Deepening Meditation (1/5): Spiritual Friendship

Dharma talk by Diana Clark

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[Introduction before the Guided Meditation]

Good morning, good afternoon, good evening. Hope you all are doing well on this wonderful Monday in September right now. I don't know, I'm just feeling so happy to be here, to be practicing with you all. It's fantastic. I hope that you are happy, happy enough [Laughter] to be here too. Maybe for you it's Monday, or maybe not.

So, I just want to offer a short introduction to what I'd like to talk about this week. It's based on the Meghiya Sutta[1]. This is one of my favorite suttas. It has a depth of teaching, a breadth of teaching, and an interesting narrative featuring a character that we can relate to—somebody who is struggling with practice. And then the Buddha doesn't tell him, "Oh, you should just try harder," or anything like that. Instead, he helps Meghiya find his way in a lovely way. So I draw inspiration from this sutta and hope that it may support all of us in deepening, nourishing, and supporting our practice.

Over these five days, I'll be unpacking some of the narrative that happens, as well as some of the teaching that occurs in the Meghiya Sutta. For those of you who care about this stuff, it's Anguttara Nikaya[2] 9.3, as well as Udana[3] 4.1. There are two different versions of the sutta, but what I'm teaching is consistent amongst both of those.

Okay, with that as an introduction, let's start with a guided meditation.

Dharmette

Okay. So today we're starting this new series on deepening practice. It's based on the Meghiya Sutta (Anguttara Nikaya 9.3, Udana 4.1) about what helps practice deepen. And I'd say one of the encouraging things about this is that the Buddha is not presenting practice as something that you just have to push through, apply more energy, willpower, or self-force to. He's not saying that. He's not saying it's just about trying harder, becoming a better meditator, or making the mind behave in a certain kind of way.

Sometimes we might have this subtle idea that that's what we should be doing. If we sit down to meditate and discover, "Wow, the mind is busy, and not only is it busy, it's busy with things that are not supportive," we have this idea like, "Oh, I should be different," or "I should try harder." But that's not what's happening in the Meghiya Sutta here.

As I said at the beginning of the guided meditation, each day this week, I'll unfold some of the teachings as well as a little bit about the narrative arc that's happening in this sutta.

For today, I'll start with this character Meghiya just a little bit. He's attending the Buddha, so he's with the Buddha, and one day while he's out walking, he sees a mango grove that's really inviting. It seems delightful, pleasing, and lovely, and he thinks, "Wow, that would be a great place to meditate."

Maybe this is understandable. So many of us have this movement of the mind or this thought that, "If only I could practice where there was more silence, then my meditation would go better. If only I could practice where there was more beauty, then I could practice better. If only I could meditate out in nature, then I could practice better." Right? Sometimes we have these ideas, and of course, our outer conditions really can make a difference. Quiet can be supportive. Simplicity can be supportive. Having a regular time and place can be supportive. This is partly why we go on meditation retreats.

So maybe in some ways we can relate to Meghiya. He sees this mango grove and thinks, "Oh, this could be a great place to practice." But what Meghiya doesn't appreciate yet, or what sometimes we don't appreciate yet, is this expectation that if we somehow get the outer conditions perfect, then our inner conditions will settle. *If it's quiet outside, it'll be quiet inside.* Sometimes we don't recognize that we have these expectations. It's reasonable we have them because sometimes it's true: having a quieter outside can help foster a quieter inside.

Meghiya talks to the Buddha. The Buddha says, "Yeah, sure." I'll unpack all the details of that interaction on a subsequent day, but the Buddha gives permission for Meghiya to go to the mango grove. Meghiya goes to this beautiful, delightful, lovely mango grove. And instead of becoming peaceful, Meghiya discovers that his mind has this onslaught of unskillful thoughts: sensual thoughts, malicious thoughts, and cruel thoughts.

What a surprise! He wanted to go meditate in this beautiful location thinking that he might have a beautiful experience. Instead, he has all these unhelpful, unhealthy thoughts. Sometimes this happens for us too, right? We sit down thinking that meditation will be one way and discover that it's another way. But from the perspective of the dharma[4], this isn't a failure. It's just part of the practice. It's not a problem. It's just part of how understanding begins—when we start to actually see what's here and what's actually happening, not focusing on what we *wanted* to happen, but what's *actually* here.

So, Meghiya goes back and reports to the Buddha like, "Wow! [Laughter] I sat down in this mango grove thinking it would be fantastic, and I have all these sensual thoughts, malicious thoughts, and cruel thoughts."

