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Spiritual Friendship

Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi

People new to Buddhism often take the Dharma to be a purely individual path of spiritual development. They imagine that the only correct way to follow the Dharma is to lock oneself up in one's room, turn off the lights, and devote all one's efforts to practicing meditation. However, if we look at the Buddhist texts, we would see that the Buddha again and again stressed the value of spiritual friendship as a support for the Buddhist path throughout the entire course of its practice. On one occasion the Venerable Ānanda, the Buddha's attendant, came to the Buddha and said that in his view half the spiritual life revolves around spiritual friendship. The Buddha immediately corrected him and said, "Do not say this, Ānanda! Do not say this, Ānanda! Spiritual friendship is not half the spiritual life. It's the entire spiritual life!" Then, with reference to himself, the Buddha added, "In this whole world, I am the supreme spiritual friend of living beings, because it is in dependence upon me, by relying upon me, that those who are subject to birth, old age, and death become liberated from birth, old age, and death."

I want to make a distinction between two types of spiritual friendship, which might be called the "horizontal type" and the "vertical type." What I call horizontal spiritual friendship is friendship between people who are at roughly the same level in following the path; this is the friendship between "partners" in following the path, and what unites them as spiritual friends is a common dedication to following the Buddhist path.

People come together and unite as friends for various reasons. We usually take the gregarious side of human nature for granted, but to understand the nature and importance of friendship it's instructive to reflect on the factors that bring people together and unite them as friends. To do so, will give us a standard for evaluating our own friendships and seeing which are helpful and which harmful.

The Buddha says that it is because of an "element" that people come together and unite. What is meant by "element" here is the basic disposition or trait of character. Thus the Buddha says that those of inferior disposition come together and unite with those of inferior disposition, whereas those of superior disposition come together and unite.

So, if we cast our mental eye out upon the world, we can see that on a given Saturday night many people will go out to night clubs to enjoy themselves dancing; others will go to bars to enjoy drinking and chatting together; others might go to sports matches; others will get together and watch crude films. That is what unites them in friendship. So this is how people of inferior disposition come together and unite.

But others come together to listen to Dharma talks, participate in meditation retreats, and study the Dharma. In this case, what unites them is a shared dedication to the Dharma. So, the defining characteristic of spiritual friendship is dedication to a common teaching, in this case, the Buddha's teaching. This is dedication to a common teaching, dedication to the practice of the same path, dedication based on similar ideals and aspirations, unity based on engagement in similar practices. To unite with others in a common dedication to the spiritual path has a strengthening and uplifting effect upon our own practice. When we try to practice the path alone, we may feel as though we are walking through a desert. It can be very lonesome, the landscape around us is rough and barren, and we have no refreshment, no inspiration from others to replenish our energies. But when we unite with others in spiritual friendship based upon common aspirations, this reinforces our own energies. When we walk a common path and engage in common practices, we gain encouragement, strength, and inspiration to continue in our practice. This is like crossing the desert in a caravan: others help us carry the supplies, we can pause for conversation, we have a sense of sharing the trials along the way, and we rejoice together as we approach our destination.

When we unite with others in spiritual friendship, this not only transforms our approach to the practice, but also has an impact upon the very nature of our friendships.

In our worldly life, our friendships are very closely connected with personal attachments, which in turn are rooted in our own egocentric needs. Even when we think we love the other person, often we really love that person because this relationship in some way satisfies a deep need within ourselves. When the other person fails to satisfy this deep need within us, our feelings quickly become embittered and our love turns into resentment or even enmity.

But when we enter into a spiritual friendship based upon dedication to a common goal, this friendship helps us to transform our attachments and ego-centered drives. Even more, it helps us to transcend the very idea of the ego-self as a substantive reality. Spiritual friendship, we discover, is not about satisfying my personal needs, or even about my satisfying the other person's personal needs. It's about each of us contributing as best we can to uplift each other, and to

bring each other closer to the ideals of the Dharma.

In spiritual friendship we are concerned with the other person not because of the ways that person satisfies us, but because we want to see the other person grow and develop in the direction of greater wisdom, greater virtue, greater understanding. We want the other person's wholesome qualities to attain maturity and bring forth fruits for the benefit of others. This is the essence of "horizontal" spiritual friendship: a keen interest in helping our friends grow and develop in the practice of the Dharma, in maturing their potential for goodness, for understanding, for wholesomeness.

The other aspect of spiritual friendship is what I call "vertical" friendship. This is the spiritual friendship between people who are at widely different levels on the path. We might also call this "asymmetrical" friendship, in that the relationship between the two members is not one of equality. This type of spiritual friendship is the bond between senior and junior followers on the path, especially the bond between a teacher and a student.

Because the relationship between the two is not equal or symmetrical, if this relationship is to be mutually beneficial, different qualities are required of the teacher and the student. In a relationship that revolves around the Dharma, the ideal teacher should have wide knowledge of the Buddhist scriptures and also abundant practical experience in following the teaching. Few teachers measure up to the ideal in all respects, and thus most students must be ready to settle for teachers who, like themselves, are still far from perfect. But two essential qualities in a teacher are a clear understanding of the fundamental principles of the Dharma and a sincere dedication to the proper practice. Besides knowledge and practical experience, the teacher must be willing or eager to teach. This willingness or eagerness to teach, however, shouldn't stem from personal ambition or egotism, from the desire to be an outstanding teacher surrounded by a flock of admiring disciples. Rather, the teacher should regard himself as a humble transmitter of the tradition, and his desire to teach should be motivated by compassion for his students and by a sincere wish to uplift the students by improving their knowledge and practical experience.

The teacher should treat the students with kindness and gentleness when they are well disciplined and obedient; but though he should be kind and gentle, he should not treat his students too leniently but should know how to maintain the proper distance needed to preserve his own dignity as a teacher. And if he's a true spiritual teacher and not just one who is imparting knowledge, he should be ready to discipline his students when necessary by admonishing them, pointing out their faults, and attempting to correct their faults.

