

# Good Friendship, Good Companionship, Good Comradeship - Ubuntu

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Dharma Talks · 26:46

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*Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma Sambuddhassa*

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Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-awakened one.

I'm going to investigate this phrase that the Buddha says. So Ānanda 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 he taught, even if it was to the devas, he had to come back and tell him what it was. Anyway, he used to get things wrong.

At one point he says to him, "Bhagavān, I think good companionship is half the spiritual life." And the Buddha says, "Oh no, Ānanda." You always say, "Oh no, Ānanda." "This is the entire spiritual life, Ānanda. That is good companionship, good friendship, good companionship, 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.

I'm using these words in a slightly different way. So friendship, good friendship, that's really all the people whom you know. They compete from the intimate to just acquaintance, really. Your friendship group, your social friendship group. And 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. So 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. So the people who are with you on retreat were your companions, your spiritual companions for this time. And 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, you've got good comradeship. We use the word comrade, don't we? It 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. So when you go to, say, a festival or something, so if you went to, say, 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. So it's a South African word used by people even in Zimbabwe. So it's 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. I am because of whom we all are." So you could translate that as "I am my relationships." And for those of you who know Krishnamurti, that was one of his big statements: "We are our relationships."

I mean, how true is that? So 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. All right, so we're going to have a look at that.

And 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. So there's the body, there's feelings, perceptions, all our habits where the will comes in, and consciousness.

So if you just think about the body itself, where does it come from? Did you choose it? So you just ended up in it. You woke up one day and thought, "God, this is my body." So it's a case of recognising 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, haven't we, in the gut to keep us going. So there's a whole thing about there, there's a connection with the body itself.

And through the body, there's dependency, obviously on nature: air, water, food and all that sort of stuff, 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 is 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 anyway. 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, and then we produce it. So if you're cooking, then you're actually producing something from what somebody else is giving you. It's passing through you, right? 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, right? All our clothes are mediated through the fashion industry, except mine. Mine was set by the Buddha. He gave me this great freedom that in the morning I'd have to wake up and wonder whether I'm going to wear blue. It's just there.

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

I've got, since I had this sciatica, I've got boxes of medicines. I've got chemistry. So 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 you read the instructions and you think, "Oh my gosh." So they build up on your shelf. So everything, well, virtually everything. Even the water, like 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, don't we, of a body, of something substantial that doesn't change. There's always some concept that we have about our bodies which remain static even though it's changing before our very eyes. But it holds it together, and 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 or something, I mean, it'd 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. You don't have to hop everywhere.

And there's this word that you might come across called proprioception. And 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 then 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 get this, sometimes this perception that your arm's over here, your head's on top of your knee. You've got this 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 it makes things up. So that should really warn us about the mind. It's constantly making things up.

I mean, if you think of that, of the artistry of sports people, tennis players and footballers. They never think about their bodies, do they? I mean, those services are coming at them about a hundred miles an hour, aren't they? For me, yeah. And somehow they hit it back. I've always been amazed at that.

So this body is always in relationship with something else. So when you're walking down the street, you're constantly dodging pedestrians, aren't you? So walking, 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 you're enclosed, right? 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, the pit. So 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 more and a half or something. And there was a woman, an Australian woman, Elizabeth Clayton, who lived in Fiji. And when she heard about this, she went to see him.

And 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 Old People's Home and tied him to a bed. And that's where she found him. So he's been like that for twenty plus years. Twenty years tied to a bed.

So 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 do people, people's faces and the way their faces change to express certain emotions and relationships, all that he slowly began to pick up. And you can see he's... He never will be 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? So that's why it'd 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'd be horrible. So it's a case of recognising that the senses themselves are absolutely empty of what they're aware of. 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. So

obviously, if you're colour-blind, 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? *Āyatana*, that sphere, dimension, that dimension of human communication. You're unable to have it. A lot of people lost their sense of smell through COVID. So flowers aren't what they were. They can see them, but they haven't got that ability to appreciate their smell.

