

Lesson 20 – HARSH SPEECH – Battle at the River Rohini

The Sakya clan lived in Kapilavatthu, the city where the Buddha grew up as Prince Siddhartha. The Sakyas got their water for drinking, cooking, bathing and watering their food crops from a small river called the River Rohini. On the other side of the river lived the Koliya clan who also used water from the River Rohini for all of their needs.

One year there was not much rain, and the dry weather caused the River Rohini to flow with much less water than usual. The farmers of the Koliya clan and the farmers of the Sakya clan needed a lot of water for their rice crops, and they were worried that there would not be enough water and that their plants would therefore die and they would not have enough food. Already, the plants on both sides of the river were starting to wither from the hot, dry weather.

The farmers of Koliya crossed the river to meet with the Sakyan farmers. The Koliyan farmers said,

“Friends, if the small amount of water in the river is divided and shared by both of us, then neither of us will have enough to water our fields. But, our crops will soon be ready to harvest if we just water them thoroughly now. We request you to let us use this small amount of water in the river to water our fields.”

Their plan was to dig more ditches that would allow enough river water to flow into their rice fields for their rice to grow healthy and be harvested. Then they would sell some of their rice to the people of the Sakya clan so everyone would have enough to eat.

The Sakyan farmers did not like that idea. They responded,

“Friends, we can’t go begging desperately from door to door of your clan’s houses carrying baskets with gold, silver and precious jewels to offer you in return for some of your rice, while you all are sitting around at ease with plenty of rice. Our crops, too, will soon be ready to harvest and also need enough water.”

The farmers of each clan began to argue with the farmers of the other clan. Each side said,

“We are not going to give in.”

The Sakyan farmers were upset, thinking, “How dare they tell *us* to stop using water and depend on *them* for food!”

The Koliyan farmers were upset because the Sakyan farmers didn’t trust them and accept their offer. Neither side would agree to let the other have more water to grow their crops. There seemed to be no solution.

They became so frustrated and angry with each other that they started shouting. They all felt very disgusted with the farmers of the opposite clan.

One farmer started hitting a farmer from the other clan, who hit him in return. As the fight grew more intense, one Koliyan farmer shouted in anger,

“You threatened us by relying on the royal clan of Kapilavatthu. This Kapilavatthu royal clan you depend on behaves like dogs and jackals, forest animals. They don’t even have proper wives—they just marry their own sisters! What harm can their armies do to us?”

