

The Five Qualities that Lead to Spiritual Maturity

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on
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Today I want to talk about spiritual maturity and the qualities that lead to it. My sources are two of the Buddha's discourses: the Discourse on Two Kinds of Thought (MN 19, Bhikkhus Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, trans.) and to Meghiya (Ud 4.1; AN 9.3, Bhikkhu Bodhi trans.).

I want to begin with an example of spiritual maturity from the Buddha's own experience. The Buddha tells us that before his Awakening,

"... it occurred to me: 'Suppose that I divide my thoughts into two classes.' Then I set on one side thoughts of sensual desire, thoughts of ill-will, and thoughts of cruelty, and I set on the other side thoughts of renunciation, thoughts of non-ill-will, and thoughts of non-cruelty." (MN 19.2)

Then, while he was meditating

"a thought of sensual desire arose in me. I understood thus: 'This thought of sensual desire ... leads to my own affliction, to others' affliction ... it obstructs wisdom, causes difficulties, and leads away from Nibbāna.' When I considered: 'This leads to my own affliction,' it subsided in me" and the same for afflicting others "Whenever a thought of sensual desire arose in me, I abandoned it, removed it, did away with it." (MN 19.3)

Then the Buddha repeats this for thoughts of ill-will and thoughts of cruelty.

Next the Buddha tells us:

"Bhikkhus, whatever a bhikkhu frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of his mind. If he frequently thinks and ponders upon thoughts of sensual desire, he has abandoned the thought of renunciation to cultivate the thought of sensual desire, and then his mind inclines to thoughts of sensual desire." (MN 19.6)

And of course he then says the same thing about thoughts of ill-will and thoughts of cruelty.

The next step was:

"... a thought of renunciation arose in me. I understood thus: 'This thought of renunciation ... does not lead to my own affliction, or to the affliction of others... it aids wisdom, does not cause difficulties, and leads to Nibbāna.'" (MN 19.8)

And then the same passage is offered in terms of non-ill-will and non-cruelty.

So, having let go of the afflictive thoughts and emotions of greed, hatred and cruelty and strengthened the qualities of renunciation, goodwill and non-harming, Siddhatta Gotama settled his mind, aroused tireless energy and unremitting mindfulness, concentrated his mind to a deep level of absorption and out of this the insights arose that led to his full and complete Awakening.

So this is what's possible when the factors of spiritual maturity are fully developed. Of course most of us aren't quite to that point yet. But I think it's useful to keep that level of mental discipline in mind as a possibility.

As a contrast to that, I want to share the story of Meghiya, which may be a little more like your own experience. It's certainly more like mine.

At the time of this story, a bhikkhu by the name of Meghiya was serving as the Buddha's attendant. The sutta begins with Meghiya asking the Buddha's permission to go from the monastery where they were staying into a nearby city to collect his alms, his food for the day. Perhaps he was also going to collect food for the Buddha, but that isn't stated. The Buddha gave permission and off Meghiya went.

After Meghiya had collected his alms and was making his way back to the monastery, he came upon "a lovely and delightful mango grove." And the thought arose that this would be a good place to meditate for the day.

So when Meghiya got back to the Buddha, he asked permission to go there. But the Buddha told Meghiya that it wasn't a good time, that he should wait until another bhikkhu arrived to assist the Buddha. Then Meghiya said:

"Bhante, for the Blessed One there is nothing further to be done and [no need to] increase what has been done. But, Bhante, I have something further to be done

and [need to] increase what has been done." (AN 9.3, Bhikkhu Bodhi trans.)

In other words, the Buddha was fully awakened but Meghiya wasn't. So he still needed to meditate and work at purifying his own mind of greed, hatred and delusion. But for a second time the Buddha asked Meghiya to wait.

Then Meghiya asked a third time. Apparently there was an understanding that if you asked the Buddha to do something three times he would give in, and so he did.

So Meghiya went off to the mango grove and began to meditate. But, the sutta says, as he was meditating:

"three kinds of bad unwholesome thoughts frequently occurred to him: sensual thoughts, thoughts of ill will, and thoughts of harming." (AN 9.3, Bhikkhu Bodhi trans.)

