

Namo tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammâ Sambuddhassa!

A BUDDHIST APPROACH TO FRIENDSHIP ¹

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Friendship can be a difficult and complex topic for a young person to grasp. At times it can be difficult to know who means one well and who does not. This article aims to shed some light on this topic from a Buddhist perspective, especially for the benefit of young adults.

Someone can either be a friend, an enemy or neither a friend nor an enemy (neutral). However this can also be subject to change (*anicca*). Generally friends are the beings that are dear, mean one well and offer protection. Enemies on the other hand are the opposite of this; they are not dear, wish to cause one harm and to see one's demise, suffering, loss and unhappiness. Neutral beings (e.g. acquaintances) neither mean one well nor any harm. The Lord Buddha outlined how to differ between friends and enemies in depth in the *Sigalovada Sutta*. As a basic guideline, any being who acts to cause one harm can be considered an enemy, while any being that causes no harm to one and give rise to happiness and well-being can be considered a friend. Someone who does neither can be considered neutral.²

Sometimes the line between a friend and an enemy can become blurred. A friend can act like an enemy and an enemy can act like a friend. This is consistent with the law of impermanence (*anicca*) where everything, including relationships, constantly changes. So regardless of whom one deals with, it is important to do so with wisdom (*panna*). It is of paramount importance to not let others take advantage, use, abuse, trap, mislead, or do any other harmful thing to one when dealing with others, whether they are classed as friends, enemies or neutrals. There are wise and skilful ways of preventing others from causing one harm that are in-line with the *Dhamma* (reality, truth, the way things are) teachings, which cause no harm to either oneself or others.³ This way no matter how others change, one will always be protected.

The Lord Buddha advised to avoid companionship with the foolish. 'Foolish' here refers to those lacking in wisdom and live unskilfully – this is essentially those who lead ignoble lives that contradict basic moral values and decency and/or takes one away from the correct Path. If one associates with such beings, one will be at the risk of falling down to their level through association and bad influence and may even miss the chance to find the lasting peace of *Nibbana*. The Lord Buddha said that if one cannot find a wise and good companion to associate with, someone who is on the same 'level' as one or better, to lead a life of solitude – that is to live alone.⁴ This advice is completely contradictory to the cultural outlook and thinking of Western societies where a life of solitude can be looked down upon. It is important to not get influenced by such thinking and to always resort to the Lord Buddha's words for better guidance instead.

People need and seek out friendship for many of the benefits that it brings. Good friends can be depended on in times of need, are good advisors and companions. It helps to understand why people seek friendship at a deeper level. From a Buddhist perspective people seek the friendship to be 'happier.' How is this 'happiness' defined in Buddhist terms? It is defined as pleasure. Friends are associated to please the eye with their pleasant sight (seeing them), to pleasing the ear with their pleasant sound (their voices), to please the body with the pleasant touch (e.g. hugging) and also to please the mind with the pleasant ideas that friendship gives rise to (e.g. good memories) (the nose and tongue faculties are not mentioned here, but it can include them too). It is when this 'happiness' (pleasure) is missing that one feels 'unhappy' (displeasure). Under this condition, one is said to be 'lonely.' Enlightened beings and others advanced along the Path do not need nor seek companionship as they do not desire pleasures of any kind.⁵

Generally beings that primarily give rise to pleasure (causing attachment) are classed as 'friends' and beings that primarily give rise to 'displeasure' (causing aversion) are classed as enemies. The choice of friends is a personal thing, based on personal likes/dislikes, standards, ideas, views, beliefs, etc. It is natural for like beings to be drawn to other like beings and unlike beings to be repulsed from other unlike beings. Some beings become one's enemy because of a personal weakness they possess, be it fear, insecurity, desire (*lobha*) and competition for something, aversion (*vyapada*) or even stupidity and confused thinking (*moha*) and not because of anything that one has done to them. Especially in such instances, there is nothing to take 'personally'.⁶ One needs to understand this with wisdom (*panna*) as to why beings act the way they do.

Everyone has friends, enemies and neutral beings. Generally friends mean one well, enemies mean one harm and neutral beings mean one neither harm nor happiness.⁷ The distinction between friends and enemies can sometimes blur, so it is always important to use wisdom to employ skilful means of preventing anyone, be it a friend, enemy or otherwise, from causing one harm. The Lord **Buddha** has explained in detail how to determine between friends and enemies in the *Sigalovada Sutta*. Outwardly appearance/behaviour is not always a good way of judging this. The Lord **Buddha** advised to avoid companionship with the **foolish** and to only associate with beings who are the same as one or more advanced along the **Path**. It is better to live alone if one does not find such a companion despite societal/cultural pressures. People seek friendship and companionship for various reasons, including deriving **pleasure**, which is widely viewed as ‘happiness.’ Beings may become enemies due to their own personal weaknesses and it may have nothing to do with one’s behaviour towards them.

