

## The Good Friend, the False Friend, and the Spiritual Friend

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According to the *Upaddha Sutta*, there was a time when the Buddha was staying in the territory of the Śākyaans, the tribe to which he belonged by birth, and Ānanda was living in seclusion nearby. While in seclusion Ānanda reflected that the successful practice of asceticism depended on the cultivation of two factors: spiritual friendship (*kalyāṇamittatā*) and manly vigour (*viriya*). Having thus reflected, Ānanda went to see the Buddha, and after saluting him told the Buddha what he had thought, namely, that spiritual friendship was half of the holy life (*brahmacariya*). The Buddha flatly disagreed. Spiritual friendship, companionship, or comradeship was not half of the holy life, he told Ānanda. It was the whole of it! He then proceeded to explain that when a monk (*bhikkhu*) had a spiritual friend it was to be expected that he would develop and cultivate the Perfect Eightfold Path. He further explained how the Eightfold Path was to be cultivated, the Eightfold Path of Perfect Vision, Perfect Emotion, Perfect Speech, Perfect Action, Perfect Means of Livelihood, Perfect Effort, Perfect Awareness, and Perfect *Samādhi*.

In denying Ānanda's idea that there was a manly striving separate from spiritual friendship, the Buddha was in fact denying that there was any such thing as a purely individual spiritual life. Man was a social being, and this applied as much to his spiritual life as to his worldly life. In the oft quoted words of the poet-preacher John Donne, 'No man is an island entire of itself.' From the moment of birth to the moment of death the individual human being, like other animals, is able to survive only because he or she belongs to a group and is dependent on it in all sorts of ways, from the most basic to the most refined. We depend upon other human beings for our education, for the food we eat, and for the amenities we enjoy. We depend upon them for our ideas and for the institutions and social structures that make the development of friendship possible. These structures exist on various levels and make possible friendships on various levels. In the Pāli scriptures

there is the more worldly friendship of the *Sīgālovāda Sutta* and the more spiritual friendship of the *Upaddha Sutta* of which the Buddha speaks to Ānanda. These may be distinguished, in English, as good friendship and spiritual friendship, the Pāli word *mittatā* being used in both senses.

At another time the Buddha was staying at the Bamboo Grove in Rājagaha. Here he met Sīgāla, a young Brahmin, and explained to him how good friendship is one of the six basic relationships of human life, the others being the relations to parents, to teachers, to wife and child, to workers and servants, and to Brahmins and ascetics. There is an important difference between good friendship and the five other kinds of relationship. In the latter the relationship in each case is between those who are unequal, whereas the relationship between friends is one of equality. Friendship is thus an area of freedom. With a friend one does not have to act a part, or be guarded, or conceal what one really thinks. One can say to a friend what one cannot say to one's wife, or to one's parents, or to one's employers. There are five ways, the Buddha told Sīgāla, in which a man should be of service to his friends: by giving gifts, by speaking kindly, by looking after their welfare, by treating them like himself, and by keeping his word to them. The friends, for their part, reciprocate by looking after him when he is inattentive, by looking after his property when he is inattentive, by being a refuge when he is afraid, by not deserting him when he is in trouble, and by showing concern for his children.

The false friend is described no less graphically. He is a great talker, a flatterer, a spendthrift, one who takes everything and wants a lot for very little, one who does his duty to you out of fear, who seeks his own ends, who talks of past and future favours, but in the present pleads his inability due to some misfortune. What is worse, he assents to bad actions and dissents from good ones, he praises you to your face and disparages you behind your back. He is your companion when you indulge in strong drink, when you haunt the streets at untimely hours, when you frequent places of entertainment, and when you indulge in gambling.

The good friend, the Buddha further told Sīgāla, is loyal in various ways. Among other things, he is a helper, he is the same in happy and unhappy times, he points out what is good for you, he is sympathetic, in business he lets you have twice what you ask for, he tells you his secrets and keeps yours, he does not let you down in misfortune, he would even sacrifice his life for you, he keeps you from wrongdoing, and he points out the path to heaven. Thus the good friend does a lot for you. He will even sacrifice his life for you, even show you the path to heaven; but that is all he can do. Only the spiritual friend can help you to go further, beyond the worlds of the *devas* and the *brahmās*, beyond all that is conditioned, to Nirvana. For, as the Buddha told Ānanda, if a man had a spiritual friend it was to be expected that he would develop and cultivate the Perfect Eightfold Path. Thus it could be seen that spiritual friendship is the whole of the holy life (*brahmacariya*). With him for spiritual friend, beings subject to birth are freed from birth; beings subject to ageing are freed from ageing; beings subject to death are freed from death; beings subject to sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair are freed from sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair. Thus the Buddha was the original spiritual friend. He was the spiritual friend of Ānanda and Mahākassapa, Sāriputta and Moggallāna, who in their turn were the spiritual friends of their own disciples and so on down to the present day.

Not all Buddhists have as vivid a sense of the Buddha as spiritual friend as their predecessors had. Such a sense is an important element in the Buddhist spiritual life and one that can be cultivated. Before describing some of the ways in which this may be done I want to touch on the meaning of the term *brahmacariya*. It would seem that the 'holy life' has come to be accepted as the translation of *brahmacariya*, and so far I have followed this usage. The term 'holy' has, however, Judaeo-Christian connotations and little or nothing to do with Buddhism. I would therefore prefer to render *brahmacariya* as the 'divine life', which is theologically more neutral. In Buddhist and pre-Buddhist parlance, Brahmā is a divine being higher in rank than human

beings and *brahmacariya* thus means following after Brahmā or in other words following a way of life that is conducive to spiritual liberation. In the Pāli scriptures we come across Brahmā, the ruler of ten thousand worlds, and the radiant *brahmās* who are occupants of the various levels beyond the levels of the *devas*. All are disciples of the Buddha, who is represented as visiting them on occasion and being visited by them. Thus following the Perfect/Noble Eightfold Path and being a *brahmacari* are practically synonymous. *Brahmacariya* can also mean chastity or celibacy, so that a *brahmacari* is one who is celibate, though this is a more limited usage of the term.

