

Frank R. Podgorski
Seton Hall University

KALYANA METTA : THE BUDDHIST SPIRITUAL GURU

To look for a spiritual guide or a spiritual director in any religious tradition is to search for an adept, i.e., for someone who attests to *personal experience* of the tradition, or at the very least for someone who claims intimate knowledge of the details or signposts on the path or paths proclaimed by a particular vision. For Buddhist spiritual guides, *experience, experience* modelled after the Buddha's original Enlightenment and Nirvana, is the commanding principle and paradigm; personal *realization* of an *experience* similar to the *Buddha-experience* is thus the goal of both the Buddhist novice as well as the spiritual guide or skilled adept. Significantly, both novice and guide are located within a process of spiritual journey toward an appreciation, realization, and awakening to an *experience* proclaimed by the Buddha. Both are motivated to pursue the *unique wisdom* proclaimed by the Buddha.

The Theravāda tradition names such spiritual guides "*kalyana metta*"; a "*kalyana metta*" is literally a "beautiful friend." A Buddhist "beautiful friend" is one who encourages, instructs, and acts as a guide or director for those wishing to follow the path of the Buddha; this guide consciously points to a specific moral and ethical ideal. Although disciplined "self-effort", the prescribed norm and dynamic of the earliest Buddhist spirituality, seems almost automatically to point in the direction of solitariness and individual effort, nevertheless the early communities do name the "*kalyana metta*" as a specially skilled adept whose guidance is to be sought. Thus the "*kalyana metta*" identifies with the spiritual journey of the novice in a unique way; the guide encourages, prods, corrects, blends with, and clarifies the details of the path or the stream to be crossed. The "*kalyana metta*" aims to foster and *intensify* the novice's efforts at "self-control"; yet the guide always encourages and relates such "self-emptying" to the spirit, tone, footprints, and awareness of the model of the *Buddha-experience*. *Thus the journey of the Buddha became a map or paradigm for all Buddhists.* Yet most

importantly, full responsibility for pursuing and persevering in the rigours of this spiritual journey ultimately rests on the novice, although the "*kalyana metta*", the "beautiful friend", may very well prod and frequently recall the path and effort recommended by the original Buddha. However, does the spiritual guide assume total responsibility for the progress of the novice?

Even the earliest Theravada spiritual guides could both point to and draw upon the all pervasive and deep Indian reverence for the Guru tradition. By the time of the Buddha, the "*Guru-Śiṣya*" relationship had already become one of the most traditional ways of transmitting India's sacred heritage and wisdom. "An enlightened guru is the very embodiment of the living word; it is said that he has realized and internalized its meaning within the depths of his being; he is thus the perfect mediator between the disciple and the ultimate".¹ Thus the guru was envisioned as a living link between past and present; indeed the guru is often considered the very embodiment of a directly communicable oral tradition, a wisdom tradition which *transcends* and yet *impacts* on all *particularity*. The living guru therefore personifies the continuity of a directly communicable oral tradition; each guru then is far more than a individual skilled spiritual explorer; the guru is the transmitter of sacred wisdom.²

Thus to meet a guru means not only to hear and learn sacred wisdom and teachings from the past; more importantly, the *śiṣya* or disciple encounters the living witness of the heritage in the person of the guru. Therefore, the *śiṣya* imitates, learns from, and takes as model the *guru* who is encountered. *Śravaṇa* (listening) is far more than simply hearing and ingesting words; rather it is the discovery and uncovering of the living tradition handed on by the guru; it is the discovery of the viability of this tradition for our present age. In this shared quest, guru and *śiṣya* blend and overcome individuality although each remains personally responsible for the pursuit of the journey; a unique empathy and compassion arises between the pair. Precisely because of such "leading forth" or "midwifery", the guru has actually been revered and

1. Purusottama Bilimoria, "The Spiritual Guide and the Disciple in the Indian Tradition" in *Journal of Dharma*, V. 3 (1980) : 277.

2. William Cenkner, "The Pondit : The Embodiment of Oral Tradition" in *Journal of Dharma*, V. 3 (1980) : 237-251.

even worshipped in India; yet the guru is revered for the "holiness" or "sacredness" of the tradition that is transmitted or handed down. Nevertheless, this guru leads forth or brings to the surface precisely that "holiness" already present within the novice.

The Buddhist "*kalyana metta*", the Buddhist spiritual guide or "beautiful friend", must be viewed in the light of this all pervasive "*guru-śiṣya*" relationship; this was the context that the early Buddhist communities and the Buddhist spiritual guide presumed. Like the guru, the Buddhist spiritual guide is also identified as the living embodiment or personification of a tradition; like the guru, the *kalyana metta* is also revered for a living wisdom; moreover, this wisdom is far more than the individual self-discovery of the spiritual guide. The *kalyana metta* seeks to witness, attest to, and then pass on the unique experience proclaimed by the Buddha. The Tri-Ratna, the celebrated three jewels of Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṃgha, became an early catechetical formula which summarized the tradition that these early Buddhist spiritual guides wished to transmit.