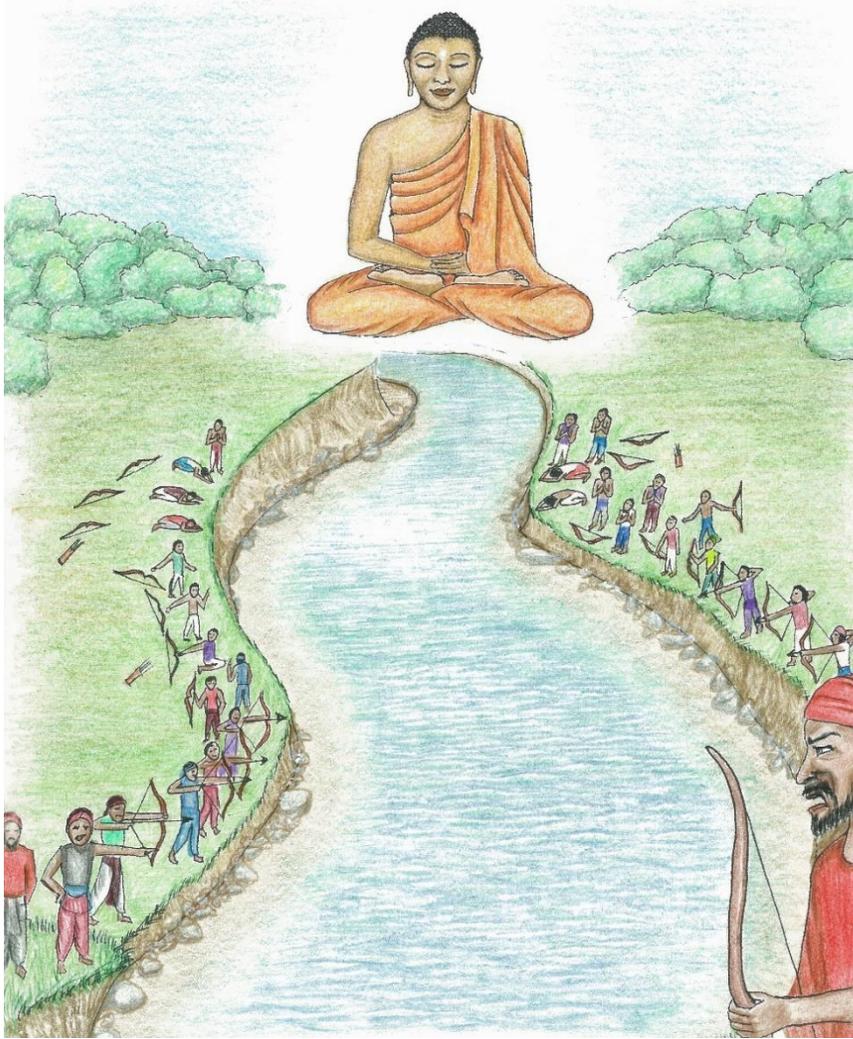
The farmers of the Sakya clan responded angrily, “You threatened us by relying on your wretched people who are diseased with leprosy! The Koliya people who you depend on are living a miserable life ever since they were kicked out of the city and were living like animals in the Kola trees. What harm can their armies do to us?”

These insults to their clans infuriated the farmers so much that they left the meeting. To accuse people of marrying their own sisters was horribly offensive, and to allege that people were kicked out of the city for having the frightful disease of leprosy and that they lived in trees like monkeys was equally offensive. The Koliyan farmers reported the fight to the ministers of agriculture in the Koliya clan, who then reported it to the Koliyan royal family. And the Sakyas reported the fight to the ministers of agriculture in Kapilavatthu, who then reported it to the Sakyan royal family.

The ministers and royal families of each clan were outraged, extremely angry and totally disgusted with the other clan when they heard about the insults. How could they insult them like that? They each felt that they wanted to destroy the other clan and never have to see them again. So, they each planned and prepared for war against the other.

The Buddha, far away in Savatthi, looked around as usual at sunrise with his supernatural power, and could see the people of Kapilavatthu and Koliya preparing for battle. He could see that it would start that evening. The two royal families were his closest relatives: his father was from the Sakya clan of Kapilavatthu and his mother came from the Koliya clan. He knew that he could prevent the battle from happening, save people from killing each other, and lead them to peace by teaching the Dharma.

He went out to receive food in his bowl from people in the town as usual, and then he spent the day sitting in a special room in meditation. Toward evening, he left the room. And suddenly, he was sitting many miles away in the sky over the River Rohini, between the armies of Sakyans and Koliyans. He made dark-blue rays of light radiate from his hair, causing the sky to look darker and making the scene look more ominous. It frightened the warriors, who couldn’t see him and didn’t know what was happening.



Next, he sent out five colors of light rays from his body, and finally, he made his form—sitting cross-legged in the sky above the river—visible to all the warriors.

The Sakyans and Koliyans were shocked to see him floating in the air above them. However, they had seen or heard about his supernatural powers before, so they knew it was indeed the Buddha.

When the Sakyans saw him, they thought, “The Buddha, who is

our own relative, has come. Maybe he knows everything about our fight.”

They talked among themselves and decided, “Shooting weapons and killing others isn’t the right thing to do in front of the Buddha. Let the Koliyans kill us or take us captive if they want.”

They dropped their weapons on the ground and bowed to the Buddha.