One way in which the modern Buddhist can develop a more vivid sense of Śākyamuni, the historical Buddha, as their spiritual friend, is by reading the Pāli scriptures, in which there are passages descriptive of many of the events of his long life. We learn how he left home, how he practised extreme asceticism to no avail, how he gained supreme Enlightenment while meditating under the Bodhi tree, how he gained his first five disciples, and how he spent the rest of his life wandering from place to place teaching all kinds of people the way to liberation that he had discovered. One should read such passages slowly and mindfully, imagining oneself to be actually present at the event described and being affected by it. In this way, one can feel the future Buddha's exhilaration as he leaves home, his utter determination as he practises extreme asceticism, his sense of selfless triumph as he gains supreme Enlightenment, and his joy as he shares the fruits of his attainment with other beings, whether rich or poor, high or low, happy or unhappy, Brahmins or ascetics, doers of good or evil doers. There are also passages dealing with incidents of a less dramatic character, as when the Buddha and Ānanda nurse a sick monk who has been neglected by his companions or when he advises Soṇa to practise in a balanced way, being neither too taut or too slack, as when one plays a stringed instrument. Some of these events have been illustrated by artists both ancient and modern, the latter often being more representational than iconic. I particularly remember Nandalal Bose's *Buddha as Ascetic*. This does not relate to the Buddha's period of extreme asceticism but to his old age. He wears a simple robe, carries a small

bowl, and he is standing just outside the door of a hut. His scant hair is white and his expression is one of resignation. Whether or not it was because I myself was old when I first encountered this painting, it touched me deeply. I felt that the Buddha could have indeed looked like that during the last years of his life, and I could imagine myself walking with him just as Ānanda had done centuries ago.

We can also read biographies of the Buddha. One of the most popular of these is *The Light of Asia* by Sir Edwin Arnold. It was first published in 1879 and is still in print, having been translated into many languages and illustrated by many artists. Written in fluent blank verse, the story of Śākyamuni's life has been put into the mouth of an imaginary devotee. One of the reasons for the book's popularity is the fact that Arnold is able to draw on his own experience of the sights and sounds of India, in some respects not so very different from what they were in the Buddha's day. This brings the biography to life in a very special way, so that one can read it and reflect on it in the same spirit that one reads and reflects on the biographical passages in the Pāli scriptures. Another popular biography is the *Lalitavistara*, a Mahayāna work that tells the story of the Buddha's life from a docetic point of view in which he only appears to pass through the different stages of his earthly existence, being in a sense already Enlightened. Some years ago a friend read the work to me and I could not but be caught up in the current of intense devotion that runs through the work. For the author, the Buddha is always 'that pure being', regardless of what he happens to be doing.

One can also develop a sense of the Buddha's presence and of his being our spiritual friend by reciting the traditional formula by which he is described in the Pāli scriptures and elsewhere. He is indeed the Richly Endowed One (*iti'piso bhagavā*), the Foe-Destroyer (*araham*), the Perfectly Enlightened One (*sammā-saṃbuddho*), Fully Endowed with Knowledge and Conduct (*vijjācaraṇasaṃpanno*), The Well-Gone One (*sugato*), Knower of the Worlds (*lokavidū*), Unsurpassed Charioteer of Men to be Tamed (*anuttaro purisadammasārathi*), Teacher of Gods and Men (*sathā devamanussānam*). Thus he is the Richly En-

dowed Enlightened One (*buddho bhagavā ti*). This formula one repeats like a mantra, at the same time reflecting on the meaning of each of the Buddha's epithets. Alternatively one may recite the Śākyamuni mantra *Om Muni Muni Mahāmuni Śākyamuni Svāhā*, which by referring to the Buddha as Śākyamuni connects him with the tribe into which he was born and thus with the fact of his historicity. Going a step further, one may visualize him as the central figure of a *sādhanā*, but this will have to be the subject of another paper.

While working on the above, I was listening to Vera Brittain's *A Testament of Friendship*, in which she describes the friendship between herself and the writer Winifred Holtby, whose novels *Mandoa*, *Mandoa!* and *Poor Caroline* I had enjoyed some time previously. At the beginning of her work Vera raises the question of whether there can be friendship between women in the same way as there is friendship between men. This question she answers very much in the affirmative, and in her sprawling and very lengthy memoir she gives ample evidence of how Winifred was a good friend to her and she a good friend to Winifred. Both women exemplify the Buddha's idea of what a good friend should be. Winifred is in fact a good friend to quite a large number of people, from struggling writers to black South Africans stranded in London. Neither Winifred nor Vera seem to have had any false friends, with the possible exception of Winifred's unreliable lover, who pops in and out of the narrative from time to time, usually at long intervals. Winifred died in 1935, at the age of 37. At that time there was little or no Buddhism in England, but had she lived as long as her friend, who died in 1970, she might well have encountered it. Indeed it is pleasant to think that she might have encountered the young FWBO and to come to see the Buddha as spiritual friend.

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