

Duties of Friendship in Buddhism

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Spiritual friendship and shared ideals; The Duties of Brotherhood in Islam by Al-Ghazali; why duty?

Thank you Jnanavajra. Ok, so this is an introduction to the retreat but it will probably be a fairly full talk – I'm not quite certain how long it will be but make yourselves comfortable.

So, the basic theme of this retreat is spiritual friendship, spiritual friendship, Kalyana Mitrata. So, as we've already been exploring on the weekend that has preceded this, it's the friendship, the association, the brotherhood that you can develop with others with whom you are treading the Buddhist path. Those who share your ideals and share, to some extent, your commitment to Buddhist ideals; who, to some extent, go for refuge to the Three Jewels. That's the way we usually talk about it.

The Three Jewels being:

The Buddha: the ideal of human Enlightenment. That being an ideal that we can all aspire towards and move towards.

The Dharma: the Truth which the Buddha perceived when he gained enlightenment. Also, the path that he communicated to enable us to experience that enlightenment for ourselves.

And then there's The Sangha: the spiritual community. In particular, it really means as an ideal, "the community of those possessing insight." And in a sense the type of communication and association and brotherhood that those people have.

Okay. Each night on this weekend we're going to be hearing talks, talks about specific spiritual friendships that are drawn basically from the Buddhist Canon. So we'll be hearing about some of the Buddha's friendships. The Buddha was, in a sense, the primary spiritual friend or Kalyana Mitra. So we'll be hearing about some of his friendships with some of his disciples. We'll be hearing about some of those disciple's friendships with one another and we'll also be hearing about the friendship which existed between Milarepa and his teacher, Marpa, coming from the Tibetan tradition. So, you'll be hearing one of these talks each night. Hopefully, they'll provide us, well, with a certain amount of inspiration; you know when we actually hear the stories of these friendships, certain duties could be drawn out of them and I've no doubt that our speakers will actually do that. There are certain duties we can draw from those stories that we can actually apply to our own lives and to our own practice of friendship.

The title of this retreat, which I think came up with Katannu – I think Katannu actually suggested this, I can't quite remember – "*Duties of Brotherhood in Buddhism.*" It's a sort of bastardisation of a book title and it's a book that comes from the Islamic tradition, strangely enough, a book known as "*The Duties of*

Brotherhood in Islam.” Those of you who’ve been here on the weekend, I think you’ve heard that mentioned, I think Paramabandhu mentioned it last night. It’s by a Sufi writer, known as al-Ghazali, “*Duties of Brotherhood in Islam.*” This book is one which Sangharakshita once led a seminar on. The reason being, that although it’s a book from the Islamic tradition, it’s actually got a lot to say about friendship which we as Buddhists can actually draw on and make something of.

So, tonight by way of introduction to this particular retreat, I just want to first of all explore the question of duty. Why do we talk in terms of duty, for example, with regard to brotherhood? Why even think in those terms? I want to explore that question. Perhaps because, well, for some of us, thinking in terms of duty with regard to friendship and brotherhood is a rather unfamiliar thing to do. We might be more inclined to think in terms of rights, you know, what we would *get* from friendship. So, it may be a little bit unfamiliar to think in terms of duty. Again, this theme has kind of come through on the weekend already and, in a sense, actually, there is probably nothing that I’m going to say in this talk tonight that you didn’t hear, well for example, last night. Paramabandhu covered quite a lot of the ground that I cover but it’s worth actually just hearing it again.

Anyway, I’m going to explore this question of duty and I’m going to do that by looking particularly at an essay that Bhante, Sangharakshita, wrote many years ago. It’s in a collection of essays known as “*Crossing the Stream.*” It’s published as “*Crossing the Stream.*” The essay itself is entitled “*Rights and Duties.*” It’s a very, very important little essay and there’s a lot in it. So I’m going to look at what he’s got to say in there, or at least some of what he’s got to say in there, and then I’m going to make a few general points about duties in friendship, this question of duties in friendship, and then I’m going to finish by just saying something about the program that we’ll be following for this retreat and how to engage with it and get the most out of it, and how well we can use it to really explore the practice of friendship. Because in the end friendship is not something that you theorize about, friendship is something that you do, that you engage with and you experience.

Ok, so first of all, the general question of rights and duties.

Rights and Duties - an essay by Sangharakshita; attitudes to rights in the west - parents, consumption

So to orientate ourselves towards this question, what we really need to ask to begin with is “what are rights and duties?” What are they? When we use these words what exactly are we talking about? So, let’s see what Bhante’s got to say in his essay. I’ll just read a little bit now:

“Human relationships are not only reciprocal but complementary. The concept of Father cannot exist without the complementary concept of child and the ideal of ruler is meaningless without the corresponding idea of subjects for him to rule over. The two ends, so to speak, of a human relationship are in fact as inseparable as the two ends of a stick. Just as we may run our hand either from the top to the bottom or from the bottom to the top of the stick so, in human relationships, we may precede either from ourselves to others or from others to ourselves, considering either what is owed by us to them or by them to us. The first comprise what we call duties, the second what we call rights but the relationship nevertheless remains in itself an indivisible whole.”