The Koliyans talked among themselves and made the same decision. They dropped their weapons and bowed to the Buddha.

The Buddha then gracefully came down from the sky and sat on the shore of the river. He asked,

“Why have you all come to this place?”

The king of Kapilavatthu and the king of Koliya both stepped forward. One of them said,

“Most exalted Buddha, we haven’t come here to look at the river.”

The other king said, “Lord, we haven’t come here to swim in the river. In fact, we have come here to make war against each other.”

The Buddha said, “Your royal highnesses, what is the actual cause of your fight?”

One king said, "Water of this Rohini stream is the actual cause of it.”

The Buddha asked, “Your royal highnesses, what is the value of water of this Rohini stream?”

“It is of little value,” the kings said.

“What is the value of the Earth?” the Buddha asked.

“Its value is priceless, Lord,” the kings said.

The Buddha asked them, “What is the value of the people of your clan?”

They responded, “Their value is priceless, Lord.”

The Buddha said, “For some water in this Rohini stream that is of so little value, why do you wish to destroy the priceless people by fighting each other? Not the slightest amount of pleasure can be found in worthless conflicts and wasteful fights.”

The Buddha gave them a talk on the Dharma. He taught them about the harm of making enemies and hatred. He taught them that when they are anxious to get what they want and they fight over it, insult each other and develop hatred, they live with the disease of unhappiness. He told them that they are living with hatred, but that he is free from hatred; that they are developing selfishness and the feeling that others are enemies, but that he is free from developing selfishness and enemies.

The people of both clans felt ashamed of their foolishness, apologized and made peace with each other. They felt extremely grateful to the Buddha for intervening and preventing them from killing each other, destroying both of the clans. He had saved them from a huge tragedy.

They knew that the Buddha—their own relative—had given up the possibility of becoming a great king and enjoying all the luxuries, pleasures and powers that a king would have, and instead decided to become an ascetic and a monk. They thought it was therefore appropriate to offer him young men from the royal families to become his student monks. So, the Sakyans and the Koliyans each offered the Buddha 250 princes for him to ordain as monks.

The Buddha ordained them, and then led all of them each day either to Kapilavatthu or to Koliya to receive food in their bowls. The people on both sides of the river offered them plenty of food, so, after all, there was enough water for each clan to grow and harvest healthy crops.

The princes at first didn't like living as monks. They thought it was boring and that it was difficult to adjust to the strict lifestyle. They felt that they had only become monks because they couldn't refuse the requests of their parents and relatives. But after the Buddha gave several talks on the Dharma, they were very satisfied as monks, and attained the first stage of enlightenment, along with some supernatural powers.

Questions:

1. What were the Sakyans and Koliyans worried about that made them argue? (they worried that there was not enough water in the river for the crops of both clans)
2. What did the Koliyan farmers propose to the Sakyan farmers? (they would use more water from the river for their rice plants and sell some of their rice to the Sakyans)
3. Why didn't the Sakyans agree to that proposal? (they didn't want to depend on the Koliyans for food, begging them for it and paying for it)
4. After some farmers hit each other and the fight became more intense, what did the farmers of each clan do? (they insulted the other clan)
5. What made the ministers and royal families so angry? (the insults about their clan)
6. What did the Buddha show them was more important, the water or the people? (the people)

What the Buddha said:

“Māvoca pharusam kañci, vuttā paṭivadeyyu taṃ, dukkhā hi sārambhakathā, paṭidaṇḍā phuseyyu taṃ.”

Do not speak harshly to anyone, because if you do, they may speak harshly back to you. Angry speech hurts, and retaliation may overtake you.”

Dhammapada 133 (10:5)

Dharma Discussion – Harsh Speech:

Why did the farmers get into a conflict?

They were worried that there wasn't enough water, that they wouldn't get what they need, and that the farmers from the other clan were being unfair.

What happened when they couldn't agree on a solution?

They fought and insulted each other's clan.

