

The Good Friend

(from a Kathina/alms-giving occasion at Hartridge Monastery, 2010)

Buddhist cultivation covers more than what we would understand through reading books, or even through meditation. For instance, although solitary meditation is what we see in the discourses, one of the main features in the Vinaya and of the Buddhist life, is the practice of community. You can recognize this especially when there is a big gathering, such as today's alms-giving ceremony, the Kathina.* This presents an occasion for communion, a gathering of many people – who perhaps don't know each other or don't see each other very much – because they have a common interest in Dhamma. This encouragement of the spirit of communion is one of the main reasons to have these occasions. In this case it's linked to the down-to-earth process of cooperation for a good cause. Yet such communion isn't based on particular personalities; rather, it gets a wide range of people of differing temperaments and backgrounds, to work together. The greater the diversity, the better the practice and the richer the results. We get stronger and broader as a collective, and that result pays off in many ways. So an occasion like this is also an expression of faith in human nature, that we can put aside our differences and enjoy warm-heartedness and mutual respect. And of course, be patient with each other's limitations. This is what Kathina is about.

Communion is a religious term; it indicates a human bond around something sacred. With communion, we rise above our pettiness and self-interest. This, I think, is a fundamental human need; otherwise we just get absorbed in our daily events and targets and lose the bigger picture. We can miss out on inner development, and just be getting by. But who wants to spend a life just getting by? Communion offers a chance to sense that we are part of a shared something that is timeless and benevolent. Both of these aspects – the need and the benevolence – represent the domain of religion: that on one hand humans have a fundamental need for help, and on the other, that there is a blessing for our lives that doesn't come from our personality, but from where that is put aside. So whether the cry of the heart is for God's help or Jesus' or Mary's help, or for blessings from Allah or Krishna or Buddha or Kwan Yin, a common theme in religion, beyond its outward form, is the connection to that felt, revealed or intuited source of benevolence.

As for the fundamental nature of our need for help: life is difficult, and we realize sooner or later that we're all vulnerable, subject to illness, subject to pain, and that

we need other people's involvement to keep going. We wouldn't have got born or lived past the age of five without an enormous amount of help, and we wouldn't have survived psychologically without about twenty years of encouragement, guidance, modelling and companionship. So becoming a whole human being takes group effort; you can't do it on your own – it's impossible. And you can't continue on your own; every day you need support from the planet in terms of air, food and water. But although some people are looking for someone up there in the sky, or someone on the other shore to give them help, the spirit of Dhamma-communion is to take the responsibility to provide support for each other. The Sangha can't materially survive without the free-will generosity and practical assistance of householders, and for their part, people in the world find themselves spiritually bereft without the teachings, modelling, and companionship of the Sangha. So maybe this is how God or Kwan Yin or the Absolute are sending their help – by putting us in situations where we will learn to help each other. At any rate, in terms of Buddhist practice, this is what communion is about.

And yet ... one of the most difficult thing for human beings to do is to get on with each other. We need assistance and friendship – but we can find other people irritating; particularly if we have to live together and have a lot of contact. And it's the people who are closest to us – such as our parents, spouse, colleagues or fellow-monks – that we find the most irritating! So, although we need to cooperate and it makes plain economic sense to share and be part of some community with others – it's the 'otherness' that we find difficult. In terms of my instinctive preferences, I'd like to be in a community of people who always thought like me, had the same tastes and were sensitive to the same things – but that's a fantasy. Nor would it be very useful for personal growth. Instead we can use other people to gain perspective on our own habits and opinions, and learn to broaden. Because if they don't grow in that way, people always get offended and disappointed with each other, say the wrong thing at the wrong time, are experienced as not being there when they're needed, or being there when they're getting in the way. If this kind of scenario goes on, it results in falling out and quarrelling. In fact real friendship, the friendship of communion, doesn't happen casually, impulsively or by chance.

It's also entails getting involved with others. Meditation can give you clarity as to your intentions and mind-states, but if you want to get your tie straight, it's best that somebody else tells you. Similarly, you can't know how you act purely from your own perspective, any more than you can see the back of your head. So in terms of our

speech, body language and mode of conduct – where we create kamma in fact – you need other people to tell you how you're coming across, or to cast some light on your blind spots. And that requires friendship, because we tend to take our actions and appearance very personally, and can feel attacked, misunderstood or betrayed by another's critical feedback.

So it's interesting that the Kathina season begins with what's called the *Pavaranā* – which means 'Invitation.' *Pavaranā* is the invitation that the samanās, the monks and nuns, offer to each other; it's a kind of voucher. And this voucher says: 'If you see or even suspect that there's something that I've been doing wrong – please let me know.' The Buddha said this is the most precious gift we can offer to each other – it helps us review our actions, and consequently the mind-set from which they arose. In this way we get wiser and see what we didn't see clearly before. Of course, we can feel worry about being humiliated or attacked, but without another person offering correction, how are we going to get out of our blindspots?

