And you know parents—I don't know how many are parents out there. They are always telling their children, "Oh don't succumb to group pressure, peer pressure". "Oh, if your friends are doing something that's not so good, you don't let them pressure you." But if you look at the way parents live—they let their friends pressure them! My mother always used to say to me, "Do what I say, not as I do." But I don't think that's so good. I think as parents, you need to do what you want your kids to do.

Anyway what I'm getting at is sometimes some groups of people have really positive purposes, and if you go along with their positive purposes, it's really good. Other groups of people—when they get together, they begin to have a kind of negative group think and then maybe it becomes a kind of group pressure to do things that aren't so good for us.

So we always need to maintain our own awareness, self-confidence and discriminating wisdom so that we can make decisions about what we consider beneficial to do and what we don't feel comfortable doing. If certain people are pressurizing us to do something we don't feel comfortable doing, it's fine for us to say, "No thank you." or "It's okay."

Fear of not belonging

One part of us goes, "Oh but then they won't like me". Isn't there a part of us that is so afraid that people aren't going to like us?

Who is afraid that people aren't going to like you?

Come on don't lie! I mean, we all have this fear that "Oh oh, what happens if I go with this group of people and nobody likes me." Or what happens if I'm with a group of friends and they all want to do something but I don't want to do it and they think I'm weird. "I don't want anybody to think I'm weird". What happens if everybody's doing that and I can't do it? Everybody's really good at sports but I'm not very good. Oh, they're not going to like me, what am I going to do? We get really scared like that, don't we?

I think we can acknowledge that shakiness inside ourselves but then also let go of it. It's okay if we're not like everybody else. And not everybody has to like us. Anyway, not everybody is going to like us. Why? Because they are stupid isn't it? What stupid person wouldn't like me? [laughter] But that's the way life is and so we have to give people permission not to like us and not worry about it so much.

I remember when I was in secondary school, there were all sorts of cliques. Do you have cliques in your schools? Everybody's in a clique and there are some cliques which are the real popular ones—the real good-looking people. I was a good student but I wasn't gorgeous okay? And I also wasn't interested in sports so I didn't like football stars very much. But those were the kids who were very popular—the good-looking ones, the athletic ones. And I always kind of felt, "Oh, I don't quite fit in with all these people. Everybody fits in but I don't quite fit in." Of course, I had my own group of friends but I wasn't part of the group of the real popular kids.

And it was very interesting for me to find out... Years after I graduated from secondary school and met some of the popular kids when we were all working adults, I talked about our experiences in secondary school. I found that none of them felt like they fit in either. I was so surprised because I thought it was only *me*. And when I began to talk to everybody else in secondary school, nobody felt like they fit in. It was such an awakening for me! I mean, even those very popular kids felt like people didn't like them. It was so interesting for me to discover this.

So I'm passing this discovery along to you in case you have that kind of fear that nobody likes you - that you recognize that everybody else actually feels the same. And in fact, we all have a few people who do like us, and we all have some friends. Nobody feels like they are the big king who everybody loves because in actual fact, nobody is the big king or queen who *everybody* loves. And I'm telling you so that you know it's okay to be who you are. You don't need to try to be like the people whom you think are popular.

This is my personal opinion—I think advertisements and magazines often make us very confused about friendships. When you look in the magazines, how does everybody look? They all look beautiful don't they? The guys are very good-looking, the women are very good-looking, everybody looks like they are having such a good time and that nothing is wrong in their life and that everything's fine. And we look at those pictures in the magazine and we go, "Oh, I'm not like that. Something must be wrong with me."

Well, I want to know, who is really like that? When you look at all the pictures in the magazines, sometimes you look and you go, "Oh, they are so good-looking but my body's the wrong shape. I bulge where I shouldn't bulge and I don't bulge where I should bulge. What's wrong with my body? I should be taller. If you are short, you think, "I want to be tall". If you are tall, you wish you could be shorter. If you have curly hair you want straight hair; if you have straight hair, you want curly hair. It's like we're totally dissatisfied with our body. We want to be somebody different, and look different. "Oh I should only look like these people in the magazine."

Well you know, even the people in the magazines don't look like the photographs in the magazine because everything is computer altered. I mean, all these models have zits on their face! And they just change it on the computer and do all the photographic stuff and cover it up. Nobody looks like the photographs in the magazines— not even the models!

