Mittā Suhadā Veditabbā: The Buddha's Teaching on True Friendship in the *Sigālovāda Sutta*[1]

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Abstract

In Buddhist thought, *kalyāṇamitta* (spiritual friendship) is regarded as essential for awakening, guiding one along the Noble Eightfold Path. However, the *Sigālovāda Sutta* introduces a less-examined but vital form of friendship in the phrase *mittā suhadā veditabbā* friends who are seen as good-hearted. Unlike the spiritually focused *kalyāṇamitta*, *suhadamitta* emphasizes emotionally supportive, socially grounded relationships. The Buddha's use of the term *suhada* (good-hearted) rather than *kalyāṇa* (noble or spiritual) marks a key distinction in the dimensions of friendship. In this discourse, he reinterprets the ritual of worshiping the six directions as a symbolic framework for maintaining harmony in six core human relationships parents, teachers, spouses, friends, religious mentors, and workers stressing mutual duties over rights. The Sutta identifies both harmful and beneficial friendships, highlighting traits of loyalty, compassion, and wise counsel. It also promotes ethical living, prudent wealth management, and mutual care. While *suhadamitta* supports worldly happiness and moral living, *kalyāṇamitta* leads to spiritual liberation. Together, these friendships embody Buddhism's dual goal of fostering social harmony and guiding individuals toward *Nibbāna*.

Keywords: *kalyāṇamitta*, *suhadamitta*, friendship, *Sigālovāda Sutta*, Buddhist ethics.

Introduction

What makes human beings truly remarkable is their rational nature. It is this unique faculty that distinguishes them from other forms of life, allowing them to shape their environment and exercise influence over the world around them. Through the power of thought and reason, humanity has achieved remarkable feats, soaring through the skies without wings and traversing vast oceans without fins. Such achievements are a testament to the incredible potential of the human mind. Yet, for all this intellectual

[1] The *Sigālovāda Sutta*, also known as the *Sigālaka Sutta*, is a significant discourse delivered by the Buddha, found in the *Dīgha Nikāya* of the *Sutta Piṭaka*—one of the three collections (*Piṭakas*, meaning 'baskets') that make up the Buddhist Canon, known as the *Tipiṭaka*. The other two collections are the *Vinaya Piṭaka* and the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*

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and technological progress, one fundamental area is often overlooked: the nature and value of friendship. Despite its profound impact on our well-being, friendship remains one of the least examined aspects of life. As a result, many people struggle with feelings of disconnection, dissatisfaction, and loneliness. Against this backdrop, we turn to the Buddha's teaching on *mittā suhadā veditabbā* as presented in the *Sigālovāda Sutta*.

Friendship occupies a central role in the Buddha's teachings. The Buddhist Canon is rich with instances in which the Blessed One emphasizes the crucial role of companionship on the spiritual path. In one such teaching, the Buddha declares: "*Bhikkhus, I do not see even a single thing that so causes unarisen unwholesome qualities to arise and arisen wholesome qualities to decline as bad friendship. For one with bad friends, unarisen unwholesome qualities arise and arisen wholesome qualities decline*" (Aṅguttara Nikāya, I: 70 -hereafter, AN). He reinforces this idea from the opposite angle: "*Bhikkhus, I do not see even a single thing that so causes unarisen wholesome qualities to arise and arisen unwholesome qualities to decline as good friendship. For one with good friends, unarisen wholesome qualities arise and arisen unwholesome qualities decline*" (AN I: 71)

These statements underline the transformative power of our associations. Our spiritual progress, and even our happiness in everyday life, is deeply influenced by the people we surround ourselves with. The *Dhammapada* offers a similar warning and encouragement: "*Associate not with evil friends, associate not with mean men; associate with good friends, associate with noble men*"(The Dhammapada, 78 – hereafter, Dhp.). This verse reminds us that harmful associations can derail our lives and entangle us further in the endless cycle of *saṁsāra*—the round of birth and death. In contrast, the company of good and noble friends supports both our worldly happiness and our journey toward the highest goal: *Nibbāna*.

