Friendship (and healing) in the ‘intersubjectivity of silence’
A case illustration

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In this essay, I argue that friendship as a ‘technique of belonging’ can be enacted not only through discursive acts but also in the ‘intersubjectivity of silence’ (Pagis, 2010), in the meditative space through the shared practice of sitting meditation, ‘alone in the presence of’ others (Winnicott, 1969 cited in Storr, 1988). An individual may eventually return to a sense of well-being by mobilising such ‘techniques of belonging’, not among the group once he or she had access to (and lost), but in another that becomes accessible in new social practices and circumstances. I draw on the story of Ananya as a case illustration. She does not necessarily represent the urban professional women in India but the trajectory she followed shows how friendship (and healing) can happen in an unfamiliar territory.

The runaway bride

Ananya, a 31-year-old woman from India, took a life decision not to marry. Not that she was essentially against marriage but she had her own reasons to call off the wedding she had planned earlier with her family and fiancé, a man she had chosen for herself. The result of her decision was catastrophic. Her widowed mother became clinically depressed. The fiancé refused to have any further contact. Many of Ananya’s friends and colleagues in India blamed her for being fickle-minded and ‘too western’ for her own good. Overnight, Ananya became a social outcast.

Ananya is a young urban professional woman. She is well trained in her fields, medicine and social science. She is financially independent and had access to a wide network of friends: online through her active engagement with the virtual world through blogs, emails and Facebook as well as offline through formal membership of professional associations and informal social connections made up of friends, colleagues and relatives in geographical proximity.

Yet, when she took this momentous life decision Ananya was immediately thrown out of most of her existing social networks. Her friends
in India were deeply disturbed by the moral question whether an Indian woman had a right to cancel her wedding in the last minute or not. They decided against Ananya, who, in their opinion, lacked cultural ‘common sense’ and stood in solidarity with the ‘poor victim’ – Ananya’s fiancé. Facing this systematic boycott, Ananya lamented in her blog about the sense of rejection from the communities she thought she really belonged to:

... I was back in India, amidst my family and about to merge with other family through matrimony. But when things did not go as planned, I was to experience what it means to threaten the norms of community and society ... the same [thing] happened with the online community, like Facebook. Suddenly there was a wave of – block/remove this person from friends’ lists – campaign. The members of [my] community shrunk in number almost overnight. One actually wonders how social networking sites and online communities have a powerful way of telling you: ‘you are not required in our lives any more’. The friends suddenly cease to be your friends as if you never existed, with just a click of mouse.

What was the definition of ‘community’ according to Ananya? How did the sudden and excessive reactions of her ‘communities’ affect her well-being? How did Ananya eventually return to well-being? Did she plead forgiveness and reconcile with the very communities that threw her out? Or, did she establish new ‘communities’, new networks? What were the ‘techniques of belonging’ that she mobilized to survive in her rapidly shifting life-world?

Last December, Ananya was defining her community and I quote from her blog:

One thing is for sure, I was wrong when I thought I could be happy on my own without much social/communal [support]. Over [the] years, I have understood [that] I need much more communal support to redefine myself and grow in the process ... [in a] community which is open, accommodating, challenging, encouraging, stimulating [and] at the same time gives me a strong sense of belonging. In short, it has to be a community that I choose to be part of and not one where I am expected to belong. [Added emphasis mine]

Suffering from the loss of her communities, Ananya had visited a psychologist to seek professional help for her sense of helplessness and a deep sadness.
that had often left her not wanting or being able to eat, talk or sleep. Her mother was pressuring her to reconsider the decision. Only her younger brother provided emotional support but he was a glaring exception. The psychologist conducted an elaborate personality test to diagnose what might cause such unusual behaviour (canceling her own wedding?) in someone who was otherwise a charming, dutiful Indian woman. Ananya felt the visit rather had a negative impact on her well-being. The psychologist was an extension of the disapproving social voice, perpetuated with a new label: a ‘personality disorder’ with major depressive episode was, according to the psychologist, the most likely diagnosis for Ananya’s distress.

Once again, Ananya did not know where else to turn to for support. She was losing the battle outside as well as inside. She began to consider the social loss of contacts/friends as her ‘personal failure’. Her deep sadness and disappointment was internalized and persistent.

Fortunately, she had already made preparations to study in Europe where she had been earlier for a year. She left India and came to Western Europe, in a new country with the prospect of spending a Christmas holiday filled with painful memories. It had been the December before when she had said yes to the marriage proposal. It was another December when she became the much talked about ‘runaway bride’. Last December, Ananya was alone and in considerable distress.