So just to reiterate what he's saying there. Rights and duties are basically an intrinsic aspect of human relationship, of which, friendship, brotherhood, Kalyana Mitrata, is one example. There's the aspect of what we may expect from others - what's, as it were, due to us from others - and that's rights. And there's the aspect of what others may expect from us - what we owe others, as it were - and that's duty.

So then he goes on to say this:

"The idea of rights with duties or duties without rights is, therefore, an absurdity, a palpable contradiction in terms, for the two are in reality one, being nothing but the same object looked at from different points of view, approached from different ends."

So, rights without duties and duties without rights is an absurdity, it ignores one or other of the poles of the human relationship, which doesn't really make sense. If you just insist on rights you're ignoring or you're negating other. If you just insist on duty you're ignoring or negating self, you know, duty without rights. Rights without duties you're negating other.

At different times and in different cultures one pole or other tends to be emphasized, and one pole or other tends to get lost sight of, and in our own culture, something that Bhante goes on to argue, we've tended to lose sight of the pole of duty and we tend to insist on the pole of rights. That's kind of the general trend. And this is worth reflecting on, it's worth reflecting on a lot, because it's going to rather twist our perception of the whole question of rights and duties in any given relationship and it's certainly going to twist our perception of rights and duties in friendship, and there's a number of mistakes we may make if we're not clear about this.

So, for example, we can easily, perhaps, recall not getting from our parents what we ought to have done or, at least, what we thought we ought to have got, what in a sense we had a right to. And it's very easy to forget that actually we've got a duty to our parents, so we can sort of insist on the rights, perhaps, that we felt weren't fulfilled and forget that actually we've got a duty towards our parents. It's a very common problem and we forget, for example, to look after them when they get older. They are your parents after all.

So, I'm not trying to argue that the notion of rights is a bad thing. Children actually do need certain things from their parents and there are problems if they don't get them, so I'm not trying to argue that. They need love, they need security, they need moral instruction and so on. But if you insist on rights and you ignore your duties it's going to lead to problems, especially the problem of selfishness. That's primarily what's going to happen; you're going to become very selfish. And also, it's going to lead you into a situation where you're going to lack the ability to take responsibility because you're kind of waiting around all the time for someone to give you your rights, so you're unlikely to take responsibility. Not only that, but you're likely to blame others for not meeting your needs and so you're going to give way to resentment. That's another problem that then arises, you'll give way to resentment.

Another example. These days, we're very readily able to think about our right to consume what we wish to consume, when we want it. We're very familiar with that right. We've been told that we've got that right all the time. It's very easy to get on with it, as it were. But what about our duty towards the environment? What about taking responsibility for the consequences of that consumption? Do we think like

that? This is very, very important and if you don't think like that you're missing a whole dimension of ethics and, in a sense, you are being very selfish and you're potentially causing a lot of harm to others without actually realizing what you are doing. I could give you lots and lots of examples of this sort of tendency in our culture. The growing compensation culture, that's another example of it. There's loads of things you could think about there, but I won't say any more about that.

Visiting another culture – Indian health and safety

I suppose the thing is, that this sort of conditioning to think in terms of rights rather than duty becomes very, very apparent when you visit another culture that isn't like that. So, I've had a bit of an experience of this going to India. I went to India in 1997 and basically, the culture is just not like that. They orientate themselves quite differently and there's a lot of expectation that you perform your duty and it comes down to certain very basic things.

The area that I noticed it most strikingly was in the area of health and safety. We're kind of used in this culture to everything being reasonably safe. It's not like that in India, and in India there is no one to sue and blame and get money back from if you have an accident. It's your problem. I remember being in Pune just after I'd arrived and I was going for a walk with Suvajra and he just pointed out, "Look, just keep an eye on the pavements, will you? I know in the UK pavements are nice and flat and they're sort of safe and you can just sort of walk down the road and nothing is likely to happen to you. You can't make that assumption here. There are going to be all sorts of often very large holes that are just unmarked. There are going to be sometimes loose flagstones which, when you step on, will pitch you into whatever is underneath and quite often that will be the sewer which, believe me, is not a great place to end up in India, all right?" He was just sort of warning me, "Take responsibility. Don't assume you've just got a right to walk down the street without paying attention to where you're going. You haven't got that in India, it's not there."

The other really striking example of this, I visited the Taj Mahal with Mokshapriya and we were walking around the back of the Taj Mahal and there's this sort of big marble sort of walkway, quite a wide marble walkway. There's hundreds and hundreds of people, at points even thousands of people, all sort of milling around on it and at the back of this big marble walkway is a big drop, I mean like about 40 or 50 foot onto another marble walkway. And there's this little balustrade that's approximately about that tall – so it's about shin height. So you imagine, that you've just got to walk back against it and you'd be pitched over. I was quite shocked by this. I actually found myself getting really angry, you know sort of "Well, we've got a right to safety!" It's like, well, you haven't got that there; you haven't got that in India. If you fall over, that's your problem, you're going to have to accept the consequences. So you know, it kind of really showed me, that type of thinking, just how deeply rooted that kind of thinking was in my psyche, living in this particular culture. So it's a very, very useful way of showing yourself that.

