Friends and Teachers

1. WHY SHOULD A BUDDHA NEED A FRIEND?

In spiritual friendship we take delight in the spiritual beauty of our friend.

ALTHOUGH the Buddha had had some difficulty in finding a satisfactory personal attendant, Ananda was by no means in a hurry to take on the task. It is as though he realized that it would be no easy matter to be the constant companion of an Enlightened one. Ananda had made steady progress in the spiritual life. He was certainly a "Stream-entrant," so his progress toward full Enlightenment was assured. But he was not a Buddha. And even for someone like Ananda, even for a Stream-entrant, even for someone who had grown up with the Buddha, it was a rather awe-inspiring prospect to be the Buddha's constant companion, to be with him, by day and by night, in rain and in sun, year in and year out. Ananda therefore thought the matter over very carefully. He had seen some previous attendants come somewhat to grief and was reluctant to give the Buddha any further trouble.

In the end, however, Ananda decided to accept the challenge, but laid down certain conditions, of which a couple are relevant here. One of these was that he should not be given any share in the various offerings and invitations that were given to the Buddha. He argued that, if people saw him benefiting from the offerings that were made to the Buddha - all the new robes and so on - then they might think that he was acting as the Buddha's companion just for the sake of what he could get out of it. He also realized that there would be times when he might have to be away from the Buddha, running errands, taking messages, and so on. While he was away, someone might come to see the Buddha and ask for a teaching. In consequence, the Buddha might give a discourse, might even give an important teaching, in his absence. So, another condition he laid down was that the Buddha should repeat to him whatever teaching he had given during his absence.

The Buddha accepted these conditions, and Ananda became his constant companion for twenty years. How successful this arrangement was can be seen from an incident that occurred shortly before the Buddha's parinibbāṇa, his final passing away. Ananda was very deeply upset by the prospect of losing the Buddha. Apparently, he stood leaning against the door, weeping. As he wept, he said: "Alas, I am still a pupil with much to be done, and my Master will be passing utterly away, he who was so kind to me." This was Ananda's impression of the Buddha after twenty years of constant, day to day, companion- ship. He did not say that the Buddha was wise, or energetic, but that he was kind.

Fortunately, we also know about the Buddha's impression of Ananda. When he was told that Ananda was weeping outside, he sent for him and spoke the following words of encouragement:

For a long time, Ananda, you have been in the Tathagata's presence, showing loving-kindness in the act of body, speech and mind, beneficially, blessedly, wholeheartedly and unstintingly.

Thus, the Buddha's predominant impression of Ananda was that he too was kind, that Ananda had served him with kindness of body, speech, and mind, that he had kept nothing back, that he had given himself totally. The relation between the Buddha and Ananda was essentially one of mutual kindness, even though the Buddha was spiritually by far the more developed of the two.

This may seem like a very small thing, but if we reflect, we shall realize that it is actually a very big thing. Their kindness had never failed, had never been found wanting even for a moment on either side. When two people are constant companions, and when the relation between them is of unfailing mutual kindness, you can only say of them that they are friends. Indeed, you can only say that they are spiritual friends, because such unfailing mutual kindness over such a long period of time is possible only on a deeply spiritual basis.

To some, it may seem a little strange that the Buddha and Ananda were friends. It may seem strange, perhaps, that the Buddha should have had a friend. One may wonder whether a Buddha needs a friend. But this depends on one's conception of Enlightenment. In response, I can give only a hint.

The Enlightenment experience is not self-contained in a one-sided way. The Enlightenment experience contains an element of communication, and contains, therefore, an element of spiritual friendship, even transcendental friendship, or friendship of the highest conceivable level. This, perhaps, is the significance of the Buddha's having a constant companion. There is surely no question of the Buddha keeping up the "dignity" of a Buddha. Ananda is not a sort of spiritual valet- cum-private-secretary. The fact that he is in the Buddha's presence, as the translator has it, represents the fact that there exists within the Enlightenment experience, within the heart of Reality, an element of communication, an element of spiritual friendship, something that found expression in the later history of Buddhist thought as that rather mysterious concept of Sambhogakaya.

We can see how the Buddha and Ananda worked together as friends in a story that is told of how they once came upon a monk who was sick. We will join them as they make their way around the lodgings of a group of monks.

The Exalted One was going his rounds of the lodgings, with the Venerable Ananda in attendance, and came to the lodging of that brother.

A point to notice here is that the Buddha was going his rounds of the lodgings. In the original, the word for "lodging" is vihara, and that is all that vihara means. We must not imagine the Buddha going his rounds of a large, palatial, well-furnished monastery. The lodgings in question were probably just clusters of thatched huts scattered over an area of parkland just a few miles outside the city gates.

The Buddha was making his rounds of these lodgings. In other words, he was taking a personal interest in the monks. How were they getting on? What were they doing? How were they passing their time? There was of course no question of them sitting outside their thatched huts reading newspapers, or listening to transistor radios, or watching television, but they might possibly have been up to other things that they should not have been up to. They might have needed some encouragement, some teaching, or even a little correction. The Buddha was seeing things for himself. In this way, he and Ananda came to "the lodging of that brother."

Now the Exalted One saw that brother lying where he had fallen in his own excrement, and seeing him He went to- ward him, came to him, and said: "Brother, what ails you?" "I have dysentery, Lord."

"But is there anyone taking care of you, brother?" "No, Lord."

"Why is it, brother, that the brethren do not take care of you?"

"I am useless to the brethren, Lord: therefore, the brethren do not care for me."

There are a number of points to be noted here. The Buddha goes toward the sick monk, asks him what is wrong with him, and gets very quickly to the heart of the matter, especially in the sick monk's last reply: "I am useless to the brethren, Lord: therefore the brethren do not care for me."

This is a very significant statement indeed. It is a shocking, terrible statement. Of course, we have only the bare words of the printed page to go by. We do not know how those words were spoken-and this of course makes a difference. Did the Buddha say, "Why is it, brother, that the brethren do not take care of you?" indignantly, or with concern, or sadly? And did the sick monk reply with dignity, with resignation, with weariness, or with bitterness and anger? We do not know. All we have is the bleak, shocking statement itself, "I am useless to the brethren, Lord: therefore, the brethren do not care for me."

However the words were spoken, they must imply, sadly, that people are interested in you only so long as you are useful to them, only so long as they can get something out of you. It implies that they see you not as a person but as a thing. To treat a person as a thing is to treat them unethically. And this, apparently, is how the other monks were treating the sick monk. He was not useful to them, and so they were not interested in him. He was left lying in his own excrement. No one took care of him. There was no kindness between the sick monk and the other monks as there was between the Buddha and Ananda. There was no ordinary human friendship—not to speak of spiritual friendship; neither was there any sympathy or sensitivity or aware- ness. There could not be, because these are qualities that you can experience only in relation to a person whom you actually see as a per- son. The other monks did not see the sick monk as a person. To them he was like an old worn-out broom, or a broken pot. He was useless to them, so they did not care for him.

Only too often we ourselves can behave like this. We often con- sider people primarily in terms of their usefulness. We do this even within the spiritual community. Sometimes we are more interested in someone's talents and capacities-as a bricklayer, accountant, or lecturer-than in who they are in themselves. If you are treated in this way, then, when you are no longer able or willing to employ your talents, you may have the disappointing and disillusioning experience of finding that nobody wants to know you, nobody wants to be "friends" with you anymore. We must therefore learn to see persons as persons. There must be kindness between us, there must be spiritual friendship, as there was between the Buddha and Ananda. There must be sympathy, sensitivity, and awareness.

There are two principal aspects to persons treating each other as persons. These are communication and taking delight, and these two qualities are of the essence of friendship. Even in the case of ordinary friendship there is the great benefit and blessing of being able to share our thoughts and feelings with another human being. It has been said that self-disclosure, the making of oneself known to another human being-being known by that person and knowing that you are known by that person-is essential to human health and happiness. If you are shut up in yourself, without any possibility of communication with another person, you don't stay healthy or happy for long. In the case of spiritual friendship, we share our experience of the Dharma itself. We share our enthusiasm, our inspiration, and our understanding. We even share our mistakes-in which case communication takes the form of confession.

The aspect of "taking delight" means that we not only see a person as a person, but also like what we see, enjoy and take delight in what we see, just as we do with a beautiful painting or poem-except that here the painting or poem is alive: the painting can speak to you, and the beautiful poem can answer back! This makes it very exciting and stimulating indeed. Here we see, we like, we love and appreciate a

per- son entirely for his or her own sake, and not for the sake of anything useful that we can get out of that person. This also happens in ordinary friendship to some extent, but it happens to a far greater extent in spiritual friendship-kalyana mitrata. The primary meaning of kalyana is "beautiful." In spiritual friendship we take delight in the spiritual beauty of our friend; we rejoice in his or her merits.

2. THE NETWORK OF RELATIONSHIPS

However calm, kind, and wise we may feel in the privacy of our own hearts or shrine-rooms, the true test of how fully we have developed these qualities comes when we are faced with the realities of life as represented by the challenges offered by "other people."

SOME VERSES I once composed for the dedication of a Buddhist shrine-room include the aspiration: "May our communication with one another be Sangha." This reflects the very great importance that has always been given in Buddhism to the quality of communication both between members of the Sangha and in the context of all the relationships an individual Buddhist has with other people. The Buddha had a great deal to say about communication-about the importance of truthful, kindly, meaningful, and harmonious speech, and about the necessity to pay attention to one's relationships in general, making sure that one is relating in ways that accord with one's Buddhist principles.

The reasons for this are quite obvious. To be human is to be related to other human beings. We cannot live our lives in isolation; whatever efforts we make to develop as individuals are continually tested in the fires of our relationships with other people. However calm, kind, and wise we may feel in the privacy of our own hearts or shrine-rooms, the true test of how fully we have developed these qualities comes when we are faced with the realities of life as represented by the challenges offered by "other people."

The first human being to whom we are related is of course our mother. That relationship is very intimate, and it affects us for the whole of our lives. After that, our father comes into view, and per- haps brothers and sisters as well, together with grandparents, if we are fortunate. A little later we may also become aware of aunts, uncles, and cousins. This is usually the extent of our family circle. But then there are neighbours - next door, up the street, over the way - and from the age of four or five there are teachers, schoolfellows, and friends. Later, there may be a husband or wife, and perhaps children. On top of these relationships, we will probably have connections with employers and workmates, perhaps even employees. And we will also, sooner or later, have to have relationships of a kind with government officials, bureaucrats, even rulers, whether in our own country or abroad. By the time we reach maturity, we will find ourselves in the midst of a whole network of relationships with scores, perhaps hundreds, of people, and connected indirectly or distantly to very many more.

This network of relationships is the subject-matter of a Buddhist text known as the Sigalaka Sutta, which is to be found in the Digha Nikaya, the "Collection of Long Discourses," in the Pali Canon." It is a comparatively early text, the substance of which, we can be reason- ably certain, goes back to the Buddha himself. It is called the Sigalaka Sutta because it is a discourse given by the Buddha to a young man called Sigalaka. One translator describes the sutta as "Advice to Lay People." In it the Buddha lays down a pattern for different kinds of relationships, explaining how each should be conducted. All this is set forth with such clarity and succinctness that it remains of consider- able interest today.

Sigalaka is a young brahmin, which means that he belongs to the priestly caste, the highest and most influential caste of Indian society. The introduction to the sutta reports that the Buddha happens to meet Sigalaka early one morning. Sigalaka's clothes and hair are still dripping wet from his purificatory ritual bath. (This is something you can still see today—brahmins standing in the holy River Ganges at Varanasi, dipping into the water and reciting mantras.) Having taken his bath, Sigalaka is engaged in worshipping the six directions: north, south, east, west, the zenith, and the nadir.

He is doing this, so he informs the Buddha, in obedience to his father's dying injunction, in order to protect himself from any harm that might come from any of the six directions. The Buddha there- upon tells Sigalaka that although worshipping the six directions is right and proper he is not going about it in the right way, if he wants such worship to protect him effectively. He then proceeds to explain what the six directions really represent.

The east, he says, means mother and father (in Indian languages mother comes before father) because one originates from them just as the sun-or at least the day-originates in the east. So, the first relationship the Buddha refers to is that between parent and child. As for the other directions, they refer to the other key relationships in life: the south to the relationship between pupil and teacher; the west to that between husband and wife; the north to friends and companions; the nadir to the relationship between "master and servant" (employer and employee, in modern terms); and the zenith to the relationship between lay people and "ascetics and brahmins.'

True worship of the six directions, the Buddha explains, consists in carrying out one's duties with regard to these six kinds of relationship. Such ethical activity is naturally productive of happiness, and it is in this sense that one protects oneself through this kind of "worship." Here the Buddha envisages the individual as being at the centre of a network of relationships, out of which he enumerates just six. The Buddha seems to give equal emphasis to these six primary relationships, which represent a fairly wide spread of human interaction, and in this respect, he is characteristic of his culture, that of northeast India in the sixth century BCE.

But most other cultures emphasize one kind of human relationship rather more than the others. For example, a similar list to the one the Buddha gave Sigalaka can be found in Confucianism, according to which there are five standard relationships: between ruler and subject (sometimes described as prince and minister), between parent and child, between husband and wife, between brother and brother, and between friend and friend. But in ancient China particular emphasis was always placed on the relationship between parents and children, and especially on the duties of children toward parents. According to some Confucian writers, filial piety is the greatest of all virtues, and in classical times sons and daughters who were conspicuous examples of it were officially honoured by the government with a title, or a grant of a large piece of land, or a monument erected in their honour. The whole idea can only seem rather strange to us now, living as we do in very different times, when independence from one's parents is the goal as far as most people are concerned.

Turning to the ancient Greeks, we find no particular list of significant relationships. However, if we take Plato's account of the teachings of Socrates as representative of the highest Greek ideals, it is clear that for them the relationship between friend and friend was the most significant. The moving description of Socrates' death puts this emphasis into stark perspective. Sometime before his death we find him bidding a rather formal farewell to his wife and children, who are nevertheless described as sobbing bitterly. He then dismisses them and devotes his last hours to philosophical discussion with his friends.

In medieval Europe, on the other hand, the emphasis was placed on the relationship between master and servant, particularly that between the feudal lord and the vassal. Such was the centrality of this relationship that a whole social system was built around it. In the feu dal system, the great virtue was loyalty, especially to the person directly above you in the social pecking order. If you were a great lord, it would be the king; if you were a small landowner, it would be the local lord; if you were an ordinary

servant or serf, it would be your knight. And you would be prepared and willing to die for your feudal superior.

