

Developing Wise Friendships in Recovery Dharma

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The purpose of this document is to explore how to build a strong Buddhist-inspired recovery support system using the practice of Wise Friendship.

This is intended as a living document, to be edited and expanded by our community based on what works.

To summarize a Buddhist saying, “Wise friendship is not *half* of a spiritual life, it’s the *whole* of a spiritual life.”

What is Wise Friendship?

Wise Friendship within Recovery Dharma is a relationship with spiritual friends that support our recovery. These friendships have specific qualities such as mutual respect, kindness, and compassion. There are many forms the practice of Wise Friendship may take.

The book *Recovery Dharma* describes Wise Friendship in the section on “Community.”

This document explores ways to build a strong Buddhist-inspired recovery support system using the practice of Wise Friendship. There are many ways to follow this practice. However, it is not a "one size fits all" approach. Any of the suggestions may be used, modified or disregarded. Nobody is perfect. Seek out guidance. You don't need to do this alone!

Kinds of Wise Friendships

There are as many ways to use Wise Friendship to support recovery as there are people seeking relief from the suffering of addiction. The following list is intended to provide some ideas to help you find what best suits where you are in your recovery and spiritual growth. All of these approaches may be casual and informal or more structured: whatever works best for the people involved. We encourage you to try more than one approach as more support leads to stronger recovery.

- Peer texting
 - Having a friend or peer with whom you can text regularly to check in
 - Having a friend or peer to text with for a particular focus (e.g. gratitude)
- Phone check-in

- Same as texting, but with a phone call
- Peer in-person activity or check-in
 - Casual regular get-together with a peer for checking in or activities (e.g going for walks, going to the movies, support with grocery shopping, sober support at events, etc)
- “Accountability Friends” or “Buddha Buddies”
 - Having a peer whom you can check in with via text, phone, or in-person to hold you accountable.
 - This can be one-way (one person holding the other accountable) or mutual (both people holding each other accountable)
- Going through the Inquiries with a partner
 - Getting together with another person to do writing or sharing on each of the Inquiry questions in the Recovery Dharma book
- Peer Support Guides (formerly known as “mentors” - see [Appendix](#))
 - A more intensive, intentional relationship between individuals with different levels of experience in the Recovery Dharma program
 - Some members may use the term “mentorship” for this, some do not
 - There are more detailed suggestions and best practices in the [Appendix](#)
- Mirroring, “wise reflection”
 - Someone with whom you can check in when struggling who can provide support using Buddhist principles and practices.
- Text/WhatsApp or email message group
 - Having a group of peers who text or email each other for support
 - Having a group of peers who text or email each other on a particular topic (e.g. gratitude, meditation, etc)
- Book study circle
 - Gathering of peers to read and discuss buddhist or recovery-related literature
 - Could be in-person or online
- Support circles
 - Consider forming small work circles (for example, Inquiry or Kalyana-mitta circles) of trusted friends to discuss and explore Inquiry questions, provide mutual support for recovery, or how to apply Buddhist principles and tools to life.
- “Traditional” sharing meetings
- Group or buddy activities!
 - Shared meals
 - Movie/concert outings
 - Dharma bowling
 - Intersangha or local sangha social events
 - Etc.

Best practices for any peer-based support method:

Things to be aware of when giving OR receiving support

- Take care of yourself first and foremost
- It's always okay to end a relationship or put it on pause
- It's always okay to say "no" to someone else's request
- We are all equals with different pieces of wisdom and experience we bring to each relationship. We can all learn from and support each other.
- We are all human. We all make mistakes. Try and avoid putting anyone on a pedestal. Also, notice when others do that to you and find ways to bring that back to equal footing.

- Practice wise communication. Many of us were not taught how to communicate wisely. Part of wise speech and wise friendship is learning to communicate clearly.

- Try using "I statements," speaking from your own experiences and owning your thoughts and beliefs as your own rather than universal truths.

- Try using whole statements (or other versions of this) when making a request or stating a need.
 - I want or I need ... (what wants or needs you are hoping to get met?)
 - Would you ... be willing to ...
 - a request for information or a specific action (e.g., put away your phone) rather than something vague is generally more well-received and do-able and offers a bridge for further communication/interaction
 - Example: I noticed that the last time we spoke you kept looking at your phone. I felt hurt and that you weren't listening to me or that you were uninterested in what I was saying. I would like to know what was going on that had you looking at your phone. I'd like to ask you to put your phone away when I'm sharing something important.
-- or --
I need to feel heard when I'm sharing something important.

Would you be willing to put your phone away when we're talking?

- Try to avoid blame by making observations rather than accusations (e.g. instead of “you were late again!” try “I noticed this is the second time you got here 10 min later than what we agreed”)
- Keep the Three Ts in mind: Timing, Tone, & Tact
 - Ask yourself:
 - Is now the right *time* to bring this up?
 - Is the *tone* of your voice appropriate? This can point to your internal emotional state.
 - Is how you are stating something *tactful*? In other words, are you using wise speech?
- Take ownership when you make a mistake. Apologize when appropriate. Use the [Three Parts on an Effective Apology](#) article if necessary.
- Avoid support situations which could lead to romantic or sexual attraction or are of a sexual nature. This can slow your progress on the eightfold path and introduce new challenges in your recovery.

