Sutta Stories - Fruit of Spiritual Practice

May 18, 2021

SUMMARY KEYWORDS
Long Discourses of the Buddha, The Fruits of the Renunciant Life, The Fruits of the Reclusive Life, *Sāmaññaphala Sutta*, *phala, sāmaññā,* religious, recluse, renunciant, contemplative, Ajātasattu, king, patricide, Buddha, full moon, ministers, Jīvaka, physician, elephants, monks, teacher, slave, gradual path, morality, ethical, blamelessness, heart, Dharma eye, harm, Burma

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Today I will continue to recount some of the stories that occur in the suttas, the ancient discourses that contain the teachings of the Buddha. These stories contextualize the teachings. They illustrate the teachings and highlight what is important about them.

Today's story comes from the second discourse in an anthology called *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*. The collection is called "long" because the discourses are relatively long compared to many in other anthologies. The second sutta is called "The Fruits of

the Renunciant Life" or "The Fruits of the Reclusive Life."

The title of the sutta in Pali is "*Sāmaññaphala*." *Phala* means "fruit"; *sāmaññā* means a person who is a recluse, contemplative, or renunciant. In the old days, we would call someone like that a religious. A religious was someone who dedicated themselves to the religious life. So *sāmaññā* is someone in ancient India who dedicated themselves full-time to the religious life.

I think of this discourse as operatic. It has huge pathos. The discourse displays an operatic kind of suffering, which is the context for the teachings. I do not know if I can describe the scene as grandly as an opera.

The story begins with a king by the name of Ajātasattu. He was the greatest king of India at the time of the Buddha. It is a beautiful night with a full moon and a clear sky. The king is on the high terrace of his palace, looking out across the scene above the treetops. He is with his ministers.

The king exclaims: "How beautiful, how wonderful the night is. The full moon is wonderful to see." He asks his ministers: "Who can I go visit? What spiritual teacher can I visit?" Spiritual teachers often gathered with their disciples on a full moon night, so this was a time to remember the spiritual life.

The king says, “Who can I go visit who might bring peace to my distressed heart?” The reason for the king’s distress comes at the end of the discourse – we understand that he became king by killing his own father. This troubles the king, and he wants to find someone who can settle or calm his troubled heart. The six ministers each suggest that the king go see a particular religious teacher of the time. The king replies to each of them, “No, no, I visited that person before, and what they said did not help.”

Jīvaka, the royal physician, does not say anything. He is silent. The king turns to Jīvaka and says: “Jīvaka, you are not saying anything. Do you have a suggestion about whom I might visit?” Jīvaka says, “Well, in fact, there is a religious teacher who is nearby in the woods. He has a very good reputation. He is not only a wonderful teacher for people but a wonderful teacher for the gods.” The word “god” in ancient India also meant “king,” implying that the Buddha is so wonderful that he is good for the gods and kings.

Hearing this wonderful report about the Buddha, the king says, “Let’s go.” They assemble a grand pageant of 500 elephants. (Ancient kings had many war elephants, like modern-day Bradley tanks.) The king rides the royal tusker, and each of his 500 wives rides an elephant. This image may be using the great size, power, and

wealth of the king as a metaphor for his great involvement with sensual pleasures, which we see later as one of his primary preoccupations.

They march into the forest to see the Buddha on the full moon night. As they get into the dark forest, the king becomes very frightened. His hair stands up on end. The king says: “Jīvaka, are you taking us into the forest so my enemies can ambush me? Is this a trick?” Jīvaka reassures him, “No, no, it is not a trick.” The king says: “But it is so quiet here. You told me there are 1,250 monks with the Buddha. I do not hear a peep from any of them.”Jīvaka says: “Ah! That is because these Buddhist monks are very well-behaved and quiet. They are sitting listening to the Buddha.”

King Ajātasattu gets off his elephant and walks the final distance to where the Buddha sits. The king says: “Jīvaka, where is the Buddha? I do not see him anywhere.” This suggests that the Buddha is in the assembly with the other monks, but the king does not recognize him. Jīvaka says, “The Buddha sits in front of the central pillar facing all the monks.” So the king goes up to the Buddha and offers his greetings.

The Buddha picks up on something and says,

> *King Ajātasattu, are you thinking of the people you love?*

The king replies: “Yes, I think about my young son. I wish he could be as calm and settled as these 1,250 monks who are sitting here so peacefully and quietly listening to you. I wish my son could be this calm and quiet.”

That is all the king says about his son. But the audience – who is watching this opera or listening to this story – knows that the king killed his father to become king. Because this story was told for centuries after the Buddha died, the audience also knows that King Ajātasattu’s son later killed Ajātasattu to become king. The patricide continued, so there is pathos implied in the sutta.