In the modern West, of course, we find the main emphasis placed upon the sexual or romantic relationship. One may move from one such relationship to another, but through all these ups and downs, their current sexual relationship nevertheless remains the central relationship for most people, giving meaning and colour to their lives. The romantic relationship is the principal subject-matter of films, novels, plays, and poems, and as an ideal it is all-consuming-lovers commonly declare that they cannot live without each other, even that they are prepared to die for each other. Thus, for most people in our culture, the sexual/romantic relationship is the central and most important one-an idea which people of the ancient civilizations would probably have found ridiculous. This is not to say that they would necessarily have been right, but we can at least remind ourselves that people have not always felt as we feel today.

In the modern West other relationships often tend to be superficial because they are simply not given the same weight. We tend to neglect our relationships with our parents and with our friends, rarely taking these relationships as seriously as we do our romantic liaisons. That, we think, is the way things are meant to be. We tend to think that the tremendous value we give to this particular relationship compared with the lesser value we accord to others is perfectly normal; indeed, we are apt to assume that it has always been like that every- where in the world. But that, as we have seen, is not really the case. On the contrary, our position is a distinctly abnormal one-no other society has raised the sexual relationship so high above all others.

Quite apart from the neglect of other relationships, our attitude has the unfortunate result of overloading the romantic relationship. We come to expect from our sexual partner far more than he or she is able to give. If we are not careful, we expect him or her to be everything for us: sexual partner, friend, companion, mother, father, adviser, counsellor, source of security--everything. We expect this relationship to give us love, security, happiness, fulfilment, and the rest. We expect it to give meaning to our lives, and in this way, it becomes like an electrical cable carrying a current that is too much for it. The result is that the poor, unfortunate sexual relationship very often blows a fuse-it breaks down under the strain. The obvious solution is to work at the development of a greater spread of relationships, all of which are important to us, and to all of which we give great care and attention.

But one can see it the other way round too. As well as contributing to the decline of other relationships, the present-day centrality of the sexual or marital relationship also reflects the fact that other relationships have become more difficult or have tended to fall into abeyance. Teacher-pupil, employer-employee, and ruler-subject relationships have all been seriously depersonalized—indeed, often they are not seen as relations that should involve a personal element at all. But this was not the case in older societies. Centuries ago — as little as a hundred and fifty years ago in some areas of Europe - if you were a servant or an apprentice, you would probably have lived with your master under the same roof. You would have shared in his day-to-day existence, eating the same food at the same table, just as though you were a member of the family, albeit one who knew his or her place. Under the traditional apprenticeship system, a very close personal relationship could grow up between master and apprentice or servant, or in modern terms, between employer and employee.

The novels of Dickens, which date from the 1840s, by which time the industrial age was well under way, could still portray the relation between master and servant in distinctly feudal terms, because those

terms were still a reality for many people. When in The Pickwick Papers Sam Weller, Mr. Pickwick's faithful servant, wants to get married, Mr. Pickwick naturally offers to release Sam from his service. Sam declares his intention to stay with Mr. Pickwick, who says, "My good fellow, you are bound to consider the young woman also." But Sam says that she will be happy to wait for him. "If she doesn't, she's not the young woman I took her to be, and I give her up with readiness." His duty, he says, is to serve Mr. Pickwick,

In this way he was harking back to the situation where you served a feudal chief who led you in battle, who was more powerful than you, who protected you, and to whom you were unconditionally loyal. This commitment made it a truly personal relationship, and very often the most important relationship in a man's life, even emotionally, and one for which other relationships would be sacrificed if necessary.

This attitude was still around to some extent in the East when I was there in the 1950s. In Kalimpong I sometimes had to engage Tibetan or Nepalese cooks, handymen, or gardeners, and it was noticeable that they quickly became very loyal. They weren't interested in just getting the money at the end of the month. Some of them didn't even want to work for money at all. They were much more concerned to have a decent relationship with a good master.

Nowadays, for better or worse, all this is on the way out, with the steady incursion of Western values. The very word "master" makes people today feel slightly uneasy. The result is that you cannot generally have any truly personal relationship with your employer. You work not for a master but for a department in a company, and your work is overseen by people who have more power than you, but no loyalty or commitment to you. Only in truly archaic situations, like an army regiment, in which loyalty and devotion to duty is the key to success, do you still find anything like this sort of relationship. Likewise, we have a very remote, impersonal relationship with those who are meant to protect our interests, and we certainly don't think in terms of serving them. You may, once or twice in your lifetime, get round to shaking hands with your local Member of Parliament or Congress- man, but usually that's about as close to them as you are likely to get. One might think that the relation between teacher and pupil would be a naturally personal one; it certainly can be so in the tutorial system of some universities. However, in general, teaching these days is a businesslike process of passing pupils from one teacher to another in the hope that a balanced ingestion of facts will result. Under the usual classroom system, one teacher sometimes has to address as many as forty pupils and then moves on to teach another large group. A relationship is necessarily an individual thing, and it is virtually impossible to develop such relationships with every pupil in your care in such circumstances. Nor can you have favourites, as this will lead to resentment.

Anyway, most of us come in contact with teachers only when we are comparatively young, so that any relationship we might have with a teacher never gets a chance to mature. We don't generally think in terms of learning anything beyond the point at which we stop accumulating qualifications; that is the end of the teacher-pupil relation- ship for us, although certain relationships later on may involve an unofficial mentoring element which can have a profound effect on our development.

In modern life, relationships between friends are not, in the case of men anyway, meant to go deep enough to produce problems. We tend to keep such relationships at an easy going, undemanding level, probably because in many people's minds there is a fear of homosexuality. Any strong emotional relationship between two people of the same sex, especially between two men, tends in our times to be rather suspect.

We can also say that relationships among brothers and sisters are much less important than formerly. One obvious reason for this is that some of us don't have brothers and sisters. It is all too common to find oneself an only child-very different from the large families of earlier times, when (especially before the advent of the Welfare State) members of the family would be expected to care for one another.

The fact that these various kinds of relationship have become more superficial means that we are left with only two effective personal relationships in our lives nowadays. The ancient Indians had six, the ancient Chinese had five, but we, for all practical purposes, have two: the parent-child relationship, and the husband-wife or boyfriend-girlfriend relationship. And of these two, it is the second that is for many people by far the more important.

Of course, there are various complicating factors in sexual relationships, the most obvious one being sex itself. Under the conditions of modern life, sexual needs are not only biological but also psychological. For example, a man will tend nowadays to associate the expression of his manhood less with his activity in the world than with his sexual activity, particularly if his work is fairly meaningless and undemanding.

Another complicating factor is that, as in most civilizations, the man-woman relationship is institutionalized-whether as marriage or as cohabitation. Apart from the parent-child relationship (which is on a rather different basis), marriage is the only one of our relationships that we legalize and institutionalize in this way. It is not just a personal understanding between two people; it involves a legal obligation, which under certain circumstances is even enforceable in a court of law. It is not always easy to make changes in such a relation- ship, and this can lead to difficulties.

When a conflict arises between our need to develop as an individual on the one hand and our sexual relationship on the other, the psychological pressure can build up to create intense distress. Indeed, any personal relationship has the potential to get in the way of our attempts to grow spiritually. There is something of a paradox here. On the one hand, personal relationships are absolutely necessary for human development. On the other hand, if we are committed to spiritual development, it is much easier to sustain a personal relationship with another person who is also trying to lead a spiritual life. Problems are likely to arise—especially in the context of a sexual relationship— when one of the two people wishes to engage in spiritual practice and the other does not, and such problems are difficult to resolve because we are unlikely to be completely wholehearted in our commitment to the spiritual life anyway. Part of us, so to speak, is likely to side with the other person against our spiritual aspiration, so that we may find ourselves agreeing that setting aside time to meditate, for example, is simply selfish.

Some people find that as they get involved with spiritual practice, the importance to them of their old personal relationships diminishes, at least for a time. This can be very difficult to accept. It sounds unbearably harsh to say that as you grow, you just have to leave family and friends behind in some sense. But in a way this is only to be expected. Spiritual life does involve an element of going forth. And if you are interested in things that your friends and family have little or no knowledge of or interest in, you can't help losing contact with them to some extent.

However, many people find that as they mature in their spiritual practice, their increased positivity, sensitivity, and sense of gratitude brings them into much deeper and closer relationship, especially with their families, and this is very much to be welcomed, and indeed consciously worked on. After all, as the Buddha reminded Sigalaka, our parents gave us this life, which we increasingly feel to be very

meaningful and precious; great love and respect is due to them for that, whatever has happened since. At the same time, as we move more deeply into spiritual practice, we will be forming new personal relationships with other people who are trying to live a spiritual life-in other words, we are likely to join or help form a spiritual community.

3. THE IMPORTANCE OF SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIP

The real significance of the deep individual-to-individual contact that Going for Refuge to the Sangha involves lies in a simple psychological fact: we get to know ourselves best in relation to other people.

It has been said that the history of Buddhist philosophy can be summed up as the struggle between Buddhism and the abstract noun. So -to guard against the ubiquitous enemy abstraction- I should be clear that when I speak of the spiritual community, I am not refer- ring to some ethereal entity apart from the people who comprise it. Membership of a spiritual community means relationship with people within that community. But how is it that entering into relation- ship with other people who hold a common ideal and follow a common path should help us in our spiritual life?

In a sense, it comes down to the simple saying: "Birds of a feather flock together." That is how they survive. There was an occasion when the Buddha addressed the Vajjians, a tribe from the Vaisali area who had come under some threat. Among other things, he told them that they would prosper as long as they continued to meet regularly, in full and frequent assemblies, conducting their business in harmony and dispersing in harmony. Afterward he went on to apply the same criteria to the spiritual survival of the Sangha.

The heart of the Sangha is kalyana mitrata, a very beautiful phrase; in fact, it is less a philosophical term than a poetic one. Kalyana means beautiful, charming, auspicious, helpful, morally good. Thus, the con notations are aesthetic, moral, and religious. The term covers much the same ground as the Greek expression Kalon kai agathos, which means "good and beautiful." Mitrata means simply friendship or companionship. Kalyana mitrata therefore means something like "beautiful friendship," or "morally good companionship," or as I have translated it—"spiritual friendship." There is a well-known exchange between the Buddha and his disciple Ananda which spells out its importance to the Buddha himself. Ananda was the Buddha's cousin and became his attendant for the last twenty years of the Buddha's life. He accompanied the Buddha wherever he went, and they had an understanding that if by any chance Ananda was not present when the Buddha delivered a discourse, or discussed the Dharma with anyone, when they were alone together the Buddha would repeat to Ananda everything he had said. Ananda had an astonishingly retentive memory; he was apparently the human equivalent of a tape-recorder. Indeed, it is said that we owe our knowledge of the Buddha's teachings to him. Because he made a point of listening to everything the Buddha said, storing it away in his memory so that he could repeat it later on for the benefit of others, his testimony was used to authenticate the teachings that were preserved after the Buddha's death.

But on this particular occasion the Buddha and Ananda were on their own, just sitting quietly together, when Ananda suddenly came out with something to which he had obviously given a bit of thought. He said, "Lord, I think that kalyana mitrata is half the spiritual life." And then one presumes that he sat back and waited for some kind of appreciative affirmation from the Buddha. It seemed to Ananda that what he had said was incontrovertible: having like-minded people around you who are also trying to grow and develop must be half the battle won. But the Buddha said, ‘‘Ananda, you're wrong. Kalyana mitrata is not half the spiritual life; it's the whole of it."

Why is this? Of course, we learn from those we associate with, especially those who are more mature than we are, and learning will clearly be important if we are to make progress in the spiritual life. But in what does "progress in the spiritual life" really consist of? What are we really learning? The knowledge

we need, in the end, is self-knowledge. And the real significance of the deep individual-to-individual contact that Going for Refuge to the Sangha involves lies in a simple psychological fact: we get to know ourselves best in relation to other people. If you spent your whole life alone on a desert island, in a sense you would never really know yourself. As it is, though, we have all had the experience of clarifying our ideas through discussion-and even of dis covering that we knew more than we thought we did-simply through trying to communicate with another person. It is as though trying to communicate activates an understanding that is already there but has never manifested until now and even brings forth new aspects of oneself aspects which one only ever discovers as a result of contact with another person. Through meeting the challenge of real communication, one comes to know oneself better.

It is not only a matter of activating our understanding. Meeting certain people can disturb aspects of us which had been rather deeply buried. We say that particular people "bring out the worst in us.". Perhaps nothing is said, but they somehow touch a raw nerve. It can be a shock to realize what that individual has evoked in us, to find ourselves behaving in a way that we like to think is uncharacteristic of us, even expressing hatred or contempt toward the person who has triggered off this uncharacteristic behaviour. Of course, that unpleasant side of us was always there, but it needed that person to bring it to the surface. In this apparently negative-but highly spiritually beneficial-way too, other people can introduce us to ourselves. We cannot transform ourselves unless we have a full sense of what lies within us.

Conversely, certain people seem to "bring out the best in us." Again, nothing necessarily needs to be said, but just being with them makes us feel lighter, more cheerful, more energetic, more positive. Other people can also sometimes activate resources of kindness and decency that we didn't know we had. And in a specifically Buddhist context, there will be certain people who activate a quality of faith in us simply through contact with their own faith. Something that was not active before is stirred up.

The Sangha is necessary, in short, because personal relationships are necessary for human development. This applies at all levels-cultural, psychological, and spiritual. The vast majority of people undoubtedly develop most rapidly, and even most easily, in the com- of others—or at least in contact with others. Not that it is impossible to develop entirely on one's own; indeed, there is a Buddhist term for those who do so: pratyekabuddhas, private or solitary Buddhas. However, although there are a number of canonical references to them, it is significant that all these solitary Buddhas are located in the remote and legendary past. There appear to be no historical examples.

We generally need the stimulation, reassurance, and enthusiasm of others who are going in the same direction as we are. We are naturally stimulated by someone who shares our special interest in something. Even though we still must put in the effort ourselves, at least we see the point of it more clearly—we are less undermined by doubts. Membership of the Sangha also gives us the opportunity to serve others, to express our generosity and helpfulness. Even in such a simple activity as providing tea and biscuits at a Buddhist festival, we can dis- cover in ourselves the capacity for generosity, altruism, and general positivity.

Thus, the Sangha is there to help us know ourselves and express ourselves better. It is able to do this because everyone who participates in it is committed to the Buddha as the ideal of self-knowledge in the highest and deepest sense, and to the Dharma, the various principles, and practices by which that self-knowledge may be achieved. A common allegiance to the first two Refuges constitutes the bond of unity between the members of the spiritual community. We are all following-albeit at different stages-the same path to the same ultimate goal.

