

3 - Stories from his life

These notes look at a few of the stories of the Buddha's life. They convey something of the spirit of Buddhism.

Meeting the five ascetics in the deer park

After his Enlightenment the Buddha went to the deer park at Isipatana near Varanasi. He had been walking for a week, and now, exactly two lunar months after his Enlightenment, he arrived at the deer park. Five ascetics, formerly close disciples, had been living there for some time. When they saw the Buddha coming they agreed among themselves not to show any respect because they felt that in giving up self mortification he had abandoned his ideals.

As the Buddha came nearer, the five ascetics tried to take no notice. But when he drew close they could not help themselves. One politely took his bowl, one took the spare robe he was carrying, one prepared a seat, while another brought some water for the Buddha to wash his feet. Even though they could not help showing respect, they still addressed him in a casual way. The Buddha responded that this term of address was no longer appropriate because he had attained Enlightenment.

But the five ascetics were not so sure. One of them said: *“You practised selfmortification, but you did not gain Enlightenment. Now you’ve gone back to a comfortable way of living, how could you possibly be Enlightened?”*

To this the Buddha reiterated that he’d had a great spiritual awakening, saying: *“In all the time that you knew me before, did I ever speak in this way? Have I ever claimed before that I have gained Enlightenment?”* After a little more communication he convinced them.

The Buddha started teaching the five ascetics in turns. While two of them remained listening to him in the deer park, the other three would go out to collect food. What the three of them collected, all six would eat. Then the Buddha would teach the three who had just been collecting food, while the other two went out for alms. The six of them lived in this way throughout the rainy season, which would have lasted for about three more months. At the end of that period all of the five ascetics had gained Enlightenment.

The oldest account of this story does not say what the Buddha taught them. That remains a mystery. [Later accounts in the Pali scriptures fill in the blank. In particular there is the “discourse on the setting in motion of the Wheel of the Dharma” (*Dhammacakkappavattana sutta*). This is a useful although stereotyped summary of the Buddha’s teaching, dealing with the doctrines of the Middle Way, the Four Noble Truths, and the Noble Eightfold Path.]

At the end of the rainy season the Buddha encouraged all five of them to wander in different directions in order that they could help as many people as possible, through teaching them the way to Enlightenment.

A case of dysentery

Once, many years later, the Buddha and his companion Ananda came upon a cluster of his wandering disciples. There they found an elderly follower in a hut lying on the floor in a terrible condition. This follower had a severe case of dysentery and had been lying in his own excrement for days without any help. The Buddha asked what had happened and was told the sick man not very popular with the others and of no use to them. On account of this he had been neglected.

The Buddha took the head and Ananda took the feet of the sick man. They lifted him onto a bed, washed him, and made him comfortable. Then the Buddha called all the wanderers together and strongly encouraged them to look after one another, particularly as they no longer had the usual supports of an extended family. He said that everyone should be treated with respect, irrespective of how useful or talented they were.

Kisagotami

A young newly married woman called Kisagotami lost her only child soon after his birth. She was extremely upset. In fact she could not bring herself to believe the baby was dead. She took the dead baby in her arms from house to house asking for medicine to make her baby well. Because she was crazed with grief people sent her to the Buddha saying he was a great physician. So she went to the Buddha and asked him to bring her child back to life.

The Buddha did not give her a long sermon. That would have been useless because she was stupefied with grief and would not have been able to listen to words of that sort. He said, *"I will cure your child if you bring me a certain medicine. Bring me just a few grains of sesame seed, but bring them from a family where none have died"*.

Off she went, knocking on the door of house after house. Everywhere she went they were ready to give the sesame seed, but when she asked whether anyone from that family had ever died they said: *"Do not remind us of our grief. The dead are many, but the living are few."* At every house from which she sought the sesame seed she learned the same lesson. Gradually she realised that death comes to all, that she was not the only one who had been bereaved.

Eventually she came back to the Buddha and just sat quietly at his feet. She did not have the dead baby anymore. His body had been left in the jungle. She did not say anything for a long time. And when she did speak she asked for spiritual guidance. She became a follower of the Buddha.

