Journal for the Study of Religious Experience Vol. 7, No. 3 (2021)

The Buddha's Teachings on Friendship in the *Avadānaśataka*

Naomi Appleton

Edinburgh University
(naomi.Appleton@ed.ac.uk)

Introduction

In an oft-cited passage found in a few different early Buddhist texts, and quoted here from *Avadānaśataka* 37, the Buddha's personal attendant, the monk Ānanda, declares to the Buddha:

> "Sir, when I am here alone and solitary in retreat, this thought arises in my mind, that this is half of the religious life, namely good friendship, good companionship and good associations, and not evil friendship, evil companionship and evil associations."

To which the Buddha replies:

> "You should not say this, Ānanda, that this is half of the religious life … . Ānanda, this is the entire, complete, whole, pure, accomplished religious life, namely good friendship, good companionship and good associations, and avoiding evil friendship, evil companionship and evil associations."[1]

This exchange is fairly well known amongst Buddhists because it is at the heart of an important notion: the ideal of what is referred to by terms such as "spiritual friend" or "admirable friend" (*kalyāṇamitra* in Sanskrit).[2] The term *kalyāṇamitra* is more directly translated as "good friend" as above, with *kalyāṇa* meaning good and virtuous, as well as

---

[1] All translations and summaries from the *Avadānaśataka* are my own and reproduced from Appleton 2020, which is based on Speyer's 1958 Sanskrit edition.

[2] Usually the exchange as it appears in the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* (3.18 and 45.2; Bodhi trans. 2000: 180–1, 1524–5) is the source cited in such discussions.

ISSN: 2057-2301

beautiful and agreeable, and here presented as the direct opposite of "evil" (*pāpa*). A *kalyāṇamitra* is not a "good friend" as you or I might use the term, however, to describe someone who is loyal, kind or even fun; this is precisely why translations such as "admirable" and "spiritual" have gained currency. A friend of this kind is one who is good (i.e. virtuous), but also one who is good for you, in other words one who leads to your improvement. It is someone who helps you along the Buddhist path, guiding your practice, encouraging you; the best *kalyāṇamitra* was the Buddha, but now Buddhists find such friendship in teachers and mentors.

This exchange between the Buddha and Ānanda appears twice in the *Avadānaśataka*, a Sanskrit collection of one hundred karmic stories affiliated to the now lost (Mūla-) Sarvāstivāda school of Indian Buddhism, and dating to perhaps the fourth or fifth century CE.[3] Both occurrences of the exchange appear in association with the telling of a *jātaka* story, or story of a past-life of the Buddha, in which we learn more about friendship. In this article I will explore these two occurrences, in the context of a literary work that – I argue – deliberately presents the Buddha as speaking in favour of rather mundane goods: generosity, cherishing teachings, looking after one's parents, and dwelling as good friends.

The article is a tribute to Peggy Morgan, whose good (virtuous, spiritual and nourishing) friendship in my own formative years as an Oxford doctoral student was invaluable to my welfare and development. Since friendship is both an entirely "ordinary experience" and – at its best – an extraordinary and transformative experience, I hope this brief article may contribute at least a little to the wider debates and studies in this volume.

Avadānaśataka 37:
The Story of the Hare

Many people will be familiar with the story of the Buddha's past birth as a hare who sacrifices his life to feed a brahmin ascetic and, as a result, has his form painted on the moon by the king of the gods. However, the version in the *Avadānaśataka* is not the same as that in the better-known Pāli *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* or Sanskrit *Jātakamālā* of Āryaśūra.[4] In those tales, the hermit is simply passing through the forest – indeed he is not really a brahmin ascetic at all, but the god Śakra/Sakka in disguise as such, come to test the virtue of the hare.[5] The hare and his animal friends (a jackal, otter and monkey) have a rather fleeting encounter with the brahmin, in which they demonstrate their careful observance of the holy day and obligations of hospitality by each offering some food. The hare, having nothing to give, offers his own body.

---

[3] For a fuller discussion of the nature and history of the text, as well as a full bibliography and a translation of the first forty stories, see Appleton 2020. This article draws upon and expands ideas first expressed there.

