



Association with the Wise

The Mahamangala Sutta, the Great Discourse on Blessings, is one of the most popular Buddhist suttas, included in all the standard repertories of Pali devotional chants. The sutta begins when a deity of stunning beauty, having descended to earth in the stillness of the night, approaches the Blessed One in the Jeta Grove and asks about the way to the highest blessings. In the very first stanza of his reply the Buddha states that the highest blessing comes from avoiding fools and associating with the wise (*asevana ca balanam, panditanan ca sevana*). Since the rest of the sutta goes on to sketch all the different aspects of human felicity, both mundane and spiritual, the assignment of association with the wise to the opening stanza serves to emphasise a key point: that progress along the path of the Dhamma hinges on making the right choices in our friendships.

Contrary to certain psychological theories, the human mind is not a hermetically sealed chamber enclosing a personality unalterably shaped by biology and infantile experience. Rather, throughout life it remains a highly malleable entity continually remoulding itself in response to its social interactions. Far from coming to our personal relationships with a fixed and immutable character, our regular and repeated social contacts implicate us in a constant process of psychological osmosis that offers precious opportunities for growth and transformation. Like living cells engaged in a chemical dialogue with their colleagues, our minds transmit and receive a steady barrage of messages and suggestions that may work profound changes even at levels below the threshold of awareness.

Particularly critical to our spiritual progress is our selection of friends and companions, who can have the most decisive impact upon our personal destiny. It is because he perceived how susceptible our minds can be to the influence of our companions that the Buddha repeatedly stressed the value of good friendship (*kalyanamittata*) in the spiritual life. The Buddha states that he sees no other thing that is so much responsible for the arising of unwholesome qualities in a person as bad friendship, nothing so helpful for the arising of wholesome qualities as good friendship (AN I.vii,10; I.viii,1). Again, he says that he sees no other external factor that leads to so much harm as bad friendship, and no other external factor that leads to so much benefit as good friendship (AN I.x,13,14). It is through the influence of a good friend that a disciple is led along the Noble Eightfold Path to the release from all suffering (SN 45:2).

Good friendship, in Buddhism, means considerably more than associating with people that one finds amenable and who share one's interests. It means in effect seeking out wise companions to whom one can look for guidance and instruction. The task of the noble friend is not only to provide companionship in the treading of the way. The truly wise and compassionate friend is one who, with understanding and sympathy of heart, is ready to criticise and admonish, to point out one's faults, to exhort and encourage, perceiving that the final end of such friendship is growth in the Dhamma. The Buddha succinctly expresses the proper response of a disciple to such a good friend in a verse of the Dhammapada: "If one finds a person who points out one's faults and who reproves one, one should follow such a wise and sagacious counsellor as one would a guide to hidden treasure" (Dhp. 76).

Association with the wise becomes so crucial to spiritual development because the example and advice of a noble-minded counsellor is often the decisive factor that awakens and nurtures the unfolding of our own untapped spiritual potential. The uncultivated mind harbours a vast diversity of unrealised possibilities, ranging from the depths of selfishness, egotism and aggressiveness to the heights of wisdom, self-sacrifice and compassion. The task confronting us, as followers of the Dhamma, is to keep the unwholesome tendencies in check and to foster the growth of the wholesome tendencies, the qualities that lead to awakening, to freedom and purification. However, our internal tendencies do not mature and decline in a vacuum. They are subject to the constant impact of the broader environment, and among the most powerful of these influences is the company we keep, the people we look upon as teachers, advisors and friends. Such people silently speak to the hidden potentials of our own being, potentials that will either unfold or wither under their influence.

In our pursuit of the Dhamma it therefore becomes essential for us to choose as our guides and companions those who represent, at least in part, the noble qualities we seek to internalise by the practice of the Dhamma. This is especially necessary in the early stages of our spiritual development, when our virtuous aspirations are still fresh and tender, vulnerable to being undermined by inward irresolution or by discouragement from acquaintances who do not share our ideals. In this early phase our mind resembles a chameleon, which alters its colour according to its background. Just as this remarkable lizard turns green when in the grass and brown when on the ground, so we become fools when we associate with fools and sages when we associate with sages. Internal changes do not generally occur suddenly; but slowly, by increments so slight that we ourselves may not be aware of them, our characters undergo a metamorphosis that in the end may prove to be dramatically significant. If we associate closely with those who are addicted to the pursuit of sense pleasures, power, riches and fame, we should not imagine that we will remain immune from those addictions: in time our own minds will gradually incline to these same ends. If we associate closely with those who, while not given up to moral recklessness, live their lives comfortably adjusted to mundane routines, we too will remain stuck in the ruts of the commonplace. If we aspire for the highest—for the peaks of transcendent wisdom and liberation—then we must enter into association with those who represent the highest. Even if we are not so fortunate as to find companions who have already scaled the heights, we can well count ourselves blessed if we cross paths with a few spiritual friends who share our ideals and who make earnest efforts to nurture the noble qualities of the Dhamma in their hearts.

