

Lecture 152: A Case of Dysentery - Edited Version

I am aware that the title of this talk is not like any of my previous titles. It is something of a change from the 'spiritual this', and the 'transcendental that', or the 'creative something else'. Perhaps it will raise a few eyebrows. Perhaps people will think that there has been a dreadful printing mistake or a deplorable lapse of good taste. Others might think that the title is meant to be symbolic or mythic. But there is nothing symbolic about it at all. My theme really is a case of dysentery--in the literal sense.

This is no ordinary case of dysentery, however. This particular case of dysentery is quite an important one, though not from a medical point of view. The case in question took place some two-thousand-five-hundred years ago, and we know about it because it is mentioned in the Vinaya Pitaka of the Theravada Pali Canon:

Now at that time a certain brother was suffering from dysentery and lay where he had fallen down in his own excrements.

And the Exalted One was going His rounds of the lodgings, with the venerable Ananda in attendance, and came to the lodging of that brother.

Now the Exalted One saw that brother lying where he had fallen in his own excrements, and seeing him He went towards him, came to him, and said: 'Brother, what ails you?'

'I have dysentery, Lord.'

'But is there anyone taking care of you, brother?'

'No, Lord.'

'Why is it, brother, that the brethren do not take care of you?'

'I am useless to the brethren, Lord: therefore the brethren do not care for me.'

Then the Exalted One said to the venerable Ananda: 'Go you, Ananda, and fetch water. We will wash this brother.'

'Yes, Lord,' replied the venerable Ananda to the Exalted One. When he had fetched the water, the Exalted One poured it out, while the venerable Ananda washed that brother all over. Then the Exalted One taking him by the head and the venerable Ananda taking him by the feet, together they laid him on the bed.

Then the Exalted One, in this connexion and on this occasion, gathered the Order of Brethren together, and questioned the brethren, saying:

'Brethren, is there in such and such a lodging a brother who is sick?'

'There is, Lord.'

'And what ails that brother?'

'Lord, that brother has dysentery.'

'But, brethren, is there anyone taking care of him?'

'No, Lord.'

'Why not? Why do not the brethren take care of him?'

'That brother is useless to the brethren, Lord. That is why the brethren do not take care of him.'

'Brethren, ye have no mother and no father to take care of you. If ye will not take care of each other, who else, I ask, will do so? Brethren, he who would wait on me, let him wait on the sick.

If he have a teacher, let his teacher take care of him, so long as he is alive, and wait for his recovery. If he have a tutor or a lodger, a disciple or a fellow-lodger or a fellow-disciple, such should take care of him and await his recovery. If no one take care of him, it shall be reckoned an offence.' <Some Sayings of the Buddha p.126-8>

This passage deals with a significant episode in the collective life of the early Buddhist spiritual community. And, as I am sure you have realized, it deals with the kind of situation which might arise in the collective life of our own order, two-thousand-five-hundred years later, despite the lapse of time and despite the vast cultural differences. In this episode we are able to see how the Buddha responded to a situation of this sort, what advice he gave, what action he took, and so on. The episode is concerned with much more than the treatment of a sick monk; it is concerned with a number of principles of fundamental importance--some of them only apparently peripheral to the main issue.

The passage begins rather dramatically:

Now at that time a certain brother was suffering from dysentery and lay where he had fallen down in his own excrements.

This is a dreadful picture! Here is a brother, a bhikkhu--we are not told whether he is old or young, we are not even given his name--who is suffering from dysentery. It must be a really serious attack because he has fallen to the ground and is lying in his own excrement. Apparently he is too weak to get up. And he is on his own. There is nobody near, nobody within call, no one to help, no one to give him a drink of water. His condition is very pitiable.

The Exalted One was going His rounds of the lodgings, with the venerable Ananda in attendance, and came to the lodging of that brother.

There are two points to notice here. The Buddha was going his rounds of the lodgings, and Ananda was in attendance. Ananda was the Buddha's cousin. He had known the Buddha--and the Buddha had known him--all his life. They had played together as boys, they had fought together, they had tumbled about together in the dust, they had practised archery together, and, years later, after the Buddha had gained Enlightenment, Ananda too went forth from home into the homeless life. He became a disciple of the Buddha and advanced steadily on the spiritual path. We know further that Ananda was the Buddha's constant companion for the last twenty years of his life. Ananda is usually described as the Buddha's 'attendant'. But why should the Buddha have needed a personal attendant?