By the same token, if one is not really aiming for Enlightenment, and not really trying to practice the Dharma, then one may say that one is committed to these ideals, but whatever one may say, one is no more a member of the Sangha than a donkey following a herd of cows can be a member of that herd. This is the image used by the Buddha in the Samyukta Nikaya: as he puts it, "The donkey may say, 'I am a cow too, I am a cow too'... but neither in his horns nor in his hoofs is he anything like a cow, whatever he may say.'' Likewise, simply reciting the Refuges does not make one a member of the Sangha. The bond is inner and spiritual.

At a certain point in our development, however much we may meditate and read books about spiritual practice, we have to recognize that these are not enough. There is no doubt that we can learn a lot on our own. But if we are to grow spiritually in a fully rounded way, we eventually have to experience the vital part that communication has to play in our spiritual life. The following verse comes from the Dhammapada, a very early collection of the Buddha's teachings, here quoted in the original Pali:

Sukho buddhanamuppado, sukha saddhammadesana. Sukha sanghassa samaggi, samagganam tapo sukho.

The first line means "happy-or blissful or blessed (sukho)-is the arising of the Buddhas." When someone becomes a Buddha, this is a happy thing for all humanity. The second line may be translated "Happy is the preaching of the true doctrine." The teaching of the Dharma is a blessing for the whole world. The third line is "Happy is the spiritual community in following a common path." In the fourth line tapo means "heat" and refers to spiritual practices which are like a fire burning up all impurities. The line therefore runs, "The blaze of spiritual practice of those on the same path is happy or blessed."

So, it is not enough to have a distant idea of Enlightenment, the theory of the Buddha's teaching, or a Buddhist organization. There is no future for Buddhism without a truly united and committed spiritual community, dedicated to practicing together. And when Buddhists do come together in the true spirit of the Sangha, there is then the possibility of inhabiting, for a while at least, the Dharmadhātu, the realm of the Dharma. In this realm, all we do is practice the Dharma, all we talk about is the Dharma, and when we are still and silent, we enjoy the Dharma in stillness and silence together. The clouds of stress and anxiety that so often hang over mundane life are dispersed, and the fountains of inspiration within our hearts are renewed.

4. FRIENDSHIP: THE WHOLE OF THE SPIRITUAL LIFE?

No one else can practice the Dharma for us; we must practice it ourselves. But we do not have to practice it by ourselves. In the modern world, friendship is arguably the most neglected of all the primary human relationships. But as we have seen, according to the Buddha himself, friendship has a direct connection with the spiritual life. Speaking to Sigalaka on the subject, he says that friends and companions are to be served and looked after in five ways. In other words, we have five duties toward our friends, and if we perform these, our friendships will flourish.

First of all, it is our duty to be generous. We should share with our friends whatever we have. This should ideally be taken quite literally. Some Buddhist residential communities live on the basis of a common purse, pooling all their resources. This isn't easy to do, of -some people find it difficult even to share a book-but it reflects the ideal relationship between friends. Ideally, your friend should not even have to ask you for money. If you take the principle of sharing seriously, you share everything: time, money, resources, interest, energy, everything. You keep nothing back for yourself.

The second duty is never to speak harshly or bitterly or sarcastically to our friends, but always kindly and compassionately. Speech is taken very seriously in Buddhism. The five basic Buddhist precepts include just one speech precept-to refrain from false speech-but it is not enough just to speak truthfully, and this is reflected in the ten precepts taken by some Buddhists. These include no less than four speech precepts, because it is so easy to fall into harmful, destructive speech, to speak in an indifferent, careless, or even callous way.

Our third duty to our friends is to look after their welfare, especially their spiritual welfare. As well as seeing that they are all right in terms of their health and economic well-being, and helping them with any difficulties they have, we should help them in whatever way we can to grow and develop as human beings.

Fourthly, we should treat our friends in the same way that we treat ourselves. This is a very big thing indeed, because it means breaking down the barrier between oneself and others. One of the most important Mahayana texts, the Bodhicaryāvatāra of Santideva, deals with this topic in great depth and considerable detail.

And fifthly, we should keep the promises we make to our friends. We should keep our word. If we say we will do something for a friend, we just do it, come what may. If we are careless about fulfilling our promises, it is usually because we make them carelessly. We therefore have a duty to make our promises so mindfully that we treat them as serious obligations. Once we have given our word, that should be that.

Just as we have these five duties toward our friends, they have the same duties toward us: it's a two-way thing. Our friends and companions minister to us, serve us, reciprocate our friendship. Having listed our duties toward our friends, the Sigalaka Sutta therefore gives a list of five ways in which our good friends look after us. Firstly, according to the sutta, they take care of us when we are sick. Secondly, they watch over our property when we are neglectful; in other words, they take more care of our possessions than we do ourselves--that is a sure sign of friendship. Thirdly, they are our refuge in time of fear: they can allay our anxiety, and if we have genuine cause for fear they help us deal with the situation. Fourthly, they do not forsake us when we are in trouble; as the proverb says, "A friend in need is a friend indeed." And lastly, they show concern for our dependants. If we have children, our friends are just as concerned

for their welfare as we are ourselves, and the same goes for the welfare of our disciples, if we happen to have disciples.

These, in brief, are the duties of a friend. Clearly, they represent a very high ideal of friendship, and they repay careful reflection. Here I will just point out one or two salient features. It is interesting, for example, that the first four duties are identical with another well- known list that occupies an important place in Mahayana Buddhism: the four Samgrahavastus, usually translated as the four elements of conversion. These form part of the seventh paramita, the seventh of the ten Perfections to be practiced by the Bodhisattva: Upaya-paramita, the perfection of Upaya or skilful means. The four Samgrahavastus are thus an aspect of the Bodhisattva's skilful means.

The fact that these elements of conversion are the same as the first four duties of a friend says something deeply significant about how the Sangha operates at its best. It suggests that the best way of converting people is simply by being friends with them. Some people try to convert others to their point of view or their religion almost forcibly, but this is not the Buddhist way. Buddhists should convert people-if that is really the right word-simply by being friendly. We make friends and that's an end of it. There is no need to preach to people, to knock on their doors and say, "Have you heard the word of the Buddha?"

As a Buddhist one should not be thinking about "converting" people, or in any way manoeuvring them onto the path that one follows oneself. One's business is just to be a friend, to be generous, to share whatever one has, to speak kindly and affectionately, to show concern for one's friends' welfare, especially their spiritual welfare, to treat them in the same way that one treats oneself, and to keep one's word to them.

However, the fact that these four things are elements of conversion means that in themselves they constitute a communication of the Dharma. You communicate the Dharma itself by practicing friendship in this way. One could even go so far as to say that friendship is the Dharma. William Blake, the great English poet, artist and mystic, said, "Religion is politics." But he went on to say: "Politics is brotherhood." Religion, therefore, is brotherhood. We can say, following him, that the Dharma is friendship. If you are practicing friendliness, you are not only practicing the Dharma but communicating it.

One further issue raised by the duties of friendship has particularly important implications. It concerns the fourth duty: treating our friends and companions like our own self. The Sanskrit term, here, is Samanarthata - saman meaning equal. A friend is one whom you treat equally. But what does this mean? A clue is to be found in the etymology of the word friend, which is apparently cognate with the word free. Friendship is a relationship that can exist only between two or more free people-that is to say, people who are equals. Understanding this, the ancient Greeks maintained that there could be no friendship between a free man and a slave.

We can take this metaphorically as well as literally. Friendship, we can conclude, can never involve any kind of power relationship. The relation between master and slave is based upon power, and where one person has any kind of power over another, there can be no friendship, because friendship is based upon love-to use the word love in the sense of the Pali term metta rather than in the sharply differentiated sense of the term Pema, which is love as sticky attachment or possessiveness. Pema is fundamentally selfish, and it can easily turn into hatred; sexual love, of course, is often of this kind. But metta is unselfish or non-attached, concerned only with the happiness and well-being of others.

The Pali word for friend, Mitta (Sanskrit mitra), is closely related to the term metta (Sanskrit maitri). With the help of the metta bhavana meditation practice we can develop a friendly attitude. In other words, we can shift from operating in the power mode to operating in the love mode. There are many ways of operating in the power mode—that is, focusing on getting what we want in a situation that involves other people. Usually, if we are clever enough, we don't have to use force. Subtly and indirectly, we manipulate other people into doing what we want them to do, not for their good but for our own purposes. Some people are very good at this. They are so subtle, they seem so unselfish and so frank, that you hardly know that you are being manipulated, and it's so indirect that they may not even realize they're doing it. But in one way or another we deceive people, and ourselves, as to our real motives. We cheat, we lie, we commit emotional blackmail. But in metta, in friendship, there is none of this, but only mutual concern for each other's happiness and well-being.

Thus, friendship has a definitively spiritual dimension. We see this in chapter four of the Udana, in which we find the Buddha staying at a place called Calika, accompanied by his attendant, who is at this time a monk called Meghiya. The two of them are alone together one day when Meghiya, who seems to be quite a young monk, happens to see a lovely grove of mango trees. In India, you often get these on the out- skirts of a village; the trees are very beautiful, with an abundance of dark green leaves, and they grow close together, so that as well as producing mangoes, they provide cool shade in the hot Indian summer. Meghiya thinks to himself, "What a beautiful grove of mango trees! And what a very fine place in which to sit and meditate--so cool and refreshing!" He therefore asks the Buddha if he may go and spend some time there. The Buddha, however, asks him to wait a while until some other monk arrives, because, for one reason or another, the Buddha needs someone to be with him. But Meghiya is not concerned with what the Buddha needs. Instead, he comes up with a clever and apparently unanswerable argument. He says, "It's all very well for you you've reached the goal of Enlightenment—but I have a long way to go in my practice. It's such a beautiful mango grove, I really want to go there and meditate." In the end the Buddha has to agree, and off Meghiya goes, leaving the Buddha on his own. How- ever, although Meghiya has got what he wanted, and the mango grove turns out to be just the fine, peaceful place he thought it was going to be, he finds that he can't settle into his meditation at all. Despite his enthusiasm and energy, as soon as he sits down his mind is over- whelmed with greed, jealousy, anger, lust, false views--the lot. He just doesn't know what to do. In the end he trudges back to the Buddha and reports on his abject failure. The Buddha doesn't scold him, but he gives him a teaching. He says, "Meghiya, when you are spiritually immature there are five things that conduce to spiritual maturity. And the first of these is spiritual friendship. The second thing is the practice of ethics; and the third is serious discussion of the Dharma. Fourthly, you need to direct energy toward eliminating negative mental states and developing positive ones. And fifthly, you must cultivate insight in the sense of a deep understanding of universal impermanence."

In marking out these five things as necessary for the spiritually undeveloped, of course the Buddha was implying that Meghiya should put spiritual friendship first. If you have a spiritual friend, whether the Buddha or someone much less eminent, that one cannot be disregarded in the careless way that Meghiya has brushed off the Buddha. But like Meghiya, we are often unaware of the extent to which we are dependent spiritually on having personal contact with our spiritual friends, particularly those who are more developed than we are. It is very difficult to make any spiritual progress without them. The Buddha himself is no longer around, but most of us, like Meghiya, would not be ready for such a friend anyway. We would probably act in one way or another rather as Meghiya did.

We may not have the Buddha, but we do have one another. We can help one another and encourage one another in our practice of the Dharma. We can confess our faults and weaknesses to one another. We can share our understanding with one another. We can rejoice in one another's merits. In these ways we can make a practice of spiritual friendship.

No one else can practice the Dharma for us; we have to practice it ourselves. But we do not have to practice it by ourselves. We can practice it in the company of other like-minded people who are trying to do the same, and this is the best way-in fact, the only effective way- to practice.

As the Buddha was to say to his disciple and cousin Ananda, some years later at a place called Sakka, "Spiritual friendship is the whole of the spiritual life." But how are we to take this? We can understand that friendship is important, but the idea that friendship, even spiritual friendship, should be the whole of the spiritual life, does seem hard to swallow. But let us look a little more closely at what is being said here. The Pali word I have translated as "spiritual life" is Brahmacariya, which sometimes means celibacy or chastity-that is to say abstention from sexual activity-but in this context it has a much wider meaning. It consists of two parts. Brahma means high, noble, best, sublime, and real; it also means divine, not in the theistic sense but in the sense of the embodiment of the best and noblest qualities and virtues. And cariya means walking, faring, practicing, experiencing, even living. Hence Brahmacariya means something like "practicing the best" or "experiencing the ideal"; we could even render it "the divine life," or just "spiritual life."

There is a further aspect to the term Brahmacariya that brings us to a deeper understanding of what it means in this context. In early Buddhism there is a whole series of terms beginning with brahma, and one of these is brahmaloka, which means the sublime realm, the divine world, or simply the spiritual world in the highest sense. So, the Brahmacariya or spiritual life is that way of life that leads to the brahmaloka or spiritual world. But how is it able to do this? For the answer, we must turn to yet another early Buddhist text: the Maha Govinda Sutta. Without going into the background to this sutta—it's a long story-we find in it this very question being asked: "How does a mortal reach the immortal brahma world?" In other words, how can one pass from the transient to the eternal? And the answer given is short and simple. "One reaches the brahma world by giving up all possessive thoughts, all thoughts of me and mine." In other words, one reaches the brahmaloka by giving up egoism and selfishness, by giving up all sense of "I."

Thus, the intimate connection between spiritual friendship and spiritual life starts to come into focus. Spiritual friendship is a training in unselfishness, in ego-lessness. You share everything with your friend or friends. You speak to them kindly and affectionately, and show concern for their welfare, especially their spiritual welfare. You treat them in the same way you treat yourself—that is, you treat them as being equal with yourself. You relate to them with an attitude of metta, not according to where the power between you lies. Of course this is very difficult; it goes against the grain, because we are naturally selfish. The development of spiritual friendship is very difficult. Leading the spiritual life is very difficult. Being a Buddhist-a real Buddhist--is very difficult. We need help.

And we get that help not only from our teachers but also from one another. We can't be with our spiritual teacher all the time, but we can be with our spiritual friends all the time, or at least much of the time. We can see them regularly, perhaps live with them, perhaps even work with them. If we spend time with spiritual friends in this way, we will get to know them better, and they will get to know us better. We will learn to be more open and honest, we will be brought up against our weaknesses, and in

particular we will be brought up against our natural tendency to operate in accordance with the power mode. If we have spiritual friends, they will try not to relate to us in this way and they will expect us to operate in the love mode as well, to relate to them with metta. Learning to relate to our friends in this way, we will gradually learn to respond to the whole world with metta, with unselfishness. It is in this way that spiritual friendship is indeed the whole of the spiritual life.

5. IS A GURU NECESSARY?

One could say that there are many misconceptions about the guru, but only one true conception.

