

The Path of Friendship: From the Buddha Through Facebook

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Abstract

The concept of friendship has reigned throughout history as one of the most significant of all human relationships. Whether forged on the battle field in history, in the halls of contemporary universities, or waged through opaque veils of cyber space connection quality friendships exhibit universal properties of trust and integrity, and great friendships present intense personal characteristics of love and tenderness. But the recent explosion of social media, Facebook in particular has challenged this. This paper begins at the intersection of Buddhist and Greek thought by offering some basic definitions. The Buddha's friendship with Ananda receives specific attention, and findings from the author's recent research is shared to argue contemporary claims.

Key Words: Aristotle, Friendship, Buddha, Facebook, Deborah Tannen, Alexander Nehamas

1. Introduction

Many great thinkers throughout history have said friendship is the most important kind of human relationship. The Buddha and Aristotle were some of the first to suggest this, and long before them, in Homer's *Iliad*, the famous friendship between Achilles and Patroclus depicted their unwavering bond. Five hundred years later, the Greeks laid claim to an equally remarkable friendship between Alexander the Great and Hephaestion. It seems in some form or another, the bond of friendship has been with us since the beginning of human existence.

But why is friendship such a powerful human experience? What distinguishes it from other relationships? What experiences most enhance or diminish it? Are friendships today different from those of the Buddha's day or the ancient Greeks, and if so, how are they different? And most importantly, what is friendship, and what makes good ones? These questions provide sustenance and direction for this paper.

Moreover, as an academic, it is especially fascinating to explore friendships within the university setting since these are places for natural cultivation among students. While it is true deep, meaningful, long lasting friendships may develop for them, that same academic environment may promote damaging competition among fellow faculty, hence challenging the path of true friendship for academics.

At the onset, it is fitting to share we are here today in some measure because of a friendship I've developed with Rob Fisher. Over the last several years I've had the good fortune to attend many interdisciplinary conferences hosted by both interdisciplinary.net and progressiveconnexions. Two years ago, one of my students and I presented a paper on evil in Lisbon, Portugal, and it was there I suggested to Rob that friendship might be an interesting conference. He was receptive; I began a serious exploration of literature and began researching friendship at my university; the good people at progressiveconnexions performed their usual magic to create the call for presentations; and here we are.

2. The Path of Friendship: Exploring Definitions

Westerner scholars often begin a discussion on friendship or *philia* with Aristotle's three descriptions of friendship.¹ According to Alexander Nehamas, author of the recent book, *On Friendship*, their relevance to contemporary life is debatable, and he in fact argues that the first two categories are not really friendships.² Nonetheless, Aristotle's first description includes relationships from which we gain something, as in a business partnership. We might also think of these as useful relationships. To support Nehamas's point, today it is possible to be involved in a successful business relationship with someone who is not a friend. The second kind includes those that give us pleasure. Examples today might be people we enjoy being together for the sake of playing cards as in bridge or poker clubs; or fans who root for the same sports team; or even an intimate love relationship. The third type of friendship and most important according to Aristotle, is the virtuous friendship. Cicero agreed and went so far to claim that without virtue, friendship did not exist.³

During Aristotle's time, virtue was the primary driving force behind one's life and by most standards, the virtuous friend was described as impeccable, brave and often heroic.⁴ It's no surprise that many of the aforementioned friends were decorated war heroes who often lost their young beautiful lives in tragic battles. In short, these friendships embodied honor and glory. *Areté* and *virtus* were the respective Greek and Latin words for virtue and they stood for manliness and strength. The word *virile* also comes from the same *Latin* root. It also seems a deep love accompanied this virtuous quality.

More recent contemporary definitions suggest a particular moral excellence or chastity, especially in women.⁵ It's worth noting that while women's friendships are woefully missing from the literature, it would be a mistake to suggest that their friendships lacked a similar virtue or worse yet, there were no such friendships among women.

Furthermore, Aristotle described virtue as a point between deficiency and excess.⁶ Hence, he implied its significance came from the middle or a mid-point which supposed qualities of balance and stability. Thus, to be virtuous in friendship was to take a balanced middle approach—a middle way that was not deficient or extravagant in human agency.