But the point I'm driving at is that we just need to be aware that within our culture we tend to insist on rights over duties. We forget about duties and we insist on our rights and this has a very, very all-pervading effect on the way that we view all sorts of things, including friendship, including that relationship.

Performing duties rather than expecting rights; generosity and Enlightenment; duty as a gateway to freedom

Bhante then makes a further point:

“But just as in the case of a walking stick, although its two ends are inseparable, so that one is unthinkable without the other, it is nevertheless the handle of the stick that must be grasped, not the tip. Just so in human relationships; it’s duties that must be performed rather than rights that must be demanded, even though the two are in fact inseparable so that one necessarily follows from the other.”

So not only must we be careful not to insist on rights without duties, we must think in terms of performing duties rather than getting our rights. This is what Bhante is saying here. So the question arises, well why? And why, particularly as practicing Buddhists, is this an important point?

So Bhante makes another point about the importance of duties here. I’ll just read this out:

“Duties consist in what is due from us to others and are based upon giving, whereas rights consist in what is due from others to us and are based upon, from the subjective point of view, upon grasping and getting. The performance of one’s duty does not mean merely the grudging recognition and half-hearted rendering of what is legally or even morally due to one’s family and friends, social or national group, political party or religious organisation but in the unobstructed flow of one’s love and compassion over the whole world. Duty is not, as the poet apostrophises her, ‘the stern daughter of the voice of God’ but the sweet child of the realisation of emptiness, sunyata, within the depths of our own heart.”

So, basically what he is saying is that practicing your duties is in accordance with the goal, from a Buddhist point of view, because it focuses on what is due from us to others. It causes us to orientate ourselves towards others, so rather than towards selfishness, towards generosity. And the complete absence of selfishness, that’s Enlightenment; the complete fulfilment of generosity, that’s Enlightenment. Whereas, if we take the opposite stance, if we insist on our rights, we head in the opposite direction, we tend towards selfishness.

So Bhante’s got something else to say about the importance of duties. This is another important point:

“The former, i.e. duties, depend upon ourselves and are therefore swift and easy of accomplishment. The latter, i.e. rights, depend upon others and are therefore tardy and difficult if not impossible of achievement. Rights are wrested forcibly from other human beings outside but duties are softly and sweetly laid upon us by the voice of the divine, our own potential Buddhahood reverberating within.”

So, when we look at the question of rights and duties like this, what we see is that duty, contrary to perhaps our usual way of looking at it, is not some sort of a restriction that is imposed upon us but is actually a gateway to freedom and the more we can see it like this, the more we are going to make spiritual progress, the more we are going to move towards freedom from selfishness and the fullness of generosity.

So that's rights and duties, two aspects of human relationship: two intrinsic aspects of the same thing. Rights is what others, as it were, owe to us. Duties is what we owe to others. One without the other is an absurdity and we need to be aware that within our culture we tend to emphasize rights and underplay duty. But for practicing Buddhists, and ourselves as practicing Buddhists, to the extent that we are, it needs to be the other way round and this is a very, very important point because that's in line with our goal.

Duty leads towards self-transcendence and it also leads towards the active taking of responsibility because it's something you can do. You don't have to wait around for others to do it, *you* can take responsibility and get on with it.

Befriending; Aristotle's threefold classification of friendship as discussed by Subhuti; utility, pleasure, the Good

So, the next thing is to apply this to the question of friendship. What this basically means is that friendship is really about befriending, that's really what it is, it's about befriending. It's something that you give to others. Or to put it another way – and this is the way I tend to think about friendship – it's more important to *be* a friend than to *have* a friend. It's more important to keep your emphasis, your attention on what you do. Be a friend, rather than have a friend. That's the way you need to keep it.

Now this is very, very challenging. I've tried working with this and believe me it's very, very challenging. Those times when we feel lonely and isolated, so say here on this retreat this is going to happen to you, it always happens on retreats. At times, you will feel lonely and isolated. And it's so easy to then fall into "Well, why doesn't someone come and sort me out?" Forget about it. Don't do that. Turn it around. You need to take responsibility. Do your duty. Befriend somebody. Take an interest in somebody and you'll find strangely enough that when you do *that* you don't feel lonely and isolated any more. If you just sit there waiting for someone to come and sort you out, you'll just get resentful. That's basically the way it works.

So, don't just sit around waiting for something to be given you. Take responsibility. Take initiative. Friendship, and especially spiritual friendship, is about self-transcendence. Go beyond yourself. Go beyond yourself. Take an interest in others.

So, basically, this is kind of the core message of the retreat. That's kind of it. If you get this, you've got what this retreat is really about and you've basically got the key to friendship and you've got the key to spiritual friendship. So if you remember one thing when you leave Padmaloka, remember this. Forget everything else, but remember this:

"Friendship equals befriending. It's more important to be a friend than to have a friend. Friendship is something that you do, that you give to others."

If you do it in this way, if you do it in this order, you will strangely enough find that you do have friends. You have deep friends, deep friendships. You have all sorts of friendships. So the duties of brotherhood, which is the title of this retreat, they're all expressions of this one basic principle.

I'm going to – it's a bit of a digression here – but it's something that it's just very, very useful to know about and it's worth thinking about because it helps you to get a bit more of a perspective on this whole question of duties in friendship.