IS A GURU necessary? This is not a question that is likely ever to have occurred to anyone at the time of the Buddha; then, the first question anyone would have asked you would have been, "Who is your teacher?," not "Do you think a teacher is necessary?" But this question will inevitably arise sooner or later for anyone today who is genuinely trying to develop as an individual, trying to be authentically himself or herself. In particular, it is likely to arise if one attempts quite specifically and consciously to follow what we usually refer to as the spiritual path, and it will demand an answer all the more imperatively when one tries to follow that spiritual path in one or another of its oriental forms.

However, before we address the question itself, we must banish the haze of imaginative associations that gather around the magic word "guru." We must, unfortunately, dispel the vision of brilliant blue skies, beautiful white snow peaks, and, just above the snow line, the snug little caves which are in the popular imagination the natural habitat of that rare creature, the guru. We must come down to earth from those inaccessible valleys of Shangri-la in which benign and wise old men with long white beards and starry eyes pass on the secret of the very highest teaching to a very few devoted disciples. We must ruthlessly dismiss any notion of those lucky disciples effortlessly floating up to nirvana on the strength of having secured the most advanced techniques from the most esoteric lineage holder.

We need to consider the whole question of the guru in as sober and matter of fact a fashion as possible, and try to understand what a guru is, and what a guru is not. On that basis, it should become clear to what extent and in what way a guru is necessary, if at all. We can also consider the attitudes it may be appropriate to adopt in relation to the guru.

Let us begin by seeing what a guru is not. First of all, a guru is not the head of a religious group. By a religious group I do not mean a spiritual community, but rather a number of non-individuals organized into a power structure around the forms or conventions of some kind of religious practice. Religious groups are of many kinds-sects, churches, monasteries, and so on-and they each have someone at their head. Such heads are regarded with great veneration by other members of the group, but there is likely to be something unfocused or off-key about this devotion. They are venerated not for what they are in themselves, as individuals, but for what they represent, what they stand for, even what they symbolize.

It might seem obvious that they should stand for or symbolize something spiritual; and in a superficial sense they do. But in fact, they represent the group itself. That they are the head of a group is their principal significance. It is easy to see when this is the case; you just have to wait for the head of a group to be criticized or even vilified, as in course of time will inevitably happen. Members of groups usually feel that an attack on the head of their group is an attack on them. Any disrespect shown to the head of the group by those outside the group is interpreted by group members as lack of respect for the group itself.

The Buddha refused to countenance any such attitude among his followers. The Brahmajala Sutta of the Digha Nikaya tells the story of how the Buddha and a great crowd of his followers were once traveling on foot between Rajagaha and Nalanda and found themselves in company with a wanderer called Suppiya and a follower of his, a young man called Brahmadatta. These two, in the hearing of the Buddha and his followers, began to argue, and kept arguing as they walked. And the subject of their argument, one can imagine, must have upset some of the Buddha's disciples considerably. For Suppiya,

the text tells us, was finding fault in all sorts of ways with the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha-though Brahmadatta was praising them just as strongly. All the travellers found themselves staying in the same place overnight, and still Suppiya and Brahmadatta kept on arguing.

Not surprisingly, when dawn came, the Buddha's followers gathered together and started talking among themselves about this dis- concerting behaviour on the part of their fellow travellers. Coming to join them, the Buddha asked them what they had just been talking about, and they told him. Reading between the lines here, we can gather that they were somewhat upset, even angry, at what had happened. But the Buddha said: "Monks, if anyone should speak in disparagement of me, of the Dhamma, or of the Sangha, you should not be angry or displeased at such disparagement; that would only be a hindrance to you.

Nor did the Buddha let the matter rest there. He said: "If others disparage me, the Dhamma or the Sangha, and you are angry or dis- pleased, can you recognize whether what they say is right or not?" And the monks had to admit that, in those circumstances, they would be in no state to think about things objectively.

So the Buddha said, "If others disparage me, the Dhamma or the Sangha, then you must explain what is incorrect as being incorrect, saying: "That is incorrect, that is false, that is not our way, that is not found among us."

If one reflects on this episode, one realizes that the Buddha is pointing out to his disciples a tendency that is all too human. If they had become angry, they might have thought that their anger had arisen because the Buddha was being criticized, but in fact it was probably because the group to which they belonged was being criticized, and so, in effect, they were being criticized. A disciple in that position might well feel that his wisdom in being a member of that group, and a follower of the person being criticized, was being called into question.

Examples of such sensitivity are not confined to the Pali Canon. I have come across Buddhists who would hunt through books on comparative religion, dictionaries of religion and philosophy, and the like, to see if they could find unfavourable references to Buddhism. When they found them, they would write to the publishers, call public meetings, and organize protests and demonstrations. It seemed that little short of stringing up the unfortunate person responsible for the offending comments could pacify them. The most interesting aspect of the whole business was that the Buddhists who thus spluttered and seethed with rage were invariably convinced that they were thereby demonstrating their devotion to the Dharma. What they were exhibiting, however, was their group spirit-a thing that has nothing to do with the spiritual life or the Buddha's teaching.

Hence a guru is not the head of a religious group. Nor is he an ecclesiastical superior, someone high up in the power structure of a religious group. When prominent religious personalities come from the East, they are sometimes heralded by advance publicity in which one is told that this particular personality is in charge of an important group of monasteries, or that he is second-in-command of an ancient and historic temple. Sometimes in India one is told simply that he is very wealthy. I was once in Calcutta [Kolkata] at a time when preparations were being made for the arrival of a monk from a famous temple in Sri Lanka, and I was told by the head monk of the temple where I was staying that I ought to go and see him, as he was very important and influential. Naturally I asked, "In what way is he important?"

The head monk replied, "He's the richest monk in Sri Lanka." It was on that basis that I was expected to go and pay my respects to him.

This is an extreme example, but it is representative of a general expectation that one should be impressed by people who are higher up in the ecclesiastical structure and regard them as gurus. But a guru is not this sort of figure at all. Someone who is organizationally important or influential is not thereby a guru.

A guru is not a teacher either—a statement that may come as something of a surprise. It is comparatively easy to understand that a guru is not the head of a religious group, but it is quite usual to think that a spiritual teacher is just what a guru is supposed to be. But what is meant by a teacher? A teacher is one who communicates information. A geography teacher teaches facts and figures about the earth; a psychology teacher teaches facts and figures about the human mind. In the same way, a teacher of religion may teach the general history of all the different religions of the world, or the theology or doctrinal system of a particular tradition. But a guru, as such, doesn't teach religion. In fact, he or she doesn't necessarily teach anything at all.

People may ask questions, and he may answer those questions- whether or not he does so is up to him. But he has no vested interest in teaching. If nobody asked him any questions, he probably wouldn't bother to say anything. The Buddha himself made this perfectly clear. In several places in the Pali scriptures, he is reported as saying that he has no ditthi - no view, no philosophy, no system of thought. "There are lots of other teachers," he says, "who have this system of thought to expound, or that philosophy to teach; but I have none. I have no 'view' to communicate. The Tathagata (Buddha) is free from views, liberated from doctrines, emancipated from philosophy."

Outside the Pali Canon the Buddha is further reported as saying that he has no Dharma to impart. The great Diamond Sutra describes innumerable Bodhisattvas and disciples sitting and waiting for the Buddha to teach them the Dharma. But the Buddha tells them, "I have nothing to teach."126 In another celebrated Mahayana text, the Lankavatara Sutra, the Buddha goes so far as to say that he has never taught anything. "Whether you have heard me speaking or not, the truth is that from the night of my Enlightenment, all through the forty-five years until the night of my Parinirvāna, the night of my passing from the world, I have not uttered a single word." So, the Buddha, the ultimate Buddhist guru, has no view, no teaching to impart. He is not a teacher.

Something else that the guru is not relates to one of the most striking facts about the human race as a whole, which is that the majority of its members do not grow up. People develop physically, of course, and they also develop intellectually in the sense that they learn how to organize their knowledge more and more coherently. But they don't grow up spiritually, or even emotionally. Many people remain emotionally immature, even infantile. They want to depend on someone stronger than themselves, someone who is prepared to love and protect them absolutely and unconditionally. They don't really want to be responsible for themselves. They want some authority or system to make their decisions for them.

When one is young, one depends on one's parents, but as one grows older, one is usually obliged to find substitutes for them. Many people find such a substitute in a romantic relationship, which is one of the reasons marriages is so popular, and also, often, so difficult. Others find their parent-surrogate in a concept of a personal God. One might even follow Freud in saying that God is a father-substitute on a

cosmic scale. The believer expects from God the kind of love and protection that a child expects from his or her parents. It is highly significant that in Christianity, God is addressed as "our Father."

The role of father-substitute is often played by a guru-or rather a pseudo-guru. Mahatma Gandhi, for instance, was a great Indian politician, thinker, activist, even revolutionary, but it is rather significant that as a religious figure for much of his life he was addressed by his disciples as Bapu, "Father." Nor was this sort of title at all unusual in India. When I lived there, I was in contact with quite a number of religious groups and their gurus, many of whom liked to be addressed as Dadaji, or "Grandfather." Their disciples, it seemed, were only too happy to fall in with their wishes in this respect.

This rather amused me, and when I was in Kalimpong and had some pupils of my own-most of them Nepalese rather than Indian-I asked them out of curiosity how they regarded me. At that time I was about thirty, and they were in their late teens and early twenties, so when they clasped their hands together and said with great fervour, "Oh sir, you are just like our grandfather," I was taken rather by surprise.

In India I also met a number of female gurus, and they were invariably addressed as Mataji, "Mother," or even Ma, which means "Mommy." One of these gurus, who was well into middle-age when I first got to know her, was surrounded by young male followers, most of whom, as I discovered later, had lost their mothers. In the evenings they would gather in the meeting-hall to sit gazing up at "Mommy" and singing in chorus the word Ma - nothing else, just that word, "Mommy"--to the accompaniment of drums and cymbals. They would keep it up for two or three hours at a time: "Ma, Ma, Ma, Ma, Ma." They believed that what they called "Ma-ism" was a radical new development in religious history, and that the worship of Mother- this particular mother, anyway-would be the future religion of humanity. I was not at all surprised to find that there were intense competitiveness and jealousy among her disciples, as if they were all vying with one another to be the favourite, if not the only, son. It was also noticeable that they tended to disparage other groups. In the same way that children will say, "My daddy is much stronger/richer than your daddy" or "Our house is bigger than your house," they would maintain that in comparison with their own guru, other gurus were insignificant.

Fortunately, I have known gurus who knew how to manage their followers in a much healthier manner-particularly certain Tibetan gurus. A story about three great lamas I knew personally in Kalimpong will illustrate this. All three were eminent lamas of deep and genuine spiritual experience, and they all had many disciples. Though they all belonged to the predominantly "Red Hat" tradition, their characters were very different. One wore a sheepskin robe, dyed red, and was always on the move, so that it was difficult to catch him. Another lived with his wife and son and gave initiation to thousands of people-initiations that were said to be particularly powerful. The third was the scholarly head of an important monastery.

The story I was told by one of their disciples-and they had a number of disciples in common--was that a discussion had once arisen among the disciples as to which of the three gurus was the greatest. In the end, one of the bolder spirits plucked up courage and approached one of the gurus. He said, "Look, there's been a lot of discussion as to how the three of you would place yourselves with respect to each other. We all have immense veneration for all three of you, but we would appreciate it if you could clear up this point: Which of you is the greatest? Who has gone furthest? Who is nearest to nirvana?" So, the guru smiled and said, "All right, I will tell you. It is true that among us three there is one who is much more highly developed than the other two. But none of you will ever know which one that is."

A real guru does not fall into the role of a father figure. This is not that people do not need father substitutes, at least for a while. Such a projection may be necessary for their psychological development. One must also allow that the function of the guru is analogous to that of the true father: the guru fulfils the same function on a spiritual level that the true father fulfils on the ordinary human level. But the guru is not a substitute for a father where the father has been lacking, or where he is still required.

Neither should a guru be taken for a problem-solver. This brings us to a distinction that I find it helpful to draw between a problem and a difficulty. The difference is that a difficulty can be overcome or resolved with effort, whereas a problem cannot. If you put a lot of effort into what I call a problem, you only make it more problematic. It is like finding a knot in a piece of string and pulling on the two ends to untie it. You can pull as hard as you like, but you will only succeed in tightening the knot. The genuine guru may help people overcome their difficulties, but he will not attempt to grapple with their problems.

There are fundamentally two kinds of problem: doctrinal problems and personal, usually psychological, problems. The problems of Westerners tend to be of the second type, whereas in the East people's problems are often doctrinal—they want to resolve technical questions to do with nirvana, the skandhas, the samskaras, and so on. How- ever, even such doctrinal problems are very often psychologically motivated, or at least psychologically oriented. One asks even the most abstract theoretical question ultimately for personal psychological reasons, though usually one is not conscious of this.

If you have a problem, it embodies a self-contradictory situation; it cannot be solved on its own terms. But if you bring it to your guru, you are in effect asking him or her to solve the problem on its own terms. For instance, a woman comes along in great distress, so upset that she can hardly speak. Eventually she tells her guru that she just can't live with her husband any longer. She's had enough. If she has to put up with anymore, she'll go stark staring mad. She's just got to leave him. But her problem is that if she leaves her husband, she will have to leave her children too-because the children cannot be taken away from their father—and leaving her children is no less impossible than continuing to live with her husband. She will go mad if she has to stay with her husband, but she will also go mad if she has to leave her children. "What am I to do?" she asks her guru expectantly.

Then somebody else comes along and complains of lack of energy: "I'm always tired," he says. "I feel exhausted all the time, constantly at a low ebb, totally depleted. I can't do a thing. I don't seem able to work up any interest in anything; I just lie around all day like a limp, wet rag. I can watch a bit of television or listen to the radio, but that's it. I feel utterly drained all the time. There's just one thing that I know will help: meditation. I can get energy through meditation-I'm convinced of that." So, the guru says, "Well, why don't you meditate?" And the unfortunate disciple replies wearily, "I just don't have the energy." But if the guru has to send this person away with his problem still unresolved, there are still more problems waiting in the wings. To take yet another example, someone comes along and says that he just wants to be happy. That's all he asks from life. And he feels that he could be perfectly happy if only someone would give him a satisfactory reason for being happy. He has examined all the reasons offered by religions, philosophies, and friends, but none of them has proved truly convincing. Can the guru do better? If anyone has the answer, surely the guru will. Surely a guru is there to provide the answers to the big problems. Of course, the guru knows quite well that every rea- son he can produce will be rejected as unsatisfactory. But still the man demands a reason.

