



## *The Buddha and His Disciples* Electronically Distributed by BuddhaNet

### The Two Chief Disciples

46. The two people who were to become the Buddha's chief disciples were both born on the same day in adjacent villages just north of Rajagaha. The first was named Moggallana while the second was named Upatissa, although he was always called Sariputta, son of Sari, Sari being his mother's name. The two boys grew up together and became close friends. When they grew into youths, they went into Rajagaha one day to attend a festival, and as they sat watching a theatrical play they were both overcome by a strong sense of the impermanence of life, as a result of which they both decided to renounce the world. One of the most well-known religious teachers of the time was Sanjaya Belatthiputta, and the two young men became disciples under him. Sanjaya was famous for his evasiveness in answering questions and his rivals referred to him as an eel-wiggler (*amaravikkhepikas*).[[N1](#)]

47. Moggallana and Sariputta stayed with Sanjaya for some years, leading the life of wandering ascetics, but they were not really satisfied with what they were learning from their teacher. After a while they decided to split up and each go their own way in search for truth, promising that the first to find it should tell the other. One day, as Sariputta was walking through Rajagaha, he saw a monk and was deeply impressed by the grace and poise with which he moved and the calm happy expression on his face. The monk happened to be Assaji, one of the Buddha's disciples. Sariputta asked him:

"Who is your teacher?" and Assaji replied, "Friend, there is a great ascetic, a son of the Sakyans, who went forth from the Sakyan clan. It is because of this Lord that I have gone forth. This Lord is my teacher, I accept this Lord's Dharma."

"What doctrine does your teacher teach? What does he point to?"

"Friend, I am a beginner, I have only just gone forth, I am new in this Dharma and discipline. I cannot teach the Dharma in full, but I will tell you its essence."

"So be it, your reverence, tell me little or tell me much, but either way give me its essence, I just want the essence. There is no need for great elaboration."

So Assaji said: "Those things that proceed from a cause, of those things the Tathagata has told the cause. And that which is their stopping, of that the great recluse also has a doctrine."

48. When Sariputta heard this he became a Stream-Winner, and set out straight away to find his friend Moggallana. When the two met, Moggallana could see straight away that something wonderful had happened to his friend. "Friend, your faculties are quite pure and your complexion is bright and clear. Can it be that you have attained the Immortal?" "Yes, friend, I have attained the Immortal," Sariputta replied. He told his friend how it happened and the two decided to seek out the Buddha so they could both hear more about the Dharma from his own lips. But Moggallana, whose compassion often led him to think of the welfare of others before his own, suggested that first they go to Sanjaya and his disciples and tell them what they had discovered, certain that they would welcome the news. But when they told Sanjaya that they intended to become disciples of the Buddha, he was far from happy and tried to change their minds. In fact, so worried was he at the prospect of losing two well-known disciples to someone whom he looked upon as a rival, that he even offered to make them his co-teachers if they would stay with him. Sariputta and Moggallana refused this offer and together with nearly all of Sanjaya's two hundred and fifty disciples, they left to find the Buddha. As soon as the Buddha saw the two young ascetics coming at the head of their followers, he knew that they would become his most capable and trusted disciples. Moggallana became enlightened seven days after his ordination, as did Sariputta two weeks later.[ N2 ]

49. Sariputta's and Moggallana's abilities and dispositions were such that they developed very different faculties. Of all the Buddha's disciples, Sariputta was best able to understand and explain the Dharma, and in this way he was only second to the Buddha himself. Once the Buddha said to him: "You are wise, Sariputta, great and wide is your wisdom, joyful and quick is your wisdom, sharp and analytical is your wisdom. Just as the eldest son of a Universal Monarch rules rightly as his father did, even so do you turn the wheel of the Dharma just as I have." [ N3 ] Such regard did the Buddha have for Sariputta that he gave him the title General of the Dharma (Dharmasenapati). In one of his discourses, Sariputta talked about the qualities needed to teach the Dharma and we can safely assume that he emphasised these same qualities when he was teaching.

"When one who teaches wishes to teach another, let him establish well five things and then teach. What five? Let him think: 'I will speak at the right time, not at the wrong time. I will speak about what is, not about what is not. I will speak with gentleness, not with harshness. I will speak about the goal, not about what is not the goal. I will speak with a mind filled with love, not with a mind filled with ill-will.' When one who teaches wishes to teach another, let him establish well these five things." [ N4 ]

50. Though Sariputta was an enthusiastic and effective Dharma teacher, he also knew that while people can be helped through being taught the Dharma, sometimes they need practical, material help also. And in this way he was always ready to lend a hand. Once, Yasodhara became very ill with wind and her son, Rahula, tried to get medicine for her. He consulted Sariputta who, because of his experience in nursing the sick, knew exactly what the most suitable medicine would be and then went to get some. Together with Rahula he administered the medicine to Yasodhara who soon recovered.[ N5 ] While he was always ready to visit the sick to offer them comfort and help, he also had a particular concern for the poor and lonely whom he often helped and favoured over the wealthy and the influential. On one occasion large numbers of people were coming to the monastery where the Buddha was staying to invite monks to their homes for a meal. People were anxious to get the more well-known monks and these monks were particularly happy to go to the homes of the wealthy, knowing they

would get fine food. All the monks except Sariputta had accepted invitations when a very poor woman appeared and asked if a monk would like to go to her home. The monastery attendant informed her that all monks except Sariputta were gone. Thinking that such an eminent monk would not wish to accept a humble meal from her, she was quite disappointed. But when the attendant informed Sanputta about the poor woman, he happily agreed to go to her home, to her delight. When King Pasenadi heard that Sariputta would be eating at the home of a very poor woman, he sent her a large amount of money, more than enough to provide Sariputta with a meal, with plenty left over to live comfortably for the rest of her life.[ N6 ]