Modern philosophers contest how relevant these three types are for today's world, and while no universal agreement exists, virtue remains a significant characteristic. In fact, while Aristotle maintained the virtuous friendship was rare, he also stated only virtuous people could have virtuous friendships. In other words, if one claimed to have virtuous friendships but was not a virtuous person, one was simply mistaken or wrong. Such distinctions however, appear to be missing from Eastern thought and conflict with Christian thought.

3. The Midpoint of Virtue: Intersecting Western and Eastern Thought

Here I make a plausible connection to Buddhism by linking Aristotle's virtuous mid-point to the Buddhist Middle Way.⁷ This middle way is explained thus; for many years the Buddha searched for true understanding and the end of all suffering. As an attempt to gain this insight, he engaged in extremes practices. It has been said he ate one grain of rice a day for extended periods to the point of causing ill health.

But for all of his self-indulgence and self-mortification, he could not alleviate his own suffering or that of others. Some of you know his story; while sitting under the Bodhi tree in deep practice he eventually discovered another way. The path to liberation and self-realization avoided extremes like those just mentioned. The Buddhist path is therefore called the Middle Way.⁸

Although the Buddha preceded Aristotle by nearly two hundred years, both men emphasized spiritual and virtuous features of friendship. In one famous story the Buddha's cousin, Ananda, asks him if friendship is half of the path to enlightenment. The Buddha's response is clear, "No Ananda, having good friends isn't half of the holy life. Having good friends is the whole of the holy life."⁹

Here, the cross-cultural similarities are evident; friendship was the most important part of life. Everything else flowed from it. Moreover, in the Mahayana tradition, teachers were referred to as *kalyanamitras*—or spiritual friends. They were described as people who saw us as we truly were, loved us despite our inequities, and cared for our ultimate welfare.¹⁰ The Buddha and early Greeks also noted friendship was strengthened (or diminished) by a strong sense of community. My own research affirmed this.

Norman Fischer, a contemporary Zen master states,

A teacher's job is to model spiritual friendship. While at first we may be intimidated by the teacher, imagining him or her to be far more spiritually developed than we are, as time goes on the teacher transforms from a scary boss to a trusted friend. And over time in community life we come to have such inspiring friendships with others who support and love us in the same way.¹¹

Fischer is referring to a Zen community and used the word spiritual in an eclectic sense. Maybe the same could be said for what transpires at a University between faculty and students. Certainly, such University friendships with faculty and students are complex; exertion of power, especially over grades and professional codes of conduct are complicating, yet necessary factors. Boundaries exist for good reason, and responses from my surveys indicated overstepping boundaries could dramatically harm friendships.

4. The Powerful Bond of Friendship: Literary Expressions

In addition to the male friendships mentioned in the opening of this paper, 16th century French essayist Montaigne says profound things about friendship, especially as exemplified by his own friendship. In his famous essay, he describes his relationship with Etienne de La Boétie in flattering ways and offers a commentary on women's friendship, notwithstanding a negative one. Regarding his friendship with La Boétie he states,

...thus starting on its way this friendship which together we fostered as long as God willed, so entire and so perfect that certainly you will hardly read of the like, and among men of today you see no trace of it in practice. So many coincidences are needed to build up such a friendship that it is a lot if fortune can do it once in three centuries.¹²

In this passage he explains the treasured and cherished sentiment of this friendship, and states women are incapable of the same depth and magnitude. He continues,

To compare this brotherly affection for women, even though it is the result of our choice—it cannot be done, nor can we put the love of women in the same category. Its ardor, I confess—is more active, more scorching, and more intense. But it is an impetuous and fickle flame, undulating and variable, a fever

flame, subject to fits and lulls, that holds us only by one corner...As soon as it enters the boundaries of friendship, that is to say harmony of wills, it grows faint and languid.”¹³

In the interest of time and space, I forgo any diplomatic rebuttal of Monsieur Montaigne. However, his expressions confirm the depth and profundity often mentioned by men, and like Aristotle, he notes its rare occurrence.