The traditional explanations do not seem very adequate. It is simply suggested that the Buddha needed someone to wash his robe, arrange his interviews, and carry messages for him. Ananda did indeed do all these things, as well as many others. It is also said by the tradition that it was simply the 'custom' for a Buddha to have a personal attendant. Buddhas had always had personal attendants, and that was that--just as they had always had a particular tree under which they gained Enlightenment, or a particular horse, or a particular charioteer, or two particular chief disciples, and so on. Thus Ananda was the personal attendant of Gautama the Buddha. This is the traditional explanation; but it is not good enough, it does not go deep enough.

Ananda was not the first of these so-called personal attendants. There was, for example, Meghiya, whom we encounter in the Udana. Meghiya was the Buddha's personal attendant for a while. He was not a very satisfactory one because he went off on his own one day when he should have stayed with the Buddha--with rather disastrous consequences for himself.

Although the Buddha had had some difficulty in finding a satisfactory personal attendant, Ananda was by no means in a hurry to take on the task. It is as though he realized that it would be no easy matter to be the constant companion of an Enlightened one. Ananda had made steady progress in the spiritual life. He was certainly a 'Stream Entrant', he was irreversible from full Enlightenment. But he was not a Buddha. And even for someone like Ananda, even for a Stream Entrant, even for someone who had grown up with the Buddha, it was a rather awe-inspiring prospect to be the Buddha's constant companion, to be with him, by day and by night, in rain and in sun, year in and year out. Ananda therefore thought the matter over very carefully. He had seen some previous attendants come somewhat to grief, and was reluctant to give the Buddha any further trouble.

In the end, however, Ananda decided to accept the challenge, but laid down certain conditions, of which a couple are relevant here. One of these was that he should not be given any share in the various offerings and invitations that were given to the Buddha. He argued that, if people saw him benefiting from the offerings that were made to the Buddha--all the new robes and so on, then they might think that he was acting as the Buddha's companion just for the sake of what he could get out of it. He also realized that there would be times when he might have to be away from the Buddha, running errands, taking messages, and so on. While he was away, someone might come to see the Buddha and ask for a teaching. In consequence, the Buddha might give a discourse, might even give an important teaching, in his absence. So another condition he laid down was that the Buddha should repeat whatever teaching he had given during his absence.

The Buddha accepted these conditions, and Ananda became his constant companion for twenty years. How successful this arrangement was can be seen from an incident that occurred shortly before the Buddha's Parinibbana, his final passing away. Ananda was very deeply upset by the prospect of losing the Buddha. Apparently he stood leaning against the door, weeping. As he wept, he said: 'Alas, I am still a pupil with much to be done, and my Master will be passing utterly away, he who was so kind to me.' This was Ananda's impression of the Buddha after twenty years of constant, day to day, companionship. He did not say that the Buddha was wise, or energetic, but that the Buddha was kind.

Fortunately, we also know about the Buddha's impression of Ananda. For when he was told that Ananda was weeping outside, he sent for him and spoke the following words of encouragement:

'For many a long day, Ananda, the Tathagata has been waited on by you with kindly body-service, that is profitable, ease-giving, undivided, and unstinted; waited on with kindly service of speech, that is profitable, ease-giving, undivided, and unstinted; with kindly service of thought, that is profitable, ease-giving, undivided, and unstinted.'^{<Ibid. p.349>}

Thus the Buddha's predominant impression of Ananda was that he too was kind, that Ananda had served him with kindness of body, speech, and mind, that he had kept nothing back, that he had given himself totally. The relation between the Buddha and Ananda was essentially one of mutual kindness, even though the Buddha was spiritually by far the more developed of the two.

This may seem like a very small thing. But if we reflect we shall realize that it is actually a very big thing that they were kind to each other. Their kindness had never failed, had never been found wanting even for a moment on either side. When two people are constant companions, and when the relation between them is of unfailing mutual kindness, you can only say of them that they are friends. Indeed, you can only say that they are spiritual friends, because such unfailing mutual kindness over such a long period of time is possible only on a deeply spiritual basis.

