

Spiritual Friendship

[How fellowship is vital to the spiritual life]

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1 The Buddha's compassion

According to the Commentarial tradition, the Buddha would each day survey the world twice with his Buddha Eye: once at dawn, looking from horizon inwards towards his Fragrant Chamber, and in the evening looking from the Fragrant Chamber outwards to see who was ready for admonition and conversion. One day, the Buddha saw that a young sick monk was ready for instruction.

The young monk, named Tissa, came from a rich Sāvattihī family. Not long after his ordination, he suffered from boils that broke out and festered as open sores all over his body. After a while, his bones began to disintegrate. Due to his sickness, he was called the **Elder Pūti,gatta Tissa** (Tissa of the Festering Body), and he was left unattended and alone by the monks

The Buddha, knowing that Tissa was ready for arhathood, thought to himself: "This monk has been abandoned by his colleagues. At present he has no other refuge than me." Pretending to be making his rounds of the monastery, the Buddha went to Tissa's quarters. There he prepared some hot water and was preparing to nurse Tissa.

When the monks noticed the Buddha doing such menial tasks, they quickly approached and took over the nursing of Tissa. The Teacher then instructed them how Tissa should be nursed. First, he had some warm water sprinkled over Tissa to loosen his soiled robes that had stuck to his festering body. The upper robe was thoroughly washed in warm water and then dried.

When the upper robe had dried, the Teacher had Tissa's lower robe removed and after his body was carefully washed and dried, he was dressed in the clean dry upper robe. The soiled lower robe was then washed and dried. When the lower garment was ready, he was fully dressed with his body refreshed and mind tranquil.

The Teacher, knowing that Tissa had not long to live, stood by Tissa's pillow and said to him: "Monk, consciousness will depart from you, your body will become useless and, like a log, will lie on the ground." So saying, he pronounced this stanza:

In no long time, this body will lie on the ground,
With consciousness departed, rejected like a useless log. (Dh 41)

At the end of the lesson, Elder Pūti,gatta Tissa attained arhathood and passed away into nirvana. The Teacher performed the last rites over his body, and taking the relics, caused a shrine to be erected. (DhA 1:319 ff.)

2 The monk with the stomach disorder

The Vinaya records a similar story of the Buddha's compassion. This event is so significant that it is actually the occasion (*nidāna*) for the Buddha to introduce Vinaya rules regarding monks taking care of one another. We have here a good example of how a Vinaya rule is introduced.

The sick monk

At one time, a certain monk had a **stomach disorder** (*kucchi,vikār'ābādha*), probably dysentery. He lay fallen in his own excrements. The Blessed One, as he was touring the monastic lodgings (*sen'āsana*) with the venerable Ānanda as his attendant (*pacchā,samaṇa*), approached the monks' dwelling (*vihāra*). Then the Blessed One saw that sick monk lying fallen in his own excrements. Seeing him, he approached that monk, and spoke thus to him:

"What is your sickness, O monk?"

"I have a stomach disorder, bhante."

“But, O monk, don’t you have an attendant (*upaṭṭhāka*)?”

“No, bhante.”

“Why don’t the monks tend you?”

“I, bhante, am of no use to the monks, therefore the monks do not tend me.”

Tending the sick monk

Then the Blessed One addressed the venerable Ānanda: “Go, Ānanda, bring some water. We will wash this monk.”

“Yes, bhante,” the venerable Ānanda replied in assent. When he had brought the water, the Blessed One sprinkled the water over the monk’s body, and then the venerable Ānanda washed him.

Then the Blessed One took him by the head, the venerable Ānanda by the feet, and having raised him up, they laid him down on a couch.

Investigating the Order

Then the Blessed One, on that occasion, in that connection, having assembled the Order of Bhikshus, asked the monks:

“Is there, bhikshus, in such and such a dwelling-place a monk who is ill (*gilāna*)?”

“There is, bhante.”

“What, bhikshus, is that monk’s illness?”

“The monk has a stomach disorder, bhante.”

Seeking the cause of neglect

“But, bhikshus, is there anyone who is tending that monk?”

“There is none, bhante.”

“Why don’t the monks tend him?”

“Bhante, this monk is of no use to the monks. Therefore the monks do not tend that monk.”