The student should adopt the proper attitude in relation to the teacher. In Buddhist spiritual training, the attitude required is quite different from that of a student at a university. The attitude required of a student is one directed toward spiritual understanding and realization. Whereas academic study can lead to success independently of the personal character of the student, in the study of the Dharma, success is directly proportional to the purification of one's character. Thus at the outset students need the qualities conducive to spiritual growth.

Students should have faith in the teacher, confidence that the teacher is a superior person able to help them, to guide them in their spiritual development. This, of course, is not a blind faith, but a trusting confidence in the spiritual capacities of the teacher. It is the trust that the teacher has invested a long period of time in his own spiritual training and thus is sufficiently qualified to guide the student at least a few steps further in the practice of the Dharma. Both teacher and student are united in a common faith, faith in the Triple Gem, faith in the efficacy of the Dharma as a path to liberation and to the realization of the ultimate good. But students should assume that the teacher, by reason of his role, has a faith that is deeper and more solidly grounded than their own and thus that the teacher's advice and guidance should be accepted as worthy of trust. This does not mean that the student must regard the teacher as infallible and accept every bit of advice that the teacher offers, nor does it mean that the student must docilely follow every order that the teacher issues. The Buddha respected the capacity of mature human beings to make independent judgments; he did not subscribe to the view held by many Indian religious teachers that disciples must regard their teacher's word as absolute law. In the Vinaya, the Buddhist code of monastic discipline, pupils are authorized to correct their teachers if they see them engaging in improper modes of conduct or hear them advancing wrong interpretations of the teaching. This principle, laid down over two thousand years ago, is still valid today and should regulate the relationship between teachers and their students.

But to allow students to evaluate their teachers' ideas and conduct does not mean that the students are entitled to act without respect. To the contrary, one can only advance in the Dharma if one is respectful and reverential towards one's teachers. One should never be obstinate, proud, or arrogant towards anyone, least of all towards the person one regards as one's guide to the understanding and practice of the Dharma. The practice of the Dharma aims at subduing the ego, the false sense of self, and to act in ways that inflate the sense of self is to defeat one's very purpose in following the Dharma.

The relationship between student and teacher provides an ideal field for both to work at tackling the importunate demands of the ego. The student gains this opportunity by developing a respectful attitude towards the teacher and by showing respect in bodily and verbal conduct: for example, by standing up when the teacher enters the room, by making *añjali* towards him, by speaking to him politely and with a humble demeanor. The teacher also can use the relationship to subdue his own ego: by refusing to adopt an arrogant attitude towards the pupil, by treating the pupil with kindness and consideration, by sharing his knowledge with the pupil.

One quality that the Buddha considered essential in a qualified student is called (in Pali) *suvaṇṇa*, which means being "easy

to speak to.” A student who is “easy to speak to” is ready to listen to his or her teacher and to accept the teacher’s advice without resentment, without vindictiveness, without arguing back, without complaints. Spiritual growth in the Dharma is a process of abandoning one’s faults and replacing them with the opposing virtues. Yet too often we are blind to our own faults, unable or unwilling to see them.

A skillful teacher is like a mirror: he shows us our faults clearly, insistently, without deception, reminding us of the faults we continually strive to hide from ourselves. For it is only when we are willing to see our faults that we can correct them. If we go on denying these faults, insisting that we are perfect, then we will continue to wallow in them, like a buffalo in the mud. But when we open up to the teacher and show a willingness to see our own faults, to subdue our self-will, we then take the first major step in the direction of correcting them. It is through this consistent, continuous process of removing our faults, of subduing our egocentric tendencies, that we move in the direction that the Buddha is pointing us, the direction taken by all the noble ones of the past. It is in this way that we can collect the precious jewels of the noble virtues and embed them in our own hearts and minds, so that we shine resplendent in the world. For this reason, the Dhammapada says that when the teacher points out a student’s faults and tries to correct them, the student should feel as though the teacher were pointing out hidden treasure.

This is the entire holy life, Ānanda, that is, good friendship, good companionship, good comradeship. When a bhikkhu has a good friend, a good companion, a good comrade, it is to be expected that he will develop and cultivate the Noble Eightfold Path.

And how, Ānanda, does a bhikkhu who has a good friend ..., develop and cultivate the Noble Eightfold Path? Here, Ānanda, a bhikkhu develops right view, which is based upon seclusion, dispassion, and cessation, maturing in release. He develops right intention ... right speech ... right action ... right livelihood ... right effort ... right mindfulness ... right concentration, which is based upon seclusion, dispassion, and cessation, maturing in release. It is in this way, Ānanda, that a bhikkhu who has a good friend, a good companion, a good comrade, develops and cultivates the Noble Eightfold Path.

By the following method too, Ānanda, it may be understood how the entire holy life is good friendship, good companionship, good comradeship: by relying upon me as a good friend, Ānanda, beings subject to birth are freed from birth; beings subject to aging are freed from aging; beings subject to death are freed from death; beings subject to sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair are freed from sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair. (SN 45:2)

In Memoriam: Venerable Sumedha Bhikkhu

On 21 December 2006, at the age of 74, the renowned Swiss artist-monk Venerable Sumedha Bhikkhu, suffering for a long time from severe, chronic ailments, passed away peacefully and clearly aware in the ICU of the Peradeniya Teaching Hospital—a place to which he had a close connection. He went in a manner that befitted both his artistic and monastic life and referred to his dying process an “installation.” Venerable Sumedha’s art is featured on the covers of several BPS books and he maintained a close relationship with Ven. Nyanaponika, Ven. Bodhi, and the BPS. The following article consists of extracts from the eulogy written by Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi, “Ven. Bhikkhu Sumedha: The Sage-Artist of Dulvala.”

Eulogy

In 2001, Ven. Sumedha had almost died due to asphyxiation and had entered a coma. Unexpectedly, however, on perhaps the fourth day he emerged from his coma, regained consciousness, and then slowly regained his health. But a bigger surprise was to come. Not only did he recover his health, but he felt such gratitude to the staff of the ICU for saving his life that there arose in him an irresistible urge to find some way to express this gratitude. Convinced that his deep coma and near-death experience had given him a rare insight into the state of critically traumatized patients, he decided to become a spiritual guide to the patients of the ICU. He spoke to the doctor in charge of the unit, Dr. Chula Goonasekara, about his experience and ideas, and the doctor accepted his offer of help.

