

“Practising together we, in a sense, carry one another when there is faltering – just through doing the practice to the very best of our ability.”



The Buddha's advice to Meghiya

From a sutta class with Ajahn Candasiri

This sutta, which appears twice in the Pali canon (Ud. Iv i, AN ix i 3), tells of a young monk, the Venerable Meghiya, who was the Buddha's attendant.

This bhikkhu, returning from alms round one morning, spotted a beautiful and delightful mango grove. He felt this would be the ideal place to practise meditation, so he asked the Buddha if he might go there for the day's meditation.

The Buddha responded by asking him to wait until another monk came to carry out his duties as attendant. However, the Venerable Meghiya was eager to go and persisted in his request: "The Lord has nothing further that should be done, and nothing to add to what has been done, but for me there is something further to be done and something to add to what has been done."

After the third such request, the Buddha agreed: "Do now, Meghiya, as you think fit." So Meghiya went to the mango grove and finding a suitable shady spot, sat down, his back erect and began his meditation. But for the whole time his mind was filled with unskillful thoughts — of sensuality, malevolence and cruelty. This was a source of surprise and consternation.

He had gone forth, full of faith and aspiration; he had found for himself what seemed like the perfect situation for practice, and was making enormous effort — but it was all going wrong, it was not bringing the results he had anticipated or hoped for. At the end of what must have been a very difficult afternoon, he returned to the Buddha to tell him of his troubles.

It seems that the Buddha was not at all surprised when he heard what had happened. (In fact, the Pali commentary suggests that the Buddha had refused permission for him to go, knowing that he was not yet ready to practise in this way.) He then listed the five conditions that, when the heart's deliverance is not yet ripe, conduce to its ripening:

1. Good friends
2. Virtuous life
3. Profitable talk
4. Zealous exertion
5. Insight into impermanence, which leads to the ending of Ill.

Four other things, he said, should also be developed (*bhavetabba*):

- i. Meditation on the unlovely (repulsive or loathsome) for the abandonment of passion (lust or greed).
- ii. Kindliness, for the abandonment of ill will.
- iii. Mindfulness of in and out breathing (*anapanasati*) for cutting off discursive thinking.
- iv. The contemplation of impermanence

(*aniccasanna*), in order to uproot pride of egoism: “for one who thinks on impermanence, the thought of not-self is established; thinking on there being no self, one wins to wherein the conceit ‘I am’ is uprooted, to the cool (*nibbana*) even in this life.”

We can take a closer look at these.

Firstly, good friends (*kalyanamitta hoti kalyana-sampavanko*): this is usually understood as meaning one has a wise teacher or wise spiritual companions. It would certainly be appropriate in this context: the Buddha advising the young monk on the importance of being with people who can influence him in a wholesome way. However, the word ‘*hoti*’ means ‘he is’, so a more literal translation might be: “He is a friend, an intimate of what is good and wholesome.’ This points to the need for any type of spiritual endeavour to be motivated by a sense of what is right, a love of the good, and a longing to manifest that in one’s life.

Whereas, practice motivated by selfishness — the desire to gain power, prestige, or to take advantage of others — would bring, instead of release, a sense of being increasingly trapped in the world of one’s own self seeking (*samsara*).

The Buddha explains that having a wise advisor, good friends or simply a love of the good, is the natural basis for the arising of other conditions. So, secondly: ‘It may be expected of one who has wise companions that he will be virtuous’ (*silava hoti*).

We learn by example. In Sangha life, although there is formal training in vinaya, most of our learning and aspiration comes simply through watching how others do things: their manner of behaviour, what they say (or don't say), and when and how they say it. Associating with people following a similar precept form stimulates an interest in this training of body, speech and mind; we are encouraged by its results. So the full translation of the second condition is that 'a monk is virtuous, he abides restrained by the restraint of the obligations; he is perfect in the practice of right behaviour, sees danger in trifling faults and trains himself in the ways of training.'

Thirdly: profitable talk. The sutta states that such talk arises easily, and that there is a willingness to share one's understanding with others: it arises naturally, according to the way one is living the life.

This talk is described as being that which is 'serious and suitable for opening up the heart, and conduces to a complete turning away from worldly values (*nibbidaya*): to dispassion, ending, calm, comprehension, to perfect insight, to Nibbana. That is to say, talk about wanting little; contentment; solitude; avoiding society; putting forth effort; virtue, concentration and wisdom; about release and the knowledge and insight of release'.