"Buddhism, however conceived, is primarily *experiential* in nature and purpose. It concerns the life, here and now, of each sentient being and this *interrelatedly of all existence*."³ As the Tri-Ratna of Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṃgha emerged, an emphasis on *personal experience* became key to the transmission of Buddhism.

Taking refuge in the Buddha came to be understood as trying to tread in the footsteps of Gautama, the Buddha; the novice was encouraged to imitate, appreciate, realize, and awaken to the unique awareness of experience proclaimed by the Buddha. Just as rigorous self-discipline was central to Gautama's Enlightenment, so also a disciplined will effort in imitation of the Buddha became the central path for the disciples of the Buddha. A realization or *re-experience* of Buddha's Enlightenment became the goal of the novice as well as for the spiritual guide. Indeed not only Enlightenment but also Nirvana became explicit Buddhist aspirations at a very early date. The detailed disciplinary code of the Patimokkha as well as the elaborate records of the Khandakas or the monastic chapters of faults and confessional

3. Richard Gard (ed.), *Buddhism* (New York : George Braziller, 1962), p. 15.

services attest to a rigorous and demanding asceticism practiced as a form of community service by the early Saṃgha. As in the classical "guru-śiṣya" pattern, both novice and adept *expand* and *stretch* beyond customary and formerly comfortable egocentric identities in quest of Enlightenment and Nirvana while each retains personal responsibility for deepening the journey.

Several early texts emphasize this experiential nature and purpose of all reality and indeed of all nature. Early manuals rapidly delineated the *interrelatedness* of all existence and indeed of all experience; soon precise foundational ethical codes and specific acts of common everyday conduct emerged as the initial means for awakening to a more profound awareness or realization of the human condition. To accept and face reality for what it is, no more and no less than what it is, just as the Buddha had taught, was the very human path detailed in such early manuals as the *Vishuddhimagga*.

The *Visuddhimagga* sketched a detailed map for the exploration of our inner space; it suggested that the path for Enlightenment begin by such ordinary virtues as "correct speech, correct actions, and correct livelihood." "Śīla" or human virtue is the very doorway to fuller self-understanding; ordinary acts and actions, when disentangled from subjective bias and prejudiced interpolation, may reveal the path to Buddhist wisdom. Following the example of the Buddha, the *kalyana metta* insists on personal spiritual effort as the initial catalyst for self-awakening. Strong conative words such as exertion, zeal, striving, vigour, and effort create and characterize the early Buddhist vocabulary; the word "*virīya*" (energy) appears repeatedly in the early Buddhist texts which all point in the direction of virtue (*śīla*). "Rouse yourselves, O Monks, to a still greater effort to what is as yet not reached, to conquer what has not yet been conquered, to realize what is yet to be realized."⁴ Moreover, while the novice alone exerts such personal self-effort, all that the "beautiful friend" or guide can do is to encourage, call forth, and direct such energy.

Yet the practice of such acts already suggests the need for an ever-deepening probe of human experience. The *Visuddhimagga* recommends a middle path between the rigorous asceticism of the wandering

4. *Majjhima Nikaya* III, 79.

saññiyasi and the negative fatalism of the *Ajīvakas*. Yet the guidance offered is neither abstraction nor palliative platitude; the recommendations are, in fact, concise and practical—and concerned with daily life. The earliest *Vinaya* texts, for example, list 227 codes of practical conduct which at first glance resemble a collection of rules for orderly living within a community setting. Thus the celebrated “Ten Prohibitions” of *Kuddakapatha II* proscribe:

1. killing all living things,
2. taking what is not given,
3. unchastity,
4. falsehood in word or actions,
5. all intoxicants,
6. eating at unseasonable times,
7. viewing displays, dancing, singing, and musical performances,
8. wearing garlands, perfumes, and unguents,
9. the use of a high or large bed,
10. receiving and collecting gold or silver.

Thus the initial lesson learned from the pursuit of routine, everyday virtue (*śīla*) is that “right speech, right action, and right livelihood”, accepted and experienced for what such common phenomena really are, not only uncovers a fuller appreciation of what such common experience really is *but also at the same time points to the need for a deeper penetration of the interrelatedness of all such existence*. Even begging may be a clue to hidden depths. The most common of human actions, when embraced for all that they *are* and are *not*, without the projection of any exaggerated subjective *Egoistic* expectations or hopes, are like signposts which point to the interrelatedness of all existence. Experiencing human acts fully suggests hidden depths and fuller meaning. Thus the acquisition of such virtue (*śīla*) is the first step, the beginning of the spiritual journey recommended by the *Visuddhimagga*.

