Good Friendship, Good Companionship, Good Comradeship - Ubuntu

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 26:46

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā Sambuddhassa. Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-awakened one.

I'm going to investigate this phrase that the Buddha says. Ananda was his companion for the last twenty years of his life. He was a cousin of his, and he had a contract with the Buddha that whatever the Buddha taught, even if it was to the devas, he had to come back and tell Ananda what it was. Anyway, Ananda used to get things wrong.

At one point he says to the Buddha, "Bhagavan, I think good companionship is half the spiritual life." And the Buddha says, "Oh no, Ananda"—he always says "Oh no, Ananda"—"This is the entire spiritual life, Ananda. That is good companionship, good friendship, good comradeship. And when a person has good friends, a good companion and a good comrade, it is to be expected that they will develop and cultivate the Noble Eightfold Path."

So we're going to investigate that a little bit.

Using these words in a slightly different way: good friendship—that's really all the people whom you know. They compete from the intimate to just acquaintance, your friendship group, your social friendship group. It's an encouragement if you have amongst that group people who are keen on the Dhamma. That's what you might say is an understanding of your friendship group. You can tell a person about the company they keep—you've heard that one.

Good companionship: these are the people whom you spend some time with. They might not be within your particular friendship group. They could have been here, for instance. The people who are with you on retreat are your companions, your spiritual companions for this time. You can be motivated by them. You can have what you might call a wholesome envy for people who seem to be able to practice better than you—because it's all in your mind, of course. You don't know what's going on in their head.

And then finally, good comradeship. We use the word comrade, don't we? It sort of connects us with the Communist Party, so it gives you an idea that your comradeship extends to all people who are connected with the Buddha's teachings. When you go to a festival or something—if you went to the London Buddhist Vihara for their Buddha Day, there'd be so many people there you wouldn't know any of them apart from just a handful. But you get that sense of comradeship.

So that's what the Buddha says, but exactly how deep does that go? I don't know whether you've come across Ubuntu. I'm not talking about the programming—I'm talking about the actual word itself. It's a South African word used by people even in Zimbabwe, all the people that live down there: Xhosa, Zulu and all that. And this is what they say: "I am because of who we all are."

You could translate that as "I am my relationships." For those of you who know Krishnamurti, that was one of his big statements: we are our relationships. How true is that?

If we look at the Satipaṭṭhāna discourse, there's a recurring phrase, a recurring refrain that says they meditate on an aspect of the body, or feelings, or mental states, or a teaching of the Dhamma, internally, externally, and both internally and externally. We're going to have a look at that.

To make it easy for us, I'll use the schema that the Buddha uses in terms of a cross-section of a human being: there's the body, there's feelings, perceptions, all our habits where the will comes in, and consciousness.

If you just think about the body itself, where does it come from? Did you choose it? You just ended up in it.

You woke up one day and thought, "God, this is my body." So it's a case of recognizing that the body itself is not something that you have or even own, because it has its own life force, doesn't it? I mean, what is it? It's just a collection of cells—billions of cells just doing their own thing. And we've also got these guest cells in the gut to keep us going. So there's this whole dimension of connection with the body itself.

And through the body, there's dependency obviously on nature—air, water, food, plants. But it's all mediated through human beings, isn't it? All the food we get is mediated through human beings. They grow it, they collect it, they sell it to us at ridiculous prices. And then we eat it. And most of it, virtually all of it, is processed—some of it just gently processed. All this stuff is cancer-producing, so we've got to thank them for that. And if you think about air, how it's being affected by human beings at this present time in our history... And the water, oh my goodness, the sewage and all that.

So you can see that even at that cellular level, there's this connection going on, this incoming information. And the way we produce and the way we work with it—then we produce it. If you're cooking, you're actually producing something from what somebody else is giving you. It's passing through you. So if you say, "This is my cheesecake, it's a wonderful cheesecake," it's not quite right to say it's mine, is it? Because all the ingredients belong to somebody else. And that goes for things like clothes—all our clothes are mediated through the fashion industry. Except mine. Mine was set by the brother. He gave me this great freedom that in the morning I don't have to wake up and wonder whether I'm going to wear blue. It's just there.