In the Buddhist tradition, the most widely recognized and frequently discussed concept of friendship is *kalyāṇamitta*. The Pāli term *kalyāṇamitta*, often translated as "spiritual friendship," has been extensively examined in Buddhist literature, with scholars and practitioners alike emphasizing its unique and transformative nature. However, the concept of friendship presented in the *Sigālovāda Sutta* (Dīgha Nikāya 31/III: 180-193 – hereafter DN), characterized by the term *suhada* (*mittā suhadā veditabbā*), has not received comparable attention. Consequently, its unique qualities and potential significance in cultivating a meaningful life have remained largely overlooked. It is important to note that the Buddha does not use the noun *suhadamitta* in the *Sigālovāda Sutta.* Instead, he speaks of *mittā suhadā veditabbā*—friends who are seen as good-hearted. This phrasing points to a form of friendship that is different in emphasis from *kalyāṇamitta*. The use of *suhada* (good-hearted) contrasts with *kalyāṇa* (noble or spiritually virtuous), suggesting that these terms highlight different dimensions of friendship. Whereas *kalyāṇamitta* primarily refers to spiritual companionship and guidance, *mittā suhadā*

veditabbā implies a form of friendship that is more socially grounded, emotionally supportive, and relational in nature.

The Concept of Kalyāṇamitta

A fitting starting point for exploring *kalyāṇamitta* is the *Kalyāṇamitta Sutta* itself (Saṁyutta Nikāya 45:2—hereafter, SN). The Buddha, addressing a group of monks assembled at Sāvatthī, delivered this precise, concise, and yet profound statement on spiritual friendship. He employs the parable of the dawn to put across his message. The Buddha likens *kalyāṇamittatā* (spiritual friendship) to the dawn, which precedes and heralds the coming of daylight and the rising of the sun. In the same manner, spiritual friendship serves as the initial condition that prepares and supports the cultivation of the Noble Eightfold Path (*ariya-aṭṭhaṅgika-magga*), culminating in awakening and ultimate liberation.

In any discussion on *kalyāṇamittatā*, the *Upaḍḍha Sutta* (SN 45:2). plays a central role, and it can be described as the *locus classicus* of the Buddha's discussion on spiritual friendship. In this *Sutta*, an important discussion transpired because of Ven. Ānanda's understanding of the holy life (*brahmacariya*). Ānanda thought that the holy life consists of two equal parts, namely, personal effort (*paccatta purisa kāra*) and spiritual friendship (*kalyāṇamittatā*). This conception of the holy life spurred him to raise the question, "*Venerable Sir, this is half of the holy life, that is, good friendship, good companionship, good comradeship*" (SN 45:2). The Blessed One had to correct him, affirming that *kalyāṇamittatā* is the entire holy life. Thus, the Buddha remarks, "*Not so, Ānanda! Not so, Ānanda! This is the entire holy life, Ānanda, that is good friendship, good companionship, good comradeship*" (SN 45:2).

This idea of the Buddha that spiritual friendship is the whole of the holy life is also found in the *Kalyāṇamitta Appamāda Sutta* (SN 3:18). Here, we come across King Pasendī sharing a personal reflection with the Buddha. The Buddha approves of the personal reflection of King Pasendī, recalling his conversation with Ven. Ānanda in the *Upaḍḍha Sutta*. Thus, we see that the *Upaḍḍha Sutta* appears in full in the *Appamāda Sutta* (See. SN 3:18). Nevertheless, we need to note well that in the *Appamāda Sutta*, the Buddha talks about spiritual friendship at a mundane level for the benefit of the king, that is, how spiritual friendship can help the ruler to develop diligence in wholesome states and how it eventually leads to the protection and prosperity of his kingdom and family.

The conception of *kalyāṇamittatā* as encompassing the whole of the holy life is likewise presented in the *Sāriputta Sutta*, where Ven. Sāriputta articulates his perspective on the connection between the holy life and spiritual friendship: "*Venerable Sir, this is the entire holy life, that is good friendship, good companionship, good comradeship*" (SN 45:3). Ven. Sāriputta's statement regarding the holy life and spiritual friendship was met with the Buddha's admiration and

wholehearted approval: "*Good, good, Sāriputta! This is the entire holy life, Sāriputta, that is good friendship, good companionship, good comradeship*" (SN 45:3).

The Concept of Suhadamitta

The *Sigālovāda Sutta* provides the clearest exposition of the Buddha's guidance on the nature of a good-hearted friend (*suhadamitta*). In this discourse, the Buddha does not use the term *kalyāṇa* to describe friendship; instead, he employs the word *suhada*, which is commonly translated as "good-hearted." The *Sutta* offers a detailed explanation of how to distinguish genuine friends from those who are merely enemies in disguise. The fundamental criterion the Buddha presents is simple yet profound: anyone who causes harm to another should be regarded as an enemy, while one who avoids harm and actively contributes to another's happiness and well-being qualifies as a true friend.

