

Triratna Dharma Training Course for Mitras – Foundation Year Part 1: Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels

Week 10: The Sangha (2) – The Sangha as the Goal

*(Text abridged from ‘Buddhism and Friendship’, by Subhuti with Subhamati,
Chapter 2: ‘One in Mind: Friendship as the Goal’)*

The ‘horizontal’ dimension of spiritual friendship

In the story of Meghiya, we see his selfishness and naivety contrasted with the Buddha’s tactful wisdom. In this sense the friendship we are shown is unequal, for one of the partners is spiritually more advanced than the other. This is an important kind of spiritual friendship, but it is not the only one.

There is also a kind of friendship that exists between those who are approximately on the same level. These friends are like spiritual brothers or sisters, or, if you prefer, fellow wayfarers. Although friends of this kind are more easily found than guides, they too are precious. The spiritual path is long, arduous, and easily lost. Our guide, if we are lucky enough to have one, is likely to have many other claims on his or her attention, and won’t always be at hand to resolve our doubts, revive our flagging spirits, or steer us past the byways that tempt our erring feet. It is important to have not just a guide but also companions on the path. Such companions represent the ‘horizontal’ dimension of spiritual friendship.

In Buddhism spiritual friendship (*kalyāṇa mitratā*) was originally understood to include not only teacher-disciple relationships, but also any friendship between good people who revere the Buddha and his Dharma. This emerges clearly from, for example, the Buddha’s teaching to the lay disciple Dighajanu:

“And what is friendship [*kalyāṇa mitratā*]? Here... in whatever village or town a family man dwells, he associates with householders or their sons, whether young or old, who are of mature virtue, generosity and wisdom; he converses with them and engages in discussion with them. He emulates them in regard to their accomplishment in faith, virtue, generosity, and wisdom. This is called good friendship.”

Although these words were spoken to a layman, we should not conclude that horizontal friendship was only relevant to lay disciples. One could ask for no better example of it than the friendship between Sāriputta and Moggallāna, who were foremost among the Buddha’s monks. For me the most interesting aspect of their relationship is that Sāriputta and Moggallāna remained friends even after their Enlightenment. It seems that friendship belongs not only to the path but also to the goal of the spiritual life. It is important to grasp this point, because when we understand spiritual friendship only in terms of the path, we are in danger of cultivating friendship not for itself, but ‘for the sake of my spiritual development’. Thinking in this way, we could end up thinking of our friends as ‘equipment’ in

the service of our own spiritual ambitions, in which case they wouldn't really be friends at all. We can only experience genuine friendship when we see it as an end in itself, or at least as an intrinsic part of some larger end.

Three Friends

The vision of friendship as part of the goal is expressed in a *sutta* (or discourse), which tells the moving story of Anuruddha and his friends.

Anuruddha, Nandiya and Kimbila are staying together in a quiet forest grove, where the Buddha goes to visit them one evening, after emerging from solitary meditation. On becoming aware of their teacher's arrival, the three monks hasten to welcome him, one relieving him of his bowl and outer robe, another making a seat ready, the third bringing water to bathe his feet. When they are all seated the Buddha first checks that they are in good health and adequately supplied with food. He then begins to ask them about their way of life together. His first question is, in essence, whether they get on well with one another. Anuruddha confirms that he and the other two are 'living in concord, with mutual appreciation, without disputing, blending like milk and water, viewing each other with kindly eyes.'

The Buddha (who knows very well that not all his monks get along so cordially) enquires *how* they manage to do so. Anuruddha explains that he considers himself fortunate to be living the spiritual life together with such companions as Nandiya and Kimbila. To do so is, in his opinion, a 'great gain' for him. The way they live together is an expression of *mettā*. Accordingly he maintains a positive attitude towards the other two in every possible way - kindly deeds, affectionate speech, and loving thoughts. Anuruddha's words suggest that he has been developing *mettā* towards his companions as a practice, something nurtured through mindfulness, a conscious part of the spiritual life.

However what began as a practice has now become second nature. He has reached the point of routinely putting the others' desires before his own. He simply asks himself, 'Why should I not set aside what I wish to do, and do what others wish to do?' And then he does precisely that. In conclusion, he tells the Buddha, 'We are different in body, venerable sir, but one in mind.'

Nandiya and Kimbila, for their part, reply to the Buddha in the same way, each saying that he has surrendered his own inclinations and is living according to the will of the other two. They all agree that they are 'different in body, but one in mind.' As they have all given up their wills to each other, there is no question of one dominating the other two. It seems that they experience a shared will, or rather a mysterious coincidence of wills, based on a deep mutual awareness and harmony.

