



SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIP

One day Ānanda, who had been thinking deeply about things for a while, turned to the Buddha and exclaimed:
"Lord, I've been thinking — spiritual friendship is at least half of the spiritual life!"

The Buddha replied:
*"Say not so, Ānanda, say not so.
Spiritual friendship
is the whole of the spiritual life!"*

AN EVIL FRIEND

An insincere and evil friend is more to be feared than a wild beast; a wild beast may wound your body, but an evil friend will wound your mind.

We in Winnipeg are very fortunate. The teachings of the Buddha are rare and hard to find in the West. Despite this we have had the opportunity to live with the Dhamma for over 20 years. I see many in Winnipeg who have progressed in the Dhamma. I see many who are inspired and practicing with great effort.

The Buddha advised Ananda that a *kalyana mitta* or spiritual friend is the whole (success) of the spiritual life. How does one distinguish between a friend who will assist one in one's spiritual growth and a friend who will hinder one's progress? How can we distinguish between a true friend who has our best interest at heart and a false friend who will use honeyed words to lead us astray? How can we discriminate with wisdom when we ourselves are steeped in delusion?

When the Buddha claimed that the whole of the success of spiritual life was a *Kalyana Mitta* or true spiritual friend he pointed out three important truths about trust and delusion which will assist us in making the right choice. It requires clear powers of judgement to distinguish between a *kalyana mitta* and a sheep in wolves clothing. One must be careful and use one's wisdom and experience. If not, one could be disappointed.

The first truth that the Buddha declared is to realize that you can't really trust yourself to see through your delusion on your own. When you are deluded you do not know that you are deluded. At times you need some trustworthy outside help to point this out to you. This is why the Buddha ended the Kalama Sutta by saying; "adopt the actions praised by the wise".

When the Buddha showed his son Rahula a mirror and advised Rahula to reflect and examine his speech and actions to ensure they have not caused any harm he also advised Rahula to talk it over with a knowledgeable friend if he had digressed and performed an unskilful action. Little Rahula was very fortunate. He had Venerable Sariputta and Maha Moggallana as his spiritual friends. In the absence of an *Arahanth* we have to use wisdom and the guidelines that the Buddha gave when we select our *kalyana mitta*.

The Buddha declared that the primary duty of a trustworthy friend is to point out your weaknesses because it is only when you see your weaknesses that you can correct them. As such when you are seeking a teacher make sure that you find someone who will be honest with you and say what is best for you rather than what is best for him or others. Find someone who will be honest with you even though it is difficult to say the truth and so much easier to just overlook or hide the truth. A great teacher will not hide the truth for self benefit and self interest. There should be no manipulation and no vested interest for the teacher. No malice or self importance in the teacher. You should have perfect trust and confidence in your *kalyana mitta*. If you do not, then it is time to change your teacher.

I have heard people criticize great monks for scolding and correcting their devotees. They feel that a monk should not raise his voice and rebuke his disciple. This foolish talk is because people can not see the compassion behind the words. They do not recognise the wisdom behind the words.

The Buddha said,

*Regard him as one, who points out treasure,
The wise one who seeing your faults,
Rebukes you.*

I can truthfully say that the only teacher I have bowed down to and placed my head on his feet is a great teacher who rebuked me in my negligence of my practice in favour of teaching and Dhamma service. Even though the time was not right for me to head his advice I knew that he was right and it was just a question of time before I followed his advice.

But how should a good teacher rebuke his devotee or friend. A good teacher is like a good trainer. Once when a horse trainer came to see the Buddha, he asked the trainer how he trained his horses. The trainer said that some horses respond to gentle training, some to harsh training, and some to a combination of both gentle and harsh training. But if a horse did not respond to his training he would kill the horse to maintain the reputation of his teacher's lineage.

Then the trainer asked the Buddha how he trained his disciples. The Buddha said. "In the same way". "Some students respond to gentle criticism, some to harsh criticism and some to a mixture of gentle and harsh criticism". "But if a student does not respond to either of these types of rebuke I would kill them". This surprised the trainer until the Buddha explained what he meant by 'I would kill them.' The Buddha said that he would give up teaching the student which would essentially kill the student's opportunity to grow in the practice. I have seen this method of teaching used by the best meditating monks. It is also the advice that was given to me, a lay Dhamma teacher, by the present day great monks.

So the first requisite is being willing to take criticism, both gentle and harsh. This is why the Buddha told his disciples not to teach for money. When you teach for money you are biased and vulnerable. You are now under obligation and tend to hide the truth for political reasons. The person paying is the one that determines what is taught. An unencumbered *kalyana mitta* who is under no obligation will have only your best interest at heart. In conclusion the first truth the Buddha declared is the realization that one needs a *kalyana mitta* for spiritual growth.

The second truth is that you can not just open your heart to just anyone when selecting your *Kalyana mitta*.

Our judgement is powerful. It can have harmful consequences or beneficial consequences. You have to take great care when choosing your spiritual friend. Follow the middle path, one must not be judgemental neither should one be non judgemental. In other words do not make hasty judgements based on hearsay or preconceived likes or dislikes. Also do not trust every Dhamma teacher thinking he is a Dhamma teacher surely he must be beneficial to my spiritual growth. Even though there is no fool proof way – there is a way if you are willing to learn from experience.