 Friendship in silence: a ‘technique of belonging’

In one of her e-mail chat sessions, she was advised by a close friend to spend the Christmas holiday in a ten-day silent retreat known as the vipassana meditation ‘boot camp’, with the hope that it would break the sad spell. With this self-reflexive technique, she was told, she might find a way out of her suffering. Ananya was curious. The day before she left for the retreat, she wrote in her blog:

I am embarking on yet another adventure ... something that I have never done before and I feel this is the best way to say goodbye to 2010 and welcome the year ahead with a newly found self ...

I leave in 30 minutes for a small place in the woods near Amersfoort for a 10-day meditation. No cell phones, no internet, [living a] disciplined life that starts from 4 a.m. and ends at 9.30 p.m. Turning the mind inwards and resolving all the conflicts? I do not know how I will be in this program but I am really inspired and curious to be part of this.
This is going to be a lifetime experience but I am not allowed to have a pen and paper to make notes about these days. I have to fully experience this state of being.

Ananya spent ten days in silence without any contact with the outside world. She focused on her breathing, observed her body sensations, practiced equanimity in the process and tried to generate loving kindness for herself and others. During these days, she calmed down and was able to eat well and sleep peacefully (after months of troubled sleep and nightmares). Such health benefits were perhaps expected. There is encouraging evidence of the health effects of mindfulness techniques like vipassana meditation in clinical studies and popular practice (Chiesa & Serretti, 2010; Germer, Siegel & Fulton; 2005; Pagis, 2010). What was not expected however was friendship.

On the last day of the silent retreat, when everyone was allowed to speak, Ananya spoke to a friendly group of women in their 20s, 30s and 40s in whose presence she had spent the previous ten days – sharing meals, living space and silence. In an e-mail exchange, Ananya wrote to me: ‘You rarely make friends without saying a word for ten days but it happened here … for the first time in my life.’

Friendship was an immediate consequence of spending ten days ‘alone in the presence of’ (silent) others. On the last (talking) day, these women giggled about the suppressed laughter during the course, the emission of certain body sounds and odours (e.g., farting and swallowing saliva). They gesticulated the comical intonation of the instructor’s voice, criticized certain aspects of the retreat and admired some of its surprising benefits. One woman later said to Ananya that her smile (although she was not supposed to smile at anyone) lifted her spirit during the heavy silence in the centre. A smile, a gesture, a giggle, a cough (intended or not) – the involuntary gurgling sounds from hungry stomachs and active intestines – listening to others snore, suppressing burps after a long-awaited meal – hearing the rustling sound of approaching footsteps, the subtle noise of shifting of legs during long hours of sitting – dealing with body odours, appreciating perfumes – having occasional tears and frequent sighs – the incessant thoughts and emotions that could not be shared … all that ‘sound and fury’ in the silent ordeal of ten days created an inter-corporeal bond among these women.

A friendship that began in silence was followed up with words, laughter and e-mail exchanges. This led to further meetings for coffee and lunch, dinner invitations, learning to tango and cooking Indian food, playing
truth-telling games, and other shared activities that included occasional sitting together for meditation in the following months.

A day after her return to everyday life, on the first day of the New Year, Ananya wrote briefly about the meditation experience:

Last ten days in the silent meditation retreat, I found my word – ‘Beginnen Opnieuw’, the Dutch way of saying ‘Start Again’. For the meditation students, it meant start the process of meditation again and by the last day, most of us started smiling on hearing these very words, relating to them in some strange ways. I am taking these words beyond meditation now and this is going to be my Mantra for the year ahead. ‘Start again’ – is like a gentle reminder for me who often falls back into the memories of past and completely loses track of the present. [Added emphasis mine]

What exactly happened with Ananya? What did she find? How did she return to a sense of well-being? Through these new friends or a confrontation with her self with a newly found meditation technique, or maybe both? Again I cite her words:

I noticed how desperately I seek approval of people around me for my actions ... I could clearly see how I created more troubles for myself by trying to do things I did not believe in wholeheartedly. [I did that] just because I wanted to make others happy. Can I ever make others happy especially if our ideas of happiness are absolutely [in] conflict? My rational mind tells me one thing but then I act and behave in counterintuitive ways. I want to learn to be comfortable in my own skin. I do not want to try [to become] the person I am not and this is what I am going to do consciously every single day ahead. I am not hoping to convince others about what I believe, nor do I expect them to understand my views but I am not going to force myself to ‘fit’ a certain norm in which I absolutely do not fit. [Added emphasis mine]