And every time you sense something, it's always changing the concept that you have of it. And the word for that is that 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 of the world through our senses, and even more so of the person. Everybody meets 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, emotions, so the medieval philosophers thought of human beings as these four types: choleric is the angry type, the melancholic the sad type, then there was the sanguine who was the happy type and the phlegmatic types, the ones who was lazy, couldn't be bothered. So if you actually define people in that 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 recognising 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 and this word, our perception of how things change. Even on a wider scale of society, 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 was the Republicans at Charles' coronation. They went and arrested them, for heaven's sake. That made world news.

So then we come to habits. So these are *saṅkhāras*. They are translated as volitional conditionings, by which we mean this is what we have really the power to change and the power to grow, the power to get rid of when we don't want them. And we find what we found in our lives that we might have had a certain understanding which has produced a certain type of behaviour. And then when you came across the

Buddha's teaching you find yourself changing. That ability to change from one type of behaviour to another is to do with our volitional conditionings.

And this is our work. I mean, in terms of spiritual life, that's our work. Can't do much about our senses, but you can definitely do something about your...

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, which is probably equally strange to some of the stuff that you get these days. But the idea was by these two ascetics that they were in a sense trying to beat *kamma* by being what they might be at some future time.

So they were practising dog asceticism and cow asceticism. I don't know, there's a lot of humour in the discourses and you never know whether this is actually for real or not, but it definitely 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? 2,500 years ago they had water rights. And they would have been connected some way. They would have been very close as peoples.

Anyway, the son of the Koliyans was an ox-duty ascetic, and also Seniya, who was a naked dog-duty ascetic, went to see the Blessed One. And Punna, the ox-duty ascetic, paid homage to the Blessed One and sat down at one side. And while Seniya, the naked dog 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.

Now, 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 by him and practised by him. What will be his destination? What will be his future course?"

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

So the second time he goes through this rigmarole: "Please, can you tell me what will happen to him?" And the third time, Punna, the ox-duty ascetic, said: "Venerable sir, this naked dog-duty ascetic Seniya does what is hard. He eats his food when it's thrown on the ground. That dog duty has long been taken up and practised 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, he develops the dog habit fully and unstintingly, he develops the dog mind fully and unstintingly, he develops dog behaviour 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 'This is duty' or 'This is asceticism' or 'This is 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 ascetic wept and shed tears. And later, of course, in the discourse, 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.

So, just in summary, if we were to sum up, there's this lovely word: osmosis. In a chemical way, it's when one solvent passes through a semi-permeable membrane into another one. I think the salty one will... The water goes into the salty one. Is that right, Lorena? It was the other way around. They'll try and even each other out anyway.

So what we have, it's also used figuratively, osmosis, as a gradual and unconscious assimilation of ideas and knowledge. And I think that's what's happening to us ever since we were born. Without you knowing it, you take stuff in, you work with it from your own perspective, your own little experience of life, and then you give it out by the way you speak and the way you act and what you do. And this constant ebb and flow of things.

So nothing is ever still, nothing is ever steady. And everything, if you think about it, everything that we have or experience is somewhere connected to other human beings. And in that sense you can go back to this idea of Ubuntu: where I am because of what you all are, I am because of what we all are. And we've lost that sense in the West because we've gone for individualism, and that's unfortunate because we go around thinking that I do my own thing in my own way, in my own time. That was the old hippie.

So having reflected on that, it's a case of recognising that this flow is constantly going on. So that's what the Buddha says. To be aware of what... Ah, come in, Pam. To be aware of what is internally happening, to be aware of what is externally happening, and to be aware internally and externally. So that's what he's asking us to do all the time in the discourse.

And the discourse, although it's centred upon the actual practice of meditation, remember, there's a whole section there about ordinary daily life, about how we behave in ordinary daily life. And when he does that, the same refrain comes through: internally, externally, both internally and externally. And it's just making ourselves more and more aware of that. That's all.

And the more aware you are of something, the more your choice is there. Now, it's not as though you've got free will. It's a conditioned choice because you know which way you're going to go. So for instance, if you decide to go for a walk and you've got your map, you've come to a crossroad, then you've got to figure out which road you take from that crossroad, especially if you've got multiple offshoots.

So it's recognising that and beginning to make the right decisions which draw us closer and closer to happiness. That's all we want to be, isn't it? A bit of happiness. For heaven's sake.

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

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