And the dwellings—they're all constructed, all designed by architects and builders. The medicines that we take are all invented, developed by people, and they're given to us by people—doctors, nurses. So you can see that everything we have is being mediated into us, and we then share it one way or another.

Since I had this sciatica, I've got boxes of medicines. I've got chemistry—I've got a chemist in my room at the moment because they keep giving you these medicines and then you read the label and the instructions and you think, "Oh my gosh." So they sort of build up on your shelf. Everything, virtually everything—even the water, town water, it's got chlorine in it and stuff like that. It's all coming in, we're doing something with it, and then we give it out.

And yet we still have this perception of a body, of something substantial that doesn't change. There's always some concept that we have about our bodies which remains static, even though it's changing before our very eyes. But the concept holds it together—that's what concepts do, they hold things together into a whole. And then we presume that that is real. That's the problem.

So for instance, if you were to lose an arm or a leg, it would be a loss, but it wouldn't undermine that sense of "I." It would change it, but you're still me, aren't you? I'm still me—even if you have to hop everywhere.

There's this word you might come across called proprioception. It means that you know where the body is at all times. It's not conscious—you just know whether it's standing up or falling over. You're generally aware of that, unless you've had too much to drink. And there's that sense of force, the heaviness of the body, the lightness of it.

Now, you might have noticed that when you're on retreat, you sometimes get this perception that your arm's over here, your head's on top of your knee—you've got this sort of dislocation of the body in places. That's because the information from the body is not coming up into the mind, the brain, to be able to position you. You've lost contact with the body. The body's become so relaxed that it's not sending the signals, so the mind makes things up. That should really warn us about the mind—it's constantly making things up.

If you think of the artistry of sports people—tennis players and footballers—they never think about their bodies, do they?

Those serves are coming at them about 100 miles an hour, aren't they? And somehow they hit it back. I've always been amazed at that.

So this body is always in relationship with something else. When you're walking down the street, you're constantly dodging pedestrians. If it's a crowded place, you don't think about it, but the body's always moving. Why? Because you're in relationship with these other people.

When you walk up a set of stairs, you might find yourself feeling enclosed, and your body shrinks a bit. If you're with somebody who has power over you—your boss or something like that—whether you like it or not, your body shrinks. And if you happen to be powerful and over somebody, whether you like it or not, you'll be extending your body. It's just the way we manifest these things.

You're always negotiating your situation with the floor when you're walking on it, or with the couch lying

on it, or when you're in the bed. Even then you're constantly shaping your body to make it fit in with your surroundings. And when you walk with people, it depends. If they're fast walkers, you've got to adjust your pace to them. And if they're slow walkers, you've got to slow down a bit. So there's this constant communication going on. Most of it, of course, is completely subconscious.

Now, if you go on YouTube, there's an interesting little thing about a feral child, this poor man. When he was a young kid, his parents thought he had an evil spirit in him. So they stuck him in the chicken coop. Would you believe that? And he was in there from about the age of two or two and a half or something.

There was a woman, an Australian woman, Elizabeth Clayton, who lived in Fiji. And when she heard about this, she went to see him. Basically, if you look at the first video, he's standing like a chicken—these are his arms—he's standing like that. And he's clawing the floor with his foot, like chickens do. Unfortunately, we don't hear him squawk or anything like that. I don't know whether he actually copied their voices.

But when he got too big to be in the chicken coop around about eight, nine, ten, they stuck him in an old people's home and tied him to a bed. And that's where she found him. So he'd been like that for twenty-plus years. Twenty years tied to a bed.

When she found him, of course, she had some sort of background education, some training with children who had educational difficulties and whatnot. But she definitely took him under her arm. And then she went on to set up an orphanage. But he can't speak—he's gone beyond the ability to speak. If you don't learn to speak within four years or so, that's it, you've lost it. All the social graces, what people's faces mean and the way their faces change to express certain emotions and relationships, all that he slowly began to pick up. But he never will be fully adapted to human life. He's been absolutely crunched.