[4] Āryaśūra's *Jātakamālā* 6 (Khoroche trans. 1989: 32-38), *Jātakatthavaṇnanā* 316 (Shaw trans. 2006: ch18), and elsewhere including *Cariyāpiṭaka* 10; for the range of stories, including in art, see the appropriate cluster on the Jataka Database (https://jatakastories.div.ed.ac.uk).

The *Avadānaśataka* version represents a rather different transmission.[6] Here the hare (who, conveniently, has a human voice) develops a friendship with an ascetic living in the forest. During a time of drought, the ascetic decides he must give up on being a forest-dwelling renouncer and go to a village or town to seek food. The hare is distraught, not only at the thought of losing the companionship of his friend, but also because of the obstacles to religious practice that his friend will encounter in leaving the forest. As a result, he decides to offer himself as a meal to his friend, to keep him in the forest at least another day.

His friend is so shocked by the hare's sacrifice (which he manages to prevent in the nick of time) that he promises not to leave after all. The hare then offers a verse of truth:[7]

> "Having come to the forest my heart delights in solitude!
> By this statement of truth may the god rain down the rains of Great Indra!"

This statement of truth causes the abode of the god Śakra to shake, alerting him to what is going on below. He sends rain, the food supply resumes, and the sage considers the hare as a good (or spiritual) friend.

That the emphasis of this story is on friendship is not only clear from the tale itself. The frame story explains that the Buddha told the story of the hare after having finally persuaded an errant monk to separate himself from his family and practice properly in the forest: while the hare in the story is the Bodhisattva (Buddha-to-be), the human ascetic is identified as a past-life of the errant monk. The Buddha concludes his story of the past with a teaching:

> In this way, monks, you should train: "We will dwell as good friends, good companions, good associates, not evil friends, evil companions, evil associates."

---

[5] This is a fairly common motif in *jātaka* stories. See discussion in Appleton 2017: ch2.

[6] This transmission of the story is also represented by Haribhaṭṭa's *Jātakamālā* 4 (Khoroche trans. 2017: 33-39), and the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* (Panglung 1981: 45 [213,1,7]).

[7] A sincere statement of truth, according to a motif present in a range early Indian literature and particularly prominent in *jātaka*s, has the power to affect the laws of nature or attract the attention of the gods.

Immediately after this comes the exchange with Ānanda, in which the Buddha declares that good friendship is the entire religious life, and goes on to explain that he himself is the best of all friends, as he helps beings to achieve awakening.

There is a striking tension in this story between the benefits and dangers of human company. The errant monk must be separated from the close associates of his lay life (though nothing is said to suggest they are specifically *bad* people), and made to go and practice in the forest, with the Buddha as his spiritual friend. Likewise the hare sees the danger in his friend giving up his renunciate life, and hence proves his own friendship, in part through a sincere (yet somewhat ironic) declaration of the delight he takes in solitude. The idea of the "holy life" (*brahmacariya*) is one of chastity and of separation from loved-ones. Indeed, the idea that friendship is half the holy life occurs to Ānanda when he is "here alone and solitary in retreat". It would seem that good, virtuous and spiritual friendship is something of particular value to renouncers, who are deliberately cut off from wider society, and provide guidance to one another instead. As such, this message about friendship might seem limited to a monastic audience, ready to revere the Buddha as best-ever guide, and encouraged to treat their own teachers with respect. Nonetheless, the benefits of friendship seem to apply more broadly, with even the friendship of animals (albeit in extraordinary form, as a past-birth of a *buddha*) being lauded as a potential source of support and guidance.

Avadānaśataka 40:
The Story of Subhadra

The other *Avadānaśataka* story that is explicitly told in praise of "good friendship" is the story of Subhadra, which forms the last of the ten *jātaka*s in the text. It is a complex tale, with two embedded past-life stories, one about the Buddha's own past-life rescue of Subhadra-as-deer, and the other told to explain why Subhadra became the Buddha's last personal disciple. The first of these, which is the *jātaka* proper, tells of how the Bodhisattva (Buddha-to-be) was leader of a herd of deer, and helped his herd escape hunters by making his own body into a bridge across the water. After all his herd seemed to have escaped, he carefully checked the shore, and found one young deer left behind. After carrying him to safety, he made an aspiration to buddhahood and died. The metaphor of the Buddha helping his followers across the turbulent waters of *saṃsāra* to the further shore of *nirvāṇa* is clear here, and the Bodhisattva even looks around thinking, "let there be nobody else who has not crossed over". However, it is the leadership and self-sacrifice of the Bodhisattva that is prominent, rather than any notion of friendship.

