

Lesson 5 – INFLUENCE OF OTHERS – Leaving Home

Prince Siddhartha very often thought about the ascetic that he saw, the man who was a renunciant, a person who has renounced - given up - family life and home to live a spiritual life of meditation. His face was so calm and peaceful that he seemed to have no worries at all, although he had no home, belongings or family. Prince Siddhartha thought,

“House life is like living in a crowded dusty atmosphere. The life of a renunciant is like living in wide open fresh air. It is not easy, living in a household, to lead a holy life as perfect and pure as a polished shell. Suppose I shave off my hair and beard, put on the yellow robe, and leave the household life to live as a renunciant?”

King Suddhōdana noticed that his son lately seemed deep in thought and uninterested in the entertainment at the palace, and he worried that his son may decide to abandon the royal life and become a holy man. King Suddhōdana was anxious for his son to become the next king, so he ordered the very best musicians and dancers in the land to entertain in his royal palaces, hoping that would distract the prince from his deep thoughts.

The king also thought that the prince soon would be more focused on family life because the prince’s wife, Yashodhara, was going to have a baby. One day, when the prince was away from the palace, he heard the news that his son was born. Instead of being overjoyed as most fathers would feel, he thought to himself,

“An eclipse has arisen. Another bond to the world is created which is an obstacle to my renunciation, giving up the household life.”

An eclipse is a darkness that covers up the light of the sun or moon. He meant that the birth of the baby was an obstacle because it was an attachment of love that would bond or tie him to the life of a family man, which would make it more difficult for him to leave household life to become a renunciant.

Later, he named his baby son Rahula, which means “little eclipse.”

As Prince Siddhartha was returning to the palace, he passed the mansion of Princess Kisagotami, who was standing out on her balcony. When she saw the kind and handsome prince, she felt joy and admiration for him. Thinking that his family must feel great joy to be with him, she said aloud,

“His mother, father and wife must be nibuddha.”

Nibuddha means very peaceful. As the prince heard her say this, he thought, “Nibuddha is such a wonderful word. I am looking for nibuddha, which is not selfish happiness but true peace. Today I must give up my householder life. Princess Kisagotami inspired me with the word ‘nibuddha,’ so I’ll give her a gift.”

He gave her some jewelry as a gift, which made her feel very happy.

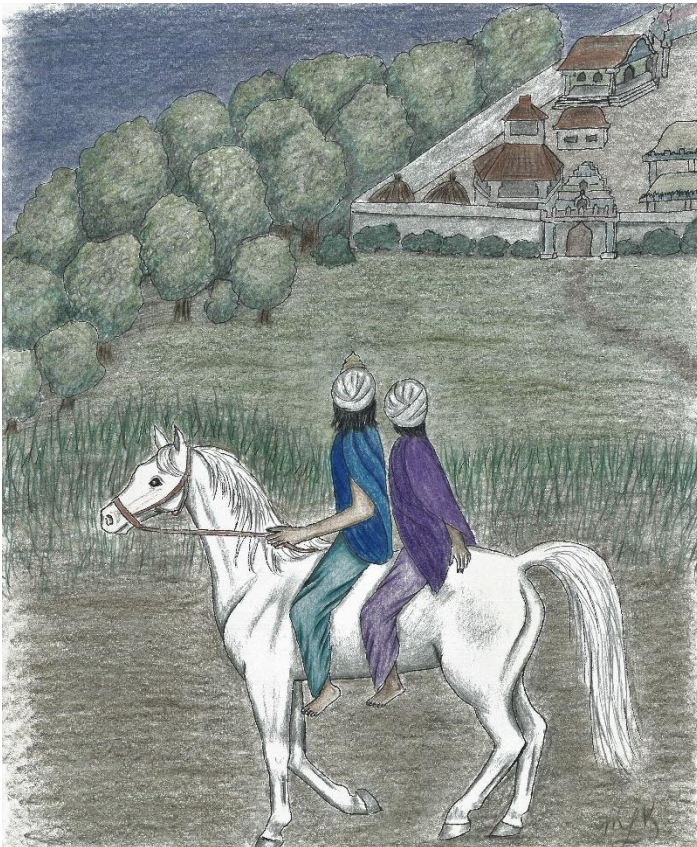
When he arrived at the palace, the finest dancers and musicians were there to entertain him. To please his father, he watched them late into the night, until he fell asleep. Then, one by one, everyone started falling asleep.