If you asked any of these people what they are really looking for, all of them would say that they want to find a solution to their problem. That is why they have come to the guru. They firmly believe he can solve their problems if he chooses to do so. But, in fact, this is not the situation at all. What these people really want to do is defeat the guru. They present their problem in such a way that the guru cannot solve it without their consent or cooperation-which they have no intention of giving.

Such people are sometimes very cunning. Especially in the East they will very often approach the guru with a great show of devotion and humility, bearing presents, making offerings, bowing, and declaring their unshakable faith in the guru. They say, "I've taken this problem of mine to lots of other gurus, to all the most famous teachers and masters, and not one of them could solve it. But I've heard so much about you, and I'm sure that you are the one person who can." Only a guru who lacks experience, or isn't a true guru, will be taken in by all this. The true guru will see what is going on at once, and will refuse to play the role of problem-solver, even if, as is very likely, the person with the problem goes away disgruntled, and starts saying that the guru cannot be a true guru because he hasn't got the down-to- earth compassion to deal with his disciples' problems. Some gurus are rewarded with quite damaged reputations for refusing to play this sort of game.

So, a guru is not the head of a religious group, or a teacher, or a father-substitute, or a problem-solver. This does not mean that he or she may not, from time to time, function in these ways, and in many others. A guru can function, for instance, as a physician, a psychotherapist, an artist, a poet, a musician, or even just a friend. But he or she will not identify with any of these roles.

The guru may be the head of a religious group, although this rarely happens, because the qualities that make a guru are not those that assist promotion within an ecclesiastical system. Much more often, particularly within the Buddhist Sangha, the guru may be a teacher- that is, he or she may function outwardly as a teacher. But it remains important to distinguish the teacher from the guru as such. Some gurus may be teachers, but by no means all teachers are gurus. A guru may even function as a provisional father-substitute or problem - solver, but the emphasis is on "provisional." As soon as possible, he or she will discard this role and function as a guru.

But if the guru is none of these things, what is a guru? It has been said that there are many different ways of being wicked, but only one way of being good (which in the eyes of some people makes goodness seem rather dull). One could also say that there are many misconceptions about the guru, but only one true conception. There is therefore much that can be said about what a guru is not, but comparatively little to be said about what he or she positively is. Of course, this doesn't mean that it is any less important. Indeed, from a spiritual point of view, the more important a thing is, the less there is to be said about it.

Perhaps, above all, the guru is one who stands on a higher level of being and consciousness than us, who is more evolved, more developed, more-in a word-aware. Also, a guru is someone with whom we are in regular contact. This contact may take place at different levels. It may take place on a higher spiritual plane—that is, telepathically-as the direct contact of mind with mind. There may be contact between the guru and the disciple in dreams or during meditation. But for the ordinary disciple it generally takes place on the physical plane—that is, on the ordinary social plane, in the ordinary way. The relatively undeveloped disciple will need regular and frequent physical contact with the guru. According to Eastern tradition, ideally, he or she would be in day-to-day contact with the guru, even living under the same roof.

Contact between the guru and the disciple should be "existential"—that is, there should be real communication between them— not just the sharing of thoughts or ideas or feelings or experiences, even spiritual experiences, but communication of being, or, if you like, action and interaction of being. The guru and the disciple need to be themselves as fully as possible in relation to each other. The guru's business is not to teach the disciple anything, but simply to be himself in relation to the disciple. Nor, as the disciple, is it your business to learn. You simply have to expose yourself to the being—and to the effect of the being-of the guru, and at the same time, be yourself in relation to him.

Spiritual communication, like integration, can be thought of as being of two kinds: "horizontal" and "vertical." Horizontal communication takes place between two people who are on more or less the same level of being and consciousness. Because their states of mind fluctuate from day to day, sometimes one of them will be in a better state of mind than the other, but the next day it may be the other way round. Vertical communication, on the other hand, takes place between people one of whom is on a consistently higher level than the other, quite apart from any ups and downs. It is such vertical communication that takes place between guru and disciple. modal

In all communication, whether horizontal or vertical, there is mutual modification of being. In the case of horizontal communication, in the course of communication anything one-sided or unbalanced in one's nature is corrected. People who really communicate gradually develop a similarity of outlook, responding to things in the same spirit; they have progressively more in common. At the same time, paradoxical as it may seem, they become more truly themselves. Suppose, for example, a very rational person engages in true communication with a very emotional person. If they sustain this communication long enough, the emotional person will become more rational and the rational person will become more emotional. At the same time, if you are the rational person (to take that example) you do not just have emotionality added to you from outside. Through communicating with the emotional person, you are enabled to develop your own undeveloped emotionality which has been there all the time (as it were) beneath the surface. A quality emerges that was there, but not active. The communication has simply enabled you to become more yourself, more whole, more complete. And it's the same, obviously, if you are the emotional one of the two.

Vertical communication is different. The disciple grows in the direction of the guru's higher level of being and consciousness, but the guru does not become correspondingly more like the disciple. The principle of mutual modification of being does not mean that the guru slips back in his development as a result of his communication with someone less developed. He does not meet the disciple halfway, as it were. In the intensity of his or her communication with the disciple is in a sense compelled to evolve. He or she has no choice, except to break off the relationship altogether, and a real disciple can- not even do that. It is said that the true disciple is like a bulldog puppy. When offered a towel, the puppy will snap at it and not let go, even if he is lifted off the ground with his jaws still attached to it. The true disciple has that sort of tenacity.

As a result of his vertical communication with the disciple, the guru also grows spiritually. The only guru who doesn't do this is a Buddha, a fully and perfectly Enlightened one, and even among gurus a Buddha is extremely rare. It is sometimes said in Tantric circles that disciples are necessary to a guru's further development, that nothing helps a guru so much as having a really good disciple-not an obedient, docile disciple, but one who really engages in communication, one who is really trying to grow. A good disciple may give the guru quite a lot of trouble, sometimes more trouble than all the other disciples put

together. It also occasionally happens that the disciple overtakes the guru, and a reversal of roles takes place. This situation is less problematic than it might seem from the outside, because the relationship is not one of authority or power, but of love and friendship.

So, is a guru necessary? Well, to grow spiritually without any con- tact with a guru is extremely difficult. Generalizing, one might say that for most people spiritual growth does not take place without at least two factors being present: the experience of suffering and contact with a more highly developed person or persons. Why? --because personal relationships and real communication are necessary to human development. Not only that--we need real communication that includes a vertical element. Through communication with our friends, we develop horizontally-we become more whole, more our- selves. But most people seem to need communication with a to guru enable them to rise to a higher level of being and consciousness. Just as a child develops into an adult mainly through contact with his or her parents, regular contact with at least one person who is more highly developed than we are, is necessary for our spiritual development. Not that it is absolutely impossible to make progress without being in contact with such a person, but that kind of contact certainly speeds up and intensifies the whole process.

But if a guru is necessary, how do you go about choosing one? How do you know whether someone is more highly evolved than you are? Obviously, it is important not to make any mistake in this matter. The problem is that it is very difficult indeed to know if someone is really more advanced-perhaps impossible-without prolonged contact. Some gurus in the East say not only that it is impossible for the disciple to choose the guru, but that it is quite presumptuous for the disciple to think that he can do so, or that he can know whether someone is more developed than himself. What actually happens, they say, is that the guru chooses the disciple. You may think that you are choosing a guru, but in fact the only choice you are capable of making is of a religious group (with the guru as its head), or a religious teacher, or a father-substitute or problem-solver. You are not choosing a guru as such, because you are not equipped to see who has greater spiritual attainment.

So as a would-be disciple, what are you to do? All you can do is make as much progress as possible by yourself so that you can recognize and make contact with a spiritual community (as distinct from religious group). Then you must hope that some member of that community will take you on as a friend or refer you to somebody else who can. In any case, you should always be ready and receptive for the advent of the guru.

In a way, the guru cannot be overvalued. Nothing can be more valuable than the person who helps you to develop spiritually. All the same, it is true to say that in the East the guru often tends in a sense to be overvalued, while in the West he is usually undervalued. What can happen in the East is that a false and inflated value is attached to the guru. People in India sometimes say that the guru is God. This is asserted not just as a figure of speech, but quite literally. If you are sit- ting in front of the guru, you are not just looking at a human being, seated on a cushion on the floor. You're sitting in front of God-in fact, all the gods rolled into one, the all-powerful, the all-knowing himself. He may look just like an ordinary human being, but he knows everything that is going on in the whole universe, including every-thing going on in your mind. He can read your thoughts like an open book. If you've got a problem, you don't have to tell him--he knows already. He can do anything he likes. He can bless you, give you riches, promotion, fame, children, all with just a word of blessing. He can give you Enlightenment if he wants to. It is all in his hands-it's all the "grace of the guru," as they say.

All the disciple has to offer is faith in the guru, faith that the God. If the disciple only has enough of this kind of faith, the guru can work miracles on his behalf. Such faith is therefore regarded as of the very greatest importance. There are, of course, little difficulties. It sometimes happens that the guru appears not to know something, or to forget something you have told him, and you may get a bit upset by this. But the true disciple isn't bothered at all because he knows that these apparently human limitations and failings are tests of faith. The guru is only pretending to have slips of the mind to see if your faith is still firm and sound, just as a potter taps a pot after it's been baked, to see whether or not there's a crack in it.

It is no wonder that over the years the disciple comes to inhabit a fantasy world in which whatever happens is seen to do so on account of the guru's "grace" and the guru's will. If the guru isn't careful, he may come to inhabit this fantasy world too, especially if he isn't a real guru. After all, it isn't easy to escape such a fantasy world if you your- self are at the centre of it. If someone comes and tells you that their child was sick and has now recovered due to your blessing, you may not be inclined to dispute that interpretation, even if you hadn't given the child a moment's thought.

The problem from the guru's point of view is that sooner or later it will dawn on certain of his more perceptive disciples that he isn't really God. While he may have a deep level of insight and spiritual experience, he also has some quite human limitations. Perceiving this, they are likely to conclude that he isn't a true guru, and go off to look for someone else, someone who is a true guru, someone who is God. If they do that, the same thing will inevitably happen all over again. They will start noticing little discrepancies, get disillusioned, and see that this guru too is "only" a human being after all. And so, the merry- go-round continues.

This happens among Buddhists as well to some extent. A Tibetan friend of mine, a lama and guru living in Kalimpong, recalled that when he first arrived there, the local Nepalese Buddhists used to flock to see him, bringing him wonderful offerings and eager to take initiations from him. But after a few years they got a bit tired of him. They continued to come to pay their respects, but he was amused to observe that they didn't bring quite such big offerings as before. Then a new lama arrived on the scene (he was a friend of the first one) and everybody abandoned my friend to get their new initiations from the new lama—to the amusement of both lamas. Eventually, as the Chinese communists seized power in Tibet, more and more gurus started to arrive in town, which was very bewildering for the local community. No sooner had they identified a supremely powerful guru and rushed to make him offerings, than another one arrived, who- according to some people--was even more eminent and accomplished. In the end they must have run through perhaps twenty gurus, looking for the "real" one.

Clearly, the guru is overvalued in this manner in the East because he is regarded as an idealized parent figure: all-knowing, all-powerful, infinitely loving and tolerant. The disciple in such cases wants to adopt an attitude of infantile dependence. Gurus are usually very popular in India, but there is one thing demanded of them, regardless of almost anything else: they must always be kind and affectionate, soft-spoken and gentle. What they teach and how they live are side issues by comparison.

In the West we have traditionally gone to the opposite extreme. Here, far from overvaluing the guru, we have hardly any concept of the guru at all. This is no doubt largely due to the influence of Christianity. On the one hand you have belief in God with all his various attributes, and on the other you have submission to the head of the particular religious group to which you belong, your ecclesiastical superior, but there seems to be no room for the guru in the true sense. The gurus who do appear-who may eventually be identified as saints--are usually subject to the rule of the ecclesiastical authorities. In

medieval times, even a great saint sometimes had to submit to a bad Pope. Perhaps that didn't do the saint much harm, but it was bad for the Pope, and for the Church as a whole. However, we must not imagine that the Christian tradition is the only spiritual tradition the West has ever known. Nor should we accept the assumption that the concept of the guru in the Eastern sense is alien to the Western mentality. There were certainly gurus in ancient Greece and Rome-for example Plato, who maintained a sort of school or academy, Pythagoras, who founded spiritual communities, Apollonius of Tyana, and above all perhaps, Plotinus. From Porphyry's life of Plotinus, especially the description of his later life in Rome, one gets the definite impression of a sort of spiritual community, set up more along the lines of an Indian ashram than in a manner typical of the kind of institution one might think of as characteristic of the later Roman Empire.

Such great figures of classical times were gurus in the true sense of the term. And in modern post-Christian times there are signs that the importance of the guru is again beginning to be appreciated in the West, despite our democratic and egalitarian prejudices, our modern belief that no one should be seen as better than anybody else. Even in modern cultures so apparently hostile to the possibility of spiritual development, there are signs that people are beginning to appreciate the significance of those who are more highly developed than the average person.

As Buddhists, we have to follow a middle way. We have to recognize above all that we are capable of evolving from our present state of being and consciousness to a more fully developed degree of self-consciousness and even to a realization of transcendental conscious- ness, leading to what, without really being able to understand it, we can only call absolute consciousness. In order to do this, we have also to recognize that different human beings are at different stages of this great process of spiritual development. Some are lower down than we are, while others are higher up, even a great deal higher up. We have to recognize that those who are higher up in the scale of the evolution of humanity are in a position to help us, and that we will develop through communication with them. It is gurus in this sense whom we need to recognize as being superior. The kind of guru we don't need is one to whom we give an unrealistically inflated value and onto whom we project our desire for an idealized father-figure. It is a great mistake to expect from a guru what we can only get, ultimately, from ourselves. The Buddha did not ask anybody to regard him as a god or as God. He never asked anybody to have faith-much less to have absolute faith-in him. In fact, this is a very important aspect of Buddhism. The Buddha never said, "You must believe in me, and believe what I say, if you want to be saved, or if you want to realize your own true nature." Again and again in the Buddhist scriptures he is presented as saying, "Let any reasonable man come to me, one who is willing to learn; I will teach him the Dharma." All he asks is that we should be rational and open-minded. All he requires is reasonable and receptive human contact. He seems to have been quite convinced that he could introduce anyone to the spiritual life without making any appeal for absolute faith and devotion, but purely by rational and empirical means. On this basis alone he could awaken anyone to the truth that the path to Enlightenment is the most worthwhile thing to which as human beings we can possibly devote ourselves.

6. SPIRITUAL HIERARCHY

It is this kind of spontaneous emotion that creates the spiritual hierarchy: a spontaneous feeling of devotion when one encounters something higher; a spontaneous overflowing of compassion when one is confronted by other people's distress or difficulty; and a spontaneous welling up of love and sympathy when one is among one's peers.