Admonition

“Bhikshus, you have not a mother, you have not a father, who might tend you. If you, bhikshus, do not tend one another, then who is there who will tend you? **Whoever, bhikshus, would tend me, he would tend the sick** (*yo bhikkhave maṃ upaṭṭhaheyya so gilānaṃ upaṭṭhaheyya*).

“If he has a preceptor (*upajjhāya*), he should be tended for life by the preceptor, who should wait for his recovery.

“If he has a teacher (*ācariya*), ...

“If he has a co-resident (*saddhi, vihārika*)...

“If he has a pupil (*antevāsika*)...

“If he has a fellow preceptor (*samān’upajjāyaka*)...

“If he has a fellow teacher (*samān’ācariya*), he should be tended by the teacher, who should wait for his recovery.

“If he has neither preceptor nor a teacher nor a co-resident nor a pupil nor a fellow preceptor nor a fellow teacher, then he should be tended by the Order.

“If one should not tend him, then it is an offence of wrong-doing (*dukkāṭa*).” (V 1:300 f)

The above is an example of how a rule of Buddhist canon law is promulgated. The basis for this rule is **compassion** and fellowship. First, the Buddha questions the monk concerned regarding the personal reason for his indisposition (“What is your sickness?”), then regarding the social cause of his suffering (“Why don’t the monks tend you?”). Having established the reason, he then takes immediate measures to correct the situation—in this case, to tend to the sick monk.

Once the immediate problem has been resolved, the Buddha assembles the Order. He questions the Order if they are aware of a problem situation (“Is there, bhikshus, in such and such a dwelling-place a monk who is ill?”) and asks the Order the reason for the problem (“He is of no use to the monks”).

Having established the case, the Buddha (in a gentle optative mood) goes on to admonish the Order on the value of fellowship, using himself as the example (“Whoever, bhikkhus, would tend me, he would tend the sick”). This is the spirit of the law. Then, he promulgates the rule: the letter of the law (“an offence of wrong-doing”). This is the basic pattern for the introduction of the monastic rules.

3 Spiritual friendship

It is clear from the Buddha’s personal examples cited here and many other such accounts recorded in the Buddhist Canon, that caring for one another is not only vital for community life, such as that of the Buddhist Sangha, but is also essential for spiritual development. The *locus classicus* or key reference for spiritual friendship is **the Upaḍḍha Sutta** (S 45.2) which, due to its importance, is quoted here in full:

Thus have I heard. On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling among the Sakyas where there was a town of the Sakyas named Nāgaraka. Then the venerable Ānanda approached the Blessed One, paid homage to him, sat down at one side, and said to him:

“Bhante, spiritual friendship, good companionship, good comradeship, is half of the holy life.”

“Not so, Ānanda! Not so, Ānanda! Spiritual friendship, good companionship, good comradeship, is **the whole of the holy life**. When a monk has a spiritual friend (*kalyāṇa, mittassa... bhikkhuno*)¹, a good companion, a good comrade, it is to be expected that he will develop the noble eightfold path.”

“And how, Ānanda, does a monk who has a spiritual friend...develop the noble eightfold path? Here, Ānanda, a monk develops right view, which is based on seclusion, dispassion and cessation, maturing in release. He develops right thought...right speech...right action...right livelihood...right effort...right mindfulness...right concentration, which is based on seclusion, dispassion and cessation, maturing in release. It is in this way, Ānanda that a monk who has a spiritual friend... develops the noble eightfold path.

“By following the method, too, Ānanda, it may be understood how the whole of the holy life is spiritual friendship...: **by relying upon me as a spiritual friend**, Ānanda, beings subject to birth are freed from birth, beings subject to aging are freed from aging, beings subject to death are freed from death, beings subject to sorrow, lamentation, pain, anguish and despair are freed from them. By this method, Ānanda, it may be understood how the whole of the holy life is spiritual friendship, good companionship, good comradeship.”

(S 5:2 f.; also at S 1:87 f. = 3.18; cf. Sāriputta’s remark, S 5:4)

The Commentary says that Ānanda thinks that the practice of an ascetic succeeds when he relies on spiritual friends and on his own personal effort, so half of it depends on spiritual friends and half on personal effort. But, as with children, it is not possible to say: “So much comes from the mother, so much comes from the father.”