Devadatta

Devadatta, a cousin of the Buddha, had been a follower and fellow wanderer for many years. He was very good at meditation and had all sorts of supernormal powers. But he was ambitious and proud. One day, when the Buddha was an old man Devadatta suggested to him that he should retire and let Devadatta take over the leadership of his following. The Buddha knew Devadatta's mind, so he refused to give the leadership over to him. This so offended Devadatta that he resolved to kill the Buddha.

Devadatta conspired with a wicked king, with whom he was on friendly terms. He bribed the king's elephant trainer to release a mad elephant against the Buddha; but nothing happened.

So Devadatta tried again. He knew that the Buddha sometimes used to walk at the foot of the Vultures Peak, and in an attempt to kill him Devadatta climbed onto a rocky promontory and pushed a great boulder onto the Buddha. The boulder bounced down the hillside, just missing the Buddha. But a splinter pierced his foot and drew blood.

After these incidents the Buddha's disciples became very alarmed and concerned for his safety. They thought they ought to protect him, so without saying anything to him they constituted themselves into a sort of bodyguard. Armed with sticks they ringed the place where the Buddha was sleeping. But during the night the Buddha came out and saw the disciples guarding him. He told them to go away, saying he did not need any protection. Slowly they all melted away, and the Buddha remained there by himself.

Meeting with Bharadvaja

This is a reasonably typical story of the Buddha encountering someone and teaching them in a way that is meaningful to them. In those days there were many holy people who had adopted the lifestyle of a wanderer. The Buddha was one of them. There was a great diversity of spiritual views and practices among this group, but they did not regard themselves as part of the Indian cast system. The wanderers were supported by local people, and generally had a life of hardship, spending most of their time in the open. Many wanderers rejected the ideas of the Brahmins (the top cast, which is also the cast that is regarded as the specialist in religious matters). They were therefore unpopular with the Brahmins who followed ancient texts called the Vedas.

On this occasion the Buddha was in city of Sravasti begging for food. On his alms round he saw a Brahmin called Bharadvaja who at that moment was doing a fire worship ceremony. This is a Brahminical ritual dedicated to the god Agni. It requires special wood, a special altar, and the recitation of particular verses. At a certain point in ceremony a Brahmin puts clarified butter (ghee) into fire. This is the point Bharadvaja had got to in the ceremony when the Buddha came along. As Bharadvaja was ladling the clarified butter into the sacred fire, from the end of a long spoon, he happened to look up and saw the Buddha approaching. To see a wanderer at this moment was regarded as bad luck, so Bharadvaja shouted: *"Go away you outcast"* (The word for outcast here is *vasala*, which also means lowly person.) Normally Brahmins don't expect to be answered back, but Buddha was not timid. He made a confident but friendly response: *"You use the word vasala (lowly person) but do you know what a vasala (lowly person) really is?"*

Maybe Bharadvaja was impressed by the Buddha's demeanour, but for whatever reason he seems to have been an unusually receptive at this moment. Rather than trying to construct an explanation of what a lowly person is based on

caste, or one based purely on the observance of conventional rules, he admitted that he didn't really know what it was to be a lowly person.

The Buddha used the opportunity to explain that whether or not someone is a lowly person is not to be determined by their caste, but by whether they act ethically. He then gives various examples of unethical activity. For example he says an unethical person is one who blocks their own or others' spiritual development. He also gave some more specific examples of what *vasala* or lowly person is, for instance he said that if someone is mean-spirited, cruel to animals, bears false witness or conceited they are a lowly person.

Bharadvaja was deeply moved by this explanation and became a follower of the Buddha, although he remained a householder.

Resolving a dispute

Five years after his Enlightenment the Buddha paid a visit to his home town, Kapilavastu, just inside the modern state boundary of Nepal. It was fortunate that he did so because a dispute had arisen between the Shakyans (his father's tribe) and their neighbors the Koliyans (to whom the Buddha was related through his mother). As a result of the dispute war was about to break out between the two peoples. The original cause of the dispute was comparatively trivial. Both tribes were accustomed to irrigating their fields with water from the River Rohini, which flowed between their respective territories; but that year there was not enough water for them both. The Koliyans proposed that they should have the water on the grounds that their crops would ripen with a single watering. The Shakyans flatly rejected this, saying they did not want to have to beg food from the Koliyans later on in the year, and that in any case their crops would also ripen with a single watering. Since neither side would give way the dispute became bitter and blows were exchanged.