Ananya remained steadfast to her commitment to this new way of being, and kept in contact with her new ‘vipassana’ friends. This is what she called her ‘beginnen opnieuw’ (new beginning). She was finally looking forward to the New Year:

Months ahead are going to be super busy with schoolwork, thesis, assignments and exams but I am ready for it. In fact, I am looking for-
ward to this *new beginning*. There are more parties lined up in days ahead and it seems finally I will have more Dutch friends. In [my past year in Europe], I made many friends but hardly any locals ... But last ten days connected me with so many Dutch people from Rotterdam to Friesland from Groningen to Delft that I have to plan my weekends very carefully. [Added emphasis mine]

**Community of strangers: communion with friends**

Classical views on friendship focused on friendships based on utility, pleasure and goodness. Contemporary sociologists and anthropologists agree less on a consensual definition of friendship. Scholars talk about a shift, from ‘friendship based on utility’ to ‘friendship based on virtue’ (e.g., perhaps a mutual interest in self-cultivation?), in post-industrial societies (Pahl, 2000). Anthropologists of *friendship* argue for a culturally specific notion of friendship against the universalistic assumption of friendship as relationships among self-conscious individuals. They assume a declining significance of kinship ties and the increasing importance of friendship in contemporary societies (Beer, 2001). How do we understand *friendship* in Ananya’s story? How do we *situate* the story of a woman from urban India who travels to post-industrial Europe to find *friendship* (and healing) in an *unfamiliar territory*?

Pagis (2010) in her pioneering ethnography of vipassana meditation, argued that social communication is not only discursive but can also happen in the ‘intersubjectivity of silence’, among a ‘community of strangers’ in a meditation hall:

> Meditation is a personal and individual practice. Yet, at the same time it is also a collective practice. The fragile balance between the two is generated through the production of intersubjectivity in silence, an intersubjectivity that does not require the exact articulation of experiences. The individuals who share a meditation centre compose a community of strangers. They are not familiar with one another, they have not learned the specific expressions of the other members, and they have not socialized together ... These participants have come there to be alone, to ‘spend time with themselves’. And yet, they are not alone ... They spend time in other minds: they react to the movement and non-movement of others, they feel comfort when they learn that their
experiences are ‘normal’, and they assume that the others understand their experiences since they participate in a similar event (p. 323).

Following Pagis but taking her argument further, I suggest that in the course of such shared practices it is not only a preliminary social communication that happens but a certain kind of friendship is born. A sense of belonging is enacted in the resonating silence of the meditation hall. Friendship is a particular ‘technique of belonging’ and when it begins in the ‘intersubjectivity of silence’, in the meditative space through the shared (and yet not shared) practice of sitting meditation, ‘alone in the presence of’ (silent) others – it is based on a shared focus on the self. A self that no longer requires approval from the reference group that one had belonged to, but a shared interest in cultivating a self that finds its place in a ‘community of strangers’ and becomes a ‘communion with friends’. For some of the women Ananya met, the retreat was to have a unique ‘experience’, for others it was to seek relief from suffering, or to cultivate ‘embodied self-reflexivity’. For Ananya, it was friendship more than the technique that she brought back home.

I would like to argue that this specific type of friendship, and not familial ties, was a more accessible ‘technique of belonging’ for Ananya. No longer dependent financially or emotionally on birth family and relatives, and yet not finding her place or emotional support among other women of her generation in her own society she needed to look elsewhere for coping with life events and re-inclusion. Not in romantic love, matrimonial security or existing friendships that she grew up with but through friendships that happened, and friendships she consciously chose.

Friendship is probably considered a second-rate relationship in urban India in the sense that it ‘lacks canonical status’ in comparison to kinship ties consummated in marriage. This might have been the case in Western cultures in former times or still so among certain groups (Tillmann-Healy, 2003). Friendship of course varies in India and elsewhere, according to class, gender, social positioning and the different contexts where it takes place (Beer, 2001). Although Ananya’s professional status made her financially independent her gender roles remained fixed by her reference group and immediate social circumstances. Stepping out of a planned marriage may seem an individual choice but in Ananya’s case, it was considered a lack of cultural ‘common sense’. I had asked Ananya many times: ‘Did you not find any friends in your city who could support you?’ Each time she responded with a ‘No’. Does it mean that urban professional women in India suffer similar consequences each time one of them decides to step out of or reject
matrimony at a certain age? We do not know. Ananya’s story cannot tell us more than it does.