King Ajātasattu asks the Buddha: “What is the fruit of the renunciant life? What is the benefit of becoming a monastic and practicing the religious life?” The Buddha says,

Have you asked anyone else that?

The king says, “Yes. I asked six other spiritual teachers, but I was not satisfied with their answers.” The Buddha says,

Well, tell me.

King Ajātasattu recounts the following teachings of the other spiritual teachers:

One teaching was that there is no such thing as evil, badness, or demerit. You can do whatever you want, and you will not do any evil.

Another one taught that we do not really exist – people do not exist. They are empty. If you chop someone's head off, you are not killing anyone because people do not exist.

Someone else taught that your amount of suffering, pain, and joy is allocated when you are first born, and you have to play it all out. It is all pre-determined, so nothing you do makes any difference.

Another teacher said that they did not know anything. They did not know if there was any benefit or fruit to the practice, and so they had no answer to give.

The king's recounting of the teachings goes on. But you can feel that none of the teachings will settle the heart of someone who has killed their own father. None of the teachings can touch the king or work for him.

So the king asks the Buddha the same question. The Buddha answers indirectly by asking the king a question. The Buddha often did that rather than answer directly. The Buddha says,

Dear King, suppose you have a slave ...

So here is King Ajātasattu, the most powerful person in the world at that time, and the Buddha is talking about a slave, one with the least power. The Buddha continues:

> *... and your slave decides that there is another way of living. He wants to do good in the world. He wants to acquire merit and not do grunge work for the king for his whole life. The slave goes off to become a monastic – he ordains, becomes a renunciant, and lives a holy life. What would you do? Would you insist on the slave coming back and being a slave?*

The king replies: “No, no. If they were really living a renunciant life and a good life, then I would honor that person. I would bring them gifts – food, robes – and support them.”

The Buddha asks,

> *Well, is this one of the fruits of the holy life, of the renunciant life?*

The king says, “Oh, yes, being freed from slavery would be one of the fruits if you lived that life.”

The king continues, “Oh, tell me something more.” The Buddha says,

> *Well, if someone was one of your workers, maybe a minister, and they left your employment to become a monastic, what would you do then?*

The king says, “Oh, I would honor them, give them gifts, support them, and protect them.” The Buddha says,

This too is a fruit of the renunciant life.

Then King Ajātasattu asks, “Well, tell me, are there any other fruits of the holy life?” The third time the king asks, the Buddha then gives some of his teachings. There is an ancient tradition that you do not teach someone until they ask three times. The Buddha says,

> *Well, as a person hears the teachings from the Buddha or some other teacher, they become a monastic, a renunciant, and they engage in the spiritual life.*

Then the Buddha describes what is called the gradual path of practice – the practice of morality, cultivation, and concentration – all the way to awakening. The Buddha describes all the steps, and many of them result in happiness, bliss, gladness, and joy.

Once we practice living an ethical life, there is the bliss of blamelessness. There is contentment. As we practice meditation and the hindrances abate, there is gladness that we are no longer enslaved by powerful mind states. As we enter into the *jhāna*s, there is deep joy, happiness, and tranquility.

The Buddha describes this wonderful gradual path where there are all these benefits – the fruits of joy, happiness, and well-being that come along all the way up to awakening. When King Ajātasattu hears this, he

says: “Wow, yes, this is the fruit of the homeless life. I am so inspired. From now on, I will go for refuge in the Buddha. Let the Buddha be my teacher.” The Buddha nods an assent.

King Ajātasattu, who has heard this great teaching and is so inspired, continues: “Well, I have a lot to do. I have a lot of work and a lot of sensual pleasures to attend to. I have to go back to my job.” The Buddha says, “Do as you wish,” and the king goes off.

After the king leaves, the Buddha tells his monks and nuns who are there:

> *If the king had not killed his father, in hearing this discourse, he would have attained the first stage of awakening. His Dharma eye would have opened.*

I interpret the Buddha’s statement to mean the fruit or the consequence of the king’s heavy harm is that his heart is closed to the liberative effect of these teachings. A fruit of causing harm in the world is your heart is much more closed.

Is the heart permanently closed or not? We do not know. My teacher in Burma told me lots of stories of people he had known – soldiers who had killed people – and the struggles they had opening up their hearts. But they always succeeded in opening to the teachings and changing.

The theme of this operatic sutta is the fruit that comes from the spiritual life. This is shown in the contrast between the king and the consequence of his actions, and the choice of a monastic and the consequence of their actions – their practice – and what arises, what is welcomed, and what is received.

That is the story for today, and we will continue tomorrow. Thank you.