To some, it may seem a little strange that the Buddha and Ananda were friends. It may seem strange, perhaps, that the Buddha should have had a friend. One may wonder whether a Buddha needs a friend. But this depends on one's conception of Enlightenment. In response, I can give only a hint.

The Enlightenment experience is not self-contained in a one-sided way. The Enlightenment experience contains an element of 'communication', and contains, therefore, an element of spiritual friendship, even 'transcendental friendship', or friendship of the highest conceivable level. This, perhaps, is the significance of the Buddha's having a constant companion. There is surely no question of the Buddha keeping up the 'dignity' of a Buddha. Ananda is not a sort of spiritual valet-cum-private-secretary. The fact that he is 'in attendance', as the translator has it, represents the fact that there exists within the Enlightenment experience, within the heart of Reality, an element of communication, an element of spiritual friendship, something that found expression in the later history of Buddhist thought as that rather mysterious concept of Sambhogakaya.

The Exalted One was going his rounds of the lodgings, with the Venerable Ananda in attendance, and came to the lodging of that brother.

There is a second point to notice here: the Exalted One was going his rounds of the lodgings. In the original, the word for 'lodging' is vihara, and that is all that vihara really means. We must not imagine the Buddha going his rounds of a large, palatial, well-furnished monastery. The lodgings in question were probably just clusters of thatched huts scattered over an area of park-land just a few miles outside the city gates.

The Buddha was making his rounds of these lodgings. In other words, he was taking a personal interest in the monks. How were they getting on? What were they doing? How were they passing their time? There was of course no question of them sitting outside their thatched huts reading newspapers, or listening to transistor radios, or watching television. But they might possibly have been up to other things that they should not have been up to. They might have needed some encouragement, some teaching, or even a little ticking-off. The Buddha was seeing things for himself. In this way, he and Ananda came to the lodging of that brother.

Now the Exalted One saw that brother lying where he had fallen in his own excrements, and seeing him He went towards him, came to him, and said: 'Brother, what ails you?'

'I have dysentery, Lord.'

'But is there anyone taking care of you, brother?'

'No, Lord.'

'Why is it, brother, that the brethren do not take care of you?'

'I am useless to the brethren, Lord: therefore the brethren do not care for me.'

There are a number of points to be noted here. The Buddha goes towards the sick monk, asks him what is wrong with him, and gets very quickly to the heart of the matter. All of these points could be enlarged upon, but perhaps that is not necessary, their significance being sufficiently clear. The main point of this

section is contained in the sick monk's last reply to the Buddha: 'I am useless to the brethren, Lord: therefore the brethren do not care for me.'

This is a very significant statement indeed. It is a shocking, terrible statement. Of course, we have only the bare words of the printed page to go by. We do not know how those words were spoken--and this can of course make a difference. Did the Buddha say 'Why is it brother that the brethren do not take care of you?' indignantly, or with concern, or sadly? And did the sick monk reply with dignity, with resignation, with weariness, or with bitterness and anger? We do not know. All we have is the bleak, shocking, statement itself, 'I am useless to the brethren, Lord: therefore the brethren do not care for me.'

However the words were spoken, they must imply, sadly, that people are interested in you only so long as you are useful to them, only so long as they can get something out of you. It implies that they see you not as a person but as a thing.

To treat a person as a thing is to treat them unethically. And this, apparently, is how the other monks were treating the sick monk. He was not useful to them, and so they were not interested in him. He was left lying in his own excrement. No one took care of him. There was no kindness between the sick monk and the other monks as there was between the Buddha and Ananda. There was no ordinary human friendship--not to speak of spiritual friendship; neither was there any sympathy or sensitivity or awareness. There could not be, because these are qualities that you can experience only in relation to a person whom you actually see as a person. The other monks did not see the sick monk as a person. To them he was like an old worn out broom, or a broken pot. He was useless to them so they did not care for him.

Only too often we ourselves can behave like this. We often consider people primarily in terms of their usefulness. We do this even within the Spiritual Community. Sometimes we are more interested in someone's talents and capacities--as a bricklayer, accountant, or lecturer--than in what they are in themselves. If you are treated in this way, then, when you are no longer able or willing to employ your talents, you may have the disappointing and disillusioning experience of finding that nobody wants to know you, nobody wants to be 'friends' with you any more. We must therefore learn to see persons as persons. There must be kindness between us, there must be spiritual friendship, as there was between the Buddha and Ananda. There must be sympathy, sensitivity, and awareness.

