**Friendship, Love and Transcendence**

[Sāgaradevī Barratt](https://www.linkedin.com/in/s%C4%81garadev%C4%AB-barratt-4a965920/)

*Talk given at Jewel Quest, 17th March 2024 Colchester Buddhist Centre*

**This talk was written for women training for Ordination in the Triratna Buddhist Order not for a general audience. I therefore talk about Ordination a lot! However, I have been told that it does have meaning outside of that context, particularly the reflections on love, friendship and the arising of insight so I thought I would take a leap of faith and share it.**

Whilst in the ordination process, probably a couple of years before my ordination, it started to dawn on me that the ordination process was not about learning more Buddhist lists or even about doing more meditation but could be considered instead as a transmission of love that passes from Preceptor to Preceptee.

In this talk, I will consider the arising of this initial thought and its context before looking at what ‘Ordination as a transmission of Love’ may mean. I consider what is meant by love and how it relates to insight, how this manifests within friendship, in the sangha and within the context of ordination and becoming an Order Member.

In putting together this talk, I realised that the underlying thread is about how we open to, connect with, and become part of the Sangha and the Order. I feel as though much of what is included in this talk are things that I wished I had been told while I was in the ordination process - but then maybe I was? I have an astonishing capacity not to hear things I am not ready to take in! Or maybe these are things that cannot be told but must be lived.

**Seeing the Love**

I was walking along the seafront at Brightlingsea listening to a beautiful spoken word version of Tilopa’s song to Naropa. I had come across this writing in the back of a book by Lex Hixon (1993: 246), on Prajnaparamita. On this particular walk, one verse stood out:

‘For you alone, beloved Naropa, this wonderful song springs forth from Tilopa, as spontaneous friendship that never ends.’

It was not a verse I had ever paid attention to before. I had previously been intrigued by what the writing said about the ‘sheer awareness’, ‘radiance of mind’ and ‘the treasure of Buddhahood’. I had not noticed before this reference to friendship. I simply overlooked it as the mundane context for the more interesting stuff to come! But suddenly, on that morning, I felt I could see the love that motivated Tilopa to say that to his disciple. I was washed away in this sudden knowing that the motivation for teaching that had arisen in Tilopa was based on the depth his insight, and that the love that had become known to him through his practice made passing this on totally inevitable. I had a deep embodied sense that spiritual friendship was the manifestation of something deeper, the unfolding and coming into the world of reality itself.

It suddenly mattered that these words were being spoken by one human being to another. This process was not an intellectual one - about Tilopa telling Naropa how things are so that he could pass an exam about it. This was an expression of his wisdom, motivated by love, with no agenda but opening the possibility of freedom for another human being. I could feel the love flow between them - the love of a teacher, buoyed and expansive through insight, not restricted to his personality but revealing the vast open love of reality through his human form in this vibrant friendship. And the love and gratitude of his disciple looking back at him. And crucially in their relatedness, each opening the other further and further.

I still cannot explain what happened on that morning. Why then? Why this change of perspective? But it really changed the idea of spiritual friendship for me in a way that I can feel but is difficult to communicate. One thing that stayed very clear in my mind from that morning was this phrase ‘ordination as a transmission of love’ - sensing that connection between teacher and disciple expressed in this profound text made me realise that there was something much more mysterious to this whole thing than I had allowed for and that friendship was intimately bound in the process of awakening.

**Opening to friendship and through friendship**

A bit of background. I have found the sangha aspect of practice very difficult to understand. As an almost fiercely independent type I have struggled to see why it’s important. Often, when reflecting on Sangha, I would find myself in quite a dry and pragmatic space. “Make friends” they said. Isn’t this the mantra we all hear during the ordination process? And, some us, push back against? I remember my Preceptor asking whether I felt like I needed a bit more support? “What for?” was my response. I am fine. Completely missing the point that whether I was fine or not was irrelevant with regards to the need for spiritual friendship due to the potential transformation it holds and its foundational role in the unfolding of the Order.