It is the second past-life story that more clearly has friendship at its heart. This story is set in the time of Kāśyapa Buddha, one of the *buddha*s of the past, and concerns one of his monks, also his nephew, called Aśoka (not to be confused with the famous Mauryan emperor of the same name). Aśoka doesn't really bother to practice hard, perhaps feeling a little complacent as the nephew of the Buddha. However, when he hears that his uncle is about to enter *parinirvāṇa* (that is, to die for a final time), he is very distressed that he has wasted his chance to really progress. He is too far away to reach the Buddha before his death, and so a tree-deity helps him with her magical powers. On hearing one final *dharma*-teaching, Aśoka achieves awakening as an *arhat* (awakened disciple), and hence becomes the last person to achieve awakening before the *parinirvāṇa* of Kāśyapa Buddha. The tree-deity, moved by this, declares her intention to one day be the last disciple of the (then future) *buddha* Śākyamuni. This, the frame story makes clear, she achieves in her rebirth as Subhadra, the final personal disciple of Śākyamuni Buddha (the most recent *buddha*, usually referred to simply as "the Buddha"). Subhadra's conversion by Śākyamuni Buddha on his deathbed is also included within the tale.

As with the story of the hare, the Buddha concludes the story of the past with an instruction to his monks to train as follows: "We will dwell as good friends, good companions, good associates, not evil friends, evil companions, evil associates." Directly after this Ānanda interjects with his well-intentioned misunderstanding of the extent of friendship's relevance to the holy life, and is corrected. This is the end of the fourth chapter of the text, and the ten *jātaka* stories therein. Friendship is therefore the concluding teaching of this section of the *Avadānaśataka*, and we see that even the friendship of a tree-deity can bring dramatic results. Once again, it is the monks who receive the instruction to cherish friendship, but once again we can see the potential ramifications for all Buddhists, or indeed all beings. The idea that the teaching can apply on different levels is reinforced by the way the chapter, and indeed the text as a whole, works on several levels.

Levels of teaching in the *Avadānaśataka*

The two teachings on friendship in the *Avadānaśataka* appear in the fourth chapter, also known as the fourth decade, since each chapter contains exactly ten stories. The ten stories of the fourth decade are ten *jātaka* stories, that is to say past-life stories of the Buddha, and all are set in times of no past *buddha*s. Ten other *jātaka*s set in times of past *buddha*s, and demonstrating the karmic rewards of serving such supreme beings, occupy chapter 2, while the other decades present stories of predictions to future buddhahood (chapter 1) or future pratyekabuddhahood[8] (chapter 3), or the past life stories of *arhat*s (chapters 7-10), and the deeds that lead to rebirth as a god (chapter 6) or hungry ghost (chapter 5). As such, the overriding focus of the text is karma and its multi-life results.

The idea of karma is, in one sense, an important leveller. All beings are affected by karma, as karma is an impersonal natural law that governs our experiences within the cycle of rebirth. According to Buddhist karma theory, good and bad are universal ethical principles, based upon the motivation or intention behind the deed, as well as the deed itself and the doer's feelings about it afterwards. An action motivated by greed, hatred or delusion is bad and will have bad karmic results, while an action motivated by generosity and kindness, and underpinned by wisdom, will have good karmic results. This will be the case regardless of whether or not the doer is a Buddhist, a brahmin, a hare, a tree-deity, or even the king of the gods. Karma is, one might say, the ordinary experience of all beings, whether or not they are aware of it.