So what I'm going to introduce here is something you may have come across in Subhuti's spiritual friendship talks but if you've come across it already I'm just going to remind you of it. And that is Aristotle's Threefold Classification of Friendship, which I've always found a very, very useful little list.

So the three categories of friendship that Aristotle talks about are classifications according to the object of the friendship. The object of the friendship. Either Usefulness, that's the kind of lowest level, or Pleasure, or the highest level, the Good.

Usefulness. Pleasure. The Good.

So, I'm going to give you some readings from Subhuti's talks just to give you a sense of these.

So, Usefulness or utility.

"The first object of attraction which draws you into a friendship is that you like someone because they are useful to you. In one way or another they give you some benefit; they provide something for you. They are an opportunity for you. So, for instance, you might like somebody because they're very popular, so that your being attracted to them gives you a circle of friends. You might like somebody because they had influence. You're attracted to the fact that they've got a bit of influence and may be able to help you in that way. You might be attracted to them because they're rich. You might be attracted to them because they're knowledgeable and can give you some information: they can help you to increase your knowledge and so on. You might be attracted to them because they are surrounded by lots of women and you think that you might pick up some of their leavings. So, in many different ways, you might be attracted to someone because they are useful. And I don't think that we should be ashamed of this. I don't think we should look down or frown on this or think that we are being cynical in doing this. We have got to live and in order to live you do need help; you do need aid. So I think that quite a lot of one's friendships are actually to do with what the friend can do for you in one way or another. It may be more subtle psychological help that they can give you or intellectual stimulus or something like that."

So that's utility. That's friendship on the basis of Usefulness.

Second one. Pleasure.

"Well, the second motive is for pleasure. You enter into a relationship for pleasure. In a way, this is a bit the same. You like them because they're a source of pleasure to you; they are good company. It's just that when you're with them they make you feel happy. You like them because they make you feel happy. They are a good laugh maybe or they are always amusing and witty. So you feel good in their company. They like a good time, for instance, and they know how to have a good time. So when you are with them you have a good time too. Maybe you're not very good at it yourself. Or they're just nice to you. They're just friendly and nice to you. So they give you lots of pleasure just to be with them."

So that's the second motive, Pleasure.

So, the third one. The Good.

“The third motive is the love of the good, according to Aristotle, and this is, I suppose, what we could call friendship proper or real friendship. Maybe even we could distinguish it by talking about spiritual friendship rather than ordinary friendship. The more the love of the good is present, the more there is spiritual friendship. So this kind of friendship is based on a mutual love of the good and the good is the end of man’s spiritual and ethical quest.”

So, basically, in terms of the Good, what he means is virtue. Nobility. The best within one’s friend and within oneself. So that’s the third level.

Not wrong but limited; spiritual friendship as a value in itself; a hierarchy of friendships; isolation

So the first two, which are kind of about normal friendship, use and pleasure, they’re concerned with getting various needs of yours met. And in a sense, there is nothing wrong with this – this is what Subhuti is pointing out in there. There’s nothing wrong with it. It’s just that it’s limited. It’s just limited. It’s not as much as, in a sense, you could, as it were, get from friendship. Most of our experience of friendships are going to be like this. If it’s not that they’re like that now they probably certainly started like that. And as a result of that, if a friendship is just about use and pleasure, they tend to come and go depending on whether you, your friend, are still useful and pleasurable. So, quite naturally they’ll come and go. There’s a lack of depth to them. So they’re okay. There’s nothing to be ashamed of there, as it were, but they’re limited.

Friendship based on the good, on the love of virtue, and in our terms, self-transcendence, going for refuge to the Three Jewels. This is spiritual friendship as opposed to just ordinary friendship and it goes beyond use and pleasure. It’s not limited or constrained by them. Your friend, who’s a spiritual friend, well maybe sometimes they’re not useful and pleasurable to you, maybe you’re having a difficult time with them. They’re still your friend, because together you’re working towards the good. So your friend is not just useful or pleasurable, he helps you to transcend yourself and that’s really what this type of friendship is about. He relates to your potential and he helps you to actualize it. He reminds you of your ideals. In a sense, spiritual friendship is quite useless. It’s quite useful to bear this in mind. Useful to bear in mind it’s useless. Spiritual friendship isn’t really about helping you, say, to get a new car or whatever it is. It’s not necessarily about helping you to have a good time. It’s useful to bear this in mind.

In fact, as I’ve sort of already suggested, sometimes when you have to, say, point out your friend’s unskilfulness or he has to do the same to you, you know, you might not have a good time, but in a sense, that doesn’t matter. But it is in fact of great value, much more value than anything else because it helps you to transcend yourself and that’s a very difficult thing to do and anything that helps you to do that is of immense value. Ultimately, spiritual friendship is actually just a value in itself. It’s just a value in itself. It’s not about getting something else. So, for example, later on in the retreat we’re going to hear about Śāriputra and Moggallāna’s friendship, their friendship together. Now Śāriputra and Moggallāna were Enlightened; they didn’t need anything. They certainly didn’t need anything from one another. Their friendship was purely a matter of delighting in the good in one another. In a sense, their friendship was quite useless but that’s where it’s value lay - you know, it’s a value in itself. The same is true of the Buddha and his friendships. The Buddha was the Buddha – he

didn't really need his friends in the way that maybe we need our friends but he loved them, he appreciated them, he appreciated the good in them. He saw the value in that.