In other words, the three kinds of thought and emotion that Siddhatta Gotama had been able to set aside.

As Meghiya reflected on this, the thought arose "This is truly astounding and amazing!" (That's not the usual response most of us have when we realize we've been caught up in greed, hatred and delusion, is it?) But Meghiya was surprised that these unskillful thoughts were arising with such force. After all, he had left the lay life and become a bhikkhu because he had the motivation to practice for full awakening. He had found a place that seemed conducive to practice. Yet he was still stuck in thoughts of sensuality, ill will and cruelty. So Meghiya went back to the Buddha, reported on his experience and asked for advice.

The Buddha's response is recorded in this way:

"Meghiya, when liberation of mind has not matured, five things lead to its maturation. What five?

"Here, Meghiya, a bhikkhu has good friends, good companions, good comrades. When liberation of mind has not matured, this is the first thing that leads to its maturation.

"Again, a bhikkhu is virtuous; he dwells restrained by the Pātimokkha [the rules

of conduct for the monastics], possessed of good conduct and resort, seeing danger in minute faults. Having undertaken the training rules, he trains in them. When liberation of mind has not matured, this is the second thing that leads to its maturation.

"Again, a bhikkhu gets to hear at will, without trouble or difficulty, talk concerned with the austere life that is conducive to opening up the heart, that is, talk on fewness of desires, on contentment, on solitude, on not getting bound up [with others], on arousing energy, on virtuous behavior, on concentration, on wisdom, on liberation, on the knowledge and vision of liberation. When liberation of mind has not matured, this is the third thing that leads to its maturation.

"Again, a bhikkhu has aroused energy for abandoning unwholesome qualities and acquiring wholesome qualities; he is strong, firm in exertion, not casting off the duty of cultivating wholesome qualities. When liberation of mind has not matured, this is the fourth thing that leads to maturation.

"Again, a bhikkhu is wise; he possesses the wisdom that discerns arising and passing away, which is noble and penetrative and leads to the complete destruction of suffering. When liberation of mind has not matured, this is the fifth thing that leads to maturation." (AN 9.3, Bhikkhu Bodhi trans.)

I'm going to abbreviate what the Buddha says next: "When a bhikkhu has good friends, good companions, good comrades, it can be expected of him that he will" develop and experience virtue, hear talk on the Dhamma, abandon the unwholesome and cultivate the wholesome, and clearly see the arising and passing of phenomena. (AN 9.3, Bhikkhu Bodhi trans.)

It's interesting to me that the first factor that the Buddha cites, and the one that all the others seem to be dependent upon, is spiritual friendship. The words in the Pāli language that we translate as good friend or spiritual friend are "kalyāna mitta". In the Theravāda Buddhist tradition kalyāna mitta refers to several kinds of companions on the path.

Our teachers are regarded as good friends. In this tradition the teacher isn't a guru. The teacher-student relationship isn't like a parent and a child. The teacher is, simply, someone who is more spiritually mature than we are, and who has the ability to inspire and instruct us about this path of practice.

A good friend can also be someone we know who is on this path of practice just as we are. This could be someone who isn't a teacher, but is still more advanced than we are. Or it could be someone who is equal to us in spiritual development, truly a companion on the path. And just as others can be one of these types of good friend for us, we can be that for others.

As I've emphasized over the last month, the importance of good spiritual friends is actually emphasized a number of times in the Pāli suttas. The Buddha said

"Bhikkhus, in regard to external factors, I do not perceive another single factor so helpful as good friendship for a bhikkhu who is a learner..." (Itivuttaka 1.17, trans. John Ireland)

In another place the Buddha commented that just as the dawn is the forerunner and precursor of the rising sun, so spiritual friendship is the forerunner and precursor for the arising of the Noble Eightfold Path. (SN 45.49, trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi)

And there's the story where, when Ānanda tells the Buddha that he has realized that spiritual friendship is half of the holy life, the Buddha corrects Ānanda and tells him that good friendship is the whole of the spiritual life. (SN 45.2). I suspect that this comment should be understood in the sense that good spiritual friends provide supportive conditions for the development of the path, just as the Buddha indicates in this teaching offered to Meghiya.