Sigālovāda Sutta: A Guide to Wholesome Living

The *Sigālovāda Sutta*, known also as *Gihi Vinaya* (Discipline for the laity), stipulates directions that should permeate one's daily life if one is to achieve both concord and peace and thereby live in harmony with others. Living with others is no easy task because the world is not a homogeneous place. It is full of diverse ideas, sundry thoughts, manifold approaches, different values, and assumptions, which at times are contradictory and confusing. Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the fact that human beings are born to live in community because to live is to co-exist.

The *Sigālovāda Sutta* unfolds in a dramatic style the advice of the Buddha to the young layman Sigālaka on the worship of the six directions. This *Sutta* becomes particularly important in the context of the alarmingly increasing number of negative patterns and trends of human conduct. The primary focus of the *Sigālovāda Sutta* is the nature of social interactions among various members of society. It lays down obligations or duties that can guarantee perfect harmony, solidarity, and responsibility in the community.

The methodology employed by the *Sutta* to communicate its message can be likened to cultivation. Before sowing the seed, the ground has to be prepared well. The soil must be ready to welcome the seed. The Buddha in the *Sutta* follows this pattern. As the farmer prepares the field before sowing, the Buddha prepares the mind of the listener before interpreting a new the worship of the six directions. Hence, the *Sutta* can be summarized in five phases divided into three: Preparation of the ground (the *rendezvous* of the Buddha and Sigālaka, Negative factors to be avoided, and Friendship and the right use of wealth), Sowing the seed - Re-interpretation of the six directions, and Reaping the harvest – passage from darkness to light.

The Rendezvous of the Buddha and Sigālaka

Sigālaka was the son of devout followers of the Buddha in Rajagaha. Despite his parents' deep religious commitment and devotion, Sigālaka himself remained indifferent to religion. The devoted parents were unable to persuade their son to visit the Buddha or his disciples to hear the noble Doctrine. Sigālaka was very much attached to material possessions and he considered a visit to the Sangha as worthless and was afraid that such a visit would entail material loss. On his deathbed, Sigālaka's father, concerned for his son's spiritual growth, asked him to worship the six directions each morning. He hoped this ritual would one day lead Sigālaka to encounter the Buddha or his disciples. Out of respect for his father's final request, Sigālaka diligently performed the ritual each day.

As was his custom, the Buddha rose early, radiating boundless loving-kindness and surveying the world with compassion to see whom he might help. One morning, the Buddha noticed Sigālaka performing worship toward the six directions—East, South, West, North, Zenith, and Nadir, and saw a valuable opportunity to guide him. During his alms round in Rājagaha, the Buddha approached the young man and delivered this profound discourse, reinterpreting the ritual of honoring the six directions to highlight the essential duties of a layperson in both family and social life.

Negative Factors to Be Avoided

The Buddha drew the attention of young Sigālaka to three things: First, to the four defilements of action: taking life (*pānātipāta*), stealing (*adinnādāna*), lying (*musāvāda*), and adultery (*kamesumicchācāra*) (DN 31/III:181); secondly, to the four causes of evil: desire (*chanda*), hatred (*dosa*), fear (*bhaya*), and folly (*moha*) (DN 31/III:181); and finally, to the six ways in which one can squander one's wealth (*apāyamukhā*): addiction to strong drinks and sloth-producing drugs, haunting the streets at unfitting times, attending fairs, gambling, bad company, and habitual idleness (DN 31/III:181).

Friendship and the Right Use of Wealth

A key challenge in life is distinguishing genuine friends from pretenders. The Buddha highlights this in his teachings, identifying four kinds of false friends: one who associates only for personal gain (*aññadatthuharo*), one who speaks empty words (*vacīparamo*), one who flatters insincerely (*anuppiyabhānī*), and one who encourages harmful behavior (*apāyasahāya*) (DN 31/III:185). Though they may seem friendly, such individuals are actually enemies in disguise (*mitta-patirūpaka*) (DN 31/III:186). This insight is echoed in the *Holy Bible*, where it is said: "Some friends play at friendship, but a true friend sticks closer than one's nearest kin" (The Holy Bible, The Proverbs 18/24). The Buddha not only identifies these false companions but also

clearly explains why they are dangerous and should be avoided. He praises the wise who recognize deception and steer clear of their harmful influence.

An important aspect of the Buddha's teaching is that he not only points out what is harmful but also guides us toward what is worth cultivating. After exposing false friends, he highlights the qualities of true and loyal companionship. The Buddha describes four kinds of true friends: the helpful and supportive (*upakāraka*), the one who stays constant in joy and sorrow (*samānasukhadukkha*), the one who offers wise advice (*atthakkhāyī*), and the compassionate and understanding (*anukampaka*) (DN 31/III:187). These are the kinds of friends the Buddha encourages us to recognize, value, and associate with, true companions who nurture our well-being and growth. The *Sigālovāda Sutta* details the qualities of these four types of friends and emphasizes that these qualities should be reciprocally active among friends.

