

Kalyana Mitrata and Meditation

Kalyanamitrata

Kalyana is a word for the spiritual or the beautiful. Kalyanamitrata is said to be

The space between two people in which the kalyana can arise

It is the basis of sangha.

Sangha is a free association of individuals¹

To practice the dharma as an individual is to make dharma practice your own.

Having done so, you are able to be in communication with others in the sangha as one individual dharma practitioner in relation to another.

Sangha can be understood to be this quality of communication between individuals with shared ideals:

May our communication with one another be sangha²

A distinctive emphasis

Kalyanamitrata is one of the distinctive emphases of the Triratna Buddhist order that Sangharakshita founded.

As Bhante puts it:

Without spiritual friends one can hardly be a practicing Buddhist. Spiritual friends help us to make spiritual progress.³

A mutual modification of being

This quality of being in relationship that is kalyanamitrata allows “a mutual modification of being”⁴. It completely eschews the control approach of the power mode⁵ which can be understood as an endeavour to change the other’s behaviour or character without in any way changing oneself. Rather, it engages the quality of sensitivity in which there is no endeavour to control. Rather, there is a preparedness to change oneself together with an openness to change in one’s friend.

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- 1 Sangharakshita: What is the Sangha
 - 2 Sangharakshita: Dedication ceremony
 - 3 Sangharakshita’s six distinctive emphases were drawn out in the exhibition for the 50th anniversary at <https://bristol-buddhist-centre.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Triratna50-Catalogue-Lulu-Version-4-A5.pdf>
 - 4 Sangharakshita: Is a Guru necessary? Talk at <https://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/audio/details?num=90> summarised in Mitrata at https://thebuddhistcentre.com/system/files/groups/files/11_mitrata_66_on_the_threshold_of_enlightenment_1.pdf
 - 5 Sangharakshita describes the difference between the love mode and the power mode in “The Ten Pillars of Buddhism” - see <https://www.windhorsepublications.com/sangharakshita-on-love-and-fidelity/>

Meditation

Befriending one's experienced

There is a parallel with kalyana mitrata in the way in which we relate to our experience in meditation. Just as one might be with a friend, sensitive to what they're going through without endeavouring to control them in any way, without needing to come up with strategies to suggest – so one can be with one's experience, drawing on the same capacity to be present with sensitivity.

Renouncing control

This involves letting go of any endeavour to control – which is an endeavour to make our experience change without any preparedness on the part of the controller to change.

What it does involve is

- a letting go of fixed self-view (the view of oneself as the one in control)
- an engaging with the interplay of intention and experience
- with a sensitivity of approach
- and a pliancy and flexibility (kammanatatha): a preparedness to be changed by experience as much as to induce change in it

Open to change

Whilst this approach involves letting go of any endeavour to make experience change, it also involves an openness to change. We're not relating to our experience as fixed any more than we're relating to ourselves in a fixed way.

Suvajra once said that for him the essential quality of kalyana mitrata – what differentiates it from ordinary friendship – is an openness to change in our friend: we're not relating to them in a fixed way. This openness to change in relation to our higher values is what characterises a positive group.⁶ We're not endeavouring to bring about change, to make or force change. We're just open to change. One's kalyana mitra is welcome and accepted just as they are, but we're not relating to them in a fixed way.

Similarly, one's experience is welcome and accepted just as it is, but we're not relating to it in a fixed way.

Without openness to change

In the absence of this openness to change we limit, fix, and box in each other. Sometimes one of the particular challenges of Dharma practice is returning to old friends or family who've know us for many years, and formed a view of what we're like from experience long past. It's difficult to stand apart from that, be an individual with a different character now whilst in that context.

A parallel limiting dynamic in meditation is habit and fixed self-view which prescribes what your experience is and can be.

6 Sangharakshita: What is the Sangha? Ch 5 The Group and the Spiritual Community

Balanced Effort

This approach of openness to change without endeavour to control is characteristic of balanced effort in meditation, where the effort is a meeting resistance with a gentle lean back towards the focus of the practice, as though you were bringing your fingertips in to contact with something leaning away from this focus: the intention being to bring a sensitivity and understanding to what is happening, rather than to stop it and make something else happen instead.

Finding a comfortable distance

In coming in to relationship with what is difficult or resistant in our experience, part of the letting go of control is to begin by seeing if how this difficult part: this 'something in me' feels from its side: checking if it is ok to just be with it rather than insisting on intimacy. Generally, there will be a comfortable distance. You may already have a sense of this with your friends: how it's best to be with them at a comfortable distance – neither too remote nor too invasive. The quality of sensitivity that we bring to bear to finding this comfortable distance and the intention to be with makes the experience of a degree of separation very different from the separateness of alienated awareness.

We can think of this comfortable distance as the space within which the kalyana can arise. It's relational, not controlling.

As indicated above, we're not controlling the relationship by insisting on close intimacy, and at the same time we're open to change: the comfortable distance may become closer as this resistant part of our experience becomes more open to the sensitivity of our awareness.

The value of samatha

Just as, last month, Padmadrishiti's emphasis on alignment allowed insight to arise safely because held in a state of integration, so with this approach of bringing sensitivity and a quality of kalyana mitrata to our relationship to experience, we can let go of habit and fixed self-view safely because the practice is held within a space of positive emotion: of sensitivity and metta.

Moving on to more subtle experience

Initially there may be quite a strong experience that is particularly calling your attention.

Over time, when this feels fully accepted, fully welcomed, and fully felt, it may no longer be particularly calling your attention, and there is an opportunity to move on to bring your sensitivity and awareness to more subtle experiences

It can be helpful to bring the sensitivity of awareness, and the quality of being with to more subtle aspects of experience such as

- any resistance experienced to being with an experience
- the quality of sensitivity
- the intention towards sensitivity
- the self-sense / self-image / self-view / sense of identity
- any quality of spaciousness around experience, perhaps a space imbued with metta
- any softening or fading of the hard edges and strong colours of experience