When we raise the question how to recognise good friends, how to distinguish good advisors from bad advisors, the Buddha offers us crystal-clear advice. In the Shorter Discourse on a Full-Moon Night (MN 110) he explains the difference between the companionship of the bad person and the companionship of the good person. The bad person chooses as friends and companions those who are without faith, whose conduct is marked by an absence of shame and moral dread, who have no knowledge of spiritual teachings, who are lazy and unmindful, and who are devoid of wisdom. As a consequence of choosing such bad friends as his advisors, the bad person plans and acts for his own harm, for the harm of others, and the harm of both, and he meets with sorrow and misery.

In contrast, the Buddha continues, the good person chooses as friends and companions those who have faith, who exhibit a sense of shame and moral dread, who are learned in the Dhamma, energetic in cultivation of the mind, mindful, and possessed of wisdom. Resorting to such good friends, looking to them as mentors and guides, the good person pursues these same qualities as his own ideals and absorbs them into his character. Thus, while drawing ever closer to deliverance himself, he becomes in turn a beacon light for others. Such a one is able to offer

those who still wander in the dark an inspiring model to emulate, and a wise friend to turn to for guidance and advice.

—Bhikkhu Bodhi

Publications

Recent Releases

- *King Asoka and Buddhism*. Edited by Anuradha Seneviratna. This book comprises scholarly essays which seek to define, from both historical and literary angles, Asoka's relationship to Buddhism. Contributors: Richard Gombrich, Ananda Guruge, Romila Thapar, N.A. Jayawickrama, John Strong, Anuradha Seneviratna.

Softback: 180 pages, with maps 140 mm x 214 mm
U.S. \$12.00; SL Rs. 300. Order No. BP 410S

- *The Questions of King Milinda: An Abridgement of the Milindapañha*. Edited by N.K.G. Mendis. One of the great classics of Pali Buddhist literature, a spirited dialogue between the Greek king Milinda and the Buddhist sage Bhante Nagasena, touching on many subtle problems of Buddhist philosophy and practice.

Softback: 208 pages 140 mm x 214 mm
U.S. \$10.00; SL Rs. 280. Order No. BP 217S

- *Being Nobody, Going Nowhere*. Ayya Khema. A popular book of talks on meditation practice by the well-known German nun, given at a ten-day meditation retreat in Sri Lanka. For sale in Asia only. "This jewel of a book is full of sound practical advice for treading the Buddha's way ... Essential reading for all those whose hearts incline to this path" (*The Middle Way*).

Softback: 190 pages 136 mm x 214 mm
U.S. \$10.50; SL Rs. 300. Order No. BP 5115

- *The Edicts of King Asoka*. Compiled by Ven. S. Dhammika.

Wh 386 / 387. U.S. \$2.25; SL Rs. 35.

- *Reading the Mind: Advice for Meditators*. Acharn Kor Khao-suanluang.

Wh 388 / 389. U.S. \$ 2.50; SL Rs. 45.

- *The Lion's Roar: Two Discourses of the Buddha*. Trans. by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli.

Wh 390 / 391. U.S. \$ 2.50; SL Rs. 45.

- *A Pali-English Glossary of Buddhist Technical Terms*. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli. In the press. Available by early June. Price to be announced.

In Preparation

- *The Vision of Dhamma*. Nyanaponika Thera. A comprehensive volume containing the writings of our esteemed Patron from the Wheel and Bodhi Leaves series. One of the most mature and authoritative contemporary expositions of the Dhamma. Planned for July 1994.
- *The Pali Buddhist Literature of Sri Lanka*. G.P. Malalasekera. An old classic, long out of print, to be reissued by the BPS. Planned for September 1994.

Prices and order numbers will be announced in this column when these books become available.