For the next five years he would visit the ICU and other wards in the hospital three or four days per week. He spoke to patients, offered them advice and consolation, inquired about their special needs, and sought ways to fulfill them. He went to the most gravely injured of them all, without the least squeamishness: the woman whose in-laws had poured gasoline over her clothes and set them ablaze, so that her body was a mass of scars; the young man who had lost both legs in an auto accident; the child afflicted with a rare disease, lingering on the verge of death, surrounded by his distraught parents. To the astonishment of the medical staff, he showed an uncanny ability to discover the precise way in which a patient in a particular critical condition could best be treated in order to regain hope and courage. He became fast friends with Dr. Goonasekara, and the two worked together as a team at conferences and on special projects. With the doctor’s support, he organized trainings sessions for the other doctors and nurses in which he would actually teach *them* how to tend to the patients in their care.

Though his father (who vanished in his childhood) was a medical doctor, his instructions were not based on any background training, but on sheer intuition. It was the intuition of an artist, one with a gift for seeing deeply behind people's faces and beneath their words into the hidden recesses of their hearts—an intuition that came naturally to him, for in lay life Ven. Sumedha had indeed been a highly trained painter gifted with vision and rigorously disciplined in artistic technique. It was also the intuition of a yogi, for in his early 40s he had renounced the world for the life of a contemplative Buddhist monk, meditating for years in solitary caves.

Born in Basel, Switzerland, in 1932, he was the son of a German mother and a Coptic Egyptian father. Because of a peculiar Swiss law, he always remained a German passport holder though he had never set foot in Germany.

As a young man in Europe, he began his artistic training at the Art Academy in Geneva and continued later in Paris. Under the impact of this training, his paintings show the influence of Cubism and Paul Klee, but they also preserve a distinctive originality that is unmistakably his own. From 1952 to 1974 he lived as a free-lance artist in Zurich, and from 1968 on he simultaneously ran a second studio in London. He had been married twice, the second time to a highly gifted illustrator of children's books. He had two children, a daughter through the first marriage and a son through the second.

In 1970 he made his first trip to Sri Lanka, and in each of the following three years he visited the island for extended holidays, spending several months there at a stretch. In Colombo, he lived the ebullient life of an avant-garde artist, mingling with the indigenous literary and artistic elite and with Western expatriates like himself. In 1974, after his second marriage ended in divorce, he settled in Sri Lanka. Thereafter he never left the island.

One day, probably in 1975, in the small hours of the morning at a merry house party, a friend of his, the script writer and scuba diver Mike Wilson, suddenly declared to him: "The time for renunciation has arrived." With hardly a second thought, Schmidlin said: "I'll join you in that." Thereupon the two men wrapped up their worldly affairs and spontaneously set out for Kataragama, the ancient mystical seat of Hindu and Buddhist spirituality in the southeast corner of the island. Here they became Hindu Shaivite ascetics. While Wilson took readily to the Hindu religious life, and under the name Swami Siva Kalki remained a Shaivite ascetic up to his death in 1995, Schmidlin soon came to feel that this was not his true calling. After the initial excitement of his new way of life wore off, Shaivism lost its appeal for him and another voice began to beckon him. This was not the voice of the world calling him to return to a life of sensual enjoyment. Rather, it was the lure of a different spiritual vocation. He had brought along with him to Kataragama some volumes of Neumann's German translations of the Buddha's discourses, and as he read them, he realized that *this* was the teaching that spoke to his heart, *this* was the path he wanted to follow. He thus left Kataragama to seek a Buddhist master who would initiate him into the life of a Buddhist monk.

His first attempt almost led to disaster. He had inquired from a Sinhalese lay contact, a prominent entrepreneur, how one goes about becoming a Buddhist monk. The gentleman told him—from whatever motive I do not know—that if one wants to be ordained one should purchase a set of monk's robes, *put them on*, and then go seek an elder monk to ordain one. So Schmidlin bought a set of bhikkhu's robes, exchanged his swami's robes for them, and then went to Balangoda to ask if Ven. Balangoda Ānanda Maitreya—the esteemed old scholar-monk—would ordain him. He did not know that he was committing an act that in the Pali Vinaya texts is called *theyyalinga*, "wearing the marks of a monk (the robes) by theft," i.e., without legitimate ordination, and if done with conscious intent to deceive is considered a very serious matter.

Ven. Ananda Maitreya was not at his temple at the time, but when the other monks (all Sri Lankan) asked Schmidlin why he wanted to meet their teacher, he replied that he wanted to get ordained. Puzzled, they asked him why, if he wanted to get ordained, he was already wearing monk's robes. When he told them about the advice his supposed benefactor had given him, their faces shriveled with expressions of horror. It was as if someone were to say that the proper way to get warm on a cold night is to throw oneself into the fireplace, or the proper way to enjoy the view of New York City from the top of the Empire State Building is to jump down to the street below. The monks at Balangoda corrected this error, procured a set of layman's clothes for him, and then sent him on his way.

His search next led him to Ratnapura, where he found the teacher he was seeking in the person of Ven. Prof. Henpitagedara Ñāṇavāsa. Ven. Ñāṇavāsa gave him his first formal instructions in the Dhamma and arranged his "going forth," his ordination as a novice-monk or sāmaṇera. The ordination took place on 5 December 1975. After a period of guidance under his teacher in the ways of the monk's life, the newly ordained Sumedha then returned to Kataragama, where he lived a life of solitary meditation in a cave on Valli Amma Kanda, one of the famous seven hills outside the town. Later, in 1981, at the sacred city of Anuradhapura, he received full ordination (*upasampadā*) as a bhikkhu in the Rāmañña Nikāya, again with Ven. H. Ñāṇavāsa as his teacher.