But seeing the beauty and mystery of the relationship between Tilopa and Naropa, this flow of wisdom and love, I realised this was the route through which wisdom and love become manifest in our experience. If we think of love as a feeling and wisdom as intellectual knowledge then we miss the point. Wisdom and love have always been passed down through relationship: relationship with each other as friendship, relationship with our embodied lived experience and relationship with the transcendental.

Love is expressed and cultivated through a process of what Prof. John Vervaeke, a philosopher and cognitive scientist refers to as reciprocal opening. This process of getting to know each other, loving each other, can be seen as a process of reciprocal opening - I tell you something about me and then you tell me something about you and this expands and opens the both of us. Then through our relationship and what we say about each other and about the world to each other, further opening (loving?) is facilitated. Our sense of who we are, who are friend is and what the world is changes through that opening. Vervaeke (2023, no page number) describes how reciprocal opening *‘gives you peace of mind, gives you a deep reality, and it causes you to love’*.  Thought about in this way, ordination as a ‘*transmission*’ of love feels too linear and limited. Instead, maybe ordination is an opening to love? Made possible through our friends and most importantly our preceptor.

Part of my starting to feel ready for Ordination was the dropping away of the strong linear, developmental model of Ordination that I had had in my head. And seeing the friendship of Tilopa and Naropa come alive was an important part of this. Simultaneously, I started to realise, particularly through my conversations with my Preceptor that I had been missing something. Because I felt confident that I ‘knew’ what I needed to be doing and what ordination was, I was kind of getting in my own way. We had, what I remember as being, intense conversations, the topics of which I can’t remember but the sensation of them was like having something solid in me prized open, or sanded down, smoothed away. It would be hours and days after, that I would have clearer reflections on what these conversations were about. But the common thread was an opening of myself beyond how I knew myself to be. And I sensed that this was not a one-way thing. And with the language I have now, I can think of these as excellent examples of reciprocal opening. There was of course a vertical dimension, but this did not override the deep mutuality of the unfolding in that friendship. Through getting to know each other you also start to realise that you never can! That the inexpressible mystery at the heart of being is also ways present, so our getting to know and opening to each other is endless – Tilopa stated this clearly.

**Love as openness**

What has been really interesting in the course of my reflections on this, is that I have been made to take a step back and consider what we mean by love and the related terms of loving-kindness and compassion. Understanding these terms in Buddhism is further hampered by the issue of translation. I think as a result of translation and my own biased lens of understanding, loving-kindness has always felt a bit wet to me – a bit of wet fish – compared to its much more exciting cousin LOVE. I can’t relate to the term loving-kindness without a sense of hopelessly polite Britishness that makes me want to apologise for any inconvenience I may cause by loving someone. Sangharakshita in ‘Know your Mind’ points out that if we are conditioned by an understanding of love as romantic love, we might not respond or be sensitive enough feel metta, even when it is genuine and full of good intention. It might feel rather cool and detached compared to the heated, excitement of a romantic relationship. But it is through metta that we can come to have genuine self-love he states (1998: 228):

*‘If you aware that someone also has genuine goodwill for you, you can come to feel genuine good will for yourself…you come to realise that another person feels you are genuinely worthwhile and begin to appreciate your own worth for yourself’*

Thankfully meditation experience, reading and friendship has helped to counteract my constrained sense of metta. Drawing on the work of poets and philosophers has also proved fruitful. To return to the work of Vervaeke, he is very clear that love is not an emotion. He describes it as an *‘existential stance’*, an open way of being in the world that does not shut down into the narrow confines of self-hood. He also describes how we know that love is not an emotion because it stirs up in us so many different emotions - love can cause us to feel jealous, sadness, joy and happiness.

This has been really helpful for understanding my sometimes conflicting feelings towards the ordination process (and life!) – a process I loved and with people I love but certainly not easy. Negative emotions do not mean that something is wrong and nor do positive emotions mean that something is right. Love as openness creates space for whatever is part of our experience.