What is clear however is that Ananya could not mobilize enough social support (including friendship) during the worst phase of her crisis in her immediate social milieu. But she eventually ‘bounced back’. If we frame resilience not in having an innate quality or in the phenomenological being in a certain way, but as active doing – it is evident from Ananya’s case how she enacted resilience in unfamiliar circumstances. She survived by following up with the professional decisions she made earlier. Sadness was debilitating her personal life but not her academic career. Her sense of well-being was an all-time low when she left India but in the past one year, she could revive it with a renewed self-interest. She did it by adopting a new tool (sitting meditation) among other tools, and a new technique of belonging (friendship in silence) from all the techniques available to her.

Aguilar (1999) argued for a culturally specific notion of friendship enacted through participation in social life within a certain geographical context against the notion of ‘friendship’ as only relations of self-conscious individualism. He illustrated how the ‘social importance of friendship’ does not always conform to a ‘liberal model of commodity value’. Presenting a series of case studies from many parts of the world, such as Papua New Guinea, Kenya, China and Brazil, Bell and Coleman (1999) illustrated how the kinship or proximity-based (older and more rigid) social relations are facing tough challenges by the (more flexible and newer) connections among people who move across local, national and global ‘networks of social relations’. Ananya’s story illustrates this transition. What her story also tells us is that situating friendship in the geographical contexts of the ‘South’, ‘Eastern’ or ‘Developing Countries’ versus the ‘North’, ‘Western’ or ‘Post-industrial’ societies is not always helpful. Rather a mobility in the category of friendship is required, to match the moving reality of the actor(s), specially if and when the actor(s) are not geographically static in their life-trajectory, travelling across national boundaries, actively engaging themselves in a trans-national ‘technology of the self’ such as vipassana meditation, and a multi-sited ‘technique of belonging’ of friendship made possible in such settings.

If a certain kind of friendship happens in a new unfamiliar circumstance without reference to a shared past, I argue, it may offer better grounds for social and emotional support. A friendship that is no longer limited to long-term associations with peer or professional groups sharing a certain cultural commonsense and neither it is restricted to certain geographical locations
or fixed sites. A friendship that seems to be by nature mobile, shifting and therefore perhaps more accommodating and ultimately healing?

**Ananya’s story: to be continued?**

Presently, six months after her confrontation with her distressed self and the *vipassana* friends she found in the meditation retreat, Ananya is breathing deep and slow. In the meantime, she attended another three-day *vipassana* retreat in Southern Europe. From our recent communication, it is evident (because she tells me so) that she is slowly recovering from her sadness that had resulted from a loss of her ‘community’, a sense of belonging in the world she previously inhabited.

I am not going to provide a commentary on the most likely explanations of this recovery. I shall stick to Ananya’s representation of her predicament. Physicians and epidemiologists bear the onus of attributing the positive outcome to particular health interventions as ‘evidence’. As anthropologists, we deal with ‘evidence’ of another kind and sometimes it suffices to (re-)present a story worth telling without going too far from the experience-near accounts. Therefore, it matters less whether Ananya’s recovery is due to the multiple ‘technologies of the self’, her sporadic practice of *vipassana* meditation as one of many others that she employed (e.g., vitamin D supplementation during the dark winter), or, the ‘technique of belonging’ that she mobilized with the *new* circle of friends.

Ananya’s ‘runaway bride’ story is at least a ‘thrice-told tale’. A story that she recounted in her public blog, in the private space of our friendship, and in informal social gathering. I, as her friend and interlocutor, have been privy to her *story-telling* on many occasions. For this essay, I summarized my recollections of those events and used only her blog entries in verbatim. Ananya’s blog is a ‘public’ representation of her *self* and remains the most immediate and personalized recording of her experience. An illustrative example of how her access to her group/society was obstructed and resulted in emotional distress. But, more importantly, how she mobilized friendship in another geographical location, in a unique space within that location through a shared practice – to find a community of friends, a *new* belonging. This, among many other steps she *chose* to follow, may have led to her eventual return to well-being.

Ananya’s story does not end here. Despite having repeatedly crossed national boundaries with legal visas and living in Europe with residency permits, Ananya has to leave by the end of this year. She has to return
What kind of technologies or techniques will come to her aid in this not-so-distant future? Her mother is still clinically depressed, having faced indirect social rejections and oscillating between her affection for the high-achieving and still-unmarried daughter in a society where ‘30 plus and single’ is often an unacceptable way of ‘being-in-the-world’. Ananya’s brother is the lone support system she will have in India. What about the friendships that I just referred to – these new and mobile, precious but precarious ‘techniques of belonging’ that she found access to during her stay in Europe? That is another story yet to happen and cannot be told now.