During the late 1970s, Ven. Sumedha had visited the renowned German elder Ven. Nyanaponika Mahathera (1901–1994) at the Forest Hermitage in Kandy. Though so different in character—the German scholar-monk methodical, rational, and punctilious, the Swiss artist-monk intuitive, emotional, and instinctive—the two quickly became friends. When the elderly German nun, Sister Uppalavaṇṇā, left the Manapadassana Lena at Dulwala, seven miles from Kandy, in 1979, Ven. Nyanaponika wrote to Ven. Sumedha asking whether he would like to move from his austere cave in Kataragama to a more comfortable cave near Kandy. Ven. Sumedha responded positively and moved to the Manāpadassana Lena, "The Cave with the Lovely View," whose Brahmi-script inscription above the drip ledge testifies to its use by Buddhist monks

even from ancient times. Here, in this hillside grotto to be reached by climbing ninety-nine stone steps, he lived for the last twenty-six years of his life. His proximity to Kandy enabled his friendship with Ven. Nyanaponika to blossom over the next fourteen years, right up to the Mahāthera's death in 1994.

During his years as a monk, Ven. Sumedha did not abandon his artistic training but steered it in a new direction. He used his new-found meditative skills, his sharp and original intuitions into the Buddha's teachings, and his extraordinary gifts for balancing color and imagery to transform his art into both a vehicle and an expression of his meditative experiences. During his most productive periods, paintings, mainly watercolors, drawings, and sometimes mixed media creations, poured forth from his hands with remarkable profusion—wondrous, evocative, mystifying pictures that, in his own words, were meant “to make the invisible visible.”

Despite his high level of artistic productivity, for many years Ven. Sumedha's work remained shielded from the eyes of the public. Perhaps, as a cave-dwelling hermit, he did not want to attract public attention to himself and become known as an artist rather than a monk. He did share his paintings with a few friends; a few made their way to the covers of our publications; and some were given as gifts to friends and supporters. But they did not spread beyond this. Nevertheless, sometime in 1995, word of his talent somehow reached the ears of executives at the Deutsche Bank in Colombo. They approached him with the idea of holding an exhibition of his work, and he finally agreed to break his artistic silence. Thus in October 1995, at the Lionel Wendt Art Gallery in Colombo, a two-week exhibition was held of over a hundred of his paintings, mostly watercolors, jointly sponsored by the Deutsche Bank and the Goethe-Institut. The exhibition was repeated at the Buddhist Publication Society in Kandy the following February.

Unlike certain other Western monks who made Sri Lanka their homeland, Ven. Sumedha was not a writer or scholar, but he understood the Dhamma well. His style of comprehending and explaining the Dhamma was quite unique, almost idiosyncratic. I used to say that whereas most of us understand and explain the Dhamma by way of ideas and concepts, Ven. Sumedha understood and explained the Dhamma by way of images. He didn't absorb the teachings conceptually, as a normal person does; to assimilate them with his own peculiar mental faculties, he had to relate to them *imagistically*, to turn them into pictures. Even when he gave talks on the Dhamma, the talks usually unfolded by stringing together images or by abruptly juxtaposing conceptually discrete notions in an almost metaphorical way rather than by linking logically connected sequences of thoughts.

While Ven. Sumedha could speak uninterruptedly on the Dhamma for hours, his most congenial medium for communicating his understanding of the Buddha's message was visual art, and in this medium imagery naturally prevailed over concepts. His paintings, however, were not constituted by ordinary images, by familiar pictures of the everyday world. They disclosed to us, rather, mysterious and hidden realms of the imagination, landscapes of the deep mind. In these landscapes, geometric shapes emerge out of space, intersecting, melding, or colliding; bizarre figures hang suspended, staring out at us with enigmatic expressions, as though trying to convey to us a tale that cannot be stated in words; animals, humans, demons, and deities join in a deep embrace, dropping their differences in the recognition of a shared psychological space; luminous spheres arise against dim backgrounds, floating spheres filled with faces, sometimes solemn, sometimes gleeful, sometimes absorbed in meditative bliss—often different perspectives on Bhikkhu Sumedha's own face! In Ven. Sumedha's paintings we meet many strange beings, indeed; yet these beings are not as strange as they might seem at first sight. They are the deep images of the subconscious mind becoming manifest through watercolors and paints. They are our own past and future lives staring back at us and asking to be acknowledged. They are the myriad potentials of our karma, which the Buddha himself has said are more varied than the most complex work of art, splattered among the realms of sentient beings. And through Ven. Sumedha's art they speak to us of crucial themes that take us to the heart of the Dhamma: of the transience of sensual pleasures, of the dance of impermanence, of the mask-like nature of selfhood, of the ever-shifting stream of forms that constitutes saṃsāra, and of a peace that always lies just on the other side of this stream, transcending all conditioned modes of understanding.

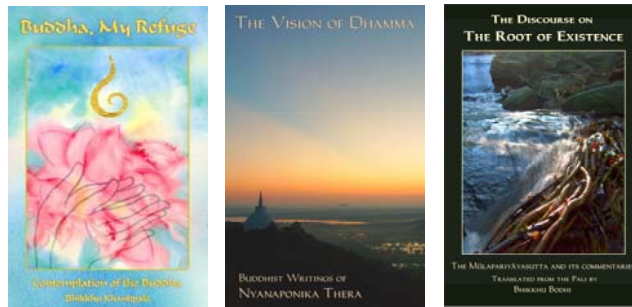
Venerable Sumedha was a much loved and venerated member of the Sangha. He came to Sri Lanka as an artist seeking enjoyment and relaxation; the strange workings of karma, swelling up from an unfathomable past, turned him into a sage who found here wisdom, consolation, and a path to final peace. He lived and died as a true monk and rare visionary: Sumedha, the cave-dwelling meditator, the spiritual patron of the Peradeniya Teaching Hospital, the genius artist, and one who, even on the brink of his own death, still thought of a frightened child crying on a nearby hospital bed.