So we can see these different categories: Use, Pleasure and Good as a sort of hierarchy and this is quite a useful way of looking at it. Use and Pleasure are about on the same level but above them is the Good, friendship based on the Good and if you look at them like this you can start to see them as a bit of a path, a path to friendship. So, you've got at the bottom, as it were, the more contractual type of friendship, friendship that's based on getting something: Use and Pleasure. You've got this more contractual type of friendship. Probably, when we've got these friendships, we're going to be quite attached to them because we're attached to getting that use and pleasure. But gradually, these types of contractual friendships can develop into much more unconditional friendships, friendships that are not about use and pleasure but are about the Good, about self-transcendence. Gradually, they can evolve, whereas friends, you know you and your friend, become increasingly independent of one another: in a sense, you don't need one another which allows you to really appreciate one another more fully, more fully as independent human beings and to therefore really love one another and really love the Good in one another.

Underneath this kind of hierarchy of contractual friendships and unconditional friendships, at the bottom, as it were, there's the position of being isolated, not really being in relationship at all. This is very different from independence where one is free to associate or not, one is free to cooperate or not. When you're isolated, you have to remain in isolation. That's the point. And the state of isolation will be characterized by selfishness, hatred and resentment rather than by love.

So contractual friendships, those based on Use and Pleasure are actually an advance on the state of being isolated and this is why, in a sense, there's nothing wrong with them; they're just limited and there's something much bigger, much more important that you could have, which is spiritual friendships, unconditional friendships.

Needs and insistence; the duties from Al-Ghazali's Duties of Brotherhood in Islam - material generosity; placing your brother on an equal footing; preferring your brother to yourself

So back to this question of rights and needs in friendship, just a sort of last point about it. In a sense, having needs in friendship is not really the problem; it's not really the problem. It's *insisting* on them that's the problem. And if you insist on getting your needs met, getting your rights, then you're not really going to develop friendship and you're certainly very unlikely to develop spiritual friendship. So, having the needs isn't the problem, it's the insisting on them.

So, conversely, if you can just relax and just give, what you find is that actually your needs will be met. If you can just, as it were, give to your friend and just get on with this friendship that is based on the Good you will actually find that your needs will be met. If your friend loves the Good in you he will also want to help you. If you love the Good in your friend you will also want to help your friend and you will also want to give them pleasure and they will want to give pleasure to you. But you've just got to kind of relax and let go of that tight grasping after those things and then it will come. Then it will come. You've just got to give.

So, basically, what I'm saying is, work to cultivate the attitude of placing more and more importance on the duties of friendship rather than the rights. So that's it, that's the message. Be a friend, is more important than having one. The more you do this, the more you'll at least develop contractual friendships which will eventually deepen and flower and evolve into spiritual friendships.

Just before finishing off I want to take a look at what we'll actually be doing on the retreat, what we'll actually be doing on the retreat in order to explore this. But before I do that, I want to speak for a little while on some of the duties of friendship. The actual duties of friendship. I could use a Buddhist list – there are a number about, for example there's the Sigalovada Sutta (*Digha Nikaya 31*) – we'll hear a reading from that later on tonight. There's a very, very good list of duties of friendship in there. But, what I'm actually going to do is go back to that book which I mentioned at the start, "*The Duties of Brotherhood in Islam.*" We're going to explore just some of the duties out of there - Al Ghazali's book. This will be the only bit of Islam, don't worry; there won't be any more after tonight. It is actually a Buddhist retreat.

So, I'm going to talk about four of the duties which Al Ghazali lays out. He actually lays out eight in total in the book. I'm going to talk about four, which I see as being particularly important.

So, number one. Number one is what he calls the "material duty." This basically means generosity, material generosity. Specifically, meeting the material needs of your brothers. Al Ghazali talks about three degrees of this and Paramabandhu mentioned them last night. So the first degree is where you give to your brother out of your surplus. You've got spare, so you give it to your friend because he needs something. This is the lowest level of generosity. In a sense, it's not really generosity at all. It's a start but it's very, very limited. The second one is where you place your brother on an equal footing to yourself. So, in a sense, they've got an equal right to what you've got. Now, according to Al Ghazali, this is still quite a relatively low level of generosity; it's only just generosity this way of looking at it. Because the real thing, the real thing according to Al Ghazali – and I think we can learn an awful lot from this – is preferring your brother to yourself. In a sense, your brother, your friend, has more of a right to your possessions than you do, which is quite an interesting one isn't it?

So we can at least begin practicing this by giving out of our surplus. We can at least begin at that level, not holding the surplus that we've got for ourselves or for some future use that we want it for but being prepared to just give it away to others. But the second level that we could move towards is where we're actually prepared to give our friend an equal right to our possessions and there's a lovely little story that occurs in the book, which I'll just read out to you about this – if I can get my tongue around the names:

"Fath al-Mawsili once came to a brother's house while he was away. Telling his brother's wife to bring out his chest, he opened it and took from it what he needed. When the slave girl later informed her master, he exclaimed, 'If what you say is true, you are a free woman for the sake of God', so delighted was he by his brother's deed."

