

The Buddha on Friends and Friendship



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Essays on Buddhist Doctrines

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What the Greeks called *philia* is what the Buddha called *mittata*. Both words mean loving friendship or brotherly love. Until recently, even in Western societies, friendships were much closer and deeper than is expected today. The friendships between Achilles and Patroclus and those from the Bible between Saul and Jonathan and Ruth and Naomi are well-known in the West. In India the mutual devotion of Arjuna and Krishna as depicted in the *Mahabharata* has long been celebrated as the ideal friendship. Krishna said of Arjuna: “My wives, my kinsmen and my relatives, none amongst them is dearer to me than Arjuna. I shall not be able to cast my eyes, even for a single moment, on the earth bereft of Arjuna ... Know that Arjuna is half my body.” Saying this to someone of the same gender might sound inappropriate to the modern Western ear but similarly expressed sentiments were common in our culture until the beginning of the 20th century.

Such a friendship from a Buddhist culture is to be found in the Sri Lankan epic the *Culavamsa*. It seems that palace intrigues forced young Prince Manavamma to flee to south India, where he found employment at the court of King Narasiha. A friendship grew up between the two men which gradually became love. When the kingdom was invaded by a neighbour, Narasiha’s first thought was for his friend. If Manavamma joined the fighting and was killed, “all that we have planned together would be without result”, and so he marched off to battle and bid Manavamma to stay in the capital. But Manavamma thought: “If the king dies while I am alive my life is nothing. I would betray his trust in me if I did so. He has made me his equal and therefore it behoves me to go with him to the battlefield. It is my greatest joy to either live or die with him.” Manavamma rode off to join Narasiha and the two of them led their troops to victory. After the victory the king “embraced Manavamma lovingly” saying: “It is you who have given me victory.” Out of gratitude for his devotion, Narasiha gave Manavamma an army so he could invade Sri Lanka and try to win the crown for himself. The expedition was a failure and Manavamma remained at Narasiha’s court, serving his friend and biding his time. Eventually Narasiha thought: “With his pride unbroken and honour as his wealth, my friend serves me for the sake of royal dignity and he will become old and grey thereby. When I see this how can I myself rule with joy? If I cannot send him to reclaim his kingdom what is my life to me?” So another army was assembled, Narasiha gave his own armour to Manavamma and he invaded Lanka and made himself king (*Culavamsa* XLVII 1-60).

Not as fervent as this and certainly of a more spiritual nature was the friendship between Ananda and the Buddha. Ananda was the Buddha’s first cousin, somewhat younger than him, and became in effect his private secretary for some 25 years. He was gentle, amiable and accommodating, one of those types of people that almost everyone seemed to like. He was also a very practical person, happy to make all the Buddha’s arrangements, keeping people from him when he needed a rest, making sure his living quarters were in order and catering to his personal needs. The Buddha trusted Ananda implicitly and was happy to leave everything to him. It is clear from the scriptures that the two men had a deep and affectionate appreciation for each other. Ananda might be thought of as being equivalent to the “disciple who Jesus loved”, the one who “was leaning on his bosom” during the Last Supper. According to the ancient commentary, when an enraged elephant charged at the Buddha it was Ananda who threw himself in front of the Buddha to try to protect him (Ja. V,335-6).

In the months before the Buddha’s passing, the illness that would eventually hasten his death first appeared and Ananda was deeply affected. “I was staggered, I lost my bearings and things were unclear because of the Lord’s sickness” (D.II,99). Ananda may have been exhibiting what is called empathetic distress, taking on some of the symptoms of a loved one’s sickness. Later, when it became clear that the Buddha’s last hours were approaching, Ananda “leaned against the doorpost and sobbed” saying: “Alas, I am still but a learner with much to do. And the Teacher is passing away, he who was so compassionate to me!” The Buddha noticed Ananda’s absence and called for him to come. Seeing him so upset he both comforted and thanked him for his many years of selfless giving. “For a long time Ananda, you have been

in my presence showing bodily acts of love, showing verbal acts of love, showing mental acts of love, helpfully, happily, whole-heartedly and immeasurably. You have created much good, Ananda. Make an effort and in a short time you will be free from the defilements” (D.II,143-4).