Burns Unit

Venerable Sumedha's was hoping to set up a burns unit at the Peradeniya University Teaching Hospital as there is no such facility in the whole of Sri Lanka and patients with large burns now usually die from infections due to the lack of sterile conditions in the normal hospital wards. Their lives could be saved if there would be a burns unit, which is not prohibitively expensive to set up here, probably not costing more than an average Mercedes Benz. Dr. Goonatilake, who is mentioned in the above article, is intending to carry out Ven. Sumedha's idea and intends to set up a state-of-the-art unit with three patient rooms and a rehabilitation area, etc. Those who are interested to support this meritorious project can contact Prof. Chula Goonasekera MD PhD, Professor in Anaesthesiology, Faculty of Medicine, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka. Email: agoonase@slt.lk or Ken and Visakha Kawasaki at brelief@earthlink.net.

Reprints

Vision of Dhamma by Ven. Nyanaponika Thera, *Root of Existence* by Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi, *Buddha My Refuge* by Bhikkhu Khantipālo, *Life of the Buddha* by Ñāṇamoli Thera, *Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma* by Bhikkhu Bodhi (Asia edition).



In the Printing Press

Jhānas in Theravada Buddhism by Bhante Henepola Gunaratana, *Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma* by Bhikkhu Bodhi (global edition), *Curbing Anger, Spreading Love* by Visuddhācāra, *Pali Glossary* by Ñāṇamoli Thera, *In this Very Life* by Sayādaw U Paṇḍita, *Opening the Door of Your Heart* by Ajahn Brahmavaṃso.

Online Ordering System

After some unpredicted delays, the BPS online ordering system is finally being set up and, if things go well (which they might not as the bank is not so helpful as it said it would be), should be ready in a month or two. Once the gateway is working, BPS books can be ordered online and memberships can be extended online.

Dr. Ian Stevenson (1918–2007).

On 8.2.2007, Dr. Ian Stevenson passed away. Among Buddhists he was well known for his research on rebirth and parapsychology, especially for his book *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*. During his Asian research trips, he collaborated with Francis Story and wrote the introduction for Story's posthumous *Rebirth as Doctrine and Experience*, published by the BPS. He was a professor of psychiatry at the University of Virginia from 1957 until his death and was known for his high quality, extraordinary work. More information on Dr. Stevenson can be found on <http://www.pflyceum.org/178.html>.



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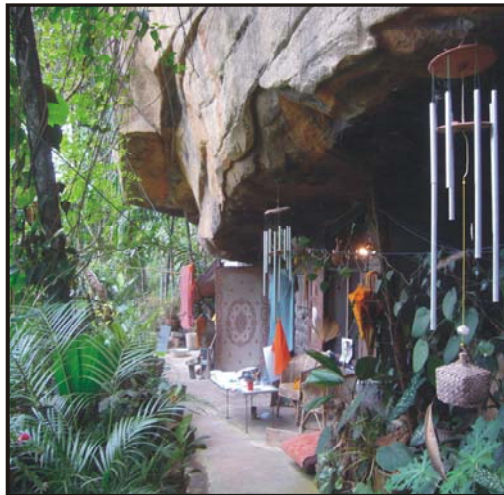
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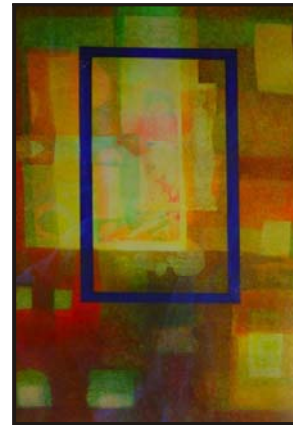
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(1) A “self-portrait” painted on the wall of the cave. (2) Ven. Sumedha in his cave, three weeks before he died. (3) In ICU, 2 days before he died. (4) Paritta chanting led by Ven. Y. Dhammapāla, just before the body was donated to the medical faculty for medical research purposes the morning after Ven. Sumedha died. (5) Painting. (6) The veranda of the Cave. (7) Painting.

Similes of the Raft and the Snake-catcher

by Bhante Henepola Gunaratana¹

“Bhikkhus, I shall show you how the Dhamma is similar to a raft, being for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of grasping.” (Majjhima Nikāya, Sutta 22 § 13)

What is the use of a raft? It is used for crossing over a vast expanse of water which is difficult otherwise to cross over. The close scrutiny of the application of this simile used by the Buddha in the Snake-simile Sutta (Alagaddūpamasutta) in the Majjhima Nikāya (MN 22) elucidates how skillfully he chose it to illustrate precisely what people, who don't fully comprehend the meaning of religions, have been doing throughout the history of religion. In this simile the Buddha pointed out that if a man who, after crossing over the vast expanse of water by a raft, were to determine to carry the raft over his shoulders, thinking by doing so he would show his gratitude to the raft for helping him to save his life, he would be foolish.

The simile of snake-catcher used by the Buddha in the aforementioned Sutta is also equally indispensable in illustrating the danger of the wrong grasp of a religion. If a man who does not know how to catch a poisonous snake, were to hold the snake either by his body or by his tail he may get bitten by the snake and consequently suffer severe injury or death. The message in these two similes, once realized fully, facilitates better understanding of the tension stemming from the increase of violence and crime in the name of religion in modern society.

The wrong grasp of religion can lead man to justify his greed, hatred, and foolishness. His distorted views, distorted perception and distorted consciousness force him to grasp a religion wrongly and undermine its very foundation, causing more pain and suffering—as does the wrong grasp of the snake.

A wrong grasp of religion can be a passageway to defeat the very purpose of religion and encourage people to commit atrocities in the name of their faith. People sometimes not only cling to religions but naively obey any man or woman who, being a persuasive speaker, may promote and justify violence and unethical practices in the name of religion. By supporting such a person with their time, skill, or wealth, they only increase his or her greed and hatred and ignorance. Blinded by religious beliefs, they may even try over-zealously to protect their religions not only by inculcating hatred and fear in many of their gullible followers' minds, but also by advocating even murder in the name of their beliefs.