Fortunately the Buddha advised us on how to develop our powers of judgement. The important principal is that the teacher stays focused on your actions rather than on your self. In other words the teacher is not judging you. He is judging your actions and correcting these to ensure a steady improvement. The teacher is also observing you closely and changing the method of teaching and introducing interesting material based on your needs and requirements. The same material is taught in varied ways based on the audience.

As a Toastmaster I was trained on evaluation for over ten years. When I was asked to evaluate the New Year cultural show and later, the Rangana dress rehearsal for improvement I used all the techniques I had learnt. I wanted perfection for my friend who was coordinating the event. The people - the actors just faded away. Only the performance remained. It was only the performance that required improvement. This is the way one needs to evaluate.

The Dhamma teacher needs to train the students just as a piano teacher trains his students – Gradually, over a long period of time. The piano teacher trains, observes, listens and corrects. Then he repeats this cycle over and over again. But you too need to do your part. You have to follow his direction and put it to practice. The teacher is watching your progress and actions with a view to improvement and perfection. But at the same time the piano teacher is training you on how to watch yourself. You are learning how to judge your own performance, observing carefully and truthfully your intention, your execution and your commitment to developing higher standards. That is also the best way for the Dhamma student to improve. Start to watch yourself by observing and examining your heart and mind. You have to think out side the box for ways to improve. Focus your judgement on your performance. When you do not take ownership and relate the evaluation to yourself, you are more willing to recognise unskilful habits and drop them in favour of more skilful ones. You have to understand that however skilful your teacher is that his experience, teaching skills and skilful words are of no value to you if you do not heed them.

The Path to freedom from stress has been revealed. Each and every one of you know that the path is composed of generosity (*dana*), virtue (*sila*) and meditation (*bavana*). The teacher has to impart his knowledge, inspire you in the practice and ensure that you are practicing correctly. This requires repeated correction. This leads to an important decision for both the teacher and student. The relationship must be mutually beneficial. You have to make sure that you respect and want to emulate the values and behaviour of your teacher. You are not passing judgement. You have to make sure that his actions and mental qualities are what you want for yourself. He is the example that you are following. The Buddha recommended that we look for two qualities in a teacher - wisdom and integrity. To gauge these qualities takes time and sensitivity. When King Pasenadhi Kosala saw some naked ascetics he asked the Buddha if they were worthy of homage. The Buddha said you could answer that question fairly only after spending time with them and only if you were really observant. You have to be true to yourself and observe the teacher with no bias and pre conceived notions.

To save time and needless pain the Buddha noted four early warning signs of teachers that do not have wisdom or integrity to merit your trust. The two early warning signs that he gave for wisdom are:

1. People who show no gratitude for the help they have received. This applies specially for the assistance they have received from parents and teachers. People with no gratitude do not appreciate goodness. This also includes those that do not value the effort that goes into being helpful and selfless. Not valuing it they will not put out such effort themselves.
2. The second warning sign is that they do not hold the principle of karma. They may say that they accept the principle of karma but behave in a contradictory manner or they may deny the freedom of choice or indicate that one person can clear away the karma of another.

The two warning signs the Buddha gave for integrity are:

1. When people feel no shame in telling a deliberate lie. The Buddha said there is no evil that such a person might not do.
2. When they do not conduct disagreements in a fair and above board manner. Misrepresenting their opponents, pouncing on minor lapses, not acknowledging valid points and threatening behaviour if he does not have his own way are also warning signs that one should heed. People of this sort the Buddha said are not worth talking to much less taking on as teachers.

If you do not find what you seek in your teacher look elsewhere. This is not necessarily a reflection on the teacher. The teacher too will observe and evaluate the student. If he sees no progress he may decide to give up the student. This mutual separation is not a judgement on either the student or the teacher. It just means that the relationship is not the right one. You need another teacher more suited to your personality. And the teacher needs students who will progress spiritually with his instruction. In conclusion the second truth the Buddha declared is the careful selection of a true *kalyana mitta* for spiritual growth.

As you keep observing your self in an unbiased and truthful way and as you practice the teacher's instruction you discover the third truth - **The truth of learning from your mistakes**. If you act on the mistakes you have made you will not repeat them. It is no longer a mistake. It is now an improvement. I am sure that each and every one of us at some point of time in our life made a wrong judgement and regretted the out come. This is to be expected, but we must learn from our mistakes and not repeat them. When we learn to observe ourselves and our mistakes and accept them and correct them we are progressing well under the teacher. You will be surprised as to how much you can learn about yourself through truthful self observation. We are progressing well for you know that the teacher has imparted the knowledge of self discovery to you. In conclusion the third truth the Buddha declared is that self observation leads to self correction and spiritual growth

Finally use the test that the Buddha gave to Maha Prajapathi Gothami. You know that it is the real Dhamma that your teacher is giving by seeing the result it gives when put into action. If the practice leads to dispassion, modesty, content, energy, peace, and unburdensome, then it is the genuine teachings of the Buddha. The person who teachers such a Dhamma has passed the test for being a *Kalyana Mitta* and with his guidance you will learn to observe and examine yourself and correct and improve yourself.. This teacher will lead you to the greatest spiritual growth.

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