

Sariputta & Moggallana: Spiritual Friendship

Many times, when you see a depiction of the Buddha, he'll be flanked by two standing figures in monk's robes. These represent the Buddha's two chief disciples: Sariputta and Moggallana. Tonight I'd like to tell you a little about these two disciples and some of the lessons we can learn from their story.

Commentarial texts tell us that Sariputta and Moggallana were born on the same day and grew up as childhood friends. Both came from wealthy families of the Brahmin caste. After attending a theatrical festival, each of them independently spent the night pondering along these lines: "After a few years, these glamorous actors will all be old and feeble; they will leave the stage of life and continue their migrations through existence, driven on by craving, and we too will also have to move on." The friends shared these thoughts with each other and decided to leave their homes and become spiritual wanderers. They made an agreement that if one of them discovered the path to the Deathless, he would tell the other.

They joined the fellowship of a teacher named Sañjaya. From what we can tell, Sañjaya seems to have been an extreme skeptic who prided himself on not believing much of anything. He denied all answers (and even denied the lack of answers) to the philosophical questions of the day. Sañjaya was a surprisingly successful teacher, with about 250 students.

One day, Sariputta spotted a Buddhist monk named Assaji going about on alms round. He was struck by the monk's peaceful, restrained appearance and asked him who his teacher was and what he taught. The monk answered with the following verse:

*The Perfect One has told the cause
Of causally arisen things;
And what brings their cessation, too:
Such is the doctrine preached by the Great Monk.*

On hearing this statement, we are told that "the spotless, immaculate vision of the Dhamma arose in him: 'All that is subject to arising is subject to cessation.'" In technical terms, he attained what is known as "stream entry," the first stage of enlightenment.

Sariputta went promptly to Moggallana, who immediately saw that his friend seemed different. When Sariputta repeated Assaji's verse, Moggallana also became a stream enterer.

The two friends next reported to Sañjaya, saying that they were going to go study with the Buddha. Sañjaya didn't take it well. To make matters worse (for Sañjaya), all of his other students decided to follow Sariputta and Moggallana. The scriptures say that Sañjaya was so mad that "hot blood gushed from his mouth."

On seeing Sariputta, Moggallana, and the other 248 followers of Sañjaya coming from a distance, the Buddha announced that these two friends would be his chief disciples.

Moggallana attained Nibbana after one week of training. This seems to have been a rough week for him and he experienced a lot of problems, including the very common problem of falling asleep while meditating. The Buddha gave him a personal discourse on remedies for drowsiness. Moggallana went on to become the disciple most renowned for supernatural powers. He was also known as an able teacher of more advanced students, helping them to attain arahantship.

Sariputta attained Nibbana after two weeks. Although it took him longer, he reportedly had fewer difficulties than Moggallana. Sariputta went on to become the foremost disciple in wisdom and was especially known as a teacher for beginning students. Several of his discourses are preserved in the Sutta Pitaka of the Pali canon.

There are many things that we can learn from the stories of Sariputta and Moggallana, but the thing I'd like to focus on tonight is the value of spiritual friendship. While each of them had remarkable qualities on his own, it seems clear that they inspired each other and that their friendship created a certain synergy.

What if instead of agreeing with Sariputta the day after the theatrical festival, Moggallana had said: "Oh, you're just depressed! Let's go see a movie." Things could have gone very differently.

There are several suttas that demonstrate the great importance that the Buddha attached to admirable friendship. One example is the Upaddha Sutta (SN 45.2). In this sutta, the Buddha's cousin Ananda says to the Buddha: "This is half of the holy life, lord: admirable friendship, admirable companionship, admirable camaraderie." The Buddha replies:

"Don't say that, Ananda. Don't say that. Admirable friendship, admirable companionship, admirable camaraderie is actually the whole of the holy life. When a monk has admirable people as friends, companions, & comrades, he can be expected to develop & pursue the noble eightfold path."

So how do we go about cultivating admirable friendships? In the Cula-punnama Sutta (MN 110) the Buddha enumerates six qualities that characterize the friends of a person of integrity:

1. Confidence in the Dhamma
2. A sense of moral dread
3. Learned in the Dhamma
4. Energetic in the cultivation of mind
5. Mindful
6. Possessing wisdom

You'll notice that the mark is set pretty high. You may be thinking that people like this are rather thin on the ground on a 21st century college campus. You're right. If it makes you feel any better, I'm pretty sure that such people were rare in 5th century BC India as well.

So how can we apply these criteria to our present situation? As with most things, mindfulness is a good first step. We can be mindful of the effects of different kinds of companions on our mental states and behaviors. We can ask ourselves questions like "would I be doing this if X were not here?" We can notice how we feel when we're with a person and how we feel after they leave. Do we feel energized or exhausted? Peaceful or agitated? Contented or filled with desire? These observations can provide insight into the nature of our current relationships.

As we notice the qualities of our associations and how they affect us, we'll begin to make more intentional choices about who to associate with. We might not have a choice about whom we have to work with on a group project, but we certainly have choices about which we spend our time with after work or classes. We can usually exercise some choice about whom we will live with. It's probably the wrong time of the semester to bring this up, but I'd recommend being especially careful about roommates. When you live with someone, you have a lot of time to be influenced positively or negative by that person (and by that person's associates).

Another thing you can do is to make contacts within the group. Buddhist organizations are a little odd in that we tend to spend most of our time together in silence, so it may take you a little time to get to know people. But make an effort, especially with the folks that you see here frequently.

As the list of criteria above states, the *ideal* friend would be one who follows the Dhamma. But I don't think this means that we can only be friends with Buddhists. Buddhists do not have a monopoly on moral behavior, compassion, and wisdom. Seek out the company of people who exhibit these traits regardless of their religious affiliation or lack of it. (But avoid proselytizers. They're distracting and exhausting.)

Finally, don't be afraid to be alone. Many of us are fortunate enough to have grown up surrounded by friends, siblings, &c. We may not have had the opportunity to cultivate the important skill of being alone, and we may even be a little scared of it.

Remember that your own company is preferable to that of a bad companion. As the Dhammapada says:

If, in your course, you don't meet your equal or your better, then continue your course, firmly, alone. There's no fellowship with fools.