That's quite a response isn't it? He's just completely delighted that his brother trusts him so much, he's quite prepared to come round to his house and take a load of

money and walk off with it. So, think about it yourself. Your mate, one of your close mates, who of course, you've given him the keys to your flat, comes round while you're out and takes your stereo because he needs your stereo. And you come back and you're just delighted. Wow! [LAUGHTER]. My friend really trusts me, and he's prepared to even do that to me. That's a great response isn't it? I've had some experience of this myself, some, through sharing money and belongings with various people like Arthapriya, Nagapriya when I've lived with them in communities. And it does really teach you to bear others in mind. It's a very, very good thing to do. We shared money, we shared possessions, we shared books, we shared clothes. It's a very challenging practice but it really taught me an awful lot. I think it's particularly true with regard to money. You're out somewhere and you've got some money in your pocket and you're about to spend it and it's like, well, "What about those two? Do I need to spend these resources or not?" You've got to bear others in mind. Do they need these resources for something that they really need?

So, all right, that's lofty and it needs careful setting up but you can at least make your resources available to other people and that's a way of moving towards it. You know, share them with your friends as a practice and there's another thing that Subhuti talks about here, this idea of stewarding your possessions. Your possessions aren't just there for your own benefit. You look after them and when someone else needs them you just give them to them. But, as al-Ghazali says, that's only the second degree - there's further to go. There's the third degree where you actually prefer your friend's rights to your possessions over your own right to them. I think what this is really telling us is "Don't make the mistake of complacency." You might be a pretty generous person. You might give out of your surplus. You may even, as it were, share your possessions equally with others but don't be complacent of that. There's still further to go. You can still go further than that. Don't make that mistake. Don't settle down and just challenge yourself. Go further.

Another little story about this one:

"Abu Sulayman al-Darani used to say, 'I feed a morsel to a brother of mine and find the taste of it in my own throat.'"

Which, basically means something like "The taste of food in your brother's mouth is preferable even to the taste of that food in your own." Now, this is a really easy practice to engage with and I've practiced this quite a lot and I found it very, very useful. All you do, is like, when you're at the table, when brunch is served - one of the only two meals of the day, brunch - and there's something that you really want, maybe you really want it, give it to your friend, let them appreciate it. If it's something you're really going to appreciate, why not give it to them? Appreciate the fact of your friend enjoying the taste of it and, as it were, take your enjoyment in that. It's a very, very easy practice to engage with and it really does get you to think. So, when you're reaching out for the last biscuit, stop. Hang on a minute, give it to somebody else, let them enjoy it. See what that tastes like.

Serving your brother when he asks; forgiveness – faults in relation to religion and to yourself

Second duty, so that's the duty of material giving. Second duty is that of service. So this is generosity again, but it's with regard to action. Generosity in terms of action. Al Ghazali talks about degrees again:

“You serve your brother” – this is the lowest level – *“when he asks you for it.”* Your brother wants something, you give it to him or you help him out in some way. *“Then you see your brother’s needs like your own.”* It’s the same sort of thing, on an equal footing and then you prefer them. So you prefer to serve them rather than to be served by them. So these are the three degrees of serving.

Again, there’s an obvious application to this particular retreat. You can just take this out and practice it. You can just practice it. There are loads of opportunities to serve one another: make the most of them. And don’t just wait to be asked, offer to help. If you notice that the washing up is taking a bit too long and people aren’t going to be ready to come to the talk, or whatever, well just pile in and help out. Just go beyond yourself. Don’t think, “But it’s my free time and I did the washing up yesterday.” Just go beyond yourself a bit. Just step in there. Don’t wait to be asked. When you’re making tea for yourself, make tea for others too. With regard to serving and washing up, don’t just sign up for the serving and avoid the washing up – this is one of the classics. Or, if you like washing up, don’t just sign up for the washing up and avoid the serving. Maybe other people appreciate doing what you like doing. Do the opposite. So think about that. Maybe that means you’re going to have to change round the rota but I’ll leave that up to you.

There are going to be work periods on this retreat: every day we’ll do an hour’s work. This is a way of serving Padmaloka, serving this particular retreat centre. This particular retreat centre, which gives so much to so many people like yourselves. So in quite an open-handed way, you’re serving whoever comes here, so throw yourself into that. Don’t sort of “Ah, another way of getting something out of us on this retreat.” Just throw yourself into it. Serve. Enjoy it. Or, if you’re just walking around, using the facilities of the place, you know, you walk into, say, the pink bathroom and it’s pretty filthy, the toilet’s really dirty, don’t just think, “Well, someone else can do it during the work period.” Why not just give it a quick clean? You know, serve the retreat centre, serve your brothers. You can find all sorts of little ways of actually putting this into practice and I’d actually look for them. I’ve always found a very, very good way of cultivating friendship is just to attend to your friend’s needs and to help them. What is it they’re doing? What are their projects? What are they getting on with? Help them out. Don’t think of friendship in terms of sitting around talking. Help them out.