Other Publishers

- *History of Buddhism in Ceylon*. Walpola Rahula Thera. 352 pages. U.S. \$12.50; SL Rs. 450.
- *Early History of Buddhism in Ceylon*. E. W. Adikaram. 154 pages. U.S. \$6.00; SL Rs. 180.
- *Buddhist Psychology of Perception*. E.R. Sarachchandra. 110 pages. U.S. \$5.00; SL Rs. 160.
- *Guide to the Tipitaka*. U Ko Lay. 150 pages. U.S. \$8.00; SL Rs. 260.
- *Buddhist Monastic Discipline*. Jotiya Dhirasekera. 190 pages. U.S. \$5.00; SL Rs. 150.
- *The Buddha's Explanation of the Universe*. C.P. Ranasinghe. 372 pages. U.S. \$10.00; SL Rs. 330.
- *New Pali Course, Parts I & II*. Ven. A.P. Buddhadatta Thera. 270 pages. U.S. \$5.00; SL Rs. 160.

Note: The above titles are available on a retail basis only, not for trade orders.

Notes & News

Translations

Over the past two years BPS publications have been appearing in increasing numbers in other languages in response to the surging interest in early Buddhist teachings in both East and West. In 1992 an Italian publisher, Promolibri (Turin), published an Italian translation of Bhikkhu Bodhi's *The Noble Eightfold Path* and is scheduled to issue *The Road to Inner Freedom*, edited by Nyanaponika Thera. In Budapest, Orient Press recently published a Hungarian translation of *The Noble Eightfold Path* and has on lineup Hungarian translations of Bhikkhu Bodhi's *The All-Embracing Net of Views* and *The Discourse on the Root of Existence*, and Nyanaponika Thera's *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*.

In the Czech Republic, Stratos Publishing (Prague) last year published Mahasi Sayadaw's *Practical Insight Meditation* and in late 1993 Nyanatiloka Thera's classic *The Word of the Buddha*. A translation of Piyadassi Thera's *The Buddha's Ancient Path* is close to completion, and the same publisher plans to issue anthologies of *Wheels* and *Bodhi Leaves* in the near future.

In Germany the energetic nun Ayya Khema has established a publishing venture, Jhana Verlag, which last year published a German translation of Ñāṇarama Mahathera's *Seven Stages of Purification*. Jhana Verlag earlier had issued Ven. Nyanatiloka's manuscript translation of the *Dhammapada* and has almost completed production of the same author's translation of the *Abhidhammattha Saṅgaha*. Jhana Verlag has been co-operating with the Pali Text Society to bring to light Nyanaponika Thera's German translation of the *Atthasalini*, the commentary to the *Dhammasaṅgani*, which has remained in typescript since the late 1940s.

In the East, Korea has been the most active source of BPS translations. In Seoul the Calm Voice Society has been publishing about five BPS titles annually since 1988, and these have been greatly appreciated by Buddhist readers in Korea, especially among the educated classes. Vietnamese translations of two of the *Lives of the Disciples*—Ven. Sariputta and Ven. Moggallana—have appeared in California, the work of Truong Upakara, intended mainly for the Vietnamese expatriate community. Preparations are also underway for large-scale translations of BPS titles into Chinese and Hindi.

Book Review

The Monk and the Peasant: A Study of the Traditional Sinhalese Village. J.B. Disanayaka. Colombo: State Printing Corporation, 1993. 164 pages, softback. SL Rs.125.

J.B. Disanayaka is a Professor of Sinhala Language at Colombo University. A dedicated scholar, teacher, and a prolific writer, he has authored sixteen books, among which is the magnificently illustrated *Mihintale: Cradle of Sinhala Buddhist Civilisation*. By training and discipline Professor Disanayaka is primarily a linguist, but his love and devotion for Buddhist monks, for the peasants, and for the villages is so deep that an inner voice has urged him to write *The Monk and the Peasant*. Indeed, he has done full justice to the subject, for this book is hugely successful both in presenting the situation and in expressing the emotional tone of the symbiosis.

In this well-printed book with an attractive cover depicting the monk, the peasant, and the temple with its *dagaba*, the author explains in simple terms the relationship between the Buddhist monk and the Sinhala rural farmer. Written in a lucid and readable style, the role of the temple in the village is clearly defined. The explanations of Sinhala stanzas about the daily life of a peasant present a clear and meaningful picture of his relationship to the temple.