The importance of this sutra is attested by the fact that it is repeated in full in the **Appamāda Sutta 2** (S 3.18), where, at Sāvattihī, King Pasenadī shares his personal thoughts with the Buddha:

“Here, bhante, while I was alone in seclusion, the following reflection arose in my mind: ‘The Doctrine has been well taught by the Blessed One, and that is for one with spiritual friends, good companions, good comrades, not for one with bad friends, bad companions, bad comrades.’”

The Buddha replies by relating the incident of the Upaḍḍha Sutta. In this case, the Buddha applies **spiritual friendship on a more mundane level** for the benefit of the king, saying that through spiritual friendship, his kingdom and family would be guarded and prosper (S 1:88 f).

¹ *kalyāṇa, mittassa... bhikkhuno*. This expression has often been mistranslated. Bhikkhu Bodhi makes an important note here: “As an independent substantive, *kalyāṇamitta* means a good friend, i.e. a spiritual friend who gives advice, guidance, and encouragement. When used in apposition to *bhikkhu*, however, *kalyāṇamitta* becomes a *bahubbhīhi* compound, and the whole expression means “a bhikkhu *who has* a good friend.” (S:B 1890 n6).

The Commentary says that although the Dharma is well taught for all, just as medicine is effective only for one who takes it, so the Dharma fulfils its purpose only for a compliant and faithful person with spiritual friends, and not otherwise. Elsewhere, the Buddha often declares the importance of spiritual friendship:

Bhikshus, dawn is the forerunner and harbinger of the rising sun. Even so, bhikshus, spiritual friendship is the forerunner and harbinger of the noble eightfold path. (S 5:29)

Bhikshus, I do not see any other thing by which the unarisen noble eightfold path arises and the arisen noble eightfold path develops to completion except through spiritual friendship. (S 5:35)

4 Clay-pot Friendship

4.1 THE MAHĀ SUÑÑATĀ SUTTA. The **Mahā Suññata Sutta** (M 3:118) records an important teaching on spiritual solitude expounded by the Buddha to Ānanda. While staying in the Banyan Park at Kapilavattu, the Buddha discovers that in the dwelling (*vihāra*) built by the Sākya Kāḷa, khemaka there are numerous furniture for resting (*sen'āsana*)—beds, chairs, mattresses and mats. It looks like a club house! Ānanda then explains to him that it is robe season and the monks are making robes. For that reason there are many monks present there. The Buddha then admonishes Ānanda that it is difficult to for a monk (or anyone) to attain mental calm and release in the midst of a crowd (*gaṇa*).

The Buddha then goes on to instruct Ānanda on how to meditate on voidness (*suññatā*) after having attained the four form dhyana (*rūpa-j-jhāna*). Living with such a state of mind, the practitioner is not inclined to indulge in “animal talk” (*tiracchāna, kathā*),² that is, talk on worldly matters and things unrelated to spiritual development.

The Buddha then goes on to distinguish between **two levels of sense-experience**: that of “the five cords of sensual pleasure” (*pañca, kāma, guṇa*), the level of the worldling, and “the five aggregates of clinging” (*pañc'upādāna-k, khandha*), the level of the practitioner. The five cords of sensual pleasure have a “binding” (grasping) effect on one who enjoys them. The five aggregates of clinging, on the other hand, can natural states that arise and fall away moment to moment. If a practitioner watches this rise and fall, he would abandon the “I am” conceit, and as such be free from the grip of Māra.

4.2 “EVEN IF THE TEACHER TELLS YOU TO GO AWAY.” Then turning to a new level of instruction, the Buddha asks a rhetorical question: “What do you think, Ānanda? What good does a disciple see that he should seek the Teacher’s company even if he is told to go away?” When Ānanda requests that the Buddha elaborate, he does so:

- (1) A disciple should not seek the teacher’s company “for the sake of discourses, stanzas and expositions”, but **only such talk that promotes spiritual development**, that is, talk on “few wants, contentment, seclusion, aloofness from society, arousing energy, moral conduct, concentration, wisdom, deliverance, and the knowledge and vision of deliverance”.
- (2) How does a religious teacher fail? A teacher who has gone into solitary retreat is visited by “brahmins and householders from the town and country” and as a result he becomes filled with desire, succumbs to craving and reverts to luxury. This is **the failure of the teacher**.
- (3) How does a religious pupil fail? A student who, following the teacher’s example, has gone into solitary retreat is visited by “brahmins and householders from the town and country” and as a result he becomes filled with desire, succumbs to craving and reverts to luxury. This is **the failure of the pupil**.
- (4) How does a brahmacari [celibate religious] fail? Here, a true follower of the Buddha who keeps to his teachings goes into spiritual retreat. Even when visitors from the city and country come, **he does not fall from his training**. But, when one follows a false or weak teacher, as a