Prince Siddhartha woke up in the middle of the night. He saw the dancers and musicians asleep. Just a few hours ago, they had looked absolutely beautiful, smiling and dancing joyfully and gracefully in colorful clothes, with perfectly groomed hair. Now, what a shock! They looked totally different - messy and frightening. Some of them had their mouths open, some had saliva dripping from their lips, some were snoring, and some were grinding their teeth like demons. The dancers who had looked so beautiful now looked so disgusting!

He got up and told Channa to secretly prepare his favorite white horse, Kanthaka, for a journey.

Then he silently walked into the bedroom to see his newborn son. Yashodhara and the baby Rahula were sleeping so peacefully. Yashodhara had the baby cradled in her arms, holding him close to her, and her arm was covering the baby's face. Prince Siddhartha wanted to see his son's face, but he thought,

“If I move her arm, she will awaken, and then my concentration will be ruined - I won't have the determination to leave her and become a renunciant. But I will find enlightenment, and then I will come back to them.”



That night, at the age of 29, he left the palace, riding his horse along with Channa. As he rode away, he looked back at his home city, Kapilavasthu, and thought,

“I will not return until I have found the way to put an end to old age, sickness and death!”

When he got to the deep Anoma River, the powerful horse Kanthaka jumped over the river. The prince got off the horse and told Channa,

“Please take my jewelry and the horse and go back to the

palace. I will become a renunciant. Tell my parents and Yashodhara not to worry, that I have gone to find a way to put an end old age, sickness and death.”

Channa said, “Please let me go with you!”

The prince said, “No. When I have found the way to enlightenment, I will return. Then everyone will be happy.”

With his sword, he cut his hair. As soon as each small bunch of hair was cut, it curled around to the right in a circle and stayed that way. That is why many statues and paintings of the Buddha show his hair as small knobs or curls all over his head.

Channa bowed to Prince Siddhartha, and started to ride back to Kapilavasthu. But as the prince disappeared into the distance, Kanthaka’s heart broke with love for the prince, and he died. Channa cried with sorrow not only for the horse but especially because he deeply missed his dear friend Prince Siddhartha, not knowing if or when he would ever return.

The prince saw that his beautiful clothes were not appropriate for a renunciant. He couldn’t wander around in rough jungles and remote forests in fancy silk clothes, which would quickly become ragged and ruined. A great heavenly being named Ghatikara, who lived in a heaven-world of very powerful gods called brahmas, knew that Prince Siddhartha would become a renunciant, so he brought him the eight necessities for a monk: three robes, a bowl, a razor, a needle, a belt, and a water strainer. The razor was for shaving his head and beard, the needle was to repair his robes, and the water strainer was to strain out any tiny living beings floating in water from streams and rivers that he would use for drinking water.

No longer a prince, Siddhartha accepted the gifts from Ghatikara, put on the monks’ robes, left his silk clothes behind, and went to meditate in the forest.

Questions:

1. Why did Prince Siddhartha feel that his baby son was an obstacle? (the baby would be an attachment of love that bonds him to family life that would make it more difficult to leave the household life to be a renunciant)
2. What did Princess Kisagotami say that inspired him? (nibuddha, peaceful)
3. What did Prince Siddhartha think of the dancers when they were asleep? (they looked frightening, disgusting)
4. Why did Prince Siddhartha leave the palace? (to find a way to put an end to old age, sickness and death and find enlightenment)

5. Why did he not see his son's face before he left the palace? (Yashodhara's arm covered his face, and if Prince Siddhartha would move her arm, she would wake up and it would be very difficult for him to leave)

6. How did Siddhartha get monks' robes to wear? (a powerful god - a brahma - gave him the 8 necessities of a monk, including three robes).