51. Next to Sariputta the Buddha considered Moggallana to be his wisest and most highly developed disciple. According to tradition, he had a very dark complexion, as dark as a rain cloud. Moggallana's most developed faculties were not wisdom but psychic powers (*iddhi*). When, as a result of meditation, the mind is "concentrated, purified, cleansed, unblemished, free from impurities, malleable, workable and firm," it sometimes becomes capable of extraordinary abilities. Some of the psychic powers that Buddhist monks occasionally developed were the ability to change their appearance, being able to sense what was happening a great distance away, being able to read other people's minds and being able to leave the body.[ N7 ]

52. The Buddha knew that the display of psychic powers could have quite an effect upon people, and not always a positive one. Those who displayed such powers could easily be spoiled by the adulation they received, while those who saw such powers displayed often gave unthinking devotion to those who had them. He was also critical of the use of psychic displays to convert people. Once, when the Buddha was staying at Nalanda, one of his disciples said to him: "Lord, Nalanda is rich, prosperous, crowded, full of people who have faith in you. It would be good if you were to get a monk to perform extraordinary feats and miracles. In this way Nalanda would come to have even more faith." [ N8 ] The Buddha refused this request because he wanted people to follow the Dharma out of understanding, not because they had been impressed by miracles or psychic feats.

53. Once, a wealthy merchant put a sandalwood bowl on the top of a long bamboo pole which he set up in the market at Rajagaha. Then he let it be known that any monk who could rise into the air and remove the bowl could have it. Shortly afterwards, Moggallana and Pindola Bharadvaja went into Rajagaha, and when the merchant saw them he said, "You both have psychic powers. If you fetch the bowl, it is yours." So Pindola rose into the air and brought the bowl down, to the immense admiration of the large crowd who had gathered to watch. Then the merchant called Pindola to his house and filled the sandalwood bowl with expensive food. After that, everywhere Pindola went, crowds of noisy, excited people followed him. When the Buddha heard about this, he called Pindola and scolded him:

"It is not fitting, it is not becoming, it is not right, it is not worthy of a monk, it is not allowable, it should not be done. How could you, for the sake of a miserable wooden bowl, exhibit one of the conditions of a developed person to these householders. It is just like a loose woman who exhibits her undergarment for the sake of a few miserable coins." [ N9 ]

As a result of this incident, the Buddha made a rule making it an offence for monks to unnecessarily display their psychic powers. However, he also realised that psychic powers could sometimes be put to good use. On

another occasion, some thieves attacked a house and kidnapped two children. When the monk Pilindavaccha heard of this, he used his psychic powers to bring the children back. When the other monks accused him of breaking the rule, the Buddha declared him innocent of any offence because he had used his powers out of compassion." [ [N10](#) ]

54. Moggallana likewise usually used his psychic powers only to help people. Once when he was staying with the Buddha on the upper floor of the residence of Migaramata, a group of monks on the ground floor were chattering away and making a great noise. The Buddha described them as being "frivolous, empty-headed, agitated, with harsh and useless speech, lacking concentration, unsteady, not composed, with flighty minds and with senses uncontrolled" and he urged Moggallana to give them "a good stirring." So using his big toe Moggallana made the whole house, as large as it was, shake and tremble. Thinking that the house was about to collapse and shouting in fear, the monks ran outside. The Buddha then approached them and told them that at his request Moggallana had shaken the house by means of the psychic powers he had developed with diligent meditation and that they likewise should spend time meditating instead of indulging in idle chatter. [ [N11](#) ] But like the Buddha himself, Moggallana more usually helped people by teaching them the Dharma, and the Tipitaka preserves many of the discourses he delivered to monks and nuns, laymen and laywomen.

55. Both Sariputta and Moggallana died before their teacher, the Buddha. When Sariputta realised that his end was near, he took his leave of the Buddha and set off for the village where he was born. Despite having such a spiritually developed son, Sariputta's mother had no faith in the Dharma, and Sariputta wished to repay his mother for bringing him up by helping her understand the Buddha's teachings. He sent a monk ahead to inform his mother that he was coming home. She was delighted, thinking that her son had finally disrobed and returned to the lay life. When he arrived and she realised that he was still a monk, she locked herself in her room and sulked. Sariputta's health rapidly began to deteriorate and as he lay in his room numerous devas came to pay their respects to him. When Sariputta's mother saw all these heavenly beings, she began to realise just how virtuous and holy her son was, and went to see him as he lay dying. Sariputta discussed the Dharma with her and she became a Stream-Winner. He then called all the other monks who had accompanied him and asked them if over the last forty years he had offended them, whether they would forgive him. They all assured him that there was nothing to forgive and shortly after this, Sariputta attained final Nirvana.

56. Only two weeks later, Moggallana died. He had long claimed that he knew the destinies of those who had passed away and that Jain ascetics were usually reborn in the lower realms. Moggallana was widely respected, his psychic powers were well-known and people believed what he said about the Jains. Alarmed at their waning influence, a group of unscrupulous Jain ascetics decided to murder him. They hired some thugs who surrounded the house where Moggallana was staying, but when he became aware of their presence, he escaped through the key hole. This happened on several occasions until eventually the thugs caught him, beating him severely and leaving him for dead. Barely alive, he staggered to where the Buddha was, to pay his last respects, and then he died. Legend says that Moggallana met his death in this way because, in a former life, he had murdered his parents at the instigation of his wife, who was jealous of the attention he gave them.