When we associate with spiritual friends, we will have people we can talk with about the things that matter most to us in our effort to live a meaningful life, in our effort to live in as harmless and wise a way as we can. It is through hearing, reading and participating in discussions of the Dhamma that we begin to develop an intellectual form of Right View. —Right View being that actions, whether in the form of thought, word or deed, have consequences; and that the most useful framework for viewing our

experience if we want to be free of *dukkha* (stress, unsatisfactoriness, suffering) is the Four Noble Truths rather than our usual tendency of framing experience in terms of I, me or mine.— This intellectual understanding helps to guide our practices until we directly experience for ourselves how things truly are, until we deeply and repeatedly see the impermanent, unsatisfactory or unreliable and conditioned nature of all experience.

Spiritual friends also provide a counterbalance to the larger culture's emphasis on pursuing passion for what is sensually pleasant, on getting caught in ill will or aversion for what is unpleasant and for delusion, especially constantly taking things to revolve around "I, me or mine".

Through Spiritual Friendship, engaging in talk on the Dhamma and then developing Right View we experience support for living a life of virtue, which is another of the qualities that leads to spiritual maturity. For lay people like us the cultivation of virtue usually involves working with the training rules called the Five Precepts.

(As a reminder, the precepts involve training ourselves in:

- Not taking the life of any living being and cultivating goodwill towards all beings.
- Not taking what hasn't been given and cultivating generosity.
- Not using our sexuality in ways that are harmful to others or ourselves.
- Not engaging in false, divisive or harsh speech or gossip, and speaking only what is true, beneficial and timely.
- And not using intoxicating drink and drugs that lead to carelessness.)

Working with the precepts creates an atmosphere of harmony and mutual trust in our relationships. But the Buddha has also said that virtue is one of the forerunners for the development of Mindfulness. (SN 46.11, refers to development of Awakening Factors) To train ourselves in virtue requires the application of mindfulness: repeatedly remembering that it is our intention to follow this specific precept; paying careful attention to our thoughts, words and deeds, and giving them attention that is wise, discerning, but not judgmental towards ourselves or others.

So, through Spiritual Friendship we're able to engage in talk on the Dhamma and develop Right View, which leads to our strengthening and purifying our virtue. And as we work with the precepts, we are also training ourselves in the fourth of the qualities that lead to spiritual maturity: Recognizing and letting go of the qualities of greed or passion for the pleasant; hatred or aversion for the unpleasant; and delusion, especially the perception of "I, me or mine." And recognizing and cultivating the qualities of generosity; goodwill and compassion and wisdom.

You may have already recognized that this is essentially the factor of Right Effort. It is also, in terms of thoughts, exactly what Siddhatta Gotama was doing when he divided his own thoughts into two categories and set the unskillful ones aside while cultivating the skillful ones.

So, through Spiritual Friendship we are able to engage in talk on the Dhamma and develop Right View. This supports our effort to increase our virtuous behavior. And this also involves strengthening the quality of Right Effort.

To practice Right Effort, to recognize, to see, to let go of the unwholesome and to cultivate the wholesome, requires a great deal of mindfulness and compassion for ourselves and others. As these qualities are developed, they also increase our ability to cultivate the fifth quality that leads to spiritual maturity: seeing impermanence. Seeing the impermanence of all of the things that we normally get entangled in, all of the things that we think will bring us happiness and long-term benefit, but don't. When one begins to directly see the arising and passing of moments of our sense experience, our thoughts, our desires and our hatreds, and the things we identify with, we also see their emptiness, their not-self nature. We see that they simply arise based on certain conditions and when those conditions change they pass away. In that very direct, experiential seeing of arising and of passing, in that moment of seeing, there is no holding on. There is freedom.

In that moment, for that moment, our spiritual development has become quite mature.