So that tells us how important our parents were, and our siblings, cousins, all the friends we've had, because it's this constant communication on how we speak and how we relate to people.

So when it comes to the senses, the senses themselves are just gateways for objects to come into the body. They themselves are empty of the objects, remember? That's why it would be horrible, wouldn't it, if your tongue had a basic taste of curry. How would you get to enjoy pizza? Or cheesecake, for that matter. It would be horrible.

So it's a case of recognizing that the senses themselves are absolutely empty of what they are aware of, what they sense. And that of course refers us back to awareness itself. Awareness itself is empty of everything it's aware of. And that's the process of awakening—but that's just by the side.

So a nose doesn't have a scent. Thank heavens.

Our relationship to the world out there is completely based upon what our senses will give us. Obviously, if you're colorblind, you're seeing a world different from most. If you're deaf, then you're unable to

experience that level of communication.

What does the Buddha call it? *Ayatana*—that sphere, that dimension of human communication. If you're unable to access it, you're cut off from a whole realm of experience. A lot of people lost their sense of smell through COVID, you see. So flowers aren't what they were. They can see them, but they haven't got that ability to appreciate their fragrance.

And every time you sense something, it's always changing the concept you have of it. The word for that is perception. Every time you have an apple, it changes your concept of an apple. It might be ever so slight—you might not be aware of it—but every time you see an apple, your concept of an apple is ever so slightly changed.

So that also tells us about this constant communication, this interrelatedness that we have with the world through our senses, and even more so with persons. Every time you meet somebody whom you know, you have a concept of them, you have a way of being with them. And during that conversation, during that meeting, it'll ever so slightly change. So there's again that constant relationship.

When it comes to feelings and emotions, the medieval philosophers thought of human beings as four types: choleric is the angry type, melancholic the sad type, then there was the sanguine who was the happy type, and the phlegmatic—the one who was lazy, couldn't be bothered. If you actually define people in that sort of very simple way, then you can see they have a certain emotional life, which is then again mediated through the people whom they meet. And they probably copied their parents in some way or other.

So again, it's a case of recognizing that all this stuff is being mediated to us—through television, YouTube, social media, whoever you meet. We're constantly being changed. And we are changing, of course. Don't forget that. We also have an effect on others. But it's just a recognition that nothing is static here. Not even our emotional life is static. It's always changing.

And we have a power. This is the whole point of moving into habits. We have a power to change ourselves. This is the point.

So we've talked a little bit about concepts and perceptions—this word, our perception of how things change. Even on a wider scale of society, you know, there was a time in this country where if you insulted the monarch—*lèse-majesté*—well, you could have your head chopped off. And there was a time you could actually declare your desire for republicanism quite openly, even during the king or queen's appearance. But now you get arrested. So it just shows you how times change. You know that, don't you? There were the Republicans at Charles's coronation. They went and arrested them, for heaven's sake. That made world news.

So then we come to habits. These are *sankharas*. They are translated as volitional conditionings, by which we mean this is what we really have the power to change and the power to grow. The power to get rid of

when we don't want them.

We find in our lives that we might have had a certain understanding which produced a certain type of behavior. And then when you came across the Buddha's teaching, you find yourself changing. That ability to change from one type of behavior to another is to do with our volitional conditionings. And this is our work. In terms of spiritual life, that's our work. You can't do much about your senses, but you can definitely do something about your habits.

So I want to read a little bit here from the discourses. This is a discourse about two ascetics. There were some very strange ideas during the Buddha's time—probably equally strange to some of the stuff you get these days. But the idea held by these two ascetics was that they were, in a sense, trying to beat karma by being what they might be at some future time. So they were practicing dog asceticism and cow asceticism.

I don't know—there's a lot of humor in the discourses, and you never know whether this is actually for real or not. But definitely it points to the fact that some people had some very strange practices.

So there was Punna, the son of the Koliyans. Now the Koliyans were actually on the opposite side of the Sakyans on that river. They almost got into a war over water rights. It's interesting, isn't it? Two thousand five hundred years ago they had water rights. And they would have been connected some way. They would have been very close as peoples, you know.