Ok, third duty. Forgiveness. And this is a very, very important one. In the book, al-Ghazali splits forgiveness up into two things:

1. Forgiving your brother when he does not attend to his duty towards religion – so we’re thinking of a different religion but it still applies.
2. Forgiving your brother when he does not attend to his duty towards yourself.

This is a really, really important duty. We’re cultivating friendships, and ideally spiritual friendships, with human beings. We’re human beings ourselves: that means we’re imperfect. All of us are imperfect so we’re going to make mistakes. People are going to cause you offense. Even your friends will cause you offense: they’re going to hurt you in various ways. It’s inevitable and it’s certainly my experience. And if you’re going to develop friendship, and certainly if you’re going to develop spiritual friendship, you need to learn to be able to forgive, repeatedly. Again, and again, and again. You’ve just got to keep forgiving. It’s a really, really important duty. You’re

not going to get very far without it. You've got to learn to forgive rather than take offense.

Ok, so with regard to forgiving your brother when they fail in their duty to their religion, basically what you need to try and do here is, well, do try to restore your brother to virtue. If somebody here acts in a way that you sort of think, "Well that's a bit off isn't it? Couldn't they do a bit better than that?" Well, ok, bring it up with them. Try and point it out to them in a kindly and gentle way. Actually sort of raise it with them. Do it kindly. Do it appropriately. Pick the right time. Do pick the right time. It's very easy just to blurt it out at the wrong time and it doesn't really come across very well.

I've found situations like this, like this sort of retreat, they're very, very useful working grounds for this because you're thrown together with lots of people in quite an intense environment and you'll see their weak spots and their blind spots. You'll just see them. And it's dead easy to get really irritated about it. It's very, very easy to resent them for it and develop a rather harsh and unforgiving attitude towards them. With regard to this, watch out for your assumptions. Watch out for your assumptions about other people. Maybe they're not doing the washing up for a particular reason. Maybe they've got a perfectly good reason for doing that. Maybe they're not turning up for something for a particularly good reason. Don't just assume, "Slacking, or they're this or they're that." Watch out for your assumptions.

The other one that I've noticed again and again over the years: I often get really irritated with other people's faults, only to discover that the reason I'm getting irritated is because I possess those faults myself. It's easier to see them in other people and it really winds you up. So, just watch that one.

And if, when you're pointing something out to your brother, you're trying to restore them to virtue, they can't see what you're going on about, well, just forgive them. You're just going to have to be open-handed about that one and forgive them. If they need to change and they can't see it, well in the end you've just got to recognize, well, that's their loss. You can still forgive them. You can still remain in friendly contact with them. Maybe, at some point, they'll actually see what you're going on about. You should respond with compassion, not resentment, in that situation.

Now, the more difficult one in a sense, I think, is when the failing is towards you. When your friend lets you down in some way. You've still got to forgive them but it is much harder to do. But you've just got to do it. What you have to do is try to let go of wanting to balance the accounts. You know, "Well, I was generous to you the other day and you were really tight with me." You've just got to let go of that basically. You've got to drop that sort of attitude. And you've got to let go of the idea of retribution, of justice, in that sort of way. You've just got to forgive. So, work on it. If you need to, raise the issue with the person concerned. If you really can't let go of it raise the issue with the person concerned. Or if you don't feel that you can do that usefully, well, talk to somebody else to try and get a more objective picture of what's going on. But try and choose somebody who's not just going to indulge in a bit of like, "Yeah, they are like that aren't they." Someone who's actually going to help you come up with a more objective picture. So cultivate forgiveness.

Fidelity – loyalty and sincerity

Fourth duty. Fidelity. Fidelity. The way al-Ghazali talks about this is loyalty and sincerity but I think of it as fidelity. This is kind of a long-term duty. Fidelity. The duty to just keep going with the friendship. And this is a key duty. It's a key duty. Friendships take years to develop. They take years to deepen and they take years to mature. I was talking – I can't remember where it was, it was in a group one time – someone came up with the image that friendship is like an oak tree. An oak tree takes years to reach maturity and that's how you have to view friendship and particularly how you have to view spiritual friendship and you're only going to develop it if you maintain fidelity towards the friend.

This is an especially important duty when difficulties arise and when your friend is no longer useful or pleasurable to you. Maintain the friendship, maintain fidelity towards them. It's so easy at that time just to cool to your friend and go off somewhere else and go and find another acquaintance. Well, if you do that your friendships will remain superficial. Maintain fidelity. My experience is that when friendships have gone through a few phases like this, when they've been actually been quite difficult and you've had quite a few things to sort out with your friend and you've come through that, and your friendship is still intact, and actually it's deepened as a result of it, that's when the friendship really begins to develop because there's a lot of trust that's there. You know that even if things get tough the friendship will survive and not only that, that something positive will come of it. So, actually, you need to view these as like positive trials. They're things to just get on with and maintain fidelity towards the friendship.

Another aspect of this one is, well, bear your friends in mind when you're apart from them. You know, when you're here on this retreat, keep in the back of your mind your friends at home. When they're away from you, keep them in mind. Ultimately, if you developed a really strong friendship then, in a sense, you'd maintain your fidelity with them even when death separates you, you know, if they die. You'd still keep them in mind. The friendship would, as it were, transcend death in that way.