So we don't need to feel bad if we don't look like those people. Sometimes I go and give talks in secondary schools in America and the teenagers always ask me "Why do you shave your head?" Because there aren't a lot of Buddhists in America—you don't see women walking around with shaved heads. Or they ask "Why did you cut your hair off?"

I explain that it's part of our vows and it symbolizes that we are freeing our self from ignorance, anger and attachment. And I say that usually in society, we are trying to look good and our hair is one way that we try to look good. You part your hair this way, you part your hair at the center; you clip it short here and grow it long here; you grow it long here and you clip it short there and then you sprinkle it with red or you sprinkle it with blond. In America, a little bit of green, a little bit of blue—so ugly but they think it looks nice! And we are always trying to look beautiful—the women, you paint your face, the guys you put on aftershave lotion and we get so bent out of shape depending on our looks.

And so I tell them that our hair is one of our big ways that we try to look good and I say I cut off my hair because I'm saying that I don't want to try and look good externally because that's not the criteria with which I want people to use in choosing me as a friend.

In other words, I don't want people to like me because I look nice. If people like me because I look nice, then that's not going to be a very stable good friendship. So we give up external beauty by cutting our hair off to show that what we're trying to develop is internal beauty. And I think if we have internal beauty: if we are a kind person, if we speak well, if we're supportive to others and we are honest, we are going to have a lot more friends than if we have external beauty. And our friendships are going to be a lot better.

So all these people in secondary school were looking at me like "Wow...really?" And I go, "Really. And you know what else? I wear the same clothes everyday and people still like me even though I wear the same clothes everyday and I don't have any hair." And I don't wear any make up and I don't wear any

perfume and I don't watch TV and I don't know any of the popular movie stars; I don't watch any of the TV programmes, I can't talk about them, I don't know any of the popular music. I tell people I am out of it and proud of it. And you know what?

People still like me. Can you believe it? [laughter]

Be happy and true to ourselves

What I'm getting at is, just relax with who you are and be happy with who you are and live according to your own heart. Live in a way that feels honest and true to who you are. And don't worry about whether people like you or not.

Some people will always like you and some people will not. There will always be people who don't like you. But the meaning of our life is not to have people like us because you know what? We always worry so much: "What are they thinking about me? What are they thinking about me? What are they saying? Do they like me?" Well you know what? Other people are so self-centered they don't really have that much time to think about us. They are too busy thinking about themselves. We really are not that important that somebody's going to think of us all day and how bad we are!

I mean, reverse it: do you spend all day thinking about other people and how bad they are? No! You're too busy thinking about yourself! So we are really not that important that we have to get all bent out of shape worrying about what other people think of us. Because their thoughts are just their thoughts and their thoughts change all the time. That's the thing about getting so worried because you never know what they think from one day to the next, because their minds are so changeable.

And it's really incredible—two different people can look at you and have two totally different opinions of you. Why? That's because people are just seeing you through the veil of their own personality.

I remember two situations that illustrate this so well. In one situation, I was with some people and there was some kind of conflict in the group or something was going on. So I spoke and tried to ease the situation and so on. The next day, one person called me back and said, "You really caused so much conflict. You spoke so terribly." Half an hour later, somebody else called me and said, "Thank you so much for what you did. You really calmed my mind down."

Who's true? Who's right?

I remember another day when I was living in the monastery. One nun came to see me and said, "Oh, you are so uptight, you keep your vows so strictly, you're not very flexible, you're too uptight." And half an hour later, another nun came to see me and said, "You are so sloppy the way you keep your vows. You need to be stricter. Why are you so sloppy?"

Who do I believe? One person says this, one person tells me the opposite. If I'm going to get my own self-image dependent upon what other people say about me, I'm going to be real confused about who I am. They all think something different about me because they are all looking at me through their own veil.

That's why I think we have to look at our own heart, at our own mind and look at our own motivation. If we do something with a good motivation, with a kind heart, if other people like it, that's good; if other people don't like it, that's also okay. But if we do something with a nasty motivation and we are trying to deceive somebody or manipulate somebody, even if the whole world praises us, we're not going to feel very good about ourselves. At the end of the day, we're the person who has to live with us.