What the Buddha said:

“Asevanā ca bālānaṃ, paṇḍitānaṃ ca sevanā, puḷā ca pūjanīyanaṃ, etaṃ mangalamuttamaṃ.”

“Not to follow or associate with the ignorant, associating with the wise, honoring those who deserve honor, this is the best way.”

- Mahamangala Sutta

Discussion – Influence of others:

Prince Siddhartha suddenly left his wife and son – and his whole family - without telling them. They had no idea if or when he would ever return.

Usually, if a man runs away from his family, what do people think? It's terrible – he's neglecting them.

But Prince Siddhartha was not leaving like an ordinary man.

He knew his destiny from the time he was born. What did he know about his life when he took his first steps just after he was born? That this was his last life.

That means he would be enlightened - he would find the way to end suffering.

And then he could share his knowledge with his family and others so they could end their suffering too.

But he wouldn't be able to do that if he simply stayed home and became the king.

He would be too busy with responsibilities; his family and the people of the kingdom would expect him to take care of them.

So he had to leave to be able to help his family and kingdom in the best way – to guide them to the way to end all their suffering by enlightenment.

Also, he knew Yashodhara was well supported at the palace even without him; plus, she was not an ordinary woman; she was very pure-minded and would eventually understand the importance of what he was doing.

Yet it was very difficult for him to leave; he wanted to see his baby son, but knew that if his wife woke up, he would feel the strong attachment to her and not leave

Why couldn't Prince Siddhartha, being the king, direct others to do the work so he could do whatever he wanted to do?

Because others would influence him - expect him to spend time helping them, solving their problems, making decisions, doing what they want him to do.

What does “influence” mean? Others hint or suggest what they want, what is important, what you should do, what you should focus on.

Are there people who influence you? Who?

Your parents, brothers and sisters, friends, teachers, coaches.

Do they influence you in a good way? Hopefully, they suggest what is good for you; they encourage you to do what is good, kind, and helpful to you and others.

Does anyone influence you in a negative way?

Do you have a friend who sometimes does something, or suggests doing something, that you think is wrong?

Even if the friend doesn't suggest that you do something wrong, we can be influenced by their behavior and their way of talking, just by being with them.

Can you think of some examples?

If they talk badly about someone, then we start to think that person is bad.

If they are a bit disrespectful toward a teacher, for example ignoring the teacher when she is talking to them, then it may seem to us to be okay to do that.

If they are sometimes arrogant or uncaring toward others, it may seem to us to be “normal” to behave that way.

If they start acting silly, we may join in with the silliness.

If they use rude words, we might begin using those words too.

Have you ever seen others being influenced like that?

We might not think we're being influenced by others, but it happens much more than we think. Bad behavior very easily spreads to others – it's contagious.

We can see this happening with adults: when one speaks rudely, then some others start speaking rudely too.

We don't want to be influenced in negative ways; if our behavior goes down to a lower level, then we will regret it later.

What can we do to avoid negative influences?

Be aware when a friend does or says something that doesn't seem good, that isn't the way your parents raised you. For example, notice if a friend is disrespectful or unkind toward another person.

Let that awareness be your signal to be a leader, not a follower.

Why are you a leader? Because you know what's good, what leads to happiness - you know something about the Dharma.

Do you want to be a follower of those who don't know or don't care? No.

Don't be fooled into following their behavior just because they're popular, successful, or fun to be with.

Instead, be a leader by doing what is right, or letting them know how you feel about their behavior.

How do you let them know? You can tell them that what they said wasn't nice, you can frown or turn your face away from them, or you can walk away.

What if your friend continues their negative behavior, or it gets worse?

You may have to leave your friend - maybe for just a while, or, maybe it just isn't worth being around them anymore if their behavior is unacceptable.

Remember, bad behavior is very contagious.

It's often difficult to leave a friend, but we can remember how the Buddha - even though it was very difficult - had to leave all his family and friends to avoid being influenced by them, and to do what was really the best for everyone.

Activity:

Make a poster: Copy the quotation, what the Buddha said (above), on paper with markers or colored pencils. Then decorate the quotation with various art materials. The poster can be hung on the wall or refrigerator as a reminder of this very important teaching.