If a man simply clings to the raft after using it to cross over the ocean, instead of leaving it on the shore for someone else to use it, he will not do the wise thing either. He rather makes the raft a heavy burden on his shoulder. The raft is made out of reeds, sticks, branches, and foliage. They are bound by a rope or bark of a tree. Similarly this body is made up of form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness, which are bound together by ignorance and desire to make body-mind complexity. Just as this man clings to the raft made up of reeds, sticks, branches and foliage, we may cling to the body and mind made up of form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness bound by craving and ignorance. The man clinging to the raft which helped him to cross over the vast expanse of water may continue to carry the burden of the very same raft. Similarly by clinging to our mind-body complexity and our religious beliefs we continue to carry their burden. He remains bound to his raft and we to the mind-body. He is on the shore and we are in saṃsāra. This body and mind, together with the feelings, perception and mental formations, exist not for clinging but only for gaining knowledge and insight necessary for attaining liberation from saṃsāra. “Monks,” said the Buddha, “you should let go even (good) teaching, how much more false ones.” Good teaching benefits us only if we use it, just like the raft. No teaching, however good it is, can help us if we simply cling to it. Clinging even to good teaching can cause pain and suffering. Just imagine how much more painful it could be when we cling to bad things! The man who uses a raft to cross over the body of water has to be wise. Similarly one who uses this body-mind complexity to cross over the ocean of saṃsāra has to be wise. Therefore he will not cling to this body-mind complexity at all. If he does, he cannot attain enlightenment.

Clinging to beliefs without practice can also easily make people religious fanatics who seek refuge in violence to resolve problems, for they are totally ignorant of what their religion teaches them. People who are unaware of the message of their religion may live in constant fear of criticism of their religion and wish to protect it by destroying people who have different beliefs. The fear of criticism arises in the mind ill-directed by the ambivalent belief system that cannot vouch for security and actuality. The Buddha said: “An ill-directed mind can do you more harm than all your enemies in the world together can do.” (Dhp 42) Similarly, he said: “A well directed mind can do you more good than all your parents, friends and relatives together can do for you.” (Dhp 43) The real conqueror is not the one who conquers thousands upon thousands of people in a battle field, but one who conquers himself. (Dhp 103)

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The Buddha never even implied causing harm to anybody in order to protect one's country, to protect Buddhism, the religion of peace, harmony, compassion and loving-kindness. Killing or even the thought of killing any living being, let alone human beings, is diametrically opposed to the teaching of the most compassionate and loving Buddha, who said: "He is called virtuous and wise who, wishing success, does not commit crimes for the sake of oneself, for the sake of others, for the sake of one's own children, for the sake of wealth, or for the sake of the country." (Dhp 84) The Buddha's teaching stands above all notions of countries, cultures, languages, ethnic affiliations and everything else, for he taught only the truth which is permanent, eternal and bound by nothing in the world.

When you embark the raft, you should check it very carefully to verify whether it is secure and properly put together, lest you may drown by using a defective raft. Similarly, you should very carefully learn and critically examine any religion before accepting or rejecting it. Patient listening to someone criticizing the Buddha, Dhamma or the community of Sangha, is highly recommended in the teaching of the Buddha.

"If for that others revile, abuse, scold and insult the Perfect One (Buddha), on that account, O monks, the Perfect One will not feel annoyance, nor dejection, nor displeasure in his heart. And if for that others respect, revere, honor and venerate the Perfect One, on that account the Perfect One will not feel delight, or joy, or elation in his heart. If for that other respect, revere, honor, and venerate the Perfect One, he will think: 'It is towards this (mind-body aggregate) which was formerly fully comprehended, that they perform such acts.

Therefore, O monks, if you, too, are reviled, abused, scolded, and insulted by others, you should on that account not entertain annoyance, or dejection, or displeasure in your hearts. And if others respect, revere, honor and venerate you, on that account you should not entertain delight or joy or elation in your hearts. If others respect, revere, honor, and venerate you, you should think: 'It is towards this (mind-body aggregate) which was formerly comprehended, that they perform such acts.'" (MN 22 § 38)

Analytical investigation and critical knowledge of Dhamma are essential factors of enlightenment in Buddhism. For if you know for sure that what you practice is true, you should not be alarmed by criticism. You rather should be glad to welcome critical investigation of it so you can look at what you practice from different perspective. If you know gold as gold, for instance, you would without any hesitation let any well trained goldsmith test it by cutting, burning, rubbing and hammering it, for you are certain that he will not determine your gold to be copper. Only if you give him a gilded piece of lead saying that it is gold, you would have reason to fear of his test.

The Buddha advised us not to be alarmed by criticism, but listen to criticism very carefully and mindfully without getting upset about what we hear and measure it by the text. After thorough investigation, we certainly find no fault in the Buddha, Dhamma, or Sangha. However, we will find out that the criticism has come from anger, prejudice, frustration, fear, neuroses, paranoia, etc. Then, of course, instead of getting angry with the person who has all these problems, we should try to help him with loving-kindness. He deserves our loving-kindness and compassion rather than our hate. No hate is ever going to solve any problem in the world and it never did, for hate is never appeased by hatred in this world, but by love alone.

In the teaching of the Buddha, one finds no room for resolving any problem through violent means. A Buddhist who is full of greed, hatred and delusion, and unmindful of the Buddha's real message, exercising his total freedom of choice and responsibility guaranteed in Buddhism, may kill someone, but he can never quote any Buddhist text to justify and support his killing.

We are supposed to use the Buddha Dhamma without clinging to it, but only to cross this cycle of birth and death—saṃsāra. He advised us to use his teaching like a raft that is used only to cross a body of water not to cling to it. It is the passionate clinging to what we believe, rather than understanding how we should use it to guide our daily life in the right direction, which arouses our deeply rooted hatred that may force us to solve our problems through violent means. It is the passionate clinging to things that creates all kinds of problems.