His response is that he doesn't shame him or say, "Oh, just try harder." Instead, the Buddha says, "Well, here are some things that might be a support. Here are some things that might help the practice deepen, so that you're no longer with this onslaught of sensual thoughts, cruel thoughts, and malicious thoughts."

What the Buddha offers is part of what I'll be offering this week. But I love this. The Buddha is not saying, "What's wrong with you?" Instead, the Buddha is saying, "What's needed here? What could be a support?"

One of the first supports that the Buddha offers Meghiya is spiritual friendship. I pointed to this a little bit in the guided meditation because the Buddha doesn't just say "friendship." He says friendships, companions, and associates. I love that there's three different words that aren't perfect synonyms in English, right? We can sense that there's a different level of intimacy here: associates, companions, friends.

It's not that we have to have this intimate, deep connection with lots of people. It's not that we have to share everything about our practice with lots of people, or even a handful of people. The Buddha is pointing to how just having others that we're practicing with can be a support for deepening our practice. In the same way that here in this online community, there's something about just coming together that is a support. Even if we don't really know one another with depth, or know so much about each other, there's something about just coming together that can support some confidence in practice. Not by pretending everything is fine or by giving easy answers to each other, but just by our coming together, it helps us stay connected to this path of practice.

Maybe there's also a way in which, if we do have some people that we talk about the dharma with, it encourages honesty. It encourages this recognition of, "Oh, this is what's really happening for me. This is really where I feel confused about the teaching. This is really where I have doubt about these teachers [Laughter], about the teachings, about myself as a practitioner."

So, it's friendship that helps us remember the dharma and what's important in the dharma. Especially when we feel like we're caught. Especially when we feel like we have this onslaught of unhelpful thoughts just like Meghiya here has, because sometimes wisdom that's coming from outside our own views is really supportive and really what can make a difference in our lives. When the mind is caught, like Meghiya's, it can feel very convincing. A resentful mind just feels resentment about everything: "I can't believe those people aren't doing that. Why do I have to take care of everything?" Or an anxious mind just believes anxiety; it's all caught up in anxiety and can't see anything else that could be settling and supportive. Or if there's a mind that's filled with discouragement, then it just feels discouraged by everything it sees.

Sometimes when we're inside one of these states, it can be really helpful to have some wisdom from outside because we think we're seeing clearly. We think we're just being realistic. But in fact, the mind is often caught and we don't even see it. So spiritual friendship can interrupt this enclosure, this way in which sometimes we get trapped in our views.

One simple way here in an online community is just showing up together. We're rarely interacting with one another, but let's not underestimate how powerful it is. Maybe I'm speaking to the choir here because you guys are the ones that are showing up here regularly, but let's really celebrate, acknowledge, and appreciate what it's like to practice together. It doesn't require a perfect community. It doesn't require lots of close friends that know everything about us or that we share everything with. It doesn't require ideal circumstances. It just begins with recognizing that practice is supported by a relationship with others. That relationship can show up in different ways because we are influenced by others. We are encouraged by what we give our attention to.

And so this morning, I'm inviting us to give some attention to this feeling of support that we might have with practicing together.

This was the first instruction, the first support that the Buddha gave to Meghiya. When Meghiya came back after trying to meditate and reported to the Buddha what had happened, the Buddha said, "Well, there's a number of things that can be a support to help the practice deepen. The first is spiritual friendship, companions."

I kind of like this partly because Meghiya wanted to go off into the mango grove. He wanted to be by himself out there practicing. And solitude is really helpful and important sometimes, but also this recognition of the opposite—practicing together—is also supportive. Maybe the Buddha is pointing to something important here.

So may you today feel this support of community. Maybe not restricting ourselves to the conventional way in which we think of community, but just this recognition that others are practicing on this path, literally here this morning at 7:00 a.m. But maybe also there's a way in which books, podcasts, videos, or other mediums support our practice as humans finding our way towards greater and greater freedom.

So today, may you recognize what are some of the ways in which others support our practice. Maybe I'll just add little furry family members too. They can be a support too.

Okay. Thank you. Thank you for practicing together. My heart is actually very full with this. Thank you.

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1. **Meghiya Sutta:** A discourse where the Buddha advises the monk Meghiya on the conditions necessary for the maturation of liberation. ↩
2. **Anguttara Nikaya:** The "Numerical Discourses" of the Buddha, a major collection of the Pali Canon. ↩
3. **Udana:** The "Inspired Utterances" of the Buddha, a collection of profound statements and accompanying narratives found in the Khuddaka Nikaya. ↩
4. **Dharma / Dhamma:** The teachings of the Buddha. ↩

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