ACCORDING TO the Pali Canon, just after the Buddha became Enlightened—or rather, while he was still exploring the different facets of that experience which we usually refer to as though it were a single undifferentiated occurrence--he became aware of a very powerful aspiration. He knew that he had to find somebody or something

that he could revere and respect. His fundamental impulse, it seems, so soon after his experience of Enlightenment, was to reverence: to look up, not down. After some reflection he realized that having attained Enlightenment, there was now no person he could look up to, because no one else had attained what he had attained. But he saw that he could look up to the Dharma, the great spiritual law by virtue of which he had attained Enlightenment. He therefore decided to devote himself to reverencing the Dharma.

This episode cannot be called to mind too often, especially because it is so contrary to the modern spirit of not wanting to honour or be indebted to anybody or anything. We are sometimes only too willing to look down on others, but we are unwilling to look up and even feel resentful if others appear to be superior to us in any way. We are generally happy enough to admire and even venerate the superior physical strength, quickness of eye, and will-to-win of the athlete, but very often we are unwilling to respect or reverence qualities that are superior from a spiritual point of view.

Someone once made the point that in any culture where a particular principle is of such fundamental importance that it is taken for granted, no word for that principle exists in the local language. One quite interesting reflection of this is to be found in the fact that in Buddhism there is no traditional term that corresponds to "tolerance." It's as though in order to appreciate the tolerance of Buddhism you have to be able to look at it from the standpoint of a tradition or culture that is not tolerant. Buddhism traditionally does not think of itself as tolerant. It doesn't promote that concept, doesn't recommend itself as being a tolerant religion; it has never attained that sort of self-consciousness with regard to its own nature.

It is the same with hierarchy. Buddhism is traditionally saturated in it, to the extent that Buddhists are almost unable to step aside and see Buddhism as hierarchical. The very fact that the spiritual path consists of a series of steps or stages shows how deeply the hierarchical principle is embedded within Buddhism. In fact, the spiritual life itself is inseparable from the hierarchical principle. There is a hierarchy of wisdoms: the wisdom you hear or read about (sruta-mayi-prajna), the wisdom you cultivate through reflection (cinta-mayi-prajna) and, as the highest form, the wisdom cultivated in meditation (bhavana-mayi-prajna). There is a hierarchy of the different levels of the cosmos, from the kamaloka up to the rupaloka and the arupaloka. And of course there is a hierarchy of persons: both the ariya-puggalas of the Theravada and the Bodhisattvas of the Mahayana are organized into hierarchies. It would seem that the concept of hierarchy is absolutely fundamental to Buddhism; without it, Buddhism as we know it can hardly exist. And for that very reason, perhaps, there is no traditional word or concept for hierarchy. There are certain words. that express the idea of a sequence of increasing value within a

particular context, but there is not an overall, generalized term covering all the different, more specific hierarchies.

But when as Westerners we approach Buddhism from the outside, as it were, its hierarchical nature certainly strikes us, and some people have to struggle with this in a way that Eastern Buddhists, with different cultural and psychological conditioning, do not. After many years as a Buddhist myself, however, my own difficulty lies in trying to sympathize with the non- or anti-hierarchical concept of equality, which seems very limited and restricting. It would seem to me that inequality is one of the most obvious things about life.

Of course, there are true hierarchies and false ones. In Europe in the eighteenth century, especially in France, the social and ecclesiastical hierarchy was completely false; it did not correspond to any facts or realities. For example, court favourites with barely the faintest pre- tense to piety were appointed to bishoprics. When the name of a certain courtier was proposed to Louis XV for Archbishop of Paris, he demurred: "No, no, the Archbishop of Paris should at least believe in God!"--which shows how far things had gone. In the case of poor Louis XVI, who was guillotined, his real interest was in making locks, and that is what he spent most of his time doing. He had no idea about government; in other words, he wasn't really a king in the true sense of the word.

Eventually there was the great upheaval of the French Revolution, and the false hierarchy was overthrown in both church and state. But in negating the false hierarchy people asserted not true hierarchy but no hierarchy, or anti-hierarchy: hence the famous slogan ‘‘Liberty, Equality, Fraternity." We have inherited a great deal from that period, politically, socially, intellectually, and spiritually. In particular, we have inherited an anti-hierarchical tendency-opposition not just to false hierarchies but to hierarchies as such. That is unfortunate. One can understand people in revolutionary France being unable or unwilling to distinguish between genuine hierarchy and false hierarchy. They didn't want to give a false hierarchy any reason for existing at all. But in calmer times we shouldn't have to reject the very idea of hierarchy in that way. It is sometimes said that everybody is as good as everybody else "as a person." But this assumption is questionable. It is not as though the terms "person" and "individual’’ refer to something static; they suggest a degree of development. And some people are more developed than others; that is to say, some are better as persons or individuals than others.

The point of such an assertion of hierarchy is not to put people in their place. Quite the opposite is true, because this hierarchy is not fixed. All that matters is that everybody should be encouraged to grow, and that none of us should accept some fixed idea of our value as individuals. Our value consists in the effort we make at the level we are at rather than in some fixed position we hold in the hierarchy. If we have done our best, there can be no criticism of us.

It does seem that competition helps people to give of their best, achieve their best, be their best. In one of his discourses, the Buddha spoke of each of his more intimate disciples in turn, declaring who was best at what. And, it seems, each of them could indeed be found to be the best at something or other. One was the best at giving talks, another was the best meditator, another was the best at going for alms. Everybody excelled at something.

Still, the word hierarchy is very unpopular these days, and the dictionary definition-"a body of ecclesiastical rulers"-does nothing to make the term more appealing. But in its original sense, hierarchy meant something like an embodiment, in a number of different people, of different degrees of

manifestation of reality. One can speak, for instance, of a hierarchy of living forms-some lower, expressing or manifesting less reality, others higher, expressing or manifesting more reality. There is a continuous hierarchy of living forms from amoebas right up to human beings-the higher the level, the greater the degree of reality.

And there is another hierarchy of living forms: the hierarchy from the unenlightened human being right up to the Enlightened Buddha. This corresponds to what in other contexts I have described as the Higher Evolution. Just as the unenlightened human being embodies or manifests more reality, more truth, than the amoeba, in the same way the Enlightened human being embodies or manifests more reality in his or her life and work, and even speech, than does the unenlightened person. The Enlightened person is like a clear window through which the light of reality shines, through which that light can be seen almost as it is. Or one can say that he or she is like a crystal or diamond concentrating and reflecting that light.

Between the unenlightened human being and the Enlightened one, the Buddha, there are a number of intermediate degrees, embodied in different people at different stages of spiritual development. Most people are still short of Enlightenment, to a greater or lesser extent, but at the same time they are not wholly unenlightened. They stand somewhere between the unenlightened state and the state of full Enlightenment, and thus make up the spiritual hierarchy, the higher reaches of which can be referred to as the Bodhisattva hierarchy. We may have an appreciation of the intensity of Bodhisattvas' aspiration and commitment to the spiritual life, but even among Bodhisattvas there are degrees of spiritual attainment.

The principle of spiritual hierarchy is very important. As human beings we are related to ultimate reality both directly and indirectly. We are related to reality directly in the sense that in the very depths of our being is something which all the time connects us with reality, a kind of golden thread which, though it may be gossamer thin, is always there. In some people that thread has become a little thicker, a little stronger, in others it has strengthened almost into a rope, while in those who are Enlightened there is no need for a connecting thread at all, because there is no difference between the depth of their being and the depth of reality itself. We are all directly connected in the depth of our being with reality, although most of us don't realize it. But although we don't see that thin golden thread shining in the midst of the darkness within us, nevertheless, it is there.

We are related indirectly to reality in two ways. In the first place, we are related to those things that represent a lower degree of manifestation of reality than ourselves. We are related to nature: rocks, water, fire, the different forms of vegetable life, and the forms of animal life that are lower in the scale of evolution than ourselves. This relation- ship may be compared with seeing a light through a thick veil; some- times the veil seems to be so thick—especially in the case of material forms-that we are unable to see the light at all.

We are indirectly related to reality also through those forms that represent a higher degree of manifestation of reality than ourselves. This is like seeing a light through a thin veil-a veil that seems at times as fine as gossamer, and even, just occasionally, parts and falls away to allow the light of reality to be seen directly, as it is, without any mediation at all. We could say that this thin veil, through which we see the light of reality, is the spiritual hierarchy, especially the Bodhisattva hierarchy.

It is of the utmost importance for us to be in contact with people who are at least a little more spiritually advanced than we are our- selves, through whom the light of reality shines a little more clearly than it shines through us. Such people are known traditionally in Buddhism as our spiritual friends, our kalyana mitras, and they are more important to us than even a Buddha would be. If we happened to have the opportunity to meet a Buddha, we probably wouldn't be able to make much of the encounter or even realize the nature of the person in front of us. We are likely to benefit much more from con- tact with those who are just a little more spiritually developed than we are.

In this connection there is a beautiful passage in that great Tibetan spiritual classic, The Jewel Ornament of Liberation of Gampopa. Speaking of spiritual friends, Gampopa says:

"Since at the beginning of our career it is impossible to be in touch with the Buddhas or with Bodhisattvas living on a high level of spirituality, we have to meet with ordinary human beings as spiritual friends. As soon as the darkness caused by our deeds has lightened, we can find Bodhisattvas on a high level of spirituality. Then when we have risen above the Great Preparatory Path, we can find the nirmanakaya of the Buddha. Finally, as soon as we live on a high spiritual level, we can meet with the sambhogakaya as a spiritual friend.

Should you ask, who among these four is our greatest benefactor, the reply is that in the beginning of our career when we are still living imprisoned by our deeds and emotions, we will not even see so much as the face of a superior spiritual friend. Instead, we will have to seek an ordinary human being who can illumine the path we have to follow with the light of his counsel, whereafter we shall meet superior ones. Therefore, the greatest benefactor is a spiritual friend in the form of an ordinary human being."

We can't get far on our own. If week after week, year after year, we had no meditation classes to go to, if we never met another person who was interested in Buddhism, if we couldn't even get any books- because reading books of the right kind is also a sort of spiritual communication—if we were entirely on our own, we wouldn't get far, however great our initial enthusiasm and sincerity. We get encouragement, inspiration, and moral support from associating with others who have similar ideals and who are following a similar way of life. This is especially the case when we associate with those who are a bit more spiritually advanced than we are, or, to put it more simply, who are just a bit more human than most people are- a bit more aware, a bit kinder, a bit more faithful, and so on.

In practice, this means that we should try to be open and receptive toward those whom we recognize to be above us in the spiritual hierarchy, those who clearly have greater insight, understanding, sympathy, compassion, and so on. We should be ready to receive from them, just as a flower opens its petals to receive the light and warmth of the sun. As for those who are, as far as we can tell (and bearing in mind we might be mistaken), below us in the spiritual hierarchy, our attitude should be one of generosity, kindliness, and helpfulness-giving them encouragement, making them feel welcome, and so on. And with regard to those who seem to be roughly on the same level as our- selves, our attitude should be one of mutuality, sharing, reciprocity. These three attitudes correspond to the three great positive emotions of the Buddhist spiritual life. First of all, there is sraddha. This is often translated as "faith" or "belief," but it really means a sort of devotion, a receptivity to the light streaming down-as it were- -from above. Secondly there is compassion, which is a giving out of what we have received from above to those who are lower in the spiritual hierarchy. And thirdly there is love or metta, which we share with all those who are on the same level as ourselves.

In The Jewel Ornament of Liberation, Gampopa goes on to say: "The Enlightenment of a Buddha is obtained by serving spiritual friends"--- a strong statement, to say the least, and possibly not a palatable one. The whole idea of service is rather alien to us. We are familiar with the idea of devoting ourselves to caring for our children, perhaps, or looking after our parents when they are old, but it is not always easy for us to transpose that feeling to other situations. This is very much connected with the collapse of the idea of spiritual hierarchy, or any kind of hierarchy. If we are all equal, why should you do something for someone else? Why shouldn't he or she do it for you? Or why can't you do it on an exchange basis? "I'll do it for you today, if you'll do it for me tomorrow."

To put oneself in the position of serving someone is to acknowledge that the person one is serving is better than oneself in some respects. It is this that many people are unwilling to do. But unless one can make that acknowledgement, one cannot grow spiritually. In "serving spiritual friends" one grows to become more like them--and then one finds that there are other spiritual friends to be served. Even when one becomes an advanced Bodhisattva, one finds that the universe is full of Buddhas to whom one can give devoted service. There is always someone whom one can serve.

Gampopa also says that one should "think of a spiritual friend as the Buddha." The idea of this is not to burden your friend-as an ordinary human being--with the idea that he or she is a Buddha, or to try to convince yourself that they are a Buddha when your reason tells you that they are not. You need not regard everything they do or say as the action of a Buddha. What is important is that, while your spiritual friend may be very far from being a Buddha, he or she is at least a little more spiritually developed than you are yourself. It's as though behind your friend stands his or her own teacher, and behind that teacher another one, back and back until, behind them all, stands the Buddha. So, the Buddha is shining, as it were, through all these people, who are of varying degrees of translucency.

At least, this is one way of interpreting the advice to "think of a spiritual friend as the Buddha." However, Gampopa, who belonged primarily to the Tantric tradition, being a guru of the Kagyu school of Tibet, as well as one of Milarepa's main disciples, might well have intended this statement to be taken quite literally. Fundamental to the Vajrayana is the idea that each of the Three Jewels has its esoteric aspect. Esoteric as it is, this notion is a profoundly practical one. The Vajrayanists said, in effect, that the Buddha's Enlightenment, his teaching of the truth he had discovered, and the growth of the circle of his Enlightened followers--these Three Jewels which have been revered down the ages of Buddhist tradition-all happened a very long time ago. We ourselves can have no direct contact with them and cannot benefit from their direct influence. We have to find, in effect, our own Three Jewels. The question is where to find them. The answer the Vajrayana came up with was that one should regard one's Dharma teacher, one's guru, as the Buddha, the exemplar of Enlightenment as far as one is personally concerned. Similarly, one should see one's yidam, the Buddha or Bodhisattva upon whom one meditates, as the embodiment of the truth itself. And the esoteric Sangha Refuge is the company of dakinis, with whom, according to Vajrayana tradition, one can be in living contact. In one's own particular context the guru or teacher stands for the Buddha, and even-in the Tantric context--is the Buddha.

Another way of approaching Gampopa's maxim is to reflect on the teaching that every human being is potentially a Buddha. According to some Buddhist schools, if one could only look hard enough, one would see that every human being is in fact a Buddha, whether they realize it or not. In the case of a

spiritual friend, since he or she has become at least a little Buddha-like, it is easier to see in him or her the fundamental Buddha-nature that we all possess.

