

## The Buddha's compassion

Source: SD 8.1 Spiritual friendship: Stories of Lovingkindness, compassion and fellowship are vital to the spiritual life<sup>1</sup> by Piya Tan © 2002, rev 2004.

### 1 The Buddha's compassion

According to the Commentarial tradition, the Buddha would each day survey the world twice with his Buddha Eye: once at dawn, looking from horizon inwards towards his Fragrant Chamber, and in the evening looking from the Fragrant Chamber outwards to see who was ready for admonition and conversion. One day, the Buddha saw that a young sick monk was ready for instruction.

The young monk, named Tissa, came from a rich Sāvattihī family. Not long after his ordination, he suffered from boils that broke out and festered as open sores all over his body. After a while, his bones began to disintegrate. Due to his sickness, he was called the **Elder Pūti,gatta Tissa** (Tissa of the Festering Body), and he was left unattended and alone by the monks.

The Buddha, knowing that Tissa was ready for arhathood, thought to himself, "This monk has been abandoned by his colleagues. At present he has no other refuge than me." Pretending to be making his rounds of the monastery, the Buddha went to Tissa's quarters. There he prepared some hot water and was preparing to nurse Tissa.

When the monks noticed the Buddha doing such menial tasks, they quickly approached and took over the nursing of Tissa. The Teacher then instructed them how Tissa should be nursed. First, he had some warm water sprinkled over Tissa to loosen his soiled robes that had stuck to his festering body. The upper robe was thoroughly washed in warm water and then dried.

When the upper robe had dried, the Teacher had Tissa's lower robe removed and after his body was carefully washed and dried, he was dressed in the clean dry upper robe. The soiled lower robe was then washed and dried. When the lower garment was ready, he was fully dressed with his body refreshed and mind tranquil.

The Teacher, knowing that Tissa had not long to live, stood by Tissa's pillow and said to him, "Monk, consciousness will depart from you, your body will become useless and, like a log, will lie on the ground." So saying, he pronounced this stanza:

In no long time, this body will lie on the ground,  
With consciousness departed, rejected like a useless log. (Dh 41)

At the end of the lesson, Elder Pūti,gatta Tissa attained arhathood and passed away into nirvana. The Teacher, says the Commentator, performed the last rites over his body, took the relics, and had a shrine erected over it. (DhA 3.7/1:319-322)

### 2 The monk with the stomach disorder

The Vinaya records a similar story of the Buddha's compassion. This event is so significant that it is actually the occasion (*nidāna*) for the Buddha to introduce Vinaya rules regarding monks taking care of one another. We have here a good example of how a Vinaya rule is introduced.

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<sup>1</sup> SD 8.1, <https://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/8.1-Spiritual-friendship-Stories-of-lovingkindness-piya.pdf>

### THE SICK MONK

At one time, a certain monk had a **stomach disorder** (*kucchi, vikār'ābādha*), probably dysentery. He lay fallen in his own excrements. The Blessed One, as he was touring the monastic lodgings (*sen'āsana*) with the venerable Ānanda as his attendant (*pacchā, samaṇa*), approached the monks' dwelling (*vihāra*). Then the Blessed One saw that sick monk lying fallen in his own excrements. Seeing him, he approached that monk, and spoke thus to him:

"What is your sickness, O monk?"

"I have a stomach disorder, bhante."

"But, O monk, don't you have an attendant (*upaṭṭhāka*)?"

"No, bhante."

"Why don't the monks tend you?"

"I, bhante, am of no use to the monks. Therefore the monks do not tend me."

### Tending the sick monk

Then the Blessed One addressed the venerable Ānanda, "Go, Ānanda, bring some water. We will wash this monk."

"Yes, bhante," the venerable Ānanda replied in assent. When he brought the water, the Blessed One sprinkled it all over the monk's body. Then the venerable Ānanda washed him.

Then the Blessed One took him by the head, the venerable Ānanda by the feet, and having raised him up, they laid him down on a couch.

### Investigating the community

Then the Blessed One, on that occasion, in that connection, having assembled the community of monks, asked the monks,

"Is there, bhikshus, in such and such a dwelling-place a monk who is ill?"

"There is, bhante."

"What, bhikshus, is that monk's illness?"

"The monk has a stomach disorder, bhante."

### Seeking the cause of neglect

"But, bhikshus, is there anyone who is tending that monk?"

"There is none, bhante."

"Why don't the monks tend him?"

"Bhante, this monk is of no use to the monks. Therefore the monks do not tend that monk."

### Admonition

"Bhikshus, you have not a mother, you have not a father, who might tend you. If you, bhikshus, do not tend one another, then who is there to tend you? **Whoever, bhikshus, would tend me, he would tend the sick** (*yo bhikkhave maṃ upaṭṭhaheyya so gilānaṃ upaṭṭhaheyya*).

"If he has a preceptor (*upajjhāya*),

he should be tended for life by *the preceptor*, who should wait for his recovery.

If he has a teacher (*ācariya*),

he should be tended for life by *the teacher*, who should wait for his recovery.

If he has a co-resident (*saddhi, vihārika*),

he should be tended for life by *the co-resident*, who should wait for his recovery.

If he has a pupil (*antevāsika*),

he should be tended for life by *the pupil*, who should wait for his recovery.