² D 1:7; V 1:7, 178, 3:54; Vism 127; DA 1:89.

result of contact the world, one is filled with unwholesome states. This is **the failure of the religious celibate**, which is the worst failure of the three, even leading to great suffering.³

- (5) “Therefore, Ānanda, **conduct yourself with friendliness towards me**, not with hostility.” And how is this not done? The Buddha teaches Dharma out of compassion to the disciples, but they neither listen nor make an effort to understand, and turn away from the Teaching. This is being unfriendly with the Teacher.
- (6) How do disciples conduct themselves with **friendliness towards the Teacher**? Here, the disciples want to hear and makes an effort to understand the Teaching, and do not turn away from it. This is being friendly to the Teacher.

“**I shall not treat you as the potter treats the raw damp clay.** Repeatedly restraining you, I shall speak to you, Ānanda. Repeatedly admonishing you, I shall speak to you, Ānanda. The sound core will stand the test.” (M 3:118). The Commentary paraphrases the Buddha’s closing remarks thus:

After advising you once, I shall not be silent. I shall advise and instruct by repeatedly admonishing you. Just as a potter tests the baked pots, puts aside those that are cracked, split or faulty, and keeps only those that pass the test, so I shall advise and instruct you by repeatedly testing you. Those among you who are sound, having reached the paths and fruits, will stand the test. (This test, the Commentary adds, also includes the mundane virtues as criterion of soundness.) (MA 4:166)

This sutra is also known as the Gaṇa,bheda Sutta (MA 4:165) because it tends to break up a crowd, that is, it admonishes against the unwholesome socializing.

4.3 THE GANDHĀRA JĀTAKA. The analogy of the unbaked clay pot is also found the **the Gandhāra Jātaka** (J no. 406), where the Bodhisattva was reborn as a prince of Gandhāra. He admonishes an ascetic also named Ānanda against hoarding salt and sugar and to accept almsfood as it comes: “I will not work with you, O Ānanda, as a potter with raw clay only. I will speak chiding again and again. What is truth, that will abide.”

Were not wisdom and good conduct trained in some men’s lives to grow,
Many would go wandering idly like a blind buffalo.
But since some are wisely trained in moral conduct fair to grow,
Thus it is that disciplined in paths of virtue others go. (RA Neil’s tr J:C 3:224)

In the end, both ascetics, through their practice, were destined for the Brahmā world. (J 3:363-369)

Spiritual friendship, in other words, is a “fiery” friendship. Just as the primordial fire of the earth crushes coal deep underground to produce diamonds, even so the communication between spiritual friends inspires one another to higher spiritual levels, as exemplified in the lives of Sāriputta and Moggallāna, and of Mahā Kassapa and Ānanda, with the Buddha as their common spiritual friend.

5 Mutual respect

The Ghaṭa Sutta (The Barrel Discourse, S 21.3) records an episode showing the warm friendship existing between Sāriputta and Moggallāna. On one occasion when the Blessed One was dwelling in Anāthapiṇḍika’s Park in Prince Jeta’s Forest at Sāvathī, Sāriputta and Moggallāna were dwelling at Rājagaha in a single dwelling in the Squirrel Feeding-ground in the Bamboo Forest.

Emerging from his meditation retreat, Sāriputta approached Moggallāna and remarked: “Friend Moggallāna, your faculties are serene, your countenance is pure and bright. Has the venerable Mahā Moggallāna spent the day in a peaceful dwelling?”

³ Comy explains that by using two analogies. For a religious teacher or student outside the Teaching (a non-Buddhist) to fall from his training, only falls away from a mundane training—like one falling a donkey and is only covered in dust. However, for one who violates the holy life training in the Teaching (with its path, fruit and nirvana), that is, consciously violates the precepts, it is a great loss, like one falling from an elephant, incurring great suffering. (MA 4:165)

“Actually I spent the day in a gross dwelling,⁴ friend, but I did have some Dharma talk.”