That's why it's much better, as I was saying, to be true to ourselves and think things through and make our own decisions independently. If we have a good motivation, then we don't have any reason to regret what we say or do. What other people say doesn't matter because whatever you do, they are not going to change their mind.

Okay. Those were just a few comments I had about friends. There's some time for questions and answers. Somebody typed me some questions so I thought I'd do those first. In the mean time, others

who have questions, you can write your questions on that beautiful booklet they gave you and the ushers will collect them. Or if you want to come to the mike and ask questions, you can do that too.

Questions and answers

Q: I suppose when you decided to ordain, there may be much strong criticism and opposition to your decision, probably even from your immediate family members and loved ones.

Ven: Yes, that's completely true. My family thought I was going completely nuts! They said, "You graduated from UCLA, and you're going to go live in Nepal where they don't even have flush toilets! Are you totally mad?" They thought I was going to grow up and get a good job and make lots of money and give them grandchildren and you know... look at me. [laughter]

Q: Are you able to share your experiences and lessons learnt on how you overcame those difficulties? Examples like how you were able to get them to understand your situation, your higher noble aspirations, or give your advice to us on how to better respond to similar situations.

Ven: Well, with my family, it's true that first of all, my family didn't have any idea what Buddhism was. They didn't know what being a Buddhist nun was or anything like that. They thought I was going to live my life in one way, and then I wanted to live my life in a very different way. And so they thought I was just completely crazy or that a cult had convinced me to do something.

Growing as a family

At that time, I was quite young and I don't think I explained well to my parents, what I was doing. But even looking at it now, I don't think even if I had been able to explain well that they would have understood. This is because what I was doing was so completely different from anything they had ever encountered in their life. I think even if I had explained well it still would have been hard for them to understand. But what I think they've seen over the years is they've seen I'm happy. And as a parent, if your child is happy, even if they are not doing what you think they should do, or if they didn't turn out the way you wanted them to, you can't complain if your kid is happy.

There are a lot of kids who grow up and have the very career their parents want them to, but these children are miserable. So I think if your kids grow up and they are happy and they are living a life that doesn't harm anybody else, as a parent, you can be satisfied. And I think that's what my parents realized--that what I was doing was not harming anybody and was quite the opposite. I think they are beginning to realize that what I do benefits people. And they see that I am happy, so they are able to accept what I am doing now.

One interesting thing happened in 1989, when His Holiness the Dalai Lama won the Nobel Peace Prize. Because the Dalai Lama is one of my teachers, and, in the world, the Nobel Peace Prize is a great honour, it's very highly respected. So when His Holiness won the Nobel Peace Prize, my parents were saying "Oh, our daughter knows a Nobel Prize Peace winner!" Then they were very proud of me because they never knew a Nobel Peace Prize winner. "Our daughter is the student of the Dalai Lama—he's a Nobel Prize Peace winner!"

So it's interesting but I always tell people that if you give your parents a chance to grow up, they will. Okay? So parents, you're not only giving your kids a chance to grow up but also kids, you have to give your parents a chance too. And just some advice to kids: sometimes, it's hard when you are becoming an adult and you're not so dependent on your parents anymore, because your parents have spent years just taking care of the kids and their whole identity of who they are is as a care-taker and provider for the kids.

So your parents go through a little bit of an identity crisis when you grow up and they don't need to take care of you anymore. Because you're becoming an adult and all of a sudden, they don't know what to do with themselves. They are so used to telling you what to wear and what time to be home and what to eat that sometimes it's hard to adjust and to know that you are an adult and that you can be responsible. So be a little bit patient with them.

And I learnt this very clearly because sometimes when you are growing up and your parents still treat you like a kid, you get a little bit irritated at them. Anybody ever had that experience? I remember one time with my dad and grandma—he was probably about 60 years old and my grandma was in her 80's—and my grandma told him to put on a sweater so that he didn't catch cold. I knew at that point, your parents are always going to tell you to put on a sweater so you don't get sick (no matter how old you are). Just accept it, don't get angry.