5. Battlefield Friendships

There is some belief that friendships formed on the battle or during war have a unique quality, perhaps out of necessity. Charles Bracelen Flood’s, *The Friendship that Won the Civil War* serves as another example. Recently I read this piece because my own meditation teacher recommended it as an example of spiritual friendship. The piece chronicles the friendship between Ulysses S. Grant and William Tecumseh Sherman. After the war ended they continued to correspond and in one letter Sherman writes to Grant, “...I knew where ever I was you thought of me, and if I got in a tight place, you would come to me, if still alive.”¹⁴

Trust and faith, were qualities mentioned in my own research and if not directly mentioned, they were almost always implied. The example of Grant and Sherman is one among countless others. As noted at the beginning of this paper, Homer’s *Iliad* depicts the Trojan friendship of Achilles and Patroclus and demonstrates the heartbreak Achilles feels when he learns of his friend’s death. Five hundred years later, Alexander the Great and Hephaestion developed an equally intense friendship and like Achilles, when Hephaestion died, Alexander the Great was devastated and died only a few months later. The 11th century Persian poet, Rumi describes a similar grief in his prose when Shams of Tibriz mysteriously vanishes.

Of the men (and some women) who have taken my survey, trust most often described the mark of a true friend. Betrayal, on the other hand most often destroyed a friendship. But no one yet, who has taken the survey has said a harmed friendship could never be repaired. That, at least to me implies a strength and resilience of true friendship.

6. What Enhances or Diminishes Friendships: Enter Social Media

Perhaps no one has done more to alter the influence and authority of the word “friend” than Marc Zuckerberg. At present, there are approximately 7.7 billion people living on our planet and 2.45 billion of them have Facebook accounts. Of those most active users, 76% are women. The primary intent of the social platform is to electronically connect as many human beings as possible, albeit with negative and positive consequences.

Recently, executives from the company admit that 115 million accounts have been deemed “fake”; Facebook’s first professional motto was “move fast and break things,” and the professional street address for Facebook Headquarters in Menlo Park is 1 Hacker Way. One could argue this is a far cry from Aristotelian and Buddhist qualities of virtuous and spiritual friends mentioned earlier.

Deborah Tannen, the acclaimed linguist and author of *You Just Don’t Understand* and the recent best seller *You’re the Only One I Can Tell: Inside the Language of Women’s Friendships* has published new research and explains how FOMO (fear of missing out) and FOBLO (fear of being left out) are exacerbated by social media. She states,

The ubiquity of social media platforms where people post photographs of themselves beaming and mugging among joyful

revelers means that people are constantly at risk of seeing a gathering they were not invited to, like a little match girl with her face pressed to a window, looking in on a happy world she can't enter. In the picture, everyone looks like they're having the time of their lives, intensifying the stabbing pain of being left out.¹⁵ Does this sound familiar?

Obviously, not all users abuse the platform. From my professional experience and I can attest to its use as a fantastic grief mechanism, however the links to depression and damage to one's self-esteem are well-documented, especially among women. But are these really examples of friendship as expressed by the Buddha and Aristotle? Is it possible to have 2,000, or 4,000 friends? Robin Dunbar, a University of Oxford anthropologist has suggested the maximum number of human relationships any person can maintain is 150,¹⁶ and these are leveled in gradations. He reports many people maintain an outer circle of about 30-50 friends. Dunbar also admits most claim to have about 5 close really friends. That number aligned with my own research results

7. The Inner Ring

Both Tannen and Dunbar address a phenomenon similar to what C.S. Lewis discusses in his famous piece, *The Inner Ring*. This is brilliant piece because of its relevance more than 70 years after it was written and it has special meaning for those who work in a University setting.

According to Lewis, examples of the Inner Ring include "the cool group", "the popular group", the group everyone wants to be a part of. Lewis says, we think the Inner Ring exists everywhere—in workplaces, universities, churches, the government and on and on. No doubt the perception of an Inner Ring also existed during the time of the Buddha, Jesus, and Aristotle.

