

Lesson 14 – TRADITIONS - Return to Kapilavatthu

Several months after the Buddha became enlightened, his father, King Suddhōdana heard that his son, now the Buddha, was in Rajagaha. He sent a messenger to persuade his son to come back home to Kapilavatthu for a visit.

However, soon after the messenger arrived and saw the Buddha, he wanted to stay with the Buddha and become a monk. Then, after he was ordained as a monk, he gave the Buddha the message inviting him to come to Kapilavatthu. The Buddha agreed to make the long journey.

For two months, the Buddha traveled along with a big group of monks, stopping here and there along the way, until they finally arrived in Kapilavatthu.

The Sakya clan, to which the Buddha's family belonged, were known to be proud of their status and wealth, so when the Buddha arrived with his big crowd of monks, the Sakyans weren't interested in making offerings to any holy men or showing respect by greeting them and bowing to them.

The Buddha wanted the people to see that he wasn't an ordinary holy man, but that he indeed was fully enlightened. So, in front of a crowd of people, he caused both fire and water to spray out at the same time from his arms and legs! This miracle shocked and amazed the crowd of people and they knew this was no ordinary holy man.

Then he gave a Dharma talk, in which he told a story about his past life when he was a generous prince who ended up giving away everything he had. After seeing the Buddha perform the miracle and teach the Dharma, the Sakyans then were convinced that he was indeed enlightened.

During their stay in Kapilavatthu, the Buddha and his monks went as usual to receive food from people in the town. They walked in small groups to a house and stood silently at the door holding their bowls for people to put food in them.

When King Suddhōdana heard about it, he was shocked. Why would his son, from a royal family, beg for food? He went to the Buddha and said,

“Why do you disgrace me, son? Why are you begging for food? Why don't you take food in the palace?”

The Buddha explained, “I am not putting you to shame. This is our tradition.”

The king said, “What do you mean, ‘our tradition’? No one in our family had to beg for food.”

The Buddha replied, “That is not the tradition of the royal family. It is the tradition of the buddhas. All former buddhas lived by receiving food like this.”

King Suddhōdana invited him to the palace for a meal. After the meal, the Buddha told a story of one of his past lives, in which his parents in that life were reborn to be his parents in this life also.

Hearing his son teaching, King Suddhōdana attained the third level of enlightenment, so he would never have to take another birth as a human before becoming an arahant, one who is free from all suffering and rebirth. His wife, Queen Mahapajāpati, the sister of the Buddha's mother, attained the first level of enlightenment, so she would have at most only seven lives in a heaven-world or as a human before becoming an arahant.

At the king's palace, all the Buddha's relatives and friends came to see him except Yashodhara, who was in her room. She was thinking, "He is now a buddha. Should I go to him? If I have any virtues, then he will come here and I will show him my reverence."

The Buddha asked where Yashodhara was and gave his bowl to the king, who told him that she was in her room. The Buddha went to her room with the king, Venerable Sariputta and Venerable Moggallana.

He told them quietly, "Let her respect me as she likes. Say nothing."

Yashodhara went to him and bowed, holding his feet and placing her head on his feet, according to the tradition of respecting a holy man with devotion. The Buddha kept quiet. Then she sat down.

The king told his son, "When she heard that you wore orange robes, took only one meal per day, and avoided high seats, garlands and perfumes, she did the same. When relatives offered to support her, she would not even look at anyone, so virtuous was my daughter-in-law."

The Buddha said, "Not only in this life, but in a past life, she protected me and was devoted and faithful to me," and he told the story of that past life.

Queen Mahapajāpati, the Buddha's aunt, had one son, who also was the Buddha's half-brother, named Nanda. On the day that the Buddha was visiting, the people in the palace were enjoying a celebration of the future marriage of Nanda, and preparing for the wedding which was coming soon. At the end of the visit, when the Buddha was preparing to go back to the park where he was staying, he gave his bowl to Nanda to hold.

The Buddha walked out the door of the palace. Nanda didn't know what to do with the bowl, so he just followed the Buddha, waiting for him to take back his bowl. As the Buddha continued walking, Nanda followed, expecting that he would take back the bowl at any moment and then Nanda could go back to the palace.

The princess who was soon to become Nanda's wife saw him leaving, and was anxious for him to be back at the palace in plenty of time for the wedding.

She called out to him, "Come back soon, prince!"

Nanda kept following the Buddha, holding the bowl. When the Buddha and Nanda arrived at the park where the monks were staying, he asked Nanda,

"Would you like to leave the householder's life and become a monk?"

Nanda was very much looking forward to his marriage, but he greatly admired the Buddha and didn't want to be disrespectful by refusing the Buddha's offer. So, he agreed to become a monk. He shaved his hair and beard and put on an orange robe. The Buddha ordained him, and he joined the other monks.

On the seventh day after his arrival, the Buddha went again to his father's palace for lunch. Prince Rahula, the son of the Buddha and Yashodhara, was now seven years old. He had never before seen his father. Yashodhara pointed out the Buddha to Rahula. As a wealthy family's son, it would be appropriate for Rahula to ask his father for his inheritance before he leaves the family. Yashodhara said,

"That is your father, Rahula. Go and ask for your inheritance, the property and wealth which a father gives to his son."

