

Clay-pot Friendship

Source: Spiritual friendship: Stories of Lovingkindness (SD 8.1) ©Piya Tan, 2004.¹

4.1 THE MAHĀ SUÑÑATĀ SUTTA.

The **Mahā Suññata Sutta** (M 3:118) records an important teaching on spiritual solitude expounded by the Buddha to Ānanda. While staying in the Banyan Park at Kapilavastu, the Buddha discovers that in the dwelling (*vihāra*) built by the Sākya Kāḷa, khemaka there are numerous items of furniture for resting (*senāsana*)—beds, chairs, mattresses and mats. It looks like a club house! Ānanda then explains to him that it is robe season and the monks are making robes. For that reason, there are many monks present there. The Buddha then admonishes Ānanda that it is difficult for a monk (or anyone) to attain mental calm and release in the midst of a crowd (*gaṇa*).

The Buddha then goes on to instruct Ānanda on how to meditate on voidness (*suññatā*) after having attained the 4 form-dhyana (*rūpa-jjhāna*). Living with such a state of mind, the practitioner is not inclined to indulge in “animal talk” (*tiracchāna, kathā*),² that is, talk on worldly matters and things unrelated to spiritual development.

The Buddha then goes on to distinguish between **2 levels of sense-experience**: that of “the 5 cords of sensual pleasure” (*pañca, kāma, gūḍa*), the level of the worldling, and “the 5 aggregates of clinging” (*pañc’upādāna-k, khandha*), the level of the practitioner. The 5 cords of sensual pleasure have a “binding” (grasping) effect on one who enjoys them.

The five aggregates of clinging, on the other hand, are natural states that arise and fall away moment to moment. If a practitioner clearly sees this rise and fall, he would abandon the “I am” conceit, and as such be free from the grip of Māra.

4.2 “EVEN IF THE TEACHER TELLS YOU TO GO AWAY”

Then turning to a new level of instruction, the Buddha asks a rhetorical question, “What do you think, Ānanda? What good does a disciple see that he should seek the Teacher’s company even if he is told to go away?” When Ānanda requests that the Buddha elaborate, he does so:

- (1) A disciple should not seek the teacher’s company “for the sake of discourses, stanzas and expositions,” but **only such talk that promotes spiritual development**, that is, talk on “few wants, contentment, seclusion, aloofness from society, arousing energy, moral conduct, concentration, wisdom, deliverance, and the knowledge and vision of deliverance”.
- (2) How does a religious teacher fail? A teacher who has gone into solitary retreat is visited by “brahmin householders from the market towns and the country” and as a result he becomes filled with desire, succumbs to craving and reverts to luxury. This is **the failure of the teacher**.
- (3) How does a religious pupil fail? A student who, following the teacher’s example, has gone into solitary retreat is visited by “brahmin householders from market towns and the

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

² D 1:7; V 1:7, 178, 3:54; Vism 127; DA 1:89.

country” and as a result he becomes filled with desire, succumbs to craving and reverts to luxury. This is **the failure of the pupil**.

- (4) How does a brahmacari [celibate religious] fail? Here, a true follower of the Buddha who keeps to his teachings goes into spiritual retreat. Even when visitors from the city and country come, **he does not fall from his training**. But, when we follow a false or weak teacher, as a result of too much contact with the world, we are filled with unwholesome states. This is **the failure of the religious celibate**, which is the worst failure of the three, even leading to great suffering.³
- (5) “Therefore, Ānanda, **conduct yourself with friendliness towards me**, not with hostility.” And how is this not done? The Buddha teaches Dharma out of compassion to the disciples, but they neither listen nor make an effort to understand, and turn away from the Teaching. This is being unfriendly with the Teacher.
- (6) How do disciples conduct themselves with **friendliness towards the Teacher**? Here, the disciples want to hear and make an effort to understand the Teaching, and do not turn away from it. This is being friendly to the Teacher.

“I shall not treat you as the potter treats the raw damp clay. Repeatedly restraining you, I shall speak to you, Ānanda. Repeatedly admonishing you, I shall speak to you, Ānanda. The sound core will stand the test.” (M 3:118). The Commentary paraphrases the Buddha’s closing remarks thus:

After advising you once, I shall not be silent. I shall advise and instruct by repeatedly admonishing you. Just as a potter tests the baked pots, puts aside those that are cracked, split or faulty, and keeps only those that pass the test, so I shall advise and instruct you by repeatedly testing you. Those among you who are sound, having reached the paths and fruits, will stand the test. (This test, the Commentary adds, also includes the mundane virtues as criterion of soundness.)

(MA 4:166)

This sutta is also known as **the Gaṇa,bheda Sutta** (MA 4:165) because it tends to break up a crowd, that is, it admonishes against unwholesome socializing.

4.3 THE GANDHĀRA JĀTAKA

The analogy of the unbaked clay pot is also found in **the Gandhāra Jātaka** (J no 406), where the Bodhisattva was reborn as a prince of Gandhāra. He admonishes an ascetic also named Ānanda against hoarding salt and sugar and to accept almsfood as it comes, “I will not work with you, Ānanda, as a potter with raw clay only. I will speak chiding again and again. What is truth, that will abide.”

³ Comy explains that by using 2 analogies. For a religious teacher or student outside the teaching (a non-Buddhist) to fall from his training, only falls away from a mundane training—like one falling from a donkey and is only covered in dust. However, for one who violates the training in the holy life (with its paths, fruits and nirvana), ie, consciously violates the precepts, it is a great loss, like one falling from an elephant, incurring great suffering. (MA 4:165)

Were not wisdom and good conduct trained in some men's lives to grow,
Many would go wandering idly like a blind buffalo.

But since some are wisely trained in moral conduct fair to grow,
Thus it is that disciplined in paths of virtue others go. (R A Neil's tr J:C 3:224)

In the end, both ascetics, through their practice, were destined for the Brahmā world. (J 3:363-369)

Spiritual friendship, in other words, is a "fiery" friendship. Just as the primordial fire of the earth crushes coal deep underground to produce diamonds, even so the communication between spiritual friends inspires one another to higher spiritual levels, as exemplified in the lives of Sāriputta and Moggallāna, and of Mahā Kassapa and Ānanda, with the Buddha as their common spiritual friend.

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