

## **SPRING 2006: How to Help Friends who are Suffering**

*Question: Someone very close to me is going through a great deal of psychological difficulty and can't find their way in life. I feel strongly that they would benefit from being able to take their thoughts less seriously, something I feel I've been learning from meditation. Yet, they are clearly not ready to take up Buddhism or even meditation, although in the long run I think they might. I would like to help them out now and to help them find their way to the path. How can I do that without seeming to preach Buddhism or trying to make them take up an activity they don't feel ready for?*

**NARAYAN LIEBENSON GRADY:** The short answer is that you can't make somebody take up Buddhism or meditation. The longer answer is that the process of beginning to practice meditation is somewhat mysterious. There are ways, however, that can push people away from practicing, including wanting this too much for someone, even when you have the best of intentions.

Trust in your sincerity. Through wanting to ease your friend's suffering, you transmit your love and care. However, your strong feeling that this person would benefit from being able to take their thoughts less seriously, though understandable, is a thought. It doesn't mean that it isn't true, but because of your attachment to this thought, it is unlikely to be beneficial. It may be more useful to your friend if you simply rely on the clarity available to you in noticing that it isn't possible for your friend to take up the practice. Respecting this would be a kindness. And since your friend is experiencing psychological difficulties, it might be skillful to suggest they seek psychological care.

However, sometimes one of greatest ways to extend compassion is not to offer advice. Rather, it is to offer a silent presence, letting the person rest within him- or herself. One of the more difficult things in life is to seemingly sit by and watch someone suffer when you know there is another way. Of course, you are not just sitting around doing nothing. You are continuing to practice. If you are .calm and clear-minded, you may help your friend by offering a calmer and more peaceful environment.

Your love and care are the results of your own practice. The ways in which you have benefited from the practice will benefit your friend as well. If you are happier, your friend may at some point ask how this change came about. Then you can answer enthusiastically! Living the teachings is a much more-powerful statement than talking about them.

This means applying your practice to this thought that your friend's life would be better if they would only meditate. When it comes to our personal relationships, letting go can be a most difficult practice.