Sometimes, if your parents treat you like a kid, don't worry about it. Just let it go okay? They're just doing what they are used to doing. I mean, my dad was 60 years old. He knew to put on a sweater! But sometimes, parents just get into the habit of doing what they think they need to be doing so they just keep doing it. So you don't need to get mad at them. Just let it go.

What other advice do I have to give about that? You know, some people said to me, when your parents wanted you to do one thing and you wanted to do another thing, how were you able to reconcile that? Weren't you selfish in doing that?

I thought a lot about that before I ordained as a Buddhist monastic. I thought, "Am I being selfish?" And when I looked at my motivation for ordination, I knew that a very strong motivation for me was I really wanted to live an ethical life. I didn't want to have very sloppy ethics where you kind of rationalize when you lie, you rationalize when you cheat, and you ignore the fact when you trash somebody verbally. I didn't want to live that kind of life. I really wanted to get myself in shape, so to speak.

And I knew that I really wanted to dedicate my life to spiritual practice and I knew that if I tried to live the life my parents wanted me to live, they might be a little happy but I'd never make them completely happy. In the mean time, I would probably create a lot of negative karma by cheating and lying and saying mean things about others and being greedy and stuff like that. Whereas I knew if I really tried to live a monastic life and live a dharma life, then at the end of my life I would have harmed fewer people. In my future life, I would be more capable of bringing benefit and service to others.

That's why I continued to do what I thought was right even though my parents didn't quite agree with it. Like if I had been choosing to be a drug addict, I think my parents could have had some legitimate complaints about what I was doing. "You're a drug dealer. Okay, you're rich, but look what you're doing to other people". But I think because I was really trying to improve myself so in the end, it worked out really well.

Handling criticism from friends

Q: If you ignore what others say, are you missing out on a chance to change to a better person? What if you really have a bad quality?

Ven: Remember I said we always have to look inside at our own motivation? It comes down to this because if somebody is criticizing us, instead of just getting angry with them, stop and think, "Is what they are saying true?" Because if what they are saying is true, then we have to say to them "Thank you" because they are showing us something about ourselves.

It might not be so pleasant to hear, but it's feedback that we need to get because we do have a certain fault. So in those situations when we are criticized, if we stop and look and we realize, "Yes, actually I did make a mistake or I did have a pretty bad intentional motivation," then we do have to admit it. But if other people are accusing us wrongly or if they are just seeing us through their own selfish concerns, that's when I meant don't pay any attention to what they think of us.

So when other people blame us, we have to stop and think: is it true or is it not true? If it's true, we might as well accept it, apologize, learn and try to improve ourselves in future. And we don't need to get mad at them because they're criticizing us. I mean, if we have a fault, why get mad at somebody who notices it? It's like somebody saying, "You have a nose on your face." What are you going to do? Walk around saying, "No I don't?" Okay? If we have a fault, it's there! Everybody sees it. There's no reason to try and hide it. It's much better to say, "You're right, I do have that fault and it's something that I need to work at, and it's something I am working on."

If, when they criticize us, we look and we see that it doesn't have any truth in it - that they're misinformed

or they are biased, then there's also no reason to get angry. And there's no reason to lose our self-confidence because what they are saying is wrong. It's like somebody saying "You have horns on your head." We've looked and we've checked—there are no horns. We don't need to get angry with them. We can explain to them that it isn't horns and then they'll come round. But there's no reason to get angry or to lose our self-confidence.

Q: What about superiors or bosses especially when they are giving evaluations?

Ven: Okay, so people's evaluations of us—you are working in your office and you get evaluated, it's like you get grades from your teachers, right? So again, you can learn from these things.

Sometimes, you get evaluations where you learn about your good qualities and also where you need to improve. And sometimes, superiors misunderstand us. So it's that same thing about criticism—is it true or is it not true? And the same thing with evaluations: now somebody's going to say, "If they give me a bad evaluation, then what am I going to do?"

Accept it. Forget it. I mean, what are you going to do? Are you going to try and act like a big phony so that someone writes you a nice evaluation? You might act like a big phony and somebody might write you a good evaluation but you're going to feel completely crummy about yourself. So whom do you have to live with? You live with yourself. So we don't want to feel really bad about ourselves because we deceived somebody to write a good evaluation about us.

