

SECRET RELATIONSHIPS

We all have our secret relationships. Maybe it is with someone we regard as our soul-mate, with whom we wish to share our lives. If we are married, or have been married, we are likely to know that people, especially our spouses, partners, or children, are not always predictable. Even with friends or anyone we know, our words have often enough been taken the wrong way.

Or, worse, we try to anticipate others, only to find that they fall short of our expectations. We may try to define a person, to take an emotional snapshot of someone, but that person remains forever indefinable; for, his journey is not yet done; nor ours. More often, however, we do not really know how to read people.

We do not always really know what others, even those whom we truly love, are thinking or feeling. If we could do all this, perhaps we would never have had any relationship problem, marriage strife, or family difficulty. Friendships would not break up. Communications would be happier.

On the other hand, if we think that we “know” others very well, we might, in reality, be manipulative, or be only looking at those aspects of people that we choose to look at. The problem here is that we tend to have fixed views of people, and of ourselves, too. We have practically stopped learning about them, or even about ourselves.

Our lives then lack the surprises of others’ goodness and genius. The reality is that people change; we change. We might notice such happy surprises (let us leave out the sad ones) during happy occasions, such as family reunions or meeting old friends after a long absence. We might notice that their goodness have matured with age, and it is a great pleasure to be in their company.¹

A benefit of such an encounter is that we know we can trust such people. We can truly connect with them. In fact, we can learn a lot from such positive people. Such goodness rises above family and blood relations. We have a sense of comfort and joy even to think of them. It is towards such people that the Buddha says, “Those we can trust are the best of relatives” (Dh 204).

If we think we “know” people, it is likely that we have some fixed ideas about them, even regarding them as being unchanged or unchangeable, like an antique table or the hills. Yet, all things, especially people, change. The more we are open to people, the more we are likely to notice the positive changes in them, to our joy. This is appreciative joy (*muditā*). Then, our lives are enriched by the goodness of others.

The Buddha speaks of four ways in which we can truly know a person, that is:

- (1) through living with a person, we would know his moral virtue (in terms of his actions and speech);
- (2) through dealings with a person, we would know his honesty;
- (3) in times of trouble, we would know his strength or integrity; and
- (4) through discussing, we would know his wisdom.

¹ I’m reminded of one of the most beautiful family movies ever made, “On Golden Pond” (1981) (starring the elderly Henry Fonda as his swan song).

Even then, advises the Buddha, such understanding arises in us only after a long time; if we are consistently attentive, and we do so with wisdom.²

Our most secret relationship is surely with our own views, whether a religious one, or some life philosophy. Ironically, we can be limited by our knowledge, especially if it prevents us from really being open to others, or even truly knowing ourselves. All we can know comes through our five senses. Our minds then piece these sense-experiences together, so that we make “sense” of things. So we think.

We tend to be badly influenced and manipulated by our past, so that we tend to seek a religion or philosophy or life-view that fits our past. Here we have two extremes. One extreme is a system that is so well defined (think of any religious sect or group) that it actually limits our growth and keeps us in the rut of dogma and groupthink.

On the other hand, we might throw out all caution and accept that “anything goes.” We are more likely to be overwhelmed by the floods of our own views that we hardly ever see the dry land of wisdom and happiness. We are just too busy thinking, or being right, or trying to please others, so that we have effectively stopped learning. Here again we are limited by what we know or think we know.

If there are such extremes, there must be a middle way. Such a way is not “half-way” between the two extremes: it simply avoids them altogether. The middle way is to watch and learn, from patterns in our actions and speech, how they reflect our minds. We often learn more from our failures – our sufferings – than from our successes.

Even when others are at fault, there is so much we can learn about ourselves, if we examine our role in the situation, how we could have bettered the situation. To blame others is to stop learning. To learn is to understand that such situations arise from no single cause, but from a network of conditions. To be wise is to be present in the moment so that we can influence such conditions in a wholesome way.

If we think that we “cannot change” (for any reason), or others are “always the same,” then we are likely to be fatalists. Or, we might live as if we are ahead of ourselves, in the future (what we want to be, especially when we compare ourselves with others), then we might become a caterpillar trying to “free” itself from its cocoon before its time. We would become deformed butterflies.

The Dharma reminds us to stop thinking for a moment, suspend the rush, as it were, to simply live the present moment. We need to constantly ask ourselves, what really is going on here, why am I doing this, how can I be truly happy? Such questions are a key that opens the door to our true self, true happiness; or at least to a joyfully surprising side of ourselves.

A life without surprises is a boring cyclic existence. To live in the Dharma, the Buddha’s teaching, is to live the middle way, one that is full of pleasant surprises.

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² See Satta Jatila Sutta (S 1:78 f = U 65 f) = SD 14.11; for further details, see **Thana Sutta** (A 4.192 = 2:187-190) = SD 14.12.