Gampopa goes on to recommend not just that we should serve our spiritual friends, but that we should please them. That is, we should give them cause to rejoice in the qualities they perceive developing in us. If you please a spiritual friend and he or she pleases you, both of you will be in this state of sympathetic joy (muditā), and communication will be established and will flow. Your friend will be able to teach, and you to learn.

In an interesting passage in the Great Chapter of the Sutta-Nipata, a certain brahmin is not sure whether the Buddha is in fact the Buddha, the Enlightened One, or whether he is just a great man, a "super- man" or mahapurisa. But it seems that this brahmin has heard of a way to find out. He has heard that the Buddhas reveal their true self, their true nature, if they are praised. Praising is related to pleasing-a sort of pleasing in words. If you praise a Buddha, he cannot but show his true nature. And conversely, even a Buddha cannot show his true nature unless the situation is positive enough to allow him to do so.

It is much the same, on another level, with a spiritual friend. To please him or her is to make communication more effective, whereas to displease him or her is to set up a barrier to communication. "Pleasing" here doesn't mean gratifying someone's ego, but relating to them in an open, free, sincere, genuine, and warm way, showing metta, "sympathetic joy"—that is, joy in the virtues of others—and equanimity. If you please a spiritual friend, it makes it easier for your friend to communicate with you, for his or her true nature to emerge. And you are the one who benefits from that; it is you who gains in the long run. Although I have referred to those who are "higher up" and those who are "lower down," there is no question of any official grading. If we start even thinking in terms of being higher or lower than other people, we have failed to grasp the nature of spiritual hierarchy. Everything should be natural and spontaneous; the appropriate emotion, whether of devotion, compassion, or love, should flow forth unselfconsciously and spontaneously in response to whomsoever we meet. I used to go with Tibetan friends, both lamas and lay people, to visit monasteries and temples, and it was interesting to see their responses when they entered such places. When we in the West go to a place of worship, a great cathedral or something like that, we may not know quite what to do, how to respond, what to feel. But when I used to visit temples with my Tibetan friends, there was none of that sort of con- fusion or inner conflict. As soon as they saw an image of the Buddha, one could almost see the feelings of devotion and faith and reverence welling up within them. They put their hands to their foreheads and often prostrated themselves flat on the ground three times. They did this completely unselfconsciously; it was natural to them because of the context in which they had grown up (a context which has now, of course, largely been shattered).

It is this kind of spontaneous emotion that creates the spiritual hierarchy: a spontaneous feeling of devotion when one encounters something higher; a spontaneous overflowing of compassion when

one is confronted by other people's distress or difficulty; and a spontaneous welling up of love and sympathy when one is among one's peers. These are the emotions that should influence the whole Buddhist community. People in such a community are like roses in different stages of growth all blooming on a single bush, or like a spiritual family of which the Buddha is the head and the great Bodhisattvas the elder brothers and sisters. In such a family, everybody gets what they need; the

younger people are cared for by the older ones, everybody gives what they can, and the whole family is pervaded by a spirit of joy, freedom, warmth, and light.

The Bodhisattva hierarchy concentrates all this into a single focal point of dazzling intensity. It has its own degrees, its own radiant figures, at higher and ever higher stages of spiritual development, right up to Buddhahood itself.

7. GRATITUDE

The newly Enlightened Buddha was a grateful Buddha, an idea which is perhaps unfamiliar to us.

USUALLY, influenced by books or even Buddhist scriptures, we think of the Buddha's Enlightenment as having taken place at a particular time, roughly two thousand five hundred years ago-which, of course, in a sense, it did. We also tend to think of it as having taken place on a particular day, at a particular hour, even at a particular minute, at the instant when the Buddha broke through from the conditioned to the Unconditioned.

But a little reflection, and a little further study of the scriptures, will show us that it didn't happen quite like that. Here we can consider the distinction between the path of vision and the path of transformation-a distinction usually made in connection with the Noble Eightfold Path. On the path of vision, one has an experience of the transcendental, a profound insight into the true nature of Reality which goes far beyond any merely intellectual understanding. This insight comes gradually to pervade and transform every aspect of one's being-one's body, speech, and mind, to use the traditional Buddhist classification. It transforms all our activities. It transforms one, in fact, into a very different kind of person--a wiser and more compassionate person. This process is known as the path of transformation.

Something like this takes place in the spiritual life of each and every one of us. And we see the same sort of thing happening, on a much more exalted plane, in the case of the Buddha. The Buddha's vision is unlimited, absolute, and all-embracing, and his transformation of body, speech, and mind can therefore be described as total, even infinite. But all the same, it did take a little time for this final transformation to take place. Buddhist tradition speaks of the Buddha as spending seven--or nine (accounts vary)-weeks in the vicinity of the Bodhi tree, the tree beneath which he attained Enlightenment. In the course of each of those weeks something of importance happened. We could say that the Buddha's experience of Enlightenment started percolating through his being, until by the end of the last week (whether the seventh or the ninth) the process of transformation was at last complete.

One week a great storm arose, and the Buddha was sheltered from the rain, so the story goes, by the serpent king Mucalinda, who spread his sevenfold hood over the Buddha's head as he meditated. Another week, Brahma Sahampati, the ruler of a thousand worlds, requested the Buddha to teach the Dharma, saying that at least some of the beings in the world would be capable of understanding it, their eyes being covered with only a little dust. And the Buddha, out of compassion, agreed to teach.

But here I want to focus on another episode, one that occurred quite early in the period after the Buddha's attainment of Enlightenment—during the second week, according to one source. According to this tradition, the Buddha stood at a distance to the northeast of the Bodhi tree and remained for one week gazing at the tree with unblinking eyes.

Centuries later, a stupa was erected on that very spot, to mark the place where the Buddha had gazed at the Bodhi tree. It was known as "the stupa of unblinking eyes," and Hsuan Tsang, the great Chinese pilgrim, saw it when he visited India in the seventh century CE. In the memoirs he dictated to his disciples in his old age back in China, he described it thus: "On the left side of the road, to the north of the place where the Buddha walked, is a large stone on the top of which, as it stands in a great vihara, is a figure of the Buddha with his eyes raised and looking up. Here in former times the Buddha sat [he says "sat" but the source text says "stood"] for seven days contemplating the Bodhi tree."

Perhaps the Buddha didn't literally stand or sit there for a whole week, but we may take it that he gazed at the Bodhi tree for a very long time. And the source text makes it clear why. He did it because he was grateful to the tree for having sheltered him at the time of his attainment of Enlightenment. According to the scriptures, the Buddha demonstrated gratitude in other ways too. After Brahma Sahampati had made his request that the Buddha should teach the Dharma, and the Buddha had decided to do so, he then wondered to whom he should teach it. He thought first of his two old teachers, from whom he had learned to meditate not long after he left home. Finding their teaching insufficient, he had left them, but they had been helpful to him at a particular stage of his career, and after his Enlightenment he remembered that. It's as though he had a spiritual debt to them that he wanted to repay. But he quickly realized that his old teachers were dead.

He then thought of his five former companions. They too were people he knew from an earlier period of his spiritual quest, from the time of his experiments in asceticism. After leaving his first two teachers, he started practicing extreme self-mortification in the company of five friends who became disciples of his and admired him greatly because he had gone further in his self-mortification than anybody else at that time. But eventually the Buddha-to-be saw the futility of asceticism, realized that that was not the way to Enlightenment, and gave it up. When he started taking solid food again, just a few handfuls of rice to sustain himself, the five ascetics left him in disgust, saying, "The sramana Gautama has returned to luxurious living." But this parting was not what remained in the Buddha's mind. Having realized that his two old teachers were dead, he reflected, "The five ascetics were of great help to me when I was practicing the penances. I would like to preach the Dharma to them." So, this is what he did. He went to them, he taught them, and eventually they too realized the Truth that he had realized. And he did this out of gratitude.

So, the newly Enlightened Buddha was a grateful Buddha, an idea which is perhaps unfamiliar to us. We think of the all-wise Buddha, the compassionate Buddha, the resourceful Buddha, but we don't usually think of the grateful Buddha. But one of the very first things the Buddha did after his attainment of Enlightenment was to show his gratitude to those who had helped him. He was even grateful to a tree.

This incident alone gives us food for thought. The Buddhist scriptures contain a number of references that show that the Buddha and his disciples didn't regard trees and stones as inanimate dead matter. They regarded them as living things. They would even have a relationship with them; they would talk to a tree or a flower, or rather to the spirit--the devata, as they called it—inhabiting it. It is surely much better to have this attitude, to be an animist, than to think that trees and flowers and rocks and stones are just dead matter. The Buddha certainly didn't think in that way, and it was therefore possible for him to be grateful even to a tree.

It is not surprising, given that this was the Buddha's attitude, that gratitude finds a place in his ethical and spiritual teaching. It is found, for example, in the Mangala Sutta, the "Sutta of Blessings or Auspicious Signs." This sutta, which is very short and is found in the Pali Canon, is often regarded as summarizing the whole duty, as we may call it, of the serious-minded Buddhist, and it enumerates gratitude as one of the auspicious signs. According to the Mangala Sutta, it is a sign that you are making spiritual progress.

But what is gratitude? What do we mean when we use this term?

To find this out, we can turn to the dictionaries—and, of course, we should be very grateful to the makers of dictionaries. I am personally very grateful to Doctor Samuel Johnson. His historic dictionary is always at my elbow in my study, and when I am writing I sometimes consult it several times a day. Doctor Johnson defines gratitude as "duty to benefactors" and as "desire to return benefits." Coming to more modern dictionaries the Concise Oxford says, "being thankful; readiness to show appreciation for and to return kindness," while Collins has "a feeling of thankfulness or appreciation, as for gifts or Favors."

Such are the definitions of the English word, and they do give us some understanding of what gratitude is. But from a Buddhist point of view, we need to go further and look at the Pali word being translated as gratitude: katannuta. Kata means that which has been done, especially that which has been done to oneself; and annuta means knowing or recognizing; so katannuta means knowing and recognizing what has been done to one for one's benefit. These definitions indicate that the connotation of the Pali word is rather different from that of its English translation. The connotation of the English word gratitude is emotional-we speak of feeling grateful. But the connotation of katannuta is rather more intellectual, more cognitive. It makes it clear that what we call gratitude involves an element of knowledge: knowledge of what has been done to us or for us for our benefit. If we do not know that something has benefited us, we will not feel grateful. The Buddha knew that the Bodhi tree had sheltered him, and he knew that his five former companions had been helpful to him, so he felt gratitude toward them. Not only that: he gave expression to that feeling. He acted upon it by spending a whole week simply gazing at the Bodhi tree, and then by going in search of his five former companions so that he could communicate to them the truth that he had discovered. The important implication is that it is a perfectly natural thing to feel grateful for benefits we have received.

But the benefit has to be recognized as a benefit. If we don't feel that someone or something has benefited us, we won't feel grateful to them or to it. This suggests that we have to understand what is truly beneficial, what has really helped us to grow and develop as human beings. We also have to know who or what has benefited us and remember that they have done so-otherwise no feeling of gratitude is possible.

In Buddhism there are traditionally three principal objects of gratitude: our parents, our teachers, and our spiritual friends. Here I want to reflect a little on gratitude in relation to each of them.

I came back to England after spending twenty years uninterruptedly in the East studying, practicing, and teaching the Dharma. When I came back, I found that much had changed. Quite a few things struck me as unusual-I hadn't encountered them in India, or at least not to the same extent. One thing that definitely surprised me was finding out how many people, at least among those I knew, were on bad terms with their parents. Perhaps I noticed this especially because I was in contact with people who were concerned about their spiritual development and wanted to straighten themselves out psychologically and emotionally.

If one is on bad terms with one's parents, something is quite seriously wrong. Perhaps it wouldn't even be an exaggeration to say that one's whole emotional life is likely to be affected, indirectly at least, by this state of affairs. I therefore generally encourage people to get back into positive contact with their parents, if it happens that they are estranged from them for any reason. I encourage people to be more open with their parents and to develop positive feelings toward them. This is especially necessary in connection with the practice of the metta bhavana, the development of loving-kindness. People have to

learn to develop metta even toward their parents, and for those who have had difficult childhoods, or have even suffered at the hands of their parents in some way, this is not easy. But even so, it is necessary in the interests of their own emotional, psychological, and spiritual development to get over whatever feelings of bitterness or resentment they are harbouring.

Some people, I have discovered, blame their parents in all sorts of ways for all sorts of things—an attitude which is reflected in a well- known little poem by Philip Larkin called "This Be the Verse." In this poem, Larkin gives expression in rather crude language to what he thinks your parents have done to you, and he draws a rather depressing conclusion from that. The last verse of the poem reads:

Man, hands on misery to man,

It deepens like a coastal shelf.

Get out as early as you can,

And don't have any kids yourself.

What a grim, nasty little poem! In 1995, however, it was voted one of Britain's favourite poems, coming in between Thomas Hood's "I remember, I remember" and D.H. Lawrence's "The Snake." The fact that Larkin's poem should be so popular among intelligent poetry readers gives food for thought, suggesting as it does that negative attitudes toward parents are fairly widespread in British society.

The Buddha himself had quite a lot to say about our relation to our parents. In the Sigalaka Sutta he is represented as saying that there are five ways in which a son or daughter should minister to his or her mother and father as the eastern direction. He or she should think, "Having been supported by them, I will support them, I will perform their duties for them. I will keep up the family tradition. I will be worthy of my heritage. After my parents' deaths I will distribute gifts on their behalf." There is a lot that could be said about the five ways in which one should minister to one's parents. Here, though, I want to touch on something even more fundamental-so fundamental that in this sutta the Buddha seems to take it for granted. It is hinted at, however, in the imagery of the sutta. The Buddha explains to Sigala that one pays homage to the east by ministering to one's parents in five ways. But why the east?

The reason is perhaps obvious. The sun rises in the east, it has its origin in the east, so to speak, and similarly we owe our origin to our parents leaving aside questions of karma, of which perhaps parents are only instruments. If it were not for our parents, we would not be here now. They have given us life, they have given us a human body, and in Buddhism the human body is regarded as a very precious thing. It is precious because it is only in a human body that one is able to attain Enlightenment. In giving us a human body, our parents are therefore giving us the possibility of attaining Enlightenment and we should be intensely grateful to them for that, especially if we are actually practicing the Dharma.

Not only do our parents give us a human body; despite Larkin, they bring us up as best they can. They enable us to survive, they educate us. They may not always be able to send us to university and all that, but they teach us to speak, and this is the basis of most of the things we subsequently learn. Usually, it is our mother who teaches us our first words, and this gives us the expression "mother tongue." It is through our mother tongue that we have access to all the literature that has been written in the language we learn in our earliest days, and we can enjoy that literature fully because it is in our mother tongue, rather than in a language we learn in later life.