This *Sutta* makes it clear that true friendship is a reciprocally wholesome relationship. Unlike a business situation where the vendor has to be friendly to sell his products, true friendship is an ongoing exchange of wholesomeness between two individuals. The Buddha, having enumerated the four kinds of friends who can be considered as good-hearted and having provided reasons as to why they should be considered good-hearted friends, points to a profound attitude that one should maintain towards these friends. He evokes the image of a mother and her son. These friends are to be cherished with care, like the mother who cherishes her child (DN 31/III 188).

Finally, in this *Sutta*, the Buddha talks about how to manage one's wealth. The Blessed One was a realist. He understood the importance and necessity of material possessions. Therefore, to help us achieve the wise use of wealth that can contribute to our moral and social integrity, he had the following to say: "*The wise man, trained and disciplined, shines out like a beacon-fire. He gathers wealth just as the bee gathers honey, and it grows like an ant-hill higher yet. With wealth so gained, the layman can devote it to his people's good. He should divide his wealth into four: one part he may enjoy at will, two parts he should put to work, and the fourth part he should set aside as reserve in times of need*" (DN 31/III 188). The Buddha was well aware that without some degree of economic well-being, spiritual progress was extremely difficult. The Buddha does not exalt poverty because he was well aware that this was the cause for various crimes, such as theft and murder.

Reinterpretation of the Six Directions

The Buddha takes the concept of the six directions and reinterprets them to represent six important aspects of human life. Compassionately addressing Sigālaka, he suggests that the ancient rite of worshiping the six directions could be understood in a deeper, more meaningful way. Instead of mere ritual, true worship symbolizes cultivating trust, love, and mutual respect within six key types of relationships. According to this new interpretation, the East represents parents, the South teachers,

the West wife, the North friends and companions, the Zenith ascetics and Brahmins, and the Nadir servants, workers, and helpers.

In the *Sigālovāda Sutta*, the Buddha highlights these six fundamental relationships that every human being encounters in life. He draws attention to the specific duties owed by each group to the others and emphasizes that these responsibilities must be met with reciprocal care. For example, he lists five duties of children toward their parents and describes how parents should, in turn, reciprocate. This method of defining mutual duties is applied consistently across all the relationships: pupils and teachers, husband and wife, friends, laypeople and ascetics, and masters and workers (DN 31/III 188).

The *Sigālovāda Sutta* clearly emphasizes the principle of reciprocity in friendship. It portrays friendship not as a one-sided relationship but as a mutual, two-way connection built on responsibility and care. In his reinterpretation of the traditional worship of the six directions, the Buddha designates the North to symbolize friends and companions. He outlines five duties that one should fulfil toward friends, likening this to "ministering to the Northern direction." These are: showing generosity, speaking kindly, engaging in actions that promote the friend's welfare, maintaining impartiality by treating the friend as oneself, and being honest and trustworthy (DN 31/III 190). In return, friends are expected to reciprocate with equal sincerity. They should protect their companion during moments of heedlessness, safeguard his property, offer refuge in times of fear or danger, remain loyal through difficulties, and show respect and concern for his family (DN 31/III 190). This model of mutual respect and responsibility embodies the Buddha's broader vision of ethical and harmonious living. Friendship, in this view, is not casual or self-serving, but a moral relationship grounded in trust, compassion, and shared responsibility.

A careful study of the Buddhist scriptures, particularly the *Sigālovāda Sutta*, makes it clear that friendship is not a transactional relationship aimed at personal gain. Rather, it is a deeply human and reciprocal bond, where each party has responsibilities toward the other. In redefining the six directions, the Buddha presents a framework aimed at protecting the well-being of every member of society. Significantly, the Buddha shifts the focus from *rights* to *duties*, emphasizing that the rights of one person are upheld through the duties of another. While people frequently demand their rights, they rarely speak of their responsibilities. Many are willing to fight for what they believe is owed to them, yet few are eager to fulfill what they owe to others. Tragically, these struggles for rights often lead to conflict and violence, especially when individuals neglect the very duties that protect the rights they seek. Failing to recognize that our responsibilities secure the rights of others reveals a serious misunderstanding. Neglecting duties, in effect, denies others what is rightfully theirs. For a just and harmonious society, individuals must approach their roles with the right attitude and a sincere commitment to fulfilling their obligations.