May you find **good friends** to help you on the **Path** and if not the strength to travel the **Path** in solitude and peace towards the lasting peace of *Nibbana*!

FRIENDSHIP

You are lonely,
because you *want* company,
to please your **sense-bases**,
including the mind.

‘Loneliness’ is a label used to describe the sadness of not having company,
and if you did not want company,
would you still be unhappy,
pine for others,
or **suffer** the pain that you do?

All you need is the Lord **Buddha**;
let him be your friend and relative,
in the absence of **good friends**,
and associates.

Also look to the *Dhamma*,
his faultless findings on reality,
to keep you out of sadness,
and to keep you happy and content.

Notes

1. The latest version of this document can be found in **HTML** format here <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=mitta> and in **PDF** format here <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=mittap>
2. Just because someone is outwardly nice, it does not always follow that they are a friend and means one well. The inverse (exact reverse) of this can also be true. Use **wisdom** to know and understand this.
3. Refer to a **wise person** if in doubt.
4. See *Dhammapada* verses 61, 328-330 in *Appendix A: A Selection of Dhammapada Verses and Stories on Companionship* below. *Dhammapada* verses are especially suitable for children. See an online versions here http://www.geocities.com/ekchew_geo/dhammapada.htm here <http://www.mettanet.org/english/Narada/index.htm> and here <http://www.buddhanet.net/dhammapada/>

5. This should not be misunderstood as friendship/companionship is bad, evil, etc. The Lord Buddha has said that good friendship (*kalyana-mittata*) is conducive to progress along the Path. Someone who is accustomed to living among the company of many people may find it difficult to enjoy *solitude*. The practice of *solitude* should not be attempted abruptly but in slow degrees so as to not cause any kind of harm or stress to oneself.
6. Nothing should be taken personally from an ultimate Buddhist perspective as there is no 'person' there to take anything personally. There are just collections of five aggregates (*panca-khanda*) interacting with one another influences by various forces such as cause and effect (*kamma-vipaka*).
7. In reality there are no 'friends,' 'enemies,' 'neutral beings,' 'me,' 'I,' 'you,' 'they,' or 'them,' but just impermanent (*anicca*) states. These are all just labels that are used to describe illusory concepts such 'friends,' 'enemies,' 'I,' 'me,' 'you' etc to *deluded* (until *enlightenment/realization*) beings living in the conventional world, viewing and dealing with reality in a conventional (and *deluded*) manner.

Appendix A: A Selection of Dhammapada Verses and Stories on Companionship

AVOID COMPANIONSHIP WITH THE FOOLISH

[Pali:] *Caran ce nadhigaccheyya - seyyam sadisam attano
Ekacariyam dalham kayira - natthi bale sahayata.*

[English:] If, as the disciple fares along, he meets no companion who is better or equal, let him firmly pursue his solitary career. There is no fellowship* with the foolish.**

A Disobedient Novice Monk

When Venerable *Maha Kassapa* was residing near Rajagaha, he had two young novice monks staying with him. One of them was respectful, obedient and dutiful but the other one was not. When *Kassapa* advised the disobedient novice not to neglect his duties, the latter became very offended.

One day, he went to the house of a lay disciple of the monk, and untruthfully said that *Kassapa* was ill. Thus, he got some choice food from them which was meant for *Kassapa*; but he ate it on the way. When admonished by *Kassapa* for this he was extremely angry. The next day, when *Kassapa* was out on his alms round, the foolish young novice stayed behind, broke the pots and pans and set fire to the monastery.

When a *bhikkhu* (Venerable monk) from Rajagaha told the *Buddha* about this, the *Buddha* remarked that it would have been much better for *Kassapa* to live alone than to live with a *foolish* companion who caused so much distraction.

Notes

* *Sahayata*, According to the commentary this term connotes higher *morality, insight, Paths, and Fruits of Sainthood*. No such *virtues* are found in the foolish.

** Out of compassion, to work for their betterment, one may associate with the foolish but not be contaminated by them.

ASSOCIATE WITH THE WISE

[Pali:] *Sace labetha nipakam sahayam - saddhim caram sadhu vihari dhiram
Abhibhuyya sabbani parissayani - careyya ten 'attamano satima. 328.*

[English:] If you get a prudent companion (who is fit) to live with you, who behaves well and is *wise*, you should live with him joyfully and mindfully, overcoming all dangers. 328.