Anyway, the son of the Kaleans was an ox-duty ascetic, and also Seniya, who was a naked dog-duty ascetic, went to see the Blessed One. Punna, the ox-duty ascetic, paid homage to the Blessed One and sat down at one side. Seniya, the naked dog-duty ascetic, exchanged greetings with the Blessed One, and when the courteous and amiable talk was finished, he too sat down by the side and curled up like a dog.

When Punna, the ox-duty ascetic, sat down, he asked the Blessed One, "Venerable Sir, this naked dog-duty ascetic Seniya does what is hard. He eats his food when it is thrown on the ground. That dog duty has long been taken up and practiced by him. What will be his destination? What will be his future course?"

"Enough, Punna, let it be. Don't ask me."

A second time he goes through this rigmarole—"Please, can you tell me what will happen?"—and a third time Punna, the ox-duty ascetic, asks, "Venerable Sir, this naked dog-duty ascetic does what is hard to do. He eats his food when it is thrown on the ground. That dog duty has long been taken up and practiced by him. What will be his destination? What will be his future course?"

"Well, Punna, since I certainly cannot persuade you when you ask and I say 'Enough, Punna, let it be, do not ask,' I shall therefore answer you. Hear, Punna. Someone develops the dog duty fully and unstintingly, develops the dog habit fully and unstintingly, develops the dog mind fully and unstintingly, develops dog behavior fully and unstintingly. Having done that, on the dissolution of the body after death, he reappears in the company of dogs. But if his view is such that 'this is virtue or duty or asceticism or religious life, I

shall become a great god or some lesser god,' that is wrong view. Now there are two destinations for one who has wrong view, I say: hell or the animal womb. So, Punna, if his dog duty is perfected, it will lead him to the company of dogs, and if it is not, it will lead him to hell."

When this was said, Seniya the naked dog-duty ascetic wept and shed tears. Later in the discourse, of course, they become disciples of the Buddha. In the discourses, anybody who comes to ask the Buddha, it's very rare for them not to become a disciple.

To sum up, there's this lovely word: osmosis. In a chemical sense, it's when one solvent passes through a semi-permeable membrane into another one—the water goes into the salty one, trying to even each other out. But osmosis is also used figuratively to mean the gradual and unconscious assimilation of ideas and knowledge. I think that's what has been happening to us ever since we were born. Without knowing it, you take things in, you work with them from your own perspective, your own little experience of life, and then you give them out through the way you speak, the way you act, and what you do. There is this constant to and fro of things. Nothing is ever still, nothing is ever steady.

If you think about it, everything that we have or experience is somewhere connected to other human beings. In that sense, you can return to this idea of Ubuntu—"I am because of what you all are, I am because of what we all are." We've lost that sense in the West because we've gone for individualism, and that's unfortunate. We go around thinking, "I do my own thing in my own way, in my own time." That was the old hippie way.

Having reflected on that, it's a case of recognizing that this flow is constantly going on. That's what the Buddha says—to be aware of what is internally happening, to be aware of what is externally happening, and to be aware internally and externally. That's what he's asking us to do all the time in the discourse. Although the Satipatthana Sutta is centered upon the actual practice of meditation, remember there's a whole section about ordinary daily life, about how we behave in ordinary daily life. When he addresses that, the same refrain comes through: internally, externally, both internally and externally. It's simply making ourselves more and more aware of that, that's all. The more aware you are of something, the more your choice is there.

Now, it's not as though you've got free will exactly. It's a conditioned choice, because you know which way you're going to go. For instance, if you decide to go for a walk and you've got your map, and you come to a crossroad, you've got to figure out which road to take—especially if you've got multiple offshoots. It's recognizing that and beginning to make the right decisions that draw us closer and closer to happiness. That's all we want, isn't it? A bit of happiness.

For heaven's sake—that's all any of us really want.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance, and that through your practice—inwardly, outwardly, both inwardly and outwardly—you will be led to ultimate liberation sooner rather than later.

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