In talk on the ‘Great Love’ Padmavajra (2009: 30 minutes 08 seconds) describes how the sangha becomes a true refuge when everyone in it is acting with loving kindness towards one another, when everyone in the sangha is a refuge to everyone else. He describes the problem that he sometimes sees in the Sangha when people say ‘‘I feel disappointed, I feel let down by the sangha’’. He says:

*‘When you’re like that you have completely missed the point. The sangha is not about what others do for you but about what you do for others…in the end its about being a source of deep spiritual reliability for others’*

If we allow love to be a much greater thing than emotion there is space in that love for all the conflicting feelings we may have, and the complicated feelings of others. This has been a real relief for me. Anyone who has been in a long-term relationship knows that if you need to feel loving all the time for the relationship to work, it is going to fail. But what we can cultivate is an openness, an awareness to that person no matter how we might feel about them in the moment. Perhaps this has been lost from our modern understanding of love.

As someone whose mental states can vary quite considerably in short spaces of time, it is helpful to know that my loving stance to the world is not dependent on my short-term emotions. I do not suddenly become spiritually unreliable on the basis of my emotional experience alone. Love as openness motivates me to want to cultivate that open deep sense of the mystery of reality in which my emotions are little waves on a much steadier body of water.

**Joining the body of the order**

Whilst on retreat in January, about 7 months after becoming an Order Member (OM), with the theme of love very much at the forefront of my thinking, I had an image come to mind about what this approach to love meant for joining the order. I could see that what we are actually doing when we join the order is joining a living body. A living body is only healthy according to the extent to which all the parts of the body are linked and in communication with every other part of the body. To the extent that any part is not connected to the rest of the body there is a risk of disease (possibly requiring amputation!).

The door that my Preceptor opened for me at Ordination was the point at which I became formally and ritually part of this body. The work that all the OMs were doing in supporting me was so that I could make this connection to Order but, as importantly, had the means to sustain, deepen and expand that connection so that I could become a flourishing part of that body. Rather than needing to know things or do things, maybe readiness for Ordination is about having the capacity to be open to the deep mystery of life and to actively cultivate and deepen our relationship with its unfolding.

I was sat in the conservatory at Tiratanaloka Retreat Centre listening to a talk, when an image came to mind of OMs being linked by veins and arteries, connections of openness to each other allowing love to move between us, making our work together possible (I realise here I should be talking about the Bodhicitta but the last thing this talk needs in another concept so I am sticking with love!). What these veins and arteries represented was our openness to each other, as well as openness towards the transcendental and awareness of and openness to our embodied experience.

If we continue to use this metaphor, the reason that we are encouraged to develop a variety of friendships with OMs is so that our connections with the Order are numerous, providing a source of stability to our relationship with the Order as a whole. It is not about how many times you are meeting up for coffee, it is not about some type of therapy, it is not even primarily about getting feedback - although it may involve coffee and it may be therapeutic and you may be given feedback. But all of this is in service to connecting you and making you part of the Order. You do not become part of the Order because you get a kesa, you are not a part of the Order because you contribute dana or you teach at a class. You become part of it because you are actively connected as a living component of it. And this may include wearing a kesa, contributing dana (donations) and teaching at classes! But these acts on their own are not enough. We must be actively engaged with the Order, deepening and broadening our relationships with other OMs. If we don’t keep our friendships within the Order alive we undermine the strength of the body of the order as a whole.

So, developing friendships, is not just part of your ordination journey. Once in the Order the responsibility for maintaining good relationships becomes even more crucial. This was something I was told in the process, but I interpreted this as being about everyone getting along so that we can all have a nice time together. But it is so much more than this. What I can now see is that the capacity of the Order to cultivate the possibility of enlightenment, for it to be a vibrant context that facilitates awakening we must, and I think Sanghakashita does, prioritise friendship as a primary way in which we open ourselves to each other and in so doing breakdown our restricted sense of self and cultivate the possibility of insight and of love.  Padmavajra (2009) succinctly captures the importance of a friendship as a space for us to develop love by stating: *‘You are committed to loving, because loving is essential to enlightenment’.*