In a dialogue on this theme, the Buddha used the analogy of training horses to refer to mind-sets of different kinds of disciple. One kind only need a few reminders, occasionally. These are like the horses that get the message when the trainer just raises the whip and they see its shadow. With others, he says he has to bring the point home more directly, as in the case of the horse that a trainer has to flick with a whip from time to time. Another kind of disciple is like a horse that only gets going or changes direction if it's struck repeatedly. And finally there are those disciples that he, or others, have to kill. The other person in the dialogue is naturally taken aback by this: 'You kill your disciples?' The Buddha replied: 'Yes, we kill them. We give up admonishing and correcting them. And it is death in this Dhamma-Vinaya, when one's companions no longer feel it is worthwhile admonishing you.'

So to not give honest feedback out of compassion for another's welfare is like spiritual murder; it's the worst thing that could happen to you. Because then you're left in your own mess, you continue to develop bad habits, cause pain for others, and leave unskilful mind-sets untouched – and go to a bad place.

Conscious spiritual friendship is a careful practice because the guidelines the Buddha gave on correcting another person stipulate that you have to be based on compassion rather than irritation, and that you have to find the right time and place – and not be fearful of meeting the defensiveness, or the hurt feelings of the other. Hence we train

to willingly open ourselves to feedback. When there is this openness I've found that the response is generally gentle, and maybe refers to some scenario in which one is a little insensitive – nothing much at all. And one thinks, 'Was that all?' Because we're often very critical of ourselves: my mind can come up with an entire list of things that people could find fault with me about! So opening up also helps to clear that inner critic. On the other hand, if you don't open up and make the invitation, you're left with the sense that people are really getting offended or annoyed, but are just too polite to mention it.

Some people are very skilful at offering admonishment. For instance, someone once put it to me like this: 'Because you're a person of integrity, I see there's things you're doing that are not worthy of you and that you'd want to know about.' When someone says that to you, you know you have a real friend! It's not: 'Why don't you get your act together, you idiot!' Or: 'You should be ashamed of yourself, after all these years!' The deep friend is someone who has deepened themselves and understands how even well-intentioned people don't always see how their actions affect others.

So being a good friend is a very skilful practice, one that requires us to make relationship a conscious focus rather than a casual interaction. It also requires us to work on ourselves. We have to let go of the impatience or the judgemental attitudes, and work with the understanding that: 'This is another person, not the same as me, not fitting in with my mind-sets, yet wanting happiness and needing friendship.' And of course: 'they are affected by ignorance, just as I am.' So we temper warm feelings, criticism and advice with careful, applied wisdom. And it takes work to get that blend and balance. Friendship arrived at this way is not just an emotional experience. It's a bond, a commitment in its own right; perhaps the deepest relationship we can have with another person. It deepens us and causes us to train our speech, understand our own emotions and perspectives, and to develop great heart.

In this training, one aspect of mind that has to be brought to the fore is the moral sense. A sense of respecting ethical boundaries; that this is what we do, this is what we don't do. And we have agreed upon that. Without that, there is no common ground for guidance around behaviour, and respect for others is on a shaky foundation. In Buddhism we use the five basic precepts to train us in terms of honesty, clarity and non-abuse. So in terms of speech, we commit to not abuse each other, not gossip about each other and to not speak harshly. This is an example of the moral sense; it generates a sense of value. Along with this has to come the heart

sense, with its willingness to meet another, and its concern for their well-being. The willingness to meet another is love. Although love can refer to a very superficial togetherness – with you on a good day, or when it's fun – the deeper the level at which you meet, and the wider the range of another person's experience you can be with, the deeper and stronger the love. This basic love, or mettā, means at this moment I'm not pulling away from you, manipulating you, or shielding myself from you. I'm not fearful, I'm not averse, I'm willing to meet you.

Just this is powerful and shouldn't be underestimated. How much of another person's mind can you be with? Well, it certainly gets easier if a person has trained themselves with the five precepts! And without those precepts, it might not even be possible to meet at any depth; one's own heart can get abused.

Compassion, karunā, is a development from that meeting place. It is born with the recognition and feeling for another's suffering. The spirit of compassion is one wherein we want to be present with suffering. This is an amazing quality in humans, one that blows out the idea that we're just tuned into sense-pleasure and personal achievement. But when we attune to being a good friend we find it strengthening to be with another in their difficulties.