The Meaning of Satipaṭṭhāna

by Sayādaw U Paṇḍita²

The seven benefits of mindfulness

The practice of *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation leads to the purification of the mind, the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, the complete destruction of physical pain and mental distress, the entering of the right path and the attainment of Nibbāna.

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The etymology of satipaṭṭhāna

The Pali term *satipaṭṭhāna* is generally rendered as the “four foundations of mindfulness.” However, its full meaning can be revealed by breaking up the compound word into its parts and examining these elements both individually and in combination: *sati* + *paṭṭhāna* or *sati* + *pa* + (*t*)*ṭhāna*.

The word *sati* derives from the root meaning “to remember” (*sarati*), but as a mental factor it signifies “presence of mind, attentiveness to the present, awareness, wakefulness and heedfulness,” rather than the faculty of memory of the past. *Paṭṭhāna* means “close, firm and steadfast establishment, application, setting up.”

Combining these two elements, the meaning of the compound becomes “close, firm and steadfast establishment of awareness on the object of observation.” This kind of awareness is also called *suppaṭṭhita sati*, “steadfast mindfulness.”

The four foundations of mindfulness

The four foundations of mindfulness have a single essence—mindful contemplation of natural phenomena. They are differentiated insofar as this mindful contemplation is applied to four objects: 1. the body (*kāya*); 2. feelings (*vedanā*); 3. states of consciousness (*citta*); and 4. mental objects (*dhammā*). The latter comprise such factors as the five hindrances, the five aggregates, the six sense bases and six sense objects (general activities), the seven factors of enlightenment and the four noble truths.

Sati

“Mindfulness” has come to be the accepted English translation of the term *sati*. However, this is an incomplete rendering. “Observing power” is a more adequate translation. The full scope of its meaning will be explained by examining its various aspects, such as characteristic, function, manifestation, proximate cause and the further distinguishing factors of mindfulness.

Non-superficiality

Sati has the *characteristic* of not wobbling; that is, of not floating away from the object (*apilāpana-lakkhaṇa*). The commentators have given the simile of a dried, hollow pumpkin thrown into water. The cork or pumpkin will pop up and down on the surface of the water. In the same way, the noting and observing mind should not skim over the object in a superficial manner. Instead, the mind should sink or plunge into the object of observation, just as when a stone is thrown into water it will sink or plunge to the bottom.

Suppose you are watching your abdomen as the object of your *satipaṭṭhāna* practice: try to be very firm, focusing your attention on the main object so that the mind will not skip off. If doing so, the mind will sink deeply into the process of rising and falling. As the mind penetrates this process, you can comprehend its true nature: tension, pressure, movement and so on.

Keeping the object in view

The *function* of *sati* is the absence of confusion, or non-forgetfulness (*asammosa rasa*). This means that the noting and observing mind should neither lose sight of, nor miss, nor forget, nor allow the object of observation to disappear. To express this aspect positively, the function of *sati* is to keep the object always in view. Just as a footballer never loses sight of the football, a badminton player the shuttlecock, and a boxer his opponent’s movements, so too the yogi never loses sight of the object of mindfulness.

Confrontation and protection

There are two *manifestations* of *sati*, namely: coming face-to-face with the object and protection.

Face-to-face with the object

The *chief manifestation* of *sati* is confrontation—it sets the mind directly, face-to-face, with the object of observation (*visayābhimukhabhāva-paccupaṭṭhāna*). *Sati* manifests as the mind in a state (*bhāva*) of confronting face-to-face (*abhimukha*) with an object or objective field (*visaya*).

It is said that the human face is the index of character. Therefore, if you want to “size up” a person, you have to be face-to-face with that person and examine his or her face carefully. Then your judgment will be correct. But if you stand at an angle, behind or far away from that other person, then you will not be able to distinguish the distinctive features of his face. Similarly, when you are observing the rising movement of your abdomen, if the mind is really face-to-face with the rising movement, you will notice different sensations in the rising such as tension, pressure, heat, coolness or movement.

Protection

If the noting and observing mind remains face-to-face with the object of observation for a significant period of time, the yogi can discover a great purity of mind due to the absence of *kilesas* (mental defilements). This purity is the result of the

second manifestation of sati—*guardianship* or *protection* from attack by the *kilesas* (*āraṅkha-paccupaṭṭhāna*). With sati present, mental defilements have no chance to enter the stream of consciousness.

Sati is likened to a doorkeeper because it guards the six sense doors. A doorkeeper does not admit bad and destructive people; he admits only good and useful people. *Sati* does not admit unwholesomeness (*akusala*); it admits only wholesomeness (*kusala*). By not accepting *akusala*, the mind is protected.

The proximate causes of mindfulness

The *proximate causes* for the arising of sati are: strong perception (*thirasaññā-padaṭṭhāna*); and the four foundations of mindfulness (*kāyādi-satipaṭṭhāna-padaṭṭhāna*).

Strong perception

In order to be mindful of an object, strong and firm (*thira*) perception of it is necessary. As much as perception (*saññā*) is firm, strong and steadfast, mindfulness will also be firm, strong and steadfast.

The two functions of perception are the recording and the recognition of formations (*saṅkhārā*), irrespective of their wholesome or unwholesome nature. *Saññā* is compared to the recording of talks with the help of a tape or video recorder. The recording takes place regardless of the content or quality of the talks. A clear, high quality recording, such as a state-of-the-art digital recording on CD of a classical concert or opera, is the cause for a clear, strong, impressive listening experience (mindfulness) when replaying the recording.

Similarly, in the meditation practice a strong, clear-cut perception (noting or labeling) of the arising objects of observation is very supportive of strong, clear-cut, steadfast mindfulness.

Four foundations of mindfulness

Another proximate cause for the arising of sati is the four foundations of mindfulness (*kāyādi satipaṭṭhāna padaṭṭhāna*). That is, mindfulness itself is the cause of mindfulness. In fact, the development of mindfulness is the result of continuous momentum, one moment of mindfulness causing the next.