What exactly is an insult? Words intended to make a person feel embarrassed, ashamed, unworthy, unattractive, or foolish. Words used as a personal attack, criticizing a person's intelligence, ability, or the way they look, the way they speak, or what they do. And offensive or mean words about someone's identity, family, or something or someone they love. Insults are different from constructive criticism, which is intended to be helpful.

In Buddhism, we practice Right Speech as one part of the Eightfold Path.

Right Speech includes avoiding harsh speech.

Harsh speech includes not just insults but also intentionally hurtful criticism, bad words, racist words; hateful, offensive, rude or disrespectful words, or any words meant to hurt another person.

Why is it important to avoid harsh speech?

So that we avoid hurting others and creating bad karma—the causes for negative results in our future.

And so that we become more kind and compassionate to others, creating peace and happiness around us.

There are also other reasons to avoid harsh speech. Can you think of any?

When you insult someone or use harsh speech against someone, what might they do to you in return? Retaliate—take revenge—as in the story.

How might they take revenge? Insult you in return, fight, spread rumors, turn friends against you, damage your belongings, embarrass you, steal from you.

Some people cannot take insults; they cannot handle feeling shame, so they become enraged and take revenge in particularly shocking or harmful ways.

When someone takes revenge on you, naturally you might feel upset or angry.

And what might that lead to? Behavior that you regret later.

There is another reason to avoid harsh speech. It reveals weakness!

When in an argument, if a person feels they're not winning, they can't persuade the other person, or they can't get the person to agree, they may get angry.

And then what do they do? They start shouting. For some people, shouting isn't enough. They try to intimidate or overpower the other person.

They're trying to hide the fact that they're losing the argument. They have no more reasonable words to say; they can't think of anything intelligent to say.

Or they're too angry to think clearly.

This is when they are weak—they're losing the argument, or just too angry.

And that's when they resort to insults or other harsh speech, or violence.

So, when we're in an argument, we don't want to get so angry that we use insults or other harsh speech. What can we do to avoid letting it get to that point? Remember how hurtful insults can be. Some people remember for the rest of their life the harsh or insulting words that someone said to them. Keep in mind that harsh speech leads others to take revenge. Remember that we are admitting our own weakness when we use harsh speech. And remember that we will suffer the karmic results of our harsh speech. What should we do instead, when an argument is getting out of control? It's better to walk away, stay silent or say "let's discuss this later." You can continue the discussion when tempers have cooled down. Remember, it takes two people to argue, so you *can* stop it.

What if someone insults you or uses harsh speech against you? Silence can be the best weapon – when we're silent, the other person notices how outrageous they're acting. We can say, "I don't want to argue anymore," or "that's your opinion." Or we can pretend to agree, mirroring back what they are saying, for example, "yes I am exactly what you just called me." Can you think of some other ways to respond without anger?

How can we calm our anger when someone insults us? Remember that an insult is only a reflection of that person's own frustration, anger, ignorance, jealousy, or hatred—his own weakness and ugly emotion. We don't want to join in with that weakness and let it bring us down. We make ourselves stronger if we can resist the urge to retaliate and use harsh speech against them. Instead, we can try to feel compassion for their frustration. So, the person insulting us actually is helping us to become a better person!

Activity - Role play:

Two students choose a topic for an argument, and then debate opposing views on the topic, as if representing their "clan" or friends with the same view. One partner then pretends to get angry and says something insulting – not personal insults or bad language, but only silly or general insults for the purpose of the role play (for example, "you all are big babies," or losers, fools, ignorant, selfish, lazy, bullies, or nerds). The other partner tries to deescalate the argument—responds without anger, using words that they would realistically use in talking with peers, or stays silent or walks away.

Suggestions for topics of argument:

Whether school should start (and end) later in the day
whether to require more hours per day at school but attend school 4 days a week
whether all school lunches should be vegetarian (or vegan)
whether students should be required to dissect dead animals in science class
whether to have a dress code or no dress code at school
whether to prohibit gum chewing in class.