If he has a fellow preceptor (*samān'upajjāyaka*)

he should be tended for life by *the fellow preceptor*, who should wait for his recovery.

If he has a fellow teacher (*samān'ācariya*),  
he should be tended by *the fellow teacher*, who should wait for his recovery.  
If he has neither preceptor nor a teacher nor a co-resident nor a pupil nor a fellow preceptor  
nor a fellow teacher,  
then he should be tended by *the order*.  
If one should not tend him, then it is an offence of wrong-doing (*dukkaṭa*).” (V 1:300 f)

The above is an example of how a rule of Buddhist canon law is promulgated. The basis for this rule is **compassion** and fellowship. First, the Buddha questions the monk concerned regarding the personal reason for his indisposition (“What is your sickness?”), then regarding the social cause of his suffering (“Why don’t the monks tend you?”). Having established the reason, he then takes immediate measures to correct the situation—in this case, to tend to the sick monk.

Once the immediate problem has been resolved, the Buddha assembles the Order. He questions the Order if they are aware of a problem situation (“Is there, bhikshus, in such and such a dwelling-place a monk who is ill?”) and asks the Order the reason for the problem (“He is of no use to the monks”).

Having established the case, the Buddha (in a gentle imperative mood) goes on to admonish the Order on the value of fellowship, using himself as the example (“Whoever, bhikshus, would tend me, he would tend the sick”). This is the spirit of the law. Then, he promulgates the rule: the letter of the law (“an offence of wrong-doing”). This is the basic pattern for the introduction of the monastic rules.

### 3 Spiritual friendship and spiritual life

**3.1** It is clear from the Buddha’s personal examples cited here and many other such accounts recorded in the Buddhist Canon, that caring for one another is not only vital for community life, such as that of the Buddhist Sangha, but is also essential for spiritual development. The *locus classicus* or key reference for spiritual friendship is **the Upaḍḍha Sutta** (S 45.2) which, due to its importance, is quoted here in full:

“Bhante, spiritual friendship, good companionship, good comradeship, is half of the holy life.”

“Not so, Ānanda! Not so, Ānanda! Spiritual friendship, good companionship, good comradeship, is **the whole of the holy life**. When a monk has a spiritual friend, a good companion, a good comrade, it is to be expected that he will develop the noble eightfold path.

And how, Ānanda, does a monk who has a spiritual friend, a good companion, a good comrade, cultivate the noble eightfold path, develop the noble eightfold path?

Here, Ānanda, a monk cultivates right view, ... right intention, ... right speech, ... right action, ... right livelihood, ... right effort, ... right mindfulness, ... right concentration, *based on seclusion, on dispassion, on cessation, maturing in release*.

It is in this way, Ānanda, that a monk who has a spiritual friend, a good companion, a good comrade, cultivates the noble eightfold path, develops the noble eightfold path.

In this way, too, Ānanda, it should be known, in a manner of speaking, how the whole of the holy life is spiritual friendship...:

By relying upon me as a spiritual friend, Ānanda,  
beings subject to birth are freed from birth,  
beings subject to decay are freed from decay,  
beings subject to death are freed from death,  
beings subject to sorrow, lamentation, bodily pain, mental pain, and despair are freed from them.

In this way, Ānanda, it should be known, in a manner of speaking, how spiritual friendship, good companionship, good comradeship is the whole of the holy life.”  
(S 45.2/5:2 f = SD 34.9; also at S 3.18/1:87 f; cf Sāriputta's remark, S 45.3/5:4)

**3.2** The Commentary explains that Ānanda thinks that an ascetic's practice succeeds when he relies on spiritual friends and on his own personal effort, so half of it depends on spiritual friends and half on personal effort. But, as with children, it is not possible to say, “So much comes from the mother, so much comes from the father.”

**3.3** The importance of this Sutta is attested by the fact that it is repeated in full in **the Appamāda Sutta 2** (S 3.18), where, at Sāvathī, King Pasenadī shares his personal thoughts with the Buddha:

“Here, bhante, while I was alone in seclusion, the following reflection arose in my mind,  
‘The Dharma has been well taught by the Blessed One, and that is for one with spiritual friends, good companions, good comrades, not for one with bad friends, bad companions, bad comrades.’”

The Buddha replies by relating the incident of the Upaḍḍha Sutta. In this case, the Buddha applies spiritual friendship on a more mundane level for the benefit of the king, saying that through spiritual friendship, his kingdom and family would be guarded and prosper.<sup>2</sup>

**3.4** The Commentary says that although the Dharma is well taught for all, just as medicine is effective only for one who takes it, so the Dharma fulfils its purpose only for a compliant and faithful person with spiritual friends, and not otherwise. Elsewhere, the Buddha often declares the importance of spiritual friendship:

Bhikshus, just as dawn is the forerunner and harbinger of the rising sun, even so, bhikshus, spiritual friendship is the forerunner and harbinger of the noble eightfold path. (S 45.49/5:29)

Bhikshus, I do not see any other thing by which the unarisen noble eightfold path arises and the arisen noble eightfold path develops to completion except through spiritual friendship.  
(S 5:35)

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<sup>2</sup> S 3.18/1:88 f (SD 34.3),