There are two principal aspects to persons treating each other as persons. These are communication and taking delight. These two are of the essence of friendship.

Even in the case of ordinary friendship there is the great benefit and blessing of being able to share our thoughts and feelings with another human being. It has been said that self-disclosure, the making of oneself known to another human being--being known by them and knowing that you are known by them--is essential to human health and happiness. If you are shut up in yourself, without any possibility of communication with another person, you don't stay healthy or happy for long.

In the case of spiritual friendship, we share our experience of the Dhamma itself. We share our enthusiasm, our inspiration, and our understanding. We even share our mistakes. Here, communication takes the form of confession.

The aspect of 'taking delight' means that we not only see a person as a person, but also like what we see, enjoy and take delight in what we see, just as we do with a beautiful painting or poem--except that here the painting or poem is alive: the painting can speak to you, and the beautiful poem can answer back! This makes it very exciting and stimulating indeed. Here we see, we like, we love and appreciate a person entirely for their own sake, and not for the sake of anything useful that we can get out of them. This also happens in ordinary friendship to some extent, but it happens to a far greater extent in spiritual friendship--kalyana mitrata. The primary meaning of kalyana is 'beautiful'. In spiritual friendship we take delight in the spiritual beauty of our friend: we rejoice in his or her merits.

Then the Exalted One said to the venerable Ananda: 'Go you, Ananda, and fetch water. We will wash this brother.'

'Yes, Lord,' replied the venerable Ananda to the Exalted One. When he had fetched the water, the Exalted One poured it out, while the venerable Ananda washed that brother all over. Then the Exalted One taking him by the head and the venerable Ananda taking him by the feet, together they laid him on the bed.

There are a number of significant points here. The Buddha acts instantly. As a human being he seems to have been of a prompt, decisive, character, not unlike a military commander. At this stage he does not ask

anyone how it all happened, but simply sends Ananda off for water. Then, the Buddha and Ananda act together. Ananda does not argue with the Buddha; they don't have a long discussion as to who should pour the water and who should wash the sick man, or who should take him by the head and who should take him by the feet. They act together harmoniously, efficiently, and effectively.

Perhaps more importantly, the Buddha and Ananda accept responsibility for the situation, even though it is not of their making. They do not try to hand the responsibility over to anybody else, but take care of the sick monk themselves, doing whatever needs to be done. They make the sick monk comfortable, and only then does the Buddha call the other monks together:

Then the Exalted One, in this connexion and on this occasion, gathered the Order of Brethren together, and questioned the brethren, saying:

'Brethren, is there in such and such a lodging a brother who is sick?'

'There is, Lord.'

'And what ails that brother?'

'Lord, that brother has dysentery.'

'But, brethren, is there anyone taking care of him?'

'No, Lord.'

'Why not? Why do not the brethren take care of him?'

'That brother is useless to the brethren, Lord. That is why the brethren do not take care of him.'

There are two points here. First, the Buddha looks into the matter. He does not jump to conclusions. He does not immediately assume that the other monks are guilty of deliberate neglect. He first ascertains the facts of the case, giving the other monks an opportunity to explain, even to defend themselves. He gives them an opportunity to confess--and that is what they do.

This is an important lesson. So often we jump to conclusions; we assume that someone is guilty before we have ascertained all the facts. When we don't get a reply to a letter we assume that the person to whom we have written has not replied and conclude that he is not being a good friend. We then write a second, angry, letter. But surely we should first ascertain that our friend did actually receive the letter. And we should make sure that he has not in fact replied. Only then should we adopt whatever course seems appropriate.

This is just what the Buddha did, with the result that the monks confessed their mistake. I say that they confessed, but one does rather get the impression from this passage that they did not realize that there was anything wrong with their behaviour. If this was the case, then they must have had a very inadequate conception of the spiritual life, of the spiritual community, and of spiritual friendship. Be that as it may, once they had confessed, the Buddha could exhort them thus:

'Brethren, ye have no mother and no father to take care of you. If ye will not take care of each other, who else, I ask, will do so? Brethren, he who would wait on me, let him wait on the sick.'