If, for the Buddhist, “*śīla*” prescribed an external code of outward virtue, “inwardness” or interiority is far more characteristic of the second stage on the Buddhist path of spiritual journey. Through a serene dwelling within, a new awareness or fuller sensitivity is sought. The novice becomes conscious at every moment of precisely what is taking place within body and within the subjective psyche. “A monk

on going forth or coming back, acts with a clear awareness of what he is doing, when carrying his outer cloak, his bowl and robe; when eating, drinking, chewing, tasting, etc.; . . . when he is walking, standing, sitting, asleep, awake, talking or silent, he always acts in a clear and conscious manner."⁵ "Right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration" are guiding prescriptions for intensifying this inner awareness. More than forty different meditations in the *Visuddhimagga* seek to bring about this "*vipasannā*" or this insight of "seeing and understanding things as they really are".

The Cemetery or Corpse Meditation described in the sixth chapter of the *Path of Purification* of Buddhaghosa is the most dramatic way of conveying this insight. Herein the special role of the spiritual guide is noted. After the *kalyana metta* is convinced that the novice has progressed in virtue and is ready for the next stage, the guide bids the novice undertake this rigorous exercise. The guide first explains the meditation in detail; he then gives directions "for the purpose of recognizing the manifestation of the repulsive, the relation with associated manifestations, the eleven ways of looking at the manifestation, the reviewing of the way to go and to return, concluding with guidance about understanding the manifestation."⁶ The novice is then instructed to go alone to the burial grounds in the middle of the night. "He should go alone without a companion. He should not give up his fundamental meditation subject but always keep it clearly in mind. Let him take along a stick to ward off attacks by dogs and other animals. Let him remain in constant mindfulness, establishing it well, not turning his mind outwards, determined that all his faculties, including his mind, should be directed inwards."⁷ So terrifying and rigorous is this exercise that one must not undertake this step unless one is ready and has progressed in virtue; herein the consultative role of the *kalyana metta* is crucial; the guide helps the novice to understand when this meditation is appropriate. Yet for one who is ready, the value of this exercise is inestimable; it opens new levels of consciousness or awareness; it suggests a consciousness or awareness *not distorted* by Egoistic evaluations.

5. *Majjhima Nikaya* I, 57.

6. *Visuddhimagga* VI, 12.

7. *Visuddhimagga* VI, 23.

Pañña (*prajña*) is the wisdom acquired at the ultimate stage of the Buddhist spiritual journey; "right view and right purpose" are directive signposts for this ultimate understanding and insight. Following the acquisition of external virtue (*śīla*) and the intensification of internal awareness or mindfulness (*vipassanā*), still another level of awakening or consciousness is described in the texts as the ultimate Buddhist insight. Absorption, compassion, and transcendent comprehension are some of the more common translations of the terms by which this ultimate Buddhist insight is transmitted; all approximate but fail to adequately convey this "wisdom" or "consciousness" which is "beyond the realm of perception or non-perception".⁸ Rather than an "enstasis" or standing within oneself like the yogis, it seems far more appropriately described as an "ecstasis", a state of "supra-consciousness" following this intense ascetical journey of inner exploration. Yet it is not an indwelling in *enstasis* such as "*puruṣa*" of the Yoga tradition suggests; it is more an appreciation of "supra-consciousness" following this demanding journey.⁹ All is *indeed* sorrowful; all is *indeed* passing; all is *indeed* insubstantial. Both the *kalyana metta* and the novice bow before this supreme insight.

What then is "suffering"? According to the *Visuddhimagga*, "suffering exists, but there is no one who suffers; deeds exist, but there is no doer of deeds. Nirvana is, but there is no one who is blissful. The Path is, but there is no one who travels on it." But what is Nirvana? According to the noted Buddhist scholar G.P. Malalasekara, Nirvana is simply the cessation or the end of all becoming. Nirvana is a transcendent state of changelessness, that state which is the inevitable result of the extinction of all craving and the annihilation of the illusion of self or any sense of separateness. "By this transformation of sorrow into freedom from sorrow, nothing new is built up. It is a transition in our understanding, from an erroneous view into a correct one, and with that transition, even as transiency is transmuted into sorrow, so sorrow is transmuted into sorrowlessness. Nirvana is nothing but the destruction of an illusion that has its basis in me, and has arisen simul-

8. Thomas Berry, *Religions of India* (New York : Bruce Publishing Company, 1971), p. 156.

9. *Ibid.*

taneously with my arising.”¹⁰ It is this Buddha-like experience that generations of Buddhist spiritual guides have sought to transmit.

But who is the Buddha? Does the Buddha exist? The celebrated Buddhist answer is the classic four-fold denial. “He cannot be said to exist. He cannot be said not to exist. He cannot be said both to exist and not to exist. He cannot be said neither to exist nor not to exist”. Buddha simply attests to an awakening which is beyond perception and non-perception.

To this Dhamma, to this Enlightenment, to this unique spiritual ideal, countless generations of Buddhists spiritual guides and novices continue to beckon.

10. Robley Whitson, *The Coming Convergence of world Religions*, (New York: Newman Press, 1971), p. 90.