The third way of meeting is in enjoyment, or muditā. We see another's welfare and success as something we can enjoy. So with karunā and muditā we participate in the life of another without asking anything from them except to allow us to meet them. These can bring forth another heart sense, that of equanimity. Equanimity, upekkhā, doesn't sound particularly friendly: 'I feel completely equanimous towards you!' But equanimity is the ability to maintain sensitivity and presence with each other, whether they're succeeding, losing, messing it up, or whatever – without asking for anything. It means we can address how they're acting just for clarity – not to ask them to change, but to act as a mirror. It's a pure and broadly inclusive meeting. And with equanimity, you're offering trust in another, the sense that: 'I'm there, with you, through all of it, and I trust that you have the innate ability to get through.' So you're not hovering over them, fussing, crowding them out, or tut-*tutting or nagging. You're saying, 'I trust you can get through this.' Sustaining this heart space is anything but indifference. Indifference comes with withdrawal and shutting off; it's not that difficult, and it closes your heart capacity. Equanimity is the opposite; it enables us to be clear about what's going on and let that shared mirror cause development to arise.

With these two developments – in terms of morality and good heart – not only do I act as a friend, but I'm a friend to myself. If I don't develop these, I can't meet, relate to and handle my own mind and heart. And without that inner friendship, I'm not complete. So in this way other people help me. Other people help me to extend the boundaries of conscience and concern. Other people help me to become more conscientious and less superficial. Other people help me to become more patient and generous in my estimations. Other people help me to become more equanimous. Without that, I just remain undeveloped. So we need other people, in this relationship of deep, spiritual friendship, in order for each of us to develop in ourselves. This makes friendship something more than just romance and Christmas cards. It's a strong and testing practice.

In another presentation, the Buddha remarked that there are seven scenarios in which you can know, and practise being, a good friend.** The first is that 'A good friend is someone who does for you what's difficult to do.' They walk the extra mile. They make the effort. So with an occasion like today – what makes it an occasion is that you've all made some effort to get here! Some people got up at five in the morning and came over from the other side of the country. And although we may assume that friendship doesn't need effort, you don't deepen into friendship unless you're prepared to put your body into it. You don't experience real friendship unless you're prepared to make that kind of effort. So just the fact that you hundred and something people have aroused yourselves, put your bodies on wheels and pushed them across the country to be here, that means something! You could have sent a letter, or tweeted down a mobile phone – but that's kind of weak, isn't it? The second way of the good friend is that 'they give what's difficult to give.'

Sometimes what's most difficult to give is attention. We can all live on our own little planets, with our concerns, problems, and interests. But then, that willingness to put one's own issues aside and open to another is one of the most powerful things we can do. Nothing can substitute for that offer of deep listening; it allows us to hear and reveal our hearts and minds. It helps us to know what matters, and yet it's something that we can't provide for ourselves.

Thirdly, the good friend endures. This is where it starts to get down to the nitty-gritty. 'They endure what's difficult to endure.' They bear with what's difficult to bear with for your sake. And any of you who are parents, will testify to that. Five years of sleep-

deprivation! Years and years of bearing with your young ones going through their pangs and difficulties with you bearing responsibility for them. This seasons and strengthens the heart. I remember before I became a monk, I thought, 'I never want to have children; I don't want to have to be responsible for anybody else. I just want to be able to live on my own, a free agent.' But now I'm responsible for a community, and an extended community at that. Funny how it goes isn't it? And yet at times I can experience the pettiness in the mind that says, 'Don't bother me with your problems, sort it out for yourself.' Then, when I listen to that voice, I think, 'Is that how, is that who, I want to be?' I can feel my narrowness; and I think, 'I don't want to be like that.' If some people hadn't put themselves out for me, I wouldn't have been here! So I may not have any solutions, but I can at least bear with other people's stuff. Because we all need someone to bear with us when life gets difficult.

Another way of the good friend is they reveal their confidences to you. What they carry deeply in terms of pain, aspiration, regret or joy, they reveal to you. This is precious, this act of trust whereby a person can reveal what is difficult or sensitive for them. When that can occur your sense of friendship grows beyond just liking someone; you have been given their trust. And you must never betray that.

Similarly, a good friend doesn't betray your trust by divulging what you have shared with them in confidence. They regard your trust and your willingness to confide as precious – and that gives value to your life. You are someone who is held with respect – even if what was shared were problems or dark experiences. It isn't the content that is valued, but the honesty and sharing. So you preserve that. This confidentiality is something to cultivate because we can delight in gossip, with its sense of having special information on someone, particularly if it's juicy. But something precious is lost in that gossip and chatter: human life is cheapened into fleeting entertainment. And if I don't want people to gossip about me, then I won't gossip about others. The good friend also doesn't abandon you when you're in misfortune, hard-up, or when your luck runs out. When you feel like giving up on your aims and aspirations, they don't give up on you.

And finally, the last quality of the good friend is that when you really lose it, when you're totally down and out, they don't despise you.