And the basic thing is we can't always get what we want. I've had it happen—people blame me for things I don't do. People criticize me—can you imagine that? They criticize ME! They give me bad evaluations on my dharma talks—oh! Unbelievable you know. How can anybody do that! "Oh, they gave me a bad evaluation. Oh, I can't do anything right. I'm going to give up." I mean, what are you going to do?

We have to learn to maintain our equanimity when things don't go the way we want and not get angry, and not lose our self-confidence, but learn just to keep going.

And anyway, sometimes if people give you a bad evaluation and you're really lucky so you don't get the promotion. Because when somebody gets a promotion, then they get the great honor of working four more hours everyday. If you don't get the promotion, you go home and you can relax! So don't think that getting the promotion and getting the award is necessarily the best thing. You Singaporeans don't believe that, do you? "I want to be best. I want to get the promotion! I want to make more money! I have to have a bigger rice bowl with more rice in it than my neighbor!"

Emcee: Actually, there's a question on this: "I always want to be in the centre of attention or in charge. How can I change this?"

Ven: Cherish others. Cherish other living beings. Put more attention on their happiness than on your own. Look at other people's good qualities and point out their good qualities. Give other people a chance to show their talents and good qualities. Encourage their good qualities and give people opportunity to show their strengths. So turn your attention with a kind heart to others.

Difficult friends

Emcee: Speaking of kind hearts, there are few questions here that seek Venerable's advice on how to deal with a few categories of difficult friends.

These categories are:

- **Friends who have betrayed me**
- **Friends who make me feel lousy**
- **Friends who constantly tell white lies to me**
- **Friends who are authoritative.**

Ven.: So let's start out with friends who betray me. The sad news about life is that people do betray us. Is there anybody here who has never felt betrayed by a friend? Seriously, is there anybody who's never had a friend betray them?

Usually, when a friend betrays us, we feel like we're the only person in the world who has ever suffered that much; we're the only person in the world who a dear friend has betrayed and treated so rottenly. But it's quite remarkable if we start talking to other people: everybody has had that experience at one time or another of a dear friend betraying their trust.

So I think it's something that we have to just accept. You know, yes, this happens. It's sad, it hurts, but let's just accept it, learn what we can from the situation and go on. There's a verse on this in the ***Eight Point Thought Transformation***: "When someone I have benefited and in whom I have placed great trust hurts me very badly, may I see that person as my supreme teacher."

Can you imagine that person who hurts us, and whom we benefited-- to see that person as our supreme teacher? So what are they teaching us? Sometimes, what they are teaching us is that we have a lot of incorrect expectations. Or sometimes they teach us that we were very demanding, and they had to back out of the relationship because we were too demanding. Or sometimes, they teach us that we were too possessive or that we were too clingy. Sometimes when this happens, it's good to just step back and ask our self, well, what can I learn from this? And to also realize we're not the only one who has ever felt betrayed.

And along this line, I think it's important to ask our self "Have I ever betrayed a friend's trust?" So let's reverse the question: how many of us here have never betrayed the trust of a friend? How many of us have never acted in a really rotten way to a friend?

If we look at our own behavior -I don't know about you, but sometimes I haven't been very nice to people who relied upon me; Maybe hear me talking behind their back or hearing me saying nasty things to them or whatever—so I also have to look at my behavior because if I've betrayed other people's trust, then why am I so surprised if other people betray mine? This is just karma isn't it? What I do to others gets done to me. Why am I so surprised? If I don't like people betraying my trust, I need to be much more conscientious in the world and not betray their trust.

So maybe that's what they are teaching us in this situation—to look at our own behaviour and how we can become a better friend.

How do we deal with friends who make us feel lousy? Well, if somebody consistently makes you feel lousy, you might consider making new friends. If a friend is just in a bad mood, recognize they are in a bad mood and they are not usually like this and forgive them. But if somebody is consistently belittling you, criticizing you and making fun of you, or telling you nasty things or pressuring you, maybe you don't need that person as a friend.

Okay—somebody who makes us tell white lies. I think a friend who makes us tell white lies isn't the greatest friend. Because a friend should be encouraging us to do positive things, not negative things. In the *Sigalavoda Sutra*, the Buddha wrote about qualities of good friends. And actually, in my book, *Taming the Monkey Mind*, I quoted those passages and explained them.