Prince Rahula walked up to the Buddha and said, "Even your shadow is pleasing to me, monk."

The Buddha got up from his seat and walked away, so Prince Rahula followed him and, following his mother's instructions, said,

"Give me my inheritance, monk."

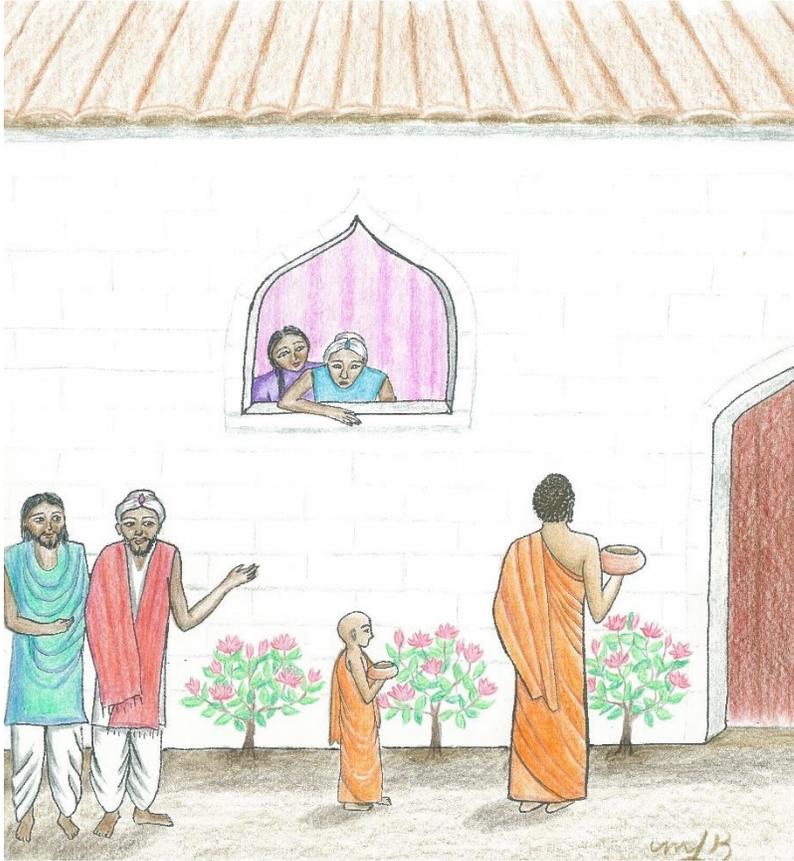
Rahula asked again, and the third time he asked, the Buddha said,

"I will give you the greatest wealth. Money is not the greatest wealth. Truth is the greatest wealth. Being ordained as a monk you can find the Truth."

The Buddha then asked Venerable Sariputta to ordain little Prince Rahula to be a monk.

Sariputta asked, "How am I to give Prince Rahula the ordination, Lord?"

The Buddha gave a talk on the Dharma to the monks, instructing them how to perform ordination: first, the man's hair and beard are shaven and he puts on an orange robe. Then, he bows to the monk and kneels, puts his palms together and takes refuge three times in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.



Rahula's hair was shaved, and a robe was draped on his small body. He took refuge, and then followed the instructions of the Buddha and the other monks.

He dutifully followed them around, including when they went from house to house to receive food.

King Suddhōdana, however, was feeling very distressed. He went to the Buddha and said,

“I ask one favor of the Buddha.”

He told the Buddha, “Lord, I suffered pain when you left to become a monk. Then there was Nanda. But Rahula is too much. Love for our children, separation from our children, Lord, cuts like a knife deep into the skin and even into our bones. Lord, it would be good if the monks did not ordain children without the parents' consent.”

The Buddha gave a talk on the Dharma his father and then to the monks, instructing the monks that from this time on, they must not ordain children without their parents' consent. This was how the Buddha made rules for the monks—when a complaint or problem arose that needed a solution, then he announced a new rule.

Questions:

1. Why did the Buddha make fire and water pour out from his arms and legs? (so the people of Kapilavatthu would see that he was fully enlightened)
2. Why was the king shocked when the Buddha went to houses to receive food? (because people in the royal family would never beg for food)

3. What did the king tell the Buddha that Yashodhara did when she heard that the Buddha wore orange robes, took only one meal per day, and avoided high seats, garlands and perfumes? (she did the same)
4. How old was Rahula when he became a monk? (seven years old)
5. What did the Buddha say is not the greatest wealth, as he taught his son, Rahula? (money)
6. What did the Buddha say is the greatest wealth? (the Truth)

What the Buddha said:

“Asārē sāramatinō sārē ca asāradassinō micchā-saṅkappagōcarā tē sāram na adhigacchanti.

Sāram sārātō ca asaram āsaratō ca ñatvā sammā saṅkappa gōcarā tē saram adhigacchanti.”

“Those who mistake the unessential to be essential, and the essential to be unessential, dwelling in wrong thoughts, never arrive at the essential.

Those who know the essential to be essential, and the unessential to be unessential, dwelling in right thoughts, do arrive at the essential.”