Things to be aware of when receiving support:

- Listen to your intuition; if something doesn't feel right, trust yourself and ask a trusted friend for feedback.
- Understand that all of us have different ways of learning and recovering. What works for one person may not work for you. Try it out. If it doesn't work, try something else!
- There is no “right way” to do this. If someone says that you MUST do something *a certain way*, proceed with caution.
- Ask for what you need! Try not to be attached to whether the need gets met, but it won't get met if it's never expressed.
- Ask for what you want! Trust and vulnerability can be strengthened when we ask for what we need or want. You might get a “no” and you won't get a “yes” if you don't ask.

- Practice setting boundaries. It can help to write down what you want to say and practice it alone or with a trusted friend (for example “can I stop you for a moment? I’m feeling overwhelmed and need a break from the conversation”).

Things to be aware of when offering support:

- Practice active listening (deep listening).
 - Fully concentrate on *what* the speaker is saying.
 - If you’re thinking about your response while the other person is talking, then you probably aren’t listening.
 - Work to understand *what* is being said.
 - You might demonstrate understanding, or clarify what is being said, by repeating back *what* was said using your own words
 - Try and remember *what* is being said.
 - Think about the emotions behind the content, or *why* it is being said.
 - Practice patience.
 - Finally, respond appropriately.
- Ask open-ended questions (avoid “yes” or “no” questions). Try asking questions that come from a place of curiosity that will encourage exploration of thoughts and feelings.
- Notice how much or how little space you are taking up. Do you tend to talk more than listen? If you do, try listening more and asking more questions of the other person. Do you tend to listen more than talk? Try speaking up and asking for some time to share your own experiences.
- Notice if you have a strong opinion of what “should” be done or if you have a desire to “fix” this person or their situation.
 - Try to avoid pushing your own agenda on someone else. A great way to notice this is to pay attention to whether you are giving advice and what your emotional state is in when offering advice or support. If you feel stressed, judgmental, frustrated, angry, resentful, etc. these might be indicators of your own internal process. Can you put that aside and just listen and offer support?

A Deeper Look at Wise Friendships

- We are emphasizing a peer-based approach to recovery, recognizing that we are *all* wise, we are *all* equal, and we can *all* learn from each other.
 - There are many relationships within a community and each can fall into the pitfalls of power imbalance, or codependency, without wise understanding, intention, speech, action and effort.
 - As such, there is a perceived need for a more peer balanced approach to mutual learning and peer relationships within one's community.
 - By encouraging a peer-to-peer support structure, without imbalanced power relationships, we tend towards healthier Wise Friendships, or peer support.
- Recovery Dharma aims to be trauma-informed.
 - Putting a person without clinical psychotherapy training in the role of support giver or guide could inadvertently cause harm, no matter how well-intentioned a support giver or guide may be.
 - Often, people with a history of trauma may put themselves in a vulnerable position.
 - There is a considerable risk of repeating unhealthy cycles and patterns, recreating trauma in a person who is already suffering.

We recognize each person's path is unique and what works for one person may not work for another. Many people have gotten great benefit from working with someone who has more experience in recovery, and we are including that as one option among many, along with some guidelines and things to be aware of to minimize the risk of unintentionally doing harm.

The Value of Wise Friendships:

When a person has wise people as friends, companions, and comrades, they are better able to develop and pursue the noble eightfold path. Working with others is a valuable tool of recovery, and many find that in addition to meetings, more individualized or in-depth support from those with greater experience, or those in the same stage of recovery, can help in personal recovery and spiritual path. Receiving support from others can help in many ways, including providing accountability, inspiration, motivation, experience-based knowledge, and compassionate support. In addition, supporting others in recovery supports the concept of *dana* (giving, generosity) and can provide valuable insight, learnings and good reminders of one's own intentions.

The level of support that will benefit you is unique to your situation, your personal comfort with interpersonal sharing, and the stage of recovery you are in. You should review your thoughts and needs to understand the types of support that would be helpful, including the frequency and intensity of the support. One of the most central teachings of the Buddha was the Middle Way, the path between pushing too hard and being too lax. It is a very subtle aspect of practice—how to find right effort. It is important in your recovery that you find the right balance of support to be helpful without being overwhelming.

Appendix

Notes about the Peer Support Guide (and why the term “Mentor” is not used)

Recovery Dharma members may choose to form a supportive relationship with one or more folks in the sangha that currently have some working experience with recovery, Buddhism and Buddhist principles, or Questions for Inquiry. Essentially: someone who has experience with X when another sangha member is looking for support with X. This is suggested with much caution, because of the power differential in the relationship. The caution is that any person who takes on a more guidance-based role may not have professional training or certification in counseling or in handling trauma and can unthinkingly do harm. Folks who are new to recovery are vulnerable. We do not want any such relationship to put anyone at risk sexually, mentally, or spiritually.

To emphasize the fact that Recovery Dharma is encouraging a wise and mindful approach to these relationships that are as free from power dynamics as possible, we are intentionally using a more specific term—“Peer Support Guide”—instead of “mentor.”

To that end, we offer the following recommendations:

1. The relationships should not be between folks who may develop sexual attraction.
2. The person seeking support is encouraged to seek additional forms of assistance, such as input from other meetings or programs or books, work with a recovery coach, and especially professional therapy or counseling if possible.
3. The self-determination of the person seeking support is respected and they are empowered to flourish.
4. The person offering guidance does so without making demands or giving orders, instead presenting ideas as suggestions or sharing one’s own experience.