

Conditions of a Nation's Welfare

Over the course of the semester, we've been following the life of the Buddha in our talks. We're now entering the final phase of his life, the events of which are told in the Mahaparinibbana Sutta, the longest sutta in the Pali canon. This sutta begins with an interesting story that sheds some light on the Buddha's view of national-level concerns as opposed to those of the individual.

One of the Buddha's many lay followers was King Bimbisara of Magadha. He appears in many suttas and often visited the Buddha to seek teachings. Bimbisara was murdered by his own son, Ajatasattu, who then became King of Magadha. (Incidentally, Ajatasattu committed this murder on the advice of Devadatta, the Buddha's evil cousin whom we'll hear more about next week.)

My point with the backstory is to emphasize that Ajatasattu, who is king at the time of the events in this sutta, was not a very nice person.

A conflict arose between the Kingdom of Magadha and a nearby people known as the Vajjis regarding a diamond mine. Ajatasattu is irate and decides to annihilate the Vajjis. "These Vajjis, powerful and glorious as they are, I shall annihilate them, I shall make them perish, I shall utterly destroy them." Strangely, he sends his chief minister, Vassakara, to the Buddha to, I guess, ask his advice. The phrasing of what Ajatasattu asks his minister to say to the Buddha is a little odd, and is more an announcement than a question. Still, he tells Vassakara "whatever the Blessed One should answer you, keep it well in mind and inform me, for Tathagatas do not speak falsely."

It seems odd that Ajatasattu would want the Buddha's advice on a making war. That's a little like asking a PETA member how to cook *foie gras*. Perhaps this was more about superstition than respect. I've heard that high-ranking monks in Thailand are often bothered by people asking them for lottery numbers. Maybe Ajatasattu was thinking of the Buddha as more of an oracle than a teacher.

Whatever the king's motivation might have been, Vassakara dutifully went to the Buddha and relayed the king's message. The Buddha's response is interesting. We might expect him to simply say "Hey! No killing! Tell Ajatasattu not to kill!" Maybe the Buddha perceived that a response like that wouldn't have much effect on a guy who'd already killed his own father.

So instead, the Buddha begins a dialog with Ananda, who was standing nearby fanning the Buddha. The Buddha asks Ananda seven questions about the Vajji kingdom:

1. Do the Vajjis have frequent gatherings, and are their meetings well attended?
2. Do the Vajjis assemble and disperse peacefully and attend to their affairs in concord?

3. Do the Vajjis neither enact new decrees nor abolish existing ones, but proceed in accordance with their ancient constitutions?
4. Do the Vajjis show respect, honor, esteem, and veneration toward their elders and think it worthwhile to listen to them?
5. Do the Vajjis refrain from abducting women and maidens of good families and from detaining them?
6. Do the Vajjis show respect, honor, esteem, and veneration toward their shrines ... and do not deprive them of the due offerings as given and made to them formerly?
7. Do the Vajjis protect and guard the arahats?

In each case, Ananda replies in the affirmative, and the Buddha says “So long, Ananda, as this is the case, the growth of the Vajjis is to be expected, not their decline.”

It would be interesting to go through the Buddha’s questions and analyze them, but we don’t have time for that tonight. The main thing I’d like you to notice is the nature of the questions in general. Also notice what is *not* asked.

The Buddha does not ask Ananda how many nukes the Vajjis have (or whatever the 5th-century BC equivalent might have been), or about their economic prosperity. He doesn’t ask anything specifically about the *leaders* of the Vajjis. All of his questions concern the character of the Vajji people. Do they respect elders, women, and monks? Are they generally at peace with one another? These are the qualities that will protect the nation from decline (and, more to the immediate point, invasion).

So the Buddha has in effect said that the state of the nation is dependent on the state of the people. He has turned a political question into a personal one.

At election time, we are obviously focused on the leadership of our country, which of course is important, but not something over which we have much direct control. (We should note, however, that the question “are their meetings well attended?” seems to call for a certain amount of civic engagement.) What we can control is our own behavior. We can make sure that we behave in a peaceful and respectful manner, even on Facebook in an election year.