

Value of Friendship in the Buddhist Perspective

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Friendship is regarded to be “a distinctively personal relationship that is grounded in a concern on the path of each friend for the welfare of the other, for the other’s sake and that involves some degree of intimacy” (Wikipedia). Because human life is not meant to be pleasant all the time, we need somebody to help us, to take care of us and to talk to particularly when we encounter problems physically and psychologically.

Here, I am going to investigate how friendship has been explained, how a real friend can be understood and how the friendship can be meaningfully and practically used for minimizing the distress caused by the problems of ourselves as well as others against the background of Buddhism - mainly based on primary Theravada texts.

Buddhist identity given to a distinctive kind of noble friend is *kalyanamitta* in Pali language and qualities attributable to it have been explained in a number of ways in different contexts in the Buddhist texts (*M* 1:43; *A* IV:30). Moreover, in other instances Buddha has also used terms such as *kalyanasahaya* and *kalyanasampavanka* (*A* V: 357) in explaining the same idea as noble friend. Another term he has made use of for identifying a noble friend was *sabbhi*, association with whom was recommended for the progress of an individual (*S* I: 37/39). The fact that the notion of the noble friend has been given a prominent place among those who should be associated with also becomes explicit considering the explanations found in the eighth chapter of the Eka Nipata of the Anguttara Nikaya (*A* I: 14). Once the Buddha emphasized the importance of keeping company with the good friends as explained in the *Vyagghapajja Sutta*. Here he included the association with noble friends among the four factors resulting in the progress of the individual (*A* IV: 281-85).

In Anguttara Nikaya, Buddha explains seven qualities of a monk who is considered to be worthy of association. These qualities are: (i). Pleasant disposition (*piyo*), (ii). Admirability (*garu*), (iii). Being worthy of veneration (*bhavaniyo*), (iv). Being able to speak sensibly (*vatta*), (v). Being patient in listening (*vacanakkhamo*), (vi). Being able to attend to serious talk (*gambhiram ca katham katta*), and (vii). Not applying oneself to useless ends and/or importuning others unreasonably (*noc’atthane niyojaye*) (*A* IV: 32). Specifically the Buddha presented a distinctive and extensive categorization of friends in the *Sigalovada Sutta* (*D* III: 173-184), presumably also based on the concepts of friendship prevalent in the contemporary society, which concepts are extremely useful for the development of harmonious relationships even in the current society.

In one instance, a noble friend is defined by the Buddha as one who: (i). Gives what is difficult to give (*duddadam dadati*), (ii). Does what is difficult to do (*dukkaram karoti*) and (iii). Bears what is difficult to bear (*dukkhamam khamati*) (*A* I: 286). In a yet another context, four other qualities have been added to the above three when dealing with a monk possessing the noble qualities expected of a friend. i.e. (iv). Confide in the friend his personal matters (*guyhamassa avikaroti*), (v). Protect what is told in confidence by the friend (*guyhamassa pariguyhati*), (vi). Not abandon the friend when he is in adversity (*apadasu na vijahati*), (vii). Not look down upon him, making derogatory remarks (*khinena na’atimannati*) (*A* IV: 31).

Among the qualities assignable to the *samanasukhadukkha* friend in the *Sigalovada Sutta* also we find the same three qualities mentioned in the above statement i.e. iv, v and vi (*D III 187*).

When dealing with the seven qualities (as mentioned above) of a friend worthy of association (in this particular context a monk), we can further understand how meaningful and practically useful all of them are in their application to human problems. These qualities when applied carefully, lead us not only to understand friends but also help create a harmonious society. Therefore, it would be useful to review how important the seven qualities expected of a good associate are, as stated by the Buddha.

- A pleasant disposition is one of the most important qualities to be found in somebody who is eager to develop a friendship with another. Being pleasant here does not mean a capacity for smooth talk. One should have the genuine preparedness and swift approachability, when needed, to conduct a conversation useful to both parties. One can thereby show a friendly attitude to others, in association manifesting a feeling of loving- kindness, the result of which benevolence would contribute to his or her well-being.
- The friend should be an admirable person. Perhaps this means that the person should be of a higher level as far as his education, knowledge, understating, virtue, vision and behavior are concerned. It is a person with such qualities as these who can be immensely helpful for the well-being of others.
- He or she should be a person worthy of veneration. This quality appears to be somewhat similar to the one explained above. However, it is clear that these personal qualifications are to be required rather more for a venerable companion than an admirable one.
- This person should be one who expresses his/her ideas clearly, competently and meaningfully so that they can lead to the well-being of others who communicate with such a person.
- He or she should be able to exercise tolerance in matters involving mistakes and such other inappropriate behavior on the part of his or her friend in their personal relationship.
- He or she should have the capability to engage himself in profound discourse, if and when serious matters arise.
- He or she should not lead the other on to a destructive path so that they would suffer as a consequence.

It is very significant that the Buddha enumerated some distinctive qualities, namely, giving, doing and bearing what is not easy in giving, doing and bearing, which are most difficult things in an association with another fellow. Here the needs to keep secrets in confidence and not abandoning a friend in adversity have been stressed as in the case of the *Sigalovada Sutta* (*D III: 187*). Equally or perhaps more important is the quality of not looking down upon others, using derogatory remarks particularly when a mistake has been made.

