

Being Human

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Tips of the Day · 4 min read

Ven. Ānanda said to the Blessed One, “This is half of the holy life, lord: having admirable people as friends, companions, & colleagues.” “Don’t say that, Ānanda. Don’t say that. Having admirable people as friends, companions, & colleagues is actually the whole of the holy life. (See below [I]) We are our relationships. This is a dynamic between ‘me’ and other. It is constantly changing. When that dynamic is wholesome, it is a dance. It brings all the benefits of community. When it corrupts, the dance morphs into a brawl. Everyone suffers. There are now so many forces that militate against our togetherness as human beings. Even our togetherness within individual nations. The neoliberal ideology that atomises us into individual entrepreneurs each vying against the other for a piece of the pie; the neoliberal economies that have created a gargantuan gap between the multitude of poor and the very few rich; the disastrous effect of Social Media in exacerbating the divisions in our society and proselytising conspiracy theories; the political powerlessness to tackle Climate Crisis and callous disregard of this existential threat by Corporations in the service of shareholders and by Deniers; the loss of confidence in our institutions – the Health Services, the national broadcaster, the police, the government; the zeitgeist, world mood, that is moving us towards ‘illiberal’ democracy and dictatorships; the growing threat of war (nuclear?) between China and the US, and even Russia. Not to talk of Covid and future pandemics that manifest the selfishness of richer nations and racial disparity. I’m sure you could add to the list. In all, it adds up to a foreboding that there has to be a crash of some sort. It can leave us feeling paralysed. Apart from becoming involved in a charity or cause that moves us, there may be something we are overlooking. We must do all we can to re-establish our sense of community. There were neighbourly awakenings during the lock downs, but once the pandemic ends, I dare say it will be back to ‘normal’. The word Ubuntu [ii] comes in many forms throughout all the countries of Southern Africa. It is a part of their view of life. Ubuntu (Zulu pronunciation: [ùbùnt’ù]) is a Nguni Bantu term meaning “humanity”. It is sometimes translated as “I am because we are” (also “I am because you are”), or “humanity towards others” (in Zulu, umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu). In Xhosa, the latter term is used, but is often meant in a more philosophical sense to mean “the belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity”. (Wikipedia) This is also included in Dhamma understanding of interdependence, but to say: I am a human because you are a human, is to cement it in a relationship of equality. As always, change begins within the individual. The Eightfold Path begins with Right Understanding and this manifests as Right Attitude which in turn manifests in how we speak and act. Here we have a practice. Just as in Metta we have phrases to establish good will to all beings, so we can develop that desire for kinship with all other human beings – even those whose actions and philosophy we detest. I am because you are – bring to mind all categories of people. How does each category affect you? I am because we are – My being a human depends on you being a human. I practised

this while walking around Shrewsbury and there was growing sense of kinship. If you try it, do send me your experience. Please send me other phrases if you think of any. This talk is the inspiration for this Tip: What do We Want to Sustain? Thinking about Faith and The Climate. Dr Carmody Grey: Hook Lecture 2021PS: Without doubt the best possible way through all catastrophe is through personal responsibility and a sense of common purpose, driven by a solidarity that comes from caring for one another. However, sadly, and I confess I am a little cynical; what will eventually drive most is the experience of danger. As all dictators know, fear is also a great motivator! But it comes with destruction. Such is the nature of Samsara!

[i]Half (of the Holy Life) Upaḍḍha Sutta (SN 45:2) I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying among the Sakyans. Now there is a Sakyian town named Sakkara. There Ven. Ānanda went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, having bowed down to the Blessed One, sat to one side. As he was sitting there, Ven. Ānanda said to the Blessed One, “This is half of the holy life, lord: having admirable people as friends, companions, & colleagues.” “Don’t say that, Ānanda. Don’t say that. Having admirable people as friends, companions, & colleagues is actually the whole of the holy life. When a monk has admirable people as friends, companions, & colleagues, he can be expected to develop & pursue the noble eightfold path. “And how does a monk who has admirable people as friends, companions, & colleagues, develop & pursue the noble eightfold path? There is the case where a monk develops right view dependent on seclusion, dependent on dispassion, dependent on cessation, resulting in relinquishment. He develops right resolve... right speech... right action... right livelihood... right effort... right mindfulness... right concentration dependent on seclusion, dependent on dispassion, dependent on cessation, resulting in relinquishment. This is how a monk who has admirable people as friends, companions, & colleagues, develops & pursues the noble eightfold path. “And through this line of reasoning one may know how having admirable people as friends, companions, & colleagues is actually the whole of the holy life: It is in dependence on me as an admirable friend that beings subject to birth have gained release from birth, that beings subject to aging have gained release from aging, that beings subject to death have gained release from death, that beings subject to sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair have gained release from sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair. It is through this line of reasoning that one may know how having admirable people as friends, companions, & colleagues is actually the whole of the holy life.”

[ii]Ubuntu – you may know the word as open source software, part of Linux. There are various definitions of the word "Ubuntu". The most recent definition was provided by the African Journal of Social Work (AJSW). The journal defined ubuntu as: A collection of values and practices that people of Africa or of African origin view as making people authentic human beings. While the nuances of these values and practices vary across different ethnic groups, they all point to one thing – an authentic individual human being is part of a larger and more significant relational, communal, societal, environmental and spiritual world. Wikipedia

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