These are to be practised. They radically elevate and deepen what we mean by friendship; and they generate communion of the spirit – even between unlikely

people. This is how true spiritual communities grow. For instance, from time to time people come to the monasteries who are in very difficult states; people who have found it hard to keep their life in order. They seek Refuge. And they need moral guidance, or a moral situation, that isn't moralising. They need to find their self-respect to pull out of addiction or depression, and a monastery provides the opportunity to clean the slate and do good in good company. I'll talk of one man, a friend, who was alcoholic and depressive. He'd come to the monastery and help out because he could sense the goodness; his response to that was to want to serve. Part of him was devotional and contemplative and worthy of respect. And monasteries offer a chance to serve in simple ways: if you just do the washing-up, that's good enough, you don't have to be a genius, as long as you keep the eight moral precepts. Anyway this man would come and stay for a month or two. He could drive, chop wood, and make good coffee; he liked meditation, appreciated Dhamma and respected the monastery and the Sangha. He was generally well-liked. So he'd stay and go along with the routines – and then one evening he'd be absent. And the next day there'd be a funny smell in the monastery, and he'd get up late, and look a bit groggy. Oh-oh! And eventually he'd really blow it and go out and get rolling drunk. So we'd have to say: 'These are the standards. If you want to be in a monastery, you have to do this, and you'd better leave until you can show that you can sustain this standard.' So he'd go away, and three months or six months later he'd come back: 'Ajahn, I can do it.' 'OK, fine.' He'd come back and pick up the routines as before – but after a while, the same thing would happen. This pattern continued on and off for years. At least a decade. And every time he'd blow it, I'd say, 'Well, I'm sorry ... if you could just get on top of this problem, it would be really good. No, there's no loss of friendship or respect, but this is the standard in a monastery.' He'd say, 'Yeah, you're right, this is the way it should be. You're exactly right.' Then he'd go away, and a few months later come back, and the same thing would happen.

People would say to me: 'Why do you tolerate this guy? You know he can't handle it! He can't do it!' I said, 'Well look – if I didn't give him that trust, where do you think he'd be? He already gives up on himself; if I gave up on him, if I didn't say that there's always the chance to begin again – where do you think he'd be? He'd probably kill himself. There's got to be someone who, even when you lose it, says: 'Look – this is wrong, this is inappropriate, this is unskillful, but I'm not giving up on you. Try to straighten this out, and we'll start again.' The Buddha never gave up on people; so this is how we should train ourselves. Because there's got to be somewhere, some scenario that offers that. This human life is played out in a breakdown world.

It's easy for the thinking mind to take over and say, 'Sorry, rules are rules; law is law – you're finished.' That's 'fair' isn't it? It takes no effort or skill to adopt that position. We call it 'justice.' I remember reading of a survey which showed that the word that was most commonly associated with punishing people, bombing them, taking away their land and property and generally causing them pain was 'justice.' Because 'justice' takes us up into our heads. In our heads we're not in communion, and we think: 'He did that, and that's wrong. He deserves it. He's not fit to be here.' The head also tells us what makes us different from each other, doesn't it? We can define all the differences, and then say: 'This is better, that's not so good, he's wiser, she's sweeter, he's nicer, she's stronger ... ' We can create all that in our heads. And not only does that faculty point out the differences, it also freezes us into unchanging objects. In the heart it's different: you get the sense of what brings us together, what defines our communality. And here you also know that a human is capable of change; that because the mind is continually arising, it can be continually renewing.

Every moment is a new moment of life, isn't it? We're not just an account, of all the bad things or the good things we do – we're not static. We're not just what we can define, we're always something mysterious that's arising in the moment, carrying potential. Potential for goodness, for kindness, for clarity, for awakening; we carry that potential. We may forget it a thousand times – and yet it still keeps coming back; it doesn't give up on us. Why do we give up on it? Because we think about ourselves. We define ourselves according to our moods and mind-sets. We label ourselves. We decide we are something, always will be that something and never can be anything else. So sometimes you need other people to tell you: 'You're not what you think you are! You're not summed up. You're not finite. You're something that's new and changing, and I want to be with that.' That's another thing you need other people for. An occasion like this is a familiar one, the annual Kathina. It's familiar, and yet it's new. The familiar thing is this quality of warm-heartedness, of interest, of concern, of humanity. This is very beautiful; we need this familiar Refuge. And yet because of this, this is also an occasion to remember – it's all new; we're not who we think we are. Every moment there is a chance for change.

So this is Buddhism in the flesh, Buddhism as it's lived. This is what our communion is about. This is what makes life really precious.

* The Kathina only occurs during the first month after the Rains Retreat, and can only occur in the presence of at least five bhikkhus who have spent an unbroken Rains. In Ajahn Chah's

monasteries, the stipulation is that these bhikkhus have to have spent the Rains in the same monastery, thus emphasizing the requirement to live harmoniously in a community.

 ** A.7.35