Acknowledgments and dedication

I met Ananya five years ago and we became friends. Since last December, we had regular face-to-face conversations or e-mail chat sessions. I thank Ananya for sharing her story and for providing me valuable feedback on the several drafts of this essay. With permission, I have edited her blog entries. I thank Sjaak van der Geest for his comments on the drafts. In an earlier conversation, he directed my attention to friendship as an unexpected outcome of the vipassana meditation retreat, a theme that I tried to develop in this essay.

I dedicate this essay to Annemiek Richters who supervised my master’s thesis on vipassana meditation in everyday life. Suffering from social exclusion and healing with social practices are important themes in her work.

Notes

1 Ananya is a pseudonym. Keeping her identity anonymous might still be an issue but she approved this text to be made public.
2 Vipassana meditation is a widely known practice in Theravada Buddhism. The ‘vipassana meditation’ mentioned in this essay, however, is a secularized and highly standardized form of sitting meditation taught by S.N. Goenka (1924) in the tradition of Sayagyi U Ba Khin, a Burmese lay teacher. Since the 1980s, this meditation practice spread worldwide with more than 100 centres organizing regular retreats by individuals who do not identify themselves as Buddhists (Pagis, 2010).
3 Vipassana meditation in the Goenka tradition emphasizes three basic techniques known in Pali language as ānāpāna-sati (awareness of respiration), vipassanā-bhāvanā (the systematic development of insight through the meditation technique of observing the reality of oneself by observing sensations within the body) and mettā-bhāvanā (the systematic cultivation of mettā, i.e., selfless love and goodwill) (Hart, 1987, p. 159, 164, 161).
4 Not all of them were friendly in the same way, sharing personal stories with a sense of co-evalness. One of the Dutch women with a fancy Sanskrit name was unusually excited to hear that Ananya was from India. For her part, Ananya felt that it had more to do with a ‘new age’ mythical imagination of the ‘spiritual India’, not the
contemporary India where all kinds of human sufferings happen, and very little to do with Ananya as a person. There was no further contact between them.

5 Life Game (also known as Truth or Dare) is a parlor game that involves asking each other questions about intimate life issues, e.g., love, relaxation, spirituality, and sex. Each participant is challenged by the others to speak the truth as he or she knows it to be.

6 ‘Opnieuw beginnen’ is the correct Dutch translation for the English phrase ‘Starting again’. Ananya, my informant, however used ‘Beginnen Opnieuw’ in her blog entries and I retain her usage of the phrase.


8 Pahl (2000) argued that ‘the replacement of much previous instrumental friendship by the rules of commercial society allowed the free expression of a new morally superior friendship based on “natural sympathy” unconstrained by necessity. These new, freely chosen relationships reflected the new universalism emerging in civil society. The well-regulated market frees the classic Aristotelian friendship of virtue from friendship of utility. Commercial society requires “authentically indifferent co-citizens” rather than potential enemies or allies’ (p. 57).

9 For more on friendship, see Doyle and Smith (2002); Bell and Coleman (1999).

10 I frame the initiation rite of vipassana meditation, the ten-day residential retreats in complete silence as evidently different from everyday life, as an unfamiliar territory for the new students. In these retreats in Europe, women and men of all nationalities practice a technique that had travelled from colonial Burma to postcolonial India in the late sixties and further to Europe in the eighties (Pagis, 2008).

11 Pagis (2009) defined ‘embodied self-reflexivity’ as the process of ‘anchoring the self in the reflexive capacity of bodily sensations’, a technique of introspection that does not mobilize discursive tools (e.g., like an internal conversation) but results from a rigorous practice of sitting meditation with eyes closed in silence and systematically following the various sensations in the body (p. 265).

12 I use the term resilience as defined by the American Psychological Association (2011), ‘the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or even significant sources of stress … it means ‘bouncing back’ from difficult experiences … Resilience is not a trait that people either have or do not have. It involves behaviors, thoughts, and actions that can be learned.’ (p. 2). Among the ten positive strategies prescribed by APA (2011, p. 4), three are the most significant in Ananya’s case: a) making connections, b) looking for opportunities for self-discovery after an immediate loss (in her case, loss of social support), and c) additional ways of strengthening resilience, for example, Ananya continued writing her blogs and signed up for a meditation retreat. In the ‘places to look for’ she did look for a mental health professional, but in her case, ‘self-help’ and support groups in the form of new friends seemed to have mattered the most.

13 This time Ananya helped in the kitchen. Notable differences between the Dutch and the Italian vipassana retreats, according to Ananya, are manifested in the culinary and talking habits predominant in each cultural setting. Needless to say, Ananya made more friends.
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