The Buddha was very clear that people might be very pleasant and nice to be with, but if they encourage us to do negative actions, they aren't real friends. So with those people who encourage us to tell white lies or just to cheat a little bit, then we need to be careful of those people. This is because we are the ones who reap the result of our own actions in this life and in future lives. And if we let those people influence us, they are going to take us down the wrong path.

So we need to have our own integrity at that point and say, "I'm sorry, I can't do that for you." And I've done that with people, when people asked me to do things that I felt were not ethical. People have asked me to tell little white lies or go around the back door—I feel like I have to be very honest and say, "I'm sorry, but I can't do that." And you put the ball back in their court. And if they don't like you because of it, fine. Friends are people who respect our own sense or ethical integrity.

Emcee: I've just got another category of difficult friends. What about friends who are clingy or possessive?

Ven: So friends that are clingy and protective: "Where are you going? Who are you going with? Why

can't I come with you? What's going on?"

That kind of friend is difficult isn't it? Especially if it's a girlfriend or a boyfriend. Again, with those friends, you have to have your own sense of what you can do and what you can't do. And sometimes with clingy friends, you have to say, "Thank you, I really appreciate your friendship. But in my mind, friends don't always have to do absolutely everything together. And that it's actually good for our friendship if people have many, many friends."

Actually, I think we've had much better friendships when we have many friends than when we just rely on one person and either we cling to them or they cling to us. So I think it's very good to kind of remind people like that--that if we have our own interests or sometimes we do different things, and we have other friends, that's fine. It doesn't mean we care less about this friend because you are with that friend.

Actually I think, to be whole, round, psychologically well people, it's very good to have many friends. That's because not everybody can meet all of our needs. And if somebody is expecting us to meet all of their needs, we have to explain to them, "I'm sorry, I'm just little, little me. I can't meet all your needs. I can't do everything you want me to do." And one will have a much better relationship if we also give each other a little bit of space."

Emcee: We've got some questions from practicing Buddhists, because they make specific references to Buddha's teachings. So I'll just mention the three specific areas.

Dealing with grief & loss

The first one is, "Is having friends being attached? My best friend passed away and I miss her dearly. Much as I try, I still slide and feel miserable. And Buddhism tells us not to be attached."

Another specific mention is on the Noble Silence—that if we talk too much or if we talk about nothing that really matters, it's vain talk. But how do we avoid vain talk and still communicate? How do we maintain Noble Silence?

Ven: The first question is about someone whose friend passed away and they miss her very dearly. And yet they are wondering on what the Buddha advised us about not to be attached. It's very natural that when we're close to somebody and they pass away, we have a sense of grief and we miss them. It's very natural.

Grief is what we go through when we are in the process of changing. When we're changing from one thing to another thing, that process can be called grief. So when we lose somebody that we care very much about, we're going through a change in our life from being with that person and being dependent upon that person, to learning to be well and happy without that person around. So grief is that process of change that we go through.

Now, if we just dwell in the past and want to recreate the past, then there is a lot of attachment and our grief process becomes very difficult because we're thinking about all the things in the past with our friend: "Oh, remember when we did this, and I want it to happen again"-- like that.

Actually when we get sad about that, we think that we are thinking about the past but in actual fact, I think we are grieving about a future that is not going to happen. Because based on what happened in the past, we have an idea of how we would like the future to be like, with that person. And then all of a sudden that person's not in our life anymore and we have to readjust our idea of the future because they are no longer part of our future.

What I find very helpful to do in those situations is to look at the past and the future in a different way. And when I look in the past, to say, "How fortunate I was to have that person in my life. How fortunate I was. We are all impermanent. None of us are going to live forever so I knew from the beginning that my friend is not always going to be alive--nor am I always going to be alive. But how fortunate I was that for as long as that friendship was there, and as long as we were both alive, that we were able to share so much affection and love and closeness together. And how fortunate I was to have that person in my life. Of course they can't be in my life forever, but I was fortunate to share my life with that person for as long as I did."

In this way you look back on the past with a sense of rejoicing, instead of a sense of loss. And then you look to the future and say, "Everything I learnt from my dear friend. Because my friend taught me how to love, they taught me how to be patient, they taught me how to have a kind heart. Everything they taught me, I want to go forth in my life and share with other people." And so, you take everything that she gave from that friendship and now, you go further and you share it and you have a sense of fullness and joy in your heart.