Here, the Buddha is laying down an important set of principles. He is asserting an absolute discontinuity between the biological family and the 'spiritual family', between the 'group' and the 'spiritual community'. Once you enter the spiritual community you no longer belong to the group, and you no longer rely upon it. The Buddha does not mean that your mother and father are dead in the literal sense. He means that spiritually speaking they no longer exist. In other words, they no longer exist as your mother and father. You can therefore no longer depend upon them to take care of you, no longer take refuge in them.

This is what is meant by the 'Going Forth'. It is a going forth 'from home into homelessness'. You go forth from the group to the spiritual community. Spiritually speaking, the group no longer exists. And since it no longer exists, you no longer rely on it or take refuge in it.

Once you enter the spiritual community, only the spiritual community exists. You take refuge solely in the Three Jewels: the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. You rely only on other members of the spiritual community, and that means that other members of the spiritual community rely on you. You rely on one another, take care of one another, encourage one another, and inspire one another.

All of this certainly applies to our own spiritual community, the Western Buddhist Order. We have in fact no mother and no father to take care of us. What was formerly done by our family must now be done by our spiritual friends--indeed more must be done by our spiritual friends.

But suppose it is not done? Suppose someone is ill, or depressed, or experiencing psychological difficulties, or not finding the spiritual life very enjoyable. If that person is left, as the sick monk was left, he may drift back to the group, back to the family, back to mother, wife, or girlfriend. He may go in search of comfort and consolation elsewhere.

It is important that as members of the spiritual community we realize that we have no true refuge except one another, no friends except one another--that is, no real friends except spiritual friends. From the group we can expect absolutely nothing--nor should we. We belong absolutely to the spiritual community, belong absolutely to one another. We should be prepared, therefore, to live and die for one another--otherwise we have not really gone for Refuge. Our future is with one another; we are one another's future; we have no future apart from one another.

The Buddha says, 'If ye will not take care of each other, who else, I ask, will do so?' If Order members do not love one another, who else will love them? If Order members do not inspire one another, who else will inspire them? If Order members cannot be happy with one another, who else can they be happy with? If they cannot come together with one another, who else can they come together with? Perhaps we should enjoy one another's company more, appreciate one another more, value one another more.

The Buddha certainly valued the brethren highly. He says, 'Brethren, he who would wait on me, let him wait on the sick.' The Buddha is not being mystical or metaphysical here: he is dealing with the realities of life in the spiritual community. By 'the sick', he means sick brethren--fellow members of the spiritual community. If one wants to wait upon the Buddha, one should wait upon them. Thus the Buddha in a sense equates members of the spiritual community with himself. It would hardly be possible to value them more highly than that.

'If he have a teacher, let his teacher take care of him, so long as he is alive, and wait for his recovery. If he have a tutor or a lodger, a disciple or a fellow-lodger or a fellow-disciple, such should take care of him and await his recovery.' Thus all conceivable relationships within the spiritual community are covered. Teacher should take care of pupil, and pupil of teacher; fellow disciple should take care of fellow disciple; occupants of the same vihara (the same residential spiritual community) should take care of one another. In sickness and in health there should be unfailing kindness and spiritual friendship between them.

'If no one take care of him, it shall be reckoned an offence'. Here, 'offence' means an unskilful action that needs to be confessed. The responsibility for the care of each member rests on the entire spiritual community. Ultimately, all are responsible for each, and each is responsible for all to the extent of his strength. Otherwise there can be no spiritual community.

By now it should be clear that this story is not just about a sick monk being neglected by the brethren. It is not just a simple case of diarrhoea. It is a case of unfailing mutual kindness, a case of personal interest, a case of harmonious and effective action, a case of treating persons as persons, a case of communication and taking delight, a case of recognizing the absolute discontinuity between the group and the spiritual community. Above all it is a case of mutual responsibility and mutual spiritual friendship. It is not a case of something that happened in the past, two-thousand-five-hundred years ago; it is a case of something that is happening now, in the present, and something that will happen in the future. It is not a case of something that concerned the ancient brethren; it is something that concerns their modern successors, ourselves.