A particular interest of the *Avadānaśataka* is in how meritorious action (or good karma) affects beings as they progress towards the highest goal of awakening. Karmicly potent deeds – such as making an offering to a past *buddha* and making an aspiration to a future attainment – are celebrated parts of the multi-life stories of all three types of awakened beings, namely *buddha*s (more correctly: full and complete *buddha*s), *pratyekabuddha*s and *arhat*s.[9] Indeed, the karmic levelling includes tales of the very humble past lives of figures who eventually go on to achieve the highest Buddhist goals. A gardener's simple gift of a toothpick to the Buddha (that is to say, Śākyamuni Buddha, the Buddha of our time) leads to a prediction of future pratyekabuddhahood, for example (story 29), while the toothpick itself spontaneously develops into a tree, in a demonstration of the Buddha's supernormal powers. Meanwhile another gardener's gift of a lotus to Śākyamuni Buddha (story 7) leads to a declaration that he will become a full and complete *buddha* in the future; meanwhile the lotus grows to the size of a cartwheel and floats mid-air above Śākyamuni's head. Such stories emphasise the benefits available to the most ordinary of people making the most ordinary of gifts, as long as they are made to the extraordinary recipient that is the (or a) Buddha.

In the fourth chapter, however, in which both friendship stories are found, the simple deeds of the past are gone, and so is the miracle-working Buddha of the present.

---

[8] That is to say, awakening as a "solitary" or "independent" *buddha*. Like a full and complete *buddha* such as Śākyamuni (whom we refer to as "the Buddha" though he is only one of many) a *pratyekabuddha* realises the truth himself. (They are always male.) Unlike a full *buddha*, a *pratyekabuddha* passes out of the world without much consequence, neither founding a monastic community nor making known his teachings. Such a form of awakening is only available in times between the dispensations of full *buddha*s. See Appleton 2019a and b.

[9] See previous note for the difference between a *buddha* and *pratyekabuddha*. An *arhat* achieves awakening thanks to the teachings made available by a *buddha*.

Instead, we find a rather humble Buddha nonetheless telling stories of his extraordinary past-life achievements. Recall, for example, how the Bodhisattva-hare's self-sacrifice illuminates a story of the Buddha helping a monk renounce properly, while the Bodhisattva-deer's self-sacrifice illuminates the Buddha's final act of conversion. In another story we discover that the Buddha's immunity to the mild illness troubling his monks results from a past life in which he jumped off his palace roof in order to be reborn as a great curative fish, then allowing himself to be eaten alive by his citizens as medicine to cure a plague (story 31). Similarly, when the Buddha teaches his monks and layfollowers to value the *dharma*-teaching, he illustrates this with stories of how, in past lives, he jumped into a fire or fed his son to a demon in exchange for the only single paltry verse of *dharma* then available in the world (stories 35 and 38).

The chapter thus has a very different framework to other parts of the text, yet it maintains the overall concern with karma. Indeed, the stories suggest that, if even the Buddha cares about his own karma, then surely we all should too, regardless of our status and progress on the path. Two further stories particularly emphasise this message. In story 34 the Buddha offers to help a monk who is struggling to thread his needle for sewing up his robe, a deed which would be recognised as generating merit (good karma). The monk:

> became agitated and quickly seized the Blessed One's [Buddha's] hand and placed it on his own head. He said, 'Blessed One, this hand of yours has accumulated generosity, good conduct, forbearance, vigour, meditation and wisdom during three incalculable aeons.'[10] And then the Blessed One said, 'I am eager for merit, monk. I have a taste for obtaining merit, monk, such that I am never satiated.'

The past-life story he then tells illustrates the strength of his commitment to karmic merit, since it recounts his willing gift of his own flesh. As he points out to his monks, what is the marvel in valuing karmic merit now, when he has eradicated greed and hatred completely and achieved buddhahoood? Even in the past, when he was imperfect in his knowledge and had not yet eradicated greed, he gave up his own flesh and even his life. Meanwhile in story 39, the Buddha is halted by a line in the sand drawn by someone who claims that the he owes him money. As the story of the past reveals, the Bodhisattva (Buddha-to-be) had offered surety to the man for the gambling debt of a friend, but failed to pay it. The Buddha explains:

---

[10] In other words the six "perfections" (*pāramī*) necessary for the achievement of buddhahood. In Pāli/Theravāda tradition there are ten.