Lewis tells us more often than not the group is nothing but a façade for a shallow, superficial experience much like the pictures described a moment ago on Facebook. In truth, the Inner Ring doesn't exist. It is just an insidious illusion, but our perception that it has existence is precisely its danger. It's why Tannen's fear of being left out or fear of missing out is so devastating.

In my own recent research there were parallels, especially among young women. Several noted one possible harm to friendship was when their girlfriends acquired boyfriends or made new friends. Having a new friend or boyfriend meant the old friend could be left out or excluded. In other words, time that was once shared by two friends, was now infringed upon by a new person, and thus causing potential harm to that friendship.

Tannen also describes clear distinctions between the friendships of men and women, but these differences do not diminish their import and that point is the beginning another paper.

8. What Is Good Friendship: Being Good Company

Friendship is not usually juxtaposed with the role of university faculty. On the contrary, the modern Academy prizes a competitive, scholastic, erudite, Western, pedantic spirit. But these qualities by themselves diminish the long standing values I have mentioned throughout this paper.

Faculty need kind, tender, generous colleagues to learn from and to be mentored; to delicately tell us the things we don't want to hear. Faculty need good friends who are students and students need good friends who are faculty. The research on healthy aging suggests, happy older people have friends across the age spectrum; well-adjusted young people have a wide range of friends from

different backgrounds and ages. And not surprising, as we age the quantity of friendships matters much less than their quality.

Marsha Baxter Magolda, a student development theorist from Miami University, suggests in her classic work, *Making Their Own Way*,¹⁷ students want to know their teachers, what they think, and what have been their experiences. She also states faculty need to be good company for students, and we know what that means. Good company are enjoyable people who are often friends. They know when to leave and not overstay their welcome. They know when and how to listen. Good company know the delicate interplay of giving and receiving. They treat our lives and property with respect.

At the University good faculty need to be good role models, to set examples for students and younger colleagues. And good faculty need to develop meaningful bonds with staff and administration. When these ties are not evident, our professional and intellectual landscape becomes flat and drab. A University that knows how to be good company models the noble and virtuous qualities mentioned throughout this paper.

I conclude with a shortened variation of a famous Buddhist sutra. It's called the Megheiya Sutra. Megheiya was a young monk who asked permission from his teacher, the Buddha to go and meditate in beautiful mango grove. Twice the Buddha told Megheiya to wait-the time wasn't right. Finally the Buddha granted him permission, but when Megheiya began to meditate, his mind was scattered and afflicted by sensual thoughts, ill-will and a desire to harm others. When he returned to explain his dilemma, the Buddha responded by noting this is what happens to the immature person. But like a good teacher the Buddha does not leave Megheiya in despair. He instead offers advice that is as appropriate today as it was 2500 years ago. He said, "Five things induce release of heart and lasting peace. First, a lovely intimacy with good friends. Second, virtuous conduct. Third, frequent conversation that inspires and encourages practice. Fourth, diligence, energy, and enthusiasm for the good. And fifth, insight into impermanence."

It is indeed our virtuous, spiritual friendships that sustain us in our despair and revive and vivify us in our celebration. So my friends, whether we have membership in the Inner Ring or not, whether we are trending on twitter or not, it behooves us all to follow the path, the middle way, and be good company.

¹ These definitions match with Aristotle's original exposition. R. Jerome, p. 7.

² A. Nehamas, p. 12.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 13

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Mavis Biss,

⁷ K. Tanahashi, p. 439.

⁸ R. Fields.

⁹ This comes from a current and popular online publication and Norman Fischer, a respected Zen teacher, is a frequent contributor.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Michel Montaigne, Donald M. Frame (trans), *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*. Stanford University Press. 1957. p. 137.

¹³ Ibid, p. 138.

¹⁴ Charles Bracelen Flood, *Grant and Sherman: The Friendship That Won the Civil War*. Harper Perennial, 2005.

¹⁵ D. Tannen, p. 128.

¹⁶ Maria Konnikova

¹⁷ Marsha Baxter Magolda

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