Clearly, *The Monk and the Peasant* is a required book for the serious student of Sinhala culture, but at the same time, it is an ideal book for the tourist and the visitor who is new to the Sinhala culture of this beautiful island of ours. The tourist, who may be ill-informed and unfamiliar with village life and with the connections between the peasant, the village, the monk, and the village temple, will find this book a *vade-mecum*.

The eighteen chapters of the book are organised into the five main themes: the village, the temple, the monk, the peasant, and the values. An appendix lists all non-English words, phrases, and verses used in the body of the text, rewritten in the Sinhala script. Sinhala words and phrases which appear in italics in the text are given in a twenty-two page index in both Roman and Sinhala scripts—an invaluable aid to the reader.

The author was inspired to undertake this study in order to record his experience with the monks and villagers of his own village, an experience which so positively enriched his life. His inner urge was hastened by the need to document these data now before this era has passed. “Change is universal and inevitable,” he writes. “Diverse processes of change, which sociologists call modernisation, westernisation and urbanisation are at work and as an inevitable result the traditional village is also changing fast.”

Of great importance in this work is a genuine effort to clarify the term “Buddhist values”—which unfortunately is used today haphazardly and arbitrarily, not knowing the real meaning of the term. Buddhist values are many, and they are vast and they are deep. Professor Disanayaka observes that “values, in the ultimate analysis, are neither Buddhist nor Christian; neither Hindu nor Islamic; but human values of universal significance, to be cherished not only by monks and peasants but by each and every member of the human race.” One must give serious thought to these observations of the author. Where do human values originate? Are not human values based on and influenced by one’s religion? On close analysis one would see the values of human beings depending on and influenced by their religions. The values of the village peasants are definitely influenced by their religion.

Two most ancient living civilisations, the Indian and the Chinese, and three of the greatest of the religions today—Christianity, Islam and Hinduism—have been altered and improved by the influence of the Buddhist ideal. In the light of these facts one can well imagine how colossal

must be the Buddhist contribution to human culture. Moral qualities are of greater value than intellectual accomplishments. We must preserve the basic values of our cultural heritage without losing the momentum which science and technology give to human progress.

Very aptly this book is “dedicated with love to the monks and the peasants of the Sinhalese Village.” I am sure that both the Sinhala Buddhists and the general reader interested in Sri Lankan culture and society will thoroughly enjoy this book.

—Piyadassi Nayaka Thera

Mailbag

Thank you to the entire BPS staff for producing so many fine books and for keeping the Dhamma active in this unhappy era. I eagerly look forward to hearing from you and receiving your books and booklets.

Allan Walton
Ontario, Canada

I cannot tell you how much we appreciate your support and encouragement. Just knowing that organisations such as yours exist is a source of inspiration and example. The publications you are sending will mean much to our centre and we will offer them as freely as they were offered to us.

Judy Kennedy
Theravada Buddhist Community
Toronto, Canada

I wish to thank you from the depth of my heart for your work in elucidating the path of liberation.

Steven Carpenter
San Mateo, California

Thank you very much for your precious gift, the collection of classical Buddhist books. It is hardly possible to express the value these books have for us. For more than 40 years in our country all religious activities were suppressed and persecuted, and we had no opportunity to obtain new books about Buddhism. Therefore your gift has a priceless value for us.

Tyang Louchovz
Olomouc, Czech Republic

We are really pleased to receive the first mailing as members of the BPS. I can't really think why we haven't been members all along. This present delight is a gift of the general secretary of the Australian Buddhist Association and we are most grateful.

Mujin Sunim
Lotus Lantern Int'l. Buddhist Centre
Seoul, Korea

Guidelines to Sutta Study

In the Kandaraka Sutta (MN 51, found in Wheel No. 79) the Buddha sets out to define the type of person who represents the spiritual ideal—the arahant—whom he describes (in terms of the fourfold typology of persons announced earlier in the discourse) as “the one who torments neither himself nor others, who is hungerless, quenched, cool, and experiences bliss with his self become holy.” But rather than assert directly the supremacy of the arahant, the Buddha proceeds to build up gradually to the figure of the liberated one by describing the methodical course of training that transforms a person from a worldling into an arahant. Because this training forms the backbone of the entire path to deliverance, the sutta concisely links together many different aspects of the practice, aspects which may be treated more fully but less integrally in other suttas. For this reason an overview of the training, as enunciated in the Kandaraka Sutta, will enable us to see at a glance the complete structure of the Buddhist path, from beginning to end.