ISSN: 2057-2301

> ‘Thus during my transmigration I experienced endless misfortunes concerning my wealth, and even now my completely awakened buddhahood is obstructed by him. For thus, monks, entirely black deeds have entirely black fruits, entirely white deeds have entirely white fruits, and mixed deeds have mixed fruits. Therefore, monks, having cast aside black deeds and those that are mixed, one should direct oneself to performing deeds that are wholly white. And one should strive to avoid taking what is not given, such as was his fault. In this way, O monks, you should train.’

The message seems fairly clear: If even the Buddha has to deal with effects of his actions, then we should all be very careful about how we behave, and pursue only wholly good deeds.

As is probably already apparent, the training instructions that end each story of the *Avadānaśataka* give us an interesting insight into what the tales are intended to communicate. Although they are always directed at the Buddha’s monastic community within the text, the instructions in the fourth chapter of the text offer very basic teachings suitable for any audience. In addition to the two that focus on living as good friends, there are two about the importance of valuing the teachings, two about giving gifts, two about cultivating compassion and loving kindness, one about caring for one’s parents, and the gambling debt story with its general lesson about karma and the importance of not stealing. As we have seen, these general lessons are demonstrated by some rather dramatic past-life stories, including tales of the Bodhisattva’s bodily sacrifice, but also by the more relatable actions and situations that lead the Buddha to tell the story of his past life in the first place. As such, we are all part of the audience for the stories, and we all have something to learn from both the ordinary and the extraordinary events within.

What seems to be presented in the fourth decade of the *Avadānaśataka*, then, is a deliberate contrast between the extreme virtue of the Bodhisattva, and the humility and mundane goodness of the resultant Buddha. In taking such an approach, these stories differ from others in the text, where mundane acts in the past – such as offering food to a past *buddha* – contrast with the supernormal powers and experiences of the awakened Buddha of the narrative present. But like this other framework, the stories of the fourth decade use the tensions and contrasts creatively, to allow audience members to relate to different possible deeds and their likely results, and to balance complete awe at the Bodhisattva-become-Buddha with their own more modest aspirations.

By playing with these different levels of teaching and behaviour, the compilers of the *Avadānaśataka* leave room for all audience members. We can all aspire to help others, to value our parents, and to cultivate the sorts of friendships that lead us (or our friends) to become better people, such as my own friendship with Peggy. Maybe, one day in the distant future, such good deeds and good friends will eventually contribute to our own achievement of awakening, and meanwhile I hope that I have many more opportunities to enjoy Peggy's friendship in future rebirths.

References

Appleton, N. 2017. *Shared Characters in Jain, Buddhist and Hindu Narrative: Gods, Kings and Other Heroes*. Abingdon, Oxon and New York: Routledge.

Appleton, N. 2019a. '*Jātaka* Stories and *Paccekabuddha*s in Early Buddhism.' In N. Appleton and P. Harvey. eds. *Buddhist Path, Buddhist Teachings: Studies in Memory of L. S. Cousins*. Sheffield: Equinox, 305-318.

Appleton, N. 2019b. 'Dialogues with Solitary Buddhas.' In B. Black and C. Ram-Prasad. eds. *In Dialogue with Classical Indian Traditions: Encounter, Transformation, and Interpretation*. Abingdon, Oxon and New York: Routledge, 36-50.

Appleton, N. 2020. *Many Buddhas One Buddha: A Study and Translation of Avadānaśataka 1-40.* Sheffield: Equinox.

Bodhi, Bhikkhu. trans. 2000. *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya*. Boston, MA: Wisdom.

Khoroche, P. trans. 1989. *Once the Buddha Was a Monkey: Ārya Śūra*'s *Jātakamālā*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Khoroche, P. trans. 2017. *Once a Peacock, Once an Actress: Twenty-Four Lives of the Bodhisattva from Haribhaṭṭa*'s "*Jātakamālā*". Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Panglung, J. L. 1981*. Die Erzählstoffe des Mūlasarvāstivāda-Vinaya: analysiert auf Grund der tibetischen Übersetzung*. Tokyo: The Reiyukai Library.

Shaw, S. trans. 2006. *The Jātakas: Birth Stories of the Bodhisatta.* New Delhi: Penguin.

Speyer, J. S. ed. 1958 [1902-09]. *Avadānaçataka: A century of edifying tales belonging to the Hīnayāna*. The Hague: Mouton & co.