This can be compared to the process of acquiring an education, assuming that the student is studious and does his homework respectfully. Lessons learnt in the lower grades are a cause for learning lessons in the higher grade. Primary school education is a cause for high school education, and this in turn serves as a cause for tertiary and university education.

In a nutshell, mindfulness leads to ever greater and stronger mindfulness.

Immediacy

Immediacy in the awareness of an object of observation is very important. Nothing should come between the presently arising object and the noting and observing. The arising object and the noting mind should not be separated in time. The observation of the presently arising object should happen at once, without any delay. It should be instant. As soon as the object of observation arises, it should be noted and observed.

If one's noting and observing is delayed, then the object will have already passed by the time one's awareness turns to it. Objects of the past and future cannot be known correctly, and if the attention cannot remain with objects as they arise, then it is no longer *vipassanā* practice. It is no longer dwelling in reality.

Concurrence

When two or more processes occur at the same time, it is the phenomenon of "concurrency." Concurrence of the noting and observing mind and the object of observation is an important aspect of sati. For example, when an object arises, the mind falls on the object simultaneously with its arising, synchronically with it.

Extraordinary mindfulness

The particle *pa* of *sati pa-(t)ṭhāna* specifies that the mindfulness should be of an extraordinary or outstanding nature (*visiṭṭha*); excessive, intensive and persistent (*bhusaṭṭha*). Ordinary mindfulness is out of place in intensive satipaṭṭhāna meditation. It is this nature of the particle *pa*, and its practical aspects, which we shall now explore.

Rushing (pakkhanditvā pavattati)

The particle *pa* of *sati pa-(t)ṭhāna* can also be interpreted as *pa-(k)khandana*: rushing, leaping, plunging. As soon as the object of observation arises, the mind has to rush forward towards and into the object of observation with great force, with courage. It attacks the object without hesitation, without thinking, reflecting, analyzing, imagining, questioning, considering, speculating or fantasizing. Thus, several aspects are involved in "rushing":

1) Sudden, impetuous, quick and swift movement with violence, speed or great force, strength and dynamism. Simile: like rushing somebody to the hospital. 2) Capturing, catching or arresting by sudden attack; to make a swift attack or assault; to

charge. Simile: soldiers capture and defeat the enemy troops in a sudden, forceful attack. 3) An eager movement of many people to get to a particular place. Simile: crowds rush the gates of the football stadium just before the game begins. 4) To move urgently, with excessive speed, haste, or hurry. Simile: a person at work may say, “I’m in a dreadful rush”; or, in accordance with the saying, “strike while the iron is hot.” One notes and observes the object while it is “fresh” or “hot.”

Yogis should not be noting and observing in a stop-and-go manner. The awareness should not be slack, sluggish, casual; not lagging behind or late; not gazing. It should be without wandering mind, with no room for thoughts. The noting and observing should not be in a cool and hesitating manner; instead, it must be rushing in a systematic and orderly manner.

Firmly grasping or seizing the object (upagaṇhitvā pavattati)

A rice farmer when harvesting paddy needs to firmly grasp or seize a bushel of rice. Only then will he be able to cut it with a sickle. Similarly, a meditator has to firmly grasp the object of observation so that the mind will neither slip off nor lose the object under observation. As mindfulness becomes steadfast, the yogi will be able to firmly seize coarse objects. With more practice, attention can hold on to more refined objects and eventually even very subtle objects can be firmly grasped by the mind. Therefore, a yogi should first try to grasp physical objects before attempting to seize the more subtle type of mental objects like intentions, thoughts, etc.

Covering the object completely (pattharivā pavattati)

The noting and observing mind must cover the object of observation completely, spreading over the entire object, enveloping it, grasping it in its entirety. Not just a part of the object must be observed, but the object should be noted and observed from the beginning, through its middle, to its end.

Unbroken continuity (pavattati)

In the practical sense, this aspect means that the noting and observing of the arising objects of observation should be continuous; that is, one moment of mindfulness connected to the next moment of mindfulness, moment after moment. The preceding moment of mindfulness should be connected with the succeeding moment of mindfulness. In brief, mindfulness should be sustained.

Similes

If there is a gap between two floor planks, dust and sand may enter. If there is no continuity of mindfulness and there is a gap, defilements may enter. In the past a fire had to be started by rubbing two sticks together. If one would fail to rub continuously, but instead would take a rest and resume rubbing later, no fire would start. Similarly, if mindfulness is not continuous, the fire of wisdom will not ignite.

To reaffirm this aspect negatively, the noting and observing, or mindfulness, of the objects should not have gaps but be continuous; it should not proceed in a stop-and-go manner. People who practice in fits and starts, resting occasionally and then starting again, being mindful for a stretch and then stopping to daydream, are known as “chameleon yogis.”

Non-manipulating

The universal characteristic of “not-self (*anattā*) can be applied to the process of noting and observing the arising physical and mental objects. A meditator must take great care to watch the objects of observation without manipulating, controlling or governing them. He should simply observe what is there—not what he expects or wants to be there.

Conclusion

What can we now say *satipaṭṭhāna* is? *Satipaṭṭhāna* is mindfulness of any noted object by rushing to, entering into and spreading over it, so that the mind stays closely and firmly with it. When noting “rising,” the mind enters the noted object; that is, the rising movement of the abdomen. The mindfulness rushes into it and spreads over it so that the mind stays closely and firmly on this object or phenomenon. The process is then repeated when noting “falling,” and so on for all other objects that arise in the body and mind.

In conclusion, mindfulness must be dynamic and confrontational. Mindfulness should leap forward onto the object, covering it completely, penetrating into it and not missing any part of it. If your mindfulness has these qualities, then swift progress in meditation is guaranteed and, with the fulfillment of the practice, seeing *Nibbāna* is assured.

Satipaṭṭhāna at a glance

Close and firm establishment; non-superficiality; keeping the object in view; face-to-face with the object; protection of the mind from attack by *kilesas*; strong perception; mindfulness is the cause of mindfulness; rushing and plunging; firmly grasping the object; completely covering, or spreading over the object; immediacy; continuity; concurrence; non-manipulating.