Dhammapada 12, 13 (1:12, 13)

Dharma Discussion - Traditions:

King Suddhōdana was upset because his son was going from house to house to receive food, which was totally inappropriate—shameful, a disgrace—for a person of a royal family. The Buddha explained that it was the tradition of the buddhas, not the tradition of the royal family, that he was following.

Yashodhara was following a tradition of Indian culture to bow to the feet of a holy man, teacher or elder to express devotion when she bowed to the Buddha’s feet. And she followed the tradition of Buddhist monks by wearing orange robes, eating only one meal per day, not sitting in high seats, and not wearing jewelry, flower garlands or perfumes.

What does “tradition” mean?

It means special activities, practices, beliefs and ways of doing things that a group of people do regularly over many years.

Can you think of any tradition that your family has?

There are different types of traditions: national, cultural, religious, local and family traditions.

For example, there are national traditions on holidays such as Independence Day, celebrated by going to a picnic or parade, watching fireworks, flying kites, or playing certain games.

Cultural traditions include wearing the clothes and presenting the foods, art, music and dances from long ago in one's culture—one's homeland or region. Religious traditions include ways of celebrating religious holidays, conducting religious ceremonies, and doing prayers.

Many people have family traditions, such as going to a certain place every summer, or relatives gathering together on a certain time of the year, or a special activity or food they enjoy together as a family on certain occasions.

There are local or community traditions such as county fairs or town festivals.

Why do we have traditions? Why are they important?

They bring people together, remind them of their history, give a sense of identity, and increase pride in culture or community.

They give people a sense of belonging to the group, making them feel closer, more friendly and harmonious with each other.

What are some Buddhist traditions that your family follows?

Some families meditate, chant verses or say prayers together at certain times.

Some make offerings such as flowers, candles and incense at a shrine or altar.

Some participate in Buddhist ceremonies or programs at a temple.

Some prepare and offer food and other things to monks.

Some wear white or other traditional clothing when they go to a temple.

Some participate in memorial ceremonies for loved ones who passed away.

Why are Buddhist traditions important for us? They are reminders.

What do they remind us of? The Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.

They remind us to keep our mind focused on good thoughts, which lead to kinder words and actions, which lead to good character and good habits.

They remind us that we belong to our local Buddhist community, and that we belong to a huge community of millions of Buddhists around the world.

They remind us of making and offering merit, so we and others benefit from our good actions.

And, most importantly, they remind us to learn and practice the Dharma.

Some people feel uncomfortable participating in Buddhist traditions when their friends don't participate.

They want to be modern, fit in with their friends, and make their own decisions about participating rather than just following along with their parents.

It's natural to want to fit in with friends, to feel you belong to a group of friends, and to make decisions independent from your parents.

But, should we make decisions based on what our friends think and do?

No. It's better to think for ourselves, considering what is best for us overall.

Let's consider what we get from spending more time with our friends and compare it with what we get from participating in Buddhist traditions.

What good do we get by choosing to spend a few hours with friends?

We enjoy some fun and entertaining activities during those hours with them.

And what benefits do we get by choosing to participate in Buddhist traditions with our family, rather than spending those hours with our friends? We make merit—which definitely makes our future better and protects us. We learn and practice Buddhist chants, prayers, participating in ceremonies, and meditation, which become good habits, bringing us more and more merit. We might find a new friend or enjoy seeing an old friend at the Buddhist event. We set a good example to other kids, and encourage other young people to attend more Buddhist events when they see us participating. Learning Buddhist traditions now helps us connect with Buddhist communities in the future, which we can join and belong to anytime for the rest of our lives. We're more likely to find a friend who is genuinely kind, caring and loyal to us in the Buddhist community than among people who don't know about the Dharma. We join the millions of Buddhists who support the Dharma and Sangha to ensure they remain available for future generations.

When we're thinking about whether to join in with Buddhist traditions, we can remember the examples of Buddha and Yashodhara. How do you think the Buddha felt when he went to houses for donations of food, which absolutely didn't fit in with his family and childhood friends? He was not at all uncomfortable or embarrassed. He had the courage to show others the tradition of the buddhas, which was far more noble and admirable than seeking wealth and power as a king. How do you think Yashodhara felt, living in a palace, but wearing orange robes, eating once per day, and not wearing jewelry or perfumes, not at all fitting in with her friends? She knew it was more important to be dedicated to Buddhist practice and attain wisdom than live like her friends, no matter what they think.

Activity:

In your bedroom, create a small shrine, or add to one you already have. To create one, clean off a space on a small table, shelf, or dresser, and remove any clutter in the area. Put a picture or statue of the Buddha in the middle of the space. You can put a Dharma book on one side of the Buddha, and a picture of a stupa on the other side to represent the body, speech and mind of the Buddha. Or you can put a bodhi leaf or picture of a bodhi tree on the shrine to represent enlightenment. You can add a battery-operated candle, incense sticks, flowers, or other traditional Buddhist decorations. You can place a cushion or folded blanket on the floor for you to sit in front of the shrine.

Chant or say prayers and meditate daily at your shrine, following the tradition of Buddhists all over the world!