What the Vervaeke’s work has made me see is that an important component of loving is the active cultivation of an openness to the mystery of each other and reality itself. A lot of our disagreements arise when someone lets us down or does something we don’t think they should do. These feelings are possible because we have in some way fixed that person in our mind. I might think of someone as a certain type of a person, for example, maybe thinking that my friend is kind. But then one day they are grumpy, and I get upset because they are a kind person so how can they act like that? (Whilst completely forgetting my own inconsistencies of course). In thinking that we ‘know’ someone we need to be careful that we do not shut down to the mystery of them. By fixing ourselves and others in certain ways, which to some extent I recognise is inevitable due to our delusion, we can imagine that we are blocking the veins and arteries of the Order – making them narrower, limiting each other, ourselves and the potential of the Order. Talking about relating to this mystery in friendship Vervaeke notes: *“You transcend yourself through me, and I transcend myself through you. And we keep realizing that. It is such an amazing mystery and it keeps happening…”*

**The mystery of ordination**

Perhaps Ordination is not so much a transmission of love as I had originally thought but I am still grateful for the insight that gave rise to that phrase in my mind. Seeing Ordination as a transmission of love was certainly more helpful than seeing it as the giving out of a certificate to recognise a particular achievement! It marked an important shift in my experience and understanding that helped me to open to Sangha, to friendship, to love. I no longer see these as things that run alongside and, dare I say it, seem to get in the way of the pursuit of insight, but as completely integral to it.

Having been engaged in these reflections on love over the last few months, and in the context of my experience after Ordination, I feel that it is more of an invitation than a transmission. Your preceptor, moved by their own insight stands wanting to open the door of the Order to you. And instead of having to reach a certain standard or having to achieve a certain thing, maybe what they are looking for is the Preceptees willingness to open and to meet with love the mystery of their being, and all beings - to cultivate a love for embodied experience as a human being through mindfulness, to cultivate connection and insight through friendship and the reciprocal opening that that offers and to become ever more open to the transcendental. There is no standard to reach because the opening, the unfolding, is infinite and that to which it points lies beyond time and space.

On that retreat in January, an OM read a quote on friendship from The Prophet which included this line *‘love that seeks aught but the disclosure of its own mystery is not love’* (Gibran 1923: page unknown). Perhaps this gives us some insight into the Ordination process. OMs are motivated by love cultivated through their deepening relationship with reality to ordain women. What they look for is our capacity to step into and open to that mystery. We often talk about this as metta, compassion or friendship but it is so easy, particularly given the painful constraints of language to overlook the wonderous, strange depths to which these concepts point. Or perhaps I should own this a bit more – it has been easy *for me* to overlook this.

I am hugely indebted to all my friends who have patiently walked by my side while I have changed and opened and learned to love, even when I did not know that that was what I was doing or needed to do. When talking about my Preceptor on the Ordination retreat, I said how grateful I was that she was my friend but also in particular how grateful I was that she had made it easy for me to be her friend. I didn’t know then, but I see now how my picking up on this reflects my sense of some deep mystery of love, the importance of this shared reciprocal opening of friendship that is such a crucial part of the path. I can see that love is never simply transmitted but is opened into. Maybe it is openness itself.

**References**

Gibran, K. 1923. The Prophet. Richmond, England: Alma Classics

Hixon, L. 1993. Mother of the Buddhas: Meditations on the Prajnaparamita Sutra. Wheaton, Illinois: Quest Books.

Padmavajra. 2009. The Great Love and the Goddess at Padmaloka Retreat Centre. Accessed https://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/audio/details?num=LOC85 on 18/02/2024

Sangharakshita. 1998. Know Your Mind: The Psychological Dimension of Ethics in Buddhism. Cambridge: Windhorse Publications

Veraveke, J. 2023. Talking on This Past Weekend w/ Theo Von<https://app.podscribe.ai/episode/87507459>