Erotic love depends very much on the physical features. Looks are important, and if sexual satisfaction is absent erotic love will soon fade. It is the same with conjugal love, at least in the early years of the marriage. Loving friendship rarely takes physical appearance into account and the happiness and delight it gives is emotional rather than sexual, perhaps one of the reasons it often outlasts romantic relationships and sometimes even marriages.

The Buddha spoke about friendship more than any other human relationship and he identified several types of friends and the levels or intensities of the friendship associated with each. Most commonly he spoke of ordinary friends, what can also be called mates (*sakha*) or pals (*sambhatta*), people we like, we get on well with, socialise with but with whom our connection is not deep. The bases of many ordinary friendships are reciprocity and shared interests and benefits. Then there are loving friends, called by the Buddha bosom friends (*mitta sahada*), confidants (*amacca*) or sometimes true friends (*sahaya or samdittha*), those of whom we can say we really love. A true friend, the Buddha said, was one on who “you can rest like a son does on his father’s breast” (Sn.255). Typically, we have only two or three such friends, they are usually the same gender as ourselves, and our connection with them commonly lasts a lifetime. We may not see such friends for years, then meet again and resume our relationship as if we saw each other only last week. Anuruddha told the Buddha that the loving companionship between he and his friends meant that they were “different in body but one in mind” (*kaya ekan ca pana manne cittam*, M.III,156). In an interesting parallel to this, Aristotle defined loving friendship as “one soul in two bodies”.

In the famous Sigalovada Sutta, the Buddha enumerated what he considered the virtues of a loving friend. These include giving more of anything you ask from them, reassuring you when you are frightened, being constant through thick and thin, rejoicing in your successes, looking out for you when you are off your guard, discouraging you from doing wrong and encouraging you to do good, confiding in you and keeping the confidences you share. A loving friend might, should the need arise, even risk his or her life for you (D.III,187). The Jatakas say: “An ordinary friend will go seven steps for you, a loving friend will go 12. If he does so for a fortnight or a month, he is family; more than that and he is your second self” (Ja. I,365). These virtues imply kindness, unstinting generosity, loyalty, sympathetic joy and absolute openness, and trust. One would, the Buddha said, “cherish and nurture such a friend as a mother does the child of her own breast” (D.III,188).

Sometimes shared passions kindle friendship; sometimes it is an unexpected offer of help in a crisis. At other times it is awakened by going through hardship or danger together. Such things may well give birth to, cement or strengthen an ordinary friendship, but it is difficult to identify what attracts one person to another so that they become loving friends. A Buddhist would say that in some cases at least, it must be the reawakening of a past life connection, that the people concerned were intimate in a previous life or lives and that the bond between them has drawn them together again in the present life. The Jatakas contain several stories where two people have renewed their relationships through several lives, in one case through seven lives (Ja. II,30). The ancient commentaries say that the Buddha and Ananda had been friends through a succession of lives.

When two people’s loving friendship includes a significant spiritual element they become what the Buddha calls *kalyana mitta* and their relationship is called *kalyana mittata*. A *kalyana mitta* is the ideal friend or spiritual friend, and *kalyana mittata* is the supreme human relationship. *Kalyana* literally means “beautiful” or “lovely” although the Buddha was not referring to physical attractiveness but inner beauty, the beauty of integrity, kind-heartedness, virtue, and love of the Dhamma. “If someone is jealous, selfish

or dishonest, they are unattractive despite any eloquence or good features they might have. But the person who is purged of such things and free from them, it is they who are really beautiful” (Dhp.262-3).