WANDER ALONE IF THERE IS NO SUITABLE COMPANION

[Pali:] *No ce labetha nipakam sahayam - saddhim caram sadhu vihari dhiram
Raja'va rattham vijitam pahaya - eko care matangarann'eva nago. 329.*

[English:] If you don't get a prudent companion who (is fit) to live with you, who behaves well and is *wise*, then like a king who leaves a conquered kingdom, you should live alone as an elephant does in the elephant forest. 329.

A SOLITARY CAREER IS BETTER

[Pali:] *Ekassa caritam seyyo - natthi bale sahayata**
Eko care na ca papani kayira - apposukko matangarann'eva nago.330.

[English:] Better it is to live alone. There is no fellowship with the ignorant. Let one live alone doing no evil, carefree, like an elephant in the elephant forest. 330.

An Elephant Waits Upon the Buddha

A trivial incident led to an unfortunate dispute amongst the bhikkhus (Venerable monks) in the city of Kosambi. The quarrelsome bhikkhus did not listen even to the advice of the Buddha. So he left them and spent the vassa (rains) all alone in the forest, where the elephant Parileyyaka waited on him. Owing to pressure brought on them by the devotees, the bhikkhus realising their mistakes requested Venerable Ananda to invite the Enlightened One to return to the monastery.

At the end of vassa, Ananda went into the forest, accompanied by five hundred bhikkhus. Leaving the bhikkhus at some distance, Ananda approached the Buddha alone. Then he told Ananda to send for the other bhikkhus. All of them came, paid obeisance to the Buddha and said, 'Venerable Sir! You must have had a hard time spending the vassa all alone in this forest.' To this, the Buddha replied, 'Bhikkhus, don't say so. The elephant Parileyyaka looked after me all this time. He was indeed a very good friend, a true friend. If one has such a good friend one should stick to him. But if one cannot find a good friend it is better to stay alone.'

Notes

* *Sahayata*. By this term are meant morality, austere practices, insight, Paths, Fruits and *Nibbana*.

Related Suttas (Discourses)

1. *Anguttara Nikaya* 7.35, *Mitta Sutta*, *A Friend* see <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an07/an07.035.than.html>
2. *Sutta Nipata* 2.3, *Hiri Sutta*, *Conscience* see <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/snp/snp.2.03.than.html>
3. *Anguttara Nikaya* 8.54, *Dighajanu (Vyagghapajja) Sutta*, *Conditions of Welfare* see <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an08/an08.054.nara.html#friendship>
4. *Digha Nikaya* 31, *Sigalovada Sutta*, *The Discourse to Sigala* see <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.31.0.nara.html>
5. *Samyutta Nikaya* 45.2, *Upaddha Sutta*, *Half (of the Holy Life)* see <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn45/sn45.002.than.html>
6. *Anguttara Nikaya* 9.1, *Sambodhi Sutta*, *Self-awakening* see <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an09/an09.001.than.html#friend2>
7. *Khuddakapatha* 5, *Mangala Sutta*, *Blessings* see <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/khp/khp.5.nara.html>

Related Dhamma Articles

1. *Offerings* - On making offerings to the Lord Buddha's supreme qualities, see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=offerings>
2. *Daily Dana* - On giving and generosity, see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=dailydana>
3. *Five Precepts* - Developing virtue through the five precepts, see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=pansil>
4. *Work Stress* - An analysis of stress in the work-place, see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=workstress>
5. *An Introduction to Buddhist Meditation* - Basic instructions for doing the meditations of loving kindness (*metta*), awareness of breath (*ana-pana-sati*) and foulness of the body (*asubha*), see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=intromed>
6. *Equanimity* - Dealing with the eight characteristics of life, see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=equanimity>
7. *Metta Meditation* - Easy to follow instructions for doing the meditation on loving-kindness, see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=mettamed>
8. *A Buddhist Approach to Problem Solving* - Problem solving through the development of wisdom (*panna*), see

<http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=probsolv>

9. *A Buddhist Approach to Mental Health* - A Buddhist perspective and approach to mental health, see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=mentalhealth>
10. *One Hour of Unsatisfactoriness* - The unsatisfactoriness that can be felt within the space of an hour, see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=onehour>
11. *Four Noble Truths* - The essence of Buddhism, see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=fourtruths>
12. *Noble Eightfold Path* - The path for ending stress and suffering, see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=noblepath>

Online Resources

1. *AccessToInsight.org* here <http://www.accesstoinsight.org>
2. *Mettanet.org* here <http://www.mettanet.org>
3. *What-Buddha-Said.net* here <http://what-buddha-said.net>
4. *What-Buddha-Taught.net* here <http://what-buddha-taught.net>
5. *SuttaReadings.net* here <http://www.suttareadings.net>
6. *Buddhanet.net* here <http://www.buddhanet.net>