When Sāriputta asks further, Moggallāna replies that he has had some Dharma conversation with the Buddha.

“But the Blessed One is far away, friend. He is now dwelling in Anāthapiṇḍika’s Park in Prince Jeta’s Forest at Sāvattī. Did the venerable Mahā Moggallāna approach the Blessed One by means of spiritual power, or did the Blessed One approach the venerable Mahā Moggallāna by means of spiritual power?”

Neither, replies Moggallāna, rather “the Blessed One cleared his divine eye and divine ear element to communicate with me, and I cleared my divine eye and divine ear element to communicate with the Blessed One”.⁵

When asked again, Moggallāna replies that he has asked the Buddha what is meant by the expression “one with energy roused” (*āraddha, viriyo*). The Buddha replies:

Here, Moggallāna, a monk with energy roused dwells thus: “Willingly, let only my skin, sinews and bones remain, and let the flesh and blood dry up in my body, but I will not relax my energy so long as I have not attained what can be attained by personal strength, by personal energy, by personal exertion (*purisa, thāmena purisa, viriyena purisa, parakkamena*).” It is in such a way, Moggallāna, that one has roused energy.

[This teaching is also given in **the Dasa, bala Sutta II**, S 22.22.]

“Friend,” Sāriputta confesses, “compared to the venerable Mahā Moggallāna, we are like a little piece of gravel compared to the Himalayas, the king of mountains. For the venerable Mahā Moggallāna is of such great spiritual power and might that if he so wishes he could live on for a cycle (*kappa*).”⁶

“Friend,” replies Moggallāna, “compared to the venerable Sāriputta (in wisdom) we are like a little grain of salt compared to a barrel of salt. For the venerable Sāriputta has been extolled, lauded and praised in many ways by the Blessed One.”

As Sāriputta is supreme
In wisdom, virtue and peace,
So a monk who has gone beyond
At best can only equal him. (S 2:276 f)

6 Like milk and water

A testimony of how the early monks and nuns live in spiritual friendship is found in **the Dhamma-cetiya Sutta** which records the praises of the rajah Pasenadi of Kosala for the monks:

...Bhante, kings quarrel with kings, nobles with nobles, brahmins with brahmins, householders with householders; mother quarrels with child, child with mother, father with child, child with father; brother quarrels with brother, brother with sister, sister with brother, sister with sister, friend with friend.

But here I see monks living in concord, with mutual appreciation, without disputing, mixing like milk and water, looking at each other with kindly eyes. I do not see any other assembly elsewhere with such concord.

Again, bhante... I have seen some recluses and brahmins who are lean, wretched, unsightly, jaundiced, with veins standing out on their limbs, such that people would not look at them again...

⁴ Saṃyutta Comy. The dwelling is called “gross” on account of its object. For he dwelt in the exercise of the divine eye and divine ear element, which takes gross objects, namely the form sense-base and the sound sense-base.

⁵ P. *Api ca me yāvata bhagavatā ettavatā dibba, cakkhu visujjhi dibbā ca sota, dhātu, Bhagavato ‘pi yāvata’ham ettavatā dibba, cakkhu cakkhu visujjhi dibbā ca sota, dhātū ti.* (S 2:276). Free tr. Bhikkhu Bodhi, S:B 1:715 & n.

⁶ Bhikkhu Bodhi remarks here in his notes that although Comy glosses *kappa* as *āyu, kappa*, meaning the full human life span of 120 years (SA 2:235; S:B 822 n387), there seems to be no textual basis for taking *kappa* in this passage as meaning anything other than a cosmic aeon, the full extent of time required for a world system to evolve and dissolve. Cf discussion SD 9 (Mahā Parinibbāna S, D 16) §§9bc.

But here I see monks smiling and cheerful, sincerely joyful, plainly delighting, their faculties clear, living at ease, unruffled, subsisting on what others give, abiding with mind [as aloof] as a wild deer's... Surely, these venerable ones have certainly realized the great and full significance of the Blessed One's teaching. (M 89.11/1:120 f)

This event occurred in the last year of the Buddha's life, when both he and the king were 80 years old.

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