The company of wise friends who are at ease in themselves, dispels any sense of having to repress or deny inclinations that do not accord with these guidelines; to see it isn't a matter of forcing oneself into a puritanical

kind of 'holiness', but that these qualities arise naturally as the practice matures.

The fourth condition is zealous exertion. One abides, 'resolute in energy for the abandoning of unprofitable things and for taking up what is profitable — stout and strong in effort, not giving up on what one has undertaken (not relinquishing the burden of righteousness)'. Again, a wise teacher or good friend can encourage us and guide our efforts towards what is wholesome.

Inevitably, on a religious path there are times when the practice seems dull, lifeless, or totally unproductive. There may be an inclination to abandon the whole thing and to return to look for refuge in the world, in what is familiar and seems comfortable.

A wise teacher and good friends remind us of our deeper aspiration and potential, and of the inherent danger or unsatisfactoriness of the world of our senses. This enables us to continue towards our goal. Practising together we, in a sense, carry one another when there is faltering — just through doing the practice to the very best of our ability.

Fifthly, 'a monk is possessed of insight, and understands the way of growth and decay, having Ariyan penetration concerning the way to the utter destruction of Ill.'

We need to be reminded of where to look to find our freedom. It is not in the attainment of some

special state in the future, although such states can be the basis for insight, but right in this moment itself.

The late Ajahn Buddhadasa used to say: “Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to!” It’s an insight that’s so subtle that we can easily miss it. Our longing for security and the power of our conditioning are so strong that we can dismiss this key to the door of the Deathless; we are bound by ignorance, nescience — not seeing, not wanting to look, until it is too late.

So we need every encouragement to keep looking, to keep remembering, in order to find that point of non-attachment — which is not a rejection of anything at all but, rather, a proper appreciation of our human predicament.

Some pick it up quickly (according to the commentary, the Venerable Meghiya attained to stream entry just on hearing this teaching); for others, the lessons need much repetition. We are caught by some desire — a plan, an idea, a regret or a grudge — it hurts, and eventually we let go.

This happens over and over again, until finally we learn not to pick things up, not to attach to anything at all. The beauty of Nature is in its transitoriness — not in anything lasting that one can claim as one’s own. The Buddha, through his own efforts, awakened to this reality, which freed him from having to ‘trudge and travel through this long round’ (*samsara*). This is the insight, as he explained to the Venerable Meghiya, that can free us

from all the pain of attachment.

The Buddha concludes by outlining techniques of meditation that should be cultivated in response to the specific conditions that may arise in the mind. This responsiveness itself is important to consider. We are not asked to simply work away at developing one particular type of meditation practice.

The encouragement is to be aware of what is happening in the mind at any time, and to exercise our intelligence in choosing the technique suitable to bring about and support a state of calm, in order that wisdom may arise.

So we have: (i) Meditation on the unlovely (*asubha*) for overcoming states of passion, lust or greed. Sometimes this is translated as meditation on loathsomeness or repulsiveness — which indeed can be the case with certain aspects of physicality. However, a more analytical approach can often be effective in inducing a sense of neutrality or disinterest, as opposed to aversion — which is actually just another form of desire.

For example, there is the contemplation that monks and nuns are given at the time of Going Forth — hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth and skin — which is a way of dismantling the illusion of physical beauty or attractiveness of another person.

Contemplating objects in terms of the elements that comprise them — earth, water, fire and air — can be helpful in cooling passion or interest, with things like

food; looking at the form, colour or texture, rather than just automatically absorbing into the anticipation of something to be consumed, or delighting in the smell or taste of it.

Next, (ii), for dealing with malevolence or ill will, the practice of kindness or well wishing (*metta*) is recommended. This does not mean that we have to like everybody, but at least to avoid allowing the mind to linger in states of negativity or aversion towards them.

The third meditation (iii) is mindfulness of in and out breathing (*anapanasati*). The Buddha recommended this universally as a way of focussing the mind in the present; gathering attention onto the breath, rather than being whirled around, pulled to and fro by distracting thoughts. While the fourth contemplation (iv) is of impermanence.

One way to approach this is by careful attention to how we experience 'ourselves' and each other in each moment. This pierces the illusion of a fixed and enduring personality that is in any way related to body or mind: there is simply awareness. These four meditation exercises need to be developed continually in order for the deeply rooted habits, which arise because of our ignorance, to be transformed.

But, as the Buddha pointed out to the Venerable Meghiya, the ripening of the heart's emancipation will arise quite naturally when the five conditions are there as a basis for our practice.