Passage from Darkness to Light

Before reinterpreting the six directions, the Buddha's careful preparation helped young Sigālaka see things differently. Because of this groundwork, Sigālaka welcomed the new teaching, seeing it as restoring what was lost, guiding the lost, or lighting a lamp in the dark to reveal what was hidden. Convinced of the lasting truth of the Buddha's teachings, young Sigālaka asks to become a lay follower, saying, "*Excellent, Reverend Gotama, excellent! It is as if someone were to set up what had been knocked down, or to point out the way to one who had got lost, or to bring an oil-lamp into a dark place, so that those with eyes could see what was there. Just so the Reverend Gotama has expounded the Dhamma in various ways, May the Reverend Gotama accept me as a lay-follower from this day forth as long as life shall last*!" (DN 31/ III: 193). This discourse powerfully shows the lasting relevance of the Buddha's teachings. Even after 2,500 years, these simple yet profound principles remain practical. If truly followed, they would foster responsible, ethical people who value humanity and nature, helping to reduce many of the world's problems.

Importance of the Sutta

The *Sigālovāda Sutta* confirms our lived experience that we must pay close attention to the social structures that shape our lives. We live within a web of relationships that includes spouses, parents and children, teachers and students, friends, religious leaders, and workers. Everyone belongs to one or more of these categories. These relationships exist within wider social frameworks like families, ethnic groups, communities, and voluntary associations such as clubs and welfare societies. This expresses the simple truth that humans are naturally social and cannot thrive alone. Mutual interdependence is central to our nature. For society to function harmoniously, respect for each person's dignity is essential. A just society upholds human rights and nurtures healthy relationships, creating a space where individuals can realize their worth and reach their full potential.

Conclusion

Humans are naturally social and our surroundings deeply influence us. Since we sometimes live in an atmosphere of laziness and negativity, we could easily pick up those traits. As the saying goes, being with a virtuous person is like staying in a room full of orchids; we absorb their goodness without realizing it. But being with a bad person is like being in a fish market; over time, we grow numb to the stench. In the Buddhist context, the present life must be understood in the broader context of actions performed in previous births. Similarly, future births are shaped by the effects of both present and past actions. This continuous cycle of birth and rebirth is technically referred to as *saṁsāric* existence. Due to the interconnection of past, present, and future lives, the Buddha emphasized not only the significance of the present life but also the way one chooses to live it.

While the ultimate goal of the Noble Path is *Nibbāna*, the liberation of the mind and the end of *saṁsāric* existence, the Buddha, because he is a realist, does not focus exclusively on this goal. He is equally concerned with the whole extent of human experience, social, economic, moral, intellectual, and psychological. Accordingly, his teachings highlight two forms of wholesome friendship: *kalyāṇamitta* and *suhadamitta*. The former, the spiritual friend, is directly discussed by the Buddha, while the latter, the good-hearted friend, is implied through the use of the adjective *suhada* in the *Sigālovāda Sutta*, which outlines the duties of laypeople. While the 'golden rule' is not explicitly stated in the *Sutta*, it fundamentally underpins the social relationships illustrated by the metaphor of the six directions. The teaching stresses that when one party fulfills their duties, the other reciprocates in kind, fostering harmony and mutual respect.

The distinction between *kalyāṇamitta* and *suhadamitta* lies primarily in the different context. Both describe wholesome forms of friendship, yet while *suhadamitta* refers to the good-hearted friend within social relationships, *kalyāṇamitta* is concerned about the spiritual companion who supports one's journey toward liberation. In the *Sigālovāda Sutta,* the term *suhada* (sincere of heart) is used to describe such wholesome companions but the deeper implications of *kalyāṇamitta* are also present. These two types of friendship are not entirely separate but closely connected, like two sides of the same coin. Their qualities often overlap, differing mainly in focus: one supports worldly well-being, the other fosters spiritual growth.

However, according to the Buddha, the most beneficial companion is the *kalyāṇamitta*, who not only offers guidance but also encourages the understanding and practice of the *Dhamma*. While the *suhadamitta* provides emotional and psychological support, it is the *kalyāṇamitta* who leads us toward inner transformation and emancipation. Thus, from a Buddhist perspective, friendship serves a dual purpose: it contributes to well-being in this life and supports us on our journey toward *Nibbāna*. Thus, *Suhadamitta* and *kalyāṇamitta* correspond to these two dimensions, earthly happiness and ultimate freedom. Together, they connect individuals with one another and, more importantly, with the *Dhamma*, giving human life both meaning and direction. Though both forms of friendship are useful, the Buddha considered spiritual friendship to be of the highest value because it leads to the Path of Liberation.

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