The Buddha begins his exposition of the gradual training by mentioning two events which are not actual parts of the training itself but serve as its prerequisites. These are the arising of a Tathāgata and his teaching of the true Dhamma. These two events are repeatedly prefixed to the account of the gradual training in many suttas, a fact which implies that the complete course of practice culminating in Nibbāna does not exist apart from the dispensation of a Buddha. The Buddha arises in the world like the sun rising above the horizon, and his teaching of the Dhamma is like the sun shedding its light upon the world, driving away the gloom of night. Just as all our routine activities depend upon the sunrise, and are conducted with the aid of the sun’s light, so the treading of the way to the end of suffering requires the arising of a Fully Enlightened Buddha and the guidance he gives through his exposition of the Dhamma:

The Buddha’s purpose in teaching the Dhamma is to inspire his listeners to enter upon the gradual training, to lead them upon the perfectly complete holy life that culminates in the release of the mind from its fetters. The initial response on the part of a receptive listener to the Buddha’s exposition of the Dhamma is the acquisition of faith (*saddhapatilābha*). Faith is the factor that transforms interest into conviction and conviction into action, the response that motivates a person to embark on the spiritual journey. Hence, in the sutta, the Buddha places the acquisition of faith immediately after his statement of the prerequisites of the training: “A householder or a householder’s son or one born into some other clan hears that Dhamma. On hearing it, he acquires faith in the Tathāgata.”

Faith, in Buddhism, does not mean blind belief or the sacrifice of the intellect to doctrines decreed by some external authority. The defining character of faith is confidence and trust. To acquire faith in the Tathāgata means that one recognises the Buddha as the Supremely Enlightened One, who has fathomed the most crucial truths concerning human existence and who teaches the course of conduct that leads to the highest goal, irreversible deliverance from suffering. Faith arises when the teaching strikes a chord deep within ourselves, when it resonates with some aspect of our most fundamental experience and discloses to us a glimpse of the ultimate good that had previously eluded us.

Faith no doubt involves an element of belief, a preparedness to accept certain principles revealed by the Buddha that may lie beyond our personal range of knowledge. Such principles, however, are accepted not by a suspension of our intelligence, but out of trust in the wisdom of the one who proclaims them, and in the confidence that we too can confirm them (at least in essentials) by making the appropriate effort. To undertake the gradual training inevitably

involves challenges and trials. It demands of us that we relinquish what we ordinarily cherish most—the pleasures and concerns of the narrow ego self—in order to strive for some greater good that at present we can envision only dimly. The readiness to face such difficulties, and to persist patiently despite the obstacles one meets, depends upon faith in the Master and his Message.

In the case of the disciple described in the *Kandaraka Sutta*, the gain of faith in the Dhamma leads to the going forth into homelessness, the full adoption of the life of renunciation. Upon gaining faith the disciple reflects: “Household life is crowded and dusty, while life gone forth is wide open. It is not easy while living in a home to lead the holy life utterly perfect and pure as a polished shell.” He then leaves behind his possessions and relatives, shaves off his hair and beard, puts on the saffron robes, and enters upon the homeless state. It is at this point that the gradual training becomes accessible in its fullness.

The fact that the Buddha places the going forth into homelessness at the head of the gradual training does not mean that the training cannot be undertaken, even in part, by those who remain within the sphere of lay life. The suttas provide ample evidence that the Buddha encouraged his lay followers not to remain content merely with the offering of alms to the Sangha and the observance of morality, but to train themselves in the four foundations of mindfulness and to arouse that “wisdom of insight into rise and fall which leads to the complete destruction of suffering for one who cultivates it.” It is also known that many of his lay disciples, even busy householders, reached the paths and fruits of holiness. But the Buddha’s teaching is, by its very essence, a doctrine of deliverance, which is designed to lead us out from the world with its attractions and dangers to the unconditioned state of freedom, *Nibbāna*, which is supramundane (*lokuttara*)—beyond the world. Because the Dhamma leads out from the world, the demand it makes of us, as the requirement for reaching the goal, is renunciation: renunciation of sense pleasures, renunciation of family and personal attachments, renunciation of mundane preoccupations. Thus the most complete dedication to the treading of the path, unhindered by worldly commitments, becomes possible for those whose lives are grounded upon renunciation, governed by renunciation, oriented towards the relinquishment of all points of attachment, namely, those who like the Master himself have left the household life for homelessness.

(to be continued)

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