To make matters worse, the Koliyans started casting aspersions on the origins of the leading Shakya families, saying they had cohabited with their own sisters like dogs and jackals. And the Shakyans cast aspersions on the leading Koliya families, saying they were outcasts who had lived in the hollows of trees like animals. Reports of this slander reached the leading families themselves, who were now armed and ready for battle.

The Buddha realized that unless he intervened these tribes would destroy each other. As soon as they saw the Buddha his kinsmen on both sides threw away their weapons and respectfully saluted him. When the Buddha asked them what the quarrel was about they were ashamed to tell him. Eventually, after cross-examining various people, the Buddha found out that the cause of the quarrel was water. Having established this, he asked: "*how much is water worth?*" to which they replied: "*very little, reverend sir*". Then the Buddha asked: "*how much are warriors worth?*" to which they replied: "*warriors are beyond price, reverend sir*". Then the Buddha said: "*It is not fitting that because of a little water you should destroy warriors who are beyond price*". And they were silent.

Ajatasatru meets the Buddha in the dead of the night

King Ajatasatru was sitting with friends at midnight on the roof of his palace, admiring the full moon. At that time the party decided it was a wonderful night for a visit to a holy man. They decided to visit the Buddha who was reported to be staying not so far away in the forest. Being a king, Ajatasatru had to go in style. Five hundred elephants were saddled and five hundred ladies of the harem were mounted on the elephants. The king went off at their head, with Jivaka (his physician) at his side.

As they went into the forest it became dark, and the king became afraid. He had a guilty conscience, having gained the throne through foul means. The king said to his companion: "*Jivaka, are you leading me into a trap?*" (This is the way the minds of kings worked in those days.) Jivaka replied, "*Fear not your majesty. The Buddha is staying just a little way ahead*". They went on a bit further, and it became even darker and quieter. They still could not hear anything at all. So king Ajatasatru again asked Jivaka for a reassurance that he was not being led into a trap, and once again Jivaka replied that this was no trap. Then the king said: "*But you have told me the Buddha is living here with two thousand five hundred monks, and there is not a sound. With two thousand five hundred monks you should be able to hear them from a considerable distance*". To this Jivaka responded: "*Look, just over there you can see the lights burning in the Buddha's pavilion*". And sure enough, they soon arrived at a great clearing with the Buddha sitting in the midst of it, surrounded by two thousand five hundred disciples. They were all sitting there in the moonlight, all perfectly still.

Despite all his previous suspicious and fears, the king was deeply moved by the presence of all those meditators. He

exclaimed: "*Oh that my son might experience peace of mind such as this*". [He probably felt it was unrealistic to hope for such peace for himself, on account of all the bad things he had done.]

Ananda's comment at the time of the Buddha's death

Ananda was one of the Buddha's cousins, and for more than twenty years he was the Buddha's personal attendant. Over this period he went almost everywhere the Buddha went. Ananda felt very close to the Buddha, so when the Buddha was about to pass away Ananda felt it very keenly.

At one time when the Buddha was inside a hut dying, Ananda went to the door of the hut and leant against the lintel, weeping bitterly. As he wept he said to himself: "*the master is about to pass away - he who is so kind*".

These words are of great significance. Ananda had seen the Buddha in so many different situations. He had been with him when he was delivering discourses, some of them deeply philosophical. He had heard him answer thousands of questions. Ananda would have also witnessed all sorts of super-normal happenings around the Buddha. But the main quality that came into Ananda's mind was that he was so kind.

His last disciple

Subhadda was a wanderer who happened to be in the vicinity of Kusinara when he heard that the Buddha was about to pass away. Thinking that he should not miss the opportunity, he went to where he was dying.

Ananda told Subhadda that he could not speak with the Buddha because it would not be right to disturb him at this time. But the Buddha overheard their conversation and let Subhadda speak with him directly. As a result of their meeting Subhadda became a disciple.

Acknowledgement

These notes include material derived from the following lectures by Sangharakshita:

- *The origin and development of the Bodhisattva Ideal*
- *The New Man Speaks*
- *Buddhism, World Peace and Nuclear War*
- *Between Twin Sal Trees*