Of course, not everybody cares to acknowledge their debt to their parents. We will consider the question of why people are so ungrateful later on. First, though, let us turn to the second of the principal objects of gratitude in Buddhism: our teachers. By teachers here I mean not Dharma teachers, but all those from whom we derive our secular education and culture. Here our schoolteachers obviously have an important place. From them we derive the rudiments of such learning as we have, and we therefore have to be grateful to them. The fact is that we have found out very little of what we know, or what we think we know, as a result of our own efforts. Practically everything we know has been taught to us in one way or another. If we think of our knowledge of science or history, for example, few of us have even performed a single scientific experiment, or discovered a single historical fact, which no one else had performed, or discovered, before. All our work in this field has been done for us by others. We have benefited from their efforts, and our knowledge is little more than the echo of theirs.

As well as learning from living teachers, we also learn from people who have been dead for hundreds of years, from the writings they have left and the records of the words they spoke. It is not just a question of learning from them in a purely intellectual sense, acquiring information. Among those books are works of the imagination— poems, novels, dramas-and these works are a source of infinite enrichment, without which we would be immeasurably poorer. They help us deepen and enlarge our vision. We should therefore be grateful to the great men and women who have produced them. We should be grateful to Homer and Virgil, Dante and Milton, Aeschylus and Kalidasa, Shakespeare and Goethe. We should be grateful to Murasaki Shikibu, Cervantes, Jane Austen, Dickens, Dostoyevsky, and hundreds of others, who have influenced us more than we can possibly realize. The American critic Harold Bloom has gone so far as to claim that Shakespeare is the creator of human nature as we know it, which is a very big claim indeed (though he gives his reasons for it). Of course, our experience is also deepened, and our vision enlarged, by the visual arts and by music. The great painters, sculptors, and composers are also among our teachers. They too have enriched our lives, and to them too we should be grateful. I won't mention any names in this connection because there are simply too many to choose from-- both ancient and modern, Eastern and Western-certainly not because I think that the great artists and composers are any less important than the great poets, novelists, and dramatists.

Thus by "teachers" I mean all those who between them have created our collective cultural heritage, without which we would not be fully human. Remembering what we owe them, and feeling grateful to the great artists, poets, and composers, we should not only enjoy their work but also celebrate their memory and share our enthusiasm for them with our friends.

Before we go on to consider the third principal object of gratitude, our spiritual friends, I want to make the general point that we need not think of these three objects of gratitude as being completely separate and distinct from one another. There is a certain amount of overlap between the first and second, and between the second and third. Our parents are also our teachers to an extent. In Buddhist tradition parents are called poranacariyas, which means "former (or ancient) teachers." They are called this because they are the first teachers we ever had, even if they only taught us to speak a few words. We can be grateful to our parents not only for giving us life but also for giving us at least the rudiments of knowledge and initiating us into the beginnings of our cultural heritage.

Similarly, there is some overlap between teachers and spiritual friends. The very greatest poets, artists, and composers can inspire us with spiritual values and help us rise to spiritual heights. In the course of the last few hundred years, great changes have taken place, at least in the West. Previously, Christianity

as represented by the Church was the great, even the sole, bearer of spiritual values. But now many people look elsewhere to find meaning and values, and they find them in great works of art: in the plays of Shakespeare, the poetry of Wordsworth, Baudelaire, and Rilke, the music of Bach, Beethoven, and Mozart, the great painters and sculptors of the Italian Renaissance. These great masters become, as it were, our spiritual friends, especially if we remain in contact with them and with their work over many years. Learning to admire and love them, we feel intensely grateful to them for what they have given us. They are among our spiritual friends in the broadest sense.

But now let us come to our spiritual friends "proper." Here, as with the word gratitude, we have to go back to the Sanskrit words behind the English equivalent. As we have already seen, the Sanskrit phrase translated as "spiritual friend" is kalyana mitra. Mitra comes from the word maitri (Pali metta), and maitri is strong, unselfish, active love, sharply distinguished in Buddhist tradition from Prema (Pali Pema),

in the sense of sexual love or attachment. A mitra or friend is therefore one who feels a strong unselfish active love toward one. And kalyana means firstly "beautiful, charming," and secondly "auspicious, helpful, morally good." Thus, kalyana mitra has a much richer connotation than the English phrase "spiritual friend."

Our spiritual friends are all those who are spiritually more experienced than we are. The Buddhas are our spiritual friends. The Arahants and the Bodhisattvas are our spiritual friends. The great Buddhist teachers of India and China, Tibet and Japan, are our spiritual friends. Those who teach us meditation are our spiritual friends. Those with whom we study the scriptures are our spiritual friends. Those who ordain us are our spiritual friends. And all these spiritual friends should be the objects of our intense, heartfelt gratitude. We should be even more grateful to them than we are to our teachers.

Why? Because from our spiritual friends we receive the Dharma. We have not discovered or invented the Dharma. We have received it as a free gift from our spiritual friends, from the Buddha downward. In the Dhammapada the Buddha says, "The greatest of all gifts is the gift of the Dharma." The greater the gift, the greater the gratitude we should feel. We should not only feel that gratitude in our hearts; we should give expression to it in words and deeds. We can do this in three ways: by singing the praises of our spiritual friends, by practicing the Dharma, they have given us, and by passing on that Dharma to others to the best of our ability.

The greatest of our spiritual friends is the Buddha Shakyamuni, who discovered-or re-discovered the path that we as Buddhists follow today. It is to him that we go for Refuge, it is the Dharma he taught that we try to practice, and it is with the support of the Sangha he founded that we are able to practice the Dharma. We therefore have reason to be intensely grateful to him—more grateful, in principle, than we are to anyone else. Our parents have indeed given us life, but what is life without the gift of the Dharma? Our teachers have given us knowledge, education, and culture, but what value do even these things have without the Dharma? It is because they are so intensely grateful to the Buddha that Buddhists perform pujas in devotion to him and celebrate his life in the context of the various Buddhist festivals.

But people don't always find it easy to be grateful to their parents, or their teachers, or even their spiritual friends. Why is this? It is important to understand the nature of the difficulty. After all, gratitude is an important spiritual quality, a virtue exemplified and taught by the Buddha and many

others. Cicero, the great Roman orator and philosopher, said that gratitude is not just the greatest virtue, but the mother of all the rest. Ingratitude therefore represents a very serious defect. On one occasion the Buddha said that ingratitude was one of the four great offenses which bring about niraya in the sense of rebirth in a state of suffering a very serious and weighty statement.

But why are we ungrateful to our parents, our teachers, our spiritual friends? One would have thought that as Buddhists we would be simply bubbling over with gratitude to all these people. A clue is to be found in the Pali word which we render as gratitude, katannuta. As we have seen, it means knowing or recognizing what has been done for one's benefit. Similarly, akatannuta (a being the negative prefix), ingratitude, means not knowing or recognizing what has been done for one's benefit.

There are a number of reasons for ingratitude. Firstly, one may fail to recognize a benefit as a benefit. There are some people who do not regard life itself as a benefit and hence do not feel grateful to their parents for bringing them into the world. Sometimes people say things like, "Well I didn't ask to be brought into this world." If you believe in karma and rebirth, of course, this isn't quite true--but anyway, it is what people say. In a few cases, they may not regard life as a benefit because they experience it as painful, even predominantly painful, and therefore don't appreciate its value, don't realize the immense potential of human life. In Buddhist terms, they don't realize that it is possible for a human being, and only for a human being, to attain Enlightenment, or at least to make some progress in that direction.

Similarly, there are people who don't regard knowledge or education or culture as benefits. They feel no gratitude toward their teachers, or toward those who at least try to teach them something. They may even feel resentment. They may feel that education or culture is being imposed upon them. Such people are unlikely to come into contact with spiritual values, with the Dharma, or with spiritual friends, and even if they do, such contact will be external and superficial. They will not be able to recognize it for what it is. They may even see those who try to be their spiritual friends as enemies, and there- fore the question of gratitude will not arise.

This was true of some people's responses to the Buddha himself. Not all those who heard him speak or teach felt grateful to him, by any means. There were many people in his day who saw him as a rather eccentric, unorthodox teacher. They certainly didn't feel any gratitude toward him for the gift of the Dharma. Sometimes people slandered him, and some people even tried to kill him.

On the other hand, we may recognize benefits as benefits and even recognize that they have been given to us by other people, but we may take those benefits for granted. Not realizing that they are a free gift, we may think that they are owed to us, that we have a right to them, and that therefore in a sense they belong to us already, so that we have no need to be grateful for them.

This attitude is widespread in society today. People tend to think that everything is due to them, that they have a right to everything. Parents, teachers, or the state have a duty to provide them with what- ever they want. Even spiritual friends, they may think, have a duty to provide them with what they want. If they don't get what they want from one spiritual friend, or teacher, or guru, and get it quickly, in the way they want it, off they will go, to try to get it from someone else. Once again, the question of gratitude doesn't arise. Of course, parents, teachers, and friends have a duty to bestow benefits to the best of their ability. But it should be recognized that those benefits have been given, and that the response to them should therefore be one of gratitude.

Another reason for ingratitude is egoism. Egoism takes many forms and has many aspects. Here I mean by it an attitude of chronic individualism: the belief that one is separate from others, not dependent on others in any way, and that one therefore does not owe any- thing to others. One feels that one is not obliged to them, because one can do everything oneself. Examples of this sort of attitude abound in literature: Mr. Bounderby in Dickens' Hard Times, Satan in Milton's Paradise Lost, and "Black Salvation" in The Life and Liberation of Padmasambhava. People who are egoistical in this sense are incapable of feeling gratitude and cannot admit that they have been benefited by others. They may not actually say so in the way Mr. Bounderby does, but this is their underlying attitude.

This attitude sometimes finds expression in the sphere of the arts. Some writers and artists don't like to think that they owe anything to their predecessors. Wanting to be original, to strike out on a completely new path, they don't like to think that there is such a thing as cultural heritage, or a literary canon. In some circles this attitude has taken an extreme, even a virulent form, and has resulted in an attempt to repudiate the greater part of our literary and artistic heritage on ideological grounds. This is an extremely unfortunate, even potentially disastrous development, and it is to be resisted wherever possible.

Egoism in the sense in which I am using the word also finds expression in the sphere of religion. It happens when we don't acknowledge the sources of our inspiration, or when we try to pass off as our own a teaching or practice that we have in fact learned from our spiritual friends.

The fourth and last reason for ingratitude that I want to mention here is forgetfulness. There are two main reasons for forgetfulness of benefits received. First, there is simply the passage of time. Perhaps the benefits were given to us a long time ago-so long ago that we have no distinct recollection of them and no longer feel grateful to whoever bestowed them upon us, even if we did originally feel grateful. This is perhaps the principal reason for our not feeling actively grateful toward our parents. Over the years so much has happened in our life: early memories have been overlaid by later ones, other relationships have assumed importance, and perhaps we have moved away from our parents, geographically, socially, or culturally. The result is that—practically speaking--we forget them. We forget the numerous ways in which they benefited us when we were young, and we cease therefore to feel grateful. The other possible reason for our "forgetting" to be grateful is that we did not feel the positive effects of the benefits very strongly in the first place and therefore did not feel much gratitude. In such circumstances, it is easy for the gratitude to fade away and be forgotten altogether.

These, then, are the four most important general reasons for ingratitude: failure to recognize a benefit as a benefit, taking benefits for granted, egoism, and forgetfulness. Ingratitude is unfortunately liable to crop up in various ways in the context of the life of a practicing Buddhist. Of course, beyond a certain point of spiritual progress, it is sim- ply impossible to feel ungrateful. A Stream-entrant is incapable of it, and in fact will be overflowing with gratitude to parents, teachers, and spiritual friends. But until we have reached that point, we are in dan- ger of forgetting to be grateful.

Over the years more than thirty, at the time of writing—since I myself founded a Buddhist movement, I have received many, many letters, perhaps thousands, from people who have recently discovered the Dharma through one of the centres of the movement I founded, or through contact with individual members of the Order. Every year I receive more and more of these letters. They come from young people and old people, from people in many different walks of life, from many different cultural backgrounds and nationalities. And all these letters say, among other things, one and the same thing.

They say how glad the writers are to have discovered the Dharma. Not only that: the writers of the letters want to express their gratitude to the Three Jewels and to this Buddhist movement, and to me personally for having founded it. Some people express their feeling of gratitude very strongly indeed. They say that the Dharma has changed their lives, given their lives meaning, saved them from despair, even saved them from suicide.

Such letters of gratitude reach me nearly every week, and they make me think that I have not altogether wasted my time all these years. But over the years I have also noticed that while some people, perhaps the majority, stay grateful, and even become more and more grateful, in the cases of a few people, unfortunately, the feeling of gratitude weakens. They start forgetting the benefits they have received and even start questioning whether they really were benefits at all. No longer knowing or recognizing what has been done for them, they become ungrateful. Feeling ungrateful to their spiritual friends, they may even start finding fault with them. This is a very sad state of affairs indeed, and in recent years I have given some thought to it and have come to certain conclusions about how it happens.

It seems to me that people forget the benefits they have received because they no longer feel them. And they no longer feel them because for one reason or another they have put themselves in a position where they cannot receive them. Let me give a concrete example. Suppose you have started attending a meditation class. You learn to meditate, and you achieve some success. You start practicing at home, but one day, for one reason or another, you stop attending the class and then you gradually stop practicing at home. You cease to meditate. Eventually you forget what meditative experience was like. You forget the peace and the joy you felt. You forget the benefits of meditation. So, you cease to feel grateful to those who introduced the practice. The same thing can happen with regard to retreats, Dharma study, spending time with spiritual friends, taking part in pujas, and attending Buddhist celebrations. People can get out of touch. They can forget how much they did, once upon a time, benefit from those activities, and therefore they can cease to feel grateful to those who made the activities possible.

Sometimes people reconnect after a while; they start attending the meditation class again, or go on retreat again, perhaps after many years. I have known people who have re-established contact after anything up to twenty-two years—rather a long time in anybody's life. When this happens, they nearly always say the same thing: "I had forgotten how good it was." And therefore, they feel renewed gratitude,

This is entirely appropriate. It is appropriate that we should be grateful, that we should recognize the benefits we have received. It is appropriate that we should be grateful to our parents, with all their admitted imperfections-parents are not perfect any more than children are. It is appropriate that we should be grateful to our teachers, to our spiritual friends, and to the Buddhist tradition. Above all, it is appropriate that we should be grateful to the Buddha, who, as we have seen, was himself utterly and instinctively full of gratitude.