So those are four specific duties drawn from that book:

1. Material duty; material generosity
2. Service; generosity with regard to action
3. Forgiveness and
4. Fidelity

There are four others. If you want to sort of look at that find yourself a copy of it and have a look at it. It's a very, very interesting book.

Summary of the talk; practising friendship on retreat

All right, so we've looked at this question of rights and duties and the basic fact that what we need to do is keep our mind on the duty rather than insisting upon our rights. And that, applied to friendship, what this means is: to be a friend is more important than to have a friend. So that we need to just take responsibility and actively befriend people rather than waiting for friendship, as it were, to come towards us.

Then we've had a look at a few of the duties that we've got towards our friends. These duties, if we bear them in mind, they can help us to really begin to cultivate spiritual friendships. They're very key practices that will help you to develop spiritual friendships. Friendships that are based upon the Good, upon self-transcendence and it's pretty obvious how bearing those duties in mind will help you to do that because they're all about transcending yourself.

So, with regard to the retreat, it's a fairly standard program. Just engage with it. That's the message. It's a fairly standard program, just engage with it and let the magic of the conditions have their effect. Let friendships flower within those conditions. As I was saying on the weekend, this is a very, very good situation within which to deepen and develop the experience of Sangha and that's basically what we're doing here together. If we just get on with that then the retreat will have worked.

So, I've organized the retreat around having two meals a day. This is just to free up a bit more time. I've been assured, you don't need to worry about this, it will be fine. Brunch will be a substantial meal, it will carry you through the day. It's at ten o'clock and it will carry you right the way through to six o'clock, there's nothing to worry about. So, don't get panicky about that. There are two meals a day and it saves a lot on washing up. So believe me it's worth it. This allows us to have a substantial period of meditation in the morning, before brunch at ten o'clock.

Now, it's structured so that if you don't really want to do as much meditation as on the program there's a point at which you can just sort of join it. So you can even have a lie in and then join in and still do a reasonable amount of meditation. But I would encourage you to go beyond yourself a bit, stretch yourself a bit, have a go. Do a bit more meditation than you'd normally do. So they'll be a period of meditation, a walking meditation and then another period of meditation. Just sort of engage with it.

Other than that, well, there's the meals themselves. A chance to serve one another and bear that in mind. Even if you're not serving – as I've kind of suggested already – don't just get your head down and get on with eating your meal, you know, feeding your face. Actually pay attention to everybody else around you. Notice whether they need things. It's a really lovely experience when you've got a retreat that's working well and in harmony and everybody, for example, at a table when they're eating is kind of aware of what one another needs. What happens if you really engage with this practice, you really pay attention to one another, is it almost becomes telepathic. You're sitting there with your toast and you're just starting to think "Some yeast extract..." and [makes zip noise] it sort of turns up. That's really what it should be like. That's what we should develop and we've got the opportunity to develop. So just keep an eye on people. Notice what they like to have on their toast in the morning so that when you're sat near them you can just provide it for them and they don't have to look around and find it. Notice what they drink. Provide it for them. So there's lots and lots of ways that you can serve each other in this way and really make the retreat go an awful lot deeper.

We're going to have groups everyday - either discussing the talks or perhaps doing things like friendship biographies and life stories. We're going to look at doing things like that. Ways that we can really begin to engage with one another and get to know one another.

There'll be the work periods. The reason that I was very keen to actually put a daily work period into the program is that I've always found working with people the best means of developing friendship with them. It's partly because in a certain way I'm sort of a bit awkward socially but I think actually it's true that working with people is the best way of developing friendship. It's not all about, kind of, talking about yourselves, it's actually doing something that's of benefit to others. It's a common project. So really engage with that. Hopefully, there'll be plenty of work opportunities that Pip's going to be lining up for us that we can just get on with. So throw yourself into that.

I remember in that connection, on that first retreat I came on at Padmaloka, the one aspect of the program I think I most enjoyed was working on the pantiles above dorms E and F with Shantipada from Germany. I built up a very strong connection with him on that particular retreat, just working with him on a daily basis through the week.

That's about it. Other than that, there's the talks, the pujas. Just engage with whatever you can. I would encourage you to kind of step up a bit and try and engage with all of the program if you can. If you really need to cut out and take a bit of time out, I'll leave that up to you to work out. But the more that you put yourself into it, the more that you put yourself into the collective practices, the more you'll get out of it and the more we'll all get out of it.

So, just to finish off, I'll just say, I'd really encourage you: make the very most of the conditions that are here. This is a very, very rare and precious opportunity that you've got and that we've got and that I've got, coming together here in this particular way. It's very unlikely that you're going to experience these sort of conditions on a regular basis. Really make the most of the opportunity.

And just enjoy the flourishing brotherhood, the flourishing experience of brotherhood. Put yourself out. Put yourself out for the other people here. Take risks in your communication. Tell people things that you've never told anyone else before. Just do that sort of thing. See what happens. I encourage you to do that sort of thing. I'm up for it. I imagine the team are up for it. If you're up for it then the retreat's really going to go well. And let's just see what we've actually achieved by the end of the retreat - what we've achieved in terms of deepening the experience of spiritual friendship and of brotherhood.