The Buddha described a spiritual friend as being “loving and warm, respected and appreciated, articulate and patient with questions, giving profound talks and pointing one in the right direction” (A.IV,32). “Whether living in a village or town one consorts with, comes together with, associates and discusses with people, whether young or old, who are full of faith and virtue, generosity and wisdom. One emulates the faith of the faithful, the virtue of the virtuous, the generosity of the generous and the wisdom of the wise. This is called spiritual friendship” (A.IV,282).

While the Buddha emphasised that the Dhamma had to be “attained by the wise each for himself or herself”, he also stressed that this could not be done in isolation from others. Being self-confidently independent was important, but it needed to be enhanced and nourished with the emotional sustenance of friendship. “Ananda said to the Lord: ‘Spiritual friendship, intimacy and companionship are half of the holy life.’ The Lord replied: ‘Not so Ananda! Not so! Spiritual friendship, intimacy and companionship are all of the holy life. When one has developed and cultivated a spiritual friend, a spiritual intimate, a spiritual companion, it can be expected that he will develop and cultivate the Noble Eightfold Path’.” (S.V,2).

The best person to have as a spiritual friend would of course be one who is enlightened. Unfortunately, it is not easy to know who has attained this state and who has not. It is also important to realise that the process of learning depends as much on the student as the teacher. Hundreds of thousands of people listened to the Buddha explain his Dhamma, but not all became enlightened. Several thousand monks and nuns trained under him and not all of them became enlightened either. Some did not improve even a little. The wiser, the more learned and skilful a spiritual friend is the better, but if we are receptive enough we should be able to learn from anyone who is just a little more mature or sensible than we are. Having such a spiritual friend can be just as fruitful as having a “recognised” or a “realised” teacher.

The Indian religious tradition in general sees the teacher (*guru*) as having a kind of mystical power capable of transforming the student who gives them self totally. There are numerous stories about teachers “testing” their disciples by making unreasonable demands on them, behaving in ways that appear to be immoral, or giving absurd instructions and praising the disciple who obeys unhesitatingly. Absolute unquestioning devotion to the teacher is seen as the key, the fast lane, to spiritual growth.

While the Buddha thought it proper to respect whoever one learns the Dhamma from he did not praise unquestioning and uncritical self-surrender to them. Far from it, he encouraged scrutinising a potential teacher over a period of time to assess whether he or she really was as wise as people said, as was claimed or assumed. After accepting a teacher, the Buddha advised the disciple to continue to be alert to whether their actions were consistent with their words or whether there was a difference between their public persona and their private life. With typical insight, he pointed out that there were some “mental defilements that only arise after one had achieved fame and adulation” (M.I,317-20). Experience shows that a teacher, like other individuals, can be spoilt by deference and success. This being the case, a teacher who may have been worthy before may not be any longer, and a wise person should be aware of this possibility.

When a group of people once asked the Buddha how they should choose between the different religious claims they were being asked to accept he said: “Do not go by the notion ‘This monk is our guru’.” (*ma samaṇo no garu*, A.I,189). Then he added: “But when you yourselves know that certain things are wholesome, admirable, praised by the wise and when accepted and followed lead to your welfare and happiness, then you should live in accordance with them.” He was advising them to rely more on their own judgement, discrimination and common-sense than the instructions of supposedly infallible teachers. The Tibetan Buddhist idea of regarding the teacher as if he or she is the Buddha may not always be helpful in encouraging this sounder advice of the Buddha.

Spiritual friendship as conceived by the Buddha is not a relationship in which one party is superior and the other dependent, where one is all-knowing and the other is all-accepting. Rather, it is a relationship where learning and mentoring take place in an environment of mutual respect and affection, questioning, discussion, perhaps even spirited disagreement. A worthy spiritual friend is loving (*piya*) and a student should serve him or her with loving endearment (*manapa*, Vin.I,45). Likewise, those who share the Dhamma with others, whether they be a “teacher” or not, whether in a formal or informal setting, should do so without desire for gain and with a mind of love (*mettacitta*, A.III,184).