For a fruitful life to be lived in healthy surroundings, it is absolutely essential that one receives proper guidance from one's associates whenever and wherever necessary. In this modern age it is common knowledge that counselors in numerous capacities are available for help on request though they are to be paid for the job. In addition to this, the electronic media has now developed to such an extent that it can offer help in most situations at the press of a key or a button of a machine for those

who can afford to internet. There are many instances where people are keeping their pets as their friends, which is no doubt helpful in so many situations. In spite of all this, however, it is the association, help and guidance provided by a human being – a noble friend at that, - who has been nurtured by loving-kindness, compassion, altruistic-joy and equanimity and who also possesses those other qualities recommended by the Buddha, (as illustrated in this article), that provide inspiration for a great personality.

A friendship formed and maintained with such good people is undoubtedly a blessing for an individual as well as for the society. This may be why the Buddha proclaimed that noble friendship is the single most important requirement for the existence and the development of the spiritual life of a person (in this context a monk) (*S V 2/3*). The difficulty lies ahead of us only in the choice of the proper individual endowed with such noble qualities as above. However, we cannot altogether deny the existence of very great individuals if we are to use our own intuition and judgment as the basis of our choice. However, most of us are not able to get the ideal decision when making a choice of our friends as in the case of making many other choices.

As the society would have us believe a friend of ours should not necessarily to be found among those belonging to our own faith etc. ‘The first thing to note in finding and cultivation admirable friendships is that we don’t have to dump our old set of friends and replace them with so-called “spiritual people”. Our current friendships, even with people who have no affiliation with Buddhism, can serve as fertile ground for admirable friendship’ (Whitaker). What is most significant in a friendship is to find out if the chosen friends belonging to a category that (a) gives harm to themselves and (b) to others in the short run or long run if we are to summarize all the qualities attributable to all kinds of noble friends mentioned above. Here what we have to bear in mind is that a singular act of an individual (in this case a friend) should not be taken for granted as his or her general disposition. Rather it would always be for the interest of ours to take the singular acts or incidents involving individuals in their proper perspective and context. What is most important in making a choice in the case of friends is to eventually understand the general disposition of them after close, careful, long and observant investigation, without jumping into conclusions probably associated with emotions.

Most important of all, one needs to be one’s own friend and no fear must be attached to oneself with regard to guilt feeling and feeling of running away from oneself etc. Friendship becomes everything when one trains one’s mind to be able to make most of the present moment. This aspect is clearly dealt with by the Buddha when he admonishes us to ‘be refuge to oneself’ (*Dhammapada v. 160*). However many friends we have, what they are eventually capable of doing for us is undoubtedly limited by every means. Therefore as single individuals each one of us should be able to face so many situations in our lives with understanding, courage and fortitude. At the same time, there can be misunderstandings that happen in dealing with our affairs with even our most beloved friends, which can make our life miserable. Moreover, every individual is subject to change from moment to moment not only physically but also psychologically and attitudinally and this factor should be borne in mind when we associate with whatever sort of friend. Above everything else, how often are we ourselves undergoing suffering as a result of guilt formed in our mind for acts inappropriately done or left undone in the past, which definitely creates grounds for making an enemy of ourselves within? It is in such instances as this that we need to highly consider the necessity of being a friend- the best friend to ourselves where no fear whatsoever is attached to our own behavior of mind. That we should

not be burdened with and worried over thoughts associated with guilt etc does not at all imply that we are justifiably allowed to do whatever we tend to do in any situation and afterward feel comfortable about our own past behavior even after doing harm to ourselves or others. It is here that we are required to undergo an essential training about how we should shape our lives in such a way that our acts should not lead to harm ourselves and others in the short as well as long run. It is here that we should realize the importance of how friendly we are to ourselves.

It is in the present moment that we always live practically and our own mind is there for us to make decisions on whatever we do, say or think. It would be very important that whatever acts we do intentionally should be done so that we do not reap the undesirable effect of them in return. We need to understand that we are singularly responsible for our own acts and, therefore, we need to be very vigilant when training our mind to make our own friend, not outside of us but within. In the word of Chodron: 'The support that we give each other as practitioners is not the usual kind of *samsaric* support in which we all join the same team and complain about someone else. It is more that you are on your own, completely alone, but it is helpful to know that there are forty other people who are also going through this all by themselves. That is very supportive and encouraging. Fundamentally, even though other people can give you support, you do it yourself, and that is how you grow up in this process, rather than becoming more dependant' (Pema Chodron as quoted by Whitaker). In conclusion, what is important is to realize that we have to essentially associate with noble friends after understanding who the most suitable friends are and how a friendship can properly be maintained for our uplift and most importantly being the best friend to ourselves in making a harmonious society. At the same time, if each of us do have the ability to become our own friend, then we are far from making most of the harmful decisions, done intentionally.

Abbreviations:

A = *Anguttaranikaya*

D = *Dighanikaya*

M = *Majjhimanikaya*

S = *Samyuttanikaya*

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