

Opting Out

April 20, 2021

The sutta that tells of the Buddha's last year begins with a very strange event. Ajātasattu, a king who has only recently become impressed with the Buddha, wants some advice. He's planning to attack the Vajjians, which is a small republic on his border, and he wants some advice from the Buddha on how to do this. Of course, this shows how benighted the king is, thinking that the Buddha is the sort of person who would give advice in that area, especially advice on how to beat the Vajjians.

But the king sends his minister, a brahman, and the brahman asks the Buddha, "Will the king succeed?" And the Buddha doesn't speak directly to the brahman. Instead, he turns to Ven. Ānanda and talks about the qualities of the Vajjian community, and how they have a very strong sense of harmony within the community. That comment contains a message: They would not easily be defeated by a force of arms. The brahman takes that message home.

As we find out later, the king defeats the Vajjians by getting the brahman to sow discord in the republic, and then he conquers the republic without any bloodshed at all. Now, there are a lot of ways of reading this incident. One is that the Buddha didn't give political advice unless he was asked to, and even then he was very indirect. He aimed mainly at minimizing the amount of killing that would go on. He didn't warn the Vajjians of what was happening. He didn't get involved, really. His only involvement was to minimize the killing. And then, within a year, he was gone.

Which showed that the Buddha wasn't here to straighten out the world, yet people still wanted his opinion on how to conduct a society. He had a few stories that he would tell about the ideal way to run a society, but they were always placed in a mythic past, or a mythic future: where kings abided by the laws, the laws were fair, and everybody was prosperous. That was his vision of the ideal society: where people lived in peace, they had to opportunities to make a good livelihood, and they could practice.

But the Buddha never tried to force his vision on anyone. He never tried to force his idea of justice, as to who was right and who was wrong. In his example, the ideal way of living, the most noble way of living, was to leave—to opt out. Otherwise you're stuck in this continual back and forth that is becoming, "further becoming." This is what makes the Dhamma distinctive.

You read every now and then, people accusing meditation, especially as it's taught here in the West, of serving the interests of the status quo: telling people that their problems are inside, and that if they learn how to straighten themselves out inside, they can be more productive members of society. The people who write these critiques are usually saying, "Instead, they should try to change society. We need a different social order." In other words,

instead of having you be a servant to the status quo, they want you to be a servant to their ideas of what's right and wrong.

But the Buddha's example is that we're not anybody's servants. Ajaan Fuang would make this point, many times: "We're *nobody's* servant," he would say. "Nobody hired us to be born, and nobody hired us to practice. "Our decision to step out of further becoming is an assertion of our independence—and it's a noble act.

In that last year, as the Buddha taught, going from place to place, one of the recurring themes was the four noble dhammas: virtue, concentration, discernment, release. It's the release that makes these dhammas noble. But they're also noble in the sense that you're not harming anyone. You're not harming yourself, you're not harming the people around you in your search for happiness. You're taking responsibility for your happiness, but you're not defining your happiness in terms of fitting in. You see that to be truly happy, you've got to get out.

So, as we meditate here, keep that in mind: We're nobody's servant, and this is an act of independence. You're learning to be independent of your defilements, independent of any clinging to anything in the world.

When you take the precepts, they're not taken with the idea, "I'll do this only when it's convenient. I'll refrain from lying, say, only when it's convenient. I'll refrain from killing only when it's convenient." You make it an absolute: "I'm not going to kill. I'm not going to steal. I'm not going to lie, have illicit sex, or take intoxicants—under *any* circumstances." And the fact that this may create some inconvenient circumstances doesn't deter you.

The same with concentration: You're sitting here, and you have to, as the Buddha says, seclude yourself from sensuality. You could be sitting here for the hour, thinking sensual thoughts and enjoying them, but you tell yourself, "No," and you stick with that decision. It's honorable, and it's noble when you realize that there's a greater happiness that comes from abandoning the lesser happiness, and you're not going to try to find some grubbing way to combine the two.

The same with discernment: All three of these dhammas of the path are dhammas of restraint. With discernment, you realize there are certain desires you could give in to, but they're going to lead to suffering, and you find a way beyond those desires. When the goal is reached, when release comes, you've found a happiness that doesn't have to depend on *anything*, which means it doesn't have to feed on anyone.

Remember the Buddha's question: "What is one?" And the answer is not "Oneness of all being," it's, "All beings subsist on food." As long as you're a being, you have to feed. When release comes, you're freeing yourself from having to be a being. This doesn't mean annihilation, it simply means that you're dropping a role that you took on, a role that *required* that you feed. When you're freed from that role, you're placing no burdens on anyone—and it is absolute freedom, in lots of different ways.

So we're doing this not to serve anyone's else's interest: neither the interests of the status quo, or the interests of the people who see the problems with the status quo. We're serving our own true interests.

This is another example in how the Buddha's teaching is the middle way that steps outside of the *either/or* that so many people in society present us with. It steps out by framing the issue in a totally new way. The Buddha's question is: Do you want to be free? That's in line with the example he gives. He left a world in which there was going to be warfare, in which there was going to be birth, aging, illness, and death—and lots of injustice.

There are the injustices of the monarchies, the injustices of capitalism, the injustices of socialism. *Any* system is going to have injustices. A good part of generosity is to help alleviate some of those situations, but that's not our purpose for being here. That's not the purpose in our generosity—we're trying to develop good qualities of mind. We're leaving behind good things as we leave the world. It's not the case that we leave everyone in a lurch.

Look at the Buddha: He left behind lots of good examples and enabled a lot of people to follow his example by showing them the way. That's why his parinibbāna was such a radical statement: "This is the way to find true peace, true happiness, and it's a way that's open to everybody."

We have the good fortune of having come across the path he found, so remember that the triple training doesn't end just with the development of discernment, it moves on to noble release, where you're freed from servitude of *all* kinds. That's a gift to yourself and to everyone else.