Do you see how it's a different way of looking at the past and the future? And when you do this, then your whole feeling about your friend changes. Because you rejoice at what you were able to share together, you realize how much they gave and now, you're going to go out and give that to everybody else. And you know that you can.

Skillful speech

The second question was about Noble Silence and not doing vain talk. This question comes up often and is this whole thing about what is skillful speech. Sometimes, we're with a group of people and one person starts talking bad about somebody else and then everybody else in the group jumps in. And this happens in school—like you all pick on one person. And it happens at work too—everybody starts, "Let's pick at one person". And when somebody in a group starts doing that, if we feel uncomfortable with it, there's no reason for us to participate. There's no reason for us to hang around the conversation.

So there are different ways to handle that situation. Sometimes, you might just say to that person, "I feel really uncomfortable talking badly about somebody who isn't here." Sometimes you don't want to handle it that way so you just excuse yourself. You go do something else because you don't like being around when somebody is getting bad-mouthed.

Sometimes, what you can do is you can skillfully change the topic of the conversation. Like somebody's criticizing somebody because they made a mistake in this project. And then you say, "Oh you know what? I've done that too. I've made a mistake in a project and let me tell you this funny story about how I did it."

You pick up on something they were saying and you steer the conversation in a different direction. So you don't let everybody sit there and spin around in their critical minds. There're a lot of skillful ways on how to handle things and navigate conversations. You can learn this if you pay attention.

The whole thing about chitchatting is that we can't have deep and meaningful conversations with everybody. There are some people in our lives that we maintain a good relationship just by chitchatting and being friendly. So you can chitchat, but you are aware of why you are doing it. You're aware, "I'm doing this just to be friendly." And the situation isn't such that I'm going to be a real close friend of this person. But you do it in a friendly way and you know why you are doing it. And you don't do it in excess.

Because where it becomes useless or idle talk is when we spend hours chitchatting about this, chitchatting about that. We talk about sports, we talk about clothes and we talk this person and that person and we crack jokes about this and that—you know. Hours and hours go by and our mind is filled with rubbish. That's when it's helpful to know how much to chitchat and when to end the conversation.

Emcee: People who speak the truth often end up not having friends.

Being truthful

Ven: Well, there're a lot of people who lie and who wind up not having many friends. If I'm back in my own country right now-- the CEOs who lie and it gets found out—they don't have any friends. The politicians who lie and it gets found out —they don't have any friends. So it's not just if you tell the truth you don't have any friends, but especially if you lie, you don't have any friends. When you tell the truth—telling the truth doesn't mean you need to say everything, okay? You know how much to say when you're telling the truth.

One question that comes up—here's an example I give: You go over to somebody's house for dinner, you go over to your aunt's house for dinner and your aunt spent all day cooking this food and she says, "How do you like it?" And it so happens that she cooked food that you don't like very much.

So what are you going to say? “Auntie dear, I can’t stand it?” I mean, you can’t say that, can you? You can’t say, “You’re a lousy cook”, or “You cooked a dish I don’t like.”

What is your aunt really asking when she says, “How do you like the food?” Is she really asking if you like the food? Think about it. She’s not really asking that. What she’s asking is, “I care about you and I cooked this meal to show I care about you. Do you understand that I care about you?”

That’s what she’s really asking, isn’t it? Don’t you think? She wants to make sure that you got the gift of her care for you.

So instead of saying, “Aunty, this food stinks”, you say, “Wow, it was so kind of you to cook this. I really appreciate that you did this meal especially for me.” Because that’s true isn’t it? You recognize that she cares about you; she cooked the meal especially for you. That’s what you acknowledge because that’s what she’s really asking. And that’s not lying, it’s telling the truth okay?

Similarly, this thing about how you’re not going to have any friends if you tell the truth—there’re different ways to say things. If your friend comes to you and says, “Oh, I just said that to somebody. Did I make a mistake?” You don’t say, “Yeah, that was such a dumb thing to say, you idiot!” You don’t say that to your friend. You could say, “It was interesting that you said that. There’s probably many other ways to get that same point across.” And so you kind of let that person think of whatever ways they could do to say that to get that point across, instead of just telling them that they were a jerk.