The Buddha expresses his approval of the three friends' way of life, and enquires what spiritual fruits it has produced. He asks them, 'But while you abide thus... have you attained any superhuman state, a distinction in knowledge and vision

worthy of the noble ones?’ Replying on behalf of the others, Anuruddha now reveals that that all three of them have passed through the whole range of spiritual and transcendental attainments. In other words they are all *Arahants* - fully Enlightened. The Buddha is delighted by this wonderful news.

Eventually, after some further talk, he leaves them. At this point, Nandiya and Kimbila have a question for Anuruddha: ‘Have we ever told you that we have achieved all those things that you have credited us with? In reply Anuruddha admits that the other two have never actually told him as much. Nevertheless he knows their ‘abidings and attainments’ by ‘encompassing’ their minds with his own. In other words, he has direct knowledge of their inner states, without any need for words. The fact that Anuruddha can speak confidently of Nandiya’s and Kimbila’s spiritual attainments, without having heard anything on the subject, suggests that the expression ‘one in mind’ is not just a figure of speech, but more literally true than we might have guessed.

The story of the three friends shows us spiritual friendship as simultaneously belonging to the path and the goal. Indeed, the discourse seems to suggest that there is a kind of ascending spiral, in which a life lived in friendship leads upwards to spiritual realization, which in turn bears the fruit of deeper friendship and fuller mutual communion.

Sangha as networks of friendship

In the example of Anuruddha, Nandiya, and Kimbila, we see *kalyāṇa mitratā* uniting a group of three disciples so that they form a circle of friendship. This reminds us that, while friendship is essentially a relationship between two people, it is by no means an exclusive relationship. A friend is free to have other friends, and two friends may have mutual friends. Among people who are committed to the same spiritual ideal, this interlocking pattern of friendship is the natural state of affairs.

It seems to me that such a network of spiritual friends, united by their common orientation to the Buddha and the Dharma, is intrinsic to the meaning of what Buddhists call *sangha*. The word *sangha* signifies the Buddhist spiritual community. It is often said or implied that only monks count as part of the *sangha*. Actually it would be more correct to say that monks constitute one section of the spiritual community. Tradition also recognises a wider *mahā-sangha* or ‘great community’, including the Buddha’s lay disciples.

Friendship is intrinsic to the meaning of *sangha*. It is not usually possible (even within a single locality) for every member of the *sangha* to be a personal friend of every other. Nevertheless it seems to me that an individual only truly participates in the *sangha* by means of friendship with at least some of its members.

The friendships that make up a *sangha* naturally tend to grow. They grow in depth as friends get to know each other better, and as they tread more and more of the spiritual path in one another’s company. Such friendships also tend to grow in

number: new friendships are formed within the existing sangha, and the sangha naturally attracts new members. The real growth of a sangha consists in the entry of individuals into this web of friendships.

The description of the life of Anuruddha and his friends offers a kind of snapshot of an ideal sangha in miniature. To participate in the Sangha (at its highest) is to lead a life like that shared by these three: to dwell in such harmony with spiritual friends as to become ‘one in mind’ with them. This is indeed a high ideal - perhaps one that we don’t find easy to imagine as a living reality. But while the loftiness of the ideal may be a little daunting, it does serve to show clearly the direction in which we need to go if we want to know for ourselves the deeper meaning of sangha.

The Three Jewels

The enlightened members of the spiritual community, such as Anuruddha and his two friends, are a kind of higher Sangha within the sangha. This higher Sangha (sometimes distinguished by writing it with a capital S) is in fact one of the Three Jewels, the three most precious things in Buddhism, along with the Buddha and the Dharma.

The fact that Buddhism chooses to honour *three* things as centrally important suggests that the essential core of Buddhism cannot be satisfactorily encapsulated in a single image or idea, and that we will only understand it when we have looked at it from three viewpoints - viewing it ‘in the round’ so to speak. The Buddha jewel represents the spiritual ideal as embodied in a human individual. The Dharma jewel is the spiritual ideal viewed in the abstract as ultimate truth and spiritual means. The Sangha jewel is the spiritual ideal as embodied in those who are advanced on the spiritual path. But I think we will miss the full significance of the Sangha jewel if we think of it merely as a category or class of individuals. To my mind the Sangha (with or without a capital S) is a living organism, and its lifeblood is spiritual friendship.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. What was your first impression of the Buddhists you met when you went along to a Buddhist Centre? How important was this in your decision to get more involved?
2. What qualities do you particularly value (or not!) about the Sangha you have come into contact with so far?
3. Do you notice a difference in the quality of the friendships you see among Buddhists, as compared to most other people?
4. Do you find the idea of being ‘many in body, but one in mind’ attractive, or unattractive. Do you think it would be possible to be like this without sacrificing your individuality?

5. How important is the Sangha to you, as a factor in your becoming a Buddhist?
6. Having gone into a bit more depth about each of the Three Jewels over the last few weeks, which do you find most inspiring or important to you now?