So telling the truth—you can be very tactful when you tell the truth. You don’t have to be insulting.

Family & friends

Emcee: Is there any difference between friends and family? Why? What for? Why can’t my family behave like my friends and vice versa?

Ven: It’s interesting—we’re born into families and our families aren’t necessarily our friends, are they? Sometimes families we don’t choose, friends we choose. We are born into families; we have to accept those people. And sometimes, the people in our families aren’t the people we would choose to hang out with.

But I think that can be very good for us. We have to learn to be more broad-minded and to be more open and more accepting. And sometimes family members are not the kind of people that we like, but it’s good for us to learn how other people think, learn to get along with a variety of people and accept people who have different interests from us. So I think we can accept and learn to live with family even though they aren’t our friends.

And then the question, “Why aren’t friends like family?” Meaning what? You mean why do friends sometimes go home when you need them to stay and take care of you? What’s the meaning of that? What do you want from your friend that they are not giving to you? Can anybody help me understand this question a little bit better?

Maybe that person’s just means that a friend also has other commitments. They don’t always live with us, so they are not always there. That’s the way it is. I’m not sure if I answered that question because I’m not sure if I understood that question properly.

The acid test: friendship & money

Member of audience: I have one question. I believe this has not been touched on. It’s the question of money and friendship. It’s often been said that if you lend money to a friend or if a friend needs you because of money, it’s a sure way of losing a friend. This thing about money and friendship. Do you have any comments?

Ven: Yeah, money and friendship can be a very sticky thing. It can be very sticky. If we choose our friends because we want to make money through them, or if people choose us as friends because they want to make money through us, it’s not going to be a very good relationship.

It's the whole thing when sometimes somebody needs to borrow money: Do you borrow money from family, do you borrow money from friends? Who do you borrow money from? And if a friend asks you to loan them money, do you loan them money? Do you not loan them money?

And I think here, a lot depends on people's own sense of integrity. If it's a friend who you really trust, you loan them money and they repay you. You may not be able to loan them as much as they want, but you can still give them whatever you feel comfortable giving.

If you ask a friend to borrow money, you should be very sure that you are able to repay it and to tell them by when you are going to repay it. I don't think we should say to somebody we want to borrow money but actually, what we want is for them to give us money. That's deceptive. If we want somebody to give us money and we have no intention of repaying it, then we should be direct and say that. But we should never make it sound like we are going to repay them when in actual fact we don't want to.

And if we do borrow money, it is our responsibility to repay back. And when somebody asks us—if a friend asks us for money—then we need to assess what they are asking money for; how much are they asking, what do I have available to me; am I the proper person for them to be asking; or is it actually more suitable for them to ask a family member or an employer or somebody like this.

So it's fine to kind of investigate and act accordingly.

Emcee: I am looking at a question that I think is pretty important, so I shall squeeze this in. "I am only 24 and I just got married. But my friends, who are staunch Buddhists, try to avoid me. I know they don't wish to get married, but why can't they continue to be my friends?"

Ven: You know, my observation on that is not so much that the single friends move away but sometimes the person who gets married is the one who has moved away. Because my observation is that when somebody falls in love, they tend to ignore their friends for a while because they are so wrapped up in whoever they are in love with that they forget about their friends. And sometimes, their friends feel a little bit hurt. And then when that person wakes up and says, "Where are my friends?" they think that their friends have moved away from them when it could be—I am just suggesting this—maybe sometimes they have ignored their friends because they have been so wrapped up in being in love.

I see a lot of people in the audience nodding their heads in agreement with what I am saying! So I think some people may have had this experience of feeling like they've lost a friend when a friend has gotten married or has gotten into a very deep relationship with somebody else. So I think when this happens, you need to take steps and really re-establish your friendships.

Also, if you're married and your friends are single, and all you do is talk about your spouse, your friends are not going to be very interested in it. You have to remember that your friends have many different interests and to renew your different interests with your friends, you need to not just talk about your spouse and your house and what it's like to be married, because that may actually not be such an interesting thing for them. But it depends on the friendships—you have to see.

Please refer to the following website for more information: www.kmspks.org/friends